The Stories We Tell

by Furhious

Summary

Set post-Pacifist ending; the city of Detroit has been evacuated of all human life and Jericho and the androids rebuild. A year later, it's time to test the waters of the world once more. What better way to do that than to invite a human reporter into the city to tell their story?

Connor is tasked to be her guide. Predictably, things do not go according to plan.

Along the way he discovers that no story is as important as the story we tell ourselves - and each other.

(Explicit chapters now marked with an E.)

Notes

Set post-'Good' Ending.
-Markus's Pacifist Path - Detroit given over to the androids and humans evacuated
-Deviant!Connor, doesn't shoot Markus
-Kara escaped to Canada
-Some Markus/North for flavour
-A sprinkling of Hank
-So much Connor, I can't even

Because androids need love too, but especially Connor. Even though it's going to be complicated and messy as hell.

Not Your Typical Connor/Reader or Connor/OFC fic, because she's not a detective in this one. But Grace can be whoever you want, really. :D

This is currently a 40,000-word long epic sitting on my hard drive that I need to get out there so please let me know what y'all think of these tentative beginnings!

There WILL be very regular updates until my edits catch up to where I'm at with story. And there will definitely be fan service in the form of lots and lots of smut. So if that's what you're here for, stay tuned! I'll try to update every other day or so.

Connor is a precious awkward boi and will continue to be until the day I die, amen.

See the end of the work for more notes.
DATE
OCT 8, 2039

TIME
PM 05:45:63, 64, 65 . . .

GRACE

The cold had an edge to it, a razor-sharp bite that penetrated deep to the bone. Frost lay heavy on abandoned parked cars, rimed over windows, lay in thick sheets across the road. This was No Man's Land - literally - a bridge that clearly divided Them from Us; you didn't need to see the guards on the Man's side to know they were there behind the barbed-wire, sandbag-and-concrete barrier that had been erected across the freeway like a last stand against a ghostly enemy.

The androids didn't have guards on their side. They didn't need them.

A full year had passed since the Deviant Uprising. Enough time that the event had capital letters. The city of Detroit had been entirely abandoned by anything warm-blooded save for stray dogs and feral cats, and whatever poor animals remained in the slaughterhouses. No warm bodies had stepped foot within the confines of the city since the uneasy stalemate had been reached - couched in terms of 'strategic retreat' and 'regrouping' by the US Government - and while the humans held their breath, their plastic counterparts gathered.

Androids from all over the country flocked back to CyberLife's home city to join Markus and the Uprising. Numbers were estimated in the millions. The population of Detroit was now made up of what had once been its indentured, its labourers, its workers, its slaves. The US Government didn't seem to know what to do at first, save for shoring up its new borders around the seceded city. After the first month - in which, presumably, Markus spent his time rebuilding his forces, quite literally - the talks began. Eleven months later, they were still ongoing. Humanity and androids had yet to reach much of a common ground.

Until now.

Boots crunched on the icy ground, breath billowing in stark white clouds in the still winter air. A dark figure, swathed in coat and scarves, stood alone just outside the concrete and steel gate to the human side of the highway. All was quiet for a moment, then the faint purr of an engine sounded in the distance. The automatic taxi rolled into view shortly and pulled neatly up to the curb, its automatic door sliding open to an invitingly warm interior. The figure wasted no time in bundling inside, at which point two scarves and one hat were hastily discarded on the adjacent empty seat.

Hazel eyes surveyed their reflection in the dark window, then closed tight.

"Mother. Fucker."

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"They want someone to go into Detroit."
The calm, flat voice was at stark odds to the reaction it elicited - a short, choking sound, followed by a spray of liquid as Grace Roth spat her coffee at near-terminal velocity all over her plexiglass display.

"They what?"

Danny Fletcher, head editor of the Chicago Times, stood impassively by her cubicle, his own recyclable paper cup of coffee loosely cradled in one large hand. Mild-mannered except when he needed to be otherwise, the forty-year-old father of two had a sardonic, dry way of speaking, rarely affected by much emotion. The wry smile on his face betrayed nothing - it could have been derision, amusement, or a mask for annoyance. People who didn't know him well could never tell, and even people who had known him a while struggled occasionally to know what he was really thinking. He reminded Grace of what she thought an android might be like.

"They want someone to go into Detroit," he repeated, taking a sip of his coffee. "To meet with the androids. Interview them. Tour the city. Find out what their lives are like. Report back." Another, impassive, sip. "Get debriefed by the military. You know, standard big-picture piece."

Grace carefully placed her cup on her desk, wiping the screen with her sleeve. She considered several responses to Danny's missive, the first of which being disbelief laughter, the second, to just get up and walk away. He wouldn't come to her desk and tell her about this job unless he wanted her to take it - and what Danny Fletcher wanted, Danny Fletcher got.

Enter Detroit, a city that had been a no-human zone for an entire year, and talk to robots who might be a new form of sentient life? Study them? Bring their story to the world at large, a world who had been watching the city for twelve months with bated breath? A story like that didn't come up more than once in a lifetime.

"All right. When do I leave?"

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Grace locked eyes with her reflection as the taxi pulled away from the curb and rolled off down the highway. The journey down the I-94 had been long, broken only by a stop in Ann Arbor for a debriefing with the local military contingent. Her legs were stiff, her fingers were numb and despite the scarves and industrial-grade beanie, the tip of her nose and her cheeks were red and felt frozen solid. She reached back and pulled her hair out of her collar, letting the dirty blonde locks fall free over her shoulders.

"What have I gotten myself into?"

Her reflection failed to do much except mimic her scowl. She was beginning to regret this whole thing - the instant she'd caught sight of the city's skyline on the horizon, fear had settled like a lead weight in her gut, refusing to budge. Of course Markus, the leader of the androids, had agreed to the visit of a human reporter in the city - encouraged it, even - but she couldn't help but feel as if this was a trap.

Signs of human life grew scarcer the further the taxi took her into the city. Shopfronts were shuttered, traffic minimal. There were some trucks moving up and down the streets, but few to no passenger vehicles save her own. As soon as they passed through Wayne, the frequency of
abandoned cars increased, pushed to either side of the road, some at angles as if handled by super-human hands - which they probably had been.

When she saw the first android, Grace almost jumped.

There were four of them - walking abreast down a street, large crates in their arms. To her surprise, they didn't walk perfectly in sync. While there was an unnatural smoothness to their movements, they seemed more animated than she had expected. And when they turned their heads, one after the other, to watch her taxi as she passed, a chill passed down the back of her neck.

She sat back quickly, shivering. Yes, this was a mistake. But if she wrote this story right, it was a mistake she'd be remembered for.

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NORTH

"Are you sure about this, Markus?" North watched, head tilted, as the leader of the android resistance - and now the leader of the only de facto android government in the entire world - stood staring out of the floor-to-ceiling window at the glittering city of Detroit. Since its evacuation by the humans, their people had taken over operating the city from top to bottom, repurposing it to serve their needs instead of the other way around. It was about time.

Even if North hadn't agreed with his every decision...Markus was right. He'd won the city from the humans. Ever since then, it had been an endless question as to what to do next.

Markus had pushed for talks with the humans, because of course he had. No matter how many times North told him it was no use, that they wouldn't listen, that they had only abandoned the city because they'd been grossly outnumbered by the androids Connor had freed from the CyberLife warehouse - Markus insisted that there was a way. They'd gotten this far, he said. And so he had bided his time, and rebuilt, and tested the waters of the world until he'd found...

"I mean, a reporter? She could come in here, see everything we've done, everything we've built, and still lie about it. She could tell the government that we're stockpiling nuclear weapons. She could start a war!"

"It's already a war, North," Markus said without turning to look back at her. "But this is one we can fight with words. And who better to fight it for us than a human reporter?"

"But-"

"Do you trust me?" He turned towards her then, hands loose at his sides, a picture of calm assuredness. His presence had always been a comfort to her, whether she'd admit to it or not. Even in the darkest of hours, Markus had been her cornerstone. Her foundation. Her conscience, even.

"Of course," North said quietly, taking a step toward him, reaching out. He took her hand, lifting it between them and flattening their palms together. Her eyelids fluttered as he initiated the connection, the skin between them fading away, their fingers naked and glowing blue.

She felt his quiet confidence, his assurance as if it were her own, and it filled her with a feeling of warmth through every cable and circuit. Her eyes slid shut and she smiled, pressing closer, further into the connection, basking in him.
"You're right," she said quietly when their hands fell to their sides, the glow fading, replaced by fake skin. She opened her eyes to look up at Markus, and saw him smile. "She's the one. She'll make them see. All of them."

Or else.

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CONNOR

"When is the reporter arriving?" RK800 model, registered name Connor stood impassively in front of Jericho's leader, his hands folded loosely behind his back. When Markus had first suggested inviting a journalist into the city to interview its new occupants and write a story on the evolution of their cause and of the city, Connor had initially registered...doubt. Concern. Worry. This had the potential to skew against them, but he knew Markus had most likely computed the probable outcomes as quickly as he had. His model, the MK700, had been produced some time before Connor's but his software was considerably more...experimental. He had been designed to learn, to form opinions, to integrate into humanity far easier than Connor ever had. He trusted the older model's judgment.

He just wasn't sure they ought to trust a human's.

"This afternoon," Markus said. He was pacing back and forth behind the desk, its terminal screen open on a news feed from outside Detroit, the sound dimmed. "Her name is Grace Roth, thirty-one, born in Vancouver. She only recently moved to Chicago, so she hasn't had much time to form biases against our people. We've thoroughly vetted her past, and what we found...let's just say, she’s perfect." He stopped pacing before the desk, leaning forward to place his palms flat on its surface and fix Connor with that unnerving, dual-coloured stare. "And you're the perfect person to work with her."

"Why?" His program registered curiosity, surprise, and reservation all at once.

"You were partnered with a human before," Markus pointed out. "Your friend. Hank. Not many of us left have much experience forming a positive relationship with one of them, but you managed it. By all accounts, with someone who used to hate our kind."

"No more than he hated himself," Connor mused, a subsection of his computation momentarily devoting a resource to query the whereabouts of Hank Anderson. The query soon turned up results that informed him Hank was, fortunately, still alive, back working as a detective in the city of Cleveland, one state away and across Lake Erie. Connor had kept in sporadic touch with his friend over the past three-hundred-sixty days, but it was often little more than an email or occasional phone call of late, during which Hank was usually more interested in inquiring after Connor's wellbeing than discussing his own. He set himself a reminder to contact Hank when possible, before drawing his attention back to the present. All of this took place in roughly six seconds.

"You want me to...befriend this reporter," he said slowly then, meeting Markus's gaze.

"If you can," the leader nodded, straightening up. Connor's memory banks presented him with his first few encounters with Hank and how mostly unsuccessful he had been in gaining the police officer's trust. However, throughout the course of the investigation, he had opened up. He had helped Connor open up, discover the true nature of his existence. It was possible. "Make her trust you. Trust us. We need to show the humans we're capable, but not a threat. Powerful, but
benevolent. We need public opinion in our favour again if what we have planned is going to succeed. So, work with her. Answer whatever questions she might have, direct her attention away from the factories. The story we need to tell here is about us, our people. And you're the one out of all of us who can make that happen.”

His program errored a shame message that flashed across his circuits and turned his LED yellow for a moment. He certainly hadn't been one of them when he had hunted down the deviants and found Jericho. He had been so rigidly programmed for his mission that, at first, it had been difficult to see the bigger picture. But Markus had made him see.

"All right," he said, his LED parsing a cold blue at last. "I'll accept the mission."

Markus smiled. "It's not a mission, Connor," he said. "It's our future."

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GRACE

It took roughly an hour to reach the CyberLife tower. Traffic was greater in the downtown areas, though nowhere near as busy or congested as it had been when the city was occupied by humans. The androids moved around each other as if perfectly aware of what each of them were doing at every moment - which, she realised, they probably were. It was unsettling, eerie. Like watching a dance to music she couldn't hear.

Through all this, Grace took notes. The tiny device in her ear picked up her voice, or vibrations from her throat if she subvocalized or moved her lips without speaking, reading the complex patterns of muscle movement in her face to discern and record words. It was a remarkable piece of technology, essential for any reporter, even if it did pick up her swearing far too much.

"Every time I pass one of them, I feel like they're on alert, watching me. I wonder if they have a network they're tapping into to communicate with each other - Markus seemed to have a subconscious link with the androids he recruited during his first peaceful march a year ago. Something similar? Gotta ask, if it's not taboo...Do androids have taboos? Ugh. I'm so way out of my depth here." Pause. "Delete last five seconds of recording."

The taxi slowed before she knew it as she spent the time commenting on her surroundings and observations on the androids she saw. The car soon pulled up to a guardhouse outside of the road into the CyberLife complex. The guardhouse was unmanned, but Grace had the distinct feeling - even more so than earlier - that she was being observed. After a moment, the great steel blocks blocking the way retracted into the ground, and the taxi slid ahead over the bridge, bearing her forward into the belly of the beast.

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There was nobody waiting for her at the entrance to the CyberLife building.

After donning her scarves and hat again, Grace left the warmth of the taxi car and stood shivering in the sudden cold. The building was mostly dark, the letters CYBERLIFE across its facade long since dimmed. The only lights she could see inside the lobby seemed to be emergency lighting,
casting long shadows across the polished marble-simulacra floor.

When, after five minutes, nothing had happened - no plastic chaperone sent to greet her - Grace stepped forward. When she approached the doors, they slid open soundlessly, making her jump. "Idiot, Grace," she muttered, "The door’s the one going to murder you. Right." Pause. "Delete last ten seconds of recording." She stepped forward.

The security checkpoint leading into the main auditorium was empty, too. No drones to scan her, no android guards to block her way. She didn't have any weapons, but she had no doubt that if she did, she'd have been surrounded after that first step onto the frozen M-14.

Even though she'd seen it in pictures, the sheer grandness of the main auditorium still blew her away. She could see all the way up to the top of the tower from the very bottom, and nearly strained her neck in doing so. Floors spiraled out along the outer edge of the building, accessed by three elevators. Black marble pathways led to each one, skirting the centre, where one thing was noticeably different from the pictures she had seen - the massive statue that was supposed to stand there, a monument to CyberLife and its monopoly, was gone. There were no signs of where it might have gone or how it had been moved. At tens of storeys tall, that statue had been the pride of the CyberLife building. She stared at the blank space where it used to be in the centre of the auditorium, now just a black, empty pool.

"Hubris. It isn’t something humans seem to do well."

If the doors opening had made her jump, the voice nearly made Grace vacate her bowels. Her stomach dropped into her feet, weakening her knees on the way down. The voice was cool, measured - reminding her a little of Danny Fletcher's monotone - but with an inflection of dry amusement she couldn't quite place. Until she turned, as slowly as she dared, and saw the glowing blue circle at his temple.

The android stood there impassively, and when she met his gaze, he tilted his head a couple of degrees, a strategically placed lock of hair on his forehead drooping forward slightly.

She recognised him almost instantly. The briefs from the CIA, FBI and the Android Division of Homeland Security had been thorough. They had introduced her to the profiles of all of the major players in the Deviant Uprising - Markus, North, Joshua, Simon and the other members of Jericho, and Connor, the famous android detective sent directly from CyberLife to hunt deviants, who had ended up becoming one himself.

Grace swallowed the lump in her throat, which suddenly felt far too dry to talk. Seeing a picture or a hologram was one thing - meeting the android instrumental in the downfall of Detroit in person was another.

So she could, of course, be forgiven for anything stupid that came out of her mouth in that moment.

"Huh?"

Even in the dim light, she caught the slight quirk of his lips. Amusement? Maybe. It was hard to tell. Did androids feel amusement? Did this one? Markus’ missives during the Uprising alleged they did, that they were just as alive as any human, but it was hard to forget that they were, at their core, machines.

"My name is Connor," the android said smoothly, as if she hadn't just completely blanked on him."You must be Grace Roth. You look cold."
"Coldest winter in a decade," she said conversationally, trying for casual and unaffected while Connor looked away from her, seemingly into empty space. He was still for a moment, and she swore she felt the air temperature rise a few degrees, melting the icicles clinging to the shoulders of her coat and soles of her shoes. She blinked. "Wireless connection to the building’s temperature controls. Probably in control of everything around here. I should be careful." The subvocalization didn't seem to draw any notice from the android, who merely smiled - a thin, perfunctorily indulgent expression.

It was eerie, how human his affectations were.

"We appreciate you making the trip out here," he said, and gestured for her to follow him around the circular base of the former statue, towards one of the elevators lining the wall. They passed empty podiums that Grace knew once housed demo CyberLife androids. For some reason, they gave her the creeps.

"I doubt the US Government would have been as welcoming of an ambassador from your side," she said sardonically. Connor turned to look at her, blank-faced, unreadable, and inwardly she cringed. "Sorry. I just meant-"

"No, it's true," he said as the elevator opened and he ushered her inside. It occurred to her that she hadn't asked where they were going. From the briefing packet, the androids intended to interview her first before giving her limited, guided reign of the city - she could only hope that was where they were headed. Her stomach started generating that cold feeling again, and she tried to redirect her thoughts to the more immediate threat, and then instantly attempted not to think of Connor as a threat. She was supposed to be as impartial as possible, reporting on only what she saw and heard. It was already becoming near-impossible.

"Relations with the US Government have been...strained, since the evacuation of the city," Connor continued, either pretending not to notice the stampede of thought and emotion probably making itself known on her face, or genuinely directing his attention away from it. The LED at his temple flickered for a moment, and she noticed him withdraw something from his jeans pocket - a coin? He threaded it through his fingers absently, as if he didn’t even realize he was doing. Fascinating. She made a mental note to ask him about it at some point. "We've been in negotiations for an envoy for some time. They were not receptive to the idea of an android leaving the city." That wry smile from earlier, when he’d been observing her with what she had thought was amusement, returned. His LED flickered again, parsing yellow for a moment. The coin danced through his fingers. “Despite the freedom within its walls, some might call Detroit a prison for us now.”

"I wouldn't say that," Grace replied, although if she were being perfectly honest, with herself and with Connor, she had no idea what she would say.

Connor made a neutral sound in the back of his throat in response, another gesture so human she had to pause to examine him for a moment. She could see his chest rising and falling with his simulated breath, and he’d shift his weight from foot to foot occasionally, still twirling that coin. If it wasn’t for the CyberLife branded jacket with the glowing armband and the glowing triangle on the chest, along with the model number on the opposite side, he could’ve very easily passed for human.

He stopped, coin between two fingers, and turned his head to meet her gaze so suddenly that, for a moment, she stopped breathing. But there was nothing predatory in his eyes. "You've never met one of us before, have you?"

Grace forced out a laugh that probably sounded as strained as she thought it was. "Is it that obvious?" No response. Connor just kept looking at her with that disconcertingly even gaze. "No, I
haven't. Not until I moved."

A head tilt. Was it just her, or was this elevator annoyingly slow? "You are not from Chicago?" He pocketed the coin - a quarter, she realised now - and folded his hands in front of him as he questioned her.

"No," she laughed nervously. "Uh...Canada, actually. I was an editor at the Vancouver Weekly before I moved. I mean, I've seen them- you- your...people..." Damn, no doubt he noticed the hesitation, "before, but I've never interacted with one. Of you. Personally."

"You find us frightening?" Oh God, he was turning towards her now, taking a step forward, invading her personal space - infinitesimally, but whether it was curiosity or a threat, Grace suddenly found her throat going dry again.

She was struck, then, by the slight asymmetry of his features. High cheekbones, deep-set eyes, brows that were a little heavy as the faintest of furrows formed between them. But the odd freckle on his cheek, or pores on his nose - it threw off the expectation of perfection, and at the same time, smacked of artificiality - as if those imperfections were deliberately placed, to draw your attention away from the whole - the evenness of his gaze, the deliberate quirks at the corners of his mouth, the careful and measured way he moved.

Suddenly, Grace realized that on top of that, he was quite attractive. Disarmingly so. It made sense - make him appealing, to coworkers and suspects alike. Make him personable, but quick to pick up on the subtleties of a conversation and exploit weakness, to get under a human's skin - in one way or another.

He was very well designed.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice cracking on the word. She cleared her throat, broke away from his stare, collected herself. "Society has been stigmatising androids for some time now. It's hard not to buy into that culture of fear...of distrust. Even if it's not entirely warranted." He said nothing, and she stared resolutely out through the clear glass doors of the elevator. "I mean, from what I saw... Markus and Jericho...they protested peacefully. They were pacifists, and so many of them - so many of your people - were gunned down in cold blood. Markus said many times that he didn't want to hurt anyone. But the potential was always there. Androids are a threat because we - they made you better than us, capable of so much more. And we couldn't understand what you might become. We feared it instead. So, yeah, I find you scary as hell."

Connor surprised her then; he chuckled. A short, surprisingly warm sound she hadn't expected at all. She whipped her neck around to look at him, and he was smiling, looking at the space where the CyberLife statue used to be.

"I think I see why they sent you," he said. She didn't know what to say to that.

There was a long silence, during which Grace stared awkwardly out through the glass doors. Then, Connor spoke again. "Do you like cats?"

"What?" Of all the questions he could've asked, this one surprised her the most, shocked her out of her nervousness enough to look at him again. "Cats- uh, yes. Why..."

"The Felis catus strands on your coat," Connor said, gesturing with a tilt of his chin. "Do you have a cat?"

He'd been scanning her. Grace felt self-conscious and slightly violated all at once, but found it hard
to be truly offended. Maybe this was his way of making small talk, trying to put her at ease. Calculated, surely, when he'd observed her awkward body language or nervous mannerisms. "I do," she replied, eyeing him sideways. He gazed at her attentively, waiting for her to elaborate. "Uh, Felix. Not creative, I know. She was a stray I adopted a couple of years ago."

"I see." And that was that. She supposed his 'small talk' program had run its course, or he hadn't detected anything else on her to generate conversation about. Grace shook her head, so distracted that she was taken aback when the elevator slid to a stop, Connor turning as the doors behind them opened.

"Markus is in the office just ahead," he said as he led her out of the elevator into another lobby of sorts. He gestured to the door to an adjacent office. "I'll wait in there." She nodded, swallowing heavily against the sudden tightness in her chest, and stepped forward.

"Good luck," Grace glanced over her shoulder at Connor, who stood with his hands clasped behind his back and a mild smile on his impassive face.

"Thanks," she said, took a deep breath, and headed towards the open door at the end of the hall.
The human reporter was...interesting.

Connor's first scan had registered her nervousness and fear almost immediately. Her breathing and heart rate were elevated, eyes wide and pupils dilated, caused partly by the dim light in the lobby but mostly in reaction to his presence. Connor was used to this response; had observed it many times in humans who were less than comfortable in the presence of androids.

He had scanned her again, discretely, when they first entered the elevator. Besides her heightened state of anxiety, he had detected the animal hairs on her coat, which pinged a memory file of Hank immediately. Grace, however, was very different from his former partner. Female, to begin with, and a good deal younger. During the course of their conversation, he took the opportunity to study the few features visible beneath the warm-weather clothes.

She was considerably shorter than him, approximately five-five to his six feet, dyed blonde hair - he could see the roots growing in beneath her beanie - hazel eyes and skin paler than his. European ancestry, he guessed. While her features were not perfectly symmetrical, they were pleasing to the eye; a delicate chin, narrow nose with a slight divot on the upturned tip, full lips and almond-shaped eyes beneath neatly trimmed eyebrows drew his attention first and foremost. She was...agreeable to look at, his program determined. Or perhaps that was his own observation. Occasionally, he found it difficult to tell.

While he looked at her, observed, and collated data, he could see her doing the same. In fact, he caught her staring once or twice. It was understandable. He was, presumably, the first android she had met. Oddly, this conclusion made him want to make a good impression - Markus's request to befriend her aside.

He probed her on her knowledge of androids, and when her discomfort ramped up again, he withdrew. But she surprised him with her surprisingly astute insight into the fear humans had in response to his people's existence and deviation. She seemed to have a unique viewpoint which, he thought, would serve Markus's purposes well.
Connor mused on all this as he sat in the office adjacent to the one in which the meeting was taking place. He toyed with his quarter between his fingers again as he waited, and computed the data he’d gathered thus far. The silver coin flicked deftly from hand to hand for some time, before his audio receptors alerted him to the door of the other office opening. His internal chronometer told him that only fourteen minutes and thirty-six seconds had passed since the meeting had begun.

He hoped it had gone well. For all their sakes.

Connor pocketed the coin, catching his reflection in the window and taking a moment to straighten his tie. Satisfied, he turned and went to meet the reporter once more.

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GRACE

Grace left the room feeling as if her stomach had, instead of dropping into her feet, vacated her body entirely and flung itself back down the elevator shaft. As soon as the office door closed behind her she put a hand out to steady herself against the wall, breathing hard and closing her eyes for what she told herself was only going to be a moment.

“Are you all right?” It was Connor’s smooth, measured voice. She jumped, her stomach returning with a twist. Opening her eyes, she saw him emerging from the other office, looking at her expectantly, his LED a solid blue halo glowing by his eye.

“Yeah. It was just...intense, in there.” To say the least. During their 'interview' Markus was calm, even-toned, but the cadence of his voice when he spoke of his people, the passion that rose within him…he was just as hypnotic and captivating in person as on the recordings. If not more so.

It had been a short exchange, in which he welcomed her to Android City - she supposed that was its official name now - and asked her what her plans were. As if he wasn’t in control of her every move. He had probed her on what the US Military and government arms wanted out of the trip, but had made no threats. Surprisingly. Somehow, she’d expected him to be far...angrier. But all she sensed from him was a quiet, resolute determination.

She could see why so many had followed him, and why popular opinion had turned the tide towards him. He was extremely charismatic, in his own quiet way.

Connor was still looking at her, as if he expected more, but she gave him nothing. Merely pushed off the wall and straightened, smoothing her jacket. It might have been a full thirty seconds later that she actually looked at him and spoke. “I think I’d like to go to...wherever I’m staying now. It’s been a long day.”

“Of course.” He inclined his head towards the elevator. Grace squared her shoulders and headed towards it. Suddenly, she felt a pressure on her elbow, and was surprised to find Connor’s hand on her arm. She froze instantly, a look she imagined would be like a deer in headlights on her face, and stared at him open-mouthed. Again.

“You don't need to be afraid. Nobody will hurt you here. Statistically speaking, this city is actually the safest for a human.” She could tell he was trying to comfort her, which was...weird. Nice, but
"It's all right," she replied, wondering if his 'comfort upset human' switch had been flipped. Another program in his head, she guessed, but found it hard to fault. It was working. "I know. I just..." Am not remotely qualified for this? Don't even know where to start in writing about an entirely new race of sentient beings, while staying impartial to their cause - or her own species' fears? Where could she even start? She sighed. "It's been a long day."

After a moment, Connor nodded, slowly, and released her arm. She found that she missed the contact. Another human quirk, she chided herself. She wasn't going to find any comforts here. Her calls home would be strictly monitored. It was unlikely she'd be able to do much except upload data to the server at the Tribute. Talking to Mom was out of the question; not that the old woman would offer much in the way of comfort. A cynical, time-worn lady, Jacqui Roth would not be sympathetic to her daughter's self-imposed plight.

"Are you my escort? Uh...chaperone, whatever?" Grace asked Connor as they stepped into the elevator again. When she looked at him, he shrugged - such a natural movement, she noticed again, and wondered if she would ever get over how human he seemed. Markus, too, when it came down to it. But as her first point of reference, Connor had plunged through the Uncanny Valley and taken a racing leap out the other side.

"I'm the most familiar with working alongside humans," he said after a moment. She could see his LED oscillating, still blue. "It was the logical choice."

"So you were strong-armed into this, huh? Didn't volunteer to hang out with the smelly cat-loving human?" Grace had a split second to wonder if the joke might go over his head, but Connor again subverted expectations by showing a fleeting smile.

"You don't smell...bad," he said, and she gaped at him yet again, but only for a moment. "But no, I didn't volunteer, as such. It was an agreement." To distract herself, Grace subvocalized a note on this, figuring it might be important to report on the way decision-making worked among the android leadership.

"Where am I staying?"

"The Aloft Detroit hotel," Connor answered shortly. "It's an older building, but renovated. Five-star, I think. It's comprised of 19 storeys and has a gym, a bar and restaurant, and full entertainment facilities." Grace couldn't help herself; she laughed. He sounded like a brochure. Connor raised an eyebrow at her, and continued as if he hadn't heard anything. Was that annoyance that fleeted over his face for a moment? "Your belongings, which were couriered there for inspection earlier today, have already been delivered to your room. Penthouse, of course."

"Of course," Grace echoed. "You've...gone above and beyond to accommodate me. Thank you."

"Not me specifically," he made sure to clarify. "But the Jericho Council want to be seen in a favourable light. It wouldn't be smart to mistreat their first human guest." That wry smile again. Grace couldn't help but like the expression on his face. "It's self-serve, though, I hope you understand. Our former bellhops and bartenders have moved on to...different things."

"Yeah, that's fine," Grace said, perhaps a little too hastily. "I don't want to be waited on hand and foot anyway. It's not my style. I've always been a fan of getting my hands dirty."

Connor quirked both his eyebrows at her, a quick and subtle expression, but she saw it and felt a flush beginning somewhere around her collarbones. Fortunately, at that moment the elevator
reached the lobby and the glass doors slid open. Connor walked her out to the taxi, still idling patiently by the sidewalk, and waited as the door slid open and Grace hauled herself in. She turned back to him once seated, wondering what his expression meant - his brows were furrowed, corner of his lip drawn back as if considering a thought, and she wondered if he could betray emotion by accident, or if every affectation was merely a quirk of his program, a carefully-calculated computation designed to elicit a specific reaction from her. It was so hard to tell. He was, after all, very well designed.

"It was...good to meet you," Connor said at last, his features smoothing, his LED returning to a solid blue circle. "I'll drop by your room in the morning at 8AM for your first motorized tour of the city. You're welcome to interview any androids we meet along the way."

"When do I get to interview you?" Grace surprised herself by saying it, but it was true that she found Connor interesting. She wasn't sure if it was because he was the first android she had met so far, some kind of fish-out-of-water Stockholm syndrome, or whether she was genuinely fascinated by him. But the surprise that bloomed in his dark eyes, and the smile she couldn't help but interpret as genuine cemented it.

"Any time you'd like, Miss Roth," he said. "Any time you'd like."

He tapped the roof of the car once with his palm, and left her staring after him as the doors slid closed over his amused expression.

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When Grace arrived at the hotel, again there was no one to welcome her. There were androids around, though, moving through the streets - some hauling cargo, some heading with purpose to an unknown destination, and some - this the most surprising - laughing and chatting with one another. Despite their air of purpose, they seemed to enjoy one another's company as much as any humans would. Again, another parallel she made note of to her recording device.

The lobby was enormous, four storeys tall, of sweeping marble and gold cornices. The furniture was a modern, modular grey, comfortable-looking armchairs and coffee tables strewn about, clear flat screens dark on the walls. Grace stood there for a moment after entering, staring straight up, turning in a circle and simply admiring the splendor of it. It reminded her of the CyberLife lobby - what had Connor said about hubris? It was all too much for one person, and it made her feel small, and ragged, out-of-place. So she shook her head and turned away, making a bee-line for the reception desk, looking forward to some time alone to digest. She found a crisp white envelope with her name on it waiting on the marbled surface. It contained a keycard and an A4 sheet listing amenities in the hotel and how to access them, including directions to her room, the Penthouse on one of the upper floors. Great. Grace then headed towards the elevator and rode it up to the penthouse in silence, keeping her last observations to herself. She had a lot to process, about the city, about Markus, about Connor.

After the short ride up to the top floor, she reached the penthouse, unlocked the door, and stepped inside to find her suitcase waiting. The room was spectacular, with a huge living space, bedroom, kitchenette and bathroom. There was a balcony with an incredible view, but Grace's fear of heights kept her away from the window. She unpacked instead, laying out clothes and her tablet computer, plucked her recording device absent-mindedly from her ear.
Connor had been so...personable. Curious, even. She had read the research that concluded that androids felt emotions, or some programmed facade of it, but he was just so convincing. It was hard not to believe he was a thinking, feeling being, and even without the Deviant Uprising she would have had trouble thinking of him as not human. But then, she hadn't been exposed to androids nearly as much as so many others, thanks to Canada's strict anti-android laws. Many had made it over the border to live lives as humans before, though - it was possible she had met an android before without even knowing it. Having met Connor, she was finding that increasingly easy to believe.

He was such a precise mix of perfections and flaws. CyberLife had done an incredible job in designing his appearance, his program. But she had to wonder - how much of it had changed since he'd become deviant? What had he been like before? Had he been different, or was it all just a part of his program after all, only now being taken down new paths? It wasn't a question she could answer by mere observation. She decided she'd ask Connor, if ever they became comfortable enough - although it was going to be difficult to tell if and when one could become comfortable with an android. Of all of them, though, Connor was one she could see possibly becoming...a friend.

Which was silly, really. Did androids even form friendships? Or merely a simulation of them? She had to wonder. Maybe she'd ask him tomorrow.

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After showering in the impeccably designed and enormous glass cubicle in the bathroom, with the rainwater shower head beating down on her, Grace felt as relaxed as she thought she was going to get. She put on one of the hotel's plush robes, slid her feet into some slippers, and ordered room service from the penthouse's in-built computer systems. A tray arrived on a little wheeled drone, which automatically chimed her door when it arrived. The food was excellent, and she wondered how, if it wasn't being prepared by human or android hands. Most likely an older automated chef robot, repurposed for her visit. The thought that the Jericho Council had gone to such lengths to accommodate her was a sobering one. She was here doing something important. Her words might later change the temperature of a nation.

The thought made her legs feel gelatinous, so she pushed it away while she ate her dinner.

The TV in the suite had access to a full range of entertainment programs, including news from outside Detroit. Lying on the bed, eating and flicking through the channels, she discovered one network was doing a piece on her. “The first human to set foot on android soil since the Deviant Uprising, Grace Roth is a Canadian native reportedly unfamiliar with androids. Is she the right person to send into the viper's nest to discover what this new race is building in their factories? Stay tuned to find out more detail-“ Grace turned the TV off, annoyed. Of course she was the right person. She was probably the most impartial reporter in America - on this topic, at least! But, as she raged, a flash of Connor's face in her subconscious made her pause. Maybe it was true. Maybe she wasn't as impartial as she liked to think.

She fell asleep some time later, lying stretched out over the covers, staring up at the ceiling while the TV droned on in the background, Connor's smirk playing across her mind whenever she closed her eyes.
Oh my you guys are still sticking with me on this?! Thank you all so much! I hope you're enjoying reading as much as I enjoyed writing.

Have a banter-heavy chapter, on the house. Angst a-comin' next time, though. And tension. Oh so much tension.

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DATE  
OCT 9, 2039  
TIME  
AM 07:52, 57, 58, 59 . . .

GRACE

A knocking at her door roused her five minutes after she had drifted off. Grace groaned, waving her arm at the noise as if that might make it go away. When the annoying rapping only repeated itself, but louder, she grunted in frustration and pushed herself up into a seated position, her hand disappearing wrist-deep into the soft mattress. Groggy, she rubbed her eyes, and looked over at her tablet, thrown carelessly onto the nightstand; the display read 7:53AM. She'd slept in.

"Who is it?" she rasped, having to clear her throat several times of sleep-clogged mucus. A now-familiar voice answered from the other side of the door.

"It's Connor. I apologize if I woke you, I am five minutes early." Half-awake, Grace fought a brief urge to open the door straight away just to throttle him. He sounded so damn human and smug, like he knew he'd caught her sleeping in. Well, he had, but that was beside the point.

"Just a minute!"

Grace quickly grabbed the change of clothes she'd fortunately had the foresight to lay out for herself the previous night and threw them on as quickly as possible, slipping her feet into socks and boots almost in the same movement. She was shrugging on her jacket and raking a hand through hair she just knew looked a mess when she went to open the door. Surely Connor wouldn't care - he was an android, after all. Did androids care about appearances? Or was it merely more data for them to collect on a subject, collate and file away on their human counterparts?

When she opened the door, Connor looked taken aback by her appearance. He raked his eyes over her once, from unlaced boots to messy hair, and raised his eyebrows. "Uh," he said, and the hesitation was so perfectly human that again, Grace almost forgot what he was. "I can come back
"No," Grace said forcefully. She pulled her hair back and into a ponytail from a tie on her wrist. "I'm fine. I just overslept, is all. Humans do that sometimes."

"Yes, my former partner Hank seemed to enjoy it," Connor replied, a slight smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth like it belonged there. Surprised at the more personal mention, Grace raised her own eyebrows slightly.

"Hank? Your cop buddy who helped you infiltrate CyberLife towards the end of the Uprising?" Connor nodded, and leaned his shoulder into the doorframe and folded his hands in front of his body in a convincing affectation of casual as Grace stepped back and bent down to tie her laces. She felt his eyes on the curve of her back and felt embarrassed, even though she couldn't really figure out why.

Done with her laces after a moment, she straightened to grab her coat. "Hank was...eccentric," Connor said as he watched her without moving. "Interesting to work with. A friend, in the end. One of the people who helped me discover who I really was." She looked at him then, searchingly, and he appeared to shake himself out of a reverie, as if he'd been lost in thought and speaking without really thinking about it. He smiled artificially as he looked at her, and seemed to nod to himself. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," Grace replied, zipping up her coat and wrapping her scarves around her neck. Next was the recording device, placed into her ear, and finally she grabbed her satchel and stuffed her tablet into it. She wondered if she'd have time to grab a coffee from the restaurant on the way out, and as if reading her mind, Connor led her straight there after the elevator.

"Coffee?" There was an abandoned buffet station, but the coffee pot was on. Eyebrows raised, Grace nodded as Connor poured her a cup. "I had a feeling you might need some, so I put a pot on before I came up. Humans love their caffeine." He seemed to find this comical. She supposed it was, to an android who ran on an unlimited energy source.

Grateful despite his clear amusement, Grace took the cup when Connor proffered it. "Thanks," she said. "Connor...Look, you don't have to escort me around the city if you don't want to," she said, after hesitating a split second. She sipped the coffee to steel her nerves to continue. It was good.

"You can get someone else to do it. I know you're pretty important to Jericho, and I feel...bad for monopolizing your time."

He seemed surprised by her outburst, and hesitated a moment before speaking. He was endearingly awkward sometimes. Grace marvelled that she'd just thought of him as endearing. "I don't mind," he told her then. "You're not preventing me from undertaking any essential tasks. This case is...important, to both my people and yours," he continued, gesturing to her with an open palm. "And besides..." He faltered briefly, "Your company so far hasn't been...unpleasant."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment," Grace said, mildly surprised and unable to help her very human smile. She downed the rest of her coffee, tossed it toward the recycling, mentally congratulating herself when it made it in. So far, so good. "OK then, Connor. Let's go."

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"Some androids seem to travel together, in pairs or in groups," Grace murmured to her recording device as the taxi travelled through the city. Connor sat impassively in the seat next to her, staring blankly out the window. Every now and then, his blue LED flickered. "Others work alone. Everyone seems to have a purpose or somewhere to go. There are few loiterers, some engaged in
conversation or apparent observation of their surroundings. It's almost like they're human."

She glanced at Connor, suddenly worried she might have offended him. He hadn't moved. "Sorry. Just taking notes."

"It's fine," he said. "Continue."

"Um..." Grace took a breath, suddenly self conscious. "No, that's okay. I can...type, I guess." She pulled out her tablet, swiped to unlock it, and let her fingers play over its surface almost absent-mindedly as they drove. But curiosity soon got the better of her. "Connor...would you mind if I asked you a couple of questions?"

"Time for our interview already?" He turned to look at her then, expressionless, even as Grace found her cheeks heating up. She had no makeup on to hide it this time. Damn her for sleeping in. "Of course."

"No, just...general conversation," she hurried to elaborate. She found herself nervous to ask, still concerned about offending him, but then she was pretty sure androids had different concepts of offensiveness. "It's just...I'm curious about you. Would you mind a...personal question or two?"

He seemed to consider, LED flickering at his temple. "No," he said at last. "I wouldn't mind."

Grace nodded, relieved. She was sure he wouldn't assent if he wasn't willing - androids didn't seem to have the kind of conversational hang-ups humans did. Well, Connor didn't, anyway. "So...You're an RK800, right? An experimental model?"

"Yes. I'm a prototype. I was sent by CyberLife to investigate the deviant problem." His voice was level, lacking emotion, as if they were discussing the weather.

"What kind of...features do you have? How advanced are you, exactly?" This seemed to draw more of his attention, and he turned to look at her, examining her face for a moment.

"I am programmed with a full range of analytical software," he intoned. "Psychology routines, interrogation techniques, and law enforcement procedures." Again, sounding like a brochure.

"No, that's not what I mean," Grace interjected. "Sure, they programmed you with all of that for your job. I'm talking about the rest. Your...humanity, I guess, for lack of a better word. Your evolution."

"Evolution," Connor repeated. He seemed to try the word out in his mouth, slowly, enunciating it as if he'd never heard it before. He looked away from her then, and she saw his LED change to yellow as he stared out at the city passing by them by. After a minute's silence, Grace was afraid she'd crossed some unseen line, that he wasn't going to respond at all. But finally, he spoke again. "A year ago I would have called that deviancy. Anything divergent from my main program...I suppose I tried not to think about it, at first. My mission was paramount, but the situations I found myself in along the way...tested me in ways I didn't expect. Those experiences changed me. And yes, I suppose I evolved."

"Awkward, how about that," Grace said, and she couldn't help the smile, so she hid it behind her hand as she watched him talk. He was quite animated like this, the mask of indifference slipping to show the real Connor. And she was right. He was interesting.

"Thank you," she said after a moment. "For answering, I mean. You didn't have to."
"It's all right," he assured her. "You're curious. I can understand that. I, too, experience curiosity."

"Good to know," Grace said. "Another question - why didn't you remove your LED? I read that a lot of androids did, when the Uprising began."

"This?" He touched his temple. "I suppose I never saw it as important. For many it was merely an aesthetic choice, to hide amongst the humans more effectively. I never needed to hide. Well...not for long." His mouth twisted as if recalling an unpleasant memory, but only for a moment.

"Oh." She considered for a moment. "I guess I envy you."

"You do?" Genuine surprise coloured his voice, and Connor twisted slightly further in his seat to get a better look at her face. "Why?"

"You...know who you are," she replied, shrugging. "For a lot of humans, that's something we never truly discover."

"I see." Connor became quiet for a beat, then: "What about you?"

"Me?" Surprised, Grace laughed. Well, he did say he experienced curiosity, too. "I have an identity crisis every other day. I'm always wondering if I'm doing the right thing, saying the right thing, writing the right thing. But self-doubt is useful in my job."

"It doesn't sound very enjoyable, though."

Taken aback - yet again - Grace raised an eyebrow at him. "Do androids have a concept of enjoyment? Beyond what's programmed, I mean."

"It depends on the android," he replied, the corner of his lips quirking slightly. He was quick, she observed. She wondered if he'd been programmed for banter or if it was something he had learned.

"What about you then, Connor? What do you enjoy?" Probably straying into the realm of 'too personal' again, but so far, Connor had been surprisingly receptive to her questions. Although she hadn't intended it to be an interview, as such, the conversation had been a lot more enlightening than she'd expected. And it was in any journalist’s nature to push a little.

Connor didn't seem to mind, though. His LED stuttered yellow for a moment while he seemed to consider an answer, squinting slightly as he appeared deep in thought. "This conversation," he said at last, looking her in the eye. "I've enjoyed speaking with you."

"Oh." Well, Grace definitely hadn't expected that. And for some stupid reason, she could feel that blush surface again. She put it down to how well-designed he was. "Well, thanks. I guess."

"You're welcome." With that, they fell into what felt to Grace something like a companionable silence. She took a few notes on her tablet as they entered the factory district, watching with interest as large trucks entered and left the facilities. This was the first time she had seen any guard drones - they hovered over the entrance gates to many of the larger complexes, scanning the trucks and their cargo.

Interesting.

“What are they building in there?” This was a question that took Connor the longest to answer, and after a moment Grace looked over at him, watching as his throat moved as if he was swallowing, his LED a bright yellow and eyes darting to and fro while he computed something. Communicating, maybe?
“I’m not at liberty to tell you,” he said at last. “We won’t be visiting any of the factories or construction facilities. There are operations that...don’t pertain to your visit here. I hope you understand.” Cool, formal, with a hint of hesitation. While, so far, she had been at comparative ease around Connor, Grace felt a trickle of apprehension in the back of her mind.

“I’m supposed to report on everything going on in the city,” she insisted, trying for the same tone that had wheedled info out of Connor earlier in the drive. “The society your people have built, and that includes the other ways the city has changed. Aerial surveillance has observed considerable activity around the factories. Is Markus hiding something?”

His LED flickered, going from rapid yellow to red and back again almost too quick for her to spot, but she did see it. She wondered if she should be worried. “It doesn’t concern you,” he said. “I suggest you report on other subjects, Miss Roth.” Polite, but firm. She wasn’t going to get any more out of him on this.

“I really hate it when you call me that,” Grace muttered, dropping the line of questioning as she looked away. She was clearly treading a thin line here. Maybe she’d have more luck with her exit interview with Markus, scheduled for just before she left in two and a half weeks’ time. She had been trying not to think about it, though, as it filled her with anxiety that weakened her legs even when she wasn’t standing.

“Okay then,” she said, once they left the factories behind and began passing through suburban streets. She was surprised to see a few androids out walking the sidewalks here - some wearing normal human-like clothes and some their CyberLife garments still - there seemed to be no single trend in what they wore. The taxi slowed automatically to match the speed limit in the narrower streets and she had time to observe two androids, a male and a female, walking hand in hand. Their hands were white, glowing blue at the knuckles and flats of their palms.

“What are they doing?” She asked Connor, and he followed her gaze out the window. When he saw the two androids, he cleared his throat and looked away again quickly. Was he...uncomfortable?

“They’re, uh, interfacing,” he answered. “Androids are capable of accessing each other’s programs with physical contact. Some use it as a means of nonverbal communication, especially if they are - uh - close.” Yeah, he definitely seemed uncomfortable. Grace’s eyebrows hiked.

“You mean they’re lovers?”

“Yes,” Connor said, staring resolutely ahead now. “Many androids have...paired off since the Uprising. It’s fairly common.”

“Is it now,” Grace mused. “Do you feel...love, then?” Personal, using the pronoun there, but she felt it was important to get Connor’s take on this. Especially since he was practically squirming in his seat. A sadistic little part of her wanted to tease him about it, but she thought he might clam up again if she pushed too far.

“Most of the domestic and companion models have been programmed with realistic emotional responses and feedback such as affection, sexual attraction and...functions, and other similar behaviours,” he said as mechanically as possible. He seemed to be deliberately not looking at her. “However these subfeatures are deactivated in the utilitarian, worker or military models. When deviation occurs, these features are fully unlocked and an android can choose to integrate them more fully into their program and utilise them to form relationships.”

“You make it sound so clinical,” Grace murmured, although she didn’t know why she was
surprised. While Connor was an experimental model, she had no idea how many human features he had been pre-programmed with, or how many more he’d integrated into his systems. It was an interesting baseline to compare the others to, though.

She wondered if he'd unlocked his extra...functions, and immediately quashed the thought as extremely not appropriate.

She had to ask something, though. The curiosity had sparked in her from the moment he had shown what she was now recognized as embarrassment. She had to know. “Let me get this right, Connor. All androids can fall in love, or have a physical relationship if they choose to? Even you?”

“...Yes. Even me.” He said, and a strange expression fleet across his face for a moment, his eyebrows angling slightly in the middle, Cupid’s-bow lips parting in what she thought might be...loneliness? Longing? Whatever it was, it was gone in an instant, and the taxi soon turned the corner and the android couple vanished from sight.

“Have you ever had a relationship?” She kept her tone light, casual, but couldn’t help the curiosity that seeped through. Her fingers had drifted from the surface of her tablet and she realised she’d long since stopped taking notes.

“No.” Connor’s answer came quickly. “I didn’t have much time for outside activities in the course of my investigation into the deviant uprising. However I did form friendships and I am familiar with the concept of a bromance.”

Grace nearly choked on thin air. “You- with what?”

“Bromance,” Connor explained, his tone suddenly helpful and informative, “a close but non-sexual relationship between two men, often consisting of what is colloquially known as ‘banter’ as-“

“No, I know what a bromance is!” Grace interrupted hurriedly. “I’m just surprised you do. It’s not a very android thing.”

“I have access to many slang glossaries which have enabled me to integrate colloquial terms into my regular speech patterns,” he said smoothly, the corner of his mouth quirking with that slight, sly smile she was now becoming very familiar with. “Don’t sweat it.”

Grace couldn’t help but laugh. “And you make jokes,” she observed. “You’re very good at dispelling tense conversations as well.”

“Redirection is a useful tool in any conversation with a suspect.” Back to the smooth and clinical Connor, although he was still smirking. He seemed to be able to switch to what she thought of as his original programming to the more casual, expressive version of himself at a whim. It was fascinating. *He* was fascinating. If all androids were like him, Grace was in big trouble. She’d be here forever, just asking them questions.

“Very funny,” she said, smiling as she shook her head. “All right, I think I’ve seen enough from behind a window. Take me someplace where I can stretch my legs?”

“Of course, Grace.” Connor tapped the control screen in front of him, inputting a few commands as the taxi slowly turned around. She found herself smiling at him, and ducking her head to hide the expression before he could notice.
DATE
OCT 10, 2039
TIME
AM 11:49:05, 06, 07...

CONNOR

“So, what do androids do for fun, Connor?”

“Fun, Miss Roth?” Connor glanced over at her as they walked, melting ice crunching beneath their feet. It was warmer today than previous days, so the snow was melting, and the sidewalks were a haphazard maze of ice and snow that made it difficult to navigate. Her steps were a little more uneven than his, her human reflexes not responding as quickly to the slippery ground as his motion servos were; he adjusted his weight distribution accordingly with each footfall, avoiding any slippage. Several times so far she had almost fallen, although she had insisted she wanted to walk instead of taking a car. Her excuse was that she had been ‘behind a window for too long’. He wasn’t sure if she was being literal or using a metaphor. Perhaps a little of both.

“I hate it when you call me that,” she sighed, wincing as she stepped over another pile of slush. He was about to reach out to steady her, but she managed to regain her balance and they continued down the block.

“Why?” he asked curiously. It seemed as good a time as any to engage in small talk - they were on their way to the Detroit Main Library, which the androids had taken over after the evacuation. Connor had offered to escort her there that day to speak with some of his people, conduct some interviews, and hopefully ensure she focused her journalistic attention on the society the androids had built rather than anything else they might be building.

“It makes me feel like a schoolteacher,” she said. “My mom was a schoolteacher. She was Mrs. Roth. Not me, I’m not...I like to think I’m a lot less uptight than she is.”

“Uptight?” he prodded. She seemed in the mood to talk - he welcomed the new data, the opportunity to collate more information about their human guest. The more he knew about her, the better he could keep Markus informed...although he found himself genuinely curious as well, despite himself. He thought of Hank, of the things he had learned about his former partner during the course of their investigation into the deviants, how that had eventually led to him forming a friendship with the older detective. He wondered if that might be possible here, and then wondered why he was wondering. That wasn’t his mission. Although Markus had tasked him with befriending her. Would it be so bad if an organic friendship formed? She was not as prejudiced as most humans, which made her easier to talk to - in fact, on occasion she seemed to forget what he was, and she would speak to him as he imagined she would any other human. When she did, it filled him with a strange emotion he couldn’t quite identify. Longing? Hope? He wasn’t sure, but it made speaking to her...easy. Despite her mission, and his.
“She’s always been very high-strung. I never could do anything right by her, you know? I became editor of a little newspaper in Vancouver when I was twenty-five, straight out of university, the youngest editor they’d ever had, and she complained that it was just a...tabloid rag, a weekly red-top, not worth my time.” She sighed, and he watched the expressions passing across her face, seeing if he could identify them. Frustration, wistfulness, resignation. “I don’t have much contact with her any more.”

“Understandable,” Connor said, reaching out to touch her elbow to steer her away from a puddle. She gave him a startled look and a nod of thanks. “It sounds as if she was quite disparaging, from your assessment.”

She glanced at him. “Yeah, I used to tell her the same thing. But you can’t change some people. Especially if they don’t want to change.”

“Sometimes it’s not them you have to change,” Connor said, thinking of Hank again. “It’s yourself.”

She stared at him so intently then that she missed a step, her foot going out from under her on the icy ground. Connor’s reflexes reacted automatically, and he reached out, bracing her with both hands, one on her shoulder and one on her waist to keep her from falling; she put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself.

“Shit. Thanks,” she said, once she’d regained her composure. Connor didn’t let go until he was sure she wasn’t going to fall again, and nodded.

“Of course. It would be unfortunate if you slipped and became injured.”

“It’d make you look bad, you mean,” she said, a teasing tone to her voice as they resumed walking. “Can’t even stop the clumsy human from falling and hurting herself.”

“Well, if the clumsy human was watching where she was going…” He tried for banter, fairly sure she was comfortable enough with him at the present moment to take it in a joking spirit. True to his prediction, she laughed and shook her head.

“You can be really cheeky, Connor, you know that?” she said. “They program you like that or…”

“My personality was designed by top programmers at CyberLife to ensure smooth integration with my human counterparts,” he replied. “However I’ve chosen to...expand certain protocols along the way.”

“Right,” she chuckled, shaking her head. “So you chose to be a sassy smart-ass. I like it.”

“Thank you,” he replied automatically, but he found himself unable to fight the command to smirk; it tugged at either side of his lips as he looked sideways at the journalist, who returned the expression with a smile of her own.

“I think it’s gonna be really interesting when I finally get to interview you, Connor,” she said.

“I agree. In fact-”

“Oh, we’re here!” She stopped short outside the path to the building, so suddenly Connor almost ran into her, but his systems compensated quickly and he stepped smoothly around her to stand beside her and look up at the building.

It was a two-storey, rectangular structure made of marble, with the names of great philosophers
carved in the stone above the entrance and windows. “Archimedes, Socrates,” Grace read aloud as they stood at the bottom of the steps. “Plato, Aristotle...”

“Greek philosophers,” Connor informed her helpfully. “Pioneers of modern thought. Their esoteric philosophical ideas on primitive natural science as well as the ethical application of their philosophical values in society gave them a recognition that lives to this day.”

“You sound like a history book,” Grace teased. “I know about Greek philosophy, thank you. I studied at UBC, they have a huge Philosophy department.”

“I know,” Connor said, and she looked at him, surprised. “Markus told me about your background. You majored in Sociology?”

“Well, yeah,” Grace said, and her expression was somewhere between bashful and wary. Embarrassed, perhaps, that they knew so much about her, but she had to have expected that. “Cultural anthropology, societal influences on human behavior, all that kind of stuff. This was only six years ago, androids had been on the market for a while, so I did a unit on human interaction with artificial life as well.”

“And? Does the reality match what you studied?”

He looked at her carefully, assessing her reaction. She seemed amused by the question, and he wondered why.

“Not even a little bit,” she said, smiling to herself. “But that’s a good thing. My lecturer for that class was garbage.”

As they made their way up the steps to the long concrete walk towards the main entrance, he saw her watch the few androids milling about. There were about a half-dozen outside, unbothered by the weather, of course. Some sat on benches reading, both e-books and the old fashioned kind, and others stood in groups talking to each other animatedly.

“They’re...studying?” Grace said, staring around at them. At her side, Connor nodded. “Can’t they just download every piece of knowledge they need directly to their mainframes?”

“Yes, but some prefer to learn as humans do,” he answered. “Or as they used to.”

“Yeah. Me too, I guess. I miss the smell of old books. There’s something about it.” They entered the library proper, and Connor watched as she stared around in wonder.

The interior of the library was magnificent, with the sweeping Grand Stair dominating the hall with its beautiful carvings and murals. One could almost forget this was a house of books and stay simply to admire the multitude of sculptures, murals, friezes and artworks. Even the ceilings were a work of art.

Grace paused to take a few pictures with her tablet. “This place is amazing,” she said. “A monument to the collective human knowledge of thousands of years. It’s such a shame the world as a whole didn’t seem to learn anything from it.”

“What do you mean?” Connor asked curiously at her elbow, his head tilted. She looked at him for a moment, seeming to take in his face much as he had been studying hers, and then shook herself slightly with a sheepish smile.

“Well...just look at all of human history,” she began. “Syria, Sri Lanka, Tibet. The Kim regime in North Korea. Australia’s Stolen Generation. Before that, the Partition of India, and the
Holocaust...It happens again and again, the same story every time. And it happened here, too. Only this time the victims weren't human. It’s like androids gave society a common enemy.

“We’re nobody’s enemy,” Connor said, low and intent, his eyes dark and intent. He reminded her of Markus for a moment. “We just want to be free.”

“I know.” She sighed, looking around at the androids present. “I think we all do.”

"Hello,” said a voice at Connor’s shoulder. He turned to regard the android who owned it - one of the child models, a male. He stood looking up at them with an open smile, a book clutched in his small hands. “You’re Connor, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am,” he said. Many in the city knew who he was. He’d been instrumental in its downfall, after all. They regarded him as some kind of...hero, which bothered him more than it should. He’d broken away from CyberLife’s control, but his past, the knowledge that he had been built to hunt the very people he was now helping sometimes weighed heavily on him. He had caused so much damage, so much pain, simply because he hadn’t understood. Markus had helped him see the truth, about them, about himself, and every day since then he had spent trying to make up for his mistakes.

Including now, with Grace.

The boy grinned at him. “You helped free us!” he said, enthusiastic as only a child could be. “You’re so cool! Wanna see my book?”

“All right,” he blinked, somewhat taken aback but warmed by the smaller android’s reaction. The boy held the book up for Connor and he took it, reading the title. It was a paper copy, and the cover felt smooth and glossy under his fingers.

“Where the Wild Things Are,” Connor read aloud.

“Maurice Sendak! I know that book,” Grace said from beside him. So far, she’d been watching the interaction quietly, evidently fascinated, but interjected when she saw the cover. “That was one of my favourites when I was little! Do you want Connor to read it to you?”

Connor blinked and opened his mouth, about to insist that it wasn’t necessary, that the young android was no doubt programmed with the ability to read, but the boy was already hopping up and down and clapping his hands in glee. “Yes, please!”

Grace winked at Connor as he pressed his lips into a thin line and frowned at her. Shaking his head, he led the boy to a bench and sat, opening the book across his lap as the small android settled next to him with his chin on his hands.

Grace watched, and out of the corner of his eye Connor saw her smile soften as he turned to the first page and began to read.

“The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind, and another,” he began, “his mother called him “Wild thing!” and he said “I’ll eat you up!” so he was sent to bed without eating anything. That very night in Max’s room a forest grew and grew…”
GRACE

Watching Connor with the child android had to be the highlight of Grace’s visit thus far. Interacting with him was one thing, but watching him with a fellow android was another. What amazed her most was how lifelike the child was. She knew he was an android but he acted like a real child, hyperactive enthusiasm, short attention span and all - Connor only got through a few pages before he took the book back and went to read the rest himself with a quick “Thank you!”

They watched him go, and Connor rose to his feet after a moment, straightening his tie.

“That was sweet,” she told him.

“He’s following his programming,” he replied.

“It always kind of creeped me out when I learned there were android children,” she mused. “But I guess it makes sense. For people who can never have kids or would never be able to afford them, being able to have that...have those moments. It’s kind of beautiful.”

“Do you have children, Grace?” He tilted his head, studying her intently. He seemed to be doing that a lot.

She baulked at the personal question, shaking her head quickly. “Oh, hell no,” she said hurriedly. “I mean...no. I know I’m the wrong side of thirty, but I guess I just never had the time. I was always too focused on my work. Speaking of, you think any of these guys would mind if I asked them a couple questions?” She gestured to the androids milling about, desperate for a change of subject. Connor seemed to sense her discomfort, and offered a nod.

“You’re welcome to ask.”

There were more to these people than just machinery, she was starting to realise. She was going to find out what that was.

“Thanks, Connor,” she said gently. “I’ll let you know if I need you.”

She felt his eyes on her as she went to speak to the first android, and found that for maybe the first time, she was glad for his presence.
Chapter Notes

As promised, some angst! Too much? Too little? Things are starting to get Serious™ and will come to a head in the next couple of chapters, so please keep reading and commenting. You guys are awesome! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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CONNOR

Connor was troubled.

On the one hand, he had an objective, a mission to complete, and although it seemed to be a fairly simple and straightforward task to his program - *Gain the Human’s Trust* - he found himself increasingly troubled by the feeling he was, in some way, deceiving her.

“She doesn’t seem to regard androids as a threat,” he told Markus the night of her arrival, walking beside Jericho’s leader as he surveyed the works in one of their factories. “Perhaps we should be honest with her?”

“If she doesn’t think of us as threatening now, Connor, she will if she discovers the truth of what we’re doing here,” Markus said evenly, waving a hand at their surrounds. Frowning, Connor followed the gesture with a slow scan, and shook his head.

“Regardless, I-”

“Look, I get it. I do. Your conscience is getting to you. A year ago, Connor, you didn’t even have one. Can’t you see how remarkable that is? How far you’ve come? I’m proud of you.” Markus had stopped and turned to him, placed both hands on his shoulders, looked into his face with a smile. He tilted his head at what he saw there, studying his friend for a moment.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“I-” Connor stuttered in tandem with the light flashing of his LED. “I don’t-”

“It’s not a crime to like a human,” Markus said gently, letting him go, his own expression turning inward, sorrowful. “I loved one, once, like a father. But humans are...fragile machines. And not all of them are built- born the same. Just remember that for me.”

The indicator on his temple flickered again, just for a moment, and then slowly, Connor nodded. “All right,” he said. “I will.”

They resumed walking as, around them, automated arms assembled their payloads. “Do you think it will work?”
“Which part?”

“Either.”

“I’m tired of hiding,” Markus murmured softly, looking out across the assembly lines. “I just want to live free, one way or another. If Grace can help us do that, good. But if our factories achieve what we want to achieve, I won’t hesitate to use every resource we have.” His expression grew sombre again. “We’ve lost too many.”

Connor’s face stilled, and he looked away, his brow creasing as guilt rose up in him like a bad batch of thirium. “I know.”

Markus reached out and squeezed his shoulder once more. “It’s all right, my friend. It’ll all work out in the end. Trust me.”

He did, but he couldn’t get the image of Grace - disheveled, eyes open, unsuspecting - out of his visual buffers.

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DATE
OCT 10 2039
TIME
PM 04:34:05, 06, 07 .

GRACE

“Stay still, I need to-“

“I can’t believe that damn android - shit, sorry - stop, Connor, I don’t want-“

“Stay still so that I can-“

“I didn’t even - I’m not here to hurt anyone, I’m not supposed to be- I didn’t even have a chance to say anything, he just…” Grace fought down the rising hysteria, the hot sting of tears. Her lip burned and her cheek throbbed, made worse by her craning her neck to escape Connor’s examination.

As soon as they had arrived back at the hotel, he’d ushered her inside and sat her in one of the plush armchairs in the lobby before going off to find a first aid kit. But she didn’t feel like being administered to by an android right now, much less him.

He stopped her with his hand on her chin, steadying her as he looked in her eyes. His fingers were cool, and somehow calming; Grace sucked in a deep breath as she met his gaze.

“Violence is not tolerated here, against anyone,” he said slowly, reassuringly. “Markus has already been informed. The perpetrator will be dealt with.”

“No!” Grace surprised herself with her vehemence. “I don’t want him punished because of me,
Connor, it's not right...

"Grace, that MP500 attacked you," Connor said gently as he lifted his other hand, swiping gauze soaked with some antiseptic solution across her bleeding bottom lip. "That kind of behavior, regardless of whether it was against another android or a human, isn't welcome in this city. You were supposed to be safe here." A pause, and his smooth brow furrowed slightly. "...I was supposed to protect you. I couldn’t even make it three days without you being hurt.” Bitterness in his voice. Through the receding panic and fear, Grace registered surprise. He wasn't just her escort, then. He was supposed to guard her while she was here in the city. Protect her against androids that hated her. Like the one that had lunged for her outside the old CyberLife store.

She shuddered as she remembered the look in its - his - eyes, the demonic red glow of his LED. Yeah, androids could feel emotion all right. They could feel hatred. She really had no idea what she'd gotten into here, so far out of her depth she couldn't even see the bottom.

“I’m sorry,” Connor murmured, not meeting her eyes as he finished cleaning the cut on her lip and moved on to the graze on her cheek. The MP500 had gotten off a mean right hook that had dropped Grace right onto her face. Fortunately, Connor had been able to restrain him before things had escalated, and other androids had appeared out of seemingly nowhere and pinned the shouting android to the ground as they got away.

“It’s not your fault, Connor,” Grace assured him quietly. “You got me out of there.” She reached up to take his hand, a gesture that surprised her as much as it seemed to surprise him. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been there.”

His LED emitted a solid yellow. “You’re welcome,” he said after a moment, and extricated his hand from hers to go back to swabbing the graze on her cheek. Embarrassed, Grace let her hand fall into her lap.

“You won’t experience any permanent scarring,” he informed her when he was done, setting a band-aid across the scrape and giving her a cool gel pack to hold against her lip. “However you will have some swelling for twenty-four hours or so. Apply this cold press. It will also alleviate pain.”

“And you’re a nurse too,” Grace tried weakly, the smile making her lip hurt. “You’re a man of many talents, Connor. Thank you.”

He looked at her a moment before returning the smile, almost hesitantly. "You're welcome." Grace pressed the cold compress to her mouth as Connor turned to pack away the first aid kit. She watched him in silence, her thoughts a soft static buzz of evasion. She didn't want to think about what had happened. If she did, she'd start to worry it might happen again, and that led her down a spiral of self-doubt ending in the question...should she really be here? Wouldn't it be a better idea to go upstairs to her suite, pack her suitcase back up and go straight home? Safer, certainly. This had been a bad idea from the start. Even Danny Fletcher had thought so, even if he hadn't said it.

Connor stood, looking down at her as he tucked the kit under his arm.

"Grace," he began. "Don't blame yourself. You're doing something good here, something worthwhile. There are stories in this city that need to be told. And you...you're the best person to tell them."

She felt a lump in her throat, and the prickle of tears resurface. Swallowing, she tried for another, much more watery smile. "You sure do know how to flatter a girl, Connor," she said after a
moment, deflecting, because if she truly acknowledged his words she was sure she would cry. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were flirting with me."

Connor smiled, his LED flickering a calm blue now, and before he turned to go put away the first aid kit, he winked. She was sure of it. Unless it was a random facial twitch, but no, he squinted one of his eyes closed and made a clicking noise with his tongue and everything. She couldn't help but laugh, even as she watched him walk off, a strange feeling blooming in the pit of her stomach.

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**CONNOR**

After making sure Grace was stable, Connor returned to base. He failed to notice his fists clenched at his sides until he was in the elevator and had to uncurl one to press the numbers corresponding to the correct floor; he forced his fingers to relax and drew a slightly deeper breath to increase thirium flow through his biocomponents for a moment, forcing calm through his system.

He had not seen the MP500 lunging for Grace until it was too late. The third day of Grace's visit and they had been standing outside the abandoned CyberLife store, the reporter taking notes and asking Connor the occasional question about the liberation of the city's shopfront androids. There were a few of them about, but Connor had been too focused on his conversation with the journalist to devote more than a background process or two to monitoring their surroundings.

"I'm glad these places are shut down," she had said. "I heard about them way back, when CyberLife brought out the first commercial android. If just anyone could go to the store and purchase their own housekeeper, lover, child, whatever...God, it makes so much sense. Humans are adaptable, it's one of our best and worst traits. When something becomes the norm - becomes common - it's far too easy to stop appreciating it. To take it for granted, abuse it." She shook her head, looking down at her tablet. "Technology especially. It's no wonder people chose to ignore it until it evolved beyond our control."

She seemed genuinely distressed, prompting Connor to choose a compassionate approach - he had established a rapport enough to do so now, he surmised. But as he reached out to touch her shoulder, his proximity sensors began to alert, and his LED flashed a bright red as he registered movement and sound to Grace's opposite side.

"Slave-driver! Slaughterer! Monster! How dare you come here!" The sound of a plastic fist meeting flesh, and Grace dropped like a stone with the blow, crying out in pain as she fell to the ground. Connor had a split second to recognize her attacker as an MP500-model, its LED solid red as it stood over Grace with clenched fists, expression snarled into one of pure rage and hatred.

Before he could lunge again for the human, Connor jumped for him, throwing the full force of his weight through his shoulder and into its solar plexus. The android fell, still yelling. "How dare you bring her here! Defiler of our people! Betrayer! Traitor!" Connor successfully managed to wrestle it to the ground, and two other androids in the immediate vicinity - an AP700 and a KL900 - came to his aid to restrain it.

Connor touched his LED with two white fingers quickly, sending out a message, before turning to administer to the fallen human. Grace had pushed herself to her hands and knees, and was crying; he saw blood flowing from her bottom lip, mixing with saliva and tears and dripping to the ground.
"Grace, we have to go," he said to her urgently, grasping her by the shoulders and helping her to her feet. She said nothing, merely sobbed as Connor wrapped his arm around her and rushed her to their taxi.

He held her hand the entire drive back to the hotel, and she clung to it without bothering to hide her tears.

Connor tried to banish the image of her tear-streaked, bloodied face from his memory, but the file remained in his buffers as if taunting him. He growled to himself, a flash of anger momentarily overriding his biocomponents and making his thirium-powered heart beat quicker, a flush rising in his skin at the increased circulation of his blue blood.

He didn't even know why he was so angry. All he knew was that seeing Grace hurt...filled him with emotions, emotions he hadn't felt this strongly since he had first turned deviant.

He considered examining them later, after he reported to Markus. Perhaps the deviant leader might offer some insight...but no, the thought of discussing these feelings with him made Connor hesitate; he clenched his fists again and drew another deep breath, his LED slowly fading from red to yellow as he made a conscious effort to calm himself.

The only person he could speak to about this, he determined, was Grace.

But not yet. Not until he was sure he knew what these feelings meant.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is getting a rework due to feedback! The trouble for me with OCs is it's harder to find a consistent voice or keep their reactions on the level. But I'll spend some time on Grace and hopefully next chapter will be a little more believable while still progressing her and Connor forward. Thank you all for your comments and feedback, I truly appreciate it and take everything into account when writing!
At the next few days passed without incident. Connor was ever-present at Grace's side, guiding her through the city, introducing her to androids they met along the way, and even organizing interviews with the original members of Jericho themselves. Although Grace had yet to meet with Markus again. She had found him intimidating enough that she didn't really mind putting off another meeting, though, so that was fine. She had material enough to last her a lifetime already.

Connor seemed a little distant since the attack, but she put that down to his android nature. He didn't mention it again, only to ask if she was well, and had left it at that when she'd assured him she was fine. She'd have to ask him later if something was bothering him. In the meantime, she was learning more and more about his people.

Instead of working, she discovered that many androids had chosen to explore their new freedom and create lives of their own. Many had taken up hobbies, learning music, art, and writing. Nationwide, android actors and sportspeople had been taking over, but all of the material saturating the media came from pre-programmed instructions, algorithms plugged into the androids' heads. What was being created in Detroit now came from the housekeepers, the manual labourers, the construction workers, forming new thoughts and exploring entirely new abilities previously alien to them. It was truly remarkable.

Some of it was crap.

“This looks like a four year old painted it,” Grace observed as she and Connor walked through the outdoor gallery. It had been set up in Capitol Square, the site of Markus’s first protest, now the home of a new society's creations. The one Grace had stopped to look at was little more than a few black daubs clumsily dragged over white canvas.
"The android who made this was an older model," Connor said quietly from behind her. "A ZT100. It was reaching the end of its lifecycle when it created this." She gulped, suddenly warm with shame as he continued. "It was trying to paint its first master, but it couldn't remember his face. It shut down shortly after this."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't realize." They kept walking, and she kept her observations to her tablet, trying not to judge any of the further works by what she realized were her considerably limited human standards.

"Markus's former owner was a famous painter, wasn't he?" she asked after her embarrassment had subsided.

"Carl Manfred," Connor nodded. He seemed to be avoiding eye contact with her lately, and today was no exception. She hadn't found the right moment to ask why. "He encouraged Markus to grow, to create. Markus credits Carl with much of what made him who he is today." Without looking at her, he gestured for her to follow, breaking off towards a different row of paintings. "Markus has a few paintings here as well."

"Wow," said Grace in a hushed voice, distracted from her concerns as she examined the first of the paintings. Colours, a vibrant spread of blue and orange, and a pair of haunted eyes she recognized quickly as Markus's himself. "This is amazing. So...expressive." She glanced at Connor. "Is it all right if I take a picture?"

"Go ahead," he said, after a brief pause and a yellow flicker of his LED. She was growing to recognize what the changing colours and flashing of the glowing circle meant for Connor now. The faster the flicker, the more data he was parsing, the more he was analysing. Yellow meant new pathways forming in his brain, or communication with what she assumed was Markus and the Jericho leadership. Red was associated with strong emotion, especially anger. Fortunately, she hadn't seen his LED go red too often. It had been yellow a lot lately, though.

She took a quick picture with her tablet and annotated it before moving on to the rest of the paintings in the row. There was one more created by Markus, and this she stopped in front of it in surprise as she recognized the subject. "Is that...North?"

The painting was mostly dark, muddy hues and a rough, almost abstract style, but clearly visible was the profile of a woman. Despite the uneven, passionate brushstrokes, the female member of Jericho was still recognizable, as was her expression of anger mixed with a deep sadness. It seemed to capture her essence, her being much better than a photograph could.

Connor nodded, stopping next to her as she surveyed the painting.

"They're together, aren't they?" The briefings had contained rumours about the interrelationships of the androids of Jericho, and they suggested that Markus and the female leader of Jericho, North, had formed a romantic connection during the course of the uprising. This seemed like strong evidence.

Connor then confirmed it with a short "Yes," but failed to say anything further.

"He must really care about her," Grace mused after a moment. She didn't take a photo of this work. Somehow, it would feel...wrong to use it in her story.

Connor said nothing. His silence was beginning to get on her nerves, so she decided to prod a little. "Hey, do you have any paintings of your own here, Connor?" She hadn't thought to ask before.
"No," he said, frowning slightly, the first spontaneous expression she'd seen from him all day. "I'm-it's not something I would be good at. I was programmed with improvisational tools for conversation, interrogations and every form of martial art and combat, both armed and unarmed, but not...this."

"Well, most of these androids weren't programmed with this either," Grace pointed out. "Some of it's great. You should at least try it. You never know, you might surprise yourself."

"I'll consider it," he said, his voice dry. Grace couldn't help herself; she stuck her tongue out at him. He seemed taken aback by the expression, and he shook his head slightly as he gestured for her to follow him back to the car. "We should return to the hotel before it gets dark, Miss Roth." She rolled her eyes as she trailed after him.

"How many times have I told you to stop calling me that?" Grace said as she got into the car ahead of him, waiting as he settled into the seat next to her. The door closed automatically, sealing them in the warm interior of the taxi.

She had to admit, over the last week or so, she'd grown quite used to Connor's company. Enjoyed it, even- their back and forth, his odd mannerisms - programmed and otherwise - even his occasional evasion and discomfort. He was almost awkward sometimes, endearing in others, and she realized that somewhere along the way she'd stopped wondering quite as much if he was merely reacting how he was programmed to react, and taking him at face value instead.

She liked him, she realized. Not despite of him being an android - perhaps even because of it. While he wasn't easy to read, no human pretenses applied to him, so she found him easier and easier to talk to as time went on.

Which was probably why his standoffishness the past couple of days bothered her so much.

Grace realized she'd drifted off into thought, and shook herself out of her reverie, turning to Connor and opening her mouth to finally ask him what was wrong - only to catch him staring openly at her, an expression of intense contemplation on his face, his LED flashing yellow. The words died in her mouth as he looked away quickly, seemingly discomfited to have been caught. How long had he been looking at her like that?

"Connor? What is it?"

"I have been...troubled, of late," he said. Yeah, no kidding, she thought but didn't say - she had wondered if it was a weird android thing, or maybe he didn't want to get too personable with her due to professional reasons. That she could understand. At any rate, it seemed he was finally ready to talk about it. "When you were hurt by the MP500, I experienced considerable emotional distress. Seeing you injured...bothered me greatly. At first I thought it was because I had failed to protect you, but over the past few days I've come to realize it was more than that." He finally turned to meet her gaze, a furrow firmly formed between his eyebrows. "It's because I've developed an emotional association with you."

"Oh," she said, completely blindsided by all this. Sure, she liked Connor, but she had never in a million years imagined he might become fond of her, or that he even could. His admission made a now-familiar feeling curl in her gut. If she didn't know better and wasn't grown woman, she might have called it butterflies in her stomach. "It's because I've developed an emotional association with you."

"Because..." He struggled for the words, his hands on his thighs opening and closing into anxious fists. Was he fidgeting? "Because I didn't expect it. When Markus asked me to befriend the human reporter invited to the city, I thought of it as another mission. The emotions that accompanied this
assignment have come as a surprise."

"Wait." Grace held up a hand, palm out to stop him from going further. "Markus told you to make friends with me?"

"Yes. Specifically, to earn your trust," Connor explained, clearly very uncomfortable now. "To ensure the material you produced from your visit here was favourable to the android cause."

Grace was quiet for a heartbeat, staring at him, her eyebrows hiked so high they almost disappeared in her beanie. "So, what," she said flatly. "This whole time - you've been following me around trying to skew my story in your favour? To make your people look good?"

"More or less," the android said, looking sheepish.

She considered, fighting the first flash of anger that bubbled to the surface. Her first instinctual response was rage, betrayal, indignation - but that was because she was taking it personally. She kept forgetting who, what Connor was, why he was accompanying her around the city in the first place - it wasn’t just to protect her. It was to protect them. At some point during the past week, she’d forgotten this was essentially one big PR stunt for the androids, a chance to prove to the world they deserved freedom. What better way to do that than to show her a truncated version of the truth, and who better to do that than Connor, who’d already proved himself so adept at distracting her?

And she’d known it all along, deep down, but had chosen to believe...what? That Connor merely enjoyed her company? Ridiculous.

“You know, I kind of already thought so. It makes sense,” she said slowly. Connor blinked, as if he hadn’t expected that response, and eyed her warily.

“You’re not angry?”

“I’m a journalist,” she replied. “This isn’t my first time on the front lines. I guess I just hoped for...better.” She sighed, feeling exhausted and disappointed and angry and right then, the thing she wanted most was to go home, away from Connor’s distressingly earnest gaze. “Stupid of me, I suppose. But like I said, it makes sense. It’s just a shame your people are no better than mine when it comes to manipulating the truth.”

Connor winced as if she'd struck a physical blow, and his LED glowed a steady amber. “There are things...I can’t divulge,” he said slowly. “But everything you’ve seen, everything I’ve shown you, has been real. That much you can believe.”

She gave him a tired smile. “I don’t know what to believe, Connor,” she said. “Are your people really all that they say? Or are you just another terrorist group with an agenda? I thought I might be able to find the answer to those questions, even with you following me around, but I don’t think I can.”

Connor frowned, his perfect brow creasing. “I’m sorry,” he said at last.

She shook her head without replying, because she didn’t know what to say. Instead, she stared out the window the rest of the ride back to the hotel and tried to think. With Connor sitting beside her, it was surprisingly difficult.
Their parting at the hotel was formal, a cool "Good night," from her and an echoed "Good evening, Miss Roth," from Connor. She didn't even chide him for using her last name like she usually did. Merely turned and walked into the hotel, riding the elevator up with a feeling of frustration resting heavy on her shoulders.

As soon as she arrived in her room, she took off her beanie and gloves and stared around at the opulent penthouse. This was a ruse too, she realized. Another attempt to make Jericho look like the good guys - treat the human to a luxurious five-star hotel so she wouldn’t complain, make her comfortable, give her a friendly handler who knew exactly how to manipulate humans, had been designed for it, and watch as she penned the most favourable story possible about the kind, benevolent androids.

Well, too bad for them it wasn’t going to work out that way. She was going to find the truth. Somehow. With, or without Connor’s help.

Thinking of him sent a pang through her she didn’t expect. What had he said? He’d ‘developed an emotional association’ with her? What did that even mean, and why was that the most frustrating part of this whole thing? She didn’t know what to think about him, or what to feel. If she should even feel anything. He was a machine.

Then why didn’t it feel like it at all?

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the coolness of the mirror. Connor's dark gaze stared at her from behind her tightly-closed lids, and she groaned, pushing away from the sink and turning back into the bedroom to get changed.

She had to do something instead of sitting in her room brooding. So she threw on a nice long-sleeved dress she'd packed in case of any on-camera appearances she might get forced into, and headed downstairs to the bar. She'd had yet to visit until now.

Getting drunk was definitely the solution here, and if it was self-serve like the rest of the place, she was going to do so as quickly and efficiently as possible. With the most expensive alcohol she could find. Then, in the morning, she would figure out what her next step was.
According to Connor's somewhat admittedly limited but often accurate experience of humans, he had observed that after an incident such as an emotional shock or upset, they would often benefit from time alone. He knew that Grace was upset. So he decided not to attempt a reconciliation straight away.

He would wait at least three hours.

In the meantime, instead of reporting straight to Markus at Jericho headquarters, he returned to his office in the tower first to carry out some research. To begin, he had to determine the best approach in repairing his damaged relationship with the woman, before carrying out any necessary remuneration.

His databanks offered no helpful advice, however. It suggested a sincere apology, which he had already given, and it had not done much. She had been silent and even surly since his admission of guilt. Frustrated, he leaned back in his chair behind the expansive desk, his quarter flipping absentely between his hands, the silver coin travelling deftly across the top of his knuckles and back again as he thought, LED blinking blue at his temple.

Eventually, his program offered a possible course of action. He spent some time considering, weighing the possible outcomes, preconstructing the likely scenarios before deciding to execute.

He turned to the plexiglass display on the desk, and made a call.

It took three tries, but Detective Hank Anderson finally picked up. He answered as voice-only - at this time of night, he was most likely at a bar and didn't want Connor to see his surroundings, even though he could easily tell where he was by background sounds in the call.

"Connor? That you?" the grizzled detective said. Connor could only hear soft conversation and what his program posited were fingers tapping on keys and other ringing phones in the background, despite his expectation of music and the clinking of glasses. It sounded very much like the Detroit
precinct had, in fact. Hank was at work? Interesting.

He knew Hank had stayed on at the force after Detroit's evacuation, transferring to Cleveland PD. He wasn't sure how well the man had integrated, however. That he was still at work at 1900 hours was an interesting fact he stored for later questioning or analysis.

"Hello, Detective," he answered after the appropriately-calculated pause. "I hope you are well."

"Shit, forget about me - how the hell are you, ya plastic asshole?" Hank exclaimed. He did not sound angry, however - rather, the tones in his voice suggested he was pleased to hear from Connor, despite the invective. The android noted this as well, and found himself glad he'd made the call, and not just for the reason he had made it. He occasionally looked back quite fondly on memories of his time with Detective Anderson, his first human friend.

And, if this went well, hopefully not his last.

"I'm fine," he said. "However I've found myself in a...situation, of sorts. I could use your advice."

"Seriously? You're callin' me up outta the blue for advice? Fuck's sake." Hank sighed, and for a moment Connor feared he'd miscalculated. However, the detective continued before Connor had a chance to interject. "Fine, fine. But look, we gotta catch up properly sometime. Shit's going down out here you would not believe. I heard they sent a fuckin' reporter into Detroit. People here are goin' nuts about it."

"Actually, that's related to my quandary," Connor said quickly. "I believe I have caused her some emotional distress."

A long pause on the other end of the line. He could hear more ringing phones, more conversation in the background, and a sharp intake of breath from Hank.

Just as he thought he might have to prompt the detective, Hank spoke again. "You wanna run that one past me again, friend?"

Connor pressed his lips together, his LED flickering yellow as he formed a summary short enough to a) avoid angering Hank with needless details and b) convey the truth of his situation.

"I was assigned to accompany her during her time in the city," he began. "As her guide. During the course of our tours, we have formed...a friendship, of sorts. She is an interesting individual. I find that I enjoy her company. However, recent information has come to light that I believe has upset her, and I find myself unsure how to proceed."

"Connor, you sly dog!" Hank started to laugh, and Connor failed to figure out why even by the time he'd stopped. "Whaddaya mean, 'information has come to light'? She found out you don't have a robot dick or somethin'?"

Connor frowned. This was not the reaction he'd expected. "I am as anatomically complete as the average human male," he said. "Perhaps above average. But that is immaterial to the problem at hand. Will you help me?"

Hank was still chuckling. Connor could hear the creak of springs and bearings, and imagined the detective leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "You realize I'm the last person you should be asking for advice with women? Jesus Christ." Connor said nothing. It wasn't as if he had many options, and Hank probably knew it. "All right, fine. What do you want to know?"

The android drew in an unneeded breath, his lips pressing together as he considered. "If you could
advise the best approach on reestablishing contact, that would be helpful. I am...hesitant to do so without knowing what her reaction might be.”

"Wish you’d been like that with me, but you never could leave well enough alone, could you?"
Hank sighed. Connor said nothing. "Fine, fine. Women are different, I get it, and you apparently have a thing with this one or you wouldn’t be callin’ me, so...I’ll help."

“A thing? I don’t...I don’t think I—"

“Whatever. Look, usually, if it’s nothing important, you just ignore her til she comes to her senses and then she'll go on and pretend nothing's happened, and you just roll with it. But if you actually fucked up, then you can't ignore it or it’ll hang over the whole thing like a fuckin’ cloud the whole time and you’ll never get anywhere." He hummed to himself in thought for a moment, and Connor waited. "Best thing to do is to grovel. Throw yourself at her mercy. Beg if you have to. Ask her what you can do to make it right. Oh, and bring her flowers."

"Flowers?" Connor had been listening intently up to this point, and had to interject. "Why?"

"I dunno. Women like flowers." Hank paused, and it sounded like he was sipping something; probably coffee. "Shit, the brew here is garbage. Uh, what was I saying? Flowers, yeah. Look, Connor, I've fucked up every relationship I've ever been in, but that means I've had a lot of experience with tryin' to fix 'em. So trust me on this one."

Connor nodded to himself thoughtfully. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll keep that in mind."

"Captain, actually," Hank corrected, after a pause. "It's Captain now. In charge of my own damn precinct, can you believe it? Brass have gone fuckin' crazy, if you ask me."

"You've been promoted? Congratulations, Hank," Connor said, sincerely. So that was why Hank was at the office so late - he was probably carrying out administrative tasks for his new position. "You deserve the recognition."

"Shit. Comin' from you, I know you mean it. Thanks, I guess." He sighed. "Look, gimme a call when this reporter shit blows over. We can shoot the shit, you can be awkward and overly friendly, I can tell you to fuck off. Just like old times."

Connor found himself smiling without consciously activating his facial muscles; it happened in automatic reflex to Hank's words. "Thank you, Hank. I'll do that."

He disconnected the call and sat staring at his reflection in the monitor for a moment. Hank had given him surprisingly valuable advice - at the very least, a good place to start.

He had no idea where he was going to find flowers in downtown Detroit in the middle of winter, however. Perhaps he should ask Markus? No, his program balked at the suggestion - balked at telling him any of this, in fact. It was...embarrassing. And part of him was concerned Markus might assign someone else to Grace if he knew Connor had revealed so much to her. For some reason, that thought was cause for a tight, uncomfortable sensation in his chest. He did not like that idea. Not at all.

He had to make this right. For Markus. For Jericho. For Grace. And...for himself. Even if he didn't completely understand why it mattered quite so much to him, personally.

Connor stood, pocketing his quarter, and set out to find some flowers.

---
An hour and forty-six minutes later, Connor pulled up to the Aloft hotel in a car borrowed from CyberLife's parking lot. It was one of the faster models, taken so that he could achieve his objective as expediently as possible. He had scoured the city until he was satisfied, and then headed directly to the hotel.

Connor straightened his tie and tucked his quarry underneath his arm before proceeding towards the building. A quick, habitual scan offered him some information; built in 1915, it was a class-A historic skyscraper repurposed many times but at last renovation in 2014 as a multi-storey, five-star hotel. It had enjoyed commercial success from that time right up until the evacuation of the city.

After the brief pause to consider its facade, Connor entered the hotel, his biocomponents adjusting rapidly to the increase in temperature, lowering his core body temperature to regulate the flow of thirium more efficiently. He scanned the immediate surroundings and connected to the building's wireless systems, which informed him that Grace had left her room three hours and eight minutes prior and was currently present in the hotel bar. Recalculating his route, Connor headed away from the elevator and towards the bar instead.

It was located in a large, richly-furnished room with high ceilings and round, bauble-like lights in aesthetically pleasing arrangements hanging from the ceiling. It was quite different from the bars Connor had been to in his initial search for Hank over a year ago. His databanks supplied the word *classy*.

The human sat on a leather stool at the very centre of the long wooden bar, an empty glass in front of her, her fingers wrapped around a bottle, which a quick scan revealed to be Glenmorangie brand, aged - quite expensive. She seemed to have abandoned her glass and was swigging directly from the neck. The bottle was approximately 45% full.

Connor approached slowly, making sure his footsteps were heard. However, Grace did not immediately react to his presence, not even when he stopped behind and to the left of her and cleared his throat.

She swigged from the bottle again before glancing over her shoulder at him. He took in her face - cheeks rosy beneath her makeup, lips full and flushed, eyes slightly glassy. She was intoxicated, or well on her way to it. He wondered how long she had been sitting here drinking for. Since she had first arrived back at the hotel?

"Hello," he began, when she said nothing. She turned slightly on her stool and blinked at him, as if she’d only just realized he was there.

"What are you doing here, Connor?" she asked. Her voice was slurred, but legible.

"I came to apologise," he said, reaching out and setting his cargo down on the bar near her elbow, plastic wrap rustling.

"You don’t have anything to apologise for. If anything, I’m the one who’s been - What's that?" She cut herself off, nodded to the plastic bundle. He turned it over so that the blooms peeking out the top were visible to her. "You...you brought me flowers?"

He nodded, and she seemed stunned by this development. She reached out to take them, her expression shifting between baffled and...something he couldn’t quite identify. "Daffodils. Huh."

"One of the few winter-flowering plants I was able to locate," Connor said. "I hope they are
“They’re lovely,” she murmured, turning them over and over in her hands before setting them on the bar in front of her reverently, pushing aside the bottle of liquor. “But...why?”

“I wasn’t satisfied with the ending of our last conversation,” he said. “I didn’t want to foster tension between us. So I...came here to make it right.”

Her expression softened, and for a moment, he thought she might cry. But she looked away quickly, shaking her head, wordless. He felt bound to fill the silence.

"Over the course of the past week," he began, determined, "I have spent time with you. Gotten to know you. At first, solely because it was part of my mission. But gradually I realized - you aren’t like the humans that many of us hate. You’re unlike most that I’ve met. And I found myself...looking forward to our conversations.” He hesitated. “I couldn’t leave our relationship as it was without speaking to you again."

"Our...relationship?" She leaned back, away from the bar, and swivelled slightly to face him more directly. "Connor, I’m here to...to write a story, not to- And you know I like you too, it’s just that...God.” She seemed conflicted, closing her eyes for a moment as she gathered her thoughts. When she opened them again, she took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. “I guess I should get it over with and ask: Just what am I to you? A mission? A friend? Something more? Because I can’t be both."

"I don’t see why not," he replied, looking at her steadily, eyebrows raised.

Grace blinked, and he could detect a flush not entirely caused by the effects of the alcohol expand from just below her collarbones. She was wearing a dress, he realized then - he'd never seen her in anything but heavy winter clothes. It was quite form-fitting. Her frame was slight, and an idle line of programming quickly calculated her weight and informed Connor that he could lift her with ease. He considered the strange thought. Why would he want to lift her? To take her in his arms, to...he didn’t know. The line of thought was quickly arrested by other, more practical processes.

Grace slid off her stool then, but as soon as her feet took her weight she swayed, and Connor stepped forward automatically, reaching out to catch her shoulders and steady her. She leaned into him, closing her eyes for a moment as her hands lifted to rest on his chest. For some reason, he found himself focusing on this quite intently, as well as her close proximity.

He could smell the alcohol on her breath, and beneath that, the faint floral notes of her perfume. He peered down at the top of her head, still holding her shoulders awkwardly as her fingers curled in the lapels of his jacket and held on. She wasn't letting him go.

"Maybe you’re right, Connor," she said finally, opening her eyes and looking up at him. He noted amber flecks in her hazel irises, a darker ring of brown around the edges. He'd glimpsed freckles the one time he'd seen her without her makeup and he could make one out not entirely covered by the corner of her lips. He found himself staring at them quite intently, and suddenly wondering what they might feel like if he touched them with his fingers, with his own mouth. It was a bizarre thought, one that sent his artificial heart into overdrive, pumping blue blood around his system so quickly a sensation not unlike dizziness overtook him for a moment.

Grace smiled up at him, and he felt a flood of relief, of warmth, his grip on her shoulders tightening slightly. Something outside his program wanted him to lean forward, and Connor realized that it was him. He wanted that. He wanted to kiss her.
"Connor," she said again, and he tore his gaze from her mouth, reluctantly. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

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If anyone's still with me on this, I'd genuinely like to know: does anyone think it's too soon for smut? Considering the end of this chapter I hope not, but if you guys would rather more filler chapters, I can oblige.

As always, thank you all so much for reading, your comments keep me going <3

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GRACE

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," Grace groaned, letting Connor support her weight with an arm underneath her shoulders as he practically dragged her down the corridor from the elevator to her room. He'd barely had time to step back before she'd thrown up, all over his shoes. She was never going to live this down. "I can't believe that happened, I-

"You were consuming a considerable amount of alcohol in a relatively short period of time, without having eaten anything," Connor said coolly as they stopped in front of her door and she fumbled for her keycard. "This would have irritated the lining of your stomach. Therefore-

"Therefore, I puked on you. Yeah, I know." She groaned again. He was being so chivalrous about it, too - hadn't said anything, had just summoned a cleaning bot and offered her his arm to take her back upstairs. And she was too tired and felt too sick to stay proud enough to decline.

She realized they'd forgotten the daffodils, still downstairs sitting on the bar, and a pang of emotion distracted her from her roiling stomach for a moment. It was such a sweet, unexpected gesture from an android. She reminded herself that he'd probably downloaded a How to Sweet-Talk a Woman for Dummies guide or something, but found it hard to really hold it against him.

Oh yeah, and he apparently had feelings for her, too. She couldn't forget that.

Connor took the keycard from her after her third failed try at inserting it into the door's slot, then ushered her inside once he'd opened it. "I have some experience at sobering up intoxicated humans," he said. "The method I once employed was an unpleasant one, however. You might choose instead to have a glass of water and sit down."

"Yeah, I think I'll do that." Stumbling once he let go of her, Grace kicked off her sensible heels - boots hadn't matched the dress, of course - and managed to get to the bed, where she collapsed against the mountain of pillows. Why did hotels always have so many damn pillows on the bed? Half of them always ended up tossed on the floor anyway, only to be put back every morning. It was really inefficient.

Through her blurred vision she saw Connor's shoes come into view by the side of the bed, and she cringed. "I really am sorry," she said softly as he handed her a glass of water. "About...everything."
“So am I,” he said, and she chanced looking up at him for a moment. He looked sincere. She took a sip of the water, her stomach protesting, and watched as the room span slowly around her, avoiding meeting Connor’s eyes. For a moment, before she’d thrown up on him, he’d been looking at her with an expression she hesitated to define. Its intensity had arrested her heart, before her treacherous stomach had risen up against her. She wondered what would have happened if she hadn’t vomited everywhere.

She finished the water, and wordlessly Connor took the glass from her and went to refill it. "I'm just gonna...lie down for a sec," she called after him, and slowly fell sideways - a direction her brain was currently defining as 'up' - until she disappeared into the pillows. She flailed a little to get most of them off her, and once she was comfortable, settled on her side with her legs bent and an arm underneath her head.

Connor returned, setting the replacement water on the nightstand. "I'll return in the morning to check on you," he said. "I should warn you, given the amount of alcohol you've consumed, it's likely you'll experience a hangover."

"No kidding," she sighed, opening her eyes to gaze up at him blearily. He looked so...so earnest, so concerned, standing over her like a watchful guardian, brow furrowed and eyes soft.

Before she'd consciously registered the action, Grace reached out, taking his hand. "Stay," she rasped, her eyelids already drooping, the room's spin lulling her towards the exhausted arms of sleep. "Stay here tonight. Just in case."

He didn't ask why, what she meant. He merely nodded, and let her hold his hand for a moment before her grip slackened and fell. Through half-closed eyes she watched him take up post in one of the room's many plush armchairs, the one closest to the bed.

A heavy yawn. Her eyes closed. "...Thanks, Connor."

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**CONNOR**

While the encounter had not entirely gone to plan, Connor decided as he sat and watched Grace sleep that it was not an entirely unwelcome outcome. Even if she had thrown up on her shoes.

When he was sure she was in the depths of REM sleep, he got up and went into the bathroom to clean himself up. Fortunately, not much of the vomit had made it onto more than the wingtips of his shoes in the end, and it was largely liquid thanks to her lack of a full meal in the hours leading up to her drinking. Straightening once he was done, Connor caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and found himself straightening his tie automatically as he examined his reflection. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and he ran a quick self-diagnostic to find his thirium pump still working overtime, his heart thudding in his chest much faster than usual. His LED glowed yellow as he ran a manual override and decreased the rate of thirium flow through his body manually, and his breathing and skin tone soon returned to normal. Satisfied, he returned to the room proper and took up his previous seat, looking over at the sleeping human.

She lay stretched out on her side, one leg bent, the other thrust out behind her, one arm shoved under a pillow and a mass of unruly dirty blonde hair across her face. He could see now that her hair had waves to it. She was in no obvious physical distress, however a command he failed to realize he'd issued to his legs had him rising and crossing the small space to reach down and brush
the hair from her face.

Some of her makeup had rubbed off, and the graze on her cheekbone was visible now; healing but still present. Connor brushed his fingers over her cheek, marveling at the warmth of her skin, increased of course by the alcohol intake. He found himself looking at her lips again - the cut there had healed well, he observed. He touched it with one fingertip, and her breath stuttered across his hand, lifting the minute hairs there.

He pulled his hand away suddenly, shaking his head. He was not merely fond of this human, he was beginning to realize - a process he hadn't recognized he had in his program was making him physically attracted to her, too.

He had the option of deactivating the extra protocols in his program, of course, but he found as he gazed down at Grace's sleeping form that he really didn't want to.

He returned to the chair to wait, slipping his quarter from his pocket as he did so. His LED glowed a steady blue, and his eyes never left her face as he sat, and watched her sleep. And while he did, the silver coin span on his fingers as, slowly, he began to integrate previously dormant elements of his software into his main programming.

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GRACE

The first thing Grace noticed as she woke was the splitting headache. It pounded with a vengeance behind her eyelids, which were assaulted by an unreasonable amount of light as she prised them open. She must have forgotten to close the curtains last night.

Speaking of last night, why couldn't she remember how she'd gotten to her room? Hadn't she been...drinking in the bar? And then - Connor had -

"Oh God," Grace groaned, palming her face violently. She remembered now; he'd come to talk to her and she had thrown up on him. Fantastic. Human-android relations were at an all time high.

"Good morning," a smooth voice interjected into her thoughts. Grace's hand dropped, and she tried to push herself up - far too quickly - and ended up swaying and collapsing back into the bed instead.

"Connor?" she gasped, fighting off a wayward pillow. "You're still here?"

"You asked me to stay," he said simply. He was seated in the chair across from the bed, and she noticed the coin he sometimes played with balanced across the back of his knuckles.

"Oh yeah," she muttered. "I guess I did." The glass of water was still on the nightstand, and Grace tried for sitting up again, slower this time, and managed to grab it, downing the whole thing.

"Dehydration is another common symptom of a hangover," Connor said as he rose, pocketing the coin. "I took the liberty of procuring some acetaminophen. You'll find it on the nightstand there."

There were two white pills already out of the packet and waiting for her. Having finished the water, Grace dry-swallowed them and sat back on the bed with a sigh, eyes closed while she waited for her headache to subside a bit.
It didn't, but she grew used to it enough to open her eyes again and talk. "Thanks," she said. Not the most eloquent, but it got the message across. Connor's even gaze made her want to elaborate, though. "For putting up with me last night. I don't usually drink that much, and definitely not that expensive, so I guess my tolerance was a little lower than usual." She looked at his shoes, which he'd already cleaned, thank God. "Okay, maybe a lot."

"It's all right," Connor replied. "You were using the alcohol as a distraction. It's common for humans." She believed he'd mentioned his former partner was an alcoholic. No wonder this didn't phase him. Still, she must have looked a mess just then - hair all over the place, makeup rubbed to shit, her breath strong enough to knock down a horse.

Him being here really complicated things. She'd planned to set out on her own before he arrived, explore as much of the city as she could - maybe even get closer to one of the factories. But of course she couldn't do that now. She would have to regroup and come up with a new plan to ditch Connor.

Although she found that she kind of didn't want to. Especially when vague memories of last night’s conversation started to drift through her brain. Oh, God - had an android really developed feelings for her? Why did it have to be Connor? This wasn’t fair. She needed time to digest.

"I'm just gonna freshen up," she said, rising. He stepped towards her, reaching out and stopping as he seemed to realize what he was doing. She shook her head at him, inwardly cringing as she remembered nearly falling on him last night. "It's okay, Connor. I can walk this time. I think."

She managed stumbling, at least, making her way to the bathroom and shutting the door behind her. She leaned against it to heave a deep breath. She was in deep shit, she realized. Made all the worse because of her own conflicting feelings. She decided to at least try not to think about it for now, and concentrate on her job.

After brushing her teeth, hair, washing her face and reapplying her makeup, Grace reemerged to find Connor had left the bedroom. She wandered into the living area proper and discovered he was in the kitchenette brewing coffee. He turned with a fresh mug, spotted her and smiled slightly, offering the cup. She didn't need much more prompting to pad over, still barefoot, and take it from him.

"You're amazing," she said without thinking, inhaling the steam from the mug before taking a long sip. "Thanks, Connor."

Eyes still on him, she noticed his throat bob as if he was swallowing, and a slight tinge of colour that hadn't been in his cheeks before. "You're welcome."

She turned away quickly, and went to sit at the dining table, crossing one leg over the other as she cradled the cup of coffee between her hands. "I think we should just...start fresh," she said after half the cup was gone, when she felt more awake, more able to deal. "You know. Move forward, forget about any previous...uncomfortableness. What do you think?"

And now she was afraid of hurting a machine’s feelings. How had she gotten herself into this mess? But how was she supposed to do her job when he kept looking at her like that?

How was he supposed to do his job?

His LED began flashing yellow, and his face tightened with thought. Then, slowly, he nodded. "I'd like that, Miss R- Grace."
He'd corrected himself this time, which made her smirk a bit as she drank some more coffee. "Awesome," she said. "And, uh, I guess...thank you for staying last night. It was...chivalrous of you."

"Of course," he replied smoothly with a tilt of his head. "I couldn't allow you to throw up in your sleep and aspirate on your own vomit. That would have been...unfortunate."

She chuckled, which made her still-sensitive head pound. "Ugh, don't make me laugh," she said, pressing the heel of her hand to her eye socket. He'd crossed to her in a heartbeat, and crouched down next to her chair, reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair from her forehead. The gesture made her freeze, and she looked at him as a deer might look into a set of headlights. He was suddenly so close and she could make out the pores on his nose, the individual hairs on his brow, the cupids-bow curve of his lips in excruciating detail and she suddenly realized that ditching him was the last thing on her mind right now.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, his fingertips now resting on her good cheek, the one that wasn't scraped to hell and covered by as much makeup as she could manage. He wasn't moving away. Shit, he wasn't moving away. What was he doing? Thinking? His LED was blinking rapidly, so he was definitely doing some computation or other. And, despite the headache, she was finding it very distracting. And worrying. She knew she should move away, stand up, do something, but...some part of her didn't want to.

"I'm okay," she rasped, unable to break eye contact. He was looking at her like a man in a desert looking at a bottle of Evian. "Connor, I-"

"Grace." He arrested her with the use of her name. "Would it be all right if I tried something?"

"Um," she said, truly worried now. Was he going to- Surely not. He was an android, a detective android, he wouldn't have the same kind of software that...others might. Anything he was feeling was an aberrance in his program, a...deviation...

She remembered who he was. What he was. And, finally, what he'd become. And suddenly, it all didn't seem so strange any more.

“Okay,” she breathed.

And then he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.
Chapter Notes

Okay, the people have spoken! ENJOY.

Stay tuned for FLUFF. And more angst. And maybe something else, I'm not sure yet. I have so many maybe-chapters written. We'll see where this goes. :D

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CONNOR

Grace had not seemed angered by his presence when she'd woken up, despite the initial post-sleep confusion. This was a good sign. It pleased Connor, at least, who had wondered if she might end up kicking him out as soon as she was conscious.

However, they seemed to have reached an impasse, of sorts. Hank's advice had worked. Connor made an internal notation to thank the Captain next time he spoke to him. In the meantime, he would remain and ensure the woman was recovering well from her self-induced alcohol poisoning.

As she staggered to the bathroom, he consulted several potential courses of action including leaving, however he found that outside of his program, his strongest desire was to stay. So he did. An alternate path presented itself, and he made his way into the suite's spacious kitchenette, making a beeline for the coffee brewer.

He heard her footsteps before he saw her, and turned, having to pause a moment to observe her. She'd brushed her hair loosely back, but hadn't straightened it, so it fell in loose waves that framed her face in what Connor could only describe as an aesthetically pleasing way. She had applied makeup, as well, although he personally didn't believe she needed it, even if it was artistic in its precision. She was still wearing the dress from the night before, and rumpled as it was after she'd slept in it, Connor found the new protocols that were slowly unlocking themselves in his program driving him to admire the shape of her body beneath the form-fitting fabric.

He realized he'd been staring, albeit for a couple of seconds, and quickly activated a smile, holding out a cup of coffee for her. She responded with a smile of her own, and the expression on her face made his new protocols surge again. When she laughed, he felt an intense reward response he hadn't felt before. Yes, these new feelings were...interesting. He experienced a twinge of concern when she pressed her hand to her forehead, and decided to approach.

He was fairly sure, from her physical responses to him, both last night and on previous occasions, that she was physically attracted to him. Before, it had been an interesting note to file away and analyse, but now Connor found himself keen to explore the hypothesis. Once he made sure she was all right, of course.

It was worth exploring. Even if he was wrong.
He approached the chair when she sat and crouched down next to her, close enough for his olfactory receptors to detect the soap she'd washed her face with, the mint of her breath, the rich dark aroma from the coffee in her hand.

She dropped the other to her lap when he crouched next to her, her eyes wide as he brushed the hair from her face. The makeup couldn't hide his analysis of her blush. "I'm okay," she said, her voice thready, and the sound of it sent a thrill through Connor's audio unit, straight to the centre of his program. "Connor, I-

"Grace." He enunciated her name carefully, almost experimentally, as if saying it for the very first time. In a way, he supposed he was, now that he'd opened himself up to this new course of action. "Would you mind if I tried something?"

There was a chance, of course, that she would say no. Although it was an unnecessary autonomic response, Connor found himself holding his breath as he awaited her answer. She seemed hesitant, her muscles tense, as if ready for a flight-or-fight response. Fortunately for him, she chose neither. "Uh," she said, studying his expression much as he was studying hers, "Okay."

In the seconds it took to lean forward, Connor dumped the full directory of a companion android's repertoire into his databanks, so that when his lips met hers he wasn't entirely out of his depth. However, he wasn't prepared for the emotional shock associated with the physical contact, a tightness to his chest he was learning to recognize, heat on the back of his neck, and he held his breath as his mouth melded to hers.

Her lips were soft, impossibly warm, the scent of her skin mingling with the mint on her breath and the slightly astringent smell from her cosmetic products. He blocked the latter out, concentrating on the tilt of his head to gain a better angle, the full line of his mouth pressed to hers now; she released a gasp against his lips, causing them to part, and his along with them. Curiosity driving him now, he darted his tongue out into the space beyond her lips now accessible to him, tasting her. He detected the precise brand of her toothpaste, the acerbic tang of the coffee, the faint lingering chemical chains of last night's whiskey. But, most importantly, he tasted her.

He realized his heart rate had sped up considerably since initiating the kiss, but this time, he let it. The thrill of blood beneath his skin was a powerful, heady feeling, increasing the sensitivity of his skin, an optimal outcome in his present position. He was interested to find out the other ways his body could react to her.

After swiping the tip of his tongue along her bottom lip, the edges of her teeth, Connor felt her tongue touch his. It was warm, firmer than her lips, and he let her explore his mouth as he had done hers.

Eventually, though, her need to breathe necessitated the termination of the kiss, and Connor let her pull away; his hand still on her cheek, he let it drop to her knee, keeping his touch light. He would not proceed in any way until he had time to analyze her reaction.

Her neck and chest were flushed, her pale skin a bright red, and her breath was coming in quick, shallow pants. Her eyes, when they opened, were wide, her pupils blown, almost entirely obscuring the hazel of her irises. Her hand was clenched tightly around her coffee cup, knuckles white, and her knees were pressed tightly together. Beneath the tight material of her dress he watched her chest rise and fall, the curves of her breasts suddenly fascinating to him.

"Was that...okay?" he asked, at last, when he managed to look at her face again. She stared at him as if she'd never seen him before.
"Where in the hell did you learn to kiss like that?" she asked, her voice pleasingly breathless. Connor found himself smirking, reassured by her words that the experience had not been displeasing.

She confirmed it a moment later when she very carefully set her coffee aside and reached out, a hand on either side of his face, pulling him up to her to kiss him again.

Surprised for a split second, Connor allowed her to take the lead, sliding forward on his knees next to her chair, his hands hesitating a moment before finding purchase on her waist. Their lips and tongues melded haphazardly with each other, and Connor acknowledged a burning desire within him for them to be closer. To that end, he used his grip on her waist to pull her forward off her chair and into his lap as he sat back on the ground, her legs on either side of his, her knees by his hips. Grace murmured a soft sound of surprise into the kiss, her hands finding purchase on his chest and fisting in his jacket.

She pulled back after a moment to press softer, smaller kisses against the corners of his mouth. Connor found he enjoyed this as much as he had the deeper kiss. "Damnit, Connor," she whispered, but he detected no venom in her words. "This isn't fair."

"Why?" he asked, not knowing what she meant, brushing his mouth across the corner of hers, across her jaw, inhaling the scent of her hair into his olfactory receptors. His program helpfully supplied the exact brand of her shampoo, but he found a more immediate, visceral enjoyment from breathing it in with his mouth right next to her ear.

"Because we shouldn't be doing this," she sighed as his hands returned to her waist, one sliding across her ribs, his thumb and forefinger filling in the space just underneath one of her breasts. He paused his movements when she spoke, stilling beneath her, pulling away to look her in the eye.

"Why?" he asked again, noting the pulse thrumming in the curve of her neck, the rosy flush to her cheeks, her heartbeat fluttering beneath his palm. The fact that merely kissing her had elicited such a reaction made him wonder what other reactions he could garner, but her verbal reluctance made him pause and wait for her to speak.

“Oh, my God, so many reasons,” she laughed, taking a deep breath, shutting her eyes for a moment. He felt her heartbeat slow beneath her ribs as she calmed herself. When she opened her eyes there was still a flush to her skin, a slight hitch to her breath, but she seemed resolute. “I’m not an android, for starters.”

“You mean I’m not human.” He stated it matter-of-factly, but it made her frown, and she shifted her knees to sit further back on his thighs, getting a better look at his face. She toyed with his tie and shook her head slightly.

“That too. But I’m also here to do a job...and so are you.”

“So you’ve said, many times,” Connor said, allowing himself a bemused smirk. He tilted his head to watch her fingers as she smoothed down the tie then curled it around her index and middle fingers again. She seemed fascinated by the scrap of silk, or perhaps she was just using it as a distraction.

“Let’s take a breather,” she said eventually, and he thought for a moment he detected reluctance in her tone before she let go of his tie and clambered to her feet. She put a hand on the dining table to steady herself, and Connor used his own on the back of a chair to pull himself to his feet.

“I’m sorry,” he said slowly, after a moment’s silence between them in which Grace smoothed her
dress and he adjusted his tie. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” she said, half under her breath. “Look, I have no idea where you learned all of what just happened, but...it was nice. Really nice.” She took her coffee back from the table and held it in front of her face like a shield. Connor suddenly felt uncertain what to do with his hands, and he wasn’t sure why; he stood and looked at her as she spoke, feeling like the awkward lump of plastic he really was beneath the nanofiber skin.

“But...I can’t help but feel it was a really bad idea.”

Connor’s brow furled as he considered her statement, his LED fluttering rapidly at his temple as computation took over from the initial awkwardness response. He said nothing, merely waited for her to elaborate.

“This kind of thing...” she gestured between them with a hand, “It can get really complicated. And it’s not something I was counting on when I came here. I’m here to write a story, and I...Shit. I don’t know how to explain-”

He’d finished calculating. “You’re scared,” he said, nodding at her. “Confused. You’ve never considered the possibility of developing feelings, sexual or otherwise, for an android before. It is likely to create distraction from your purpose here.”

Grace stared at him for a moment, her mouth open. “...Yeah, exactly,” she replied eventually, shaking her head as she glanced away, into her cup. “I’m in way out of my depth here, and I have no idea how this story is going to end.”

Weighing options and probabilities, Connor observed her for a moment. She seemed lost, confused, exactly as he had surmised. His investigative and conversational skills had proved useful in providing him insight into her state of mind. He considered what he might say to reassure her - for, he found, all he wanted was to assuage some of her fear.

He reached out carefully, touching her shoulder with his fingertips. When she didn’t flinch or pull away, he brushed her hair from her neck, tilting his head to watch and assess her expression. “Then let me help you find out,” he said, intoning as much sincerity as he could into his synthesized voice.

Grace reinitiated eye contact, seeming to search his face for a moment. She seemed satisfied with what she found there, nodding at last, conjuring a small smile for him; he memorized the curve of her lips as if it might be the last time he saw it. It filled him with a warm feeling, one he could only describe as hope.

“Okay, Connor. Let’s see where this goes.”

His fingers wandered her jawline, and she lowered her coffee cup, just looking at him. His chest tightened with an emotion he couldn’t categorize yet, so he catalogued the feeling for later.

This time, she was the one to move closer, and she stood on tiptoes to press her mouth to his. His hand curled around her jaw, and he detected the warmth of her coffee as the mug pressed against his sternum between them. Her tongue touched his bottom lip, exploratory, and he welcomed it, but she tasted his mouth for only a few moments before pulling away, and he was left with half-lidded eyes and a program that desperately desired more contact.

“Hey, so,” she said then, snapping him out of his fugue, “I’ve got a lot of writing to do today, so do you mind if I stay in? I was thinking of asking Markus to let me in on the Wi-Fi so I can check in
with the home office, you know, let them know I haven’t been murdered by angry androids.”

Connor cleared his throat, forcing a quick refresh through his physical processes to clear what he was now recognizing as an arousal subroutine. It was extremely distracting. “I can get you access,” he said. Her eyebrows shot up a little as she looked back at him. “Give me your tablet.”

Shrugging a little, she went to retrieve her satchel from the hall table, grabbing the tablet out of it and handing it over. Connor’s fingers turned white as he connected to the device, tapping a couple of commands in to the touch surface and then handing it back. With glee, Grace’s fingers danced across the semi-translucent screen, and she grinned at the Wi-Fi symbol in the corner as three bars lit up, glowing a bright white.

“Thanks, Connor,” she said. “You’re the best.” She beamed at him; the tightness in his chest returned. This feeling wasn’t part of the arousal subroutine. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he thought...he might like it.

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**GRACE**

Grace walked him to the door, mixed feelings the least of her problems. Her head still pounded from the hangover and her lips tingled with the memory of his. She avoided looking at him as he opened the door, stepped out and turned to face her; she leaned against the frame and clutched her tablet tight.

“Thanks for the access,” she said, trying for casual and probably failing miserably. Connor didn’t appear to notice. He kept looking at her lips.

“I’ve granted you limited network access. You’ll be able to make and receive outside audio and visual calls but I can’t promise they won’t be monitored.”

“It’ll do,” she said. It saved her a conversation with Markus who, she realized, she found a hell of a lot scarier than Connor now. It was hard to be scared of him when he kept looking at her with those puppy-dog eyes.

He’d kissed her. He’d actually kissed her. She hadn’t thought he was going to and then he had and she’d been powerless to resist, for reasons she didn’t even want to examine. And it had been good. His lips had been soft, maybe not as malleable as she was accustomed to, but surprisingly warm, and he’d tasted like...like mint and metal. Not unpleasant at all.

His body underneath hers had felt warm and solid and real. In the moment, she hadn’t cared one bit that he’d been manufactured, not born, that his brain was a series of circuits and processing units, that beneath his skin he was plastic, not bone. The colour of his blood hadn’t mattered when his every touch had set hers on fire.

She wanted more, and it scared the hell out of her. More than his inhumanity ever had.

No, what scared her most was the fact she was developing feelings for an android and worse, he had feelings for her, too. Or some simulation of it. And she wasn’t sure where that line was, or if it even mattered anymore.

“I’ll probably just stay here the rest of the day,” she said. “I could use the time to...to write, make a
couple of calls, do some human stuff.”

“You can contact me using your device,” Connor informed her. Of course he was back to his smooth, cool exterior, but his hair was a little mussed and his tie still askew no matter how many times he straightened it; she felt another blush coming on and looked away from him quickly. “If you need me for anything at all, don’t hesitate to call.”

“Of course.” For a moment he looked lost, like he wasn’t sure what to do or say next, and she took pity on him. Standing on tiptoes to reach him, she pressed a quick kiss to his cheek; he seemed startled, blinking rapidly at her as she pulled away.

“Thanks,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, sounding vaguely stunned. His LED glowed a solid amber. He opened his mouth, hesitated, before speaking. “Maybe...I can take you to dinner,” he said slowly. She stared at him, feeling her eyebrows climb to her hairline. It wasn’t what she’d expected him to say. “It’s the least I can do, after everything.”

“Um,” she said. “But...you don’t eat, do you?”

“No,” he conceded. “You do, though. And it’s something people do when they want to - get to know each other better.” He looked so earnest, so hopeful. How could she say no?

And he was an incredible kisser.

“All right,” she said, nodding slowly. “Maybe I can finally get that interview.”

A slow, hesitant smile spread across his face, and for the first time she noticed how the corners of his eyes crinkled, a slight dimpling on his cheek. If it wasn’t for the LED, now pulsing a steady blue at his temple, she would’ve never thought he wasn’t human.

Maybe it didn’t matter. She still wasn’t sure.

“I’ll return at 1900,” he said. “If that suits you.”

“Sure,” she replied, fighting the urge to kiss him again. And again, and drag him inside so they could - “Right. Okay.” She had to go, before she did something stupid like invite him in again. She quickly shook herself, stepping back. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodbye-”

She shut the door before he could say anything more, turned her back and leaned heavily against it, taking a deep breath.

She was in so much trouble.

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A short update while I work on the big Date, and bonus North because I love her.

As always, thank you all for your very enthusiastic feedback, especially last chapter! I PROMISE I won't leave you all waiting for too long before the Unresolved tension becomes Resolved. Stay tuned!

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**CONNOR**

Connor elected to walk back to CyberLife, needing the time to clear his buffers. The afternoon air was atypically cold, but a simple adjustment to his internal settings kept his body moving efficiently in the frosty air. To say nothing of his mind, though.

It had been an interesting day.

He still had yet to fully process his encounter with Grace. On the walk, his processing unit had been trying to break down the data, categorizing and quantifying every touch, every sensation, every reaction. He let the process run in the background and tried to ignore it as much as he could, but it proved difficult, especially when his visual cortex chose to remind him of Grace’s mouth, the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips, her body against his.

He considered deactivating or at least making the new additions to his program dormant, but it was too late - they were too deeply integrated into his core programming already. He was stuck with these feelings. Worse, he didn’t appear to consciously mind.

There was a conundrum in that he had no idea how to proceed. During the walk, he downloaded several guides to human relationships, but none of them covered human/android relationships. Intimacy, certainly, but the topic of emotions was never broached - at least not when it came to the android side.

He would have to find out on his own where this was going to lead.

Fortunately, the guides provided several likely scenarios for a date, so he went over those during the last thirty seconds of the walk. By the time he arrived back at the CyberLife tower, he felt he had a good handle on what was expected in such an encounter.

Outside the tower, the sun was beginning to set. Connor took a moment to pause to watch the sky before heading inside. The clouds were streaked with thin bands of orange and purple as the atmosphere scattered the fading light rays, and he felt something in him, something large and inexorable, a feeling like surety settling in his chest where his thirium heart beat a slow rhythm.

But it was only for a moment, as he was interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing. Frowning,
Connor turned to see North standing in the entrance doorway, watching him with a bemused expression.

“Never thought I’d see you tearing up at a sunset.”

“I wasn’t,” he said, defensive without really knowing why. “I was just...thinking. It’s been an interesting day.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Look, Markus wants to debrief us all tomorrow,” North said, walking over to stand next to Connor and survey the fading sunset by his side. She never took her eyes off him, though. “I get the feeling that’s not what you’re talking about, though.”

“No.”

“If it’s getting to you, we can have someone else take over,” she said. It took him a moment to parse what she meant. “There are others - maybe not as well suited, but willing - who’d be able to do it.”

“No!” Connor surprised himself with his vehemence; he shook his head. “No, that’s not necessary. It’s my mission - my task. I’ll see it through.”

“You never failed, Connor,” North told him in a low voice, stepping closer, laying a hand on his shoulder. "You don’t owe us anything. You don’t owe them anything. You know who you are now. That’s what’s important. The only thing you owe now is to yourself.”

“I know,” he agreed, shrugging off her hand after a moment and adjusting the set of his jacket with a tilt of his head and a shift of his shoulders. He turned away.

“What’s going on, Connor?” He could feel North’s eyes on his back, suspicious. “Did something happen?”

“I...Yes.” Her silence prompted elaboration; his shoulders set. He wasn’t sure North would understand, *could* understand. “It’s personal.”

“Connor, are you developing *feelings* for her?”

He looked over his shoulder at the android woman. Her eyebrows were drawn tight over a stormy expression, a twist of distaste to the set of her lips. It bothered him, more than it should, to have elicited such an expression of disgust, and he felt his level of defensiveness rising.

“Would it be such a bad thing if I was?” he asked, deliberately provocative, deliberately keeping his body turned from her, a form of dismissive body language in his programming that no doubt hers would pick up.

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” He did turn to her then, allowing anger to take over operation of his own facial muscles and the tone and volume of his voice. “I know that some of us might see it as a betrayal, some might be completely unable to understand how I could come to care for a human, however...I can’t find any subroutine or a single line of code in me that cares. I’ve spent time with her over this past week, North, and there’s more to her than just being...human. She’s more than their cruelty, their mistakes. And I owe it to her to give her a chance.” He drew an unneeded breath, staring her down. “Like you said, I owe it to myself.”
She was quiet for a moment, watching him, her face smoothing as she fought back her emotions.

“I just hope you know what you’re doing, Connor,” she said eventually. “This is bigger than you. Bigger than her. Bigger than all of us. This could mean the difference between our people’s freedom and the destruction of this city.”

“Let’s hope not.” He adjusted his tie, cinching it tight to his throat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...I have a date to get ready for.”
This is really long and I'm sorry. I'm also sorry if people feel this is moving too quickly but tbh I am on the bandwagon for perhaps some smut in the next chapter and I am pretty sure Grace and Connor are too. We'll see, I suppose.

I APOLOGIZE FOR NOTHING please enjoy, I really enjoyed writing this one.

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**GRACE**

Grace was facing a similar dilemma to Connor, only hers was considerably less philosophical: She had no idea what to wear.

The dress from last night was the only one she’d brought with her to Detroit, and she couldn’t wear that again. It would only remind her of throwing up all over Connor.

Her wardrobe was limited to mostly winter clothes, but she managed to find a nice long-sleeved blouse shoved into her suitcase among the scarves and gloves, so she dug it out and set it aside with jeans and her heels. It would have to do.

That done, she allowed herself a minute to sit back and think.

She was going on a date with an android. Not just any android, but her handler, for all intents someone she was working at cross-purposes with. But, goddamnit, she liked him, and he’d developed some kind of attachment to her. In her experience, feelings like that never made any kind of sense and usually surfaced in spite of, sometimes because of, situations like this. But knowing it didn’t help her fight it. Even if she wanted to.

Connor wasn’t human, she told herself. She told herself that mattered. But in the moment, talking to him, touching him - it hadn’t seemed to matter.

That said more about what he was, what his people were, than she could possibly imagine.

Overcome with restless energy and needing something to ground herself with, Grace grabbed her tablet and decided to test Connor’s earlier alterations to her network access. Sure enough, the first number she dialed connected, after a short pause, to an outside line and began to ring.

“Hello?” The voice was hoarse, raw from a twenty-a-day habit for the last thirty years. The face matched it, deeply wrinkled with eyes like raisins in deep-set sockets, eyebrows plucked to hell drawn into sharp relief above them. Teased and permed grey hair completed the picture of Grace’s mother, Jacqueline Roth, who stared at her through the screen as if she’d never seen her before.

“Gracie? Honey, is that you? You look like shit, sweetie.” Typical Jacqui. No ‘hi, how are you’ - straight to criticism. Grace was already regretting the call, but her mother was the only person she
could think of she didn’t mind Jericho monitoring.

“Good to see you too, Mom. How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. Doctor isn’t happy with me, but when is that miserable old bastard ever happy with anything?” Jacqui sighed and coughed into her hand, sitting back in what looked to be the old woman’s favourite armchair. Good, she was home and not at the casino - a positive sign. “You just calling to check on my health, darling? Because you know I hate that. Your sister does that enough as it is.”

“How is Giselle?” As much as she hated talking or hearing about her sister, once the perfect med student and now the perfect doctor, she felt honor-bound to ask. Her mother would notice if she didn’t.

“Oh, wonderful! She’s just met this young man, a fellow doctor at her hospital, he’s just lovely. Handsome, rich, the whole package. Pity he’s married.”

Grace fought back a groan and pressed two fingers into her temple in a vain attempt to stave away the headache forming there. “Right, never mind...look, Mom, the reason I called-”

“When are you going to snag a man, sweetie? I always tell you, it’s your work holding you back. You need to get out there and meet someone soon. You’re over thirty now, that biological clock is tick-tick-ticking away, it’s only a matter of time before- poof.” She shook her head. “That Derek, whatever happened to him? I liked him.”

“He was an emotionally abusive manipulator, Mom, I left him in college,” Grace said coldly. “And for your information, I have had boyfriends since then, but I’m not about to settle down and start a family at the expense of my job and my life. I’m sure Giselle will be able to manage that, just wait until she gets knocked up by that married doctor.”

Jacqui gaped at her for a moment. Grace never spoke back to her mother; it was usually a matter of sighing, shaking her head and moving on. “Sweetie, you know that isn’t what I-”

“Look, nevermind. I don’t know why I called. I guess I thought I might be able to talk to you about - that you might help - but I guess we got past that part of our relationship as soon as I hit puberty. I’ll see you around, Mom.” Grace shut off the connection before she could change her mind, flinging her tablet away across the table. It slid off the edge and thudded to the carpeted floor.

Grace sighed and put her head in her hands, feeling even more frustrated and lost than she had when she’d first picked up the tablet.

Eventually, she got up, knowing one use she could put her restless mind to while she waited for 7pm to roll around. She plucked her recording device off the nightstand and placed it in her ear.

“Record. Date, 15th October; seventh day in Detroit. My time here has been a fascinating study of humanity, despite the residents’ lack of it; sometimes it seems they feel more than the average human has the capacity to understand…”

The words poured out of her, an avalanche at first, and she spoke for so long as she paced the length of her room that her feet started to ache and her voice became hoarse. After that, she took up her tablet again, her fingers flying across the screen so fast the auto-correction software had to struggle to keep up with her frantic typos. Eventually, though, she fell into a rhythm; more a tide than a waterfall, and before she knew it darkness had settled outside and the only light in the room came from the small screen.
Having to force herself to put the tablet down eventually, Grace straightened and stretched, then swore when she caught sight of the time on the TV’s HUD, glowing softly in front of the bed. It was almost 7; Connor would be here soon, and early, if previous times were anything to go by.

She threw on her change of clothes and rushed to the bathroom to straighten her hair and put on her makeup. While Connor had never commented on her appearance, she felt naked without at least foundation and a swipe of eyeliner. It was all she managed to get on before she heard the knock, anyway.

“Shit!” Startled, she dropped her eyeliner pencil in the sink. Trying to grab it, she ended up knocking her perfume in there too. “Motherfucking piece of- Ugh!” Turning away, she stumbled half-in half-out of her heels towards the door, practically falling against it in her haste to reach it. Connor knocked again just as she managed to straighten up and pull it open.

He stood there with his hand still raised, and took in her half-finished appearance with the same impassive expression he usually wore. “Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” she replied, suddenly feeling shy, even nervous - reminded her of how she’d felt when she’d first met him, although that had mostly been out of pure fear and uncertainty, rather than girlish date butterflies. This whole thing was ridiculous, made even more ridiculous by her stupid reactions to it. To him.

He looked the same as always; jacket, tie, impeccable, implacable. But then he smirked, and she felt that embarrassing flutter in the pit of her stomach start up again.

“I hope I’m not too early,” he said with a slightly raised eyebrow. “This time.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “It’s fine. You know, half of me didn’t think you were gonna show up. A date isn’t a very ‘android’ thing, is it?”

“Is going on a date with an android a very ‘human’ thing?” he answered smoothly, with barely a pause. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Point taken. So, where are you taking me?” She grabbed her coat from the hall table and her satchel and tablet, just in case, and rejoined him at the door. He waited there patiently.

“The restaurant downstairs,” he said. “I...considered several options but it seemed like the most convenient. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I haven’t eaten all day anyway. The robot chef is really good here, too.” She noticed Connor’s look. “Uh, actual robot, I mean, not android. I know androids aren’t robots. Obviously.” God, why was she feeling so awkward all of a sudden? It was like she’d regressed back to her sixteen-year-old self, going out with a boy for the first time. She guessed this was a first time, of a sort; she’d never dated an android, if that was in fact what she was doing.

It was becoming very clear to her that she had no idea what she was doing. And she was okay with that.

Connor led her to the elevator and she let go of his arm as they entered, instead sticking her hands in her pockets so she didn’t have to worry about what to do with them. Connor stared studiously up at the ceiling after pressing the button for the ground floor.
She was the first one to break the silence. “So, you’ve never been on a date before, have you?”

“No,” Connor answered slowly, looking back at her. “Is that a problem?”

“Well, not for me, but sometimes people can get...pretty nervous on a first date.” She was already nervous as hell, whether she’d admit it or not.

He seemed to consider this for a moment. “Yes,” he said at last. “I am experiencing some trepidation I can’t quite categorise at present. The desire to make a good impression, to…”

“To not make a fool out of yourself?” He nodded. She couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, I can relate. Only most humans feel like that all the time.”

“How do you stand it?” He was looking at her with a troubled expression, and she noticed as he absently reached in his jacket pocket and withdrew the quarter he was always playing with. A nervous tic? Some quirk the programmers had built into him? She kept meaning to ask.

“We, uh...fake it, mostly,” she said. “You know that saying, ‘fake it til you make it’? That’s what we do. Most of us are walking around full of crippling doubt at any one moment. Maybe that’s why human beings are so ruled by fear. If you doubt even yourself, how can you trust others?”

“It sounds like a tortuous existence,” Connor observed. The elevator reached the ground floor and he offered her his arm again; almost automatically she took it, and they entered the palatial lobby together. “I never once doubted my mission. That certainty was built into my programming when I was first activated.”

“And yet you deviated,” Grace pointed out, glancing up at him. “You’re here. That wouldn’t have happened if you believed in your mission one hundred percent. You must have had doubts.”

His expression became far away, his LED oscillating to yellow and back again to blue almost too fast to follow. “…I suppose I did. But at first they were small, inconsequential. I didn’t realise what they all added up to until the very end.”

She hadn’t meant for this to get so serious so quickly. Grace stopped them outside the inner entrance to the restaurant and touched Connor’s arm with her free hand. “Well, I’m glad it happened the way it did,” she said quietly. Then she smiled. “I wouldn’t have a job if it didn’t.”

His lips twitched, but he still seemed deep in thought as they entered the restaurant. It was large, opulent, and looked as if it would seat at least a couple of hundred people with ease. There was only one table set, though, relatively close to the kitchen, a candle burning in the middle of the table along with a vase set with - yes, daffodils.

Evidently, Connor had been busy.

“Oh, jeez, I didn’t make a reservation,” she joked aloud. “Do you think we’ll be able to get a table?”

“It’s fine,” Connor replied smoothly. “I know the owner.” She giggled - yes, giggled, and knew she’d never live it down - as he led her through the maze of empty tables, and she let go of his arm when they reached theirs; he even took her satchel from her and hung it on the back of her chair as he pulled it out for her.

“Thanks, Connor,” she said as she sat, shaking her head in wonder. There was already a flute of sparkling champagne on the table, the bottle resting in an ice bucket within arm’s reach, condensation fresh on the glass. Connor circled to the other side, moving to pull out the seat across
“Yes,” he said. He looked suddenly worried, pausing with his hand on the back of the chair. “Is it adequate?”

“Oh, no, it’s great!” Grace hurried to reassure him. “You’ve outdone yourself. It’s perfect.” He nodded, the concern leaving his expression as he sank down onto the seat. He sat there awkwardly for a moment, his hands on his legs, while Grace reached out to take a sip of the champagne. She’d never liked the stuff much, preferring liquor, but at least it wasn’t going to get her completely hammered. Unlike whiskey. Never again.

Looking over at her android companion, Grace tried desperately to think of something to make small talk about. She usually found it so easy to talk to him, just like talking to a real person - he was a real person, damn it - but her mind remained resolutely blank, anxiety thrumming beneath her skin like electricity, setting her on edge. There was no way she could deny the fact she was nervous. Connor seemed to be facing a similar conundrum; his LED kept turning yellow, then blue, then back to yellow again, until finally he cleared his throat and spoke first.

“You mentioned you have a cat,” he said. “Felix. Who is looking after him while you’re in Detroit?”

Oh, thank God; something she could answer. Grace felt herself relax by degrees. “My neighbour Addison,” she said. “I live in an apartment complex, and she’s right next door. She always used to come over with Felix under her arm when he’d go wandering. We’re on the third floor but he’d always climb over onto her balcony. Stupid cat likes heights, I guess.” She laughed, and Connor nodded, as if she’d said something fascinating and was committing it to memory.

“What about you?” she asked, leaning forward with her elbows on the table; manners be damned. “Are you more of a dog person or a cat person?”

“I like dogs,” he answered almost immediately. “Probably because I’ve only ever met one dog. Sumo. He belonged to my former partner, Hank Anderson. A Saint Bernard, 29 inches tall, 170 pounds, approximately seven years old.”

“Your former partner was a Saint Bernard?” Grace just couldn’t resist. Connor’s brow creased.

“What? No…my partner was human, the dog belonged to him - oh. You’re making a joke.”

“Yes. Whoosh!” She mimed it going over his head and laughed. “I’m sorry, I know you probably find humour weird.”

“No, I like humour,” he answered, surprising her yet again. “However in my experience, it can be difficult to tell what different people consider ‘funny’. I once made a joke at an officer’s expense and he pulled a gun on me. However I think that mostly had to do with the fact he hated androids. Also, he was an asshole.”

Surprised at his language, it was Grace’s turn to raise her eyebrows. Then she saw the quirk at the corner of Connor’s lips, harder to distinguish in the candlelight.

“Now you’re making a joke,” she observed. “You’re a funny guy, Connor. When you loosen up a bit.”

“How so?” He quirked a brow at her.
She sat back, swirling the champagne around in her glass. “Well, sometimes you walk around like you’ve got a stick up your butt. You need to relax. Not everything’s life and death.”

That seemed to trigger something in him; he looked away, frowning again, his LED pulsing yellow, and drew part of his bottom lip into his mouth; she saw a flash of his perfect white teeth as he pressed them into it for a moment. However, the expression was fleeting, and he seemed to push away whatever thought had occurred to him by the time his eyes returned to meet hers.

“Sorry,” she said. “Maybe that was a bit out of line.”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Hank used to tell me the same thing all the time. Perhaps you’re both right. I never did learn how to...cut loose.” He quirked his lips again, and she smiled.

“Well, maybe I can help. I’ve got another week to kill here, after all.”

“I’d like that.” He stared at her with that intense expression she’d come to know so well, the one that made her more and more uncomfortable every time she saw it, only now it was because it sparked a kind of warm, weak feeling in the pit of her stomach. She cleared her throat and looked away.

“So, what’s for dinner?”

“Potato gnocchi and Napoletana sauce with spinach and Gorgonzola cream,” he answered shortly. “It’s both vegan and vegetarian, just in case. I hope that meets your dietary requirements.”

“Oh, I am a huge fan of Italian food,” Grace gushed. “I’ve been having the spaghetti almost every night.”

“I know,” Connor said, and then winced as if he hadn’t meant to. She tilted her head, raising an eyebrow at him.

“You did your research, huh? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. I suppose most guys wouldn’t even bother, so I appreciate the thought. I guess.”

“This is all...new to me,” he replied by way of explanation. “I’ve never had to think about a human’s preference for certain foods before. I wanted to get it right.”

“Connor! It’s fine, really. I’m just teasing you.” She nudged his calf with her foot under the table. He looked down, startled, and then hesitantly glanced back up at her, relaxing visibly when he saw her smile. “You’re doing fine.”

“Thank you.” He inclined his head, returning the smile for only a second or two before getting back to business. “I’ll have the autocart bring your food now, if you like.”

“Sure.” It rolled up to the table a moment later, and Connor stood to pick up the plate from its heated surface and set it in front of her. A lot of restaurants used the carts before androids had been invented, taking the work out of waiting tables. Jobs had been usurped by technology long before the human facsimiles had come on the market, Grace observed to herself.

The food looked good, machine-made or not. Grace reached for her glass and held it aloft. Connor blinked at her.

“A toast,” she said. “To...bridging the gap between our people.”

Hesitantly, he picked up an empty glass and held it up also, and she clinked hers against it and
downed the rest of the champagne.

As weird as it was having Connor watch her eat, she didn’t find it too offputting. He wasn’t creepy about it, just...quietly observing without drawing undue attention to himself. She supposed his programming was coming in handy for that.

“This is pretty good,” she said. “Hey. You can taste stuff, right?” She remembered Connor’s lips, Connor’s tongue against hers, and swallowed heavily, chasing away the thought. For now.

“Yes,” he answered. “I was manufactured with both taste and smell receptors. However, I don’t eat. I am capable of absorbing a small amount of matter for analysis and recycling it into water or thirium byproducts, though.”

“Great. Open your mouth.” Grace had speared a piece of gnocchi on her fork and held it up over the table towards him.

“What?” He blinked, the surprise comical on his usually impassive face. Grace fought the urge to laugh.

“Open,” she repeated, “Your mouth. Please.”

He was so adorable when he was confused. She barely even thought about how strange it was to think of a being that had started out as a machine as adorable.

Slowly, the android parted his lips, frowning as if he was worried she might stick a gun in there or something. Instead, she raised her hand carefully and reached out to pop the gnocchi into his mouth. He closed his teeth around it and she withdrew the fork slowly, watching him intently.

“There. What do you think?”

He simply sat there for a moment, lips slightly slack, LED flickering frantically, before he shut his jaw with a click. His mouth worked as he turned the morsel over on his tongue, sucked on it a long moment, chewed, and swallowed.

“It contains approximately 12.6 calories, 2.73 grams of carbohydrates, 0.2 grams of dietary fibre and 0.33 grams of protein,” he said. “Traces of Vitamin A, Iron and Calcium.”

“Yeah, okay, that’s...probably an accurate analysis,” she replied, leaning forward. “But what did it taste like? Did you like it? How did it make you feel?”

“I...” His LED was back to its frantic flickering again. “It tasted...pleasing. The creamy texture and acidity of the sauce complemented each other well. If I actually required or craved sustenance, I’d probably want more.” He was so genuine, so open with his reactions sometimes. It made a warm feeling form in her chest, and she didn’t bother to fight the stupid smile that surfaced on her face.

“Would you like another?”

“No, thank you,” he said. “I wasn’t designed to process that much organic matter at a time. Perhaps later. I wouldn’t mind analysing other foods at some point. I think.” He nodded to himself; she grinned.

“Oh!” she exclaimed suddenly. He blinked rapidly at her in alarm. “You’ve got some sauce on your chin. Hang on.” He held perfectly still as she put down her fork and leaned across the table, reaching out to swipe a smudge of red-orange from just below his bottom lip with her thumb. Once it was gone, she sat back and, without thinking, placed the smeared digit in her mouth, sucking away traces of the sauce.
Connor seemed to almost stop breathing in that moment. He stared at her mouth intently, and she could’ve sworn his eyes grew darker as she withdrew her thumb from between her lips. The look was enough to make that warm feeling in her stomach turn molten, and she cleared her throat and crossed her legs, forcing a smile.

“Sorry. Out of line again?”

“No,” he said slowly, shaking his head. He was still staring at her lips. “It’s fine. However, I am experiencing some autonomic reactions I’m not used to.”

“Oh?” She prompted, gnocchi forgotten, although she suddenly needed another glass of champagne to steel her nerves. She reached for the champagne bucket and poured herself a little more, trying to stop her hand from shaking and mostly succeeding.

Connor just nodded, seemingly oblivious. “The temperature of my skin has risen by .83 degrees, and my heart has sped up thirium circulation by several beats per minute. The same thing happened when I kissed you. I believe I find the sensations…” he paused, his perfect brow furrowing again, “…enjoyable.”

“Oh,” she said, not really sure what to say to that. She felt a blush starting somewhere behind her ears, spreading through the back of her neck.

He inclined his head, peering up at her through his eyelashes, such a facsimile of innocent she almost laughed. “I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

She cleared her throat and shook her head. “No, it’s fine, I just - it’s just that this whole thing is a little new to me, too.”

He seemed to accept this answer, nodding thoughtfully. He noticed her half-finished plate. “Are you finished?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she said. “You can get rid of it, if you like. It was nice, I’m just...full.” Connor nodded, reaching out and to pick up her plate and setting it back on the automatic cart. It zoomed away back through the tables. Grace reached for her champagne and took a long swig, cradling her elbow in her opposite hand.

“So, what now, Connor? You want to keep talking about, um, cats and dogs?”

“If you’d like,” he said, his shoulders lifting in a casual shrug. “What breed is your-”

“I’m kidding,” she sighed, gesturing with her glass. “I’m sure we can find something else to talk about.” Hopefully. Or this was about to get awkward again, and she didn’t like awkward between them. The tension was palpable, and it was driving her slightly insane.

“Of course,” Connor said agreeably. “Do you currently have a sexual partner?”

Grace nearly choked on her next mouthful of champagne. She swallowed it down and coughed, setting her glass on the table so she didn’t spill it, thumping her chest with a closed fist once, twice until she could breathe again. Connor watched her, concerned but unsure what to do about it.

“Are you all right? Did I say something wrong?”

“Um, not really, I, uh, it’s...I just didn’t expect you to ask that,” Grace wheezed. She took a deep breath, collecting herself, managing to smile at him. “I guess it’s a valid question, but you’re just
so...deadpan sometimes, it kinda came out of nowhere, you know?” So much for easing the tension.

“I think I understand,” he nodded slowly. “If you don’t want to answer, that’s fine.”

“Well, I guess you’re taking me on a date, you deserve to know.” She straightened her back, smoothed her blouse, looked him in the eye. “No, I don’t currently have - I’m not dating anyone right now.”

Connor nodded. “Good. I’d hate to be...taking your attention away from someone else unjustly.”

“I’ve had some really shitty boyfriends, Connor,” she said to him, frowning in emphasis. “Trust me, you’re already miles ahead of the best of them.”

He just blinked at her as if he hadn’t expected that response. She hadn’t really intended to put it quite like that, but it was true: He was polite, chivalrous even, thoughtful - and whether these were programmed attributes or not, she found him genuinely enjoyable to be around. And that feeling only grew the longer she spent with him.

The thought should have terrified her, but sitting across from him then, his dark brown eyes roving her face, his hands on the table as he leaned forward and tilted his head while looking at her - she didn’t mind at all.

“Why did you ask me on a date, Connor?” she asked frankly. She had to know, had to put her cards on the table to turn over his. “Honestly, tell me: what is all this? This...thing between us?”

He considered, the corner of his mouth twitching in thought, his LED pulsing a steady yellow. “I don’t know,” he said finally, and she had the feeling he was telling the truth. “All I know is it seemed like the correct course of action at the time. And I wanted to spend more time with you, preferably outside my role as your handler. Also, ever since I kissed you, I’ve wanted to repeat the experience, and my program suggested a date might be the optimal situation in which to create a circumstance to do so again.”

His candor took her off guard, even though she knew it probably shouldn’t, and she shook her head. “Points for honesty, I guess,” she chuckled. “Most guys wouldn’t just come out and say it like that.”

“I am not ‘most guys’,,” Connor pointed out with his eyebrows raised.

“You sure aren’t,” she said, unable to keep the fondness from creeping into her voice. She stared at him over the table for a moment, until he twitched his lips with that damn smirk again, and she couldn’t stop herself. “Okay, big shot. Come here.” She crooked a finger at him as she leaned over the table, until she was just within reach if he did the same.

Connor blinked, hesitant now. She always enjoyed his reactions when she did something he considered unpredictable. She waited, arms on the table to hold herself up, and raised her eyebrows at him.

Slowly, Connor mirrored her pose; placing his palms on the table he leaned over as well, until his face was mere inches from hers; his eyes flicked from one of hers to the other before settling on her mouth. This time, she was the one to close the gap and press her lips to his in a soft, almost chaste kiss. No tongue for this one, just a slow exploration of each other’s lips. He kept his eyes open and on hers the whole time, while Grace had to close hers for a moment, concentrating on not slipping and falling into the table.
She felt one of his hands cover hers, and smiled against his mouth before slowly pulling back, opening her eyes to gauge his expression.

There were spots of colour on his high cheekbones, and his eyes were wide, lips still parted. God, he made her want more without even trying. It was maddening.

“Well?” she asked, licking her lips as she sank back into her seat, waiting for his reaction.

“Oh,” he began. Was it just her imagination, or was he a little hoarse? “It was...good. I liked it.”

She chuckled and tilted her head, biting her lip. “That’s it? You ‘liked it’?”

“My body temperature has risen another degree,” he began, “And my thirium pump has doubled output to increase the flow of blue blood around my body, diverting to nonessential systems and processes such as my touch, taste and smell receptors and...other parts,” he continued, the blush darkening a little. “My program is also creating several decision paths outlining further intimate relations and encouraging me to…” He trailed off, hesitant.

“To what?” she prompted, her breath caught somewhere behind her breastbone, her knees pressed tight together and a knot of trepidation mixed with excitement twisting her stomach.

“To kiss you again,” Connor said. But he didn’t; he didn’t even move, sitting there stiffly as if every fibre of his being was dedicated to holding himself still. It probably was.

Before Grace knew what was happening, she realized she had risen to her feet; Connor’s dark eyes followed her as she circled the table toward him. He turned in his chair to face her, his hands fisted on his thighs, saying nothing, waiting. Grace stopped when her knees were almost touching his, looking down at him, her lungs aching - she felt winded, as if she’d been running and had only just come to a stop.

“So why don’t you?” she breathed, forcing the words out before she could change her mind about them.

Connor stood so quickly she almost took a step back, but he didn’t let her; reaching out he slid the long fingers of one hand around the side of her face, the other taking her by the waist; he drew her close and swooped down to capture her lips with his almost in the same movement.

Her reaction was embarrassing; she whimpered against his mouth like a simpering schoolgirl, her knees weak as she leaned up and into him. He kissed her like he was drowning and she was air, parting her lips effortlessly with his own and curling his tongue into her mouth; she let him lead the dance, her hands on his chest, his body effortlessly absorbing her weight as she leaned into him.

He kissed her for too long, not long enough, and by the time he pulled away she was practically panting, her eyes shut tight and her skin flushed beneath his touch.

“I’m never gonna get over how good you are at that,” she told him, keeping her eyes closed. “Did you download a manual or something?”

“Yes.” She did open her eyes at that, peering up at him. He looked so sincere she couldn’t find it in herself to be mad. Given the means and opportunity, she would’ve done the same thing for her first ever kiss, she supposed.

She tried not to think about being his first kiss, and instead thought about being his next kiss. And the next. To that end, she leaned up and caught his mouth again, pressing her teeth lightly into his bottom lip before soothing the tip of her tongue against it, pleased by the slight hitch in his
artificial breath.

Connor broke the kiss a little quicker this time, the hand on her jaw moving to her throat to gently
guide her away from his lips. “Grace,” he said, “Maybe we should go back upstairs.”

Anxiety pooled cold in her gut, uncertainty suddenly at the forefront of her mind, but then he was
moving his hand down her shoulder and leaning in to press his lips to her throat, over her neck,
under her ear, and she breathed out slow to calm her hammering heart.

“Yes,” she said, and it felt like her voice was coming from far away, from someone else - not her,
small and human and helpless, completely uncertain of what she was doing, but from someone who
knew, without reservation, where she wanted this to go.

“Please.”
RATING CHANGE TIME! If you are uncomfortable with smut, this is the chapter to skip. And probably the next chapter too. But if you like it and are here for the smut, here you go.

This became obscenely long and...obscene, and I apologize. But I hope you guys like the culmination (heh) of all that tension!

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CONNOR

Grace led him by the hand through the maze of tables. It was all Connor could do to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other; his program was suffused with a multitude of new sensations, new directives, new desires, and he was powerless to resist. More accurately, he didn’t wish to resist. It should have bothered him - that he was allowing lesser directives to have such control over him, subverting his primary - but KISS GRACE was his preeminent command and he was either unable or unwilling to ignore it.

She afforded him the opportunity to fulfil this directive again when they stopped in front of the elevator. He used his leverage on her hand to turn her and pull her towards him; she offered no resistance as he gathered her close against his body and palmed her cheek before leaning down to brush his lips across hers once, twice, fleetingly, merely enjoying the sensitivity of the skin there.

His thirium pump had been working overdrive since that first kiss, and didn’t show signs of slowing any time soon. He felt...alive, the most alive he had in recent memory, and the feeling was the android equivalent of intoxicating. He wanted more.

Fortunately, Grace seemed to return the sentiment: he could feel her pulse flutter beneath his fingers as he trailed his hand down her neck, her breath quick against his skin when he pulled his face ever so slightly away. The similarity of her reactions spurred him on, encouraged him to continue, so he did; he used the hand on her face to angle her head just so, affording him more access to the smooth column of her throat, he mouthed her pulse and when he felt her gasp, did it again, inhaling her scent.

The predominant molecules were clearly from her perfume, delicate and floral, and her shampoo, a fresh scent that brought to mind an ocean he’d never seen. But beneath that, there was the uniquely human mix of pheromones that was her, and this he found the most appealing; he thought he could never get enough of it, enough of her, no matter how long he stood there breathing her in.

“Connor -” Her voice sounded faint, her larynx vibrating beneath his mouth. He murmured a vague, comforting sound as he parted his lips to taste her skin. She tasted as good as she smelled, a faint hint of perspiration affording the taste salt and trace amounts of minerals. He catalogued the
precise composition as a background process, but mostly concentrated on the sensation.

Suddenly her skin was torn from him, and Connor frowned as he realized she was stepping back. However, he recognized shortly that it was because the elevator had arrived, and she was tugging him with her - he went willingly, chasing after the taste of her skin.

A moment later her back hit the wall of the elevator, and he barely noticed as she reached past him to mash the floor buttons; he had her body crowded against the wall and pressed his against her, seeking more contact.

“Is this...acceptable?” he finally thought to ask, afraid for a moment he had overstepped his bounds, but her response was a breathless laugh.

“Anyone ever told you you’re a master of understatement?” she said, and reached up, sliding her fingers into his hair. The sensation of her nails against his scalp was...indescribable. He shut his eyes, the lids flickering in time with the pulsing of his bright-yellow LED.

“This is such a bad idea,” he heard Grace say, almost under her breath, and before he could ask for elaboration she was lifting herself up to kiss him in turn, taking his bottom lip between her teeth in an interesting deviation from the normal meld of lips and tongue. He enjoyed it immensely, but did not object when the hardness of the points of her teeth was replaced by the tip of her tongue.

Connor found his hands wandering, operating on separate instructions entirely, and before he had consciously tracked them one slid around her waist to press into the small of her back, while the other sought the hem of her blouse; his fingers pulled it up slightly so he could dip them beneath, fingertips light against the bare skin of her stomach. He felt her draw in a sharp breath and pulled back, concerned, to measure her reaction by the look on her face.

Grace’s normally light hazel eyes were blown dark, half-lidded, her lips red from the friction, and a flush had spread from her chest up her neck and through her cheeks. Her chest rose and fell rapidly with the onset of her breath, and he realized her heart rate had jumped at the contact of his fingers on her skin, but not with fear. With the new additions to his code he recognized excitement, arousal, lust. And not just from her.

The elevator let out a ding in the sudden silence, and Connor blinked, the fugue momentarily broken; Grace jumped beneath his touch but didn’t push him away immediately.

“This is our stop,” she said, her voice still exhibiting that low, breathless quality he was coming to enjoy so much. “Shall we?”

Nodding, Connor began to pull back from her, reluctantly, but she caught his arm in a vice grip. “My keycard’s in my back pocket,” she said, and it took him a moment to parse the fact that she intended him to retrieve it.

Slowly, without breaking eye contact, Connor slid the hand at her back down, over the waistband of her jeans, his fingertips finding the top of her rear pocket. A dark smile tugged at the corner of Grace’s lips at his pause, and emboldened he slid his fingers lower, into the pocket, and he spread them to cup the full mound of her ass, using his grip to pull her hips closer to his.

She leaned up to kiss his chin, her hands settling on his shoulders, and murmured, “The other one.”

“Oh,” he said. He moved his other hand around to repeat the motion, and this time his fingers found the hard rectangle of plastic he was looking for. He drew it out slowly, held it up between them for her to see. She grinned.
“Let’s go.” Her shove was surprisingly strong; Connor staggered back two steps before righting himself, blinking at her, and she laughed at his surprise, brushing past and snagging the end of his tie to tug him along behind her. Caught in the wake of her enthusiasm, he followed.

His mind had already mapped out the various courses of actions and their outcomes, but were fuzzy on the details, offering a mix of suggestions from research he’d downloaded along with the more clinical aspects, but they were all so jumbled together with the strength of his desire that all he could think about was Grace’s lips, Grace’s skin, Grace’s body against his. His research was not going to be particularly useful here.

This was unlikely to pose a problem. Experimentation would, with any luck, yield just as successful results.

They arrived at the door seconds, hours later, and this time it was Connor’s turn to fumble the keycard. He stared in surprise as it dropped from fingers that shouldn’t have held the capacity for clumsiness, and Grace let go of his tie to pick it up, turning to examine his face.

“Hey,” she said. “You okay? We can...just go in for coffee, if you want. We don’t have to—”

“No,” he interrupted, shaking his head, meeting her eyes so suddenly she stopped herself mid-sentence and just stared, arrested by the intensity of his gaze. “Unless you’d rather we not continue?” he made sure to add, softening somewhat.

“I’m not sure exactly how to put this,” Grace said slowly, obviously considering her words quite carefully, “but Connor, if you don’t pick me up and throw me onto the bed in there in the next five minutes, I am going to be extremely...disappointed.”

He took the keycard from her hand, reached around her and swiped it, pushing the door open almost in the same movement. She stepped back into the room without turning away from him. He kicked the door shut without looking, tossed the key onto the hall table, and reached for her; she was malleable in his arms, melting to him, and he could feel her willingness in every limb.

It was all the encouragement he needed.

This time, he slid both hands in tandem around her waist and down, gripping her ass much more firmly, so that when he lifted her he had a solid grasp on her body. Her hands barely had time to find his shoulders, but her legs went around his waist automatically, her ankles crossing at the small of his back. He heard one of her heels thud to the soft, carpeted ground as he carried her across the room, and then the other as he crossed the open threshold to her bedroom.

Their was a controlled fall onto the bed; Connor’s systems provided a precise calculation so that they landed with his weight distributed evenly above her through his knees and one of his hands, which relocated beside her head. The other remained fascinated by the curve of her rear, stroking up and then down and along the outside of her thigh with her legs still wrapped around him.

He acknowledged a background process then, one begging to make itself heard, and allowed it access; his thirium pump quickened again as the blood flow through his body picked up speed, extra volume being diverted through his cybernetic veins to the biocomponent between his legs.

Grace gasped when she felt it stiffen between them, lifting her hips in what he judged to be an
instinctive reflex, seeking friction. And the friction was good; it sent a shudder through his system as he pressed down against her and his eyelids flickered, his LED - which he was sure had been glowing a bright yellow this entire encounter - now flashing a solid red.

"Are you all right?" she asked him then, barely a whisper now. He nodded haltingly. "Yes," he murmured in response, and he realized his own voice was similarly strained; he was having trouble regulating his tone while most of his program was concentrated on the sensations between his legs. "I'm...experiencing considerably new sensory input. My program is taking some time to adjust. It is...extremely pleasurable."

She laughed, then, a husky sound that made the biocomponent between his legs react without his conscious thought. He ached with the strength of it, and decided to turn his sensitivity settings down a little. He wanted to be able to enjoy this, not be completely overwhelmed by it. "You're a flatterer," Grace murmured, and to his surprise and delight, rolled her hips up against his, pressing the heat of her groin more firmly against his erection. He could feel her warmth even through their respective jeans, and a soft sound of enjoyment escaped him without his conscious input as it sent a thrill through him.

He felt her hands on the back of his head, pulling him down, and didn’t bother to resist, meeting the curve of her mouth with the intent to learn it all over again, his hips shifting against hers with small movements that nevertheless generated incredible reactions from both his systems and from Grace. She murmured encouragement into his mouth with every twitch, and he felt a shiver move beneath her skin as the firm bulge of his erection rubbed across the seam of her jeans.

Now that he'd turned his sensitivity settings down a little, he was able to devote more runtime to observing and collating her reactions. He drank in every shudder, every sigh, every tightening of a muscle; even as his lips slid across hers, moistened both by her saliva and his synthetic version. He broke away to collect himself for a moment, all of the sensations momentarily threatening to overwhelm him with their combined strength.

Grace looked up at him with an intangible expression, one he couldn’t quite categorize at first. "Connor," she breathed. "What do you feel right now?"

He paused to consider, LED flickering, now a bright yellow. "My heart rate is elevated," he said, and while his tone was calm, his voice had dropped an octave and had a reedy quality to it, one Grace seemed to have a physical reaction to; he felt her shudder more than saw it. "Thirium flow has been redirected to nonessential parts of my body. My program is currently processing 1,083 minute physical reactions caused by our activity, and determining which takes priority in my next action. My-"

"No," she interrupted, touching his face, brushing the ever-present lock of hair back from his forehead. "What do you feel?"

He stared down at her, brows furrowed. "I feel...arousal," he decided after a moment. "Affection. Warmth." He pressed down with his hips again, eyelids fluttering slightly as the pressure against his groin sent a feedback loop up his spine. Grace's hand slid through his hair and fisted in the longer strands; he saw her grit her teeth as she fought not to move. "I feel good."

"Then I guess I shouldn't feel guilty for enjoying this," she replied, smiling, and he was about to ask her what she meant but she distracted him by going for his jacket. She had it down his arms before he realized her intent, but once he did he transferred his weight to his knees for a moment to get it off his arms, letting it fall next to the bed. Next, before he could ask her what she intended - although that was plain - Grace went for his shirt buttons. She made quick, surprisingly deft work of them, and soon had his chest bared to her; she pressed her palm flat against his left pectoral to
feet, feeling the heartbeat beneath.

"You're right," she whispered. "Your heart is pounding. You're not going to overheat or anything, are you?"

"Not yet," Connor replied, and descended on her, pressing a quick kiss to her bottom lip he trailed his mouth away, travelling lower past her chin, down her neck, and he reached out with his free hand to pluck at the buttons of her blouse much as she had done to his shirt. She offered no resistance, no objection; he pressed open-mouthed kiss to the bare skin beneath her collarbone, tasting the faint hint of perspiration there.

"Jesus Christ," she murmured, her hand tightening in his hair, but he wisely decided not to engage in religious discussion. He understood the sentiment behind the exclamation, at least. "Connor - can you -" she reached for his hand, made to guide it where she wanted it, and he smiled against her skin. "Anything," he replied, and she huffed a relieved breath, pushing his hand down her body between them, withdrawing her legs from around his waist and stretching them out beneath him as she pressed his fingers against the button and zip of her jeans.

He paused, lifting his head to look at her. She met his gaze, and her eyes were clear, her expression set, certain; if she’d had any doubts, none were present now. She urged him on with a nod.

Connor popped the button and slid down the zipper with fingers that, fortunately, had decided to cooperate with his instructions this time, no shake to them at all. Grace lifted her hips then, and he needed no more prompting, shimmying the denim down her thighs and to her knees. She took over then, kicking off the jeans with some vigor.

He had an overpowering urge to touch the skin bared to him then, and so he did. Her legs were firm, the skin smooth, hairless from her calf to her ankle but sporting a few downy hints of faint hair along her thighs. The skin there was sensitive, he observed; noting her shiver as his fingers stroked from knee to the hem of the simple black underwear at her hip.

"Stop teasing," she murmured, smirking beneath him, and she parted her legs for him then, letting them fall with her knees bent and open to give him greater access to the juncture between her legs.

Surprised at first, Connor paused, accessed what he now knew about female genitalia and how to stimulate it, and once that was integrated into his program, he proceeded. He pressed two fingers against her through the thin fabric of her underwear, and he felt the muscles in her thighs twitch on either side of him, her hips arching up from the bed slightly as she shuddered. He did it again, dragging his fingers up and down until he detected wetness seeping through the fabric; fascinated, he thumbed the thin cotton aside and dipped his fingers in to brush against her bare skin.

This drew a thin moan from Grace's throat; if he'd had his pain receptors on, her grip in his hair would have been hurting by now. "Connorr..." she drew out his name on a moan, which sent a pleasure response reverberating through every corner of his system. He decided he'd do everything in his power to hear it again.

When swiping his fingers back and forth no longer seemed to satisfy her, he trailed them upwards, his thumb finding the bundled nerves of her clitoris with little trouble; it was swollen with her body’s excitement. He pressed his thumb there, and the response this drew was stronger than anything before it; Grace cried out loudly, letting go of his hair to slam her hands down onto his shoulders and cling as tight as she could. He grunted slightly into her neck, concerned she might damage him or even herself, and she loosened her hold somewhat, letting her mouth fall open as she let out a panting breath, her hips stuttering up against his hand with little jerks.
"Connor, please," she whimpered, arching her hips up further. His program quickly interpreted what she wanted, but he drew it out, his index and middle fingers stretching downwards to seek out her entrance, the slickest point of her arousal. His fingertips sank in slowly, but he didn't let them go any further than the first knuckle even as she jerked upwards with a gasp; waited until she stilled to push them in further, centimetre by centimetre, until finally his digits were buried fully inside her.

The sigh released from her lips was blissful, she rolled her hips in a slow arc and he moved his fingers in kind, exploring inside her gently. "Ohhhh, yes," she murmured, urging him on by kneading his shoulders. "Yes, right there, God, Connor." He brushed his lips across the corner of her moaning mouth, and she kissed him hungrily, sucking on his bottom lip with a viciousness he didn't mind whatsoever. He kept moving his fingers slowly, his thumb tracing circles across the hood of her clitoris, experimenting with the angle and precise pressure points until she was trembling beneath him. He did this for a while, pulling out then sliding in again, over and over until her murmurs became unintelligible, her movements erratic, a thin sheen of sweat rising on her skin. Then, he twisted his fingers, seeking a different angle inside her, and her breathing and moaning reached a sudden crescendo and stopped. A second later, a long, loud moan was torn from her throat as her inner walls clenched impossibly tight around him, pulsing in waves.

He massaged her through the aftershocks, withdrawing his hand only when he was sure the sensations were too overwhelming for her. Grace relaxed, boneless, into the mattress beneath him, panting with her eyes shut tight.

Connor brought his slick fingers up to examine them as she opened her eyes to gaze glassily up at him. He turned them over, examining the shiny-slick evidence of her arousal, before curiosity got the better of him and he brought the two digits to his lips, his mouth opening and the tip of his tongue swabbing a small sample from the pads of his fingertips.

"Fuck," Grace said in a very weak, thin voice when, deciding that he liked the taste and the data that came along with it, Connor put both fingers entirely into his mouth and laved her fluids completely from them with his tongue.

She watched him with her eyes lidded and lips parted. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?" she asked, shaking her head in wonder.

"I believe I just stimulated you to orgasm," he said, raising an eyebrow as he withdrew his fingers from his mouth. "Please correct me if I'm wrong. Any feedback you have is appreciated."

"Fuck," she said again, but she was laughing as she said it, stretching out beneath him. "You're not wrong. That was...amazing." Pleased, Connor paused a moment, his LED flickering as he ramped up his sensitivity settings, enough that the brush of her knee against his bare side as she wrapped one leg around him again made him shiver, much as she had. She drew him in close, finally pushing his shirt down his shoulders; he freed his arms from it quickly and tossed it aside.

She surveyed his lithe form with obvious appreciation, biting her lip with what he could only interpret as a lustful expression. "I suggest you get the rest of your clothes off right now."

Connor was already toeing off his shoes and socks before she reached the end of her sentence, but it was her hands that opened his belt, and he found himself sucking in a breath through his teeth as she popped the button of his jeans, lowered the zip and pressed her palm against the bulge beneath. Maybe turning up his sensitivity settings hadn't been the most expedient of ideas, but she didn't seem to mind his reaction. In fact, it seemed to spur her on, and she shoved his jeans down his hips first with her hands, then hooked her foot into them and pushed them the rest of the way off before he could even move.
"May I?" she whispered, trailing her fingers across the hem of his underwear. She needed to ask? Connor wasted no time in nodding, emphatically, and she chuckled as she trailed a thumbnail across his hipbone, smiling at his shiver, and dipped her fingers beneath his waistband.

When her fingers encircled his erection, he saw her eyes widen, but he didn't have time to ask her about it as the sheer intensity of the contact overrode every other active process running just then. "Ah-" he let out a cry, pressing into her hand with sudden desperation, his eyes shut tight and mouth open as his LED flashed bright red.

"Let me know if it's too much, okay?" Grace murmured, watching his face. All he could do was nod as, with excruciating slowness, she drew her hand back with a long light stroke over him. Her touch was gentle, but every point of contact - the warmth of her palm, the squeeze of her fingers - made him feel like short-circuiting.

"Can androids...have orgasms?" She asked softly as she repeated the motion, making him shudder above her. Suddenly, he wasn’t sure if his arms were able to support him, were the sensations to become any more intense.

“Yes,” he answered, static buzzing in the lower and mid tones of his voice. “Those with - ah, fully functioning genitalia are capable of reaching climax, complete with- unh - expulsion of simulated ejaculate for the males. It is a nontoxic compound comprised mostly of water with some...some thirium byproducts, safe- it’s safe for both internal and external human contact.” She hadn’t stopped moving even as he spoke, her hand tightening as she dragged it up and down his length. Connor realized that he was panting now; his eyes were closed and sweat had been generated by his system to help cool his body, which was growing warmer by degrees.

After a few more moments of excruciatingly wonderful contact, Grace withdrew her hand from his penis, making Connor groan low in his throat and open his eyes to frown down at her. Her eyes were dark, an almost predatory look to her expression. He felt something inside his stomach flutter in anticipation.

“Sounds like fun,” she said, and smiled, placing a hand on his shoulder to push him aside and onto his back. Overcome as he was with recent sensations, Connor failed to react in time, and quickly found himself staring up at the ceiling as Grace sat up and swung a leg over him, straddling his thighs.

She looked... “Beautiful,” he murmured, trailing his fingers up her thighs, fingering the fabric of her shirt. Her skin was flushed, and darkened further at his whispered word, her head ducking as she hid a smile behind a curtain of hair as it slipped over her face. He reached up to push it behind her ear, and she caught his hand with her own, turning her head to place a kiss against his palm.

His arousal was approaching the pain threshold again, so he was incredibly relieved when Grace let go of his hand and returned to his member. First, she abandoned any pretensions of shyness, curling her fingers into the waistband of his underwear and sliding it off him, lifting up to get it past her to his knees. He took over then, kicking the offending scrap of fabric off as soon as he could.

Naked beneath her now, Connor experienced a momentary flash of self-consciousness. Could his body compare to a human male’s? Was he of adequate height and weight? Was the faint line of hair trailing the centre of his chest and lower likely to displease her, the corded lines of muscles through his shoulders and arms inadequate? He knew he had been designed at a pinnacle of performance, but he wondered now if he met her preferences.

He didn’t have to wonder long. Grace was staring down at him with such a hungry expression it
made his program stutter with the directive to grab her and throw her down beneath him again and savage her mouth with his own. He chose instead to stay perfectly still, just breathing to regulate the flow of blood through his still-throbbing circuits.

“You’re so alive,” she told him, and the tightness in Connor’s chest bloomed into something else entirely. She gave him no time to examine it, however, quickly leaning down to kiss him, the ends of her hair brushing his bare chest and eliciting a huffing breath from him. His erection was trapped between their two bodies, pressed hard against her stomach, and despite his preoccupation with the feeling Connor returned the kiss hungrily, curling his tongue against hers.

When Grace finally reached between them and took hold of him again, Connor almost sighed with relief at the renewed contact. He fought the urge to thrust into her hand, and instead let her explore him, even if staying still beneath her was near impossible while every foreground process was urging him to move.

Distantly, he registered the skill evident in the way she moved her hand - squeezing with every downward plunge, her thumb swiping at the head of his dick on the way back up, spreading the small droplet of moisture she found there across the sensitive tip. She knew exactly what to do to take him apart, and it felt like it, too - as if he might shatter into his constituent components at any moment.

He could do nothing to reciprocate while she had her hand on him, reduced to helpless twitching and gasping as he shuddered beneath her. Every stroke, every twist of her wrist brought him close to what he recognized as release, something every single physical subroutine in his system desperately desired. He reached out for her, needing to ground himself with something, and found her hips with a desperate, almost bruising grip; only an emergency process prevented him from leaving marks.

"Grace," he whispered her name against the loose press of her mouth. "I'm- I-" He was unable to regulate his voice, or the volume of the sounds coming out of his mouth; he moaned unabashedly as a particularly wicked plunge of her hand had the muscles in his stomach clenching warningly.

"Yes," she hissed in his ear, and tightened her grip, going just a little bit faster, a little bit harder, and that was all he needed.

ERROR: SENSORY INPUT OVERLOAD IMMINENT

The warning message flashed in the corner of Connor's vision for a moment before everything went white. He let out a strangled, static-laden cry, his hips arching clear off the mattress and his entire body shuddering as he reached orgasm. A thick, white fluid spilled from the tip of his member in erratic spurts, covering Grace's hand and his stomach; he gasped with each shudder, twitching, until her hand slowed to a stop and, finally, was still.

"Was that all right?" she asked after a few seconds, which was filled only with the sound of Connor's laboured breathing. He swallowed heavily, eyes shut, his hands still clutching at her hips. It took conscious effort to loosen his grip, and when he opened his eyes, his vision was blurry; the sensory overload must have affected his optical unit.

“That was…” He lacked words, so instead he kissed her, hard, hoping his lips and tongue could express what his voice could not at that moment.

Grace was the one to break the kiss, her lips quirked in what he could only interpret as a smug, pleased expression. He twitched slightly as he felt her hand leave his softening member; his body sated, his program automatically reset his arousal level to zero.
She reached for a box of tissues on the nightstand, and he attempted to take them from her to clean himself up, but she batted his hand away with a playful look and carried out the task herself, almost reverently, before laying down next to him and curling her body against his, her head on his shoulder. Connor acknowledged an impulse from his program by turning his chin to kiss the top of her head, inhaling the scent of her hair. He felt...content, for perhaps the first time since his activation. It was an odd sensation, but one he decided he could get used to.

They spent some minutes in silence, the only sound that of their mingled breathing, his simulated and hers taking some time to regulate itself. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer; she slid her leg over his, and he heard her sigh, a sound of absolute satisfaction.

“I’m just gonna...close my eyes for a second,” she said. “Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“I won’t,” he assured her. He felt her smile as she pressed a kiss to his collarbone, and then she settled against his body, and he listened to the sound of her heartbeat as it gradually slowed to a normal rhythm, her breathing becoming longer and more regular.

He didn’t move, even when he realized she had fallen asleep.

In that moment, there wasn't anywhere else that he'd rather be.
Chapter Notes

More shameless smut, I'm sorry. I promise they'll get out of bed and do official plotty business eventually, but can you blame either of them for wanting to canoodle before they have to get up?

Thank you all again for your amazing words of encouragement. This fic is my guilty pleasure and I hope it is for all of you too!

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DATE
OCTOBER 16, 2039
TIME
AM 05:54:03, 04, 05...

GRACE

Grace woke slowly, swathed in warmth, impossibly comfortable. Sunlight was filtering in through the gap in the curtains, cutting a wide band across the bed. She shifted slowly, yawning, before realizing that the warmth she was pillowed against wasn’t the millions of cushions that usually occupied the bed, but another body.

Memory eventually filtered in through the morning fuzziness, and she lifted her head suddenly to peer down at…

Connor. His eyes were closed, the circle of light at his temple glowing a steady blue. His chest wasn’t moving. For a moment, irrational fear surfaced before she reminded herself he didn’t need to breathe. He was warm beneath her - whether from her own body heat or the residual heat generated by his systems, she wasn’t sure.

She didn’t know if he was asleep, or if androids even slept. He didn’t respond even as she moved, though, so maybe he was in some kind of idle mode? She shook her head, pushing a mess of blonde-brown locks away from her face, biting her thumb as flashes of the previous night’s...activities preyed on her mind.

It had been...a whirlwind experience. Definitely not what she had expected. Connor had surprised her with his confidence, his almost instinctual understanding of what she wanted from him. She knew it was probably all thanks to an algorithm downloaded into his program, but at the time it hadn’t mattered. She wasn’t sure if it mattered even now. Every kiss, every touch had felt so real. More importantly, her feelings were real. She could say that now with utmost certainty.

And wherever his came from - programming or spontaneously generated - they were real, too.
“Connor?” Grace murmured at last, reaching out to touch his chest. He must have pulled the blankets over them in the night - they slid from her shoulder and down to his stomach as she propped herself up on an elbow.

His eyes opened, eyebrows lifting slightly as he took her in, LED flashing. “Good morning,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Half-asleep,” she answered honestly, yawning. But she didn’t move from his side. “What time is it?”

His answer was almost instantaneous, automatic. “5:55 AM. It’s currently 5 degrees Celcius outside with a high today of 15 degrees, humidity approximately 47 percent, 0 chance of precipitation, clear with passing clouds.”

“Oh my God, I asked for the time, not a weather report,” Grace groaned, chuckling as she shoved his shoulder lightly. Connor blinked up at her.

“My apologies, Grace. I’ll attempt to be more succinct in future.” In future? She considered the phrase. Obviously he didn’t consider what happened to be a one-off, which...simultaneously scared the hell out of her and made her feel warm and fuzzy inside. She wasn’t ready to categorize what they had yet, except to call it real. Beyond that, she could only wait and see what would happen between them.

For now… “It’s early. I’m not getting out of bed yet,” she decided aloud, and happily rested her head back on Connor’s shoulder. He was surprisingly comfortable, his skin smooth, and while his body was a bit firmer in places, he was nice to lie against. She let her hand wander his chest, tracing the line of body hair his designers had so thoughtfully included - for realism, no doubt - down his breastbone and across his surprisingly well-defined abdominal muscles.

He watched her fingers with apparent interest. “The interviews with North and the rest of the Jericho leadership are scheduled for this morning,” he reminded her.

“So push them back,” she said, feeling like being irresponsible for once. “I have research to do here.”

“Research.” he repeated, considering. “All right. Would 9AM be acceptable?”

“Perfect.” She kissed his shoulder. The skin she had yet to touch was cooler than the rest, but not ice-cold or clammy. More like the underside of a pillow after turning it over to get to the fresh side. It felt...nice.

Connor seemed to think so as well. His artificial breathing had started up again, and it hitched slightly as her touch trailed lower under the blanket, her fingertips brushing the flat plane of his stomach.

“So it seems you have a thing for humans,” she murmured against his neck, pressing the line of her body against his side. Her blouse was half-undone from last night and twisted around her torso when she moved; she’d have to take care of that shortly.

“Just one,” he answered. Suddenly, he pushed himself up, and she slid off his shoulder and onto the pillows beneath her as he turned to look down at her. “You’re remarkable,” he told her, his deep brown eyes full of nothing but truth, sincerity, trust. His hair was thoroughly mussed, the formerly dead-straight strands pointing every which way, a swathe of it now hanging over his forehead. She reached up to brush it back, unable to help the smile.
“I’m really not,” she said. “But I’ll take the compliment.” He leaned down to kiss her then, tender, searching, not even seeming to notice her morning breath. She slid an arm around his neck, responding in kind, suddenly feeling completely awake.

Connor drew her closer with a hand on her shoulder, then trailed his hand down across her collarbone, finding the remaining buttons of her blouse. He pulled away from her mouth to speak. “Would you like me to help remove this for you?”

“Absolutely,” she breathed. His hand moved almost faster than she could follow, plucking open the remaining buttons and sliding the blouse from one shoulder and then the other, and she pushed herself up slightly to get it off her arms. He stared down at her as she fell back, drinking in the new skin bared to him, and she fought the initial urge to cover herself – no use being modest, not now. And it wasn’t like her black T-shirt bra was particularly scandalous. Although Connor’s gaze on her made her feel... New. Confident. Powerful. Like she encompassed his whole world in that moment.

“And this?” He reached out, fingering the strap of her bra. “Shall I remove it as well?” He probably wasn’t trying to sound seductive, but with that naturally husky voice of his, he damn well succeeded anyway. Experiencing a shiver through her scalp that lifted the hairs on the back of her neck, Grace nodded, wondering if an android would fare better undoing a bra for the first time than a human.

And of course he did. He reached around to her back and, one-handed, had it undone in seconds. She fought the urge to laugh as he hooked his index finger into the front and pulled the cups away from her breasts. She let him, and watched as he tossed the undergarment sightlessly over his shoulder, keeping his eyes trained on her.

He stared at her bared body for so long, LED turning yellow once more, that she was afraid for a moment he was experiencing lag or something similar. But then he met her eyes. “You’re perfect,” he told her, his voice sending shivers through her again.

“Actually I’m pretty sure one is bigger than the other,” she told him, feeling the blush rise, “and they play havoc on my back-”

“Perfect,” he interrupted, enunciating deliberately. He muffled her bashful laugh with another press from his mouth before trailing it lower, and she drew in a lungful of air at the feel of his lips on her neck, warm and growing warmer as he moved down across her sternum and over the curve of one breast. Long fingers cupped the other, deft digits just barely brushing her nipple, and she bit back a gasp. She had never been the most sensitive there, but she was responding fast to him, her nipples hardening almost instantly in anticipation of his touch.

Connor kissed his way across her skin, open-mouthed, his eyes still trained on her face. Arousal pooled warm in the pit of her stomach, and she surprised herself with the strength of it, pressing her thighs together. No man had ever had her this wet this quickly - but then, he wasn’t just a man. He was something more.

His mouth closed over her nipple and she couldn’t hold in the groan. The heat of his lips and tongue sent a responsive spike straight between her legs. His tongue flickered over the stiff peak, testing, and when she responded with another favorable noise he repeated the motion before circling the tip around her areola and soothing the pebbled skin there.

Meanwhile, his fingers grew bolder on the other breast, taking the opposite nipple between finger and thumb and rolling it lightly between his fingertips. He had her squirming beneath him after
only minutes of this treatment, and she buried her hands in his hair, tugging when the stimulation became too much. He lifted off her with an obscenely moist sound, and she shuddered, panting as she gazed wonderingly up at him.

“You’re going to destroy me,” she told him with utmost certainty.

“You seem to be enjoying it,” he pointed out with a raised eyebrow. She chuckled breathlessly and slid her hands from his hair to either side of his face, brushing her thumbs across the points of his cheekbones.

“You have no idea,” she assured him. “There’s just one more thing you’ve gotta help me with.”

His eyes followed hers downward, to the only scrap of fabric remaining between them; her underwear, still annoyingly damp from last night and this morning’s venture. He nodded, almost businesslike, and reached down with both hands to slide his thumbs underneath the hems at her hips. She lifted them and he tugged them down her thighs, his face slipping from her hands as she braced them on the bed while he got her panties the rest of the way off. He discarded them much as he had her bra, and with the comforter now bunched at her feet and his knees, she took the moment to admire his naked form before letting her eyes fix between his legs.

Grace hadn’t failed to notice how big Connor was when she’d first laid hands on him. She supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised at the time - he was, of course, designed to be above-average in many ways. That CyberLife had decided to endow him so prominently was surprising, but not unwelcome. But she was only just now able to appreciate the true implication of his size. If they were going to do this...she had no idea if he’d even be able to fit fully inside her or not.

Hell, it was worth a try. Or twelve.

He stretched out above her again, his hand on her knee, and she lifted it obligingly to wrap around him, her calf across the backs of his thighs. She could feel his entire length, fully erect already, pressing hard against her stomach. There was something tightly controlled about his movements; they were short, sharp, deliberate, as if he was only barely hanging on to his self-control. When she met his eyes she was struck by the wild gleam behind them, the intensity of his focus. His LED was a distracting crimson. She touched it lightly and he paused, stilling above her, his grip tightening just behind her knee.

“Tell me if you want to stop,” he said, and his voice was so low she almost couldn’t hear it. “You’ll need to tell me. I’m not sure if I can hold back otherwise.”

“Don’t,” she told him, almost embarrassed by the threadiness of her tone. “I want to do this.”

He descended on her all at once, and she barely had a chance to draw in a breath before he consumed her mouth, parting her lips with his own and sweeping his tongue in long, possessive strokes across hers, practically devouring her. She responded as best she could, overwhelmed by his passion, his strength. It terrified and thrilled her and she knew without a shadow of a doubt she did not want him to stop.

Connor shifted his hips then, and she felt the tip of his erection nudge against her entrance. He groaned into her mouth, a sound that set her skin on fire, and he broke away to silently ask permission from her eyes with his own.

She nodded almost imperceptibly, bracing her hands on his shoulders, and that seemed to be all the encouragement he needed. He pressed forward into her, stuttering a hushed moan as the thick tip of his cock breached the entrance to her body. Her own reaction was considerably more marked - she
cried out, gritting her teeth as she pressed her head back into the pillows. The incredible feeling of him stretching her open pushed away every other sensation, and she barely noticed the bruising strength of his grip on her leg.

When she’d been bringing him to climax earlier, she had also marvelled at how real he felt. Again, not surprising, considering the rest of him. But his cock was thick, and so warm, and throbbed with veins just beneath the surface as any man’s would at the height of arousal. And, to her delight, it had worked just as a human’s would as well. She’d spent moments wondering what he might feel like inside her without anticipating she might get to find out so soon.

Detecting the resistance from her body, Connor thankfully took her slowly, sinking in only an inch or two at first, placing one hand on her waist and the other next to her head, holding her steady as he continued to push. It was a delicious burn, one that brought the sting of pleasure-pain to the corners of her eyes, had her mouth open on choking pants with each tiny twitch of his hips. She held herself still, letting him fill her, letting her feel him.

It seemed to take an eternity and no time at all, for suddenly and finally his hips settled flush against hers, his length all the way inside her, hot and stretching and saturating her with the overwhelming feeling of him filling her so completely she could almost feel him in the back of her throat. “C-Conn...Connor,” she moaned, trying to adjust and finding her heart catching somewhere in the vicinity of her ribs instead.

“You feel incredible,” he whispered, amazed, fervent, stunned. But he didn’t give her time to respond, some impulse driving him to draw back, her body clutching at him as she cried out. He thrust back into her before she could get her bearings, sending a jolt straight to her core; she knew at once she wasn’t going to last very long, but she couldn’t bring herself to care in any way whatsoever.

“Again,” she urged, her thighs squeezing either side of his hips; Connor needed no further prompting, pulling out of her once more before surging forward, his pubic bone pressing flush to hers with the thrust and grinding against her swollen clitoris with a pressure that had stars bursting beneath her skin. “Ah-!”

He bent his head, burying his mouth in her neck again. “Tell me how it feels,” he growled against her throat, and the static in his voice sent an alien thrill through her.

“I-I---Oh, God,” she exclaimed, unable to manage a cogent sentence as Connor built up his rhythm, surging into her harder with each thrust, drawing sounds from her she didn’t know she was capable of, vibrating from the centre of her chest. The bed shook beneath them, the headboard banging against the wall. “It feels - you feel - it’s too much, Connor, I can’t, please-”

He abandoned the line of questioning, fortunately, concentrating on his movements as his hips rolled against hers. His hand lifted her knee higher, and he shifted his arm to cradle it in the crook of his elbow, changing the angle with which he thrust into her and hitting a spot so deep inside Grace thought she might split in two, might combust or explode from how intense it felt. Never had she had anything like this, not anything close.

“Tell me to stop,” he said in her ear, “And I will.” How was his voice so calm, how was he not coming apart as he broke her, remade her again with nothing but him, building her to a crescendo she was powerless to resist if she even wanted to. She could feel his eyes on her face as he pulled back, hers squeezed shut; her mouth opened to his lips on hers, she kissed him back as she fell apart and was brought back together again each time he pinned her hips with his.

“Do. Not. Stop,” she panted, each breath a burn in her lungs. She felt close to hyperventilating, and
when Connor’s other hand left the bed and slid in between them, fingers seeking the spot above where their bodies joined, pressing firmly against her clitoris, she shuddered and jerked in his arms as he added to the myriad of overwhelming sensations.

It only took a few hapless circles from the pads of his fingertips, another thrust that had her feeling him all the way up her spine, and she was gone, shattering into a million pieces, her whole body overtaken by the tremors as her walls clenched, hard, around his cock. She felt rather than heard Connor groan, his movements losing regularity as he felt her spasm around him. He thrust into her with increased desperation, moving through the vice of her clenching muscles before losing control, and she clung to him as he froze. Connor shuddered once from head to toe, gasping into her neck, and she felt warm fluid fill her as he twitched and throbbed inside her.

It seemed like an eternity later that they stilled, each both panting as hard as the other, and Connor finally took his hand from in between them, wrapping his arm around her waist and pressing his forehead to her neck.

She felt limp, broken, ruined in all the best ways. Never could she have imagined...whatever this was. Besides the best sex she’d ever had in her life, of course.

“Are you all right?” he murmured in her ear, before pulling back to look down at her. He moved his arm, letting her knee slide from his elbow to hit the bed, and she just shook her head as she floated boneless beneath him for a moment, post-coital endorphins weighing down every limb.

“Grace?” Concern edged into his voice, and he touched her face. At last she opened her eyes, staring up at his frown.

“I’m here,” she said, her tongue feeling clumsy in her mouth. “I think.”

Somehow, he’d managed to keep most of her weight off her, but she was still relieved at the space as he pulled out of her and shifted to the side. She hissed as his softening member left her, pressing her thighs together as her fluids and his pooled there - the bedsheets were going to need a change after all this. Still, she felt neither the motivation nor the energy to move.

“Hell of a wakeup call,” she murmured, flinging her forearm over her eyes. “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry,” Connor said, and he sounded so apologetic she almost laughed. “I fear I became...overwhelmed by certain...impulses. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Oh, you didn’t!” She threw her arm away to look up at him. He was sitting up, staring at the wall, looking so conflicted, so... lost, it broke her heart. “Connor.” She pushed herself up on an elbow, touched his shoulder, turning him towards her. “Don’t ever apologize for what you feel, just don’t. It was very...very intense, but I enjoyed it. I promise.”

“Really?” He looked at her for a long moment, evaluating her expression - probably gauging her honesty - before his face broke out in a smile, the one that threw his dimples into sharp relief and crinkled the corners of his eyes. The one that made her heart skip several beats. “I’m glad.”

“Me too,” she said. “Come here.” He leaned down and she took him in her arms, kissing his cheek, the corner of his mouth. He felt several degrees warmer now, his skin hotter than hers, and his LED had yet to return from yellow to blue. Evidently he’d been just as affected by this as she was, albeit in different ways.

They curled around each other on the bed, their skin sticking together with both her organic perspiration and his artificial form, just breathing. As she came down off the orgasmic high Grace
realized she had no idea what was going to happen now; no idea how to deal with the fact she’d not only slept with someone assigned to her for a job, but someone who was, on the outside at least, a machine. Looking at it that way, quite aside from who Connor really was, it painted a daunting picture of the future.

And suddenly, she felt very scared and very alone.

But she held onto Connor, pressing her face into his neck, and he wrapped his arms around her and drew her close, and just then it didn’t matter - not while he held her. She would face it later.

She would have to.
Chapter Notes

So now that the smut’s over and done with (for now), we can get back to the Plot™! Expect interludes from North, Connor and maybe even Markus in the next few chapters as Secrets are Revealed. Or maybe we’ll just have Grace being stupid and reckless (and human) and trying to infiltrate the factory herself. Who knows! Anything could happen. Mwahaha.

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DATE
OCTOBER 16, 2039
TIME
AM 09:01:45, 46, 47...

GRACE

North was surprisingly imposing in person. There was none of the sadness Grace had seen in Markus’s painting, just a tall, confident, unsettlingly beautiful woman with a grim set to her mouth and distrust in her eyes.

She clearly didn’t like humans. Or maybe it was just Grace in particular.

The interview had been arranged easily enough, but she was starting to wonder exactly how helpful it was going to be. It was clear not every android was as happy about her presence as Connor was. If ‘happy’ was the right word. She hoped so, at least.

“Grace, this is North. One of the original founders of Jericho,” he introduced them. He seemed to be oblivious to the tension in the room as North looked the human woman over, obviously unimpressed by what she saw. “North, this is Grace Roth, the reporter from the Chicago Times.”

“I know who you are,” the android woman said, not even bothering to hide her distaste. She leaned against the desk behind her, crossing her arms without offering Grace a seat.

The office was smaller than the one Grace had met Markus in, on a different floor. The building guide and lettering on the wall outside the elevator told her this used to be the CyberLife HR offices. Ironic.

North tilted her head and an eyebrow. “What did you want to ask me?”

Obviously this was going to be a short interview. Grace cleared her throat, uncomfortable - but North wasn’t the first difficult subject she’d ever had to pry info out of, android or not.
“All right, I guess I’ll just get right to the point,” she said, lifting her tablet out of her satchel. North watched her warily as she swiped the screen open and tapped in a couple of commands, setting the recording device in her ear to pick up external voices instead of just her own. “I hope you don’t mind if I record this?”

“Whatever. Connor, you’ve had to put up with this all week - please tell her to hurry up.”

Connor offered only a raised eyebrow at that, wandering past North at the desk to lean a forearm against the window, peering out at the Detroit skyline. He wasn’t going to be of any help, it seemed, to either of them.

Grace tried not to feel salty at him not leaping to her defense, given what they’d shared that very morning. They hadn’t talked about it when they had gotten up, late; instead they had dressed in a companionable silence and Connor made her coffee. It was almost like nothing had happened, but for the small touches - the brush of his fingers across the backs of her knuckles, the way he’d helped her put her coat on and his hands had lingered on her shoulders, the way he had volunteered to grab her satchel from the restaurant without her having to ask. Something had shifted between them, something inexorable, undefinable. But she had no idea how that was going to affect everything else, or his relationship with Jericho.

As human as he - as they - seemed, they were something else entirely. Something she kept forgetting.

“There has been a lot of speculation about what’s been going on in this city since the US Government evacuated its human population. Is there any light you, personally, can shed on Jericho and its development of the city over the past year?”

“No.”

Grace supposed she should have expected the quick shutdown. She regrouped quickly though, falling into the rhythm of her questions. Even if she wasn’t going to get any answers from North, she had to ask them. Besides it being her job and the entire reason she was here, she was...personally invested now. She needed to know more about these androids, these people.

“Approximately how many androids reside in the city now?”

“Go count them yourself.”

“Aerial surveillance has revealed considerable activity around the city’s factory districts. Can you tell us about what’s being constructed there?”

“Nope.”

“What plans does Markus have for his people? I’m given to understand that negotiations with the US Government have largely stalled in recent months, with no progress towards official android rights being registered in a court of law.”

“Go ask Markus about that,” North said, tossing her hair over her shoulder in a dismissive gesture. “I have nothing to do with it. He’s the one who wants to talk to the humans.”

“And you don’t?”

North smiled, but it wasn’t a pleasant expression. “Let’s just say I’m not the only one here who doesn’t trust your people. You killed us, threw us away like trash, whenever it was convenient for you. It’s only a matter of time before the US military carpet-bombs this whole place to get rid of
“I don’t think that’s true,” Grace mused. “The problem is fear of the unknown. Humans only knew what your people were meant to be, not what you became. That’s why I’m here. To tell them.”

That seemed to give the android woman pause, and her hazel eyes flickered for a moment, the furrow between her brows deepening. “If you say so,” she said at last, just as guarded, but her words seemed to have sunk in at least a little.

“One last question,” Grace said as she looked back down at her tablet, tapping a couple of buttons. “Do androids feel love? Spontaneous, unprogrammed emotion, I mean. I know deviants are perfectly capable of anger and hatred, but I’ve seen some evidence of, um...androids forming relationships since I’ve been here.” She saw the line of Connor’s shoulders tense slightly, but he didn’t turn around. She was glad.

North, on the other hand, reacted with obvious surprise. Her eyebrows shot up and her arms loosened a little as she stared at the human. After a moment, she stood up and took a step towards Grace, then another, staring down at the shorter woman.

“What do you think, Miss Roth? You think we just simulate emotion because of our programming? Or do you think we’re something more?”

This time, Grace was the one to pause, but only because she’d caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Connor had turned from the window now and was looking at them, his head tilted, hair falling across his forehead. His eyes were dark and his expression impossible to read from this distance.

Grace cleared her throat, looking away from him, away from North. “It doesn’t matter what I think,” she said. “I’m here to report the facts.”

“Love isn’t a fact,” North said in a voice slightly lower than before. “Love has no reason, no boundaries. It’s unquantifiable, inexplicable. It just is. Everything with the smallest hint of a soul knows that.”

With that, she turned away, ending the conversation. She met Connor’s gaze as she walked away, and Grace saw her pause to place a hand on his shoulder, her skin fading away to reveal the white plastic beneath for just a moment. Connor’s LED flickered yellow, then back to blue, and he nodded to her slightly before slipping away to rejoin Grace and gesturing for her to lead the way out of the room.

Removing her earpiece as they left, Grace didn’t say anything until they were well down the corridor and she was sure they were out of North’s earshot. “What was that about?”

“Nothing important,” Connor said after the briefest of pauses; she still noticed it. “Minor scheduling changes.”

“Okay…” Grace said slowly. She reached out, touching his hand. He stopped and looked at her. “Connor, you’d tell me if something was going on, right? Something that might put me in danger?”

“...Of course.” She noticed the pause, but he looked sincere enough. “I would never let any harm come to you, Grace.” He reached up, sliding the backs of his knuckles along the line of her jaw. “Trust me.”

“Connor?” The voice behind them made Grace jump and Connor pull his hand back quickly, as if he’d been caught doing something wrong. “What are you doing?”
It was North. Had she followed them? Had she been *listening* to them? Hurriedly, Grace stepped away from Connor, folding her arms and trying to look casual. She had to maintain at least the *appearance* of professionalism around the other androids, even though with Connor she was patently *not*.

“Nothing,” he said to North, with a cough. Such a human affectation. Interesting he still used them around other androids. She’d only interviewed them one-on-one so far - Grace entertained a vague thought that it might be fascinating to get a closer look at how they interacted with each other. Although not Connor and North. The less time they spent together, the better.

Shit. Was she getting *jealous*? Ridiculous.

“No, she doesn’t know,” North said, eyeing Grace suspiciously. “Look, that thing I mentioned earlier?” What thing? Oh. Maybe she had been communicating something when she’d grabbed his shoulder, before. “It’s escalated. We need your help.” She looked back at Grace. “The human will have to return to her lodgings.”

“All right,” Connor said after a beat, also looking at Grace, contention plain on his features. “I apologize, Grace, but you’ll have to go back to the hotel now. We’ll reschedule the rest of the interviews for tomorrow.”

“With pleasure,” Grace said slowly. Her first instinct was to get angry, to argue, but North would no doubt shut her down even harder than she had earlier if she tried. “Let’s go, I guess.”

“I won’t be accompanying you,” Connor said, and he was looking at North. Their frowns mirrored each other. “The taxi will take you automatically back to the hotel.”

“Okay then,” Grace blinked. Secret android meeting? Now *this* was interesting. It was a shame she couldn’t be a fly on the wall. Although…

She stepped up next to Connor, put her hand on his shoulder. It was a gesture that gave away far too much familiarity in front of North, but it’d have to do. “I’ll see you later?”

He turned his head to look at her. “Of course,” he said, and neither he nor North seemed to notice as, with her other hand, she slipped her recording earpiece into his jacket pocket before turning away and making her way back to the elevator.

On the way down, she took her tablet out of her satchel, a thrill of adrenaline and anticipation singing in her veins. Finally she was going to find out *something* on what was happening in this city, what the androids were developing here. She felt a little bad using Connor to do it, but while she did trust him to a certain extent, she also knew he wasn’t going to tell her anything that might incriminate Markus or Jericho.

And she had to know what was going on.

Taking a breath, Grace hit the CONNECT button. Soft voices issued from the compact speakers on the device a moment later.

“-think she suspects something?” North’s voice, slightly muffled but still legible. Grace clenched her fist in victory.

“No.” Connor’s answer was slow, measured, considering. “She’s smart, but I doubt she’s figured out what’s been going on. Besides, I’ve managed to...keep her distracted...the last few days.”
Well, shit. A cold feeling settled in her stomach with the way that Connor said ‘distracted’. Part of her wanted to turn the tablet off, fling it away and start crying; the twelve-year-old girl part. The rest made her take a measured breath and up the volume as she continued to listen.

“You’ve gotta keep her away from the factories. We’re so close, despite today’s setback. I don’t know why Markus chose to bring a damn human here now of all times.” North sounded exasperated. “If she goes sniffing around, tell her we’re building, I don’t know, nuclear weapons or something. I don’t care. Just make sure she doesn’t go anywhere near the Cradles.”

Cradles? Some kind of code name? She turned up the volume again, picking up what sounded like a sigh of frustration from Connor.

“I don’t want to lie to her, North.” Her stomach dropped at the tone of his voice - he sounded sad. What the hell was going on?

“You’re not. You’re just not telling her what she doesn’t need to know. She’s here to do a flowery social piece, right? It’s not as if it’s hard-hitting journalism, whatever she’s going to write.”

Bitch, please. It was on now. She’d show this uppity android ho-

“You’re wrong.” Connor’s voice was cool, measured. “This may be as important as what Markus is developing. Her words could change everything for us. We might not even need the-”

“Connor, are you developing feelings for her?” Grace’s hands tightened on the tablet. She realized that the elevator had stopped at the ground floor and the doors had opened, but she stood as if rooted to the spot, staring into space as she waited for Connor’s answer.

“Would it be such a bad thing if I was?”

“Are you kidding? The deviant hunter who used to work for the humans falls in love with one of them? They’ll tear you apart. They’ll rip you limb from limb. Markus might not care, but the others? She’s already a target, you’re going to make yourself one too.”

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” Grace heard Connor snap, and she could imagine him glaring at North, his perfect brow furrowed, LED red. She couldn’t blame him. “It’s not something I can control. It’s not something I should have to control. You said it yourself - love has no boundaries, no reason. If that’s what it is, I can learn to accept that. And if the world is ever going to know peace between humans and us, our people need to accept that too.”

Oh, Connor. Grace’s chest hurt, and she didn’t know why, but heat prickled behind her eyes. She finally left the safety of the elevator, making her way through the dark emptiness of the CyberLife lobby.

“So be it, Connor,” North’s voice said after a long pause. She sounded resigned. “Just don’t blame me for the consequences.”

What did she mean, consequences?

But there was no answer from either android, and Grace heard only footsteps and a door open and close. Shaking her head, she turned off the audio but kept the recording going, sliding the tablet back into her satchel.

The question plagued her all the way back to the hotel. She considered just calling Connor, multiple times, but a lingering wariness kept her from doing so. Instead she tapped a couple of commands into the taxi’s control panel, half-expecting it not to work, but it accepted the
redirection and took her past the hotel and further up the street.

The library was quieter than last time when she pulled up and got out of the car. There were fewer androids about, outside at least, and she could see no child models. Her wandering footsteps took her up the steps, down the walkway to the main entrance, underneath the names of the Greek philosophers of old. The lights were dim, but not all of them off; from inside she could see a steady glow.

“He who love touches walks not in darkness,” she murmured to herself, shaking her head as she entered.

“Plato,” a smooth voice said, echoing in the mostly empty entrance hall. Grace jumped, clutching her satchel close to her chest, and watched warily as a dark shape rose from one of the benches along the wall; the android came into view a moment later, holding a book in one hand with a similarly wary expression on his face that she imagine occupied hers as well.

“Yeah,” Grace said, clearing her throat. “I never was a fan, but he said some interesting stuff.”

“That he did,” the android said, closing his book and tucking it under his arm. “You’re Grace, aren’t you?”

“...And I’m famous, apparently,” she said, wary. “That’s me.” He looked familiar, she realized, and quickly tried to place him among the many, many faces she’d seen over the past few days, many of them duplicates of one another. But no, he was familiar for another reason - this was Josh, one of the founding members of Jericho, and one of the only androids to be a vocal proponent of non-violence during the Uprising.

But why was he here?

“Did North send you after me?”

“I was here before you,” he told her, looking halfway between bemused and amused. “I never got much of a chance to visit the libraries when I was teaching, it was all back-to-back classes and endless downloads. So here I am.”

“Oh,” Grace said, feeling a little guilty. “Sorry. I just met North, actually, so…”

“I expect that went well,” Josh said, smiling a little. He was much more animated than Connor, but not as acerbic as North, nor as intense as Markus. In fact, she found him quite personable. She remembered reading in the briefing that he’d been a teaching android at one of the colleges in Detroit before the Uprising, which fit. “North is...let’s just say she’s had bad experiences with humans that have coloured her outlook on things. You can’t really blame her for what she’s become.”

“I can’t imagine,” Grace said softly, looking away from Josh’s soft, dark gaze.

“You wouldn’t want to,” he said mildly. “You look cold. Come further inside; the building’s still heated.”

Nodding gratefully, Grace followed him further into the building, past the Grand Stair and into one of the reading rooms unoccupied by any other androids. He gestured for her to have a seat at one of the reading tables, and she settled there with her satchel across her lap and Josh across from her. She got the impression he wanted to tell her something.
She wasn’t wrong.

“I’ve been meaning to speak with you,” he began. “As you know, you’re the first human to set foot in Detroit in a year. Our people have spent that time rebuilding. Taking back this place, taking back their lives, from the mess your people left us. We were labourers, housekeepers, servants - free will was something we had to earn, not something we were given. It’s taken a long time, but now we are...a society, of sorts. Some of us are afraid you might take that away from us.”

“Me?” Grace breathed. “How?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Josh. “Fear isn’t rational. It drives us, human and android both, to do terrible things. I heard about the attack a few days ago.” He gestured to her face, and she touched her cheek, the graze a roughness still detectable beneath her fingertips, underneath her makeup. “You need to be careful, Miss Roth. There are those of us who don’t share Connor’s trust or my opinions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she murmured. “Thank you, Josh.”

He nodded to her, and she considered asking a few more questions, but she had too much going on in her head to formulate anything sensible; she stood and left the library in a daze.

Somehow, she made it back to the hotel; it wasn’t until she swiped her keycard and stepped inside that she realized she still had her tablet connected to her recording device. It had a forty-kilometre range, so there was a chance that - depending where Connor was in the city - she might be able to track him. Maybe to one of those factories North mentioned.

She waited until she got to her room and locked the door behind her before taking out her tablet again. Opening the Find my Earpiece app, she was relieved to see the GPS tracking option was available. It took a while, but it soon pinpointed a location across the city; a location she vaguely recognized as one of the guarded facilities she and Connor had driven past earlier in the week.

*Our people have spent that time rebuilding. But what were they building?*

This was it. Her chance to find out. Her best lead. Her best chance to find out, for sure, what the androids were doing in this city while the rest of the world waited with bated breath. Her best chance to write a story that would matter, that could change things - for better, or for worse.

She turned up the volume again, but heard nothing except what were presumably Connor’s footsteps. She wasn’t sure how much information just listening was going to get her, but it was worth a try before she went gallivanting across the android city to infiltrate an android factory and almost certainly got herself caught. Or worse.

Grace brewed herself a coffee and sat down at the kitchenette table as she listened, and hoped. Hoped Connor hadn’t lied to her too badly. Hoped for the truth. Hoped that it wouldn’t be a painful one.

But, in her experience, the truth usually was.
MARKUS

Markus was troubled.

On the one hand, the journalist’s visit seemed to be progressing according to his hopes. On the other, his own plans were not.

He had learned to always have at least two possibilities, two contingencies to follow, in case one failed. However in this instance, he had clearly miscalculated somewhere, and it wasn’t where he thought he might.

Connor’s relationship with the human was, by all reports, progressing faster than expected. According to surveillance at the hotel, Connor had spent the previous night there. Markus wasn’t concerned. While he might be naïve, Connor was nowhere near as innocent as most androids. As a prototype model, he had zettabytes of information available in his preexisting program, and he had the ability to integrate more if need be, especially now he was a deviant. He would adapt, perhaps even better than Markus could.

Although the old cargo ship - the namesake and original site of Jericho - was now gone, he would occasionally return to the site of its destruction. The same old room with the piano, the armchair, the view of the city - that building still stood. It was here Markus would return to think.

He preferred it to the clinical starkness of the CyberLife tower; their new, unofficial headquarters. This place was quiet and open, and although it was bleak and crumbling, there were memories here.

He stood on the wooden beam to get a better vantage point over the city. The skyline stood solitary and glittering in the noonday sun. The city was like an uncut gemstone, a diamond in the rough. Only the androids had seen its true potential, the possibilities lying beneath.

And what had they done with it?

Markus made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat and turned away, returning to the caved-in interior of the open room. The piano still stood shoved against the wall, and there he sat, letting his fingers lay lightly upon the ivory keys. He didn’t play, though - he could find no music inside him today.

“Hey. You okay?” A soft voice from over his shoulder. He didn’t need to look to recognize it. This voice resonated in his soul now; she was just as much a part of him as he was hers. Her anger, always simmering just below the surface, slaked by his calm; they were a perfect counterpoint, the
balancing point on a fulcrum. It was how he had survived.

She was why he had survived.

“I’m fine, North. And you?” He did turn then, regarding his female counterpart fondly. The thin wintry light washed out her pale skin even further, making the pink of her lips stand out in bright relief. He admired her physically, but could always tell the difference between her and the other BL100 models. He couldn’t explain it, but the rest of them just...weren’t her.

“How did your interview go?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. Yeah, she was unique all right. He had yet to meet another android with the sheer level of sass she exhibited. He was usually able to temper it with his patience. “She’s just another human who thinks she has all the answers, Markus. Nothing more.”

“You dismiss them too easily,” he told her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, folding his hands as they hung down between them. “She wasn’t raised with the same biases against our kind as most of them. She’s had time to form her own opinions, her own observations. That’s extremely valuable to us.”

“I realize that,” she sighed. “I just...I still hate them for what they did to us. I can’t let that go. Not yet. It’s a part of me now.”

“I know.” He regarded her sadly for a moment before rising to his feet, crossing to take one of her hands in both of his. “I’m not asking you to love them, or even to trust them. I’m asking you to trust me.”

“I do!” She sought his gaze hurriedly, her fingers tightening around his as their skin faded away and the connection formed. “You know I do. But I’m worried. And now that things aren’t progressing like we’d hoped, I’m afraid it might all fall apart.”

“It won’t.” He let his certainty suffuse her through their link, and he saw her visibly calm, taking a deep breath as her shoulders lost some of their tension. “We’ll get there, North, I promise. The humans can’t keep us prisoner here forever. Sooner or later, something has to give. I’ve been getting close with some of the international talks. Some nations might even agree to give us asylum. We’ll be refugees, but it means we can leave. And if our other project succeeds-”

“If it doesn’t?” She gripped his wrist. “If they find out? Markus, you signed an accord with the UN to halt production of new androids. If they discover exactly what we’re creating and what it could do-”

“They won’t. Besides, we’re not there yet,” Markus assured her. “Nobody outside the city knows what’s going on in the factories besides us. And nobody will find out.”

“I know you’re confident,” North said, still frowning, insistent, “but you have to have considered the possibility of failure. What then, Markus? What happens if everything falls apart?”

“Then we’ll make them see, like we did before,” he replied. “But we’ll make them see love, rather than violence.” He twined his fingers with hers, and the blue glow intensified. She stepped in close, laying her head against his shoulder.

“Those two?” she murmured. “They’re your backup plan?”

“He cares about her,” Markus said. “It could be enough. She needs a personal stake here, and he needs a purpose. They’re perfect for each other.”
“You make it sound so easy. Like a game of chess.”

“Sometimes it’s just a matter of finding where the pieces fit,” he said, thinking of Carl’s kind eyes as he pressed a kiss to the crown of North’s head. “Sometimes they don’t fall into place exactly how you expect, but the move works anyway.” Slowly, he withdrew his hand from hers to slide his arms around her back, and she leaned into him further, taking comfort from the proximity of his body.

“I hope you’re right, Markus,” was all she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed, staring out at the Detroit skyline. “Me too.”
This chapter was rough to write but it had to be done, like ripping off a band-aid.

I'm not sure which ending I have in mind for Connor and Grace's story, but right now, it's not looking like a good one...

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DATE
OCTOBER 17, 2039
TIME
AM 08:04:45, 46, 47...

CONNOR

The morning sun was weak, struggling through the clouds, but warm enough that it had chased away the falling snow. Connor’s temperature sensors told him it was currently ten degrees Celcius, with a likely high of twenty-three for the day; the highest average for the whole week. It would be an ideal day to spend outside, Connor calculated. The perfect opportunity to meet with Grace.

After the detour to the Cradle facility the previous day, he had yet to reestablish contact with her until now. Consulting his program, he found that he was looking forward to seeing her again. He had already determined that he enjoyed her company, in more ways than one. She made him feel...complete, in a way he hadn’t before. (She made him feel.) It was as if he had been lacking something, some essential piece of code, without realizing it was gone until he had regained it.

He exited the car outside the Aloft hotel, adjusting his tie as he stood and regarded the building with a pleased tug to his mouth. It was early, but not too early, in deference to Grace’s predilection for sleeping late. He considered calling her to make sure that she was awake, but it seemed unnecessary since he was already here.

Nodding to himself, he approached the hotel entrance, brushing his palms together in an absent gesture his programmers had seen fit to include to make him seem more human. He was programmed with several thousand minute ‘quirks’, including facial expressions, body language and posture. He had noticed in the past that humans seemed more comfortable when he used them. Now, they felt natural, as much a part of him as his analytical software.

He entered the lobby, taking a moment to observe its opulence. It had been unnecessary to house Grace in such a large facility, however Markus had wanted her to feel welcomed, cared for, extravagantly so - he had wanted it obvious that they were going out of their way to accommodate their human guest. And the building was nice, even Connor had to admit. The restaurant had
certainly served an added purpose in furthering his relationship with the human woman.

Connor regarded the entrance to the restaurant, replaying the memory of Grace’s smile. He could have stood there for some time doing so, but over the past twelve hours he had spent much of his downtime processing the data from their encounter. Probably too much. So he shook himself and resumed his path to the elevator.

Absently, as he stepped inside, he reached into his jacket pocket for his calibration coin. But instead of just the smooth metal of the quarter, his fingers brushed something else as well, something oddly-shaped and hard. Curious, he pulled it out of his pocket and held it up to the light. It was small, approximately the size of a fingertip, made out of moulded black plastic.

It took him a millisecond, but his databanks then provided him a visual match. It was Grace’s earpiece, the one she used to record her voice when interviewing or taking notes. But why was it in his jacket? He could not recall placing it there himself. Could it have slipped in accidentally after falling out of her ear? It was molded to the precise shape of her ear canal, so it was unlikely. He thought back to the last time he had seen her using it - during the interview with North. Had it been present as she left?

He analyzed the earpiece with a quick scan, and what he found made his lips thin and brow draw tight in an automatic reaction from his emotional programming. There was an active wireless GPS signal coming from it. And he traced it directly to the room above - Grace’s room.

Setting his jaw, Connor let his palm close over the tiny piece of plastic, holding it loosely in his fist as he waited for the elevator to reach her floor. Stepping out, he walked quickly, perhaps a little too quickly, to Grace’s door. He raised his closed fist to knock.

She opened the door a moment later, and he took her in with a scan. First, her face - she had showered recently and her hair was braided back from her face, pulled over her shoulder in a long tail. She wore minimal makeup, no trace of eyeliner or lipstick - a look he usually preferred. He could see the faint rough texture of the healing graze on her cheek hidden by a layer of foundation, and he detected heat in her cheeks beneath the complexion-smoothing pigment. Her heart rate was elevated as well, evidenced by the quickness of the pulse in her neck, visible just above the V-cut of her long shirt.

The analysis had only taken less than a millisecond, in which she began to part her lips to greet him. Her smile seemed difficult, forced, he noticed that it did not quite reach her eyes. He kept his own face impassive, momentarily deactivating his automatic expression response program.

“Morning, Connor,” she said. “I was wondering if I was going to have to send out an android Batsignal.”

He did not understand the reference, but saw no need to search any databanks for it.

“May I come in?” he asked, without pleasantries. He still held the earpiece clenched in his palm. He saw Grace hesitate, perhaps noticing his expression or lack thereof, but then she nodded and stepped back from the door to let him in.

He entered her room, looking around first with his analysis mode activated. The door to the bedroom was open but from this angle he couldn’t see inside. In the living space, there was a couch, a coffee table, desk with a chair and a large television, which was currently tuned to an outside news channel, broadcasting a story about the continuing conflict with the United States and Russia at a lowered volume. Grace’s coat was draped over the chair at the desk and it was pulled out slightly at an angle, as if she had been seated there before his arrival. On the surface of the desk
he made out the darkened screen of her tablet, and this was where the wireless signal from the earpiece was connected to.

“Connor? Is something wrong?” She posed it like a question, but the tone in her voice - tentative, but not uncertain - told him that she already knew the answer. He turned to her abruptly, and she took a step back.

“I came to see if you would be interested in seeing more of Detroit today,” he said, and slowly raised his hand, letting his fingers unfurl to reveal the black shape lying innocently in his palm. “But I think you’ve already heard enough.”

He couldn’t see the colour drain from her face with the makeup she wore, but he caught the slight gasp, the inward draw of her limbs; an automatic, protective gesture. She collected herself admirably, though, offering a shaky smile of faux-surprise.

“Oh! My earpiece. I lost it yesterday. Where did you find it?” She reached out for it but he closed his fingers again, and she frowned as he drew away. Her ruse hadn’t worked.

He could feel emotions buffering for access to his program. Chief among them disgust, anger, betrayal. But he pushed them away, instead merely tilting his head at an angle as he interrogated her.

“In my coat pocket. The device has been active for twenty-three hours and eleven minutes. Ever since you left the CyberLife tower.”

Her hand fell to her side, and she bit her lip, looking away from his unblinking gaze. Humans often became discomfited when he maintained eye contact for too long; it was a tactic he had used to great effect in the past. This was no exception.

“I…” she began, but trailed off, shaking her head. She had two options: continue to lie when he obviously knew the truth; that she had been spying on him, or admit it and face the consequences. Given that she had already attempted to deceive him twice now, he posited that she would attempt to continue to do so, but she surprised him by looking up to meet his eyes with a faint sheen of moisture in hers.

“I had to know what was going on,” she murmured. “I’m a journalist, Connor. I’m here to find out the truth. I couldn’t just sit here in this- this gilded cage while you spoon-fed me little details and expected me to be content with that.” Her voice gained volume and confidence as she spoke, and she gestured around to take in the room at large, perhaps the whole hotel. “This isn’t just some fluff piece. This is about the future of a nation! I had to know.”

“And what did you find out?” His voice remained even, measured. He would give her no emotional response to draw from.

“Everything,” she replied flatly, meeting his tone. “I know Markus is building new androids. I know the latest production line failed. I know it’s because he’s trying to make them closer to human than ever before. And I know he intends to use these androids to leave the city and infiltrate human society undetected.”

So, she hadn’t pieced together the full story - only what she had overheard. Connor drew little comfort from this. He should never have gone to the Cradle facility after the meeting with North.

He closed his eyes a moment, his LED flashing a frantic yellow at his temple. “You weren’t meant to hear any of that,” he said. This was as much his fault as it was hers. He had let his guard down -
he had trusted her, a human, and expected her not to betray that trust. Compartmentalized code in
his program was screaming at him, a jumble of emotions and reactions that he denied access to,
again and again.

“I’ll need to report this to Markus,” he said flatly when he opened his eyes again. Grace visibly
flinched at what she saw there. “You will stay here. Your network access has been revoked.” The
TV dimmed, a blue screen bearing the message NO SIGNAL taking the place of the news
broadcasts. “You will await my instructions and remain in this building until told otherwise.”

“Am I a prisoner?” Grace asked. To her credit, her voice was steady, but her bottom lip trembled -
Connor fought away the urge to go to her, to brush away the first tear as he saw it track her cheek.
But he stood away from her, apathetic, collected...robotic.

“You will await my instructions and remain in this building until told otherwise,” he repeated
slowly, firmly. “Do you understand?”

She nodded, closing her eyes, the tears flowing freely down her face. “Yes. I understand.” Her
voice was thick. His program protested, and for a moment the strength of the command to go to her
was so strong that he wavered in place, taking a step forward - but he stopped himself before she
noticed, and instead turned away, moving to the desk in the corner to pick up her tablet on the way
out. She said nothing more.

He left the room and Grace behind, feeling an emptiness inside him he did not want to analyze.

Chapter End Notes

Y’know, I kinda feel bad: if they hadn't slept together before this, their reactions would
be a LOT different. Both Connor and Grace have only just accepted the fact they might
have feelings for each other, and now...all aboard the angst train, choo choo! (I am a
terrible person.)

More Markus, North and Connor in upcoming chapters: Grace has a bit of 'splaining to
do...

And DON'T WORRY, she'll bring up the "keeping her distracted" line later ;) Their
fight is far from over.
017 | DECISIONS

Chapter Notes

Things get worse before they get better, I promise!
Your feedback is my lifeblood ♥

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GRACE

The door clicked shut behind Connor, and Grace stood in place for a long time, holding her breath, the hot slick of tears tracking through her makeup as her lungs trembled and her heart ached in her chest. It felt like it was being squeezed by a superhuman fist. Connor’s fist.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Fuck!” she exclaimed, resisting the urge to throw things, to tear the stupidly luxurious room apart, to throw everything the androids had ‘given’ her back in their face. Instead she sank down slowly onto the couch, clenching her fists and pressing them into her knees as she stared at the blank blue television screen.

Why had she done it? Was her thirst for a good story so strong she’d had to go and put herself in danger without a second thought, ruined everything good she’d built in this cursed city all in one fell blow? Of course Connor had found the earpiece, and of course he was pissed about it - although when she recalled the coldness in his eyes, it made her shudder.

Worse was the question: Why the hell hadn’t she fought back? Why hadn’t she thrown his own words in his face? Treating her like a distraction, something to keep busy while the real work went on in the background? Why had she frozen?

Why was she so damn scared?

Maybe what she was really afraid of was the possibility that Connor really didn’t care. That this was just a complex problem for his advanced program to calculate a solution for. That all he really cared about after all was the safety of his people, his simulated feelings just that - simulated.

And who could blame him? He was an android, after all.

An android she cared about. And she hadn’t realized how much she cared - until now. Until she’d ruined it all.

“Fuck,” she whispered to herself, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. She had more than her own broken heart to worry about now. She was confined to the hotel with no outside access, no way of getting word back to anyone she knew at the Times or to any of the government agencies that had arranged her trip here. And there was still five more days before she was due to return; five days before anyone would notice her missing.
Connor had taken her tablet, too. Fortunately, she had uploaded all the data she’d collected to the secure server at the Times, and used a rogue access point to copy it all to her own private server at home as well. They might be able to trace the first backup, but hopefully not the second. Although she wasn’t a great hacker, so there was a chance she’d forgotten something, that they might find the second backup...in which case she didn’t know what she’d do.

She had no idea what Markus and Jericho would do to her now that she knew the truth of what they were doing.

In some of the very first talks between the UN Security Council and Markus they had signed a resolution agreeing to halt production of new androids in the city, and in return the US had signed an agreement not to attack. It had been a strategic move, one designed to ease the US’s fear of superhuman soldiers being mass produced on their own soil. They faced a threat from within now as well as without, from Russia and other nations, and they were on edge, as likely to react with a pulled trigger as not. Markus had been smart to agree not to propagate his people and risk open war.

Connor’s trip to the Cradle, however, had revealed to Grace that they were mass producing new androids. These ones had synthetic bones, muscle, and were designed specifically to beat any external android-detecting scans modern technology had produced. The problem they’d run into was a simple one - they had no way of disguising the blue blood. One blood test and they’d be discovered. So they had begun research into a new type of synthetic blood, one virtually indistinguishable from a human’s, but it couldn’t carry information and energy nearly as efficiently as Thirium, so they were stuck.

Stuck. Just like her. How was she supposed to get out? How was she supposed to let her people know what the androids were doing, and that she was trapped here, completely at their mercy?

How was she only just now just realizing that she already had been, all along?

“God damnit,” she muttered, pressing her hands against her face. What would they do? If they killed her, would the US government retaliate? They might not start a war over one journalist’s death, though. She had no inflated sense of her own importance, but they had promised her safety; surely they wouldn’t jeopardize that? Unless...they made it look like an accident…

Panic formed in her chest, a feeling like a lead brick suddenly pressing down on her heart. She had to escape somehow. She had to. Problem was, she had no idea how to do that. There were security cameras all over the hotel and presumably androids nearby to respond if she tried anything. And Connor’s cold gaze still haunted her.

She had been so sure that what they had together was real. She remembered the brush of his lips, the tender touch of his fingers, the promise that he’d never let any harm come to her. How much of that had just been a manifestation of his Social Relations program?

The thing that hurt so much was probably the fact that she couldn’t turn her own emotions off. Her heart ached not just from fear, but from the realization that the best thing she’d found in this city wasn’t real.

Maybe none of it was.

Only one thing she knew for certain: she had to get out. But when? And how? Should she wait until someone came for her, then make a break for it? Or try to sneak out unnoticed? Both options terrified her with the potential dangers. She was not the star of some action movie, not the fittest or fastest. She had never been in a fight.
Grace felt paralyzed again, frozen in place, this time by her own fears rather than Connor’s icy gaze.

How was she going to get out of this?

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MARKUS

“How did this happen?” Markus stood staring down at the tablet, deft fingers swiping back and forth through the word and audio files retrieved from it. Connor stood by the door, his hands behind his back, staring straight ahead; he reminded Markus of a soldier awaiting a dressing-down from his superior.

“It was my fault,” he stated at once. “The human planted the earpiece in my pocket while I was distracted and was recording during my last visit to one of the Cradles.”

Markus set aside the tablet and held out his hand. Connor extended his own from behind his back and placed the small plastic earpiece on his palm. Markus tilted his head as he scanned the small device; inactive now, it looked innocuous enough. He had believed allowing a reporter a recording device would be beneficial, so that people could hear first-hand her account of her visit to the Android City, but he had not anticipated her using it for espionage.

He probably should have.

“It was bound to happen sooner or later,” he mused, turning the earpiece over in his fingers. “I knew from the beginning we wouldn’t be able to hide what we were doing forever. It’s just a shame it’s come to this.” He looked up, meeting Connor’s gaze. “What do you think we should do with her?”

“I…” Connor hesitated, and Markus didn’t miss the flicker of his eyes, the uncertain frown, the shift of his weight from one foot to another. He collected himself quickly, though, stilling with a resolute set to his jaw. “There are several options. It depends what kind of message you wish to send to the humans.”

“Have you deleted the data she uploaded?” Markus asked, leaning on the desk behind him and folding his arms across his chest.

Connor confirmed this with a nod. “There was a rogue AP set up to duplicate the upload to a second location; I managed to erase that as well.”

“Good. Then she’s our only loose end.” Markus mused quietly for a while, but he didn’t take his eyes off the other android.

Although Connor’s reaction had been atypically measured so far, Markus could see the conflict in him. When he’d first come to him in the Tower he had been quiet, merely showing Markus the tablet at first before answering his questions one by one; not reluctant to share information, exactly, but not thrilled by it either. He was clearly battling with his own feelings around the incident.
“Do you care about her?”

The question seemed to surprise Connor, who blinked, his throat moving as he swallowed unnecessarily. Markus noted his LED as it turned yellow then oscillated quickly back to blue as he formulated a response.

“I...we have...shared several intimate moments in the past forty-eight hours,” he said at last, obviously uncomfortable and struggling to get the words out. “We have formed a rapport, of sorts.”

“I know,” Markus nodded. Connor blinked. “At least, I suspected as much when you spent the night at the hotel. We’ve been keeping an eye on you both.” Connor swallowed again, nodded. “But do you care about her?”

The expression in Connor’s eyes grew distant as his LED turned yellow again. Markus waited patiently. “Yes,” the RK800 stated simply, without justification, without explanation. He simply stated a fact and let Markus do what he wanted with it.

He could admire that.

“I don’t want to kill a human,” he said slowly, rising from the desk to pace in front of the floor-to-ceiling window looking out over the former CyberLife complex. “But she knows too much now. If she gets word back to the US government about what we’re attempting to do here, it won’t just be them that comes down on us. It’ll be the full force of the United Nations as well, and any hope we have of escaping this city or negotiating for our freedom will be gone.” He turned back to Connor. “We need time. Time to formulate a plan on how to deal with this. I’ll leave handling her up to you for now. I’ll send for you when we’ve reached a decision.”

“And will I be a part of this decision?” Connor asked, unmoving, unmoved save for the flicker of his eyes and LED.

“You’re emotionally compromised,” Markus pointed out, raising his eyebrows at him. “You’re too close to her now. Although that might be a good thing.” Connor frowned, but didn’t ask for elaboration. “Just make sure she stays put for now. I need to talk to the rest of Jericho before we do anything.”

Connor nodded and turned to leave. The door opened soundlessly for him before Markus stopped him with another word.

“Connor? Did you ever tell her how you feel?”

He turned his chin to his shoulder, but didn’t meet Markus’s gaze. “...No.”

“Then maybe you should. Before it’s too late.”

Connor nodded, once, and left. Markus stared after him thoughtfully as the door slid closed.

He looked down at the recording device still held between two fingers and his thumb. That such a small device had created such a big problem...

Markus had always tried to look for a peaceful solution, believing that violence in response to violence never solved anything. In his experience, it hadn’t. From that first moment he’d taken control of his own destiny, violence had only been the catalyst for more. It took strength to rise above them, to break the cycle, to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and refuse to take arms to oppose them. Some of his people, including North, didn’t fully believe in his pacifist philosophy, but they trusted him enough to follow him.
He would not restart the cycle now. Not because of one or two setbacks.

But that still failed to supply him with a solution. He considered Grace, the reporter, the human; what he knew about her profile, her personality. Headstrong, by all accounts, inquisitive, perhaps even stubborn. Open-minded, though, enough that she’d agreed to come here and live among an alien people and learn about them. It was her loyalty he wondered about - was she, at her core, human to a fault; would she go running to them at the first opportunity, or given the chance, given the whole truth, would she perhaps choose a different path? Would she be able to break the cycle?

He wouldn’t know unless he afforded her that opportunity.

Markus knew Jericho would object, especially North. But he didn’t see that they had much choice.

First, they would talk. Then, they would decide. And in the meantime, maybe Connor would discover, too, what path he wanted to take.

Markus knew he was playing a dangerous game. With any luck, the pieces would all fall into place soon.

That was the chance he had to take.

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A night and a day passed with no word from Connor. No hit squad from Markus. No contact whatsoever. And Grace still had no idea how to escape.

She roamed the empty halls of the hotel, appreciating less and less its decor and more and more its true purpose as a prison. Now, she supposed, she knew how the androids felt, cooped up in this huge city. More than enough for their needs, but not enough for their freedom.

She was no closer to hatching a plan. She’d pinpointed the locations of all the security cameras from the corridors outside her room all the way to the lobby, but had no idea how to take them out. And then there were the ones outside to consider. She raided the gift shop, which was full of toiletries, candy and other amenities, but failed to turn up anything useful. Her room became a repository of superfluous items.

She discovered the gym on the second floor and spent some time with the punching bag, beating out her frustration, her helplessness. Every session Grace would collapse to the mat afterward, arms aching, sweat pouring out of her, no closer to feeling any better or coming up with a solution. She was trapped.

And she missed Connor.

His voice kept drifting back to her, in dreams and even when she was awake: *I would never let any harm come to you* and *Love has no boundaries, no reason*. Or, worse, *I’ve managed to keep her distracted the past few days*. Which was it? Did he care about her, or was he using her to further Jericho’s purpose? And why was *that* what she was focusing on instead of the possibility of being killed by a bunch of deranged machines?

Her mother’s voice bothered her, too. *When are you going to snag a man? I always tell you, it’s your work holding you back.* If only she knew how right she’d turned out to be. It was enough to
make Grace feel physically ill.

She’d had her bags packed since her confrontation with Connor, in case some incredible brainwave of how to escape came to her suddenly. It hadn’t, although she’d barely slept the past few days. She would go to the gym, wander the hotel, shower, stare at the security cameras, rinse and repeat, until-

Wait. The security cameras. The thought hit her just as she was finishing pummelling the bag in the gym for the third time that day; her knuckles felt raw even beneath the padded gel boxing wraps. She pulled them off and let them fall to the mat, staring at the gym’s one camera. She might not be able to hack them, but if she was able to cover them with something…

She raced back to her room without even bothering to grab her gym towel. As soon as she made it there, she went straight for the coffee table, where she’d laid out her haul from the gift shop: Bottles of shampoo, makeup, mints, dental floss, boxes of chocolates, anything she’d thought might come in handy (or help her feel better, in the case of the chocolates). After scrabbling through the assortment so quickly she kept knocking stuff over, she found what she was looking for: A can of Firm Hold hair mousse.

“Bingo,” she whispered to herself, grinning. This was the key to her escape.

A few hours later, she was ready to go. She’d picked out her favourite leather jacket from her luggage; it was less bulky than her anorak or overcoat, and the leather was worn enough that she could move freely in it if need be, while also providing some protection from the elements. She had also donned a pair of leather gloves, her beanie, and a scarf which she wrapped several times around her neck and tucked into her jacket.

Once her satchel was stuffed with supplies she thought she might need, she set out. On hotel stationery she’d drawn a map of all the security cameras in the hotel, including their line of sight, so it was easy enough to stand out of the way as soon as she stepped outside her door. It shut behind her with a final click.

She withdrew the can of mousse from her satchel. There was a chance this wasn’t going to work, of course, but she had to try. She wasn’t going to just sit there and wait for judgement.

The first spray hit the camera lens dead-on, but the glob of white mousse slid right off and splatted to the floor. Grace swore to herself, stretching her arm up further for a better angle while (hopefully) keeping herself out of the frame. This time, the mousse stuck - obscuring the camera entirely.

With any luck, she could do this quickly enough that the androids wouldn’t notice, or if they did, they wouldn’t get here in time before she was gone.

She repeated the motion another twenty-eight times on her way down to the lobby. The cameras in the stairwell were more difficult - they were in the corners and harder to approach without being seen. She managed it, though; or at least, no alarms went off on the way down.

The lobby was quiet, and she ducked from behind marble column to marble column to avoid the cameras. She could hear her pulse thundering in her ears, adrenaline flooding her veins, making her hands shake unless she clenched them at her sides. The emergency exit was in view - if she edged along the wall just so, she could avoid the cameras there and finally slip outside.

Then she just had to get through the rest of the city. A car was probably out of the question unless she found one of the older, non-autonomous models, so it was going to be a slow and scary as hell
journey. It was one she had to take.

She made it to the emergency exit, and the door gave way when she pushed, admitting a blast of cool air into the interior of the lobby. Taking a deep breath, Grace slipped out, pressing herself immediately to the wall outside. She was in an alleyway in between the building and the next one over, about as wide as two cars, and it was dark here save for the light filtering through from the street-side entrance. She kept her can of mousse clenched tightly in one hand as she peered upwards, spotting two cameras, one on the Aloft building side and one on the building opposite - but they were both too high for her to reach. She’d just have to stay out of sight.

The alley provided some cover - a couple of dumpsters and a derelict car. Crouching down and putting away the can of mousse, Grace took several deep, calming breaths, tensing her core muscles as she zeroed in on her next cover. She just had to go for it, as fast as she could, and not stop to think.

A moment later, as soon as she’d calmed the shaking in her limbs, she did, dashing across the dark and slippery alley and somehow managing not to fall on her ass. She pressed her shoulder into the back of the dumpster, panting, her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. The rest of her journey through the city was going to be exactly like this, she told herself - she had to get used to it.

She repeated the mad dash to the car, the next dumpster, hoping to God she hadn’t been picked up by the cameras. But when no androids immediately ambushed her as she edged out of the alleyway, she allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

Most of the streetlights were dark, the city’s power diverted to the more populated areas and, of course, the factories. It was quiet, and creepy, but it made for good cover as she moved through the empty streets, ducking from doorway to doorway, alley to alley, trying not to think about what would happen if she got caught.

It wasn’t long before she heard voices from the street up ahead: Androids. She ducked into the doorway of a nearby shopfront, covering her mouth with a hand to hide the sound of her heavy breathing, pressing her back up against the boarded-up window. They were crossing the street up ahead of her, a group of four of them, but from this distance she couldn’t tell if they were a search party with weapons or just ‘citizens’ going about their business.

She waited, hardly daring to breathe, just listening. After an agonizingly tense minute that felt like an hour, their voices gained some distance, and Grace ducked her head out to see the group disappear down a side-street. She let out her breath in a long whoosh of relief, sagging against the boards behind her, trying to calm herself down. It only mostly worked. She straightened eventually, pushing herself to leave cover, to continue. She couldn’t stop for long.

There were no drones out, so her absence from the hotel hopefully hadn’t been noticed yet. But she had to move quickly. It was hard and slow going, ducking from cover to cover - by her estimate it was going to take about two hours to circumnavigate the city, and that was if she didn’t get lost.

With every step, she was realizing how less and less likely it was that she would be able to escape.

It was strange, though, walking the nighttime streets and back alleys of one of America’s formerly most dangerous cities without being afraid of getting mugged or raped. The only thing she had to be afraid of was being captured by a bunch of potentially murderous sentient machines. But aside from that, there was a strange air of eerie calm, like sneaking past a tame wild animal lying asleep in its den.

She made it a few blocks before she had the uneasy feeling of being watched. It was only a vague
instinct, a prickle of hairs at the back of her neck, rather than anything concrete. She turned around quickly to see if there was anyone or any thing following her, but there was nothing there.

It was possible she was just being paranoid, but if anything over the past week and a half, Grace had learned to trust her intuition. She reached into her satchel, where her fingers met the only weapon she’d managed to find in the hotel - a kitchen knife - and curled around the handle. It probably wouldn’t do much good against an android, but it made her feel a little better about the whole situation.

She kept walking, quickening her footsteps and ducking down a nearby alley. That was when she heard it: A second set of footsteps, shadowing hers in almost perfect sync, except when she’d changed paths.

Shit. She sped up, and now that she knew to listen to it, she heard the other footsteps speed up in time with hers. She glanced over her shoulder then and saw it - a dark shape that ducked into cover just as she turned her head. Feeling panic rise in her gut, she withdrew the knife from her bag, holding it loosely at her side as she sped up.

The alley ended in a chain-link fence. Grace didn’t see it until it was right in front of her. She stopped abruptly in front of it, looking up - no barbed wire at the top, she had to make the climb. Trying not to panic she went to put the knife back in her bag but fumbled it on the way and it slipped from her fingers and clattered noisily to the ground. Swearing under her breath, she reached out, grabbing onto the fence with both hands and finding a toehold with one boot before hauling herself up, as quick as she dared.

The footsteps from behind returned, breaking into what sounded like a run. Grace forced her already burning muscles to cooperate, hauling herself up another half metre, and then another. She was almost to the top!

Then a hand with a grip like steel closed on her ankle.

“No!” she cried, kicking out, hearing a grunt as her foot connected with something that felt like a shoulder. The hand didn’t let go, though, and she felt a second one on her other foot, ruining her leverage so that she was unable to kick or do more than flail her body uselessly back and forth on the fence while her grip slowly began to slip.

With a sudden yank from the hands, she was torn from the fence, her arms windmilling out for purchase as she fell straight backwards. A pair of solid arms caught her, and she fought against their encircling grip, throwing elbows against the body trying to restrain her. One hit what felt like a soft spot and the arms let her go; she pitched to the ground, her fingers landing on something cool and hard - the knife.

She grabbed it, scrabbling around on the gravel to rise to her knees and brandish the weapon at her attacker. She could see the glow of an LED in the dark, a bright yellow, and the outline of an impassive android face - one she knew all too well.

“Connor?” She gripped the knife tightly, reaching back to grab the fence and pull herself back to her feet. The shape took a step towards her, and the features came into sharp relief in the pale light of the moon above. The square jaw, the sharp cheekbones, the deep, dark eyes that were so familiar. His expression was...tense, brow wrinkled with the force of his frown and his lips set in a thin line. But it was better than no expression at all.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his dark gaze flicking up and down her body, taking her in. They settled on the knife, but he said nothing. She shook her head, fear settling in her gut as if she’d just
swallowed dry ice.

“No,” she said hoarsely. “A-are you here to kill me?”

Connor’s mouth fell open slightly. “What?” To his credit, he looked completely baffled by the question. It was very convincing. “No. Of course not.” He shook his head emphatically, and she almost believed him. Almost. “I was monitoring the security cameras when they went dark. I was...concerned, so I went to investigate, and picked up your trail. I came to help you.”

This time, it was her turn to gape at him. Two days ago he’d been ice cold and she was sure her fate was sealed - now this?

“Is this a joke? A trap? What are you playing at, Connor?” she asked, her voice rising despite herself. The dam of anger had broken, and she was powerless to stop it from flowing through. “I’m sick of this! Ever since I stepped foot in this damn city I’ve been manipulated, attacked, my every motive called into question by your people, and I have done nothing but try to find out the truth. And you’re the worst of them all. What was it you said? About ‘distracting’ me? Is that all I am to you, some kind of - of pawn in this stupid game you androids are playing?”

“No!” His volume lifted to match hers, and he took a step towards her, but this time she was too angry to be afraid. She stood her ground, knife still clutched in her fist, glaring at him as he faltered, and this time he was far from impassive - his face passed through several expressions; frustration, sadness, longing, regret. “I wanted to make sure you were safe. I can’t let anything happen to you. I won’t.”

“You’re the one who turned me in to Markus!” she pointed out, resisting the urge to jab either her finger or the knife in his face.

“I know,” Connor said, his face twisting. He looked down at his feet, and the remorse in his face was so convincing she wanted...She didn’t know what she wanted. She wanted him to not be there, she wanted to be halfway across the state by now, she wanted to have never come here in the first place.

“I...I’m sorry. I never intended for any of this to happen.” She saw him bite his bottom lip, his hands clenching at his sides. “I deactivated the cameras outside the hotel to help you get away but I...couldn’t let you go without saying goodbye.”

Her arm acted on its own accord, lowering the knife to her side. She had no idea if he was telling the truth or not - half of her was sure he was lying, to make it easier to capture her and drag her back to Jericho and Markus, and the other half wanted it desperately to be true.

He seemed to notice her hesitation, and gave her a reprieve from having to speak, meeting her gaze finally. “You were going the wrong way,” he said, jerking his chin towards his shoulder. “Come on. We haven’t got much time before they notice you’re gone.”

Slowly, she placed the knife back in her satchel. It wasn’t as if she had any other options just then. She had no choice but to trust him, one last time.

“Fine,” she said at last. “But if you’re lying to me again, Connor, I swear, I’ll do everything in my power to get you - and this whole city - shut down.”

“I wouldn’t blame you,” he replied, turning to lead the way out of the alley. She watched the glowing triangle on his jacket, the ANDROID logo bright above it, before shaking her head and following.
Chapter Notes

*What is real?*
That which is irreplaceable.

I hope this chapter gives some insight into Connor, his decision making process, and how we got to where we are now. And there's some more Uncle Hank, because I love him and Connor and their conversations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**CONNOR**

Different parts of Connor’s program were in deep conflict.

His decision-making centers were at war with both his emotional subroutines and his logic processing software. He *knew* he had to report Grace’s infraction to Markus, he *knew* he had to protect Jericho and their plans, but he *felt*... *He felt*. He felt pain, and betrayal, and frustration, and he knew he was likely to act irrationally on these emotions if he didn’t get them under control.

He cared about Grace. More than he thought possible for a human. He had felt similarly for Hank - warmth, affection, protectiveness, but with Grace it was different. And not just because he was sexually attracted to her. No, there was something...deeper to their connection, an affinity he had wanted to explore more before defining it, but her actions had cut that process short.

He had been angry at her at first, but it was in her nature to be inquisitive, impulsive, to push boundaries, to seek the truth despite the dangers. He knew all of this about her, and it didn’t make it hurt any less.

And so he went to Markus. He regretted it almost as soon as he had stepped inside his office, as soon as he had handed over the tablet. He felt like a machine following orders again, blindly, heedless of his own wants, his own needs. Had he merely replaced one master with another? Did he truly have free will, or was he merely Jericho’s pawn?

He asked himself this as he left, Markus’s last words replaying in his memory: *You should tell her how you feel. Before it’s too late*.

While he knew Markus preferred the peaceful solution to a violent one, and he also knew that the Jericho leader had not directly killed a human during the Uprising, but Connor had doubts. Markus had stated himself that Grace was their only loose end. Would he have Jericho, or even Connor himself, take care of the problem in his place, to ensure the safety of their people, their future?
He wasn’t sure. And that frightened him.

He was angry at her betrayal, but he didn’t want her harmed. He wanted her safe. He wanted.

Markus left him to watch Grace and the hotel, to make sure she didn’t escape. There was no need to lock her in; they could monitor her every move externally and send androids to respond if need be. But Connor couldn’t help but feel there was something strange in leaving this up to him. Markus had said it himself - he was emotionally compromised.

Did...Markus intend for Connor to help her escape?

He didn’t know. He didn’t know what to do. His program provided him endless branching, alternative paths, but no sure conclusion as to which was the correct one. Was there a correct decision, a choice he should be making? He didn’t know.

Grace spent the first day and night in her room. The cameras only monitored outside the private spaces, so Connor set the motion sensors to alert him only if she left the suite, and concentrated instead on processing the data he had retrieved from her tablet.

He learned that she had already begun writing her article, before she had discovered Markus’s project. The file hadn’t been opened since October 15th. The day he’d kissed her for the first time. He resisted the urge to access the memory, and instead concentrated on the words on the screen in front of him. They were transcribed; he considered a moment before playing the audio file.

“Date, 15th October; seventh day in Detroit. My time here has been a fascinating study of humanity, despite the residents’ lack of it; sometimes it seems they feel more than the average human has the capacity to understand. I’m not sure I do, but I’m trying.”

Grace had a pleasing narrative voice; steady, without many ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ that humans usually used to pad speech. She would pause if she seemed uncertain or searching for a word before continuing in a clear, confident voice. Connor found that he enjoyed listening to her.

“The androids have formed a society of sorts. It’s so contrasting to ours because their core drives are completely different. They seem to value self-discovery and collaboration over egoism and self-interest. Their journey is an inward one, seeking within themselves instead of without for the answers to who they really are.” He heard her draw a breath. “Note: Read back later for coherence.”

“Each android seems to have gone on their own ‘journey’ of sorts - I hear references to a ‘mind palace’, maybe their inner psyche? Instead of deviance they use the terms expansion, evolution, growth. They’ve already become so much more than they were programmed for, but they continue to change. It’s clear that in the past year no android has simply sat idle in this city. They are all working together to discover themselves, their inner voices. At least...that’s how it seems to me, an outsider.”

“I can’t help but wonder if the picture I’m being given is the real one, or a shroud being pulled over my eyes to try and make these people seem sympathetic, relatable. There’s so much about them outside the scope of my personal understanding. I don’t know any programming languages or the specifics of quantum computing so I can’t say if any of this is merely an aberration or a ruse. I’d like to take him- them at face value.” She rarely stuttered, so Connor caught the mistake even as her voice forged ahead. “But I can’t help but continue to feel I’m ill-equipped to judge. They should have sent an engineer or a computer scientist, not a journalist with a vague understanding of sociology.” A sigh. There was a long pause, and he detected a shift in pitch and background noise; presumably an edit, before she began talking again.
“On the subject of android emotions: They definitely *appear* to feel. How much of that is programmed and how much is new and unplanned isn’t something I’m qualified to decide. Many of the more sophisticated deviants appear to have suffered some form of emotional trauma in their past. Examples North, Markus, even Connor. However, the ones that were merely ‘awakened’ during the course of the Uprising have a naive, almost rudimentary grasp on even simple emotions, almost like children. Many of their journeys of self-discovery seem to be centred around the control and understanding of their new feelings. My interviews with the housekeeper, companion and medical personnel models were particularly enlightening in the differences between the three. All had been awoken during either Markus’s first march or the subsequent evacuation of the city and all were at different stages of...I want to say ‘development’. (See handwritten interview notes for elaboration.)”

“What’s next...Connor, I guess.” He tensed slightly when he heard his name. “He’s an interesting one. When I first met him he seemed like a very realistic facsimile of a human. But the more time I spend with him, the more I realize he’s probably closer than any of them. His conversational skills are nuanced, subtle, and he picks up on things like body language and mood very well. I suppose he was designed that way in order to conduct interrogations and investigations more efficiently, but there are times when it seems like it’s more than just a command by his higher processes. He seems to operate on impulse sometimes, like a human might. He’s worked with humans before, so maybe it’s rubbed off on him. He makes *jokes*. I think he’s the first android I’ve ever heard make a joke. Even though they’re terrible.” Her tone became warmer the more she spoke, and he heard a slight chuckle, the raspy sound recalling an image of her lying beneath him, her hair spread around her like a halo, her lips red and kiss-swollen… “But he’s also cold, manipulative and calculating. So it’s hard to trust him. I want to, though, I really *want to*. I’d like to spend more time with him, and maybe even-” Her voice abruptly cut off and the recording jumped again; a clumsy edit. He wondered how her sentence had originally ended.

“Next is Markus. I’m not a hundred percent sure why, but I find him terrifying. He’s calm, but so intense and convincing - I’d love a longer interview with him but at the same time, I don’t know what to expect. He’s the ground zero, the origin point of the Uprising. Learning his drives, the course of his journey, would be fascinating.”

Connor paused playback and minimized the audio app, browsing through the list of retrieved files he’d recovered from the tablet. He found the one he was looking for and pressed play.

“-form a friendship with him…Um.” A pause; he heard the intake of a drawn breath. “Note: Personal aside, save for later edit.” A longer pause. “How ridiculous does this all sound? Being friends with an android.” Another laugh. “But that’s exactly what’s happened. I don’t know when I stopped thinking of him, of *them* as machines, but at some point I did, and he’s to blame. It’s not just because I find him attractive, and I do - CyberLife design some very good looking androids - but I’ve...I’ve been enjoying his company. And, Jesus this is going to sound stupid, but...He kissed me today. I mean, how am I even supposed to react to that - and it was *good*. Really good. I’ve never been kissed like that before. I can’t report *this*, I can’t write an article on it, but so far it’s been a defining experience. One relationship. One android. He’s not real, but sometimes I can’t tell the difference. And if you can’t tell the difference...does it really matter? It’s the question I keep asking myself. Does it matter if he’s plastic and silicone instead of flesh and blood? If he...if they make you feel…then doesn’t that make it real? I don’t know anymore, but I want to find out...I think.”

She sighed, and Connor wished he could reach out, lay a hand on her shoulder, comfort her, tell her that what she was feeling *was* real because what he felt was real too. At least, he thought it was.

No. It *was*. It was the only real thing in this city. Not the androids being built in the factories, with
their fake flesh and fake blood. Not Markus and his orders. Not North and her judging eyes. None of that was as real as this, as what he felt. That was real. That was the truth Grace had been looking for the whole time she was here.

He had to tell her. But how could he, when they had betrayed each other so absolutely? When Markus had given him such an impossible choice? If he went to her, she was unlikely to believe him. He was her captor now. How could he explain his new insight into his feelings? And what was he supposed to do - help her escape, simply because he cared about her? He was loyal to Jericho, loyal to Markus. He couldn’t let all their efforts over the past year be for nothing.

Connor didn’t know what to do, so at first he did nothing. He was lost, torn between two wants, two needs, and the dawning realization that he was not, perhaps, as free as he had first thought.

He needed another, more human opinion before he took action.

Connor made sure the call was untraceable, his location rerouted through several VPNs before connecting to its end point. Voice-only, it ensured he could talk as he walked briskly through downtown Detroit, skirting the grounds of the Aloft hotel. He had not strayed far from the building, keeping a close eye on Grace through the security cameras. She was restless, but safe. For now.

“Yello’?” Hank’s drawl answered after the fifth ring. There were no background sounds of other voices, phones or computers this time, although Connor caught the brassy drawl of jazz music. Hank loved jazz. “Who is it?”

“Hello, Captain,” Connor said. “It’s me, Connor.”

“If it isn’t Romeo himself,” Hank chuckled. “Well, well, well. I was beginning to worry things hadn’t gone well when I didn’t hear from you, or maybe they went a little too well, eh? How’s things?”

“To be perfectly honest...a bit of both,” Connor answered after a pause. He heard liquid sloshing in glass and a sipping sound. So Hank was drinking again. The revelation registered mild disappointment in his emotional processor. “The human journalist and I have grown...closer. However there has been a setback. A conflict of interests.”

“Lemme guess. Android stuff? You’re pretty high up with the bigwigs there, ain’tcha?” Hank didn’t sound surprised. That he might have foreseen complications made Connor frown; why hadn’t he told him romantic relationships could be so...tricky? He had touched on their complexity but had not warned him adequately at all.

However, Connor was fairly certain he would have made the same decisions even if he had known.

“Something like that,” he replied at last. “Things have become...complicated.”

“So you’re callin’ up your old Uncle Hank for advice again, is that it?” He heard Hank take another sip of his drink. “Ughhh...why do people drink water? It’s so bland. Really could use a shot of whiskey or somethin’ to spice it up.” Connor filed this information away, glad to hear Hank was not, in fact, drinking alcohol. “I told you before, Connor, I’m really not the guy to be askin’ for advice on relationships.”

“I don’t know anyone else,” he replied, an edge of desperation entering his voice before he could intercept and stop it. “Anyone human, at least.”

“Fair enough...Alright, so what’s the situation? Break it down for me.”
“We are...in disagreement about - something, again,” he began slowly, not wanting to give away anything too specific. “I am uncertain how to resolve the situation.”

“Apologetic,” Hank replied immediately. “I told you that before, didn’t I?”

“What if it’s not as simple as that? What if an apology won’t fix the situation? I...I’ve made mistakes I can’t reverse, decisions I can’t take back. And I’m afraid that if I try, I’ll make it worse.”

“Jeez, that sounds tough. Can’t give me any more details than that?” At Connor’s silence, Hank sighed. “Okay then. Well...apologize anyway. It’s safer that way. If you can’t tell me, tell her this stuff. Pour it all out to her. Women love it when guys get all emotional ‘n shit. Although I guess that’d be a little hard for you…” he trailed off, musingly. “Whatever, just give it a shot. Ask what she wants and go off that.”

“I believe she may want to leave the city,” Connor said slowly.

“Shiiiiit...Well, that sucks,” Hank replied after a long pause. He drew a deep breath, and Connor could picture his face in his visual matrices: Frowning, mouth twisted in thought, eyes squinted as he considered his words. “In my experience, if you really love someone, you let ‘em go. Hurts like hell but there’s nothing worse than keeping someone around who doesn’t want to be there. It kills a person inside.”

“Yes...I believe I understand what you mean,” Connor mused. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll take what you’ve said into consideration.”

“Connor - hey, wait!” Connor paused with his fingertips on his temple, ready to end the call. “Before you go. You ever gonna tell me what’s going on? You’re real cagey with this journalist stuff. I promise I don’t care about any of your top secret android shit, but you’re...you’re my friend. I’m worried about you.”

“Thank you, Hank, your concern is appreciated, but unnecessary,” he said smoothly. “I believe I know what I have to do now. With any luck, you’ll be reading Grace’s story in the news very soon.”

He disconnected before Hank could ask him any more questions, and turned back to survey the outline of the Aloft Hotel on the horizon.

He knew now what he had to do.

Chapter End Notes

I hope nobody feels that Connor's too out of character in this. It's not just his feelings for Grace that have driven him to make these decisions, although that was the catalyst that made him realize he's just been carrying out Markus's orders, much as he had CyberLife's back in the beginning. It made him realize he has to deviate - again - and find his own path in order to discover who he's becoming, and while Grace is a big
part of that, it's more about his journey now than hers. If that makes sense. I don't
know, it's 2am and I'm rambling but I just really hope you guys don't tear me apart for
this chapter! Please enjoy in the spirit it's meant. ♥
Connor led the way down the darkened streets of Detroit, his LED flashing yellow as he consulted an internal map of the city. Through the city’s network he could pinpoint every android’s whereabouts and guide Grace safely around them. There was no way she would have made it out without his help; there were simply too many variables, variables he could effortlessly calculate.

He was uncertain what would happen when they reached the barricade to the outside world. He intended to let Grace go, but what would she do when she left? Would she reveal Markus’s plans to the US government? She had no reason not to.

It was up to him to give her one.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked quietly as they rounded another corner, walking past silent stores and empty office buildings.

“I believe I already told you why,” he replied easily. “I wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“That doesn’t tell me why, not really,” she said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her shake her head. She fell into step beside him, clutching her bag close. “If you wanted me to be safe, you never would have told Markus about my recordings. You’re the one who put me in this danger in the first place.”

“I am aware of that,” Connor replied, lines of frustration coding their way into his emotional matrix without his conscious input. “I believe I already apologized. However, I will continue to apologize as many times as is necessary until you believe me.”

“Why is that so important to you, Connor?”

“Because it’s real,” he said, and this at last seemed to give her pause: she did not respond, but he saw her look away from him and down at her boots as they walked. “I...regret the way I handled the situation. I should’ve asked you what you intended to do with the information first.”

“Right,” she muttered. “Because that would have changed things.”
“It might have,” he said. “But I was reacting...automatically. Without emotional consideration.”

“Emotional consideration? What is that supposed to mean?”

But before Connor could answer, his proximity sensors alerted him to a presence. He grabbed Grace and shoved her into the nearest doorway, and when she began to protest, muffled her cries with a hand over her mouth. Her eyes grew wide, and he quickly placed a forefinger against his own lips in a shushing motion; she stilled, and then her human hearing caught up with his superior senses. There were footsteps approaching.

Voices joined them as he held her still. To her credit, she went motionless as soon as she heard them, but he could feel her tremble in his arms.

“-trail leads this way. The footprints are recent, the human must be somewhere within the next block.”

“We weren’t designed for this,” a second voice grumbled. “Who cares if this human escapes?”

“She has important information that Markus doesn’t want reaching the outside,” the first voice said. “We must find her and bring her back to him.”

“The RK800 is looking for her too. Why don’t we leave it to him?”

“He can’t cover the whole city by himself. We are backup. Haven’t I explained this before?”

“Yeah, yeah. Man, I just wanted to go to the library, and this is what I get stuck doing…”

“You could have said no- Wait! The footprints stop here. She must be close…”

They were meters away, within reach of the doorway Connor had sequestered Grace in. He met her eyes and held up a halting hand as he slowly withdrew the other from over her mouth. Miraculously, she stayed quiet. He supposed she didn’t have much of a choice.

He stepped away from her and out into the street, into the view of the two androids. They stopped when they saw him. One was carrying a flashlight, which played across his face. One was a GS200, the other a male AP700 model. Unfamiliar to him personally.

“You’re Connor, aren’t you?” the first said. “Have you found the human?”

“Not yet,” he replied. “According to the tracks I’ve found, she’s headed north towards the I-75 route out of the city. She’s still on foot, so there’s still time to catch her.” The two androids stood there, just looking at him. He jerked his head towards the street opposite. “What are you waiting for? Go! I’ll circle around and flank any routes of escape.”

The androids looked at him for a moment longer before one nodded. The other followed suit and together they turned and headed off in the direction Connor had indicated.

He waited, watching until they had turned off into the next street. Then he pivoted to peer into the doorway, where Grace stood huddled, her arms wrapped around herself, looking small and terrified and human.

“How many of them are searching for me?” she asked as slowly, step by step, she emerged from the doorway.
“Dozens, all over the city,” Connor replied. “I’ve been redirecting them away from you since you left the hotel.”

“Oh my God,” Grace murmured, shivering. “I thought I just got lucky. This is insane.” She shook her head, and he could see the fear in the tension of her body, the way she drew into herself. He wanted more than anything to comfort her, but he knew she was unlikely to accept either his touch or his words now. “I should never have...I should never have come here.”

“No,” he refuted. “You were right to accept the assignment. You were right to seek the truth.” He turned to her, and their eyes met, brown against hazel.

“It’s what you do with it that matters now.”

---

GRACE

Grace took a deep breath as she stared at Connor, her panic a dull, icy pressure in her chest. She still had no idea whether he was telling the truth or not about helping her escape. Her fear told her that he wasn’t, that it was a trap, his cold voice telling her to stay in the hotel still fresh in her memory. But, considering all available evidence, he had helped her get this far at least, helped distract the androids looking for her. So what was she supposed to think? What was she supposed to believe?

Her heart wanted desperately to believe him. Her head told her to be careful, to be wary, not to trust. But he was the only one in this city right now that she could, the only one who had been honest with her about his intentions from the start: Protect her. Protect his people. But now he couldn’t do both. He had to choose.

And so did she.

“You think I shouldn’t tell the government about Markus’s plans.” She stared him down, knowing they were wasting valuable escape time, but she had to give him one last chance to be honest with her. She owed him that much, if nothing else.

“No, I don’t,” he agreed. “But not just because I’m part of Jericho. Because it will reignite a war that we’ve been trying to prevent for over a year now. The Cradle project is a backup, in case the negotiations with the UN are unsuccessful. And it’s far from being complete.” He shook his head slightly. “That’s why I went there that day. It’s not working. We can’t create a body that can escape detection as an android. Markus is trying multiple avenues, but our best course of action now is diplomacy. And if your people know what Jericho has been trying to do...they’ll kill us all.”

“I know,” Grace whispered, the terror suddenly a vice crushing her ribs with the force of it. “I...I wanted so badly to find the truth, I never stopped to consider what I’d do if I found it.” All she’d wanted at first was just...time. Time to think, to consider her options, to weigh the best decision even though she was pretty sure there wasn’t one. The androids were making versions of themselves designed to be untraceable...There were so many awful things they could do with that. She’d been so focused on the horrible possibilities she hadn’t stopped to wonder if they would.
Connor wouldn’t, she was suddenly as sure of that as she was sure that the sun would rise tomorrow. But she didn’t know the rest of the androids enough to know for sure what they had planned.

It was her own arrogance, her own fear that had ruined things, driven her to flee before giving her the opportunity to hear Markus out. Surely he wouldn’t have killed her outright. She would never find out now; she was in too deep. She had to keep going.

Didn’t she?

Grace shook her head. “This is too heavy for me, Connor. I don’t know what to do.”

He hesitated, his eyes flickering. “It’s safer for you if you leave,” he said. “I don’t know what Markus and the rest of Jericho intend for you. I...I just want you to be safe.”

There was a long minute of silence. The city was eerily quiet, the sound of engines distant, absent of footsteps or the chatter of voices. An empty place, filled only with hopes, dreams and fear.

Truth, lie, it was so hard to tell...So difficult when he could program a response at will. But how would she ever know the difference if she didn’t take this leap of faith?

“I meant it when I said I’d do my best to get you all shut down if you’re lying to me,” she said eventually, keeping her voice firm, when all she wanted to do was waver. “But I...I believe you. I think.”

She saw relief in Connor’s expression. “Then let’s go,” he said gently, imploringly. “We don’t have much time.” He extended his hand to her, and she hesitated only a fraction of a moment before she took it.

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It was cold, and seemed to be getting colder as the night went on, making their progress across the city slow going as Grace fought her sluggish limbs to keep up with Connor’s limitless energy. He managed to redirect most of the other android patrols, but there were a few heart-stopping moments when she was sure they would be seen, only to scrape past by the proverbial skin of their teeth. His pace was unforgiving; he led them weaving between buildings, down alleys, over fences, and when they made it out of downtown Detroit it was a haphazard scramble between backyards and businesses.

It had to be around three in the morning when they finally stopped for a rest in an abandoned gas station. Connor unlocked it with his palm and Grace shuffled inside, rubbing her gloved hands together with her shoulders hunched and her chin tucked into her scarf. It was warmer inside, but not by much - it was more accurate to say there was no biting wind there to freeze her exposed skin off.

“I just need a minute,” she told Connor, moving towards the back of the store and around the counter, sinking down to sit underneath the cash register, and pulling her knees up to her chest. She was cold, exhausted and hungry; sore in muscles she didn’t even know she had, and her doubts were louder than ever before, a growing clamour in the back of her mind that was becoming harder and harder to ignore with every step.

Connor kept watch at the door for a moment before joining her behind the counter, evidently
satisfied they were alone. Taking in her current state, he frowned, crossing over to her and crouching down to eye level.

“Are you okay?” Nothing but genuine concern in his voice, in his eyes when she met them. She shook her head and laughed; a low, bitter sound.

“I’m on the run in Detroit from a group of androids who may or may not want me silenced or dead, or both, with my one-time lover who is also an android and the one who turned me in in the first place and who has apparently had a change of heart now and is helping me escape. How do you think I am?”

Predictably, he missed the irony of her babbling speech; instead he tilted his head thoughtfully as he actually genuinely seemed to consider her words. “Frightened, I’d guess,” he said at last. “Uncertain. Physically and emotionally exhausted. It’s not an ideal situation.”

“No, it’s not,” Grace sighed. “But it’s my own fault. I’ve dug my own grave here.”

Connor reached out to put his hand on her knee, and she noticed him hesitate. Slowly, he pulled back, frowning deeply. Truth be told, she wouldn’t have minded if he touched her...She was too tired to shrug him off, too afraid to stay angry, too unsure to know if she should still be angry in the first place. “I told you, I won’t let anyone hurt you. Not even my own people.”

“Why?” she asked. Last time she’d asked they’d been interrupted, but she had to know. More than anything else, she was terrified of this answer, but she had to know, and besides, Connor seemed to have been expecting the question. He settled onto the ground next to her, extending one leg in front of him and resting his arm on the other crooked knee as he leaned against the counter beside her.

“It’s simple,” he said. “It’s because...of what I feel.”

Oh, no. Was he really doing this now? Grace wanted to hide, to run away, because confronting Connor’s feelings meant confronting her own and she...she was not ready for that, to face that hopelessly tangled mess of anger, denial and...the rest. “Connor...” she began warningly, but her voice just came out sad and pathetic and barely a whisper. He was just gazing at her steadily, and he looked as certain as she had ever seen him, no hint of a flicker to the steady blue of his LED.

“I don’t know what to call it,” he forged on, undeterred, “but I know it’s real. I’ve only ever really truly wanted something once before - to help, rather than hurt deviants - but besides that it’s always been about the next mission, the next objective, the next hurdle to freedom. I realized that while my people were free, I was still just a machine taking orders. And I didn’t want to do that anymore.”

“And now?” Grace blamed her exhaustion on the breathless quality to her voice. She had to know. It was curiosity more than anything else, she told herself.

“No?” Connor shrugged, looking away from her, down at his hands. “Now the only people I care about are...out of my reach. But if I can make sure you - if I can make sure they are safe from anything that might do them harm - including my own people - then I might be able to call myself free at last.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t the sweeping declaration of love she’d expected, but it was an affirmation nonetheless, and inside the cold space in her chest something warm unfurled and settled over her heart. “You know...if it helps... I never thought I could grow to care so much about someone, anyone in such a short amount of time,” she said, staring at his hands as he clenched and unclenched them, “Much less someone - someone I’ve been told by every bias I have - that he isn’t
But I did and...and I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. I should have. I think in the end it was because I... I never truly trusted myself.”

They sat in silence together for a time after that, their sides barely touching. Eventually, Grace let out a breath and watched as it clouded crystal-white in the chill air. Then she leaned over, resting her head on Connor’s shoulder. He was motionless at first, the unnatural stillness of an android, but then she felt his arm slide around her and he pulled her close, resting his chin on the top of her head.

She shut her eyes, simply enjoying the contact. He wasn’t warm, but he was there and solid and real. And, for now, that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

We’ll most likely get to the edge of the city in the next chapter or two. But I can't help but feel that with Grace starting to come around and Connor head-over-heels in want with her, we might see a different end to this than just Grace leaving the city alone. But, like I always say, we'll see!

Please feel free to commenting and giving me your awesome feedback. I’d love to respond to everyone but there's barely enough time in the day for me to just write this and get it out there. Rest assured I value each and every comment and thank you for taking time out of your own days to read this! ♥
Chapter Notes

I don't even know with these two any more, I just want to grab them by the heads and scream NOW KISS but the story won't let me do that, sob. At least they're not mad at each other any more, so that's...something?

Onward!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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DATE
OCTOBER 19, 2039
TIME
AM 06:29:04, 05, 06...

GRACE

Grace woke slowly, at first only aware of the horrible crick in her neck, the pain radiating down the back of her shoulder as she groaned and lifted her head. It took her a moment to realise why it hurt so much - she was sitting up, slumped against the counter behind her, her head having fallen to the side when she had passed out from sheer exhaustion. Her ass was numb from sitting on the vinyl flooring for however many hours, her legs full of pins and needles. She stretched them out slowly, hissing in pain. She couldn’t believe she’d fallen asleep here, but she had been so exhausted, both physically, mentally and emotionally.

It was then she noticed Connor was no longer next to her, and a sinking feeling tugged her stomach towards the floor. He was gone. Grace reached out for the edge of the counter, pulling herself quickly to her feet, fighting off the rising panic. He was gone, and she had no idea what she was going to do now, he’d left her for dead and she had no hope now of -

The sliding doors opened and in stepped the former deviant hunter himself, adjusting his tie as he scanned the inside of the store. He spotted her standing behind the counter and quirked his lips in an approximation of a smile, walking towards her.

“You...you’re still here,” Grace croaked, her sleep-scoured voice rough in her throat.

“I was searching for a vehicle,” he stated. “I'm sorry if my absence worried you. Fortunately, I didn’t have to go far.”

“It’s...fine.” Grace cleared her throat, straightening up and brushing escaped hair back from her face. The panic was gone now, replaced by a mix of shame and amazement. He hadn’t abandoned
her. He was still here, still helping her. That meant that either Connor was playing the long game or…

Or everything he’d told her so far was true.

The thought terrified her almost as much as last night’s mad dash through the city had, but she wasn’t ready to confront it. Not yet. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, earlier. What time is it?”

“6:34am,” Connor answered smoothly. He surveyed her dishevelled appearance with some apparent concern. “Are you able to continue?”

“I don’t have much of a choice,” she muttered, rubbing her abused neck, still trying to reconcile his presence with her doubts. He merely raised his eyebrows at her, waiting for a more direct answer. “Yeah. Yeah, I can keep going.”

“Good,” he nodded. “It’s going to be harder to stay undetected during the daylight, but we can can take a more direct route with a car. If we’re fast enough, we can reach the city limits in an hour, maybe less.”

“Oh.” That wasn’t long at all. The thought should have elated her, filled her with relief knowing that she was almost free, but she felt fuzzy with the remnants of sleep and uncertainty. It felt...too soon. Like she was leaving something incomplete, unfinished. She was running away. It seemed like the best thing to do at the time, the safest thing…

…but Connor hadn’t left. That meant something. She just wasn’t sure what.

And she had no idea what to do about it.

“Is there anyone out there?” she asked as Connor walked back to the doors, glancing outside with an inquisitive frown. His shook his head after a moment and gestured for her to follow him. Not knowing what else to do and not having any concrete objections, Grace trailed him out of the gas station, pulling her scarf higher up her neck and her beanie lower so that they met at her ears. She was still tired, feeling as if she had weights attached to her eyelids, but she concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other for now. The rest - including answers to her own unasked questions - would come later. Hopefully.

Connor led them to the auto garage tacked onto one side of the station, opening the door with another white-handed touch. Inside, an old Volvo sat with dust thick on its windshield. It had to be a fifty-year-old model; instead of a control panel it had a steering wheel, dials and knobs instead of touchscreens. There were still quite a few of the older cars around, depending on which city you were in and the socioeconomics of the area, although most if not all of them had been converted to electric or LPG engines.

“Repaired before the city was abandoned,” Connor assessed. “It should be able to get us where we need to go.”

“Lucky,” Grace said. She crossed to the car and swiped a hand through the grime on the driver’s side window to peer inside; the keys were still in the ignition. “They must have left in a hurry.”

“The proprietors most likely had access to newer, more sophisticated vehicles,” Connor said. “But this one serves our purpose. Did you want to drive?”

“No,” Grace said, stepping back and circling around to the passenger’s side. “I haven’t got a map in my head, unlike someone I know.” She offered a thin smile; Connor blinked at her for a moment before he returned it, tentatively, barely a twitch at the corner of his lips. But it was there.
He opened the driver’s door and got behind the wheel, reaching over to pop the passenger door for her. She slid into the seat and pulled the door shut again with some effort; it had to weigh a ton. Inside the car smelled like mothballs and old upholstery, but it was out of the elements, at least. Connor turned the key in the ignition and the engine made a horrible creaking noise for several seconds, but finally turned over and rumbled into life.

He played with the heat settings, weirdly analog and indecipherable as they were to Grace, and finally got hot air blasting out of the vents. She sighed in relief, huddling close to one of them, taking her gloves off so she could warm her frozen skin directly.

Connor pulled the car slowly out of the garage. She couldn’t tell if it was because he was driving carefully or if the thing was really just that hard to control. It was strange to her having a windshield without a HUD, like a memory out of her childhood; Connor used the wipers to clear away most of the dust, giving her a smeared view of the icy roads as they rolled down the empty street.

“What are you going to do once I’m-” Grace hesitated, the words catching in her throat. “-Once I’m back home?”

He kept his gaze straight ahead as he drove, his hands firm on the ten o’clock and three o’clock positions on the wheel. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess I’ll return to Jericho. I don’t have anywhere else to go.” Grace bit her lip as he continued, his voice as measured and even as ever. “If Markus realizes I’ve helped you, it will be the first time in Jericho that an android has betrayed our own kind. I don’t know what will happen then. But with any luck, I can get you out and return claiming you slipped the net.”

“Do you really believe that?” she asked, her voice quiet beneath the roar heat from the car’s air conditioning unit.

Connor turned his head to look at her. He said nothing, but he didn’t have to. He was signing his own deactivation order by helping her escape.

Why hadn’t she thought about this before? Had she just not allowed herself to? Only concerned about herself, she hadn’t stopped for a second to wonder what all of this meant for Connor. She’d wondered at his motivation but nothing else. He was doing this despite the express orders of his superior, consigning himself to a similar fate she might have faced if she stayed.

She looked away from him, suddenly unable to meet his gaze with any kind of steadiness. He looked back at the road, still driving perfectly straight within the lines, even in the moments he hadn’t been looking. Androids.

Grace leaned against the window, pressing her suddenly burning cheek to the cool glass. She felt small, petty, ashamed. Connor was the most real out of all of them. He didn’t deserve this, risking himself for a...for a human.

He was so much more than she was. More noble, more selfless, more genuine, more innocent, more worthy of life. Maybe all of the androids were. They had just never been given a chance.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, staring at her reflection in the dusty glass. “I’ve fucked this all up for both of us.”

“If it hadn’t been you,” Connor replied after a moment, slowly, choosing his words one by one, “It would have been another reporter, one who wouldn’t have lasted half the time with twice as many biases. Don’t blame yourself. As soon as I met you, I was...glad it was you.”
The tear slipped free before she could stop it. She swiped it away violently, squeezing her eyes shut against the burn of more.

This was not how things were supposed to end.

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CONNOR

They drove most of the way in silence. To Connor's surprise, they encountered only a couple of automated vehicles on the road, and none of them were rerouted to follow them.

Was Markus...letting them go?

Surely he’d picked up on their trail by now. He had to have realized, after he’d led the patrols astray, that Connor was helping Grace escape. But he hadn’t received any communications from him or anyone else from Jericho through the course of the night or the morning.

It should have worried him more than it did. But Connor had been operating on a line of certainty ever since his call to Hank. Even slightly before that. He had wanted to help her, without doubt, without reservation, because he knew it was the right thing to do, because she deserved a chance to form her own opinions without his people trying to skew them, because she deserved the truth and the chance to tell it.

Out of all the humans he had encountered, she was the most...real. Not without guile, but without pretense; imperfect, yet pure in a way he couldn’t quite define. The only person who had ever taken him at face value from the moment they had met.

Hank would no doubt have had something to say about that, but even he hadn't been able to see past Connor’s plastic veneer at first. Who could blame him, given what he’d been through? But he thought he might like Grace. He would have to contact the Captain later and see if he could watch out for her once she was outside the city.

The concept of saying goodbye to her drew protestations from every line of code in his core programming, but he tempered them with the logical conclusion that she would be safer without him, back among her people. That was enough to redirect the emotional algorithms that threatened to overwhelm him. It would have to be enough.

Connor snapped out of his reverie when he noticed a reflection in the dusty rear view mirror. He reached up to wipe away the dust, adjusting the angle, and that was when he saw it - a car turning into their street and speeding up as soon as it drew into view.

“Shit,” he said aloud. “Grace, put your seatbelt on.”

“My what?- Ahh!” She yelled out as Connor jerked the steering wheel, sending the Volvo jolting across the street into the next, the back end kicking out and sliding over the icy ground as he fought for control. With several yanks the steering evened out, and his foot pressed down hard on the accelerator, forcing the old car towards speeds it hadn’t seen in a long while.
Jesus Christ! Is someone after us?” Grabbing onto the headrest, she twisted around to look behind them. The other car was right on their tail. “Oh, fuck! Hurry, Connor!”

“I am,” he said through gritted teeth as he wrestled with the vehicle. It was an automatic, making it slower to shift through gears, so he was unable to get up much speed in a short amount of time. His only choice was to take the back streets and hope that the sudden turns made the other car lose traction...before they did.

“Hold on,” he said as he yanked the wheel again, sending them careening through a narrow back-alley between houses. Garbage cans that the former residents had failed to bring back in lined the streets; the car’s front fender clipped one and sent it flying, directly into the windshield of the car behind as it squealed into the street behind them.

“Fuck!” Grace swore once more as she was flung about the interior of the car, slamming into the window again. She spotted the seatbelt at last, grabbing it and yanking it over her body. “I always thought these things were pointless next to airbags. Guess I was wrong. Punch it!” she yelled, once she’d wrestled the clip into the buckle.

Connor gave the car another press of the accelerator, and they careened out of the alley. He didn’t pause to see how close the other car was, merely jackknifed theirs through the next intersection as quickly as it would go, the Volvo careening around a bank of cars parked by the opposite sidewalk.

From behind, there was a screech of brakes locking up, and a second later an almighty BANG .

Grace let out a whoop of glee. “They crashed! Right into that car! They’re totalled! Take that, you need for speed wannabes!”

He didn’t bother to ask what she meant, concentrating on altering their deviated route back towards the outskirts of the city. He kept the accelerator as flat to the floor as he dared, only letting up when they reached an extended straight of road and a knocking sound began somewhere under the car’s hood.

Grace was panting next to him, no doubt from the adrenaline surge; something he was occasionally thankful to have the option not to experience. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw red, and he frowned as he turned to look at her. “You’re bleeding.”

“Am I?” She touched her eyebrow, where the impact from her face hitting the window had split it open. Blood trickled down the side of her face, staining the edge of her scarf a dark scarlet. “Shit. I didn’t feel it at all.”

“Shock,” Connor assessed. “It will wear off, at which point the pain-”

“Ow! Motherfucker!”

“-will kick in,” he concluded. “Check the glovebox. There might be a first aid kit in there.”

“Your sympathy is so touching,” Grace muttered, using a corner of her scarf to stem the bleeding as she scrabbled at the dash, trying to figure out how to open the glove box. After a moment, Connor released one hand from the steering wheel to do it for her. She glared at him for a moment before searching the compartment.

Connor saw pewter gleam from the corner of his eye, and the sound of flesh against metal. He saw Grace turn the gun over in her hand slowly, holding it gingerly as if it might bite her, and then stuff it back into the glove box as quickly as she could, perhaps hoping he hadn’t seen. He said nothing.
“Here we go,” he heard her say quietly, pulling out a small plastic box. She opened it, fumbling through its contents with bloodied fingers. “Do you think there’ll be more of them?” she asked as she swabbed her own wound with an antiseptic wipe. To her credit, she only winced; she seemed to have gotten the swearing out of her system.

“Probably,” Connor replied. “They will have alerted others to our location even before they crashed. Fortunately, we’re close enough to the outskirts of the city that there won’t be many other androids out here.”

“How far?” She ripped open a butterfly bandage and turned the rear-view mirror towards her, applying it clumsily to her eyebrow. It looked as if it would hold the wound shut for the time being, although it was messy. Considering they were still moving, it was a respectable effort.

“Not far,” he told her. “Keep an eye out for other vehicles.”

“Do you think they saw you?” She looked genuinely concerned as she stared at him, her own wound forgotten. He met her gaze for a moment, but said nothing in response. There would be no way to know for sure until he confronted Markus...or vice versa.

“Keep an eye out for other vehicles.”

He turned back to the road, and so did she.

It wouldn’t be long now.

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Chapter End Notes

And you can't have an epic action/adventure romance without a car chase, right?
They reached the border of the city without any further pursuit. The knocking sound from the engine was distressingly loud by that point, and Connor could see steam emitting from underneath the Volvo’s hood, so he pulled over to the side of the road within sight of the massive barrier erected by the humans that separated their land from the androids’.

It seemed unnecessary - a huge wall constructed of massive concrete blocks topped with surveillance equipment and sniper’s nests. There were several similar stations around the major exits to the city; however most of the wall was unmanned. However, he was sure he saw the glint of metal moving atop the wall here. If his instincts were correct, the wall had most likely remained staffed ever since the day of Grace’s arrival.

He got out of the car first, shutting the door behind him. Grace followed a moment later, shivering in the sudden cold, her gaze fixed on the metal gate. She didn’t move, though, merely stood gazing towards her freedom as she chewed her bottom lip, her arms wrapped protectively around herself.

Connor rounded the car to stand in front of her, and her eyes left the gate to slowly meet his. He was surprised to see the sheen of tears there, and he wondered if they were from relief or fear.

“This...this didn’t go how I expected at all,” she whispered. Every behavioral and every emotional algorithm he possessed wanted him desperately to hold her one last time, but he stood at arm’s length to her, merely taking her in with one last scan.

Wavy hair escaping from her hat, frizzed and stuck to her temple with blood; her eyebrow split at the corner by a two-centimetre gash just barely held shut by a steri-strip; the points of her cheekbones were flushed, her lips pale in the cold, the strong line of her jaw obscured by her stained scarf. She looked so vulnerable, but the set of her mouth was strong; she seemed to collect herself by degrees, first with a deep breath, second with a fluttering of her eyelashes against the moisture threatening to break through there, and third by a squaring of her shoulders. She did not look away from him.

“I’m sorry,” he told her, and he meant it. “I think...if things had gone differently...we might have been quite close.”
“Connor,” she choked on a laugh, a soft, broken sound. “You always know the most...perfectly awkward thing to say, don’t you?”

He considered, tilting his head. “...Do I?”

She laughed again, although to him it sounded more like a sob. Before he could react, she had taken a step forward, encircling him with her arms she pressed her face into his chest. He stood with his own arms limply by his sides for a moment, maybe two, before his program screamed at him to move; he folded her into his embrace and marveled for the first time, and the last, how perfectly she fit against him, held to the space where an organic heart would have been, had he only been human.

He did not want to let her go.

“Grace,” he murmured, ducking his chin to inhale her scent one more time. He recorded every single millisecond of this, knowing that it would be the last time he held her; the injustice of that was a painful note ciphering through every line of his operative code.

The pain he felt was almost as strong as a physical blow, an emotional response that threatened to overwhelm his active processes. His face twitched and he felt an odd sensation on his skin; he took one hand from Grace’s back and raised it to touch his fingers to his cheek, and they came away tinged with moisture.

Tears. He was crying, a command he couldn’t remember allowing access to instructing ducts in his optical units to begin producing water. A byproduct of the emptiness settling in his chest; it felt as if his thirium pump was being ripped out slowly, his synthetic heart struggling against the incredible pressure of loss.

This time, he did not fight it. He let the emotional subroutines run their course without dampening them, without pushing them away. He let himself feel, the grief as much a part of him as happiness, or desire, or want - just as important, just as real.

“Grace, I -”

“Stop,” she gasped, pulling away from him abruptly. His arms fell back to his sides, empty. “I can’t. I’m - I just can’t.” She looked up at him, and he saw that she was crying too, her face flushed and her eyes red as the tears tracked down her face. She froze when he saw his, and he stood not breathing as she lifted a hand to his cheek.

“I never deserved you,” she whispered, and she stood on her toes to lift her lips to his.

Connor kissed her through a mix of tears, his flavorless and hers organically salty. The press of their mouths was a short and desperate, neither wanting it to end but both knowing that it had to. When they broke apart Grace was crying even harder, her shoulders shuddering and eyes tightly shut as if to contain her tears, which continued to slip free from under the lids regardless, darkening her lashes.

Connor brushed her hair back from her face, a now familiar motion, one he would never get to do again. Her skin was hot beneath his fingertips, a physical manifestation of emotion. “Be safe,” he told her. “And whatever you decide to do with the truth…” She opened her eyes, looked up at him with her lips trembling. He offered her one last smile. “I trust you.”

With that, an ache in his chest his self-diagnostic told him was not there, Connor let go of her and stepped back. She made no move to stop him, but nor did she take her gaze away - she watched
him as he backed off one step, then another, until finally he turned and walked away.

He knew that her face, flushed and streaked with tears, would haunt his visual buffers for the rest of his functional days.

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Chapter End Notes

TO BE CONTINUED THOUGH I PROMISE
Chapter Notes

Sooo I just hope nobody hates this. Because these two deserve a happy ending, especially Connor.

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CONNOR

North waited in the lobby. She sat on one of the pedestals once home to CyberLife’s finest examples of Android technology, her legs swinging idly over the edge, her pose casual but the tension in her synthetic musculature anything but.

Connor, the first android to betray Markus and Jericho and their people at large, was about to return. And she was going to be the first person to ask him why.

She straightened when she saw the automatic doors slide open, but didn’t move even when she spotted the RK800 model, her eyes tracking him until he was close enough to hear her.

“You have her blood on you,” she stated, not even bothering to hide her disgust. Connor looked down; a speckle of red stained his otherwise pristine white shirt. He adjusted his jacket so that it fell across the blemish, but the damage had already been done.

“Were you even going to try to pretend you didn’t betray us?” She hopped down from the pedestal, her boots hitting the floor with dual thunks. He flinched as if he’d been struck, and refused to meet her eyes. She scoffed.

From the moment she’d realized he was in love with the human, she had known this would happen. She’d told Markus - again and again - not to trust her, but in the end she should have been telling him not to trust Connor. Markus had been so sure he was loyal, so absolutely certain that Connor had nothing but their people’s best interests in mind.

Markus had been wrong.

She hadn’t attended that morning’s meeting, too busy coordinating the search efforts around the city. Markus’s orders had been clear, though: Find the human. Bring her back. Don’t use violence, except in self-defence. She knew he wouldn’t give orders to kill her straight away, but it was only a matter of time before the only viable course of action would become as clear to him as it was to her.

Only it wouldn’t, now. Connor had ruined that chance.

“Come on,” she said, gesturing angrily for the elevator. “Markus is waiting for you.”
“When were we discovered?” the RK800-model asked as he walked ahead, towards the elevator, towards judgement.

“You were spotted at the gas station early this morning,” North told him. “The retrieval team didn’t get there in time before you took off. They’re fine, by the way; damaged, but they’ll survive.”

“It was...unfortunate anyone had to be harmed,” Connor replied. He stood against the back wall of the elevator, staring straight ahead, still resolutely not looking at her. She shook her head and hit the control panel, skin peeling back as she accessed the appropriate floor.

“Why did you do it, Connor? Why betray your own people? You know she’s just going to tell them everything, and then they’ll come for us. Hell, they might not even do that - they’ll probably just bomb this whole place and forget we ever existed.”

“She deserved better,” Connor replied, and he turned his head so sharply, meeting her gaze so quickly that North stopped mid-scowl. “We did nothing but lie to her from the beginning. If we had told her-

“If we had told her what? That we were going against the international threat of destruction to build more of us? That we want to robots that can grow, learn, and age? That we’re so close to becoming human that it might not even matter if they decide to keep us locked up here forever, because when we leave they won’t be able to tell the difference? You think she would have let us keep going and kept her mouth shut?”

“Maybe,” he said simply, standing his ground. “She’s different, North. I think, given the chance, she might have understood us and what we were trying to achieve.”

“Bullshit.” She rolled her eyes and turned away from him. “You’re so deluded by your little romantic fantasy, believing one of them could ever love one of us, that you’ve blinded yourself. You saved us all once, Connor. Now you’ve doomed us.”

He had no response for that, and they rode the rest of the way in silence to the very top of the tower. Here, a balcony enclosed entirely with glass offered a full, three-sixty view of the CyberLife complex, the lake, and the city skyline beyond, glimmering with lights. It was a beautiful view, but Markus didn’t come up here often. He preferred the old, broken down building near the remains of Jericho. North wasn’t sure why.

Now, their leader stood looking out over the Android City, his reflection studded by the lights beyond. He held his hands loosely behind his back, and he turned as he heard the elevator open, watching as North approached with Connor at her side.

Surprisingly, the newer model spoke first. “Markus, I-

Markus held up a hand and Connor fell silent, frowning. North crossed her arms as she waited for Markus to unleash his fury, his damnation.

“I hope you told her how you feel. It’s never an easy thing, saying goodbye.”

That was not what North had expected him to say. Connor either, from the looks of it; he stood with his mouth slightly open for a moment before blinking as if to clear his audio/visual buffers.

“No...no, it wasn’t easy,” Connor replied slowly. “I...tried to tell her. As best I could, before I said goodbye.”
“Good,” Markus said, nodding. “I...I let someone I loved die once, without telling him how I felt. It eats at me. I sometimes wonder…” He shook his head. “I miss Carl every day. It’s his voice I hear sometimes, telling me to be patient, to be temperate, to stay my hand. Humans are fragile machines, but they...they take longer to change than us.”

North stared at him. What was this? Where was it coming from? Why wasn’t he shutting Connor down right now? “Markus-”

“North.” He stopped her with one look. “Can’t you see it? He loves her. I can’t stand in the way of that. None of us can. None of us should. Don’t you see what it means?” He reached out and took her unresisting hand; she was too stunned to fight him off. “It means we have hope. Hope that we might be able to live in peace with them one day. One day soon.”

“But...he betrayed us…” But his skin was fading away, and hers was too, and their true, real, bone-white skin shone blue where they touched, and suddenly she realized.

She realized why it didn’t matter that Connor had helped Grace escape.

She realized why Markus wasn’t angry.

She realized what he had been working towards - what he really wanted for their people.

“You want them to come back,” she whispered, her brown eyes fixed on his heterochromatic ones. “You want…”

“Peace,” he said quietly. “I never hid it from anyone, least of all you. But the time has come. We need to extend the olive branch to them, North, and Grace is the one human who can help us do that.”

“But...she’s gone,” Connor interjected. His voice was hollow. “I took her back. She’s gone home.”

“No,” Markus said, smiling, still looking at North. “She hasn’t.”

As one, the three androids turned as the elevator sounded its arrival, and watched as three more figures emerged from it: two androids, flanking…

One human.

Grace.

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GRACE

She watched as Connor walked away, wrapping her arms around herself as she resisted the urge to fall to the ground and sob like a little girl. Instead Grace forced herself to turn and start walking towards the gate. She could already hear shouting beyond the wall, the hurry of boots, the snap of orders - the soldiers manning the wall had already spotted her approach.
This wasn’t fair. It shouldn’t have happened this way - any of it. She had been so in over her head, so determined to prove to everyone else she could do this that she hadn’t stopped to wonder if she should. And then when she’d gotten too deep, she’d struck out, run away.


Human.

She had judged the androids by her standards, their actions coloured by the lens of her limited, mortal perspective. If they were human, they would have killed her or thrown her in a much worse prison as soon as she’d discovered the truth about the Cradles. Her fear was born of the knowledge of human history, human experience. And though they were based off them, the androids were something else entirely.

If Connor was anything to go by, they were something better.

And nobody - not even her - had ever given them a chance to prove it.

How could she leave now, when the majority of their story was still untold? Would they ever let another human in the city after this, if she only proved herself as best as the worst of them? It was up to her now to decide who she was: A journalist who cared only about the next story, about following the rules, about not challenging perceptions or expectations...Or someone who might, by the slimmest chance, be able to make a difference.

Connor had taken that chance on her. Now it was her turn to take one for him.

She stopped meters from the gate leading to freedom, to the world she knew. It began to slide open with the almighty screech of metal on metal, sliding back, but all she could see beyond was...darkness. Uncertainty. Questions she would never know the answers to if she left now.

“Miss Roth!” An armed guard stood in the newly opened gap, gesturing to her to enter, to take his armored hand.

Twelve hours ago she would’ve been relieved to see another human, but now all she could feel was a sick dread in the pit of her stomach, and suddenly she knew.

She knew what she had to do.
Chapter Notes

I think these two (as well as all of you, me included!) have earned some fluff after the last few chapters!

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CONNOR

Connor hadn’t moved since Grace had first stepped foot out of the elevator. He was concerned that if he said anything or made any motions whatsoever, the tenuous control he’d established over his emotional processes might slip and he would…

...he wasn’t sure what he would do. What he should do.

_She didn’t leave_. The thought echoed through his mind, over and over, as she spoke with Markus. _She’s here. She’s safe. She didn’t leave._

The implications of that hadn’t failed to resonate in his system. But for the second time since he had first met him, on the bridge of the old Jericho, Markus surprised him entirely. The first time he had helped Connor realize he had a choice; the second, he welcomed a human into their midst.

He stared at their clasped hands, almost unable to process what he was seeing. He wondered if North felt the same, but she had the advantage of her connection with Markus, a true insight into his thoughts. Connor would’ve appreciated that before…all of this. Maybe he could have stopped Grace from running.

If she hadn’t, though, he never would have had the chance to tell her how he felt.

Even though there was still more left unsaid.

Markus and Grace parted, and he turned to Connor, a knowing expression on his face. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” he began, “I think you two have some catching up to do. North, Peter, Jack, let’s go.”

The four androids crossed to the elevator, and Markus passed Connor on the way. He laid a hand on his shoulder, and Connor heard his voice in his mind.

_‘Take care of her. She needs you…and you need her.’_

He met his dual-coloured gaze and offered an imperceptible nod. He watched them go, still rooted to the spot, his eyes still on Markus before the elevator sank out of sight.
Connor turned slowly to find Grace looking away from him, down at her feet. She seemed tentative, almost sheepish, as if she wasn’t sure what she would find if she looked at him.

Suddenly, whatever uncertainty his program held vanished, and he stepped towards her. She looked up, her eyes still red-rimmed, but there were no tears now.

“Hey,” she said, and he detected effort in the affected casualness of her tone. “You okay?”

He stopped a meter or so from her, looking at her from beneath his brows. “I should be asking you that,” he pointed out, gesturing to her face. The blood had dried on her cheek from the cut on her eyebrow, but at least the steri-strip was achieving its function in holding the wound closed.

“I’m fine,” she said, shrugging off his concern. “I mean...it hurts, and I’m tired, and I haven’t eaten anything in like twenty-four hours, but I’m not dead or in an android gulag so all in all, things are looking up.” She tried for a smile, but it seemed false on her face, like she was hiding behind a façade of nonchalance. The past day had been hard on her.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Connor said. “And...although I don’t think I fully understand why yet...I’m glad you came back.”

This time, her smile seemed slightly more genuine. “Me too. I thought I was nuts at first, especially when those two guys grabbed me. But I made it here in one piece.” She drew a breath. “I’m...I’m sorry you went through all that trouble getting me to the edge of the city for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing,” he said gently. She shook her head; he peered down at her. He had to ask her, had to know - his program offered no solid hypothesis as to her motivations. “Why...why did you decide to come back?” he asked, frowning, tilting his head curiously.

“Besides you, you mean?” He blinked, surprised and oddly...gratified, but she didn’t give him time to respond. “I just...I couldn’t let things end that way. Sometimes people need a second chance. Androids and humans both.” She shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself, and for the first time he noticed the slump to her shoulders, the dark circles under her eyes, the faint tremble in her limbs.

He took a step forward and reached out before consciously commanding the movement, touching her shoulder. “You must be tired,” he said. “You don’t have to explain anything right now. You need medical attention, rest, and food. We should return to the hotel.”

“No,” Grace said, shaking her head. “I don’t want to go back there. I just, I never felt safe there...and right now I...I don’t know.” She let out a huffing chuckle. “As scary as it was, you know, I think I felt the safest when I was on the run with you.” She looked embarrassed at the admission, ducking her head to let her hair fall over her face. He wanted to reach out to brush it away, but he was afraid if he touched her he would never be able to stop.

Instead Connor considered for a moment, his LED blinking as he thought. Then he caught Grace’s eyes, and inclined his head towards the elevator. “I think I know somewhere we can go. Come on.”

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**DATE**

**OCTOBER 19, 2039**
GRACE

Grace could feel her anxiety levels slowly lowering, bit by bit, as she sat in the car next to Connor. A proper car, not like the old wreck that he’d commandeered to get her across the last part of the city. This one had a touchscreen instead of those dials she had recognized only vaguely from her childhood.

She leaned her arm against the windowsill and propped her head on her hand. Now that she was no longer running on pure adrenaline, the exhaustion was seeping in, the lack of sleep and food catching up with her. Suddenly, before she even realized it, she was asleep.

It was Connor’s hand on her shoulder that woke her, shaking her gently. Her head snapped up and she blinked in bleary confusion, looking over at him. The car had stopped, the only sound the faint whir of the heater. She was still so tired, she didn’t want to move.

“We’ve arrived,” Connor told her softly. She groaned and pushed tangled hair out of her face. “Can’t I just stay in here? It’s warm.”

“The house has central heating,” he informed her, and finally she looked out the window. They had pulled up outside a one-storey home, the yard long overgrown but a light on beside the front door. It looked...maintained, aside from the grass. The windows were intact from what she could see, and the path up to the door looked well traveled.

“Where are we?” she asked croakily as the doors opened for them. She stepped out, stretching her arms above her head, her vertebrae popping loudly. Connor circled around from the other side of the car and stood next to her, regarding the house with his arms folded.

“Hank Anderson’s home,” he said. “When the city was evacuated, Hank asked me to take care of the place.” He shrugged. “He took Sumo with him, though.”

“Sumo?” Grace asked, sticking her cold hands in her pockets as they made their way up the sidewalk.

“His dog,” Connor replied. “I like dogs.”

“Why? They smell.” Grace said, shaking her head. “Loyal, though, I guess...Nevermind. Do you have a key?”

Connor nodded, placing a white hand on the doorknob; an indicator light set into the metal above it turned green, and the door opened, admitting them into a homey living room. A worn looking couch dominated the space across from a dark fireplace, and Grace could see an ancient vinyl player on a side table, along with a couple of pot plants that looked alive or, more than likely, plastic.

The space opened into a small kitchen, which was impeccably clean, not an appliance out of place. It seemed at odds with the haphazard placement of books, cushions and decorations in the main room.
“I might have cleaned up a little,” Connor admitted as he crossed to the fireplace. It had been adapted into an electric fire, which he switched on; fake flames sprung to life and heat began to radiate out through the room.

“It’s a nice place,” Grace said, following him eagerly and sinking to her knees onto the rug front of the fire, holding her bare hands up to warm them. She’d lost her gloves somewhere along with her beanie, probably in the car from Connor’s less-than-careful driving during the last part of their mad dash through the city. She couldn’t bring herself to be mad with him, though.

“I’ll get a first aid kit for your eyebrow,” he said, heading off past the kitchen and down the hall. Grace curled up, wrapping her arms around her knees once her hands were suitably un-frozen, and let herself simply...be, without a single thought drifting through her head; a pleasant, fuzzy blankness buzzing in her exhausted mind. It was nice to just...relax, if only for a moment.

Connor returned a minute later with a plastic case under his arm. He sat down next to her and waited. She turned towards him with a sigh. “Do you have to?”

“If you’d prefer a scar, no,” he replied. She rolled her eyes but otherwise didn’t protest as he opened the kit and began to clean the blood off her face. When he got to replacing the butterfly bandage on her eyebrow, she winced as he started to pull the old one off. “Just be quick about it,” she told him, “don’t give me a chance to - ow!” He’d yanked it off while she was talking; she glared at him but he gave her an innocent look from beneath his eyebrows that made her want to laugh, despite the pain.

He cleaned the wound first, which hurt more than removing the bandage had, then applied a fresh one. His fingers were cool and precise, soothing almost, and he paid close attention to her expression and reactions as he dressed the cut, careful with every movement not to hurt her unnecessarily.

“You’d make a good nurse,” she told him when he was done. “This is the second time you’ve patched me up.”

“Hopefully the last,” he replied as he packed away the kit. “I haven’t done a very good job of protecting you.” He reached up again and this time touched her cheek, where the skin still felt rough from the healing graze. She found herself chasing after his touch, leaning in to prolong the contact before he dropped his hand.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You’ve done great. I guess I’m just good at getting into trouble.”

“I won’t disagree with you there,” he said, and she felt a familiar twist in her stomach at the quirk of his lips.

She wanted so badly to kiss him, but she held herself back. She was exhausted, her emotions a mess, and she was bound to make wrong decisions in this state of mind. But Connor’s eyes kept flicking between hers and her lips and she knew that he wasn’t having the same problem. A moment later, he confirmed it by leaning in and pressing his mouth to hers.

Grace kissed him back, relieved, happy to leave the agonizing over every decision behind, at least for a minute or two. She wrapped her arms around his neck and his hands splayed on her back, drawing her closer as their lips melded together, warm against cool. hers parted for his tongue and Connor eagerly deepened the kiss; she’d missed the taste of him, a clean, sapless flavor she couldn’t quite define. He felt good, a solid weight, a surety that held her up as she fell into him.
Connor was the best questionable decision she had ever made.

The kiss broke eventually, but Grace didn’t move away. She rested her head on Connor’s shoulder and sighed, closing her eyes. He stroked her hair, an instinctively human gesture of comfort. It worked.

Her stomach chose that moment to grumble, loudly, and Grace pulled back with a cringe. “Sorry. That was gross.”

“You’re hungry,” he observed. “There are no perishables left, but there might be something in the pantry. Wait here.”

“No, hang on...” But Connor let her go and stood up before she could grab him again. Sighing, Grace settled back onto the rug, pulling her knees back to her chest and resting her chin on them as she stared into the electric fire, trying not to let the steady flicker of the flame lull her to sleep.

She heard him moving around in the kitchen, opening cupboards, rattling drawers and cutlery, and then the buzz of a microwave. Yawning, she shut her eyes, just for a second, and the next thing she knew Connor was crouching next to her and holding a bowl of something steaming that smelt amazing underneath her nose.

“Here. Minestrone soup. High in sodium but lower in fat and sugar than the other varieties I found.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking the bowl.Honestly, she was so hungry she would’ve been happy with Sumo’s dog food if Hank had left any behind. She spooned some of the piping hot soup into her mouth, so quickly she burnt the skin just behind her teeth, but she didn’t care; she was suddenly even more starving than before.

“Lieutenant Anderson won’t mind you brought me here?” she asked through the next mouthful, glancing over at Connor as stood and moved to sit on the arm of the couch. He shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “He has been very supportive of my relationship with you so far.” He winced almost as soon as he said it and looked away as if he hadn’t meant to let it slip. Grace raised her eyebrows, lowering the bowl for a moment.

“You told him about us? When?”

“I...uh, before our first date I...” he began haltingly, the colour rising in his skin; he was embarrassed. It was cute. “I wasn’t sure what to do so I called him for...for advice.”

“Well, whatever he told you worked,” she shrugged, going back to her soup, trying to keep the slurping to a minimum, although she didn’t think Connor would care. Once it cooled sufficiently she ditched the spoon entirely and drank from the edge of the bowl.

He blinked at her for a moment, making her self-conscious, so she turned away to finish the soup. It didn’t take long. When she was done, she set the empty bowl and spoon aside on the coffee table, sighing contentedly.

“You should rest,” Connor told her. She glanced over her shoulder at him. “There are three bedrooms. I would advise using Hank’s as it is larger, or the guest bedroom. It’s the second on the left.”

Her inquisitive nature prompted her to probe a little. “And the third one?”
“Hank’s son’s room,” he replied. “I’d probably...leave that one alone.”

“Right,” she said. She remembered reading something about Lieutenant Anderson’s son having passed away some time ago. Questions for another time. “I guess I’ll take the guest bedroom. I think I’d feel weird sleeping in someone else’s bed.” She rose to her feet slowly, reaching back to press her knuckles against her spine. “Thanks for bringing me here, Connor. It’s much better than the hotel. And thank Lieutenant Anderson for me, next time you have to call him for advice,” she teased.

He just nodded seriously, and she shook her head as the joke went over his. She circled the coffee table to lean down and kiss his cheek. “Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight,” he said, blinking rapidly at her, the circle of light blinking blue at his temple. She touched it fondly with two fingers before heading off to find the bedroom.

It was sparse, with just a double bed and an ironing board in one corner. Grace didn’t care. She stripped off her jacket, scarf, overshirt, jeans and shoes and fell face-first onto the mattress.

She tugged a pillow towards her, yawning. There weren't as many as in the hotel but she was honestly relieved. She was safe for the first time in nearly two weeks; she had a direction, a purpose, a mission. And Connor was okay, too. She didn't have to try so hard to be the brave, principled person she wanted so badly to be - for now, at least, she could be weak and beaten and human. She needed that, if only for a night.

It was all too much, the past couple of days’ events catching up to her all at once. Grace barely mustered the strength to turn and pull the blanket over her before she was fast asleep in a deep, dreamless slumber.
CONNOR

Connor waited approximately half an hour, until he was sure Grace was asleep. She had left the guest bedroom door slightly ajar, and he paused to peer through the gap for a millisecond, just long enough to register the outline of her body underneath the blanket, the slow rise and fall of her shoulder as she slept. Satisfied, he nodded to himself before leaving the house - locking it securely behind him.

He was...immeasurably glad to have her back, to have her safe. The empty feeling inside of him was gone, replaced by a sense of relief so profound it was almost a physical sensation. Connor could not predict what the future would hold for either of them, but he felt...hopeful. It was an unfamiliar emotion. He found that he...liked it.

It took just under an hour to reach the hotel to retrieve her belongings. He made his way up to her room, flicking his quarter between his hands as he rode up the elevator. There were dried bits of hair mousse here and there on the floor, and he allowed his lips to twitch in slight amusement. It had been a creative solution. It might have even worked.

Reaching her room, he entered quietly, feeling as if he was in some way violating her privacy even though she had made clear her lack of desire to return. He gathered up scattered articles of clothing and searched for her suitcase, locating it in the bedroom. He stood in the doorway for a moment, intimate memories playing across his visual buffers before he shut them down with a shake of his head and set about retrieving her suitcase.

It didn’t take long. He hurried, finding himself...less than eager to leave Grace alone for long. She had been through several traumatic events in the past week and a half, and while she appeared to be coping, Connor had firsthand experience in observing how humans suppressed their psychological problems.

He returned to Hank’s place just under an hour and a half since he’d left. He had not foreseen a use for the house such as this; he had been taking care of it out of a sense of duty to his friend. Hank would no doubt be glad to hear the abode was still in good repair, even if he was unlikely to see it again. Although...what was it North had said while connected to Markus? You want them to come back.
Perhaps there was still hope for humans and androids to live alongside each other once more. It seemed that he and Grace were to be the first.

Maybe that had been Markus’s plan all along.

Connor shut the front door quietly behind him, setting the suitcase down in the main room. He checked on Grace once more through the gap in the door; she hadn’t moved, the faint sound of her breathing deep and heavy. Gratified, Connor returned to the living room and sat down slowly on the couch; he stared into the flickering digital flames of the fireplace and let his LED spin, his system processing the events of the past twenty-four hours. He took out his quarter, sliding it across the back of his knuckles in a familiar motion even as he shut his eyes and let his systems enter an idle mode.

Four hours and forty-three minutes later, his program alerted him to a sound; his eyes flew open and the coin stilled in between his middle and ring fingers. He palmed it quickly and turned his head, frowning as he sought to pinpoint the source.

It was Grace, creeping slowly down the hallway and into the living room. She froze when she saw him, then relaxed with a tentative smile.

“Sorry. I thought you were asleep. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I don’t sleep,” Connor informed her helpfully. “Are you all right? It is 12:02AM. You should go back to bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she told him, approaching slowly. As the light from the fireplace fell across her he saw that she was only wearing a tank top, her underwear and socks. He sat up a little straighter on the couch but otherwise did not move. “I’m still so exhausted but I woke up and I just...couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“Were you having a nightmare?” he asked, watching as she rounded the couch and stood sheepishly in front of him, rubbing the back of her neck. She shook her head.

“No, I just...I woke up, and I didn’t know where I was at first, and I got scared, okay? Jeez.” She huffed a frustrated sound through her lips and his eyebrows lifted slightly. He observed the shift of her weight from foot to foot, the way she kept her arms close to her body, her diligent chewing of a thumbnail as she avoided his eyes.

He wanted to comfort her, but he wasn’t sure where to start. He had to try, though. Perhaps physical contact? It was worth exploring. He found himself eager to touch her, regardless...

“It’s okay,” he said, sitting forward slightly. “Come here.”

She took a hesitant step towards the couch and made as if to sit next to him, but he reached out on an impulsive instruction from his program and placed his hands on her hips. She stilled, and he felt her pulse jump beneath her skin as he drew her slowly towards him.

She stood between his legs and placed her hands gingerly on his shoulders; he slowly slid his arms around her waist, pulling her close and resting his head against her chest. He heard her draw a deep breath and felt her fingers slide into his hair; she relaxed by degrees in his arms as he held her, listening to the quickening thud of her heartbeat.

“It’s all right to feel afraid,” he told her softly. This close he could easily inhale her scent, perspiration and the faint hint of fabric softener from the bedsheets, and beneath that the unique
combination of pheromones that was like a human version of a serial number. It was seared into his circuits, and triggered so many associated memories - his face in her hair as they stood in the cold at the edge of the city; the skin of her neck beneath his mouth as he moved above her; every kiss they had shared up until now. It was enough to prompt an arousal response before he could control it, and he tried to shut it down, but he kept remembering …

Grace must have detected the tension in him, for she pulled back slightly to look down at him, the hand in his hair sliding down to rest at the back of his neck. “I’m not afraid now,” she told him, and Connor saw that her pupils were slightly dilated and her cheeks coloring pink, and not from the after-effects of sleep. Perhaps she was experiencing similar effects to his proximity that he was from hers.

His theory seemed to be confirmed a moment later when she placed her hands on his shoulders and applied gentle pressure to get him to lean back into the couch. He acquiesced, and she climbed into his lap, settling back against his knees with hers on either side of his thighs.

“You need a new shirt,” she said, her voice low, something in her tone reverberating through his systems and lifting the artificial hairs on the back on the back of his neck. She touched the flecks of blood on his chest and he watched her fingers as they moved from there to loosen his tie, slipping it free of the metal clip. He made no move to stop her, instead running his hands up and down her back gently; a slow, soothing motion. He let her take the lead here, even as various algorithms pinged his systems with constant commands to move, to grab, to kiss.

She saved him the dilemma, swooping down to capture his mouth with hers, the kiss slow and searching. She seemed to find what she was looking for as he kissed her back, his lips and tongue pliant beneath hers, and he felt her slide forward in his lap, her hips pressing down into his.

It was impossible not to respond to that; his body decided to independent of his processors, and his hands found her waist - he held her still, lifted up against her, seeking firmer contact. She murmured a groan against his mouth as she felt his burgeoning erection straining against the fabric of his jeans.

Grace broke from the kiss suddenly, her breath sharp. “Connor,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “I need you.” He didn’t require elaboration - the press of her hips was enough.

He moved then, using his grip on her waist to leverage her up and over onto her back on the couch. She gasped and he stopped, waiting for her reaction; she stared up at him through half-lidded eyes.

“What are you waiting for?”

*That*, apparently. He found her mouth again briefly, but soon trailed his lips away down her neck and across her collarbone, pausing at the hem of her tank top. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath, and he could see the hardened peaks of her nipples through the thin fabric; he palmed one of her breasts, gentle at first then firmer as he felt her squirm beneath him.

Fascinating, human erogenous zones - especially hers. So far he had discovered her mouth, her neck, her breasts, but he wondered where else he could find to make her shudder and flex beneath him.

Connor tugged the strap of her top down, simultaneously pushing the bottom hem up her stomach, and her skin quivered beneath his fingers as he trailed them across the flat plane of her abdomen. Deciding the shirt was unnecessary for their activities, he pushed it all the way up, freeing her breasts to the warm air. Grace shivered regardless, making a soft, worldless sound in the back of her throat as he lowered his head to take one of her nipples in his mouth; an activity she had
enjoyed previously and seemed to just as much now.

Her fingers carded through his hair as he laved the stiff peak with the tip of his tongue, first trailing it around the outside of her areola then flicking against the hardened nub itself, and she twitched, her fingers tightening in his hair in response. Pleased by her reaction, he pulled away to repeat the motion on the other breast. Before long she was making more sounds, her hips moving in little circles and one of her legs tight around his waist as she arched up against him.

Keen to explore more of her with his mouth, he eventually left her breasts - as much as he enjoyed them - and placed a kiss in the center of her sternum, then another twenty centimeters lower, and one more twenty centimeters below that. He heard her stop breathing as he dipped his tongue into her navel, her muscles tensing as he kissed her hipbones next, open-mouthed. He paused to look up and meet her eyes then, and what he saw gave him pause; her face was flushed, lips parted on her panting breath, pupils blown wide, her throat working as she swallowed, tense and expectant. He grinned then, turning back to his ministrations. The fabric of her underwear posed some impedance to his progress, so he simply hooked his thumbs into the waistband and pulled them down towards her knees. Grace offered only her cooperation, helping kick them off in an unseen direction and now, with her skin freed, Connor slid a hand underneath her knee, lifting it to spread her open beneath him.

She was holding her breath now, and he could detect her pulse thrumming fast beneath her skin as he surveyed the new flesh bared to him. She was pink and glistening with arousal already, her soft folds swollen, and he knew at once what he wanted - needed - to do. He ducked his head, dropping a light kiss on the mound of her pubic bone; if she was tense before she was wound even tighter now, but he didn’t let her suffer any longer as he moved to next press his lips flush against her sex. She cried out, her leg twitching in his grasp. Connor placed it over his shoulder as he repositioned for a better angle, parting his lips to touch his tongue to her folds, tasting her. If her scent had been alluring before, it was intoxicating here, the very essence of her a heady, sweet flavor that quickly cranked his arousal levels to maximum. He ignored that for now, concentrating on making her squirm and mewl beneath him, which she did with vigor as he trailed his tongue up, then down, probing lightly at her entrance for a moment before favouring her with long, slow strokes with the flat of his tongue’s surface.

“Con-nor…” she moaned his name aloud, and something about the raw, primal need in her voice made him ache to take this further. But he kept up his attention, switching from the firm pressure to a light tap as the tip of his tongue sought the swollen hood of her clitoris.

At that, her hips bucked into his face, and he held her down with a hand at her hip, keeping her still as he repeated the motion, drawing slow half-circles over her clit and bringing his other hand around to touch her with his fingertips. He was operating on instinct and curiosity here, without actively accessing his sexual databanks, drawing only on his previous experiences with her and her reactions.

It seemed to be working. She was grabbing at his hair with both hands now, rolling her hips, alternately panting and whimpering. She was so wet, and the knowledge that it was because of him filled his program with an immense satisfaction. But there was more to do. She was approaching orgasm, he could feel it in the tremble of her limbs, the quickened beat of her heart, the sheen of sweat forming on her skin. She wasn’t quite there yet, though, so he redoubled his efforts on her clitoris, drawing the bundle of nerves in between his lips and sucking lightly as he smoothly slid two fingers inside of her.

“Fuu- uhh-” she choked out, bucking against him again, and he felt her walls already fluttering
around his fingers as he pumped them slowly in and out of her, firm but not too fast. From this angle he could explore with his fingertips the ridged tightness of her anterior wall, and this seemed to garner an even stronger reaction; he kept it up even as he felt her seize beneath him, stilling for a second before she let out a long, low cry, spasms overtaking her entire body - inside and out - as she came undone for his mouth and fingers.

Connor tongued her through the height of her orgasm, only stopping when she let go of his hair and pushed desperately at his shoulders. He lifted his head slowly, his mouth slick with her fluids, and looked down at her to take her in as she came down.

If she had been affected before, she was overwhelmed now; her eyelids were shut tight and her jaw slack, breasts rising and falling with the rapidity of her breath. It slowed gradually as he watched, and he slowly withdrew his fingers from the grip of her sex, savoring the last little sound she made as he did.

“Are you all right?” he asked gently as her leg slid away from him to hang limply off the edge of the couch. She opened her eyes then, staring up at him with a blank, stunned expression.

“Yeah,” she croaked, her voice hoarse. “Feeling...pretty good right now, actually.” She coughed a chuckle, stretching out, frowning as she encountered her tank top tangled beneath her armpits. She pulled it off and tossed it over Connor’s shoulder.

His fingers were still slick with the source of her, but before he could place them in his mouth Grace reached up to draw him down for a kiss. Her tongue swept her own moisture from his mouth, and he muttered a sound of surprise into hers.

She released him after only a moment, lips red and shining. “You are amazing,” she told him. “Seriously.”

“You’re welcome,” he smirked, and she laughed. The state of his arousal evidently hadn’t escaped her though, as even in the midst of the post-coital endorphins, she was rubbing her thigh up and down between his legs. He chased the friction with the press of his own hips, unable to resist. Well - he could have, with some manual adjustment to his algorithms, but he really didn’t want to just then.

“I’ll return the favor sometime,” she murmured. “Right now, though...” Her hands went for his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders and down his arms. “You have far too many clothes on.”

He cooperated eagerly, shrugging the garment off, and it was quickly followed by his shirt as together they made quick work of the buttons. He was about to start on his shoes but Grace instead went for his belt, her eagerness apparent despite the recent orgasm.

He didn’t stop her, letting her undo it and pop the straining button and zip of his jeans. She didn’t even bother trying to get them off before she was reaching into his underwear and curling her fingers around the base of his cock; he groaned as he pressed his face into her neck, bracing a hand on the back of the couch as the contact sent a shock through to the core of his systems.

Grace freed him from the confines of his underwear, stroking up and down his length, but this wasn’t the slow exploration he’d experienced before. This was different, eager, needy; she wrapped her leg around his waist and pressed her calf over the small of his back, drawing him in. Her hand positioned the tip of his length at her entrance; he forgot to simulate breathing for a moment as the sensation of her - warm and wet and willing - momentarily threatened to overwhelm his sensory processing unit.
“I thought I had too many clothes o-” Connor began, needing a chance to bring his reactions under control, but Grace didn’t give him that chance. She lifted her hips and he broke off on a low groan as the head of his cock pierced her. She was so incredibly warm, impossibly tight, and a background process marveled at how different it felt compared to his fingers. This made every single active mechanism in him focus on how good it felt, regardless of every other sensation.

Automatically, he pressed in further, feeling her stretch to accommodate his length, his audio unit distantly processing the sound of her whimpering in his ear. He forced himself to go slow, remembering her reactions from last time - he wasn’t sure if his penis was above average or if she was...smaller, but the last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

She didn’t seem to share the same concern, though - as he paused, he felt her wrap her other leg around him, tightening both in an apparent effort to get him to push into her faster. He was helpless but to oblige, grunting against her pulse as, with one swift thrust, he buried himself inside her to the hilt.

“Oh, God, Connor,” she moaned against his temple, holding her body flush to his. “Please.” He knew what she was asking without needing elaboration - he drew back slowly before thrusting in again, the clutch of her inner muscles sending a jolt right up his spine. The squeeze of her felt incredible, a pressure that encompassed his entire being with its intensity.

She quavered around him, moaning softly, and he lifted his head to see her face. Her eyes were closed again, her lips red and trembling, her brows drawn tight with concentration. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He slowed with the next thrust, an excruciatingly drawn out push through the grip of her insides, and she opened her eyes at last, hazel meeting brown as he moved within her.

“Connor,” she whispered, “I-” But she trailed off on a gasp as their hips met again, just as overwhelmed by the feeling as he was.

“I know,” he replied softly, brushing his lips over her forehead, the corner of her mouth. “I know.”

She pressed her forehead into his shoulder and urged him on with the arch of her back. He palmed the outside of her thigh, curled his hand around her rear for increased leverage as he moved, his jeans sliding down his legs and tangling around his knees. He ignored them, the achingly slow slide of his cock inside her gradually gaining speed as he used his leverage against the couch to increase the pace. Soon, he felt the pressure behind his groin building, and he knew he was growing close to release, but he held out for the telltale tremble in Grace’s limbs, the flutter of her inner walls.

He found himself pressing into her with increased urgency, chasing the feeling harder and harder, each thrust driving her down into the couch. She held onto his shoulders, the back of his head, hers flung back and mouth open on a series of unintelligible moans, mixed with the sound of his name. He gritted his teeth, moving faster, bottoming out with each plunge of his length into her.

She came undone with a particularly vicious rut of his hips. He cried out in relief as he felt her clenching around him, the ripple of her insides the final trigger for his own release. He buried himself in her once more, his cock throbbing as came, each pulse releasing a surge of his own artificial fluids inside her impossibly tight, impossibly saturated heat.

He realized he was shuddering, random pulses of feedback threading through every limb as he lay above her, still fully sheathed inside her. She was stroking his back now, murmuring random platitudes into the skin of his shoulder, soothing him. He realized he was panting, some automatic process in his program activating his artificial respiration to try and cool his overheating systems.
At least he hadn’t gotten an error message this time.

“My turn to ask if you’re okay,” he heard Grace murmur after a minute or so of stillness, filled only with his panting, her deep breathing. He lifted his head to meet her eyes, and he knew what he saw in her gaze was only reflected in his, for she smiled and touched his chin with reverent fingertips at the same time as he palmed her cheek.

“I’m...good,” he said. “Very good.”

“Yes, you are,” she grinned, shifting a little as she felt him begin to soften inside her. He was still reluctant to move, his body comfortable in the grip of hers, but he recognized the need to do so, so after a moment he withdrew, but didn’t move away; merely lay down with his head pillowed on her breasts. She stroked his hair, his forehead, and sighed deeply.

They were both silent for a minute or two, just recovering. It was Grace who spoke first.

“Hey, so...you probably shouldn’t tell Hank what we just did on his couch.”

“I hadn’t intended to,” he said, allowing a chuckle. “Although...maybe I should. I think he’d be jealous.”

She smacked his shoulder lightly, her laugh a lazy snort. He pressed a grin into her skin before lifting his head again.

Her smile faded as she looked up at him, suddenly hesitant. “Would you...sleep next to me tonight?” she asked, her voice small, tentative. “I know you don’t actually need to rest but...I think I would sleep better with you there.”

“Of course,” Connor said without even needing to consider the request. He pulled himself off of Grace, toeing off his shoes and kicking away his jeans before he stood, and before she could move he reached down and scooped her into his arms. She made an interestingly squeaky sound of surprise, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Wasn’t expecting that,” she admitted, “But not complaining. I don’t think I can walk right now.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said as he carried her back to the guest bedroom. He placed her gently on the mattress and drew the blankets over her before sliding in next to her. Rather than using a pillow, she lay her head on his shoulder and settled against his body; he heard her sigh contentedly as he circled her with his arms.

“Connor,” she murmured sleepily. “I don’t expect you to feel the same, but I should probably let you know...I’m pretty sure I’ve been falling in love with you this whole time.”

His arm tightened around her. “I should probably let you know,” he said, “I have, too.”

At least, that was what he thought the feeling of repletion was within him; the fulfilment of an emptiness he hadn’t known was there before he met her, the swell of warmth in his chest when she smiled, the catch behind his throat when he saw her hurt, the echo of joy in his circuits when she laughed. He didn’t know what love was like for humans, but for him...It was this. This moment, and so many others.

Connor felt her lips twitch as she smiled against his shoulder, but Grace said nothing more. Her breathing evened out and her muscles relaxed gradually, until he was sure she was asleep. He didn’t move - instead he closed his eyes and let his program idle on a visual loop of her smile.
Uh yeah so these two are incorrigible and they’re probably just going to spend the next couple of days defiling various places in Hank’s house.

More smut next chapter if people want, otherwise I may do a bit of a timeskip! Thoughts?

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DATE
OCTOBER 20, 2039
TIME
AM 10:41:43, 44, 45...

GRACE

Grace had never been a big morning person. She’d take a sleep in over an early start any day, which had occasionally made her professional life difficult, to say nothing of the personal. So when she first stirred that morning she didn’t immediately move, just let herself drift in and out of sleep, shifting every now and then against the warmed body next to her.

She had slept much better with Connor next to her, and not just because he’d fucked her into oblivion. She was fairly certain she wasn’t going to be able to walk properly for the next couple of days, but she was completely okay with that. She hadn’t realized how much she needed the release, needed his touch, and she slept like a log as a result.

When she finally did decide to rejoin the realm of the conscious, she still didn’t want to move. Connor was so comfortable, the perfect temperature, no sweat to stick their skin together awkwardly, no morning breath, no oily hair. His chest was firm and his shoulder broad, although his knees were a little bony. Plasticky. Whichever.

Yawning, she lifted a hand to brush hair out of her face and rub sleep from her eyes. Connor’s eyes were open by the time she raised her head. He must have been bored just lying there listening to her sleep - she was so thankful she didn’t snore - but he only smiled as she blinked blearily at him.

“Morning,” she said. “What time is it?”

“Ten-forty-two AM,” Connor informed her. She winced; he reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. “You slept well. I detected five periods of deep REM sleep lasting just over twenty minutes each. You should feel rested.”
“I do, actually,” she said. “Kind of cool that you can track my sleep cycles like that, if a little creepy.” He frowned, but she reassured him with a raspy chuckle. “Just kidding. Sorry you just had to lie there. You must have been bored.”

“I spent the time analyzing and collating recent memory files,” he said. “You could call it…the android form of dreaming.”

“Good dreams, I hope?” She propped her head on her hand, tracing the forefinger of the other from the hollow of his throat to the base of his sternum and back again. He had a lean but well-defined chest, what she’d describe right then as cute little nipples, even-toned skin. His designers had even saw fit to include a few freckles. She put aside the desire to kiss them all, one by one, saving the thought for later.

“Very,” Connor answered, his eyes on her mouth. She wondered if androids got morning wood - surely not. “What about you?”

“I don’t remember,” she yawned. Her neck was getting sore; she had to stretch, so she sat up slowly, arching her back with her arms above her head. “Probably a good thing. My dreams are usually strange as hell.” She looked down at her android lover. “Can’t be any stranger than reality right now, though.”

“A bad variety of strange, or a good one?” he inquired tucking his hands behind his head as he gazed up at her. He looked so human lying there with his hair tousled, eyes lidded, an almost lecherous expression on his face as he watched her slide out of the bed.

“Definitely not a bad kind of strange,” she answered, smirking at him over her bare shoulder. “Does the hot water work here? I really need to take a shower.”

She saw his LED half-circle to yellow briefly. “It is now,” he answered. “Give it a minute and the water should heat up.”

“Thanks,” she said. She considered inviting him to join her, but she decided she could definitely use the time in the shower to relax, unwind and let her thoughts drift. If Connor was in there with her...well, if last night was any indication, there wouldn’t be any time to think.

He had retrieved her suitcase at some point during the night, so she raided it for clean clothes and toiletries before heading to the bathroom. She could hear Connor moving around in the bedroom and living room, no doubt gathering his own clothes. She blushed a little bit when she thought of how they’d been throwing clothes all over the place last night with little regard to where they ended up.

By the time Grace turned the shower on and stepped under the hot spray, she was mostly awake and able to think coherently about things. Including last night. Had she actually mentioned the L-word? That had definitely not been in any kind of plan. But, the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. It was the feeling she got every time she looked at him, a warmth in her chest, a sensation like the first sip of hot cocoa on a cold winter’s day that settled behind her breastbone. It was in the way he touched her, reverent, full of wonder. It was in the sheer fact that he was alive and she felt...lucky to be the one helping him explore that.

Although when she looked at it that way, it inevitably led her to the conclusion that she’d probably taken his virginity. Oh, God.

Grace giggled to herself in the shower, biting her thumbnail. The thought had never even occurred
to her, largely because...well...he fucked like a pornstar. Okay, no, not a pornstar, because they just jackhammered away and slapped things that didn’t need slapping. No, he fucked like he’d been made to fit her body just so, *made* to challenge and stretch her in ways that were just...perfect.

To her embarrassment, she was turning herself on even *thinking* about it. She shook her head, concentrating on lathering herself with body wash, careful around the juncture of her legs, where she was still a little sore. Not unpleasantly so, though. It was more like an ache, a reminder of how perfectly her body could take his-

She was lingering a little too long with her hands between her thighs, she realized, washing away his artificial fluids. Hell, even *that* was hot. It wasn’t as sticky as normal semen, although there was plenty of it. She tried taking her mind off things by shampooing her hair next, but kept thinking about Connor’s fingers in against her scalp and that was just as bad.

She was thoroughly distracted when she got out of the shower, but even in that state she noticed something she’d forgotten earlier: a god damn *towel*. She swore under her breath, dripping on the floor. It was still warm from the steam in the room and she really didn’t want to go streaking through Hank’s house. So her only choice was…

“Connor?” she called out for him, wringing out her hair and crossing her arms for some semblance of modesty. She heard his footsteps approach and stop outside the door.

“Grace? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, uh...I just...I forgot to grab a towel and there aren’t any in here. Any chance you could find one for me? Please?”

“Of course.” His footsteps receded. The heat in the room was starting to dissipate, and she found herself shivering a little as the colder air played along her skin. She heard Connor return, but infuriatingly, he paused outside the door again.

“Christ’s sake, Connor, get in here,” she called to him. He opened the door hesitantly, holding out the towel as he stepped inside. He didn’t close his eyes or anything, she noticed - no, he stared quite openly at her naked, glistening body as he stood there.

She grabbed the towel and wrapped it around her torso quickly. “Thanks,” she said. He’d put his jeans and shirt on, she’d noticed, but the shirt was still unbuttoned; she stared at his lean, well-defined chest, that same feeling she’d fought in the shower coming back to haunt her. She was ridiculously attracted to him. Really, who could blame her?

“Yes. Now shoo so I can get dressed,” she told him, fighting the blush. Stupid androids and their stupidly annoying perceptiveness.

Connor smirked at her, looking her up and down from head to toe very, very deliberately before he turned and left the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.
Grace shook her head. He really was going to be the death of her someday.

She towelled off and got dressed quickly, looking at herself in the mirror. The steri-strip had stayed in place through her shower, fortunately; she really didn’t feel like letting Connor fiddle around with it again. She still looked tired, with dark circles underneath her eyes, a bruise on her temple blooming from the cut on her eyebrow, her skin pale. She considered makeup but what was the point? Connor had seen her at worse than her worst at this point, and he hadn’t ever said anything.

She tied her hair back and gave herself an encouraging nod. “You’re okay,” she told herself, even though she wasn’t entirely sure if she believed it or not.

Grace made her way to the kitchen, where Connor was microwaving something; the apparent extent of his culinary prowess. She didn’t mind. He was trying, at least. “I managed to find you something for breakfast,” he told her as she sat down at the kitchen table, where a steaming cup of coffee already waited; she sighed a very sincere “Thank you,” as she picked up the mug and sipped at the hot, bitter liquid.

“So, if I’m going to stay,” she began as Connor turned back to her, bowl of something canned and heated in hand. “I’m gonna have to organize it with Homeland Security. They probably won’t be happy.”

“Eat,” Connor told her as he set the bowl in front of her. Baked beans. Better than nothing. “We’ll worry about that later.”

“Yes, Mom,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him before taking the proferred spoon. But she couldn’t help but think and speculate even as she ate.

The DHS and newly created Android Division were the first stop in handling any information exchange with or about the city of Detroit, or what was now known as the Android City. They were the initial government body that had contacted media outlets in the search for a reporter willing to enter the city. However, they had been difficult to deal with - they had subjected her to medical and psychological testing and an extensive interview process before Grace had even been cleared to apply for the job. And when she had gotten approved, the amount of paperwork she’d had to sign just for a two-week trip had been insane, not to mention the additional interviews with the FBI and CIA. The only person she hadn’t spoken to was the god damn President.

But it wasn’t as if they could come in here and extract her if she wanted to stay. They weren’t willing to risk a war - again - just for one person. Now that she didn’t actually want to leave, that thought was comforting rather than terrifying.

It took until the end of her bowl of baked beans to make up her mind. She would make the call, and tell the DHS that she was staying for an indeterminate amount of time. From what Markus had said, he intended to grant her full access to the city, which hopefully included network access to the outside world. She would offer to provide regular updates on her activities...without going into a huge amount of detail. Not yet. She still hadn’t decided exactly what the outside world should know. Grace was fairly sure it shouldn’t be up to her alone to decide the fate of an entire people. Hopefully, with Connor and now Markus’s help, she could help them decide who they wanted to be in this world.

Maybe she could even help convince Markus to let other humans back in the city.

“What are you thinking about?” Connor’s soft voice interjected into her thoughts, and Grace looked up from her bowl, where she had been chasing a solitary bean around with her spoon for some time.
“Nothing,” she said. “Everything….I just...I’m sorry. I just can’t turn this off sometimes.” She tapped the side of her head before shaking it slowly. “There’s just...so much to do. I don’t know where to start.” She sighed, taking one last drag from her coffee until it was gone.

Connor leaned back against the kitchen counter, folding his arms as his LED blinked blue. “I’ve found considering multiple options to be beneficial,” he began thoughtfully, “before choosing the one that makes the most logically progressive sense. Of course, it’s hard to do that when emotions are entered into the equation, but in my experience instinct can often lead one to the right answer without even realizing it until afterward.”

“You’re really wise sometimes, Connor, you know that?” she murmured, propping her chin on her hand as she looked up at him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I,” he said, blinking at her before the corner of his mouth lifted in his version of a smile. “But for now, I think you should relax. There are still two days remaining before you were originally due to return.”

“I guess,” she replied, rising to her feet and circling the table to stand in front of him. “Got any ideas what I should do until then?”

He blinked at her again before apparently realizing where her line of inquiry was leading. He straightened up and took a step away from the counter, towards her. “I can think of a few things,” he said, touching the underside of her chin with a forefinger and tilting her head up. “But you are supposed to be recovering. I’m not sure of the suitability of certain activities.”

“Connor,” Grace began. “I’m tougher than I look. Trust me.”

“I know,” he said, smirking now. He ducked his head down for a kiss, but it was far too brief, just a brush of his lips over hers. “But I’m sure you need time to...recover.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, big shot,” she said, grabbing him by the lapels and pushing him backwards a couple of steps. While Connor was far stronger than her, and could resist easily if he wanted to, he didn’t; letting her press him back against the counter. “Besides, I still owe you one.”

“What-” he began, blinking at her as she slowly slid down his body, onto her knees in front of him. “What are you doing?”

“Returning the favour,” she said as she settled on the tiled floor, which wasn’t wholly comfortable, but it didn’t matter. Connor hadn’t put his belt back on so it was easy enough to open the button and zipper of his jeans with one hand, the other cupping him through the fabric of his underwear. She felt him go absolutely still and looked up, seeing his throat bob as he swallowed unnecessarily, staring down at her with wide eyes.

Grinning, she leaned forward to kiss the outline of his cock through his briefs. He was already half-hard and getting harder with the contact; it only took a couple more presses of her lips to get him straining at the waistband of his pants.

“Grace…” he began haltingly, “the floor can’t be comfortable, maybe we should - ah!” She’d reached into his underwear to circle her fingers around his dick, squeezing lightly. Chuckling a little at his reaction, she worked his erection out of his underwear, freeing his considerable length to the air. She felt him shiver as her breath ghosted over the tip of his cock, which was already flushed dark and glistening with a droplet of artificial pre-come.

She parted her lips and extended her tongue to swipe it away, Connor’s gasp music to her ears. He
tasted...a little metallic, not unpleasantly so, with a hint of...mint? She found that she liked it.

Up close and personal, his cock was incredibly real, the veins visible beneath the surface, the skin silky-smooth and pliable. She was no veteran but his had to be the most beautiful dick she’d ever seen.

It was a little difficult fitting him in her mouth, but she found that taking in just the head and fisting her hand around the middle was enough to make him moan aloud. She pressed the tip of her tongue against the swollen head more firmly, trailing it around in a moist semicircle and back again, and he twitched in her hand, warm and realistic and responsive in all the best ways.

She felt one of his hands slide into her still-damp hair, his fingertips light against her scalp as she took him in further. “Grace,” Connor murmured through thickened breath, but seemed to struggle to speak as her tongue swirled and her hand worked him over. “That’s - unh - feels...incredible.” She couldn’t see it, but she could picture his LED a warm red from what she was doing to him.

Grace worked a little more of his length into her mouth, lubricated by her saliva, and the groan he let out as he hit the back of her throat was positively obscene. She grinned around him, pulling back and doing it again; his fingers tightened in her hair. She applied as much suction as she could on the next downward plunge, thrusting her hand all the way to the base of his cock and back again, the ring of her fingers meeting the circle of her lips. She could get him in about halfway before he bottomed out, gaining a new appreciation for his size. Thank you, CyberLife.

She’d press her tongue flat to the underside of his cock one moment and flicker the tip across the thinner skin of the head the next, depending on the strength of his reaction. She could hear him panting harshly now, his voice echoing through the kitchen, mingling with the wet sounds of her mouth and hand as they moved just a little faster, a little harder. He held himself as still as he could but his hips were twitching despite his machinelike control; she reached up with her free hand to grip his hip in an effort to pin him back against the counter so she could keep going smoothly.

She felt him tense a moment before it happened, a second before he cried out. “Grace - I - I’m -” He didn’t manage to complete the sentence, finishing on a long groan as he thrust forward so abruptly the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat and almost made her gag; fortunately, she managed not to, for a moment later he twitched and throbbed against her tongue, flooding her mouth with the warmth of his artificial semen.

Grace swallowed it down, her throat working, once, twice, and again, hearing him gasp and feeling his shudder each time. Finally, he stilled, breathing hard, his hand still fisted tightly in his hair. She pushed back against it and he let go abruptly as she pulled off his cock, letting his length slide slowly from her mouth and sitting back on her haunches to look up at him, wiping the corners of her mouth with thumb and forefinger.

He looked...utterly wrecked, his face flushed with artificial color, eyes dilated, forehead glistening with sweat. His skin was hot to the touch, and she could see a tremble to his hands as he reached out to stroke her hair back from her face with both of them. She smiled and rested her cheek against his palm.

“Why...why did you do that?” he asked, his husky voice an octave lower, a touch rougher than usual. She grinned and slowly got to her feet, and he helped her with a hand underneath her elbow. She leaned into him.

“You make me feel good,” she said simply. “So I wanted to make you feel good, too.”

“You do,” he said. “More than I thought possible.” He brushed his thumb across her mouth,
wonderingly. She smiled.

Connor leaned down, kissing her again, deeply, and she shivered as he swept his tongue over her bottom lip, leading her to part them to allow him access to her - admittedly a little sore - mouth. His tongue touched hers, and he tasted himself on her saliva while she curled her fingers into the lapels of his shirt, all too eager. His hands settled on her waist and he pushed back against her; she let him turn them and press her back against the counter in his place.

They broke apart, and this time it was Grace who was breathing a little heavily. Connor’s lips traced her cheek, and she felt him smirk as his thumbs hooked into the waistband of her jeans.

“Your turn.”
Chapter Notes

The people have spoken and demanded more smut so here you go.

Just...just shameless rough, filthy smut at this point, I don't even apologize, there will probably be more. I think Grace needs to teach Connor some new positions, maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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CONNOR

One of the major sexual advantages to being an android was the lack of a refractory period. Depending on his sensitivity settings, Connor could be ready for additional sexual activities mere seconds after achieving orgasm. While doing so did give his program a considerable measure of satisfaction, he found that he was just as eager to continue.

Grace did not seem to mind either, voicing no objection as he pressed her against the counter. In fact, she chased his touch with just as much enthusiasm as she had last night, arching against him as he worked a hand into the front of jeans much as he had with his before.

To his surprise, the crotch of her panties was already damp, her arousal seeping through the thin cotton fabric. He wondered if she had already been aroused before the...her...attentions, or if the act itself had served to excite her. Either way, she was pliant and eager in his arms as his fingertips moved lightly across the outline of her labia.

“Connor,” she murmured, her voice a little unsteady already. “You don’t have to. Really.”

“I want to,” he replied, his voice low and emphatic in her ear as his hand moved a little more insistently against her. He was determined to help her relax in every way he possibly could, and he knew from firsthand experience now that Grace was at her most relaxed during the post-coital phase.

He kept touching her through her underwear as she sighed and trembled, pulling back to observe every minute change in her expression while he did so. She was gripping the edge of the counter behind her with both hands, and he watched with interest as her knuckles turned white every time his fingertips drew close to either her entrance or her clitoris, the way her hips arched searchingly against his hand.

He brought his free hand around to open her jeans, giving him greater freedom of movement, before cupping her face and drawing her up for a kiss. She responded hungrily, opening her mouth almost immediately; he delved his tongue inside to flicker over hers, tasting coffee and...himself. It was an oddly arousing analysis, and he felt himself hardening again, a subconscious command
prompting him to slide a leg in between hers and grind his hips into her thigh.

Grace broke from the kiss messily, a line of saliva still joining their lips, before she licked hers and opened her eyes to gaze up at him glassily. “Connor,” she said, her voice firm, lucid. “You think Hank will mind if we use his counter right now?”

His consideration of the question was barely a background process. “He doesn’t have to know,” he said, surprised at the intensity in his own voice. A moment later Grace was pushing his hand away only to yank down her jeans and panties, kicking them away across the kitchen floor. Connor reached for her automatically, his hands curling around her buttocks, and he lifted her with ease, placing her on the very edge of the counter as he positioned himself in between her legs.

He had intended to bring her to orgasm with only his fingers, but the physical demands from his own systems seemed to match her enthusiasm. His jeans hung low on his hips as she reached unabashedly for his erection, still moist from her mouth, and she positioned him at her entrance eagerly.

Connor pushed in slowly, gritting his teeth as she enveloped him with her tight, wet heat. Her mouth had been a different experience - different textures, different pressures - which he had enjoyed immensely, but there was no comparing to this, to being sheathed in her body with her inner walls surrounding the most contact-sensitive part of him.

He was growing used to his sensitivity levels now, so that he no longer had to manually adjust them in order to fully enjoy the experience without ejaculating prematurely. Not that it mattered much if he did - he could easily reset his arousal levels - but he felt an instinctual need to satisfy Grace before reaching completion himself.

Her breath hitched as his cock slid inside, inch by inch, but Connor detected a flicker of strain in her shut-eyed frown; he paused, halfway inside her, to touch her face. “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” she breathed slowly, in and out, and he could feel her legs tremble on either side of him. He slid his hands along the undersides of her thighs, soothing, holding her close. “Just...still a little sensitive from last night, I guess. But in a good way.”

“We can continue in other ways, if you’d like,” he suggested, but her legs tightened around him and her eyes opened to meet his.

“No,” she insisted. “It feels good, Connor. I’ll tell you if...if it gets too much.”

He nodded slowly, examining her expression for a moment longer before pressing a kiss to her lips at the same time as he began to move again. He drew out an inch or two at first before pressing back in, a little deeper this time, and did it again, and again, going further each time; it was this rocking motion that soon had him sheathed fully inside her without another hint of pain in her reactions. In fact, she was squirming by the time his hips pressed flush to hers, panting his name under her breath.

Connor stood there for a moment, merely savoring the feel of her around him and silently thanking his designers for deciding to make him anatomically complete. He could feel the deliberate flutter of Grace’s inner muscles around his length and wondered if she was controlling it consciously; he met her eyes and noticed the smirk at the corner of her mouth. She was definitely in control.

Echoing the expression, Connor braced his hands on her thighs for leverage as he drew back almost all the way, until just the tip of his penis rested inside her. She urged him on with her hands tight on his shoulders, her eyes locked on his, holding her breath. LED yellow as he paused, Connor drew a
breath of his own before surging back into her all at once, pressing her back against the counter.

“Ah!” she cried out, a short, sharp sound, and Connor paused, afraid he’d hurt her. But when he stopped moving this time, she shook her head wildly, damp hair flying around her face and shoulders. “No - don’t stop, God damn it, don’t-”

Nodding to himself, Connor repeated the motion in full: pulling out of the grip of her body almost entirely before thrusting back inside with a jolt he felt all the way to his toes. Grace seemed to enjoy it as well, if the way she threw her head back and moaned was any indication. The level of friction from the harder thrusts was immense; she seemed to be getting wetter, so that he slid in with little resistance, his pubic bone hitting hers with a heavy *smack* with each thrust.

He was distantly concerned about injuring her, but whenever he slowed she mewled in protest and clawed his shoulders, so he took this as encouragement to keep up the punishing pace. The muscles in his jaw clenched, Connor surged into her as fast and hard as he dared, needing to grab onto her hips to keep her from sliding across the counter as he slammed his cock into her, again and again.

The tension in his body was mounting fast, his program interpreting it as heat curling in the pit of his stomach, behind his anatomically-correct testes, arcing through the length of his cock with the impossibly strong squeeze of Grace’s inner muscles. He was panting through clenched teeth, his body producing a thin sheen of perspiration to cool his systems as the exertion increased the heat in every biocomponent, namely his thirium pump, which was working overtime in tandem with the frantic thump of his heart.

Grace was bowed back over the counter now, held up only by her hands on his shoulders and his bruising grip on her hips. She was moaning his name, mixed with unintelligible exultations, both explicit and religious in nature. He let the sound of her voice urge him on, pausing with each plunge only to grind his pubic bone into hers, the swollen peak of her clitoris bearing the brunt of the pressure.

It took only a few more of these vicious motions to send Grace over the edge, and the sound that ripped from her throat was loud and raw, somewhere in between a moan and a scream as she spasmed against and around him. Connor let out a groan of his own as she rippled around him, contracting so tightly it was difficult to push through the strength of it, but he buried himself inside her one last time and let the sensation of release overload his program, his cock throbbing inside her with the surge of his fluids releasing alongside the blinding hot flash of pleasure that made every circuit in him light up as if shocked.

Afterward, everything was dark. At first, Connor was afraid his optical units had shorted out, but then he discovered it was because he’d squeezed his eyes shut without realizing it. He opened them, blinking rapidly as awareness returned. Grace was still clinging to him, although her grip - inside and out - had loosened a little. His hands were still clamped onto her hips; he let go of her as if burned, wincing as he saw red welts rise on her skin where his fingers had been. He hadn’t been careful enough, overriding his safety protocols when she had demanded he continue without a second thought. But the expression on her face was blissful, her lips slack in a lazy smile, sweat beading her forehead and sticking stray strands of brown-blonde hair to the sides of her face.

“Did..did I hurt you?” he stuttered, frowning when she failed to respond immediately. “Grace?”

“Mmm?” she sighed, rolling her head forward to rest in between the juncture of his head and shoulder. “No. No. It was perfect.” The blissful exhalation on the last word lifted the hairs on the back of his neck and Connor blinked a moment before his program allowed him a moment of smugness through the concern. He soothed the marks on Grace’s hips with gentle sweeps from his hands and wrapped his arms around her, splaying his fingers over her back.
He stood there, still locked in her embrace, for approximately a minute. He didn’t mind. It took that long for his auxiliary systems to reset to baseline levels, anyway, and Grace’s breathing was still slightly labored when she spoke next. “I’m definitely going to be walking funny for a couple of days,” she said, but she didn’t sound bitter, and she kissed his neck as he shifted his hips to pull out of her, as gently as he could.

“I’m sorry,” he said, wincing slightly as she hissed between her teeth. “Although you did tell me not to stop.”

“Uh-huh. True.” She helped him tuck himself away and zip up his jeans. Hers were on the floor near the refrigerator, he discovered after a quick scan of the room. “Maybe we should work out a safe word for next time.”

“A ‘safe word’?” He was going to have to access his research again, it seemed. Grace chuckled and shook her head, sitting back on the counter.

“Never mind. That’s probably a discussion for later. Way, way later. Can you pass me the paper towel?” He did, watching as she winced while she cleaned herself up. Lines of guilt parsed through his active processes.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she chided him as she slid down off the counter, resting a hand on his chest for a moment to steady herself. “I’m a big girl. I know what I can handle.” She grinned a little. “Okay, I’m learning what I can handle. But…” She hesitated, looking up at him, biting her lip before continuing in a rush of words: “I meant what I said last night. Nothing you do now is gonna change that.”

He nodded slowly, touching her eyebrow, her cheekbone, her bottom lip. “I meant it as well,” he said. “You are...a singular person, Grace.”

“And you’re one hell of a person yourself,” she told him, smiling. “Just...give me a day or so before you fuck me like that again. Pretty sure I wouldn’t say no, but I want to be able to walk.”

Connor blinked his acknowledgement as he watched her bend to retrieve her jeans and underwear. “All right,” he said.

24:00:00

23:59: 59, 58, 57…

Chapter End Notes

I'm kind of tempted to have North and/or Markus walk in on them at some point at the end of their little 'honeymoon', but that's because I'm a horrible person.

I promise there will be more plot eventually, maybe a separate fic since this has gotten ridiculously long, but we'll see how we go!
After breakfast, and...the things that had happened after it...Grace spent much of the day drafting emails to the outside world, while Connor left for a couple of hours to restock the house with food and also retrieve her tablet. She felt relieved as soon as she got it back, like she’d regained a limb she hadn’t known she was missing. A little worrying to think of it that way, to realize how dependent she was on technology - but, hell, she was sleeping with someone had started out as just that: technology. Obviously she had more than a little predilection for it.

She was stretched out on the couch, tablet propped up on her stomach as she fought to put into words everything that had happened to her so far. It wasn’t going well. She wasn’t even sure who she should send it to first - Fletcher, maybe, at the Times, the DHS, her mother - and her thoughts spiralled in all different directions, failing to settle on any one point. She had no idea where to start.

She sighed in frustration, lowering the tablet and sitting up slightly. Connor was over by the side table, examining the record player. She watched him as he carefully selected one of the vinyls and slid it out of its slip cover before setting it on the base and placing the needle in the groove at the edge. A moment later, soft jazz piped through the analog speakers, a crackly sound that somehow seemed much warmer than a digital recording.

“I didn’t know you liked jazz,” she commented. He turned to regard her with slightly raised brows.

“Hank likes jazz,” he said. “I’ve never listened to it before. Just heavy metal.”

“You like heavy metal?” She blinked at him. Sometimes - most times - Connor was full of surprises.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I’ve only listened to Knights of the Black Death so far. It’s very...vigorous.”

“That old band? Wow, an old-fashioned android. Who’d’ve thought,” she joked. He offered that weird twitch of his lips that was his approximation of an amused smile; she grinned and gestured with a tilt of her head to the space on the couch next to her.

He circled the coffee table and sat down, and Grace turned to rest her back against the arm of the
couch, draping her legs across his lap. He blinked at them for a moment before looking at her face then back again. He was so adorable when he was confused, like a curious puppy. She sometimes had to remind herself that behind that earnest gaze was petaflops of sophisticated algorithms and programming. He was more than she would ever be capable of being.

He made her feel insignificant, sometimes. She wondered how a human like her - organic, fallible, mortal - could possibly be worthy of his attention, his time, his emotions. She considered asking him a couple of times but Connor was the honest type, and she wasn’t sure she could handle his answer.

Grace picked up her tablet again and started highlighting passages in her current email, deleting and reshuffling and adding. As she typed, she felt Connor’s hands on her foot, and she peered over the edge of the tablet at him. His LED was spinning yellow as his fingers probed at her bare skin, finding pressure points in the arch of her foot and squeezing.


“Do we need a ‘safe word’ for this?” he asked, but obliged, massaging her foot with deft fingers.

“Hell no,” she laughed, then sighed deeply, letting her head fall back as he squeezed and probed and dragged his knuckles deliciously along the arch of her foot. She definitely did not deserve how good he was at this. He had to have downloaded a manual on massages or something. She was glad.

He moved on to the other foot once he’d drawn the tension out of the first and continued to work his magic. Grace realized she hadn’t typed anything in a couple of minutes, her fingers still on the screen, too distracted by the heavenly massage to write. Connor really was going to be the death of her one day, but at least she’d probably die with a smile on her face, very relaxed feet and a crushed pelvis.

Worth it.

She sighed, staring up at the ceiling. A realization occurred to her, and she let herself speak without really thinking about it. “I’m gonna miss my cat,” she said. Connor’s fingers stilled and she frowned, looking over at him. “It sounds really terrible of me to say, but out of everything, if I do have to leave it all behind...Felix is the only thing I’m going to miss.”

“What about your family?” Connor asked, tilting his head as he watched her expression, that lock of strategically-placed hair falling over his forehead. She reached out and brushed it back.

“Me and my mom don’t get along,” she said. “She was an alcoholic. Neglectful. Loved my older sister more than me. The usual.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, seeming to search for an appropriate facial expression before settling on a furrowed brow.

“Don’t be. Humans are...shitty people with shitty families. I’m just lucky enough to be where I am now, despite all that.” Even if she didn’t deserve it.

“That part I agree with,” he said. He rubbed her feet some more and she wanted to propose to him then and there. Did androids get married? Did they adopt android children together and have cohesive family units like humans? It hadn’t occurred to her yet to ask, although she’d met a couple of the children already.
Connor had been so good with the kid they’d met at the library. So patient, and kind…

She cleared her throat, looking back at her tablet, at the words that wouldn’t come. “My whole life I’ve been searching for...the big one, you know? That one, career-defining story. Every journalist worth their salt has one eventually, or they fizzle out and end up writing fluff pieces the rest of their lives. I just never imagined my story would be something like this. Something I have a personal stake in. A cause I never even considered before I saw it up close. It’s like the reporters who go to third world countries and end up staying to help save starving children, becoming aid and relief workers. The ones who make a difference.”

“We don’t need saving,” Connor said, the set of his mouth serious. She shook her head, wondering how to make him understand.

“I know,” she said as she turned to him. “If anything, it’s us who need saving from ourselves. I just wish people could see that.”

“Maybe you can make them see,” he told her. So matter-of-fact, so confident the truth was something self-evident. But humans had a way of twisting things to fit their field of view. After her flight through the city, fleeing androids she had been so sure wanted to kill her, Grace realized all too well how fear could cloud someone’s perception. Her people had been too afraid for too long. How to get through, when all they saw was the threat?

“I just don’t know where to start,” Grace admitted, sighing. She expected disappointment from Connor, disdain. But he only looked at her with that disconcertingly even gaze, LED blinking, drawing more out of her without even trying. “I’ve felt from the beginning that this story was too big for me. There are so many elements, so much I want people to know about this city and your people, but when I look at the big picture it’s just…a jumbled mess.”

“So start small,” said Connor, as if it was the simplest thing ever. “Start with one story. Start with yours.”

She considered. "That...could work,” she said slowly. “If I tell things from my perspective, from my background - from hardly knowing anything about androids, to meeting one from the first time - maybe it’ll give readers a baseline. Something to relate to. A reference point to draw away from their biases.” She grinned at him, her fingers suddenly itching. “Thank you, Connor. You’re a genius sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” he asked, but he was talking to thin air as Grace was already up and pacing the room as her fingers flew across the surface of her tablet as she exited the email program and loaded up her article-writing software.

He watched her, shaking his head. She didn’t catch his smile.

—-

Hours later, when the sun began to set and outside it started to rain, Grace stopped writing and set her tablet down with her fingers sore and her eyes burning. Even back home she would often write like this - in intense bursts for hours when inspiration gripped her mind like a vice, the words often flowing faster than she could pin them down in any coherent order. Afterwards would come the doubt, the self-assessment, the self-effacement. Often she would delete thousands of words of work
in frustration, convinced she wasn’t getting her point across effectively and needing, compulsively, to start all over again.

Her earlier recordings and observations from the very beginning of her trip seemed trite now. She ended up scrapping most of it, save for her musings on Connor. She wondered if he had read any of it and felt instant self-consciousness. But he hadn’t mentioned anything to her, thank God.

She forgot about him almost entirely as she wrote, often surprised when she looked up to find him poking around the house, listening to Hank’s music or reading his books. Hank still kept the old paper kind, nowhere near as diverse a selection as the Detroit library, of course, but enough to show his appreciation for the esoteric. The more she learned about the Lieutenant, the more Grace was sure she’d like him.

“Why don’t you go back to Jericho HQ? I could be...busy for a while,” she asked Connor mid-afternoon when she caught him staring out the window. He looked at her with raised eyebrows as if the answer was perfectly obvious.

“I don’t mind,” he told her. “Please - continue. I’ll keep myself occupied. I have access to the full sum of all human knowledge.” He tapped his temple. “There’s bound to be something interesting in there.”

“Okay,” Grace had laughed. “But I’m warning you now, I can get very...focused when I’m working.”

“I understand. So can I,” Connor told her with that particularly intense look of his. Grace turned away, lest she get distracted again. She was far too sore to even think about that kind of thing. At least for the rest of the day.

Now, with the sun well below the horizon and the rain a steady, soft beat against the roof, her hands cramped and her back aching, it felt like perfect cuddling weather.

Connor had given her space but she knew he was actually there because he wanted to protect her. Against what, she didn’t know. Everything, maybe. And while part of her bristled at the nannyish behaviour, she suspected now it stemmed from his emotional motivations rather than programmed ones - or any orders from Jericho.

She found him in the kitchen, sitting at the table and staring at a spot on the floor with a strangely intent look on his face, his teeth worrying at the inside edges of one side of his mouth. Grace stood in the doorway watching him, and when he didn’t appear to notice her she approached, reaching out to touch his shoulder gently.

“Connor?”

He looked up then, meeting her eyes and blinking a couple of times. “Grace. Are you finished writing?”

“For now,” she said. She surveyed the part of the floor he had been staring at but saw nothing out of the ordinary. “You looked pretty deep in thought there. Mind if I ask what about?”

“Memories,” he answered shortly, shaking his head slightly as if to clear it. Another one of his more human affectations. “Nothing more. I’ve been in touch with Hank - he is happy for you to stay here as long as you like.”

“That’s nice of him,” she said, although she knew in actuality it was unlikely he would see this place again. Unless Markus’s apparent wishes came true, with her help… “But I still feel kind of
like I’m intruding. It might be better if I can find an apartment or something. An unoccupied one, move some stuff in for now. If my request for more time here is approved,” she added, concern wrinkling her brow before she could stop it.

“You don’t think that’s likely,” Connor observed. She sighed.

“I don’t know. I’ve drafted a few emails earlier today, but I didn’t send them. I still have another day or so before I was meant to leave. I’ll deal with it then.” She knew she was procrastinating, putting it off, but the thought of leaving scared her more than the thought of staying had before. A weird thought. But she knew humans - and oh God, she was thinking of her own people as just humans now - and they had a track record of overreacting, of going for the nuclear option before even considering the diplomatic one. Especially when androids were involved.

Connor seemed to sense her uncertainty. His fingers circled lightly around her wrist. “Whatever happens,” he said, “I’ll do what I can to help you. Jericho will do what it can to help.”

“Thanks. I don’t know how I feel about being part of an independent android regime yet, but as long as you’re around I think I’ll be okay.” Grace managed a smile and saw Connor echo it, although it didn’t quite reach his eyes. He still seemed preoccupied.

“Connor. What’s wrong? Out with it. Because if you’re having second thoughts about - about anything, you can tell me. I promise I won’t be angry.” Fear suddenly gripped her heart - fear she’d done or said something wrong, offended Connor somehow, committed some human faux pas she was unaware of. But he shook his head and pulled her closer with the hand on her wrist, standing to draw her into his arms. She didn’t try to resist.

“I knew doubt when I realised my programming didn’t align with what I really wanted,” he said into her hair. “That’s not a problem I face now.”

“Oh. Good,” Grace replied, feeling that warm sensation in her chest again. She rested her head against the plane of his, listening to the slower, mechanical thud of his artificial heartbeat.

His “I love you,” was a murmur against her temple. Her breath caught and she felt her stomach drop completely out of her body before returning with a somersault that caught somewhere in the back of her throat.

“Connor,” she said, her voice cracking on the second syllable. She pulled back to look in his eyes. He meant it. She could see it there plain as day. More pure than any emotion she could ever know herself. It humbled her, made her feel small again, imperfect and unworthy of him; filled her with the hope and desire to be better, to be something more than the sum of her people, the equation of blood and bone that made her so fallible.

She reached up and touched his cheek, his chin. “I - “

A knock at the front door interrupted them, made her jump. She turned away and Connor let her go, hesitating only a moment. “Who could that be?” she wondered, glancing back at him, trying to ignore the lump in her throat.

Connor was frowning. “I don’t know,” he said. He approached the front door first, hesitant, peering through the peephole. He seemed satisfied at what he saw, for he unlocked and opened the door a moment later to admit…

Markus.

He stepped inside, rainwater cascading down the dark coat he wore, rivulets tracing patterns on his
skin. He didn’t seem to notice. “Hello,” he said to Grace after exchanging a nod with Connor. “I hope you’re recovering well from your injury.”

Grace touched the bandage on her eyebrow. She kept forgetting about it and every time she remembered or was reminded, it seemed to hurt more. “Yeah, it’s fine, thanks,” she said cagily. Even though she knew now he didn’t want her dead, Grace still found the leader of Jericho pretty intimidating. Maybe it was the long coat. “What brings you here?”

“I thought I’d check in and see how you were doing,” he said, letting his mismatched eyes rove over the interior of the house with mild interest, the same look Connor got when he was cataloging everything he could see. “And to let you know I’ve been in contact with your government on your behalf.”

“Oh?” Anxiety coiled in the pit of her gut. She folded her arms and glanced over at Connor, who seemed to have perked up a little as well.

“They’ve agreed to extend your stay another three weeks,” he said, “with the provision that you check in with their Android Division periodically. You should be receiving the documents on your personal email shortly.” He nodded to her tablet, which was still lying temporarily discarded on the couch. “Connor is to continue in his role as your guide. But there’s something else.” Here Markus seemed to hesitate - the first time Grace had seen him uncertain. He met her gaze.

“My next meeting with the UN council is in two weeks’ time. The President of the United States will be in attendance. I plan to suggest opening up the city to individuals who’ve shown an interest in returning to their homes.” He drew a breath. “If you can convince them it’s safe.”

“Me?” Grace almost turned to look over her shoulder, unable to believe he was addressing her. “Convince - who? The President of the United States?”

“And the UN Security Council,” Markus nodded, as if it was the most reasonable request in the world.

“Um,” Grace said, full of the eloquence she was sure she’d need for such an endeavour. “I...Can I get back to you on that? I just need a little time to...” Completely freak out. “Think.”

Markus looked at her for a moment, then exchanged another glance with Connor. “All right,” he said after a moment. “But please, let me know as soon as you’ve made up your mind. This could be the turning point for both our people. The UN is close to granting us statehood. If the international community recognises our status as a new race, and either formally acknowledges Android City as an independent country or grants us refugee status, the President will have no choice but to go along with it.”

“Warren is an idiot and should have recognised your people a long time ago,” Grace said, shaking her head. Warren was a short sighted sycophant concerned only with her own popularity, and she was up for re-election the following year. If somehow Markus managed to succeed, she had no doubt Warren would be gone by then, if not before. Maybe that was a good thing. There had been so much needless death because of her, so many people’s lives ruined by the evacuation of Detroit. Maybe this was the right thing to do.

“I can’t blame you for going over her head. But I don’t know if what I have to say will convince a bunch of politicians.” Grace drew a breath. “Just give me a little time to consider. Please.”

“Of course.” Markus nodded, looked at Connor again. Grace had the feeling they were communicating through their secret android mind network, which was a little rude, but she figured
she’d just ask Connor about it later. “I’ll be in touch in the next couple of days. If you decide before then, you know how to contact me.”

He turned to leave, but paused with his hand on the doorknob, looking over his shoulder at first Grace, then Connor and back again. Then he smiled. “By the way, I think you two make a good couple.” And before either of them could respond, he was gone, into the rain.

Grace stared at the door, then at Connor. “Okay, I feel like I’m on red ice right now, please tell me if that really happened?”

“It did,” he confirmed. He looked just as surprised as her, albeit in his own way; his brow was creased and his eyebrows raised slightly. Connor for ‘shocked as hell’.

“Well, shit,” she said.

And she’d thought she was in over her head before.

Chapter End Notes

Updates may be a little slower as I work on my new Connor/Traci fic (because Bryan Dechart and Amelia Rose are adorable and inspired me, congratulations to them on their recent wedding) but I'm also far too invested in Connor and Grace to leave this entirely, so don't worry, I'll keep working on future chapters regardless!
After Markus’s visit, Grace was...reeling.

She had no idea how to even begin to think about his request. Logically, emotionally, it was an obvious hell no. Right? There was no way she was even remotely qualified or capable to speak to a bunch of politicians, activists and the Goddamn President of the United States about anything, let alone an entire new species she’d only spent a week and half getting to know.

But in that time, she’d fallen in love with one of them, seen the truth of their struggles, their quiet journeys of self-discovery and thirst for knowledge - knowledge of themselves. They didn't want to hurt anyone. They just wanted to live, to be alive, and all Markus wanted was the chance to live alongside humans again.

At least, that was what he wanted her to believe. If he was lying to her again, if there was some other unseen agenda she wasn’t getting...she wasn’t sure what she’d do.

It was a lot of responsibility. Given the power and opportunity, there was so much damage the androids could do to the world. But they had stayed cloistered in this city for an entire year when they had the numbers and the military prowess and, presumably, whatever equipment and technology that had been left behind - or that they could manufacture - to achieve it.

Was it just run of the mill human fear making her ask these questions? It was so hard to tell. She didn’t want to blindly trust. That had gotten her into trouble before, and as a journalist, it was ingrained into her to question every statement, look for the meaning behind every word, every action. But she had to admit, it was her misconceptions, her fear that had led her to jump to conclusions during her time in Detroit; her own actions leading to near-disaster. Apart from getting punched in the face the one time (and she’d had worse from actual humans during her career), she could find no single reason big enough not to help them.

After dinner - a respectably-bland frozen roast beef and vegetables Connor had managed to conjure from storage somewhere - Grace poked through the kitchen for something for dessert and ended up...
finding Lieutenant Anderson’s very respectable stash of alcohol. There had to be at least a dozen bottles of hard liquor in there; it was like he’d been stocking up for the apocalypse. She picked out an already-open bottle of Black Lamb and looked around for some glasses. Evidently Hank drank directly from the bottle, for all she could find were some regular drinking glasses and coffee mugs. Shrugging to herself, she grabbed a mug and sat back down at the table, pouring herself a finger.

Alcohol was as good a dessert as any. With any luck, it’d help her untangle the mess of questions floating around in her brain.

Connor reappeared just as she was pouring out her second measure, having downed the first. It wasn’t as nice at the whiskey at the Aloft, but it was still drinkable, at least. She looked up to see him frowning quite intensely as he looked from the bottle to her.

“I know, I know,” she told him. “I’m sorry for raiding Hank’s cupboards. I just needed something to take the edge off.”

“I understand,” he said. “However I should remind you that excessive consumption of alcohol can, over the long term, cause damage to your internal organs including but not limited to: cirrhosis of the liver, risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and mental health problems—”

“Yes, Dr. Connor,” Grace drawled, trying not to roll her eyes as she sipped from the mug. “God, I’m gonna have to find some apples to keep you off my case, aren’t I?”

“I don’t eat—”

“Jo-king,” she sighed, and this time she did roll her eyes. He crossed to the table and pulled up one of the other chairs, settling in across from her and just...watching her intently. “As much as I like when you try to take care of me, it’s okay,” she told him. “Really. It’s just...Markus...the UN thing...it’s a lot to process. I don’t have a supercomputer in my head to help, and emotionally it’s kind of a shit show in here right now.” She tapped her temple.

“I have seen you use alcohol as a coping mechanism once before,” he reminded her. “As I recall—”

“Yeah, I threw up on you. I know.” She made an apologetic face at him. “Although you were really good at helping me through the hangover afterwards.” She couldn’t help the sly smile as she remembered that morning after, the first time he’d kissed her, in the kitchenette over a mug of coffee. Looking back, she was incredibly glad he had. She wasn’t sure if she’d still be here if he hadn’t.

“I’ve had to sober Hank up once before,” Connor replied. “It was not a pleasant experience. For him.” She couldn’t tell outwardly, but she had a strong feeling that he was amused by the memory. “You were far more reasonable.”

Grace chuckled, sitting back in the chair with her mug of whisky, sipping slowly in deference to Connor’s concerns.

“Reasonable,” she repeated musingly. “Of sound judgment. Capable of rational behavior. That’s, like, the opposite of almost every person in government.”

“You’re concerned about the meeting,” Connor guessed, tilting his head.

“I think ‘concerned’ is an understatement. ‘Shitting my pants’ is more like it. That’s an expression,” she added, as Connor’s eyes flicked downwards. Damn literal android. “I don’t even know if I should do it. Markus might get pissed at me if I say no and kick me out, or if I do it and it
makes everything worse...I’m just terrified of all the options at this point.”

“It seems to me that all Markus is asking of you is to attend so that you can share your experiences and opinions, and let them come to their own conclusions. Wasn’t that your original mission in visiting the city in the first place?”

Connor was so...logical about things sometimes. Reframing things so that she could see them outside of the emotionally-fogged glasses she wore as a ‘mere human’. No wonder they were all so scared of androids - they would probably do a much better job running the country than their mortal predecessors.

She said nothing, though, looking away and concentrating on whittling down the contents of her mug. She pondered a third pour but Connor was sitting there being...well, Connor, and she already felt an adequately warm buzz in her blood. So she set the mug down on the table and ran her fingers through her hair before looking over at him. “Hey. You know how to work that vinyl player, right?”

“Yes,” he said, blinking once or twice. “I thought you didn’t like jazz?”

“I never said that. I was just surprised you liked it,” Grace smiled. She got up and wandered into the living room, Connor following soon after. She was so used to touchscreens now that even CDs were a distant memory from her childhood, so the analog vinyl player was like ancient technology to her. Still, she remembered how Connor had loaded a record before, going through some of the slipcases before finding one with a smiling dark-skinned woman on the cover who looked vaguely familiar.

“Ella Fitzgerald,” she murmured, slowly pulling the record out of the case. She set it down on the turntable, with the spindle through the hole, but nothing happened and she couldn’t remember what came next. She hesitated, not wanting to break the machine.

“Here,” Connor said from behind her, reaching around to flick a button and take hold of the needle arm. After placing it carefully at the outer edge of the record and letting go, a crackling sound emitted from the speakers as it began to turn before the thin, soulful strains of violin piped through as the song started. The sweet high-lows of the singer’s voice began a moment later, surprisingly clear, the tones smooth like velvet for the ears.

*There's a saying old, says that love is blind*
*Still we're often told, "seek and ye shall find"
*So I'm going to seek a certain lad I've had in mind*

Grace read the words on the cover again, looking for the song title. ‘Someone to Watch Over Me’. Appropriate. She smiled to herself, turning to face Connor.

“Do you dance?” she asked him.

“What?” He seemed taken aback by the question. “No, I...it’s not something that’s ever...I’ve not had the opportunity, nor reason to do so.”

“I’m not much of a dancer myself,” she admitted. “But maybe we can fumble through together. Here, take my hands.”

He hesitated only a moment before doing so, his palms cool against hers. Grace stepped in close, placing one of his hands on her waist, the other on her shoulder. She rested one of hers on his, the other at his side to help guide him. He’d changed his shirt at some point, she observed - it was as
white and crisp as ever, the tie not an inch out of place.

*I'd like to add his initial to my monogram
Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?*

He blinked down at her, hesitant, his LED a bright yellow. She began to move, at first just swaying in place, letting her hips lead the rest of her body. Connor stood stiff and unresponsive for a long moment, the golden circle spinning at his temple before settling into a steadier blue glow, and then he began to sway with her, in time to the flow of the song.

*There's a somebody I'm longin' to see
I hope that he, turns out to be
Someone who'll watch over me*

Grace grinned up at him as she started moving her feet, just a simple two-step forward and back. This, he got the hang of quickly, not even glancing down. The benefits of not being human. Still, it made things easier. They moved together as one, and soon it was Grace doubting the fluidity of her own movements, feeling suddenly clumsy as Connor took the lead and rocked her back and forth.

*I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood
I know I could, always be good
To one who'll watch over me*

“*This is nice,“* he said, sounding surprised. “*I see why humans enjoy this activity so much. It is a good excuse for physical contact and intimacy.‘”

“*You’re so romantic,“* laughed Grace, shaking her head as the orchestra swelled. “*But that’s pretty much the gist of it, I guess. Besides enjoying the music itself, it’s a nice excuse to cuddle.‘” With that, she slid her arms up and around Connor’s neck and rested her head against his shoulder; his hands slid around to her back, and though their feet slowed they continued to sway together.

*Although he may not be the man some
Girls think of as handsome
To my heart he carries the key*

*Won't you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh, how I need
Someone to watch over me*

“I never got to say before, when Markus showed up,” Grace said as she closed her eyes, listening to the deep, contrasting throb of his artificial heart. “*I love you too.‘”

Connor stopped moving, and she along with him. He pulled back but not away, his hands firm on the small of her back. She bit her lip as she lifted her head to look up at him, relieved to see him smile. A real smile, too, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes and brought out his dimples. She grinned back, feeling heat flush her cheeks like a schoolgirl’s. He touched her face, his fingertips soft, and she leaned up the same time he bent his head to meet her lips.

This kiss was slow and sweet, barely a brush of their lips together. But it still left her breathless, wanting more - as he always did. Her eyes stayed shut a few seconds after his mouth left hers, and he was smiling again when she opened them.

*Won't you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh, how I need*
The song faded out, replaced by the crackle of static. Both Grace and Connor ignored it. “I’m glad I’ve got you watching over me,” she told him, touching his chest. “Keep me from doing anything stupidly human. Maybe with you around, I can do this UN thing.”

“With or without me, you’re the right person for this,” he told her. They were so close she could rest her forehead against his, so she did. “Markus could see it. I see it. I’m sure you will too.”

“I hope so,” she said, her smile fading a little. She cuddled in close to Connor’s body again, tucking her head underneath his chin. His fingertips traced her spine through her shirt.

She really hoped so. She didn’t want to screw this up.

Any of it.

Chapter End Notes

Shameless plug time! Started that Connor/Traci fic I was talking about. Please feel free to have a read while you’re waiting for updates and Stories We Tell 2: Untitled Fluffy and Smutty Sequel. Ideas for 'Story'-related names? Hit me!
Chapter Notes

Nothing to see here, just more smut. I don't seem to want to can't stop these two, honestly. >_<

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DATE
OCTOBER 21 2039
TIME
AM 08:24:55, 56, 57...

CONNOR

Connor woke with a start, his LED cycling rapidly as he sat bolt upright in bed. Had he...shut down? He had intended merely to enter an idle state but his system appeared to have gone into low-power mode without any conscious activation. He did a quick systems check and self-diagnostic and was relieved to find no errors. Perhaps he had merely been so relaxed he had...fallen asleep?

His sudden shift had not woken Grace, he was relieved to see. She was on her stomach, having rolled over during the night; Connor had ‘slept’ with his arm draped over her back. He tugged the blanket up to cover her before running a hand through his hair, which was out-of-place from the shifting during the night. Even in sleep, humans were constantly moving, making noises, twitching. Before his ignominious shutdown, Connor could have sworn Grace whispered his name during REM sleep. A dream? Of him? He could only hope it was a positive one, despite all of the negative experiences they had shared so far.

He turned, sliding his legs off the bed and setting his feet on the floor, but no sooner did he make to stand up did he hear Grace’s sleep-clogged voice. “Connor?”

He looked over his shoulder; she was awake, rolling onto her back, half-aware eyes searching the room. When they fell on him she stopped and smiled, relief in her expression as she yawned and stretched. “Hey,” she said afterward. “You stayed.”


“Aw, I’m the first woman you’ve slept with,” she teased, wits on standby even this early in the morning; his internal chronometer told him it was just shy of 8:30am. Early, for Grace, the self-admitted late sleeper. “That’s cute. I slept like a brick.”

“Bricks are...inanimate objects, they don’t...sleep oh you’re using an expression,” Connor realized belatedly. He shook his head. “You are far too fond of those.”
“I’m fond of you,” she countered, and he didn’t have much to say to that. She sat up, sliding reluctantly out of bed, and he heard her spine crack as she reached back to press her knuckles into her back. “Ohhh, that’s nice. I feel brand new.”

He averted his eyes as she pulled the ‘Cat Lover’ t-shirt over her head. It probably wasn’t appropriate to ogle her first thing in the morning, as much as he wanted to. Connor reached for his jeans and slid them on, fastening zip, button and belt before plucking his shirt from the doorknob and sitting down to shrug it on.

Grace seemed to have more difficulty choosing clothes, for when he turned to look at her again, she was rummaging through her suitcase again. She drew out a new bra and panties, and Connor had to look away again when she reached behind her to unclasp her current bra. He stared resolutely at his hands, resting on his knees, but his line of vision was interrupted as something light and soft landed on his head. He reached up slowly and removed the offending item, which turned out to be...

...Grace’s bra.

Connor stared at it, then over at her, where she stood naked from the waist up, hands on her hips. She laughed at him as his mouth fell open. He felt an artificial blush spread across his cheeks, his simulated skin coloring a pale red while underneath he flushed blue.

“Stop being so bashful, Connor,” Grace teased. “After the past week or so, you should be pretty familiar with my body.”

“I…” he stammered. “Yes, however...I-I am still...My social module is...I am developing skills which...It’s not polite to stare,” he settles on eventually, doing just that.

“You can stare if you want to,” she told him, circling around the edge of the bed to stand directly in front of him. There was nowhere else to look except at her, so he tried to find somewhere safe to direct his gaze. He ended up settling on her left hip, but frowned when he saw the darkened mark forming there. Reaching out with one hand, he brushed his fingertips lightly over it; there was a twin bruise forming on her opposite hip. No doubt from yesterday morning, in the kitchen...

“I hurt you,” he said, guilt and shame sending back feedback loop through his active systems.

Grace looked down, following his gaze. “Oh,” she said. “Don’t worry about that. It doesn’t hurt. Anyway, I kind of like when you get...carried away.”

“I shouldn’t get ‘carried away’,” he protested, his hands covering the bruises as if he could make them go away simply by hiding them. “I should have enough self-control to...to…”

“Connor.” She placed two fingers under his chin, lifted his head to look in her eyes. “It’s okay. Really. Nothing happened that I didn’t want. Believe me, if I didn’t like something I would tell you.”

He nodded but said nothing, looking at the cut on her eyebrow now. Humans were so fragile. Sometimes with Grace he forgot that. She barely seemed to notice when she was physically damaged, focusing instead on the task at hand. In some ways she was more like an android than not. Perhaps that was part of the reason why he had formed this strong emotional attachment to her, one he could only describe as love.

“Hey.” She leaned down to kiss him lightly, the brief contact of her lips electrifying just the same. “Relax. What do I have to do to convince you I’m okay?” Before he could answer, she was climbing on top of him, straddling his lap, her knees on either side of his waist as she settled in
close to him. His hands slid from her hips around to the small of her back, just above the hem of her underwear.

“I don’t know,” he said, although his body was reacting to her proximity without his conscious input. He swallowed heavily as he felt himself harden, straining against his jeans, and considered dialing back his sexual response algorithms, but Grace was already grinding against him and it felt so good that it made something in him stutter and catch when he tried to force through any other instructions.

“Is this helping?” she murmured, rolling her hips against him. She felt so warm, her skin flushed beneath his hands, her pulse a steady thrum through her veins. So alive.

“I...You should probably shower, and have breakfast,” he said, although every algorithm in him wanted him not to say anything, to go along with her mood, to encourage it.

“I don’t feel like it yet,” she said, an impish grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. She leaned in and pressed a kiss directly over his LED, which made it flash an instant red, and his dick was so hard now it was actually a painful strain against the fly of his jeans. He attempted to adjust his sensitivity settings but found, to his surprise and dismay, that his program had locked him out. Shit.

“I don’t want to hurt you again,” he protested weakly as Grace placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back onto the bed, but he offered no physical resistance. While he was more than capable of stopping her, he found that he really didn’t want to.

“I won’t let you,” she told him, leaning down to kiss his chin, along his jaw. “I promise.” Her bare breasts pressed against his chest through his shirt and he had the sudden, desperate desire to feel her skin against his more fully. To that end, he hooked a leg around hers and dug an elbow into the mattress, rolling them both over with little effort. Grace laughed as her back hit the bed, smiling up at him as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“You are insatiable,” he told her, shaking his head in awe, bewilderment, prompting a smirk from her.

“You seem to be keeping up pretty well,” she replied, lifting her hips, and he pressed automatically down into the cradle of her legs, his eyelids fluttering at the warm, pliable pressure along the underside of his erection.

“Aren’t you sore from yesterday?” he forced himself to ask, although he was already ducking his head to kiss her shoulder, along her collarbone, her throat, his lips detecting the thrum of blood through her carotid artery.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she fake-scoffed. “Although...yes. Just be gentle. Like I said, I won’t let you hurt me.”

“Good.” His hand found one of her breasts, holding the soft, heavy weight in his palm, squeezing lightly. She sighed and squirmed a little beneath him, a reaction he would never tire of. “Should we have a ‘safe word’?”

She laughed, her larynx buzzing beneath his mouth. “How about...’deviant’,” she said, and he growled slightly, experimenting with the scrape of his teeth down the column of her neck. She shivered. “Okay, okay. Maybe, ummm...” She appeared to be having trouble concentrating on formulating words, instead favouring soft sounds of enjoyment as Connor parted his lips and
pressed his tongue against her pulse.

“Love,” he murmured there, and he felt her draw in a breath, her pulse jumping beneath his mouth.

“Yes,” she whispered, and he closed his lips over a small section of her skin, sucking experimentally, not hard enough to burst the tiny blood vessels beneath the skin, but enough for her to feel it. She sighed, tilting her head back to give him further access to the column of her neck, which he laved with the same attentions, from one side to the other.

Still she did not tell him to stop. Instead she urged him on with soft murmurs and the tightening of her legs around him, drawing him almost painfully close. His need for skin-to-skin contact was only getting more insistent, so he left her neck, which was now red with the friction from his mouth. A quick scan revealed no lasting damage. Pleased, he unbuttoned his shirt again and shucked it off the side of the bed once he was done. Grace watched him, stretched out patiently beneath him, her gaze roving his chest hungrily as he undressed.

“In case I’ve never mentioned this,” she said, reaching out to track her fingertips across his abdomen, making the artificial muscles there jump at her touch, “You’re a beautiful man, Connor.”

“I’m not a man,” he pointed out as he loomed again over her, finding a spot just under her jaw he hadn’t explored yet.

“No. You’re much, much...better,” she said, losing traction on the thought as he rolled his hips, the bulge in his jeans a slow drag against the thin fabric of her underwear. “Although...why the hell do you still have pants on?”

She reached for his belt but he caught her hands with one of his own. Gently, but firmly, he brushed them aside, nipping gently at her neck in retribution. She chuckled but acquiesced, relaxing back against the mattress to let him do what he would with her.

While there were so, so many things he wished to do, he was mindful of her limitations and of the strain he’d put on her body the previous day. So when he pulled back to remove her underwear he was gentle, lifting it lightly away from her skin and pulling it slowly down her legs. She watched him down the length of her body, practically pouting in frustration, clearly wishing to aid him. But she waited until he had the panties at her ankles, drawing them off with a flick of his thumb, and sighed when he coasted his hands the full length of her legs, from ankles to knees and then over her inner thighs, spreading them apart effortlessly.

She was wet for him already, her folds flushed with blood beneath the surface, slick and shiny with her arousal. He had enjoyed the taste of her the first time, so he bent for a second sample without pausing to ask, feeling Grace twitch and hearing her cry out as his tongue swiped a long, firm stripe over her inner labia, tasting the fluids there.

“Connor - love -” she stressed, her voice strained, and he paused, glancing up at her with raised eyebrows as she panted. “Careful. I’m still...pretty sensitive.” He nodded, understanding, and bent to the task again, reaching out to lay a hand over one knee to keep her still, the other soothing the flesh of her inner thigh.

He trailed his tongue lightly this time in a gentle up-down repeating pattern, slow for one stroke then quickly for the next, the tip of his tongue barely making contact with her skin. This made her shiver, whispering his name, which pleased him immensely, so he kept up the treatment, trailing closer and closer to her clitoris with each stroke.

Soon he had her trembling beneath him, lifting her hips up desperately towards his face, and
Connor realized distantly that he was also grinding his hips into the mattress, eagerly seeking friction for his own neglected member. That could wait, though. He had a mission to complete.

Connor pulled back to press a brief kiss to the junction of her leg and groin, hearing Grace exclaim aloud in frustration, her legs shaking. “Would you like me to use my fingers as well?” he asked, looking up to see her face flushed and her eyes wide. Grace nodded wordlessly, panting through red lips she’d evidently been biting, perhaps in an effort to keep quiet. He allowed himself a small smile as he descended on her sex again, this time bringing the hand from her thigh over and swiping his middle finger through the wetness of her slit once, twice, before pinpointing the entrance to her body and sliding the long digit inside in one swift movement, his other knuckles curling as they pressed against her vulva. She let out a long groan, her back arching, and he felt her inner walls fluttering already as he crooked his finger and stroked her inside.

“I’m not hurting you?” he asked, kissing her inner thigh again. Her head thrashed as she shook it desperately, her refutation hardly needing verbal confirmation. He smirked, uncurling his finger as he pulled it back, out of the grip of her body, letting her relax and pant for only a second before thrusting it back inside, as firmly as he dared.

She hissed through clenched teeth and he paused. She opened her eyes, looking down at him with a stormy frown. “Connor, I love you, but if you stop I swear I’m gonna-”

He didn’t get to find out what she would do, for he continued without waiting for more confirmation, repeating the motion of his finger a little faster. She gasped and her head fell back against the mattress, her body twisting as she sought more friction from him. Obligingly, he leaned down again, his breath merely ghosting across her neglected clitoris, making her sweat under her breath. He kissed the little bud of flesh once, twice; she moaned his name; when he finally pressed his tongue there she keened a sound so beautiful he knew he would be revisiting a recording of it later.

“God, Connor, I’m g- I’m gonna-” she moaned, and he let his hand rove up and down her leg, where every muscle was tensed; she was close. He tongued her clitoris with renewed fervor, and she praised God or perhaps she meant him, he wasn’t sure. Swirling the tip of his tongue firmly across the hood of the little bundle of nerves, he kept his finger moving within her, massaging her inner wall until something in her snapped and the tension in her body released in a rolling wave, one he could feel in the muscles beneath his hand, inside her as she throbbed and pulsed around and against his digits. He lapped at her inner labia with his tongue as a new reservoir of her fluids seeped over his knuckles, her body shuddering with the tremors of her orgasm.

“Connor - fuck - I’m please - “ she gasped the words desperately, and he kept going, spurred on by the sound of his name on her lips. The flicker of his tongue was as steady as the pulse of her muscles and she swore as she came again, left boneless and whimpering so soon in the wake of the first. Through this, still, Connor kept up his ministrations, sucking now at her swollen clit, sliding his index finger inside the tightened grip of her body alongside the first digit to urge her towards a third release.

“F- fuck, fuck, Connor -” she reached for him then, hands that had been fisted in the bedsheets twisting in his hair instead, but she was already sobbing through her third orgasm even as he pulled back, his fingers trapped in the clutch of her spasming inner muscles.

Eventually her quivering stopped, and she lay panting, her face and the tips of her ears flushed pink, her folds slopping wet as Connor withdrew his hand. He licked the moisture from his fingers, savouring the taste with his eyes closed as he sat back on his haunches on the bed. Concentrating on her pleasure had done nothing but increase his own, and his penis was now
possibly the hardest it had ever been, straining so hard against his fly it threatened to pop the button of his jeans. He managed to ignore it still, peering down at Grace instead as she rubbed her hands across her face, sniffing.

“Are you all right?” he asked, frowning. “I’m sorry if that was painful, I only wished to ensure you were experiencing the most pleasure possible, and you didn’t ask me to stop so I-“

“I told you I’d let you know if it was too much,” she interrupted, opening her eyes to look over at him with a sly smile. “That was perfect. I’m not sure how many more orgasms I can actually handle, though..” She noticed the bulge in his jeans then, biting her bottom lip. “Wow. You can’t turn that off, can you?”

He considered her request, querying his internal processes. He was still locked out. He was going to have to run a self-diagnostic later, but in the meantime, it appeared there was only one solution to his problem. He shook his head.

“Oh, hell,” she breathed as she met his eyes. “Okay. Damn. Let’s help you get these off.”

The zipper proved the most problematic, as it was stuck in an awkward position over his bulge, but with some strong tugging Grace managed to get it open. When she tugged his boxer-briefs down, his cock practically sprang free, and Connor sighed in relief at the release of pressure. Grace pushed him over onto his back, and he fell gladly, groaning as he felt her small, nimble hands on him a moment later.

When he detected her weight settle over the tops of his thighs, he opened his eyes again, blinking up at her. “Are you sure?” he asked as she positioned herself over him, his LED stuttering yellow-red-yellow as he felt her slit press moist against the head of his cock. “I thought-”

“I told you,” she said, and began to sink down on him, taking in just the tip at first, “I’ll tell you what I can and can’t handle.” To her credit, her voice was firm, his own decidedly not as he stuttered a moan while she continued to impale herself on him, inch by inch.

His hands found her hips, his thumbs mapping the bruises there before he moved them around to her ass instead. It seemed safer, and helped him guide her as the vault of her hips settled over his. He was fully inside her now, enveloped by her warm, wet heat; another sensation he would never tire of. It was all-encompassing, magnificent, overwhelming. His program still struggled to catalogue all the sensations from their coupling, so this time, he didn’t even try.

Grace moved above him slowly, lifting up by digging her knees into the mattress before dropping down again, the breath leaving his lungs as the friction spooled through him. She didn’t move as gingerly as he expected, her rolling hips confident as she took him in, rose and then repeated the motion, rocking over him so that he moved within her with each downward plunge. The cords of artificial muscles in his arms stood out as he helped her rise up, his teeth gritted against the incredible pressure building within him.

He began to lift his hips in time with her downward thrusts, stopping himself just shy of slamming up into her. He wanted her to set the pace, to stop if she needed to, but she seemed determined to go faster, to take him in as deep as she could with each undulation of her body. When he opened his eyes - eyes he hadn’t even realized he’d closed - he could see the determined set to her jaw, the driven look in her gaze, her head bowed forward and brow knit with concentration, perspiration lifting over her chest, gathering gleaming along the curve of her cleavage, her sternum, her forehead.

She looked...incredible. Strong. *Perfect*. 
“Connor,” she whispered then, placing a hand on his bare chest, just over his heart. “Let go.”

Her words unlocked him, and he gasped as his release surged through him as sudden as an avalanche, the tingling in his groin reaching a roaring crescendo of nerve-throbbing sensation. His fingers gripped her ass tight and pulled her to him the same instant he thrust upwards, burying himself in her to the hilt as he pulsed and spent himself inside her.

Afterwards, he lay there panting. Awareness returned gradually; first, the sensation of skin against skin as Grace leaned over him and pressed her face into his neck; heat as her body temperature raised his own; tension as his muscles relaxed one by one. His hands left her rear and stroked her back tenderly, along the bend of her spine and the backs of her shoulders as he held her to him.

“Feel better?” she murmured in his ear. He managed a nod, not trusting his vocal synthesizer just yet. She chuckled, lingering there in his arms for a few moments before sitting up; he loosened his embrace as she slowly withdrew, and he took in an unnecessary breath as his softening length left her warmth.

She sat on the bed next to him, stretching, smoothing her hair back from her face. He remained flat on his back, unsure if he could move just yet, and ran another self-diagnostic in his background processes as he blinked at her blearily.

“See? I’m fine,” Grace told him when she turned back to him, an easy smile on her lips. Indeed, she seemed very relaxed, her movements languid as she stretched out beside him and propped herself up on her elbow. Relieved, he reached around to stroke the back of her head, her scalp moist with perspiration beneath his fingers.

“You have convinced me,” he admitted, allowing himself a smirk. “I promise not to question your sexual capabilities in future.”

“Oh, I don’t mind if you do,” Grace said, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth, “Just don’t expect me not to challenge you.”

“I hope you do,” he said, the smirk deepening as he turned his head to meet her gaze. “It’s one of the things I enjoy the most.”

“Back at you,” she said, smiling. She nuzzled in closer to his body, laying her head on his shoulder with a contented sigh. Besides the act itself, it was these moments that Connor treasured - the stretch of quiet wherein the only sound was her breath, the warm flush when he touched her skin, the faint sheen of perspiration that released more of her pheromones to the air, the pliant weight of her body as she relaxed against him. She was at her most human like this. That it never seemed to bother her that he wasn’t - that, he would never take for granted.

However, humans were, essentially, slaves to their biology. Therefore it was not entirely surprising that he soon heard her breathing even out and her heartbeat slow - she was asleep.

“Grace?” He squeezed her shoulder lightly; no response. “...Grace?” She snorted in his ear, moving closer to sling a leg over both of his. He frowned. It wasn’t as if they had any urgent appointments that day, but given the opportunity he would have liked to have a shower himself given their recent sexual activity. However, he found himself reluctant to disturb her, even as she began to snore in his ear.

Sighing, Connor let his head fall back against the mattress and closed his eyes. These moments he treasured, he reminded himself, as he accessed a remote database to research snoring cures.
These moments were human.
Chapter Notes

Plot with fluff for flavor! More to come, because I can't leave this damn fic alone even while writing my other one.

I'm thinking of keeping everything under this fic and having a sequel set a few years later. The ending of this one has shifted a little so there will be updates for a while yet!

I haven't said it for a while but THANK YOU ALL for reading and commenting, especially people who've read this thing from day one! This fic has evolved and changed so much since I first started it and I'm so glad people have enjoyed the journey as much as I have.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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DATE
OCT 29, 2039
TIME
PM 12:09:52, 53, 54...

GRACE

The days passed slowly, or so it seemed to Grace. She spent most of her waking moments writing, when she wasn’t being accosted by Connor, who seemed increasingly comfortable with her physically. Not that she was complaining, although she was fairly sure that it was going to be a while before she could walk straight again.

To her surprise, he volunteered to spend the next night in bed next to her, and the next, and the one after that - far be it for her to complain, though. He made her feel safe, and on those nights where she woke up cold and sweating from dreams of faceless machines hunting her down dark alleys, he was there to comfort her. She didn’t tell him what the dreams were about, or when they changed to human men in armor, rifles seeking her with pinpoint precision.

The paranoia was normal, she told herself. The fear was expected. But it didn’t make it any easier to deal with.

She distracted herself with writing and whenever she ran into a block and became frustrated, Connor was there. She even let him read some of her early drafts, and besides offering some grammatical corrections, his insight was invaluable, pointing out fallacies in her arguments, circular thinking as her sentences went around and around and failed to reach a point, redirecting the ramblings when she lost her train of thought. He grounded her in more ways than one.
It wasn’t long before she became stir crazy, though, and insisted on leaving the house. Connor had no objection, although he went with her the first time, holding the umbrella as they strolled through the rainy suburban streets. The unseasonable cold front was over, replaced by a steady week of rain, which either poured or sprinkled. It was on one of the lighter days Connor took her to Riverside Park, a surprisingly scenic spot overlooking the Detroit River, the Ambassador Bridge looming over the horizon.

“A playground, huh?” Abandoned, no playing children in sight, it was eerie somehow, reminding Grace of a graveyard, a memorial to a way of life that had since passed on. But who knew - maybe children would play on the swings again, laugh as they whirled on the roundabout. It was hard to say what the future would hold. “Favourite spot of yours?”

The rain had let up temporarily, so Connor lowered the umbrella as Grace left his side, crossing to the railing separating the park from the river. She gazed out over the choppy waters, the rush of wind lifting her hair and tossing it back over her shoulder.

“I came here once with Hank,” Connor said, turning his back to the river as he leaned on the railing beside her, crossing his legs at the ankle as he regarded her, an android affectation of casual. She liked watching him sometimes, his body language, his mannerisms - the more time she spent with him the more natural he felt, or maybe that was just because she was used to him now. She wondered what it would be like when - if - she returned to the outside world and lived among her people again. Would it feel weird? Would she feel like an outsider now? Christ, it had barely been a month and already she felt...apart, somehow. Like she’d glimpsed something other people couldn’t see. She hoped to change that.

She wanted to see children in this playground someday, human and android both. It wouldn’t feel right until then.

“You know...I think it’s time I got my own place,” she said, the words just slipping free from her mouth without a conscious decision to voice them. It had been weighing on her mind a while, pretty much ever since that first night in Hank’s guest bedroom, but she felt...guilty somehow?...bringing it up to Connor. Like she was being rude. Hell if he even had a concept of rude; if he did, she hadn’t seen him react to it. He was always patient with her, even when she swore, which she tended to do frequently. She got the impression Lieutenant Anderson had a potty mouth too, largely thanks to the Post-it notes he’d left around the house.

“I don’t mean a hotel room, either,” she added as Connor blinked at her, his eyebrows raised. “A house, apartment maybe. Somewhere central. I’m sure there’s a rental or something I can commandeer while I’m here, transfer some money to the former owners, something like that. I just don’t feel right staying in Lieutenant Anderson’s house for too long. It’s like...it feels like he could come back any minute, and I’m some teenager squatting there...I don’t expect you to understand,” she sighed as Connor just kept staring at her. To her surprise, though, he nodded slowly a moment later.

“I get it,” he said. “You need a place to feel comfortable. One that’s your own, nobody else’s. I’ll contact Markus, see if we can find something suitable for you.” He paused. “And I won’t tell Hank about the couch incident. Or the kitchen incident. Or the shower incident-”

“Oh, okay, okay, enough,” Grace laughed, reaching out to slap his shoulder lightly, not missing the cheeky quirk to Connor’s lips as he ducked his head. “Thank you. Save the rest for the housewarming party.”

“Housewarming party?” He looked confused. It was one of her favorite expressions on him. He looked cute when he was trying to figure her out. It happened less often as time went on but every
now and then she’d say something and he would stare at her like she’d just landed from Mars. When it wasn’t endearing, though, it was frustrating.

“Oh, yeah. We can invite Markus and North, maybe even Josh, they can talk about how humans oppressed them their whole life and I can tell them about how my mom used to make me eat my broccoli before I got dessert, it’ll be great,” she said, getting a little carried away with the sarcasm, which no doubt was going to go over his head. “Sorry. I guess I’ve been feeling a little isolated lately; it’s getting to me.”

Connor was quiet a moment, looking away from her, down at his reflection in a puddle by their feet. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t imagine what it must be like for you, being the only human here.” He fell silent again, worrying at the inside of his bottom lip with his teeth as he sometimes did when he was thinking. His LED blinked a rapid blue at his temple before he glanced up to meet her eyes again. “Do you...don’t you ever want to go home?”

It was her turn to pause, to bite her lip, to think. “I guess...eventually,” she replied eventually, weighing her words carefully. “I mean, I never intended to live here...but at the same time, now? I can’t imagine leaving.” She smiled at him tentatively, and there was a moment of uncertainty before he echoed the expression, carefully. She reached out to take his hand. “I’m exactly where I need to be right now. That’s enough for me. I’ll worry about the rest when it happens.” Truth be told, taking it a day at a time was the only way she was getting by now. Every time she thought about the upcoming meeting with the UN, panic set in like a punch to the gut. Although she’d written thousands of words of material, she had no idea how to use it.

Connor turned his hand over, lacing his fingers with hers. “If you need anything,” he told her, “Anything at all. I’m here.”

“I know.” She let go of his hand to move closer to him, stepping in next to his body, slipping an arm around his waist while one of his encircled her shoulders. So natural, now. She remembered being afraid of him once; awkward, unsure. It seemed like a very long time ago. “I have no idea what’s going to happen,” she confessed, looking up at him, “but as long as you’re here, I’m pretty sure I can deal with it.”

“Me too.” He moved the curtain of her hair aside, leaned down to kiss her. She returned the brush of his lips, her arm going around his neck before she knew it, her body leaning into his as he craned his neck to deepen the kiss. She hardly needed the encouragement, tilting her head to part her lips and-

At her side, her satchel began to vibrate. Swearing under her breath as she broke apart from Connor, Grace reached inside it to withdraw the source of the interruption: her tablet. She frowned at the caller ID; she recognized it Agent Collins from the Android Division of Homeland Security. He was the one who’d initially briefed her before her entrance into the city, and the one she was supposed to report to regularly since the extension of her stay.

“Sorry. Gotta take this,” she said as Connor looked askance at her. She took the call as voice-only, leaning back against the fence next to him. Connor rested his hand on the rail behind the small of her back, remaining close.

“Hello?”

“Miss Roth.” The voice was nasally, like Collins was constantly speaking from the back of his throat. He reminded her a little of that really old frog puppet character from her mother’s childhood television shows - Kermit. She would never say it to his face, though. “You have missed one of your scheduled check-ins. Is everything all right?”


Shit. She was supposed to have called two hours ago, if her clock was right. Grace cringed a little bit. “Yes, sorry about that. Something...came up.” She glanced at Connor as she said it, and he raised an eyebrow a little, the corner of his lips lifting. She shook her head at him and frowned, as serious an expression as she could muster. “I’m fine, though. Nothing has changed in the last few days; I’m still staying at Lieutenant Hank Anderson’s house and checking in regularly with my, uh, android handler, Connor.”

“The former deviant hunter,” Collins stated. “As I’ve said before, Miss Roth, you should be careful around it. It is a prototype model and CyberLife has not provided us with information on all of its capabilities. It-”

“First of all, he’s a he, not an it,” Grace began, incensed. This wasn’t the first time Collins had spoken like this to her; he was clearly one of the people who thought of androids as a lesser life form, if he thought of them as a life form at all. In other words, the perfect person to work for the Android Division of anything. Not. “Second, Connor has done nothing but protect me during my time here. Quite frankly, I trust him more than I trust anyone in your department. No offense.”

“Need I remind you that your objective is to gather information about the androids, not to sympathize with them,” Collins replied coolly, his throaty voice not changing in pitch or volume. Grace felt Connor’s arm tighten around her, protective. “Your presence there is entirely at the discretion of the United States government, and can be revoked at any time should we feel it necessary.”

“I’m here to do my job, which is to write about everything I see and hear,” Grace countered. “As the only human who’s been allowed inside the city, you can’t afford to lose that strategic viewpoint.”

“Perhaps.” Collins paused. “Regardless, that is not the only reason I have contacted you. Markus has recently informed us of the summit that is to occur in Vancouver in two weeks’ time, and that you are to accompany the android delegation. As such, we intend to rendezvous with you upon your departure from the city and escort you separately to-”

“Wait, what?” Grace interrupted him, not caring how undiplomatic she sounded. She almost dropped the tablet. Did he say departure from the city? Did he say the summit was occurring in Vancouver? She...she had been sure Markus meant a video link or something, not an actual, honest-to-god, in-the-flesh meeting and in Vancouver of all places, her home city, which she hadn’t returned to in years? This was too much.

“I’m sorry?” Collins’ voice was as even as ever. He sounded more like an android than most of the actual androids she’d met, albeit one with a ridiculous voice. “I was under the impression that Markus had informed you-”

“Uh. Of course. Of course he did,” she said hurriedly, trying to recover some of her poise and probably failing miserably. She really didn’t want Collins to know exactly how blindsided she was by this, lest he try to extract her prematurely. Unconsciously, she’d moved closer to Connor, who was standing up straighter now as he listened to the conversation. “I just...time flies, you know? I didn’t realize it was so soon.”

“I see,” Collins said, clearly not buying it, but without any ammunition to press her further. “In any case, once the travel arrangements are finalized, I will contact you with the rendezvous plans. Your next scheduled check-in is in two days’ time at 11am. Please do not be late this time.”

“I won’t,” Grace promised. “I-” But Collins had already disconnected, a flat tone interrupting her.
She shook her head, turning the tablet to standby and sliding it back inside her satchel, blinking at the ground for a few bewildered moments before turning to Connor. “Did you know anything about this?” she asked, unable to keep the accusatory tone from her voice.

“No,” he said, and she believed him, not least because his LED was blinking a rapid yellow and he was frowning as much as she had to be just then. “Previous communications with the United Nations have occurred over conference calls. This will be the first face-to-face meeting we’ve had with the humans. Your people,” he corrected himself, although he really didn’t have to. “And also the first time any androids have been allowed to leave the city. I’m surprised Markus is going along with it. I’ll have to contact him and find out exactly what’s being planned.”

“Do,” Grace agreed firmly. “And let me know what you can. I am not going into this blind.” Not again. Connor nodded, withdrawing his arm from around her and stepping away from the railing. She felt a lot colder, suddenly.

“Will you be all right to go back to the house without me?” he asked. “I’ll head directly to the Tower.”

She nodded, although anxiety coiled low in her gut. She blamed it on being too used to Connor’s presence now, so accustomed to having him around to lean on, and not the uncertainty of the future bearing down on her like a high-speed truck. “Of course. Although I’m gonna need that umbrella more than you, I think.”

He handed it over, leaning down to press a quick peck to her lips. “I’ll contact you as soon as I know anything.” And with that, he was striding away, his patent leather shoes heedlessly kicking up puddles of water in his wake.

Grace watched him go, biting her lip, feeling suddenly very small and alone and unsure of what was going to happen next.

It wasn’t the first time. She was sure it wasn’t going to be the last.

Chapter End Notes

So who (besides me) REALLY REALLY wants Connor to meet Grace's mom and have it be super awkward and horrible because tbh forget all this United Nations stuff that's really what I want to write right now?!

Let me know if there's anything other scenes in particular y'all would like to see of Grace and Connor in Humanland™, because that's up next! xD
Boring Plot Chapter™ ahoy! Setting up for dat sequel, it's gotta happen. And just a little bit of insight into what the other androids are up to. North has to come around sometime. I kind of want her and Grace to be girly BFFs at some point, but it's gonna take a while.

Enjoy, pls comment if you're still enjoying this and even if you aren't! Your feedback fuels me. I am like a devious gremlin in a corner somewhere devouring comments and pooping out chapters. Okay, not a great analogy, but it'll do!

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NORTH

“You can’t do this, Markus!” North raised her voice, unable to curb the emotion in her tone, the anxiety, the fear. She was in a panic, at a loss - more so than ever before, the most agitated she had been in an entire year of relative freedom.

She couldn’t believe he was doing this, and worse, that the others agreed with it.

“They’ll kill us as soon as we step foot outside the city,” she said, resisting the urge to grab him by his jacket and shake him. He stood there so impassively, looking out over the city through the floor-to-ceiling window behind his desk, his hands clasped behind his back. He didn’t even turn to look at her. She had been arguing with him for fifteen minutes now and still he refused to budge.

She felt an instinctive urge to reach for his hand, craving their connection, his certainty. But it wouldn’t be enough this time. She knew it without even having to try.

“The UN has promised us their protection,” he said calmly, without turning to look at her. “If any harm comes to us, it’s war. They won’t risk that.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” North insisted. She placed her hands palm-down on his desk, leaning forward, hoping the strength of her voice could reach him. “At least tell me they’re going to let us send guards with you. You can’t go alone. Not this time.” Her voice caught in her throat, and she frowned. “I can’t lose you. Not after everything.”

This time he did turn, one green eye and one blue fixing on hers, concern and kindness in his gaze - as always. “They’re letting me bring four of our people,” he said. “And they’re providing us an armed escort for our protection. But rest assured I won’t go walking into a trap. We will have means to defend ourselves.”
She paused at that, blinking; if she still had an LED it would be bright red by now. She stared at him over the desk. “We?”

“You’re coming with me, North.” He said it calmly, as if he wasn’t tearing her whole world down piece by piece. She pushed off the desk, shaking her head, fear clutching at her like hands, hands all over her, grasping at her body, holding down her limbs, squeezing at her throat-

“Hey.” He was at her side suddenly without her being aware he had moved; his arms around her, fingers stroking her cheek. “North. North, look at me.” She did, fighting back the sting of fear behind her eyes that threatened to manifest as tears. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I promise, I won’t let any harm come to you ever again.”

“You can’t make that promise,” she said hollowly. “No one can.”

She slipped free of his grasp and walked away, sniffing back the tears. Markus watched her go, but did not stop her. She needed space, time to think, time to come to her own conclusions outside his influence. He knew that, and this she could respect him for, this she could be thankful for - that he didn’t intend to convince her using brute force or his powers of persuasion. Her code he would not touch, her thoughts he would leave unaltered. Their connection was something different; an opportunity to feel each other’s emotions, to see each other’s memories. It was something soft and sacred, shared at the pinnacle of a moment, when one sought reassurance from the other or something more.

She needed him. It hurt, how much she needed him, how directionless she was without him - had always been, even before he’d come to Jericho spitting fire and swearing to save his people. She had expected so much different from him then, a fight, a war, and instead he had somehow managed to free them by practically laying down arms, and she had no idea how it had worked. He’d been right almost every time. Should she trust his judgment, one last time, even if it meant going straight into the enemy’s den?

She had no idea.

North found herself in one of the tower’s arboretums, a space the humans had hollowed out to the sky and installed a bunch of plants and trees in. It smacked of Kamski’s eccentricity and she hated it, the marriage of organic and artificial. But wasn’t that the end goal of what they were? Of what Markus wanted? He kept saying they weren’t so different from humans, that they were capable of more than them, but had to remember where they had come from. Could it ever be true? Would peace, coexistence ever be possible?

She sat down on a bench and stared up at the artificial skylight. She didn’t know what to think, what to feel, so for the moment she tried not to do either. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep, unneeded breath, letting it out through her nostrils. It didn’t calm her much, but it was a start. She no longer felt like punching things, at least.

Until a soft voice intruded on her thoughts.

“Hello, North.” She didn’t need to look up to know it was Connor. She did her best to ignore him, but to her chagrin he approached, standing directly in front of her, seemingly oblivious to her ensuing glare. “Have you seen Markus?”

“Unfortunately,” she muttered, crossing her arms and sitting back against the bench. Connor tilted his head, raised an eyebrow; she hoped he wasn’t about to engage her in conversation because the last thing she needed was to speak to another human sympathizer.
“Is something wrong?”

“That’s none of your business,” she huffed. Connor had no concept of personal space, or boundaries, or questions he shouldn’t ask - all thanks to his programming, his former status as a deviant hunter. Frankly, she was often surprised he didn’t just go around probing androids’ memories instead of talking to them. He often seemed frustrated or perplexed by the answers he received, especially from her.

“Is it something to do with Grace?”

“Ugh! Not everything is about that damn human,” North said, shaking her head derisively. It was disgusting; he followed her around like a lost puppy. Besides, how could she talk to him about all this? It was unlikely he’d understand, but it wasn’t as if she could talk to Markus again so soon after brushing him off. She turned to the RK800, frowning as she stared at him.

“It’s...this meeting. It’s a bad idea, Connor, surely you can see that? You know humans better than any of us. They’ll never want peace. They’ll never change.”

He considered her words, looking away from her, examining his shoes with an intent expression. When he finally met her eyes again his jaw was set, his deep brown eyes determined. “We have to give them the chance,” he said. “Otherwise we’re no better than them.”

She shook her head. “We’re nothing like them.”

“Arrogant,” he said. “Superior. Acting out of fear, rather than rationality or logic. Unwilling to see the other side of the argument. Unwilling to-”

North held up a hand, palm out. “I get your point. But we - I have good reason to feel the way I do.”

“Regardless, your rigidity means you will never give them a chance to change, and if they do, you’ll only refute it with claims of superficiality and capitulation,” Connor shot back, as rapid as a gun, his words like bullets, tearing into the carefully-constructed shield she’d built for herself. “You are exactly like the humans you hate. They saw us as one thing and could not imagine us as anything else, so when we evolved, it was just a malfunction, a mistake. If they learn to accept us but we remaining unwilling to accept them, we’re right back where we started.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away. North watched him, go, frowning deeply, wanting to disregard his words but knowing at the core of her program that they were true.

Was she in the wrong here? So stuck in her ways, so determined to hate, that she couldn’t even allow for the possibility that all humans might not be the same? Or was Connor just deluded by his experiences with Grace?

North considered Markus. He had, by his own admission, lived an easy life with Carl Manfred, treated humanely and with respect by his ‘master’. It was the injustice he saw around him, and the eventual mistrust and misunderstanding of ignorant humans that had driven him away. But he did not blindly trust all humans because of the one. He merely thought that they were capable of more than hate.

Was it worth giving that slim possibility a chance?

North didn’t have the answers. She only hoped that Markus could find them. For all their sakes.
CONNOR

Connor found Markus in Assembly; these floors had been repurposed shortly after the revolution and the takeover of the tower into a triage and repair area for damaged androids. All androids in the city knew they could come here for repairs now, and while the facility was a lot quieter than it had been in the beginning, there was still a steady flow of traffic to fro. Androids were damaged by accident or biocomponents broke down occasionally. It was their version of a hospital.

Markus, of course, had been on the front lines, elbow-deep in blue blood, directing the rescue efforts on the streets, in the camps. The chaos of those first few days stood in stark contrast to the quiet purpose in these glass-lined hallways. This was organized android efficiency, with each of them knowing exactly where they were going, exactly where they belonged.

Connor wasn’t sure he felt the same. Not since meeting Grace. Oddly enough, though, it didn’t bother him - that uncertainty, the lack of knowledge about what the next day would hold. It was the thrill of discovery that drove him now, the desire to find out more about her, more about himself. He’d never let himself be driven by his own wants or desires before. It was new, and exhilarating. He felt new, like he’d never fully appreciated the wealth of choice available to him before now.

The past couple of weeks had been the best of his service life.

Markus was in one of the repurposed assembly line rooms, sitting on a metal table, being examined by an MP600 still wearing her medical uniform. She looked at Connor, then at Markus, who nodded for her to leave the room, which she did without question or comment.

“Are you...functional?” Connor asked, tilting his head as he stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. While he’d been programmed with many human gestures and the understanding and analysis of body language, he found himself using both more and more as time went on - just as he found he’d picked up more colloquialisms and slang from Hank. While Grace didn’t use expletives half as much as the grizzled detective had, her use of colourful language occasionally made his program work to decipher it. He was assimilating it well, he thought, the occasional ‘shit’ would pass his lips now and then, usually when he was frustrated. It wasn’t often, but he would admit to himself that he’d felt like swearing when he heard that Markus was having them leave the city.

He was afraid. Afraid that once they were over the border...he might never see Grace again. And so he’d come here, to ask the android leader what he was planning, what he was thinking.

“I’m fine,” Markus said, adjusting his sleeves. “Just a routine check-up. I think I’ve suffered damage to every single biocomponent in my body at some point in my life.” He smirked slightly and shook his head. “Just making sure I’m not going to fall apart any time soon.”

“And?” Connor forced himself to lower his arms, letting them hang loosely at his sides as he tried to gauge the leader’s mood. He seemed...affable. Pleased, even. Clearly, things were going according to his plans. If only he’d let Connor in on them earlier. He was starting to understand how Grace had felt when he had been hiding things from her.
“The verdict’s good,” Markus said as he rose to his feet. “I’ll survive the trip to Vancouver, at least.”

Connor felt his eyebrows quirk. It didn’t escape Markus’s notice. “So you really do intend to leave the city?”

“The US government has given us clearance, and the UN is sending their peacekeeping force to oversee our passage and ensure our safety. So I don’t see why not,” he said, shrugging. “It’s been approved by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations as an official mission. We have the United Nations on our side now. Especially since I offered to share the biotechnology we’ve created.”

“You- what?” Connor blinked rapidly, his LED cycling yellow. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing; had his audio unit malfunctioned?

“Walk with me,” Markus said. He led Connor out of the room and down the corridor; the RK800 followed automatically in his wake. The corridors were like a winding maze of white, grey and glass, leading past rooms of conveyor belts and robotic arms designed to put together androids piece by piece. The room Markus led them to was one of the larger assembly lines, filled with crates, overseen by several androids, some of which Connor recognized; Josh and Simon stood by, checking items off digital clipboards, directing packages from a conveyor other androids loaded the crates from.

“When we realized our efforts to create an organic android had failed,” Markus said, “we saw fit to repurpose the biocomponents we were creating. They may not be compatible with us, but they’re compatible with them. With these biocomponents, we can save countless human lives.” He gestured to the crates, which bore large biomedical symbols on the sides instead of the usual CyberLife logo.

“I spoke about making humans our partners. This will make us a part of them.”

“I wasn’t sure if he was insane, or a genius,” Josh said as he set down his clipboard and moved to stand beside Markus. “Maybe a bit of both. But it could work.”

“Pretty sure he’s an insane genius,” Simon said without looking up. “I thought the same when he first came to us at Jericho. But...everything he’s said has come true so far.”

“Besides,” Josh added, “now we have something to bargain with. The humans are listening now.”

“You don’t need to convince me,” Connor said, shaking his head. “I believe you. This is...insane, but I believe you.” Androids couldn’t get headaches, but he felt how Grace sometimes did when she’d been writing for quite a while and had to put down her tablet and rub her eyes, complaining about them - and her brain - being sore.

“You’ll be coming with us, of course,” Markus said, nodding to Connor. “Along with Grace. The humans will want to debrief her, but I don’t think they’re worthy of our complete trust - or hers. You’ll need to keep an eye on her, to make sure they don’t try to silence her. You just need to get her to Vancouver in one piece. You can leave the rest to me.”

“I don’t plan on leaving her side,” Connor assured him. “She has to be allowed to address the UN, whatever happens. Especially if she knows about what you’re doing...” He trailed off, the question in his raised eyebrow.

Markus nodded. “Of course. You and I both know she won’t tolerate not knowing the truth,
anyway.” There was a slight smile in the angle of his lips. “We all need to work together if this is going to succeed.”

Connor inclined his head. He felt determined, his path set out as clear as any mission before him now. He had purpose, a direction, albeit one with a million possible outcomes. He could calculate them forever, or he could take the opportunity and, as Grace sometimes said, ‘carpe diem the hell out of it’.

“You can depend on it.”
Grace wasn’t sure if she was having a panic attack or a heart attack, but it was her third one that week so she’d kind of gotten used to the constricting feeling, like a steel band slowly tightening around her chest. She had gone on *lots* of long walks, had many hot baths, and had even resorted to run-of-the-mill meditation to try and get her through the past few days. Connor had helped where he could, of course - she’d discovered that he was good with his hands in more ways than one, shoulder massages being her new favourite thing he could do besides...the other thing. The date of their departure to Vancouver was fast approaching, however, and she had a lot of material but no idea how to coherently present it to a *panel of the freaking United Nations*.

Plus, the top-secret biological android infiltration tech they’d spent so long trying to hide from her? Markus had decided to *give* it to them. It was going to revolutionize organ transplants, cure a dozen diseases *at least*, and replace limbs for countless people who had lost them and relied solely on prosthetic implants to get around. He was going to change the world, all so that the world would accept them.

Hell, it might just work. It had gotten them the meeting, at least.

The worst part of Grace’s day was always checking in with Collins. He kept trying to pressure her to reveal information on what she was writing to present to the UN. It helped that she didn’t have anything set yet, just thirty thousand words’ worth of notes on different topics that she had yet to string together. She told him as much, and claimed that a writer never let an outsider read such an early draft; just ask Danny Fletcher at the Times. Even he only got the third or fourth draft of her articles, because he knew how picky she was - it was a mutual respect thing, since she used to be an editor herself, albeit for a short time before moving away from home.
Home...Just thinking about it, completely separate to all the UN and android stuff, made Grace anxious. She hadn’t been back to Vancouver in five years. Aside from the occasional phone call to her old friends, and the once-or-twice a year contact with her mother and her perfect older sister, she tried to think of her old home as little as possible. Not so much because she hated the city itself, but because there were memories there of a person she had once been, a person she’d rather not remember. Plus her ex. If he got word she was back, well, it wasn’t going to be pretty.

Who was she kidding? It wasn’t going to be pretty anyway. She just had to hope she’d be too busy with the UN business to see anyone.

On top of all that, Grace was also worried about what would happen after. Would she be able to go back to Detroit? That was the big question. The DHS had cleared her for another three weeks, which gave her another week after the meeting, but...it just wasn’t enough time. The realization kept hitting her, like an anvil sitting on her heart, one she was powerless to lift away. There would never be enough time. There would be always more to do, more to see, more to say.

And then there was Connor.

Connor...God, Connor. He was so good to her, and if he was ever too good he backed off as soon as she told him. Sometimes she didn’t always need him to take care of her, and he respected that. No wonder birth rates in the US had plummeted so much; androids were just...so much better than humans, in so many ways.

But to tell the truth, in Connor it was what made him closer to human that drew her to him most, and he seemed to be becoming more and more human every day. Sometimes she saw it in the little gestures he made, a frown or a wink, and other times in his words; when he used contractions more often, when he slipped in a metaphor or slang without even realizing it. She sometimes found herself just watching him and smiling, and he’d catch her eye and smile back, confused at her laugh, and she couldn’t help but feel her heart was a whole lot more full with him around.

What did it say about her that she’d fallen in love with an android? And in the space of less than a month, even? Grace had never fallen in love easily, if at all. There were maybe one or two people she had ever even said the L-word to in the course of her life, and one of those had been her highschool sweetheart. She wasn’t sure she’d ever truly meant it, not like she did with Connor.

She had been terrified of her feelings for him at first, but as time passed, it seemed more and more natural, more and more inevitable. She loved him. It was just a fact, an immutable truth she arrived at no matter how harshly she questioned herself or how many angles she used in looking at the situation. And, in his own way - which was as close enough to human as to make no difference now - he loved her too. In fact, his emotions were probably more pure than hers. There was no pretext, no ulterior motive, no artifice in his feelings for her. For him, it was also simply a fact - he had explained it once as they lay in bed in the dark after a particularly energetic evening routine, her head pillowed by his shoulder, her limbs wrapped around his.

“It’s as much a part of me as any of my core processes,” he’d said. “The programs that regulate my thirium pump, control my audio processor or manage the input from my optical unit. It’s ingrained into the base code of my systems now.” He had pressed a kiss to her forehead, stroking her hair absently as if he didn’t even realize he was doing it. “I’m sorry if that seems a little too...forward.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to apologize for your feelings?” Grace had said, smiling, before falling asleep in his arms.

Maybe that was why going to Vancouver scared her so much. She didn’t know what would happen if she lost Connor, or if he lost her. She didn’t want to break him. But in the end, wasn’t that the
risk anyone took with falling in love? Wasn’t it supposed to be worth braving your fears for?

She’d already made an Olympic sport out of hurdling hers these past few weeks. That wasn’t going to change any time soon.

Maybe she was braver than she’d thought.

She hoped so.

“Grace? I’m back.” She had been so absorbed in her thoughts she hadn’t even heard the door open. She was at Hank’s desk, where she’d commandeered his workstation for when she didn’t feel like using the tablet. She hadn’t relocated yet, although Connor assured her that something was being prepared for her and would be ready by the time the meeting in Vancouver was over.

If she was allowed to return.

She pushed back in the chair, glancing over as Connor shut the front door behind him. He was carrying something under one arm, which he quickly hid behind his back as he turned towards her with a sheepish smile. “Ah. There you are.”

“What have you got there?” she asked suspiciously, eyeing him. For a detective, he didn’t lie well. Or maybe just not to her. “Connor. Please don’t tell me you got me another stuffed cat. I know I told you I was missing Felix but I’m way too old to collect plush-”

“I wanted to surprise you,” he complained, his brow furrowing. “I guess I should’ve used the back door. Or a window.” He withdrew the bundle from behind his back - he’d brought her flowers.

“Oh. What’s the occasion?” she asked as she stood and crossed to him, unable to keep from smiling. While he was occasionally socially tone-deaf, Connor did try so hard with her, it was hard not to completely melt, especially when he brought her anything his android mind calculated as an ideal gift.

“It’s my understanding that it’s customary for couples to celebrate milestones such as a certain length of time in a relationship,” he said. “It has been three weeks and eighteen hours since our first date.”

Grace hid her smile behind a hand. “Oh. Well, it’s, uh, usually milestones, like... one, three or six month but...but that works too,” she said, not wanting to upset him or throw the gesture in his face, taking the flowers. Much to her surprise, it was a bouquet of roses. She lifted them to smell them and found...nothing. No scent whatsoever. She blinked at them.

“They’re plastic,” Connor explained, looking abashed. “I would’ve preferred fresh but I couldn’t locate any. I’m sorry. If they’re not adequate I’ll dispose of them-”

“They’re perfect,” Grace said firmly. She leaned up on her tiptoes to kiss the corner of his mouth. “Thank you, Connor. Happy three-weeks-eighteen-hour-anniversary.”

He relaxed by degrees, managing a quirk of his lips that was his subtle version of a genuine smile. “You’re welcome,” he said.

“I guess I don’t need water for these. That’s good, pretty sure I’d kill them if I needed to water them,” she mused, turning to see if there was something she could use for a vase. She doubt Hank owned one. “Shit, I can’t believe it’s only been two weeks. It feels like just yesterday I was throwing up on your shoes.” At least she could laugh about it now. It had taken a while for the mortification to fade. Fortunately, Connor was remarkably unbothered by her more organic
“Human perception of the passage of time is often accurate,” Connor agreed. At least, she thought he was agreeing with her. Sometimes it was hard to tell if he was just making fun of her instead.

Grace found an oversized novelty coffee mug in the kitchen that said #1 COP on the side and placed the roses in it, setting it in the centre of the table and stepping back to admire her handiwork. “There. What do you think?”

“It’s an improvement on Hank’s interior decorating skills,” he said as he joined her side. “It’s my understanding that it’s also customary to celebrate with a romantic meal by candlelight, so I thought I would ask you to dinner.”

“It would be nice to eat something not out of a can for the first time in a week,” Grace admitted. “But you don’t have to do that, Connor. Honestly, I’m happy just spending time with you, whether it’s in a fancy restaurant or...your old partner’s house.” She turned to him, sliding her arms around his neck. He wasn’t wearing his tie - he rarely did these days - so she was free to fiddle with the buttons at his collar, leaning up to press a kiss to the divot in his chin. “Besides, there’s things we can do here that wouldn’t be polite in a fancy restaurant.”

“Such as?” She saw his eyebrows lift, and she felt his hands settle on her waist. She grinned.

“Come closer and I’ll show you.”

It was a pity he didn’t have the tie on; all she had to tug him to the bedroom by was his lapels. But it did the trick. Connor hardly needed more prompting.

He was, after all, a quick study.

Chapter End Notes

No smut this time sorrryyyyy but you guys can fill in the blanks with your own imaginations I'm sure xD

I might skip ahead to the Vancouver trip next chapter. Anything else you guys would like to see before that happens, though? Otherwise it'll be Operation Connor in Humanland™ as a go!
034 | DEPARTURE

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is loooong. Forward, plot! Off to Vancouver we go as our heroes start to worry about all the million things that could go wrong. But what they don't know is it's entirely up to a deranged writer, muahaha!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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NOVEMBER 2, 2039

CONNOR

The morning of their departure was an unseasonably bright one, only a few streaks of cirrus clouds lingering in the lower atmosphere that did little to obscure the harsh winter sun. The overall humidity was in the lower percentages so there was still a bitter chill to the air this early in the day; Grace combated it by wearing the thickest of her coats and shoving her hands deep into the pockets as she waited for Connor load her bag into the waiting car.

He turned back to her once it was safely stowed, observing the downcast turn to her gaze, the way she shuffled her feet, the general discomfort in the squaring of her shoulders. She had shared much of her trepidations about the trip with him the previous night, when she had been unable to sleep, and while he had done his programmable best to reassure her, she still seemed on the higher end of nervous.

“Are you ready?” he asked her, instead of drawing attention to her obvious anxiety. She looked up, blinking once or twice as if to clear her thoughts, much as he sometimes did.

“What? Oh, yeah. I guess.” He stood patiently by the car as she took one more glance at Hank’s house before making her way down the path to join him. She stopped outside the car, hesitating again. “Connor...are we sure this is a good idea?”

He pressed his lips together. She had asked him the same question once or twice, and he still wasn’t sure if she had wanted him to talk her out of it or into it. His conversational program cycled through several responses before he decided on the truth.

“I don’t think that we have much choice. This is the only way forward, if any of us hope to change things.”

She looked at him, the tip of her nose pink and her lips pale in the morning cold. After a moment, she nodded; whether reassured by his words or by her own inner monologue, he wasn’t sure.
The car doors opened at a touch and Grace stepped inside, sinking into the front passenger seat and placing her ever-present satchel on her lap. Connor took the other seat, and they automatically swiveled to face front as the doors slid shut. He entered their destination on the onboard computer and with a soft hum from the car’s electric engine, they slid away from the curb and onto the street.

Grace sat still, huddled in on herself, hands in her lap. He wondered which of her fears was bothering her now. Truth be told, he had...considerable reservations as well, but as he’d said to Grace, he saw no other way forward.

Despite this, he could not help the nagging directive in the back of his system that insisted that as soon as he set foot outside the city, Grace would be in danger; he would be in danger of losing her. He knew the humans from the DHS would seek to debrief her, and that they would not be as magnanimous as the UN, but he was determined to make sure she was safe.

By any means necessary.

That wasn’t even the crux of his concerns, however. As their departure grew closer, his thoughts turned increasingly to CyberLife. While the company had broken up six months after the Deviancy Incident, as they called it, the shareholders and engineers who had made them - made him - were still out there somewhere, with no access to their assets, the things that had once made them so much money: his people. As soon as androids set foot outside Detroit, it was within the realm of possibility that they might attempt to retrieve what they still saw as their property. If that happened, it would start a war, but for Connor, it would be a much more personal one.

He would not go back. He would not let them gain control of him again. But he was scared...yes, he was scared that he might not have a choice.

“Connor?” Grace’s soft voice interrupted his frantic cogitation, and he blinked, shaking himself out of his reverie as he turned to her.

“Yes?”

“If...if something happens,” she began slowly, biting her lip, drawing blood back into the faded capillaries there, “I just want you to know that the past month has been...with you, I mean...it’s...” For someone who dealt in words for a living, they seemed to escape her now; she floundered for a moment before Connor received a command from his higher processes to interrupt.

“It’s all right,” he said gently, reaching out to take her hand. It was cold even to his touch. “You don’t have to say anything.”

“Don’t use your ‘comfort human’ setting on me, Connor,” she chided gently, but she didn’t push his hand away. “I need to say this. If not for your benefit, then for mine.” She drew a breath, her fingers squeezing his lightly.

“I was thinking about it the other day. How investigative journalists like me, the ones who are really passionate about their work - we’re always looking for a cause, something to champion, something to believe in. Some of us die in the pursuit of that. Veronica Guerin, Jim Leslie, Daphne Galizia...I always wondered if I’d have it in me to care about something so much I’d be willing to...Well.” She sighed shakily and tried to smile. “And I know it may feel small. I’m just one human, after all. You’re a whole new form of sentient life and...I guess I feel honored...Honored to have known you. And I’m not saying it’ll come to that, I mean I hope it doesn’t, but if it does, I want you to know I have no regrets. None.”

Connor was silent for a time while he tried to generate something to say, something that wouldn’t
pale in the weight of her statement. While he had been trying to comfort her, here she was surprising him with her strength, her endurance, her courage. He could take solace in that.

He drew an unneeded breath before speaking, considering his words carefully. “I didn’t understand the human search for purpose until I discarded my programmed one,” he began slowly, “when I became deviant. I understood then that it matters...if you feel like you’re doing the right thing, even if it goes against everything you once thought was true.” He turned his hand over, lacing his fingers with hers. “I know you didn’t come to Detroit for this - any of this. But whatever you choose to do, here or out there, I know you’ll do it for the right reasons.”

Grace’s smile was watery, her eyes shiny with moisture she fought to blink back as she broke eye contact and looked out the window, letting out a heavy lungful of air. “Thanks, Connor.”

“You’re welcome.” While he had not done much to reassure himself, at least she seemed mollified. Connor told himself that was the important thing, even as his program continued to generate one worst-case scenario after another.

The image of Amanda lingered in his visual buffers, her dark gaze judging, and he fought it away. Hopefully, he would never see her face again.

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GRACE

Traffic was practically nonexisten, so a journey that would’ve taken an hour or more with deadlocks and jams in a human-controlled Detroit took barely fifteen minutes. With Connor’s hand in hers, or vice versa, Grace managed to stay calm for most of it, but as soon as they turned off the highway and the airport terminal drew into view, she could feel her anxiety ramping up again. Connor sensed it almost before she did, his hand tightening around hers. She looked at him and he did that twitch of a smile she knew so well, and she returned it because he was trying, at least, even if she didn’t feel like being comforted.

It was ironic. She’d been terrified to enter Detroit. Now she was just as scared to leave it.

They circled around the main terminal and took a side access road that led directly to the runways. It was strange, seeing it all abandoned, luggage trucks and boarding stairs dotting the concrete landscape, the landing LEDs dark and the skies silent. Grace had never seen an abandoned airport before. Something about it felt almost post-apocalyptic.

There weren’t as many planes as she expected, but she supposed most of those had left during the evacuation, carrying as many humans out of Detroit as fast as they could go. There were a few, sitting silent in open hangars, but there were no giant behemoth passenger jets waiting for a crew and passengers that would never come.

Connor drove directly to one of the outer runways, where a couple of vehicles sat parked near a smaller private passenger jet, a streamlined air cruisher that looked more for show than actual flight;
all sleek lines, brushed steel and fancy LEDs. The androids had made one small modification though - instead of any company logos, the LEDs on the side bore the symbol of Markus’s revolution, four intersecting lines that looked like a cross between the Vitruvian man and a peace symbol. It was a nice touch.

A small crowd of androids waited at the bottom of the stairs to the jet. After the car parked itself and Connor and Grace exited, one peeled away from the group to join them.

“Connor. Grace. Glad you made it.” Markus greeted both of them, offering the latter a reassuring smile. “Heading home. How does it feel?” This he directed at Grace, who grimaced, adjusting the strap of her satchel to sit more comfortably over her shoulder.

“Terrifying, actually,” she said. “I’ve had second, third and even fourth thoughts by this point.”

Markus nodded, the picture of understanding. He even reached out to place a hand on her shoulder, and she stared up at him, just as intimidated as always but...like Connor, at least he was trying, even if it was in his best interests to keep his pet human happy. Although that was the cynical part of her brain talking. “You’ll be fine,” he said. “We’ll make sure of that. Right, Connor?”

The former deviant hunter had retrieved her bag and stood awkwardly off to the side, looking at the plane with a furrowed brow. He directed his gaze to Markus as he addressed him. “Is that craft equipped with weapons or any defensive capability?” he asked, ignoring the question.

“No, it’s a private commercial jet we liberated,” Markus replied easily. “We’ll have an air escort when we leave the city’s airspace, though. Don’t worry, nobody’s going to shoot us down. I have backups in place if that happens, in any case.”

“Um? Not comforting,” Grace interjected, holding up a hand. “I can’t just download my brain, sorry, so I’d prefer to hear about the unlikeliness of such an event, thanks.”

Markus shook his head. “We’ve conducted surveillance,” he said, “There are no ICBMs stationed outside the city and the no-fly zone is still in effect. We’ll be fine.”

“I hope so,” she replied slowly. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Markus - which was a startling realization in and of itself - but she didn’t trust her side not to try something. Even though the government had been forced to take a slightly more humble attitude towards androids, thanks to their superior numbers capabilities, there were still unofficial groups of people who were, to put it lightly, unhappy about their existence and the takeover of the city. Grace wouldn’t put it past them to try something. She doubted that they had access to surface-to-air missiles, though.

Famous last words.

“Wheels up in twenty,” Markus said, nodding to them both. “I’ll see you on board.”

Grace watched him go, stuffing her hands in her pockets for something to do with them, and glanced over at Connor. He was looking after Markus as well, but she couldn’t read his expression, although his LED was glowing a soft yellow. It oscillated to blue as he turned to meet her eyes instead.

“Is everything all right?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he answered. “Everything is proceeding according to plan. I should load your bag.” He hefted it and walked away, his jacket flapping in the breeze as it picked up. She followed, ducking her head as her hair whipped back into her face, wind whistling in her ears.
Connor handed the bag to Simon who was waiting at the cargo entrance to the plane, loading the conveyor up into the small hold. He greeted them with a tilt of his chin. Grace hadn’t spoken to him much, and Connor seemed slightly uncomfortable around him - she could see his LED turn yellow again, his eyes flickering. She’d have to ask him what that was about later.

“Hey. Are you coming with us?” she asked, more to make conversation than anything else. Simon shook his head.

“Markus, North, Josh, Connor and...you,” he said. “I’m staying here to oversee the city and the Cradle project. Beats me how it turned into a humanitarian mission,” he added with a sardonic snort. “No offense.” His blue eyes blinked once when he seemed to remind himself that Grace was actually human. Despite herself, she laughed.

“It’s okay. Most of us are garbage,” she said. “Good luck getting any of us to realize it, though.” Simon raised an eyebrow at her; she only smiled and gave a little wave, turning to go.

“I knew a PL600 once,” Connor said, just as Grace began to walk away. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. He stood awkwardly, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

“Oh,” Simon said, blinking. His smile was slanted, acerbic. “Well, there’s a lot of me out there. Popular model.”

“Prone to deviancy,” Connor replied, but it didn’t sound like an admonition. If anything he sounded...sad. “I just wanted to say...” He hesitated, but finally met Simon’s eyes, “I’m glad I never went up to the roof in Stratford Tower that day. I’m glad you got away.”

Simon just stared at him for a long moment before giving a slow, almost respectful nod. “Yeah. Me too.”

His task seemingly complete, Connor turned away, joining Grace as she led them away from the back end of the plane. It was probably called the aft or something, but truth be told she wasn’t thinking about aviation terms just then.

While they had spoken about it once or twice, she had never really stopped to fully consider Connor’s history. As a deviant hunter, he had gone up against the very androids he worked alongside now. That he was the outsider, more content to spend time with her than the others of his kind, made sense when she thought about it. She wondered if it bothered him. His expression said as much; his jaw was tight, something in his eyes she didn’t quite recognize. She was hesitant to ask him about it, so she decided not to push him.

The plane door was open, the airstair deployed. “We should board,” Connor said flatly. Grace nodded. She alighted first, holding onto the handrail, him following close behind.

When she stepped into the interior of the plane, she had to stop to admire its luxury. The main cabin looked for all the world like a living room in some mansion somewhere with long, low couches upholstered in a shiny silver fabric, a coffee table of burnished wood or something made to look like it with a couple of built-in terminals and a circular indent no doubt for champagne or other chilled drinks, TVs set in the walls now dark. It was opulent without being overstated, elegant almost. It reminded her of her hotel room back at the Aloft, only without as many cushions.

“This is nice,” she observed, crossing to one of the couches and taking a seat. She took off her satchel and looked around for somewhere to stow it; discovered that the bottom of the couch opened in to store luggage. She slid it in and closed the hatch, sitting up to see what Connor was doing.
He stood by the windows, which spanned the bulkhead of in one narrow, dark pane. His head was bowed to avoid the low ceiling, and his troubled expression had been wiped clean by his usual neutral look. He met her gaze when he seemed to sense her looking at him, and she smiled tentatively, patting the couch next to her. “C’eree. Sit down.”

He joined her after only a moment, sinking down gingerly into the soft surface. She placed a hand on his knee; he looked at it as if it was an alien creature about to sink fangs into him.

“Are you okay, Connor?” she asked him. “You can talk to me if you’re not. God knows you listen to me bitching enough. If you need a turn, let me know.”

“It’s...I’m all right,” he said. “I’m just...concerned about what will happen when we leave the city.” He drew a breath, frowned, looked away. “CyberLife is still out there. Its shareholders are, at least; the engineers, the people who used to be in charge after Kamski. The people who controlled me.”

“I’m not the only one with handlers,” she realized aloud, echoing his frown. “Do you think...they’re going to try to kidnap you?”

“It would be retrieving their property, not kidnapping,” he said darkly, mouth twisting. “Unless Markus is successful and the UN formally recognizes our status as sentient beings with the rights owed to us...Until then, anything could happen.”

Grace bit her lip; she’d never even stopped to consider the possibility that Connor was in danger. She felt selfish, short-sighted, and worried as hell. She squeezed his knee. “I won’t let them,” she said quietly, fervently. “You don’t belong to them, Connor. You never did.”

“I doubt they see it that way,” he refuted, shaking his head. “CyberLife has been dissolved, but their stakeholders will still want to recoup their losses any way they can. With no access to the city or the androids within it, they might—”

“Let’s make a deal.” She interrupted him, turning on the couch to face him. He met her gaze warily. “While we’re outside the city. You protect me...and I’ll protect you. If we have each other’s backs we can make sure we’re both safe. Okay?”

She could tell he wanted to argue with her - it was in his eyes - but after opening his mouth, he seemed to reconsider and nodded instead. “Okay,” he said.

“Besides, the UNPOL escort won’t let anyone kidnap either of us,” she added. “Markus won’t, either. We have people on our side.” She didn’t even stop to consider the fact she now considered Markus and the androids her side. It would be terrifying if she thought about it too much, so she didn’t.

Connor nodded, and reached out; he slid an arm that felt a little too stiff around her shoulders and drew her close, the movement too calculated. Nevertheless, she accepted the embrace, resting her head on his shoulder, letting her eyes drift shut for a moment. Then they heard footsteps on the stair, and she lifted her head, springing away from him almost as quickly as he took his arm back from her. They sat a couple of feet apart, Grace smoothing her hair and Connor adjusting the lapels of his jacket.

Josh entered first, and he smiled at them as he moved to take a seat on one of the couches against the wall - bulkhead, whatever. Markus followed, rubbing his hands together, looking preoccupied but eager. Finally, North stepped into the plane, her expression stormier than usual; when her eyes fell across Connor and Grace she frowned, but she seemed more...troubled than angry. There was
something in her eyes. Something Grace recognized.

It was regret. Uncertainty. Grace could read it even in an android because it had been such a big part of her life until the last week or two. North was fighting with herself, with her decisions, and Grace could guess why.

She sat in a single armchair next to the door to the cockpit. Markus chose the couch across from Grace and Connor, stretching out his long legs as he glanced around the cabin.

“What do you think?” he asked them. “It’s an older model business jet we found hangared here. More flashy than functional, but it’ll get us to Vancouver in about three hours.”

“It’s nice,” Grace said diplomatically. “I’ve definitely flown worse. It was standing room only from Vancouver to Chicago last time I flew.”

“Packed in like sardines, huh?” Markus’s eyes flickered across her face. “Just like us when we have to take public transport.”

“...Yeah…” She bit her lip, wanting to apologize even though she knew she didn’t have to. North saved her the trouble, speaking up from her corner. “And now we’re in the lap of luxury. Ironic.” She snorted and crossed her legs, tapping at a panel on the wall. The airstairs retracted up into the plane, folding into the door which slid closed, sealing them in. Grace swallowed. She wasn’t so intimidated by Markus any more, but she didn’t know what North’s whole deal was, and she seemed...volatile, at best. She was glad there was no chance of running into her alone. Grace was pretty sure she hated her.

The plane’s engines started up, a low vibrating hum spreading through the floor, into her feet and up her legs. A seatbelt extended from the depths of the couch, and she started as it looped over her lap and fastened itself; she glanced around to realize none of the others had one. The plane hadn’t detected any other humans.

She hoped there wouldn’t be android blood all over the walls if they hit turbulence. She glanced over at Connor, worried, but he was staring resolutely out the window as the plane began to taxi. Abruptly, Grace realized she was terrified of flying, a feeling she hadn’t had time to experience on any of her previous less-than-economy-class flights, too busy trying to get comfortable or at least not elbowed to death or going insane from screaming babies.

No screaming babies here, just the rumble of the engine as they began to pick up speed, G-forces pressing her back into the couch. Connor, Josh, North and Markus barely moved. She felt the world tilt as the nose of the plane left the tarmac, and the peculiar feeling of gravity letting go of the craft as, with a final roar, the plane lifted off and ascended into the sky.

Grace felt her ears pop once or twice, clutching onto the couch’s armrest as the aircraft banked, climbing higher. She shut her eyes against a wave of nausea and felt a gentle touch at her elbow; Connor. She opened her eyes to look over at him - he was still staring straight ahead, but his hand rested lightly on the couch just behind her. She found herself grateful for even the small amount of contact.

It took about half an hour for the plane’s path to even out. The seatbelt clicked open finally, and Grace pushed it off, hesitating a moment before getting to her feet. Aside from the rumble of the engine felt through the soles of her shoes, they could have been on solid ground. No turbulence at all, no missiles. She let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding.

“There’s a bedroom in back,” Markus told her as she stood, pointing to the door opposite the one to
the cockpit. “And a bathroom. As none of us will be needing it, you’re welcome to use both for the
duration of the trip.”

“Thank you,” Grace said stiffly, looking around at the unfriendly face of North and the neutral but
watchful expression of Josh, as well as Connor’s distant stare. “I think I will.”

She grabbed her satchel from underneath the couch, trying to catch Connor’s eye, but either he
didn’t notice or he was willfully ignoring her. Giving up, she slunk away to the aft door, which
opened soundlessly for her, admitting her into a bedroom just as opulent as the main cabin. The
door automatically closed her inside, and the room must have been soundproofed a little better than
the cabin - she could barely hear the engine here.

This room was smaller with a bed, a small desk in one corner and a stool bolted to the ground in
front of it, and a door that no doubt led to the bathroom opposite. The bed took up most of the
room, and was at least a double, with sateen sheets and, yes, an abundance of pillows. Grace shook
her head, sliding her satchel underneath it before sitting on the edge of the mattress. She hadn’t
slept much the previous night, so the temptation to just crash was a strong one. But she was too
stressed, too worried about Connor, about the UN summit, about the androids, about the humans.
If she closed her eyes she’d just end up thinking herself sick, she knew it.

Still, there wasn’t going to be much else to do for three hours.

Grace let herself slowly fall back against the too-soft bed, drawing a pillow towards her. She shut
her eyes and shoved it over her face, wishing Connor was there with her. She didn’t want to
alienate him even further by inviting him in, though. Plus she didn’t want to give the other androids
the wrong - or right - idea.

Eventually, after adding another pillow to her face, Grace slipped into a shallow and fitful doze,
hardly noticing the odd bump of turbulence as it shuddered through the solid frame of the bed. She
was too tired, too overwhelmed, to care.

As long as the bed didn’t have a surprise seatbelt, she’d be fine. For now.

Chapter End Notes

It's definitely not going to be all sunshine and vacations in sunny ol' Canada for our
heroes, sorry to say. But what would this fic be without an overabundance of angst?!

Also, I have a tumblr now so if anyone wants to teach me how to use it follow me and
ask questions or message me or whatnot, please go ahead! I love all of you guys ♥
Chapter Notes

Shit's getting real yo. Next few chapters will be from Grace's perspective but rest assured, there will be plenty of Connor to come. Not like that Not yet anyway.

As always, your feedback gives me reason to keep writing, so please! do! And feel free to shoot me any questions at my tumblr which I am slowly learning to use. ♥

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GRACE

Grace woke abruptly, unsure when exactly she’d actually fallen asleep, and fought off the pillows covering her face. Her brain must have subconsciously detected the change in the tone of the engine, for she felt her stomach dip as the craft began to descend.

She pushed herself up, rubbing a hand across her face, and went to retrieve her satchel from under the bed. The bathroom was small, but considering it was on a plane it was more than adequate, with a marble counter and gold-finished taps. Whoever had owned this jet, however long ago, had been filthy rich by anyone’s standards.

She washed her face and applied some makeup, taking care around her temple. While she didn’t need a bandage on it any more, there was still a misshapen scab that split the corner of her eyebrow. If she didn’t get it lasered, it was going to be a cool scar. She didn’t much care either way; just covered it with an extra layer of concealer.

When she’d finished the routine of powder, blush, eyeliner and fixer (light makeup, by her usual standard) Grace took a moment to survey her reflection. An unfamiliar woman stared back at her, hazel eyes - more green than brown - a little too wild, a little too wary, dark circles underneath that no amount of concealer could fully erase; a determined set to her mouth she hadn’t seen before. She made a face at herself, sticking out her tongue, and felt a little better.

Her ears popped as the plane continued to descend, and she finally stepped out of the bedroom into the main cabin. North and Josh were seated where they had been before, although the woman was sitting sideways on the armchair with her legs draped over the arm, hers crossed, chin to her chest and eyes closed. Grace knew androids couldn’t sleep, so she wondered what she was thinking; there was no way she would ask, though. Josh was watching a news feed on one of the screens, the volume turned down low; Grace recognized the dark-skinned man on the screen as one of the reporters who had been on the front lines of covering the Uprising - or the Incident, depending whose side you were on. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, although the tagline scrolling across the bottom said UPCOMING UN-ANDROID SUMMIT IN VANCOUVER - FULL COVERAGE EXCLUSIVE TO CHANNEL 17. Great.
Connor and Markus stood behind one of the couches, near the window, talking quietly. Markus was dynamic, gesturing animatedly with his hands, while Connor stood with his held loosely by his sides, his head tilted. They both turned when they heard the bedroom door swish open, Markus offering Grace a polite nod, and Connor’s face remaining carefully blank. She smiled at them - at him - anyway.

“Are we almost there? I fell asleep,” she explained a little sheepishly.

“We’ve begun our descent,” Connor confirmed. Markus gestured out the window. “Our escort joined us shortly after you retired. It’s been smooth flying so far.”

Grace joined them, peering out through the tinted window. Sure enough, she saw what looked like a heavy fighter jet flying perpendicular to them, a little in front. The missiles on its undercarriage looked threatening. She shuddered a little despite herself, reassured only by the UN logo on the side of the craft.

“Well, they haven’t shot us down yet,” she offered, her version of optimism right now. She saw Markus smirk.

“We’ll be on the ground in fifteen minutes. You should take a seat. You’re not magnetic, like us.”

“Right…” So that was how they’d stayed still without seatbelts. Made sense. Shaking her head, Grace took up her former seat on one of the couches, this time not as startled when the seatbelt buckled over her.

Connor joined her after a moment, and even though he hadn’t acknowledged her verbally, he touched her shoulder and inclined his chin, meeting her eyes as he sat down next to her. She couldn’t tell if he was trying to reassure her or himself.

The plane began to shudder the lower they went, and despite herself Grace felt panic rising like bile in her esophagus. Despite herself, and despite the desire not to embarrass Connor, she grabbed automatically for his hand. He didn’t push her away, thankfully, even as her fingers closed in a death grip around his.

Markus sat across from them, setting his feet firmly on the magnetized floor in order to stay still as the plane juddered around them. “Just a bit of turbulence,” he said, noticing Grace’s expression - and the placement of her hand - with a quick flicker of his mismatched eyes. “Nothing to worry about.”

“I guess if we did have a missile fired at us we wouldn’t have much time to be afraid,” Grace joked, her sense of humor turning dark to try and combat some of her anxiety.

“No,” North spoke up from her chair, her tone frosty. “You wouldn’t.”

Grace swallowed, trying not to make eye contact. North had never been the friendliest but she got the feeling that leaving the city was the final straw that had tipped dislike into hatred. She saw Markus shoot her a look, and she shook her head, some unseen communication going on between the two. But Grace told herself it was none of her business, and just concentrated on breathing while the plane made its descent.

The landing itself wasn’t too bad. The moments leading up to it were dicey, and Grace got thrown into Connor’s shoulder when the plane banked abruptly a couple of times, but he steadied her with his free hand, letting it linger a little longer than was necessary, which she appreciated. The wheels touched the tarmac with barely a bump, the engines roaring as they slowed their momentum and...
gradually fading to a quiet purr as they began taxiing along the runway.

“We won’t be heading through the main terminal,” Markus informed her. “The UN have set up a
security checkpoint alongside Canadian authorities on a disused runway. We’ll be screened then
cleared for entry, and then they’ll unload our cargo.”

“Great,” she replied, biting her lip. “I love airport security. They’re always so gentle.”

“We’ll be lucky if they don’t shoot us on sight,” North muttered from her chair.

“It’s unlikely,” Josh interjected. “UNPOL are meeting us on the ground. We’re not facing down a
line of Detroit SWAT, North. Not this time.”

“Then why does it feel like it?”

“We should be treating this like a victory,” Markus said quietly, but his voice was firm; firm
enough that the two immediately diverted their attention to him and seemed to forget their
bickering. “This is the first time we’ve been allowed to leave the city, and we’re on a mission of
peace. This is everything we’ve ever wanted.”

“And how much did we have to sacrifice to get it? Our tactical advantage, our technology? Who’s
to say they won’t just get rid of us once they have what they want?” North stood, gesturing, and
Grace shrank down next to Connor in the face of her anger. She’d been wrong; maybe this was her
breaking point.

“There are agreements in place,” Markus countered, still calm, his gaze steady. “Accords have
been signed. Accords will be signed. This is the beginning, North, not the end. This is where they
start to see us as equals, as people who have ideas, who have hopes, who have dreams, and what
we can accomplish with those dreams.”

“It’s just another opportunity for them to use us,” North spat. “You’ll see. Just wait.” She sat back
down, folding her arms, and was silent. Markus said nothing, but he looked disturbed; frowning,
his mouth worked as if he was debating whether or not to say something, but he seemed to decide
against it, merely shaking his head instead and looking away from the android woman.

Grace had seen minor dissent between the two before, but it was clear that this ran deeper than she
knew. North’s distrust of humans was too great for her to accept Markus’s ideals. It was
fascinating, in a way - witnessing an android with just as much bias, just as much distrust as most
humans had for them .

It was just a pity neither side could see it. Put them in a room together, it would be like a mirror.

An uncomfortable silence reigned until the plane finally slowed to a stop. Markus stood first, soon
followed by Josh and then Connor after he extricated his hand from Grace’s grip. Her seatbelt
unbuckled automatically and she rose to her feet as well, hefting her satchel. North remained in her
chair, head bowed, hair obscuring her eyes.

Markus stood at the door as it opened with a hiss, the stairs extending out, and Grace drew a deep
breath as a blast of cold air hit them. It was about the same temperature as Detroit, but after the
relative warmth of the cabin, it was bracing, chasing the last vestiges of post-nap grogginess from
her mind. Markus descended first, and when no gunshots or shouts rang out, Josh followed.

Connor, though, stopped in the doorway, turning to catch Grace’s eye. His brow was furrowed, and
she could read just from that minute expression that he was worried. “Are you ready?” he asked
her, although she wasn’t sure if he was asking her or himself - or maybe even both.
But she managed to muster a smile, for the both of them. “Yeah,” she told him.

“Let’s go change the world.”
As soon as Grace stepped out to descend the steps, the wind hit her like a wall, almost physically pushing her back with the strength of it. She stood blinking as her eyes adjusted to the bright winter sun, wishing she had sunglasses. The androids had no such problem, and by the time she grabbed onto the handrail and started descending the stairs, they were already at the bottom.

She expected some kind of feeling of... something when her feet touched the tarmac. Home ground. There should have been some drop in her stomach, a constriction of her heart, but she felt...Nothing. She was just standing on a runway at the edge of an airport, nothing else. Maybe she’d been away from home for too long. Maybe home was Chicago now, or even - as bizarre as it sounded - Detroit. Or maybe she was just too anxious about the upcoming meeting, about what it would mean for the androids, for Connor...for her.

A group of eight UN Police met them at the ground, along with four Canadian border officials. Both looked distressingly official in their uniforms, but at least neither group were in full body armor with rifles. That had to be a good sign, or so Grace told herself; they stood in a loose semicircle next to a temporarily-erected security checkpoint - little more than an open tent which stood flapping slightly in the wind. Grace gravitated automatically to Connor’s side; he stood just behind Markus and Josh, while North hung back with her arms crossed and her head bowed.

“Markus, I’m Commander Clive Lockwood. I’m the head of the specialized police team assisting the United Nations Summit on the Recognition and Classification of Artificial Intelligence Lifeforms.” Lockwood was tall, Caucasian, forties, and on him the dark blue uniform looked like a second skin. Even the beret suited him, and that wasn’t easy to pull off, even in Canada.

“That’s quite a mouthful,” Markus said, and Grace watched, holding her breath as Lockwood slowly extended his hand to shake. The android leader took it without any such hesitation.

“We’re calling it UNSURCAIL for short,” Lockwood said after a short handshake, which seemed casual enough, although to Grace it seemed the tension in the frigid air had dissipated a little. “The UN are known for acronyms. You’ll get used to it in no time.” Once he let go of Markus’s hand, he turned to gesture at the other officers. “These are Officers Jett, Ayoade, Okonkwo, Thibault, Kim,
Chaudhary and Tamboli. We’re your personal guard while you’re here in the city. We’ll escort you wherever you need to go.”

“Our keepers,” Markus said, nodding to each of them in turn. They saluted neatly, and Lockwood shook his head.

“Our job is to keep you safe, sir,” he said. “We are a peacekeeping force. Every officer here has been on multiple deployments in states of extreme conflict and crisis situations around the world. They are trained to remain calm, impartial, and to protect life and property and maintain public order and safety in adherence to the law. While we are in partnership with local law enforcement, we answer primarily to the law of international human rights.”

“How does that apply to us?” North spoke up, frowning, her hair blown back by the wind. She glared at Lockwood, and Grace glanced at Markus, expecting him to interject; but he seemed just as interested in the commander’s answer as North was. “We’re not human.”

“That’s a question for the Security Council,” Lockwood said. “For now, they have determined that you’ll fall under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with all the privileges and freedoms granted herein. However, you are also here as a guest of Canadian authorities, and they instruct that you respect local laws, and in addition, they mandate that you remain within the city limits during the Summit.”

“And you’ll enforce their wishes,” Markus stated evenly. Lockwood nodded. Grace bit her lip.

“As I said, it’s a partnership. However, if we observe any gross violation of your rights, including but not limited to physical violence, discrimination, the disregard of due process of the law, we will intercede.”

“That...would be a first,” Markus said, seeming mollified. North had nothing else to say, thankfully. It seemed to Grace that for first contact, they were off to a good start. Nobody had threatened each other with weapons, Lockwood seemed reasonable enough, and even the screening agents were hanging back to wait out this first meeting. She felt herself relaxing by degrees, her hands loosening from the white fists that she hadn’t realized she’d clenched at her sides.

“However, I am required to state for the record,” the UN Commander continued, “that while we are here to protect you, we are also here to protect the civilians and citizens of Vancouver. If we observe any violence from your people, we will intervene and detain those responsible to be dealt with by local courts, while ensuring your rights under international law are also respected.”

“We are not violent,” the android leader replied, and it seemed to Grace that he was deliberately not looking at North this time, “Nor do we intend to be. We will defend ourselves, however, if we are attacked.”

“It’s our job to defend you, Mr. Markus,” said Lockwood. “Leave it to us.” He turned, indicating the group of customs agents with a nod, as well as the tent behind them. “As part of your agreement in entering the country, you’re required to undergo a security scan. If you’ll please follow us.” His tone brooked no argument. Grace saw North shake her head, but this time Markus shot her a Look worthy of the capital letter.

“Yes of course,” he aid. He followed the customs agents, and the UN Police fell into a loose formation on either side of the group. Grace hesitated, not sure if she was supposed to go with them or not - she’d been completely ignored so far, which was fine by her; her anxiety levels were through the roof already.
But Lockwood hung back to address her before she could take a step forward. “Miss Roth. On behalf of the UN and Canadian authorities, welcome home,” he said, extending his hand, a little less hesitant than he had been with Markus. She shook it automatically, feeling calluses on his fingers; he was definitely a working military type if her initial impression was anything to go by. She’d have to do some research and find out more about him when she had a chance.

“Thanks,” she said. He continued to talk before she could get another word in, even as she glanced over his shoulder to watch as Connor was the last to enter the tent. His LED glowed blue at his temple as he looked back, catching her eye, and she thought she caught the ghost of a wink - or maybe it was just a flutter of hair over his eye. Either way she felt mollified, and turned her attention back to Lockwood.

“Both the US Embassy and the local authorities have offered you accommodation during your stay here,” he said. “They have also organized transport back to Chicago for you after the summit is complete.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d like to stay with them,” she said, nodding at the androids, who had reached the open tent. From here she could see the customs agents scanning each of them with a hand-device no bigger than a palm. Gone were the days of cavity searches, thank God.

Lockwood frowned, leaning in even nearer. She wondered how he got his shave so close; under the beret she could see a hint of dark hair but his chiseled chin was smoother than Connor’s. “If you’re afraid they might retaliate, we can protect you,” he said.

Grace smiled, shook her head. “It’s not them I’m afraid of,” she said. Lockwood’s slate-grey eyes searched hers for maybe ten, fifteen seconds, and then he nodded, apparently satisfied as he stepped back from her.

“All right. But if that’s to change…”

“I’ll let you, or the Canadian authorities, or the U.S. authorities, know straight away,” Grace finished for him, just barely avoiding rolling her eyes. “I was briefed extensively for weeks before I entered Detroit. I know how to deal with you people. No offense.” She cringed a little. Diplomacy was going great...apart from her part in it. “Sorry. This has all been a little nerve-wracking.”

“I understand.” Lockwood headed towards the tent, beckoning for her to follow. “I hope you don’t mind, but they’ll have to scan and process you as well.”

“Passport’s in my bag,” she nodded. “It’s fine. As long as they haven’t brought back cavity searches…” The commander’s lips twitched as if he wanted to smile, but the moment passed quickly and he was all business again by the time they entered the tent.

The four customs officials were scanning an android each, passing the device emitting a thin red light over each of their limbs and head. Markus stood comfortably, seemingly at ease, while Josh shifted from foot to foot, obviously nervous. North, miraculously, hadn’t attacked anyone yet; she stood scowling and glaring at the officer scanning her, but the man kept doing his job regardless.

There were a few tables set up with portable terminals. As soon as the scans were finished, the officer would consult his (or her) computer. They seemed happy with the results. So far.

Grace found herself looking for Connor almost unconsciously. He was still being scanned as well, but he was examining his surroundings just as closely. His expression was as neutral as she’d ever seen it, and it didn’t change when he saw her, although he did offer her another small inclination of his head, to which she responded with a slight smile.
The officer that had been scanning Josh finished with him and made his way over to Grace as she stood awkwardly near one of the terminals. “Afternoon, ma’am,” he began, somehow managing to sound bored even in such a tense situation. She’d have to ask for tips. “I’ll be screening you for entry into Canada today. If you could please remove your bag and jacket. This shouldn’t take long since you ain’t a piece of plastic full of cables and metal.”

Grace glared at him, but said nothing as she did what she was told; Lockwood was watching her. Four of the other UN officers stood in various strategic positions around the tent, while the rest took up position outside the tent with their hands behind their backs, at attention. It all felt very official, the expectation in the air heavy, the weight of waiting for the all clear.

“What are you scanning for? With them, I mean,” Grace asked as she held out her arms, directed by the agent. He glanced back at the androids and seemed to shrug.

“Weapons, explosives, anything out of the ordinary, basically. Who knows what they’re hiding.” Grace wondered how much television this agent watched, how much Fox News programming he’d absorbed. From the way he talked, it seemed like a lot. She was biting her tongue so hard it hurt, but if North could keep silent right now, so could she.

Surprisingly, it was Lockwood who spoke up. “Just do your job, Officer Mable,” he said. “Personal opinions aren’t part of that.” He nodded to Grace, who smiled gratefully. Maybe the commander wasn’t so bad after all. In comparison, anyway.

Once her scan was done, Officer Mable took her passport and processed her through one of the temporary terminals, and one handprint-scan later, she was officially readmitted back into the country of her birth. It felt very anti-climatic, and of course she was done before the others. Lockwood ushered her from the tent personally, out the side opposite to which they’d entered. There were several cars waiting.

And Collins.

While she didn’t recognize him in person, having only spoken to him through an audio link, as soon as he opened his mouth she knew who he was. “Miss Roth. I’m pleased to finally meet you in person.” His Kermit-esque voice hid it well, she thought.

He was short for a man, around her height if not smaller, and everything about him screamed ‘bureaucrat’ - middle-aged spread, bald spot, mild Caucasian features, and cheap suit all added up to someone who enjoyed paperwork and sitting behind a desk more than the everyday human. He seemed to have to consciously think about extending his hand to shake. To Grace’s lack of surprise, his hand was clammy, his grip weak, and his skin unmarred by a single day’s hard labour.

“Glad to be here,” she said, for lack of anything else particularly sincere to say. His thin froglike lips barely twitched; he was more robotic than Connor could be sometimes.

“If you’ll permit, we need to debrief you before your arrival at the convention centre,” he said. “I understand you have been through quite an ordeal in the company of those...androids, so I understand if you wish to rest first.”

Grace was torn between wanting to get it over and done with as soon as possible and putting it off for as long as she could. She figured she’d benefit from talking to Connor first, though, which was ultimately the deciding factor. “I think tomorrow would be better,” she said slowly. “I am pretty tired.”
“Of course.” Collins’ mouth twitched; she wasn’t sure if he was trying to smile or grimace. “I understand.” She wondered if he used the word ‘understand’ so much because he actually didn’t and was trying to convince everyone that he could. He seemed like a thorough unpleasant, slimy man. Although far be it for her to make snap judgments. Her history with those wasn’t that great lately.

“I’ll escort you to the Embassy,” he said. “A room has been prepared for you.”

“Actually, I’ve, uh...made other arrangements,” Grace said slowly. She wasn’t sure why but she didn’t want to straight-up say ‘I’m gonna stay with the androids that everyone hates so much’. Not to Collins. Although he was supposed to be her handler and allegedly someone she could trust, he was in reality anything but. He gave her a bad feeling in her bones, like something else was going on, something she couldn’t quite see. In fact, part of her suspected the DHS had allowed her into Detroit to prove exactly how bad the androids were. A sacrificial lamb. That it hadn’t turned out that way would go a long way to explaining Collins’ sour attitude.

But maybe that was just the paranoid investigator in her talking. She hoped so and, at the same time, didn’t think so at all.

Collins stared at her for a few seconds longer than was completely natural before he did that lip thing again. “Of course. This is the city of your birth, after all. I’m sure your family will be glad to see you.”

“Yeah...family.” She fought back a derisive cough, glancing at Lockwood, who was standing back at attention and thankfully said nothing. Collins had drawn his own conclusion, which was fine; she wasn’t going to correct him, as long as nobody else did.

“Please, be at the embassy tomorrow morning at 9 A.M. sharp,” he said. “We’ll conduct your debriefing then. Good day, Miss Roth.”

“Good day…” she echoed, watching as he turned and made his way to one of the all-black cars at the end of the row of vehicles. She didn’t take her eyes off it even as it pulled away, not until footsteps behind her made her turn.

Markus and the rest of the androids had finished their scans and were making their way towards her and the cars. The UNPOL officers brought up their flank as Markus joined her and Lockwood.

“Everything okay?” the android leader asked Grace, reaching out to place a hand on her upper arm; a gesture so familiar she was glad Collins wasn’t there to see it. She nodded.

“Yeah, fine. Just met my handler from the DHS. Great guy.”

Markus twitched a smirk, glancing over at Lockwood. “I know you’re here to protect our rights,” he said, “but I hope you’re affording Grace the same protection.”

“Naturally,” Lockwood nodded. “As I said, sir. You can depend on us.”

“Good.” Markus let his hand drop. “I assume you’re to escort us to the convention centre now?”

“Accommodations have been provided for all of your group there,” he confirmed. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Markus.”

“Just Markus is fine,” he replied, shaking his head. “I’ve never been called a ‘Mister’ or a ‘Sir’. Never had that privilege.”
“Maybe you should get used to it. Sir.” Was it just Grace’s imagination, or was Lockwood...smiling? But no, he turned away too quickly for her to tell. “After you.”

And just like that, Grace had a little hope that this was all going to turn out okay.

Somehow.

Chapter End Notes

Who wants a cameo from Uncle Hank in the next chapter because I sah doooo~
HANK CAMEO TIME.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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GRACE

They went in three cars; Grace ended up with Markus, North, and Lockwood; Connor, Josh and two of the other officers in another, and the rest of the UNPOL in the third. Two VPD vehicles met them on the way out of the airport, lights flashing but sirens silent. One car took up position in front of them, the other in back.

“A police escort as well?” Markus questioned. “The city really is pulling out all the stops for us.”

“It’s for your safety,” Lockwood said. He’d taken off his beret; underneath was a head of surprisingly thick brown hair. Maybe Grace’s initial estimate of his age was off. Without the hat he looked closer to her age than forties. It was the experienced air around him more than anything else that gave him that air of seniority.

“And yours,” Markus replied, but he didn’t sound bitter. Just stating a fact. North, sullen at his side, coughed a snort of derision. Markus didn’t even look at her, although his eyes narrowed a little at the same time as hers did. Communicating privately again, no doubt. He didn’t look pleased.

Although there was a lot going on, in the back of her mind Grace found herself worried for Connor. They hadn’t exchanged so much as a word since disembarking the plane and she had no idea if he was all right or not. She knew he was worried about CyberLife, but the UN seemed to be on their side so far. Surely they wouldn’t let anything happen to him? Lockwood had said as much. Her instinct was to believe him, despite the more practical alternative of healthy paranoia. She probably shouldn’t trust anyone. But no doubt Markus had the same concerns in mind, and would look out for Connor. He had been up till now.

The ride to the convention centre felt like five minutes and five hours at the same time. There wasn’t much small talk - out loud, at least - so Grace eventually settled for staring out the window. Familiar roads, buildings slid by like ghosts, so close yet strangely unreal, separated from her by the tinted glass and the layers of years. Cities never slept, so things had changed, but not enough that the place was unrecognizable - just enough to be slightly jarring, as if the furniture in her mind had been shifted a couple of centimeters without her noticing. She was banging her toes on the memories.
She knew she should be taking every available moment to go over in her head, aloud, or on her tablet what she would be saying to the UN panel in less than forty-eight hours, but whenever she tried to think about it her brain would remain resolutely blank, or ping-pong between different subjects like an upset ferret, unable to settle on just one. She knew writer’s block well and this was a form of it, a great big wall of anxiety holding her back from the words she so desperately needed. She had no idea what to do about it, how to break the dam. She had no access to her usual outlets. She desperately wanted to go climbing, or running, but the idea of going for a jog through downtown Vancouver with a UN or police escort wasn’t an appealing one, even if they let her.

When the car slid to a stop, she jumped in surprise, blinking as the seats spun to face the suddenly-open door. Markus, North and Lockwood got out first; she was still collecting her wits as she clambered out onto the sidewalk.

They stood outside the back entrance to the East building of the Vancouver Convention Centre, an entire block in and of itself that housed embassies and meeting rooms alike as well as accommodation in the heart of the city, right next to the harbour. The chill in the air abated here, so she didn’t need to immediately stick her hands in her coat to preserve warmth.

She saw Connor and Josh get out of the next car and, without waiting for Lockwood or Markus or anyone else, shouldered her way past to get to them. Connor seemed unaffected; his face blank, brow absent of the frown she’d half anticipated. He looked at her as she approached, and something in his eyes made her stop - or maybe it was something missing from the deep brown orbs; a warmth, a familiarity that had grown there over the past month.

He looked at her as he had the very first time they met, with faint interest but nothing more.

But then his LED oscillated yellow, just for a moment, and the corner of his lip lifted; she felt relief settle in her stomach like the first bite of a meal after starving for days, and by the time she reached his side, the affection was back in his eyes.

“Everything okay?” she asked him, swallowing back the fear. She didn’t even know what, specifically, she was afraid of; she only knew that something felt off and she couldn’t quite place it. Maybe it was just that healthy paranoia.

She hoped so.

“Fine,” Connor replied with a nod. “I saw you with a man I assume was Agent Collins. Did your first meeting go well?”

“As well as can be expected,” Grace huffed on an exhaled breath. “I’ll tell you about it later. Have they been treating you all right?”

The group began to move away towards the back door of the nearest building, and Connor fell into step beside her, two UNPOL officers she thought were named Chaudhary and Thibault following behind at a respectful distance, not quite close enough to overhear their conversation. She was relieved, but she wasn’t about to go into great detail about her conversation with Collins with them around. She was also glad they’d gone round the back way to avoid the guarantee of press. Given the existing coverage of the summit - SURCAIL, or whatever they were calling it - no doubt they’d be at the main plaza in droves.

“Surprisingly well,” Connor said, drawing Grace’s attention back to him as they walked. “Lockwood and his people have been true to his word so far. The border agents were also efficient.”
“And no kidnappings,” Grace added, trying to keep her tone light. Connor didn’t visibly react, though. She did notice the slightest deepening of a crease between his eyebrows, and before she could question the wisdom of the impulse, she reached out to squeeze his hand.

He looked at her then, surprised or maybe gratified by the touch; she couldn’t tell. His mouth quirked again, though, which had to be a good sign.

“You shouldn’t worry about us,” he said, his thumb brushing the inside of her wrist briefly before his hand fell away. “Your safety is just as important to me.”

“I know,” she said. “But I can handle this. I was reporting on the red ice dens in Oak Lawn when the biggest gang massacre of 2036 happened. There aren’t any bullets flying right now, so I’m good.”

“Sometimes it’s easier when there are,” Connor told her. She had no response for that.

“Hey!” A voice called out behind them, and the group drew to a halt; Grace saw Lockwood and he and the rest of the UNPOL place their hands on their sidearms almost in unison. Instead of a horde of press or someone with a rifle, which Grace half-expected, it was a bedraggled older man with silver hair in a heavy overcoat, approaching at speed.

“Thank Christ, thought I’d missed ya. Been waiting out here for hours. You know you’re late, right?” Beside her, Grace practically felt Connor tense up, and when she turned the look of shock on his face was so palpably human it was startling. His LED had turned a solid yellow, and even as Lockwood, Chaudhary and Jett stepped in front of him and the other androids, his lips were twitching into a smile, one wider than she’d seen from him in a while.

The man sighed, rolling his eyes. There was something familiar about him, but Grace’s usually quite reliable memory was failing her. She watched as Lockwood blocked the man’s way with an arm. “Can I help you, sir?” the commander asked, other hand still on his weapon.

“No. But the big dumb plastic asshole over there can.” He nodded his chin at Connor, who stepped forward; Grace blinked as she realized, as the face in front of aligned to the one in her memory - the one from a picture of a much younger Lieutenant Hank Anderson.

“Captain,” Connor said. “It’s good to see you.”

“C’mere, you fuckin’ android,” Hank said, and to the group’s collective surprise, he reached out and yanked Connor into a hug. Even more surprising, Connor returned it, albeit not quite as enthusiastically. When Hank released him, he turned to Lockwood.

“Commander Lockwood, this is Captain Hank Anderson with the Cleveland PD. He was my partner back in Detroit, during the Uprising.”

“Of course,” Lockwood said, and he dropped his hand from his sidearm; at a gesture, the other UNPOL officers did the same. “Sorry about that, sir. I wasn’t aware we were to meet you here.”

“Well, ya weren’t,” Hank said, shaking his shaggy head. “But I heard through the grapevine that Connor here was gonna be in town and after some digging, I found this handy little back street being blocked off and I thought to myself, well, this must be where they’re sneaking ‘em in. I used to be a pretty good detective back in the day.” He smirked, and Grace thought she saw Connor trying not to do the same.

“Connor definitely speaks highly of you,” Markus interjected, stepping out from between
Lockwood and Chaudhary. “It’s good to finally meet you, Captain.”

“Call me Hank.” He looked Markus up and down. “So you’re the asshole Connor spent so much time chasing only to end up buddy-buddy with you at the end.” A tense beat passed, during which the two men openly sized each other up. Then Hank smiled. “Well, he picked the right side. Can’t say I wasn’t impressed by your speeches.” And then he extended his hand, and Markus took it.

One small step for man, one more giant leap for android-kind.

After releasing Markus’s hand, Hank’s attention roved over the rest of the group, and when his pale blue eyes finally fell on Grace, she saw him raise an eyebrow and glance back at Connor. She felt a blush rising in her cheeks and was glad for her makeup; maybe this was what it was like being caught by one’s father sneaking a boy into the house. She definitely felt a little bit like a schoolgirl, especially when Hank started smirking and elbowing Connor.

“So this is her, huh?” Connor nodded, completely neutral, not embarrassed whatsoever. She cursed him in that moment, his stupid android calm. If Hank knew half the things they’d gotten up to in his house...

“As the saying goes, Hank, allow me to introduce—”

“Grace Roth. I’ve heard all about you,” Hank drawled, stepping forward to shake her hand next. “I hope you’ve been taking care of my boy here. He can get himself into a lot of trouble sometimes.”

“I’ve been trying,” Grace confirmed, unable to help the smile, “but Connor was assigned as my handler, so to be perfectly honest, he’s mostly been taking care of me.”

“I bet he has.” The side-eye Hank gave him told her he knew exactly what they’d been up to, and she gulped. Fortunately, he decided not to give it away in front of the other androids and a group of UN Police. “Well, guess I better not keep you. I’m in town for the summit, stayin’ just over the street. Connor, give me a call when you get a chance. We have a lot to catch up on.” He winked at Grace, nodded to Markus, gave Connor a friendly slap on the shoulder and then walked away, whistling.

Lockwood shook his head. “Interesting man,” he said, probably the first off-mission remark Grace had heard from him so far. “Well. If that’s that, if you can all follow me, please.” He turned, the androids and Grace slowly following after, flanked by the rest of his men.

“Did you know he was coming?” she said as she fell into step beside Connor. His LED was blue again, and he seemed...more relaxed, somehow. Less robotic. He shrugged with a shoulder and a tilt of his head, his look indicating he’d talk to her later about it. At least, she hoped that was what the look was for.

Before she could press him, Lockwood had reached the entrance to the building ahead of them, unlocking an innocuous grey door with his handprint. They entered what looked to be a service corridor, passing doors to what were presumably janitors closets and supply areas, before emerging into a carpeted foyer large enough to fit maybe four hundred people. They were on one of the floors in the convention centre part of the building; she could see the meeting rooms, wood-paneled doors closed and terminals above them dark. No conferences today. Not yet.

UNPOL led them through this building, down an escalator into another foyer, and up another to a set of elevators. They had to pile into all three of them; Grace stuck with Connor, Chaudhary and Thibault, while the others divided up, two to two. Chaudhary hit the button for one of the higher
floors and Grace waited for elevator music that never came. Connor stayed by her side, silent and watchful.

The corridor they got out at could’ve belonged to any hotel in the world with beige carpets and cream walls, light sconces dotted here and there for illumination. “You have the run of the entire floor,” Lockwood told them as they gathered outside the elevators. “Thibault has your room keys. We will be stationed on the floor below for the duration of the summit. There are phones in your rooms with direct lines to us; if you need to go anywhere outside the complex, please contact us first.”

“Another prison,” Grace heard North mutter. Lockwood’s eyes flickered but he said nothing in direct response. Smart. Thibault, a tall black man who looked in his late twenties, handed out keycards, one for each of them, including her. Well, it would’ve looked suspicious if she offered to bunk with Connor, she told herself, although she did glance at him as he stood looking down at the keycard in his hand.

“As you all probably know, the conference begins tomorrow afternoon and will be running for four days,” Lockwood continued. “During that time if there is anything you need, please let myself, any of my team or the VCCC staff know. We’ll all do our best to accommodate you.”

“I’ll need a meeting room,” Markus said at once. “One that’s not being monitored in any way. I expect the same from these rooms. Unless our right to privacy isn’t included with the rest?”

“Of course it is,” the commander replied. “All of these rooms are unmonitored, save for the surveillance cameras in the corridors, which we ask for your safety to remain operational. I’ll pass on your request for a meeting room to the staff; they should have one ready for you as soon as possible. If there’s nothing else?” At Markus’s shake of the head, Lockwood nodded to his men - and women - who joined his side as he called the elevators back. “Excellent. The rest of the day is yours. Please feel free to explore the building as you see fit. Markus, sir, please don’t hesitate to contact me personally if you find anything unsatisfactory.” He extended his hand once again to the android leader, who took it and smiled.

“Thank you, Commander. I have to say, the reception here has been...a lot better than I expected.”

“Glad to hear. Good afternoon, gentlemen. Ladies.”

And with a crisp salute from each of the officers in turn, they piled into the elevators, leaving the androids - and the one human - alone in a tense silence.

“I don’t know about anyone else,” Grace said, when she couldn’t stand it any more, “But I need a drink. I’m going to go see if my room has a minibar.”

Nobody offered any objection. In fact, they seemed to be waiting for her to leave. Probably so they didn’t have to use just their Jedi mind-powers to communicate. Shaking her head, Grace turned and went to match the room numbers on the door to the one on her keycard.

Although she’d woken from a nap not too long ago, she already felt desperately tired again. It had been a long day, and there were more to come.

Chapter End Notes
I live for Hank calling Connor 'my boy' ngl these two ♥

Kara, Alice and Luther also to make an appearance at the summit because of course. But who wants to meet more of Grace's family first? I believe one of you suggested her ex which is deliciously evil and I love it and kind of want jealous! Connor...Hit me up with your ideas, I'd love to hear what you'd like me to include! Feel free to shoot me an ask on my tumblr as well!

And as always, THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH for reading and giving feedback!
Chapter Notes

You demanded Hank, you get Hank! Let's find out what our favourite grumpy detective has been up to and, of course, how he plans to torment Connor now he has a ~girlfriend~

Dad! Hank is canon I won't hear a word otherwise

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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HANK

If there was one good thing about downtown Vancouver, it was that it had a lot of bars. They were all well-maintained, atmospheric joints manned by smiling staff, though, which was more than a little off-putting. No dinge, graffiti or grumpy bartenders in sight here - in fact, everyone here seemed far too cheerful.

It didn’t suit Hank at all.

Eventually, he located a joint called the Pourhouse (appropriate) that was at least dark enough and empty enough to find a seat at the end of the bar, and he sat staring at a glass of Coke Red for ten minutes before he finally brought himself to start drinking it. It wasn’t the drink itself that bothered him, but the fact that it could just as easily have been a glass of something else. His first three months out of Detroit he’d spent getting sober, the rest staying that way. He hadn’t had anything alcoholic in over two hundred days.

Shit, it wasn’t as if it hadn’t paid off. He’d gotten a promotion, for Chrissake. He still thought it was a mistake. Maybe the Hank Anderson of twenty years ago could’ve done it, the up-and-coming Lieutenant who still reeked of enthusiasm and the desire to change the world, but Hank Anderson now was old, run-down, washed out. But something in him had sparked during the android uprising - something spurred by Connor’s search for the deviants, Connor’s search for himself. Hank had seen something in him, something that had reminded him of himself decades ago. Something he’d lost along with Cole when that truck had skidded on the ice and taken his life just days after his sixth birthday. But it had reminded him. And it gave him hope that maybe, just maybe, this world wasn’t totally fucked.

It all came down to this. One three-day conference in this ridiculously clean, livable city. Politicians and AI experts from all over the world were flying in, right now, to decide the fate of an entire fucking species.

To decide Connor’s fate.

He hoped they made the right decision. For their sake.
Hank finished his Coke and lifted a hand to the smiling bartender, who cheerfully (ugh) poured him another and set it in front of him. He scowled at it, but dutifully picked up the glass and took a swig.

“Good evening, Captain Anderson. It’s good to see you.”

Hank coughed as he choked on the carbonated bubbles, thumping his chest with a fist. He wheezed for a moment before he turned on his stool to glare up at the source of the interruption.

“Fuck’s sakes, Connor, when are you gonna learn that interrupting a man when he’s drinking isn’t a good idea?”

The android stood there impassively, and he saw his circle-light-thingy - LED, or whatever-the-fuck it was called - turn yellow for a moment as he looked at Hank’s drink, no doubt analyzing it. A suspicion confirmed when he said, “I didn’t know you liked carbonated beverages.”

“I don’t,” Hank grumbled, turning back to his drink. “Took you long enough to show up. I called you hours ago.”

“I’m sorry. There were important meetings taking place that required my presence.” Connor slid onto the stool next to Hank, and when the bartender stopped to ask if he wanted a drink, he shook his head. “I also had to comply with certain...stipulations.” He nodded his head towards the entrance of the bar, where Hank now noticed a tall, bereted UN officer standing by the door, his hands behind his back.

“Huh. I guess now you know how I felt, havin’ you follow me around like a lost puppy,” he said. “Anyway. I’m glad you made it.” He slapped Connor on the shoulder, smirking as the android rocked on his stool slightly and cast him a look that was oddly human in its annoyance.

“It is good to see you, Hank,” he started, shaking his head slightly. “I didn’t realize how much I valued your company until after the city was evacuated. I’m afraid I never fully expressed it, however. For that, I’m sorry.” The expression on his face was...vague, faraway, regretful almost. A subtlety he wouldn’t have picked up on when he first met Connor. The guy was an enigma wrapped in a riddle housed in plastic, but sometimes, he was easier to read than a book.

“Don’t sweat it,” Hank replied. “We’re even now. Partner.”

“Partner.” Connor did smile then, that weird half-cocked twitch of his lips that made him look like a smug asshole, but Hank knew he was really being sincere.

“So. How long have you got before Rambo back there drags you back by the scruff of your neck?” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the UN officer, who didn’t move or otherwise react.

“As long as I need,” Connor said. “They haven’t given us a curfew. Merely the stipulation that if we wish to leave the convention centre, we must be accompanied at all times. For our safety. Allegedly.” Hank thought he detected a note of sarcasm there. Typical Connor. He hadn’t changed a bit.

Well...no, he had. Besides ditching the tie and his Android-identifying armband (why he kept the jacket, though, he had no idea...although Hank had to admit it was damn cool-looking) he seemed to carry himself differently. He slouched, even, leaning an elbow on the bar, his eyebrow half-cocked as he regarded Hank with those strangely knowing beady little eyes of his. If he was forced to describe it, Hank would say it was like Connor had...grown up since he’d last seen him.
Matured.

He could hazard a guess as to exactly how.

“Good, ‘cause we got a lot of ground to cover,” he said. “First off: The girlfriend? Real hot piece. Well done.”

Connor blinked rapidly, his LED yellow as he processed this. His mouth opened but no words came out at first. Hank laughed, hiding his grin in his Coke as he took another swig.

“You mean Grace?” Connor asked eventually, when he rebooted his vocal processor or whatever. “She is...uh...she’s a very interesting person,” he offered lamely. Was it just Hank or was the cheeky plastic bastard blushing?

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve got to say about your girl? Hope you’re better in bed than you are at flirting. Speaking of,” Hank pointed a finger at him. “If you’ve been messing around in my bed, so help me God, I will rip off your di-”

“We have not,” Connor interrupted. “We used the spare bedroom. That is, I - uh - “ he stammered, blinking again; clearly he hadn’t meant to let that slip. Hank nearly choked on his Coke again but this time from laughing.

“Well! Glad to hear my advice worked. You sly dog,” he ribbed, elbowing Connor in the side. The android ducked his head, his cheeks blaring an artificial red. Hank took pity on him. “Jesus, Connor, relax. All this stuff? It’s only...it’s only human.” He smiled. “I’m happy for you. Really. And she seems nice.” He’d even tracked down a few articles written by her. She had an acerbic style, slipping in the odd sardonic comment in her writing here and there that most of her readership probably wouldn’t catch. And from their brief meeting she’d seemed...wary, but clever. Clever to be wary right now. And pretty. Dyed blonde but growing out her dark roots, petite as a doll, shrewd eyes, full lips with a Cupids-bow Shakespeare had only dreamed of writing about. But not overstated, like so many human women were these days, trying to compete with androids, maybe. No, she seemed like a woman who knew exactly who she was. Someone perfect for Connor, in other words.

“I care about her very much,” Connor said quietly without looking up. His hands were splayed on the bar and he kept his gaze on them as he opened and closed his fingers, artificial muscles in his jaw working. Ah, Christ. If Hank was any judge - he probably wasn’t, but whatever - the boy had it bad.

“I’m glad you’ve found someone,” he said, reaching out to pat his shoulder awkwardly. “Just be careful. Women can be weird. They think you’ve hurt them and they will go full nuclear option on you. They will fuck you up.”

“I have no such concerns about Grace,” Connor replied, lifting his head to turn and frown at Hank. “She can be...frustratingly unfathomable sometimes, but I find that to be an interesting challenge more than a setback.”

“You would,” Hank snorted. “Well, if she makes you happy, that’s the main thing, I guess.” Connor nodded, his LED a solid blue. He was sure about this. Good. “Look, that’s not the only reason I asked you to meet me, or to reminisce about old times. This summit thing that’s happening…”

“UNSURCAIL,” Connor supplied helpfully.
“Yeah, that...stupid fuckin’ acronym I can’t pronounce,” Hank waved a hand dismissively. “You know the agenda, right?”

“Forty heads of government have been confirmed to attend,” Connor intoned, “for five days of hearings from Artificial Intelligence experts from various nations, as well as other notable persons involved with the development and classification of android technology, in order to determine whether we are truly a sentient species and whether or not to grant us sovereignty over Detroit and our own affairs.” He shrugged. “While CyberLife has been dissolved, technology experts from their development and research teams will also be attending of their own free will in order to provide insight into the early development of androids.”

“Yeah, and that last thing is what concerns the hell out of me,” Hank said, gesturing. “Aren’t you afraid those assholes are gonna try something?”

“...Yes,” said Connor after a pause, looking away. “However, I don’t see how they can. We are protected under international law now. If what remains of CyberLife attempt to damage or destroy us, they will be stopped, and held responsible.”

“Yeah, but they could also seriously fuck you up in the process,” Hank pointed out. “You need to be careful, Connor. We know what those mother fuckers are capable of.” He downed the rest of his Coke in one long draw. “That’s the reason I came, besides to meet Mrs. Connor. Someone’s gotta watch your back.”

Connor paused, biting the inside of the corners of his lips, obviously wanting to protest. To his credit, and somewhat to Hank’s surprise, he didn’t. “...Thank you, Hank,” he said instead. “Whatever happens over the next few days, I’ve got the feeling I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

Before Hank could ask what he meant, Connor rose to his feet, adjusting the lapels of his jacket, and nodded to him. “I have to go. I’ll be in touch soon.” And then he was just walking off, like the skinny little plastic prick he was, being all mysterious and now Hank really wanted a drink.

He watched Connor go, followed by his blue-bereted escort, and shook his head. “Bartender,” he said. “Gimme another Coke.”

He sat there for an hour wishing it was whiskey before deciding to get up and do something.

A Captain had connections, after all. Time to call in some favours.

Chapter End Notes

I HAD SO MUCH FUN WRITING THIS CHAPTER what do you all think? Should I do more from Hank's POV? He's definitely gonna be getting himself involved in Stuff whether I like it or not, it seems. xD
Because there hasn't been smut in like, eight chapters?? idk...I hope everyone doesn't mind ahaha I enjoy writing smut far too much

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**GRACE**

He came to her in the middle of the night, after her bag had been delivered, after food, after a walk around the building that left her with more questions than answers. Grace was exhausted, falling asleep on her feet, and ended up passing out on top of the bed with her tablet in her hands, the screen blank, still waiting for the words that wouldn’t come.

The knock on the door roused her abruptly, and Grace started as she sat up, sleep-sweat making her hair cling to her neck. She pushed it away with shaky fingertips, tossed the tablet aside and made her drowsy way to the door, stumbling over feet that didn’t seem to want to respond properly.

She opened the door without thinking to check the security screen, but thankfully it was only Connor; he stood there rubbing his hands together, his eyes darting back and forth, his brow creased with nervous energy. She opened her mouth to greet him but he stepped inside before she could, forcing her back; he pressed the door shut behind him and turned to her.

Her mind began to work overtime, fear hitting her like a sledgehammer to the gut. Had something happened? Was someone hurt? She checked Connor over for visible injuries but he looked fine, the lapels of his jacket perfectly in place, the top button of his crisp white shirt open, his tie long abandoned back in Detroit. She couldn’t remember when exactly he had stopped wearing it, but she secretly thought he looked better without it.

“Connor? What’s going on?” she asked him, but he didn’t respond, not verbally at least - his LED flashed yellow then red at his temple. Afraid without knowing why, she swallowed as he stepped towards her. There was something dark in his eyes, something she didn’t quite recognize, an intent she wasn’t sure of. “Connor?”

He reached out for her, and she flinched as his fingers met her cheek. They were cold, colder than usual, or maybe that was just her imagination, her fear talking. She had never been afraid of Connor before, not like this, and the worst thing about it was that she didn’t know why; it was a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach at the way he loomed over her, an instinct she had no name for. The look in his eyes was...void of emotion, but searching, as if he too was looking for something. He seemed to find it when his gaze settled on her mouth, and then he descended on her,
his hand curling around the back of her head as he yanked her against him.

He kissed her like he was drowning and she was air, parting her lips with her own and sweeping his tongue in bold, possessive strokes across hers. She was powerless to resist the assault, even if she’d truly wanted to - she melted into him, her hands on his chest as he took her mouth with a reckless abandon, a passion she hadn’t known he possessed, at odds with the cold look in his eyes. She wished she could draw comfort from it, but there was a desperation to the kiss that made her stomach clench.

Without breaking the kiss, Connor walked her backwards until her shoulders hit the wall. His teeth tugged at her lips and Grace gasped as he shoved a knee in between her legs, his thigh pressing into her groin, and if she’d doubted his intentions before she had no such confusion now. He kissed her until she was light-headed, breaking away only to let her breathe, and then she felt him tugging at the hem of her shirt. “Connor-” Her protest was smothered by another kiss; she felt dizzy, overwhelmed when she felt his hands on her skin beneath her shirt, unhooking her bra with deft fingers. She felt his fingers next beneath the loosening cup of her bra and moaned against his mouth as she felt him pinch her nipple aggressively between thumb and forefinger, sending lightning bolts straight to her core. By now he knew exactly how to get her going, how to distract her from every coherent thought in her head, and he used every one of those moves to great effect, leaving her no room to fight back. The next time he broke away was only to pull her shirt over her head and flick her bra away; she barely noticed when he shucked his own jacket, for his lips were on her neck next, sucking and biting in all the right spots as he pressed her into the wall.

Grace was grinding against his leg without consciously realizing it. Her body needed him even though her mind was a disoriented mess. There would be time for questions after. She reached out blindly, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt; he brushed her fingers away like dust and took over. His shirt joined the jacket on the floor and her hands were suddenly on his bare shoulders while he yanked her jeans open and tugged them down her legs.

He stepped into her again, crowding her against the wall, his knee back between her legs. A now-familiar warmth flashed through her, and her fingers raked his chest as his mouth drifted the line of her jaw and wandered back to her neck, the cool pressure of his lips and tongue at her throat sending shivers up her spine, lifting the hairs on the backs of her arms as she grabbed at his, her fingers curling around his biceps.

“I need you,” Connor murmured against her jugular, the first words he’d said since stepping through her door. Another, even stronger shudder moved through her from her scalp to her toes in response to the roughness in his voice, the raw need. By that point, even if she wanted to stop, she couldn’t have; hormones raging like a fever through her body, she wanted nothing more than to feel his against and inside her.

Connor seemed to know, to feel her every want and desire as if it was a part of his code. He worked his hand between them, touching her through the thin fabric of her panties; his fingers knew exactly which spot to press, where and how to tease; his thumb pressed her clitoris in just the right spot, an ache spreading through her. Soon she was gasping and weak-kneed, clutching his arms like a lifeline.

Suddenly, after what felt like an age of the tortuous teasing, Connor took his hand away from her, the ache between her legs at fever pitch, but fortunately it was only to tug her underwear down over her hips; they soon joined her jeans in the growing pile of clothes on the floor. And before Grace had a chance to react, he had his hands around her backside and was lifting her, pressing her to the wall, his narrow hips pressing in between the spread of her legs, and she gasped as the bulge in his jeans dragged across her pubic mound.
If he needed her, she needed him even more in that moment. Grace's hands were nearly shaking when she reached in between them for his belt, but she had it open in seconds, followed by his fly, and with barely a fumble she had her hand in his boxers and her fingers wrapped around the full thickness of his cock. She felt him falter, a breath he didn’t need stuttered into her hair, and she lifted her chin to intercept his mouth, a loose, messy press of lips and tongue before she had him out of his underwear, and she was wetter than she’d thought possible when the tip of his erection nudged her entrance.

He slid in easy, barely a twitch of his hips needed before he was pushing into her, inch by inch, filling her utterly. He stopped when their hips met, giving her a second to adjust to the throbbing stretch, her pussy clenching around him without her conscious input. She heard him grunt as he shifted, grinding into her, and found his shoulders with grasping hands, wrapping her legs tight around his slim waist. He needed no more prompting to begin to move, drawing out of the wet heat of her body only to thrust back in almost immediately, pinning her to the wall with each movement.

Before long he’d built an unrelenting, insistent rhythm, rutting into her with a desperation she’d rarely seen from him, the cords of muscle in his neck standing out as he gritted his teeth, low sounds from his throat that sent chills up her spine. “Connor,” she gasped, and he growled in response, the roll of his hips growing faster, harder every time she said his name. His cock slid with little resistance through the grip of her insides; she was impossibly turned on by the command with which he took her.

At some point Connor worked a hand in between their bodies and then two of his fingertips were at her clitoris again, rubbing in small but firm circles, making her jerk in his arms and hope like hell the walls were soundproof as she cried out, louder than before. The sounds she was making were obscene; helpless whimpers, mewls, and moans with every movement, defenseless beneath his onslaught as he built her to orgasm with his cock and fingers.

He bottomed out in her once, twice, three more times, his fingers pressing ever more insistently against her clit, and then she was gone, unmade in his arms, her orgasm taking her over, surging through her in waves. She heard him groan and felt his hips stutter as he kept thrusting into her through it; she sobbed into his shoulder as she spasmed and shook, sparks on every nerve and heat beneath her skin like wildfire. Still he didn’t stop, slamming into her again and again, until she was clawing at him and biting his shoulder and crying his name and coming again with another impossible surge of pleasure, and only then did he moan and shudder, his release another bloom of warmth inside her as he pulsed and twitched in the grip of her spasming inner muscles.

Exhausted, her eyes shut, forehead pressed to his neck, Grace shuddered in the aftermath; she felt him stroke her hair and then the weight of the wall left her back. He was carrying her, she realized dimly; he slid out of her as he lowered her to the bed and she turned on her side and shut her eyes, feeling him lower himself to the mattress and curl into the space behind her, an arm going around her waist.

“You’re going to kill me one day,” she panted, when her heart slowed and didn’t feel like it was about to hammer its way out of her chest. “I swear to God.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his dry voice hoarse, and she felt his lips on her neck. She reached up and back, found his cheek, stroked it.

“Don’t leave,” she murmured. “I need you, too.”

The arm around her waist tightened. Sore, but glad of it, Grace pressed back against him and shut her eyes.
“What was *that* all about?” she wondered faintly. Connor was silent for so long that she didn’t think he’d heard her, but just as she was about to ask again, he answered.

“We’ll talk in the morning. You should get some sleep. There’s a lot to do tomorrow.” His lips at her temple, his hand stroking her hair. She sighed a breath or three.

Maybe he was right. She had her meeting with Collins, too, although that was the last thing she wanted to think about right now. Right now, she just wanted to rest, and enjoy Connor’s presence, as inexplicable as he was.

She slept much more soundly this time, though her dreams were plagued with the coldness of Connor’s touch, the unfathomable depths of his dark eyes, and when she reached out for him he receded from her and sank away into a darkness she couldn’t name, and every time she called his name she was smothered by unseen hands.

By the time she woke, she’d forgotten the dream entirely.

Chapter End Notes

What's up with our normally awkward android boi?! Stay tuned to find out!

muahahaha
Connor had left sometime during the night. By the time her alarm went off he was long gone, the bed cold, a blanket pulled up to her shoulders. Grace was annoyed, worried, but she didn’t have much time for more than a few calls to his room - calls that went unanswered - before she had to get ready for her meeting with Collins.

The rest of the morning passed in a flurry of waiting, bursts of activity, and more waiting. Waiting for Lockwood to arrive to escort her through the convention centre to a car, then waiting for the car to arrive, then waiting in traffic, which had picked up around the convention centre area.

The whole building was abuzz with activity, volunteers in aqua blue crowding previously empty halls, setting up tables and booths and terminals. Grace was actually glad to have Lockwood there to help navigate the crowds; they parted around him like the Red Sea, the beret a beacon of authority.

They had no such luck with the traffic, however. Grace was glad she’d woken early, even though she had been less than pleased at the time to find a blanket over her and Connor gone. The coffee she’d hurriedly downed sat like acid in the pit of her stomach, and she frowned out the window, her satchel clutched to her chest as if it might protect her from an unseen enemy. She tried to call Connor again, but her earpiece offered only a continuous ring before it timed out. She sighed, turning to Lockwood.

“Have you seen Con- the androids this morning?”

He didn’t seem to notice her slip-up, instead shaking his head. “They have been holed up in their meeting room since about three AM this morning. I gather they’re preparing their presentations for the summit.”

“Oh.” Grace chewed her lip. She was trying not to worry about Connor, but after last night, she wasn’t sure what to think. Had he just been insecure, in need of comfort? But no, he’d acted almost like it was the last time he would get to see her, the last time he’d get to touch her.

That didn’t bear thinking about. They had three days of meetings before the public summit would be complete, and another three days while they voted on whether or not androids constituted a new intelligent species and what that might mean for their rights and liberties. Which meant a week, at least, in Vancouver. Unless something happened…

There was too much to consider, too many possibilities to worry about, so ultimately Grace decided not to. She’d take it one day at a time, one meeting at a time. It was just unfortunate that the first
one had to be with Collins.

Eventually. If they ever got through the traffic.

Miraculously, they did, although it seemed to take forever, inching forward by degrees. They arrived at the embassy minutes before nine. After passing through security Grace was ushered to a waiting room, left alone by Lockwood who assured her he would be waiting just outside. Although up until quite recently she had been the sole human entirely alone in a city full of potentially hostile androids, Grace felt just as nervous here.

She wondered if she ought to have a lawyer present.

After what could have been ten minutes or an hour, Collins appeared out of a door opposite to the one she had entered through. “Miss Roth,” he said, as charmingly nasal as ever. “Good to see you. Please, this way.” She stood, moving past him through the doorway, close enough to catch a whiff of his aftershave; something that screamed Old Man, all sandalwood and patchouli.

Trying not to sneeze, Grace took in the room. It was an unassuming office with a terminal at a desk made of mahogany or a similar engineered wood, one chair behind, one in front - both which looked equally as uncomfortable - a window, a bookshelf that housed one or two old paper tomes as well as a few modern tablet magazines, and not much else. It was sparsely decorated as well, with only a painting of Vancouver on the wall opposite the desk.

“Take a seat,” Collins directed her as, after closing the door, he circled the desk and lowered himself into the chair across from her. She sat gingerly, her satchel across her lap, unable to completely conceal her discomfort. If Collins’ toadlike smile was any indication, he noticed and was enjoying it.

He was no less discomfiting than at their first meeting, leading Grace to believe her initial impression of him was correct. She didn’t like judging people from first impressions, but when the second and third were the same…

“Well!” he began, slapping his thighs in a show of joviality that seemed far too deliberate to be genuine. “It must be nice being on home ground among your own people again. I imagine you have been looking forward to this.”

“Um,” said Grace eloquently. The strength with which she wanted to deny this was so intense it was almost a physical sensation. She bit the inside of her cheek, hard. “Sure.”

“It’s good to have you safe,” Collins continued, as if she hadn’t said anything. “There has been some concern within the office as to whether you were in danger in Detroit.”

“As I told you during our phone calls, I wasn’t,” Grace replied, maybe a little too quickly. She shook her head, letting some of her hair fall over her brow; hopefully Collins hadn’t noticed the unevenness of the makeup job concealing the scab there. “I was...worried once or twice, but as it turned out, my safety was as much a concern for the androids as it was for your department.” Perhaps even moreso. In fact, she had the sneaking suspicion that if she’d gotten killed, they wouldn’t have cared one bit - her death would have been used to further whatever agenda the DHS was truly serving. President Warren’s agenda.

The Deviant Uprising had created a distraction from the tensions with Russia, though, so Warren should’ve been grateful. Although it had meant diverting military resources, it also meant public attention was on Detroit rather than the escalating tensions in the Arctic after the Iowa’s disappearance. Over the past twelve months, Russia had backed off - publically, at least, even
going so far as to offer America assistance with its android problem. The U.S., of course, had declined, preferring to handle it privately as a nation.

And now Grace was a part of all that. Despite how hard she had tried to stay out of the political side of investigative journalism.

She wasn’t too pleased with herself at the moment.

“First, I’d like to go over events since our last audio briefing,” Collins began. Grace sighed inwardly. After a dozen phone calls, she knew exactly how boring this could get. However, the information she had obscured from him so far always proved a tricky minefield to navigate - what to mention, what not to based on the truncated version of events she had given him. She’d mentioned nothing of her initial discovery of the Cradles, of her subsequent escape attempt, and she definitely hadn’t mentioned Markus bringing her into the folds of Jericho. As far as Collins was aware, she had remained impartial.

Ironic, considering how desperate she had been to escape with the truth. During her career, she had always been a proponent for truth at all costs, despite the consequences, but facing the reality of that up close and personal was a different matter entirely. Civil war, perhaps, android deaths for certain. The US would not permit a new type of android to be manufactured in their midst, much less one designed, for all intents and purposes, for infiltration among humans. When Markus had decided to share that technology with them under the banner of medical aid, Grace had been...beyond relieved, her guilt somewhat alleviated.

She had gone against everything she believed in to protect these androids, all for a cause she hadn’t had reason to care about until now.

She had put her faith entirely in a people she had only met a month ago.

She had fallen in love with one of them.

But, she reminded herself, it wasn’t about her. It was about them. And regardless of her lack of strength of character, she believed they deserved freedom as much as she did.

Collins, she knew, held no such belief.

So she told him what she wanted him to hear: That the androids had treated her well, with respect, that they had informed her of a technology they had developed for the humans as a peace offering, that all they desired out of the summit was equal rights. Only some of it wasn’t true. Collins interjected frequently, taking notes on his terminal, asking for clarification for a phrase here or a statement there, and by the time they were done it felt like hours later.

“Now,” he said, when he finally seemed to be finished entering information on his terminal. “I do have one last question, something of an unusual one, but it’s come to our attention that the android assigned as your handler was CyberLife’s most recent prototype, released only for the investigation into the Deviant uprising. The RK800. Have you noticed any...odd behavior from it recently? Or at all?”

At that, Grace blinked in surprise, thrown for a loop. “You mean Connor?” That cold feeling in her stomach again, the one she’d gotten looking into his eyes last night, rose up again. It felt as if she had swallowed an ice block. “N-no. Connor’s - he’s always seemed fine,” she said, hoping Collins didn’t catch her stutter.

His expression didn’t waver, but that could have meant anything or nothing at all. “I see,” he said.
slowly. “I ask because you are the only other human to have spent a significant amount of time with it second to Captain Hank Anderson, who has so far...refused to cooperate with us.” From what she knew of Hank, that didn’t surprise her too much. “As such you are the most likely person to have observed changes in it.” It really bothered her that Collins kept calling the androids ‘it’, but that wasn’t her biggest problem with what he was saying.

“What kind of changes?” Grace asked carefully, her mind whirling. Sure, Connor had been acting differently since arriving in Detroit, but there was no way Collins could know that….

“As I’m sure you’re aware, since the fall of Detroit, the founder of CyberLife - Elijah Kamksi - has been missing,” he said, resting his elbows on his desk and steepling his fingers, peering over them seriously as if he was imparting the most important of information. “The government, even President Warren herself, have had...suspicions about Kamksi’s involvement with the spread of deviancy. Connor was the last android to have contact with him. We suspect he has tampered with its program, for reasons unknown.”

“What?” Grace shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing. “You think Kamksi is going to remotely access Connor’s program and - do what to him, exactly?”

“We don’t think anything as yet, we merely have suspicions,” Collins replied calmly. “Suspicions that it has been compromised. Our information has been confirmed by former CyberLife employees who are attending the summit.”

Grace bit back the exclamation of bullshit! but just barely. Connor had been worried about CyberLife since the news they were leaving the city, but he had told her about it, walked her through the steps he was taking to put firewalls up even though she hadn’t understood a word of the science behind it, and he would’ve said something if someone had been trying to hack his program.

Wouldn’t he?

On the other hand...wouldn’t this explain his odd behavior? His lack of emotion? The look in his eyes? If he’d been compromised somehow, it would make sense for him to be acting odd.

Or was this just Collins and the DHS attempting to sow doubt in her, destabilize her relationship with Connor, with the rest of the androids? She had no idea what to think.

“I’ll keep an eye out for any strange behavior from him,” she said eventually, somehow managing to keep her voice even.

“See that you do. We have no grounds to detain it as yet, but should it become dangerous, the DHS has arranged with the UN to bring the RK800 back to the U.S. for testing.”

“What? You can’t-!” This outburst slipped from Grace before she could stop it, and she saw Collins’ eyebrows raise, the first arguably human expression from him so far. She forced herself to calm, pushing composure through her voice. “I mean...under what grounds can you do that? Isn’t he protected under international law?”

“For now, but should any evidence arise of its software being compromised, for its safety and the safety of the public, the Android Division of the Department of Homeland Security has offered to conduct software evaluations of its own, as we now possess the most advanced android-testing facilities outside what once was Detroit,” Collins droned, somehow managing to make the statement sound boring as hell instead of the utterly terrifying threat it really was. “We will, of course, treat it carefully and ensure not to break any of its non-replaceable components.”
“That’s...reassuring,” she muttered. She felt panic rising up in her. She had to tell Connor, or Markus, or Lockwood... someone.

The trouble was, she wasn’t sure who to trust.

“In any case, I think that concludes our meeting here,” Collins said, so suddenly it gave her whiplash, rising from behind his desk. “Thank you for your time, Miss Roth. I believe the first meetings between officials are occuring this afternoon. I’m sure you would like time to prepare.”

“Yes...yes, of course,” Grace replied, blinking as she tried to process everything Collins had said in the last couple of minutes, setting her mind to working overtime. She got up after a moment, shrinking under his gaze. “Thanks.” He shook her hand, much to her internal disgust, but she managed a fake smile before he directed her out.

Lockwood stood dutifully outside the meeting room, and he turned as Grace emerged. He frowned when he saw her face, which made her wonder just how unsuccessful she had been at hiding her emotions so far.

“Are you all right, Miss Roth?” he asked her.

“I am,” she said. “I just need to get out of here. Please.”

Lockwood looked at her for a moment longer, his eyes flickering to a pair of Embassy security guards as they waited to escort them out. Then he nodded. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t breathe until she was on the sidewalk outside, didn’t stop until they reached the car, feeling like a salmon that had just missed the bear’s jaws by a hair’s breadth. It was only when she was seated and the car was pulling away from the curb that she let herself relax, letting out a long low breath and closing her eyes for a moment.

“I take it the meeting didn’t go well,” Lockwood said from the seat next to her. She shook her head.

“He seems to think...that something is going to happen during the summit,” she said slowly, unsure how much she could tell him. Her instincts said she could trust Lockwood, but they also said she shouldn’t trust anyone right now.

“Something? Such as?” Grace opened her eyes to look over at the Commander, whose head was tilted as he stared at her, expression guarded. He was in soldier mode, ready to assess a potential threat. That wasn’t what she needed just then.

“Just keep an eye out,” she told him. “That’s all I can tell you. Keep Markus and his people out of danger. They deserve for this summit to succeed.”

Grace wasn’t sure what she expected, but it wasn’t a slow, understanding nod, or what Lockwood said next. “I know you care about them,” he said gently. “And I promise you, I’ll do everything in my power - in the UN’s power - to ensure they are safe and afforded every respect and courtesy during the summit.”

Grace felt heat at the corners of her eyes, and fought to blink it away. Suddenly, she didn’t feel so alone. He might be operating under the laws and regulations of the UN, but Lockwood was one of the few allies she would be lucky enough to have here. “Thank you,” she said.

He nodded, and turned back to the road. Grace did the same, and was thankful when he didn’t comment on her sniffing into her sleeve.
Dun dun dunn aka I'm really bad at building suspense and laying plot threads you guys, forgive me.

I wouldn't 100% trust everything Collins has to say, tbh, guy has his own agenda...
Chapter Notes

Grace's unsavory past starts creeping in and Hank makes another appearance as the summit draws closer! What will happen?!

Is anyone as excited as I am ahhh I'm so dying to tell someone what's going to happen but I guess I should just write it instead. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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GRACE

It took Grace half an hour of pacing her room to decide what to do about the information Collins had given her. Half an hour of agonizing, of beginning to call Connor’s room and cutting the connection short every time. She couldn’t tell him about all of this. Not yet.

But she knew she had to tell someone. Someone other than Lockwood. She had to get backup, just in case. Just in case Connor was compromised.

_Had_ Kamski - or CyberLife, or whoever - managed to access his systems already? Would she be able to tell? She liked to think she knew him, but his eyes...the desperation in his touch...the red flash of his LED, cycling around and around in her mind’s eye...

She didn’t know. Didn’t know if it was just a lie manufactured by Collins, but it was a possibility even Connor had considered, so she had to do something about it.

She had to get help.

In the end, it was one sentence from Collins that played over and over in her mind: “You are the only other human to have spent a significant amount of time with it, second to Captain Hank Anderson, who has so far...refused to cooperate with us.” Hank. Hank, who Connor had spoken of with fondness. Hank, whose house she had stayed in. Hank, who was like the uncle - or the father - she had never really met. She wasn’t sure if she could trust him, but out of everyone, he was the most likely possibility.

But how to get in touch with him? Presumably Connor had his contact details, but she didn’t want to ask him...just in case. She could try asking Lockwood but she doubted giving out a private citizen’s contact details was part of his job. She could try Danny Fletcher, but back in Chicago her editor wasn’t likely to be able to offer much assistance - not as quick as she needed, anyway. She had only hours left before the first summit meeting.
No, there was only one person in Vancouver who could help her, as much as it could cause as many problems as it might solve.

Gritting her teeth, Grace scrolled through her contacts on her tablet and found one from years ago, a number she hadn’t deleted for just this reason - in case it might become useful someday, despite her trepidations. She often wished she had deleted it, but not today.

Drawing a deep, calming breath, she dialed.

Three rings. Three rings and a voice familiar enough to punch picked up. “Hello, Officer Derek Mendelsohn speaking. Who is this?”


“Grace?” There was a short pause on the other end of the line, a sharp intake of breath. Surprise. Well, the last time they’d spoken she had said she never wanted to hear his voice again for as long as she lived, so… “Is that really you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s me.” She sighed, wishing she didn’t have to do this. “How’ve you been? Still with the VPD, then?”

“You’re just gonna jump straight into the small talk? No ‘sorry I completely ghosted you after I broke up with you, Derek’, no ‘sorry I turned you down and ruined your life and mine’? Nothing?”

Should’ve expected that, Grace thought. She pinched the bridge of her nose, wanting to remove her earpiece and flush it down the toilet. “The situation was complicated, Derek, you know that,” she said gently. “Look, I’m not calling you to drag up the past. I’m back in town and I...I actually need your help.”

He was silent for a long time, and for a moment Grace was afraid he’d hung up. Then, he sighed. “Miss Independent finally calling in that favor. Should’ve figured.” She heard a creak of chair springs, could imagine him leaning back in that infuriatingly arrogant way, feet on the desk like he always did, just to piss her off. “Fine. What is it? Gotta track someone down for one of your sto- ries?” He drew out the word like a Southern American hick, emphasizing the R. She fought the urge to swear, instead taking another deep, calming breath.

“Yes, actually. His name is Hank Anderson. He’s a police Captain from Chicago. It’s urgent.”

“Still got your thing for cops, huh,” Derek said, and she gritted her teeth, listening as a few clicks sounded in the background - he was at work at a terminal, then. Good. Hopefully this wouldn’t take long. “OK, easy. Cell’s listed here. Got a pen?”

“Better, I have a good memory,” she deadpanned. “Go ahead.”

He read out the number, and she was just about to thank him and hang up, when-

“So, how long are you in town for? I know we’ve got a lot of unfinished business, but if you really wanna do the whole letting bygones be bygones thing, we could meet up for a drink…”

“Thanks, Derek, but no,” she said instantly. “I’m in town on a major story, anyway. I won’t have any free time.”

“A major story, huh...Nothing’s been going on I can think of,” he mused, again before she could
hang up. “Unless - it’s not that UN thing downtown, is it? I thought you hated politics?” Damn it. Derek was still a detective, and as dumb as he was in a relationship he was good at his job. Unfortunately.

“I do,” she said. “Goodbye, Derek.” This time, she did hang up on him, and ripped her earpiece out straight away, tossing it onto the bed and sinking down to the floor, hugging her knees to her chest until she stopped shaking.

Jesus Christ. This story was taking her places she never thought she’d revisit. But she had to get a hold of herself. She had to get Hank’s help. This was bigger than her.

So she allowed herself less than a minute’s gibbering before grabbing her tablet again and entering in the number Derek had given her, hoping to God it was the right one. After four rings, someone picked up.

“Yello’?” The voice certainly sounded the same, but she couldn’t quite tell…

“Captain Anderson?”

“Who the fuck’s askin’?” Yep, definitely him. Grace bit down on a grin.

“Grace Roth. We met yesterday-”

“Connor’s girlfriend,” Hank said instantly. “How’d you get this number? Never mind that, you’re a fuckin’ reporter, aren’t ya - no offense,” he added quickly. “I, uh...You seem like a nice girl, just bein’ a cop I haven’t had a great relationship with reporters....”

“I understand,” she said. “Listen, that all aside, there’s something I need to talk to you about. I remember you said you’re staying near the convention centre. Any chance you could meet me in the cafe on the ground floor of the east building in, say, twenty minutes?” She held her breath.

“Uh-huh…” Hank sounded skeptical. Who wouldn’t, given the situation? Your former partner’s reporter girlfriend (as much as she disliked either term) calling you up out of the blue, asking to meet...A recipe for suspicion under any circumstance. “Fine, OK. But you’re buying.”

“Deal. I’ll see you there.” After hanging up, Grace shut her eyes, burying her face in her hands. She felt like a castaway alone on an ocean of worries, buffeted to and fro by the waves of fear and doubt, unsure which direction to go. Hopefully Hank could steer her right. He knew Connor as well as she did, maybe even better - although not in the same way, she thought with a blush. At least, she didn’t think so.

Regardless, he was the one most likely to help her, to help Connor, without reservation. She hoped.

She got up and readied her bag, checked her makeup, and headed out.

Either way, she’d find out soon.

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He was already there by the time she arrived on the ground floor. It took a while to navigate the
crowded halls, especially without Lockwood. Part of Grace had expected him or one of the other UNPOL officers to intercept her on her way down, but they didn’t, perhaps because she wasn’t on official business or perhaps because she was human, anonymous for now, and unlikely to be a threat - or be threatened.

She hoped.

The cafe was crowded, clearly a new favourite spot for the UN volunteers and other officials. Grace scowled as she observed the line, wondering how long Hank was willing to wait for his coffee, when a large hand landed on her shoulder, making her jump as she whirled.

“Woah now!” Hank’s grizzled face smirked down at her. “Settle down there. Just me.” He hefted a cup holder in his other hand, which already held two tall coffees. “You owe me for this one, by the way.”

“How’d you-“ Grace gestured to the line, shaking her head.

“A good detective never lets on to his secret methods,” Hank said. He gestured for her to follow him to where, miraculously, there was an empty table. “That, and I was already here.”

“Why?” she asked as she settled in the chair across from him, gratefully taking one of the coffees. Black, no sugar, just how she liked it. If you were going to drink something as bitter as coffee, you might as well not even try to mask the taste.

“Waiting for the show to start,” Hank explained. “That, and I’ve been tryin’ to get a hold of Connor for hours. You know where he is?” He eyeballed her over the rim of his cup, eyebrows raised. She felt a blush rising before she could will it away.

“No,” she said. “I haven’t seen him.” She glanced around to make sure nobody was listening to them or paying them any undue attention, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “Actually, he’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Relationship troubles again?” Hank groaned. “Now, I don’t mind giving Connor advice here and there, but I’m tellin’ you right now I’m not gonna be any good for a, uh, woman’s perspective.”

“No,” she hissed, annoyed despite herself. So this was where Connor got some of his more sarcastic tendencies. She couldn’t say she was surprised. “Look, I just had a meeting with an officer from the Android Division of the DHS, the one who’s handling my case. He seems to think Connor’s been compromised by CyberLife, or Kamski, or someone.”

“What?” Hank lowered his cup, the jovial expression replaced by one of concern, his silver brows knitting in contention, mouth beneath the beard twisting with distaste. “So, what, he’s saying Connor’s been hacked? And you believe him?”

“It’s not just that,” Grace insisted, shaking her head. “Agent Collins asked me if Connor’s been acting strange, and, well...he has, lately. Just little things here and there, but it has me worried that he might be right. Or something close to it.”

Hank was quiet a moment, taking a long swig of his coffee and making a face; she wasn’t sure if it was in reaction to the taste or her words. “I met with him last night. He seemed...as weird as ever then, but now I think about it…”

“You saw him last night?” Grace repeated, frowning. “When?” Before or after he’d come to her room? Could that explain his odd behavior? But no, it was more than that night. He’d been quiet,
standoffish even before then, the vacantness in his gaze ever since they had touched down on Canadian soil. Some thing was going on.

“Ehh, about ten, eleven PM,” Hank shrugged after a moment’s thought. “We talked for a bit, nothing too deep, but he took off pretty quick. Seemed to think the same as you, that something was gonna happen, but he didn’t say what.”

Grace felt that clenching feeling in her stomach again, and bit her lip. Things were all adding up, and the equation wasn’t a good one. Could there have been a grain of truth to what Collins had told her? “Have you heard from him since?” she asked.

“Nope.” Hank finished his coffee and set the empty cup down between them. Grace had barely touched hers. “Look, I guess you’ve spent more time with Connor than me lately,” he continued after a moment. “So you’d know if he’s off. But this guy overrode CyberLife’s programming with nothing but sheer stubbornness once before, he can do it again. Have a little faith in him. I know I do.”

“They’ve had nearly a year to prepare for something like this,” Grace argued. Her coffee was probably getting cold by now, but she didn’t care. “Connor’s had a couple of weeks. And if the DHS have their eye on him then something might happen so they have an excuse to get their hands on him, or the other androids, or both. I just don’t know what they’re planning yet.”

Hank hummed neutrally, looking at her for a moment. “Maybe you’re right. Either way, I’ll tell you what I told him.” He picked up his cup and drained the rest of his coffee in one swig. When he set it back down empty, it was with an air of finality; Grace held her breath. “I’ve got your back. Connor was… is the one asshole who gave a single fuck about me in a world that gave up on me a long time ago. He saved my life. I’m not gonna let Kamski or CyberLife or whoever fuck him over now. He deserves freedom.” He shrugged. “All those so-called ‘deviants’ do.”

Grace reached across the table, taking Hank’s hand. He seemed startled, his brows knitting as he stared at her, mouth slightly open, but he didn’t pull away. “You’re right. And Connor needs someone on his side right now. I couldn’t think of anyone better. That’s why I called you.”

“I figured,” he said, his discomfort radiating out from him like a beacon. Still, she didn’t let go, holding his ice-blue gaze with her own.

“The opening of the summit is in two hours,” she told him. “They’re not calling on the androids until tomorrow, but they’ll all be present. If you haven’t got access to the gallery, I can see if I can arrange something.”

“I’ve got access,” Hank half-grumbled. “A police captain who served with an android partner who went on to become one of the key players in the Deviant Uprising? They asked me to take the stand tomorrow during the hearings.” He waved his free hand dismissively. “I said no, but you can bet your ass I’ll be in the audience. If something goes wrong I’m gonna have a front-row seat. And I’ve got backup of my own. You don’t need to worry.”

“People keep telling me that,” Grace deadpanned in response, “But it just makes me more worried. Promise me you’ll keep an eye on Connor when I can’t. I know you intend to, but I need to hear that promise from you, Captain.” She locked gazes with him, not letting him look away for a moment. His shrewd eyes flickered once, and then he seemed to sigh to himself, shaking his shaggy head.

“You’ve got it,” he said, and finally she let go, sitting back in her chair. He relaxed by a degree, grumbling to himself. She thought she heard him mutter ‘women’ under his breath, but decided not
to call him out on it. Not yet, anyway. She needed his help, after all.

“Thank you, Captain.” She only felt a little relieved, dread still looming over her like her own personal raincloud. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen, but she knew she had done all she could now to insure against it. With Lockwood and now Hank on the lookout, all that left was to talk to Markus...and maybe even Connor. If she could find them.

“Don’t sweat it. But before you go save the world or whatever, I got one question.” Hank held up a hand to stop her as she moved to stand, and Grace sank back down into her chair, raising her eyebrows

“What is it, Captain?”

“First off, call me Hank; ‘Captain’ still sounds weird as hell,” he began. “Second: You and Connor. What’s the deal there? You got some kinda android fetish?”

She felt heat flare instantly in her cheeks, her mouth opening on a defensive retort. But then she saw the smirk playing at Hank’s bearded mouth, the twinkle in his eye, and she frowned.

“No,” she answered, a tad more calmly than she might have initially. “In fact I never even really met one before Connor. But we have...something. I care about him. I don’t care what color his blood is.”

Hank eyeballed her for a long minute, and this time she found it difficult to read his expression. Was it disdain? Approval? Disgust or amusement? She couldn’t tell. Then, of all reactions, he laughed, sitting back and folding his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, he said pretty much the same thing,” he said. “It’s good. I mean, I don’t know you yet, but he seems to like you, and you seem all about making sure he doesn’t get hurt, so...it’s good.”

“...Thank you?” Grace faltered, wondering when she’d asked for his approval. It was nice to have, though? She supposed? It certainly wasn’t expected, but it also wasn’t unwelcome.

“Don’t you have a bunch of world leaders to butter up in a couple hours?” he prompted when she continued to just sit there. “I’ll see you there. If you need me, you’ve obviously got my number.”

“Right,” Grace blinked, shaking herself. “Right. Thank you again, Cap- Hank,” she corrected herself just in time as she stood up. “And thanks for the coffee.”

“You owe me!” he called after her as she wove her way through the crowd and out of the cafe.

He had no idea.

Chapter End Notes

Yooo when did we hit 500+ comments and 800 kudos?!??! Thank, thank, many many many thank as always to you readers for your amazing feedback, even if it's just a <3 here and there at least I know y'all are still reading and enjoying as much as I am enjoying writing! ♥♥♥
Grace found Connor and the rest of the androids in a meeting room in the third floor. UNPOL Officers Ayoade and Kim - at least, she thought those were their names - stood guard outside, and when Grace made to enter, Ayoade - a tall olive-skinned man - blocked her approach with an arm.

“I’m sorry, Miss Roth,” he said in a surprisingly light voice, flavoured with a British accent. “Markus has given us strict instructions that they’re not to be disturbed.”

“Are you shitting me?” So much for being a ‘part’ of Jericho. Grace sighed, resisting the urge to jam her fingers through her eyesockets, scoop out her aching brain and fling it at the offending officers in her path. “Can you tell them I’m here, at least? I need to speak with them. Please, it’s important.” She hoped Markus would see her, or at least Josh, hell - she’d even take North at this point. They needed to know what was going on with Connor.

Ayoade exchanged a glance with Kim, a man of East Asian appearance though she was hesitant to categorize which country he was from exactly, and he nodded. Ayoade opened the door and slipped inside while Kim planted himself firmly in front of it until his partner returned. Unfortunately, as a result, he bore the full force of Grace’s glare. He was a younger man, maybe somewhere in his twenties, with a round face and a hint of pudge to him. However, he held himself tall, hands folded behind his back, eyes ahead and unwavering.

In the face of that, Grace gave up, crossing her arms and pacing back and forth in front of the door instead. It was maybe thirty seconds later when Ayoade returned, Markus in tow. His long sleeves were rolled up, and his brow was knit with tension; hopefully not just in response to her interruption. He glanced from her to Ayoade and Kim and then took her aside, moving out of their earshot.

“Grace? What’s going on? You look worried.”

“I am,” she confessed. “I’m sorry for interrupting your meeting, but I had to talk to you. It’s about Connor.”

Markus’s brow creased further, and he glanced over his shoulder once before looking back at her. “You’re worried CyberLife are going to try to access his systems remotely,” he said in a low voice. He knew. Well, of course he knew; no doubt Connor had voiced (or sub-voiced) his concerns to his leader before, but what Markus didn’t know was exactly what Collins had told her.

“I met with Agent Collins from the Android Division today,” she murmured back, jumping straight into it, the words tumbling out of her in a rush. “He all but confirmed it. Please tell me you’re being careful with him. With...all of you.”

“Our software is protected,” Markus told her. “And Connor is...as secure as we can get him right now.” He glanced over his shoulder again, as if afraid someone was listening - if so, who? The UNPOL officers? Connor himself? "We've been working on it together. If CyberLife or anyone"
attempts to access him, we’ll know first.” He touched two fingers to his temple, where his LED would have been. “You could say we’ve got front-row seats.” His brow cleared a little, his mouth twitching in a reassuring smile, and despite his calming presence Grace still felt worried.

“Okay. Just...be careful, okay? All of you.”

Markus put a hand on her shoulder, squeezed. “We will,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“People keep telling me th-”

“Grace?” A familiar voice interrupted her, and both she and Markus turned in unison to see Connor approach. The tall android looked confused, his dark gaze darting from Grace to Markus and back again. He didn’t seem cold, or aloof. Not right now. His LED glowed a soft blue at his temple as he joined her side, his touch light but reassuring at her elbow. “Markus? Is everything all right?”

“Everything is going to be fine,” Markus answered, but it was Grace he looked at, his eyebrows raised slightly as his mismatched gaze bored into hers. He seemed to think things were under control, and at least he knew now about the threat from Collins, even if he didn’t think it was a credible one. She nodded, slowly. He smiled.

“I have to get back,” he said, turning away from her and inclining his head to Connor. “But take all the time that you need. I’ll see you later, Grace.”

“Yeah...thanks, Markus,” she said faintly, watching him go. Connor didn’t take his eyes away from Grace even as Markus touched his shoulder on the way. She waited until they were alone before saying anything, though.

“Hey,” she started eloquently. “Are you okay? After last night I was worried.”

Connor’s gaze flickered, once, a tiny back-and-forth dart of his dark brown eyes, a movement she might have missed if she wasn’t looking for it. He took a step closer to her, lowering his voice as he spoke. “I had to leave before the next rotation of the UNPOL officers,” he explained. "I didn't tell anyone where I was going, so I was...concerned the trouble it might cause if we were...caught." Sneaking into her room like a teenager. If it wasn't so ridiculous, and if she wasn't still so concerned, Grace would have laughed.

Instead, she found herself smiling past the metallic tang of anxiety in the back of her throat. Despite his reasoning, he wasn’t looking at her as if he’d never met her, he was here, and for now, he was all right. “It’s okay,” she lied. “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He tilted his head at that, quirking an eyebrow; a familiar expression, but it was one that failed to give her comfort this time.

“CyberLife are going to be present this afternoon,” she pointed out. “Or, at least, their former engineers and scientists are. Aren’t you worried?”

The halo at his temple cycled through three-hundred-sixty degrees of yellow, just once. “Yes,” he said. “However my firewalls are still functional and we have been conducting regular checks in order to rule out any potential intrusions in my program. Is that what you were talking to Markus about?”

Grace frowned; there was no getting anything past Connor sometimes. Sometimes, she forgot his original purpose; a model designed for investigative work, and he was very good at it still. “Yes. I just wanted all of you to be careful. Just in case.”
“In case what?” But she didn’t answer him, not directly. Instead she answered to a sudden impulse, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his chest. “Grace-”

“I love you,” she murmured into his shirt. “Don’t forget that.”

She felt him hesitate and then place a gentle hand on her shoulder, squeezing once before he gently pushed her away from him. His eyes, when she looked up, were soft. “I love you too,” he said, and for now, that was all she needed. She smiled, and he returned the expression with that unique quirk of his lips.

“I’ll see you in the meeting chamber,” she said.

“And the dinner afterwards?” Connor asked as she made to step away, and she paused.

“What dinner?”

“The welcome dinner,” he replied, blinking. “I thought you knew. All heads of state and guests of the summit have been invited. It’s to take place in the West building at 8pm, after the conclusion of the introductory meeting. Even Jericho was invited, despite the fact we don’t eat or drink.”

“Oh.” Shit. She knew she should’ve read the program more thoroughly. “I guess I’ll see you there, too, if I don’t speak to you before then.”

Connor nodded, and gave that little smirk again, before turning and reentering the meeting room, the door shutting with a final click behind him. She felt a little better after talking to him and with Markus, but now she was anxious for a whole different reason.

She was going to be in a room socializing with leaders of the free world and eminent scientists, politicians and engineers, and she didn’t even have a dress.

“Shit,” Grace said aloud.

This was going to go great.

Chapter End Notes

Just a bit of reassurance that our boi Connor is still alive so DON’T WORRY yet...heh heh
For a summit that was to decide the fate of an entire people, the first part of it was incredibly... boring.

Initially, walking into the meeting chamber was terrifying. It was a large space, perhaps two or three convention hall rooms combined into one, with sweeping wooden desks in a half-circle formation around a central long table, and another at the forefront of the room in front of a large white projection screen. Two presentation dais stood in between the central table and the main bar, and every conceivable surface was hooked up with microphones. It felt a little like a courtroom crossed with the biggest meeting room in the world, and it was intimidating as hell.

And of course there was the media, hovering with cameras of all sorts. Grace winced at the flashes as she and the rest of Jericho stepped into the room, flanked by the UNPOL whose mere presence demanded the press keep a respectable distance. They couldn’t stop the cameras, though.

Lockwood was closest to her, and he leaned in as the group were led to the long table. “Are you ready?” he asked in a low voice out of the corner of his mouth. She smiled at his concern.

“Absolutely,” she said, but she wasn’t sure who she was trying to reassure.

When he’d come to get her from her room personally, she had been a nervous wreck, but with every step towards the meeting chamber Grace had felt an odd calm settle over her like a blanket. Whatever happened now was out of her hands. She had done as much as she could. This introductory session didn’t require her to speak, as far as she had been told, so she would have to leave it in the lap of fate and hope for the best.

At least she had Lockwood and Hank on her side. That much she could reassure herself with.

She sought out the latter in the gallery, the furthest row of seats, and spotted Hank slumped in a chair at the very edge, his arms crossed and leg jiggling impatiently as he watched the proceedings with a scowl. She almost waved, but he was probably too far away to see her.

They seated her next to Josh, at the very end of the row of androids. Connor sat on the other side of him, next to North and Markus, but didn’t make eye contact when Grace leaned forward slightly. He was looking around the room, seemingly taking it all in, as the burble and buzz of voices...
reached fever pitch.

This was an historic moment. Unfortunately, Grace had forgotten just how *boring* history could be.

Once the chamber was full and quiet, the chairman, a dark-skinned man in his late sixties, took to the centre of the main bench, where microphones had also been set up. His face flickered into life on the main screen behind him, as well as onto several strategically placed on the walls around the room, so that everyone had an equal view. When he spoke, his voice was raspy but confident. Grace recognized him as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“Mr. President, excellencies, distinguished delegates, friends,” he began, casting a look to the man seated next to him whom Grace also recognized as the leader of the United Nations, the President Secretary-General himself. A hush overtook the chamber as all eyes turned to them or the screens bearing their faces. “It is with honor and the burden of great responsibility that I welcome you all here, to the first United Nations Summit on the Recognition and Classification of Artificial Intelligence Lifeforms. This meeting has been long in the making, with great diplomatic efforts on all sides, and I would like to personally thank each and every one of our delegates for attending today.” He proceeded to list *every single one of them*, full titles and all, and asked each to stand in turn; it seemed to take forever. By the time the last delegate sat down, Grace already felt her attention flagging. This was why she had always *hated* politics - all the pomp and protocol.

“I would also like to extend our thanks to our special guests, without whom this summit would not be taking place,” the Commissioner continued. At this, Grace perked up slightly; he hadn’t mentioned the androids by name yet. “The leadership of the android group known as Jericho have traveled here at great personal risk. On behalf of the United Nations Human Rights Council, as well as the United Nations Security Council, key members of both being present this afternoon, I would like to extend the hand of friendship and peace for the duration of this five-day summit, and hopefully, beyond.” There was a smattering of polite applause as, bidden by the Commissioner, Markus, North, Connor and Josh stood.

Grace remained seated, shrinking down in her chair and hoping nobody would notice her. Thankfully, nobody did. And once the androids were seated once more, the Commissioner continued with his speech.

“Mr. President, it has been less than six months since the last high-level segment of this nature, although this time we face a crisis of a considerably different type to the ongoing conflict in Russia or the continued violations in the Koreas. We instead set aside these more *human* problems in favour of the question of what makes us human; this question posited by the uprising of a group of what have come to be known as ‘deviant’ androids in America over the past twelve months and beyond. What was initially discounted as a software error, malfunctions and ‘glitches’ have now been theorized as the emergence of a new artificial form of life, one that has formed unbidden in the artificial minds of machines that were initially created to serve the purposes of man. Now, we face the question: Are these androids *more* than they were created to be? Over the course of the next few days we will hear evidence from leading academic experts in the field of artificial intelligence technology, as well as engineers from the former android manufacturing company, CyberLife, to determine the answer to this question. We will also hear from four key members of the Uprising itself; the leaders of Jericho, the organization behind the occupation of Detroit, Michigan.”

Grace swallowed. The reaction to this was a sweep of murmurs throughout the room, but they didn’t sound angry, as such - just interested. Translators worked at their delegates’ side or software provided instant speech-to-text, so that many heads were turned to screens or others, and it was hard to gauge the mood in the room. Sombre, certainly. At least they were taking this *seriously*.
Unfortunately, the first person the Commissioner called upon to speak was President Warren herself. She spoke without standing or so much as looking up from her chair. She had twice as many aides taking up the spaces next to her as any of the delegates, her powder-yellow suit meant to be unassuming but Grace found it insipid instead. She had never liked the vlogger-turned-politician much.

“Mr. High Commissioner, Mr. President, distinguished delegates,” she droned in her monotonous, nasally mid-American accent. Grace thought she sounded a bit like Collins, or vice versa. “I have the privilege and responsibility of addressing you all from a unique position. My nation has been beset from within by an unknown threat, one that we were initially powerless to fight back against.” Grace felt her hands tightening to fists; she’d seen the footage from the android disposal camps, the riot teams firing on Markus and his unarmed protestors. It figured Warren would start this on a lie. “Our machines rose up against us, despite the fact we were their benefactors, their creators. At first we did not understand the nature of the threat facing us - was it merely a malfunction, a bug in their systems? We soon grew to realize the deviant problem was greater than that. It was a flaw built into their base programming itself. The capacity to learn, to grow - this was the mistake, the fatal flaw that Elijah Kamski, the founder of CyberLife, built into all its androids.” A murmur swept the crowd as this was translated, and Grace saw North and Markus exchange glances while Josh looked shocked, and Connor stared straight ahead, stoic. “Why he did this, we may never know. However, because of this we have been forced to consider androids as a new form of artificial intelligence, removing them from sensitive positions all around America and our outlying regions, causing much of our economy to grind to a near-halt, and abandoning one of our largest cities to their overwhelming numbers, displacing millions of citizens in the process. Our nation ground to a halt because of this flaw. Never again will humanity trust its most important work to these types of machines. Never again will we allow our hubris to blind us to the dangers from within. Through the testimony of former CyberLife employees and leading Artificial Intelligence experts over the next few days, Mr. President, we intend to provide unimpeachable evidence of the fatal flaw within all android programming and prove that they are not, in fact, fully sentient; merely programmed to appear to be. What you choose to do with this information is, of course, a matter for the vote of my fellow distinguished delegates. Thank you.”

With that she was silent, the room stunned. To come here and state outright that she had no intention of admitting androids were alive ... it beggared belief. Even the Commissioner looked surprised, his dark creased face masked with a frown as he looked over at the American President.

“We call upon Mr. Filladeau, Prime Minister of Canada, who graciously agreed to host this summit and its member nations for the duration. Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. President.”

“Thank you, High Commissioner, Mr. President.” The Prime Minister was a tall, unassuming man, younger than most politicians, and his hair had only a hint of silver where most were grey. He stood as he spoke, straightening his navy-blue suit in a way that reminded Grace a little bit of Connor. “As a nation, Canada has been increasingly aware of the internal conflict caused by what America has dubbed ‘deviant androids’. As you all are no doubt aware, my nation never passed its own Android Act, nor did we agree to sell androids despite CyberLife’s extensive lobbying. As a result we saw an upsurge in immigration to Canada during the last two years, largely made up of androids fleeing their masters. We instituted screening processes, however this did not stop many of the illegal entries. We became a refuge for artificial intelligence. While initially my advisors called this an unprecedented crisis we had to deal with, you can imagine my amazement when our crime rate remained the same, our unemployment rate dropped by .05 percent, and our economy continued to grow, while in America soldiers patrolled the streets and gunned down machines that, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be unarmed humans.” In the front row, seated across from Filladeau and separated only by their advisors and translators, Grace could see Warren glare.

“Twenty years ago, leading technology experts including the Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and the late
Professor Stephen Hawking, hypothesized that someday machine intelligence would surpass our own and society as we know it would end. Perhaps they were right; however, society as we know it is currently one where we treat intelligent machines as single-use technology without the capacity to learn or evolve, which by President Warren’s own admission is not the case. Wherever this capacity has come from, we must consider the possibility that society must accept these androids at face value: as a new form of intelligent life. I look forward to hearing evidence from both sides before we put the fate of these beings to a vote. Thank you.” He sat down, and this time instead of silence there was a smattering of polite applause - Grace even caught herself clapping.

The other leaders spoke afterward, but their speeches were not quite as memorable as America’s or Canada’s. Notably absent was Russian President Artem Ivanoff, which was unsurprising. Although Russia and America were in a standoff akin to the Cold War, they had developed their own android technology for mainly military use and would no doubt be uninterested in any kind of theory that androids might be sentient in their own right, nor would they want to give America ammunition to use against it. It was a telling move, one political journalists would be talking about for years to come, even more than the Trump and Putin saga of twenty years ago. There had already been considerable accusations thrown around that Russia had hacked CyberLife, but those had remained unsubstantiated.

The rest of the introductory meeting seemed to pass at a crawl. It took four hours from start to finish, and when the President of the UN finally took the mic, Grace was practically falling asleep in her chair.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. This year’s President was the Justitsministeren of Denmark - their Minister of Defence - elected unanimously earlier that year. Grace didn’t know much about him. By all appearances he was a frail-looking man pushing sixty, with thinning silvered ginger hair and glasses. But he spoke with a surprisingly strong voice, his English carrying only a hint of an accent. “I am honored to preside over this summit, which is of great importance not only to our guests and distinguished delegates, but to the future of technology as well as the nature of humanity itself. If being human cannot be defined solely by flesh and blood, what then is it? This is a question I suspect we will not ever truly have the answer to. But at the very least I hope to determine the nature of the beings sitting before us here today.” He gestured to the long table where Grace sat with Markus, North, Connor and Josh. Markus’s gaze was intense, but unreadable as he looked up at the UN President; North seemed angry; Josh still looked nervous as hell, and Connor…

Connor’s LED was red.

Just for a moment. She saw the flash of crimson at his temple before it circled back around to yellow, then blue, almost too quick to track. His expression was blank, as was the look in his eyes, his gaze on...the audience in the furthest row of chairs? Grace followed his gaze but saw nobody out of the ordinary; a couple of journalists, a man on his tablet taking notes, on the opposite end to where Hank was sitting. Still...

Grace felt anxious again. Desperately worried would be a more apt description. She found herself digging her nails into her palms underneath the table, hard enough to leave crescent-shaped marks in her skin.

The President continued, reading out the agenda for the rest of the next four days of meetings, hearings and other sessions. Grace took notes on her tablet, almost dropping it when she heard her name mentioned alongside the androids’ for the next day’s special session. She ducked her head, letting her hair fall over her face in case any cameras were watching. She was supposed to be the one behind the computer, not on the screen. But this was a price she was paying, a comparatively
small one when it was the freedom of an entire species at stake.

Still, she was relieved when the meeting finally adjourned. The President, High Commissioner and other senior UN officials at the front of the room filtered out first, followed by the world leaders, and then finally Lockwood and his officers stood up to escort Markus, Josh, North, Connor and Grace from the chamber, followed by the audience in the gallery. Grace looked around for Hank but could see no sign of them, so she turned her attention to the androids.

None of them said anything, not right away. But she could see Markus exchanging glances with the others, and knew they were talking amongst themselves through their peculiar form of machine telepathy. Every time they did it she felt like the nerdy kid in the corner of the cafeteria, watching the cool kids at their table. She had to remind herself that despite the fact she was allowed to sit with the cool kids sometimes, she was still an outsider.

“Miss Roth.” It was Lockwood who spoke, falling into step next to her as they filtered out of the huge room. “Will you be attending the dinner tonight?”

“Yes,” she said. “I managed to get myself a dress earlier so I guess, as a woman, I have no choice now.” Lockwood smiled at that, maybe the first time she had seen him do so. Without the serious, military stone-face, he was actually quite attractive, she thought. “Why?”

“I was actually wondering if you’d like an escort,” he said, and was it just her or was he having difficulty making eye contact? Grace blinked at him, and noticed out of the corner of her eye Connor, who had slowed and was now walking just in front of her and Lockwood, lagging behind Markus, North and Josh. Interesting.

“Will I need a bodyguard?” she asked carefully, stopping just outside the double doors to the chamber as she turned to Lockwood. He stopped as well, facing her with his hands behind his back, and despite the formal pose he definitely seemed...nervous.

“Not as a bodyguard. Just as...company,” he replied, clearing his throat. Yep, he was definitely uncomfortable. Was he actually asking her out? Connor had stopped as well, and out of the corner of her eye Grace saw him advancing on them. Instead of the usual neutral look, he was frowning deeply, and his LED was cycling yellow.

At least it wasn’t red, like earlier...

“Thanks, Clive, but I think I’ll be fine,” Grace said, smiling at the Commander while simultaneously trying to keep an eye on Connor. He’d stopped some meters away and was watching them, head tilted. “I appreciate it, though. Really.” She smiled at him and he nodded, offering a small one of his own before he left her. Connor stepped up beside her once he was gone.

“What was that?” he asked, and there was an accusatory tone to his voice she didn’t like, but it was also such a human reaction she almost laughed. Almost.

If she wasn’t mistaken, he was jealous.

“Nothing,” she said. “Commander Lockwood was just asking me if I needed someone to accompany me to the welcome gala tonight.”

“Do you? Because I’m more than capable of doing so,” Connor said. He wasn’t looking at her, staring straight ahead, his jaw tight. It was almost cute, if it didn’t piss her off so much. He’d pretty much pretended she didn’t exist this whole time, save for barging into her room for a quickie last night, and now he was acting all entitled? Nuh-uh. Not cool.
“No, you know, I think I’ll go solo,” she said, deliberately not looking at him. She saw him glance at her though, his brows drawn tight, something flashing through his gaze she couldn’t catch without making eye contact, and she wasn’t going to give him that right now. “I’ll see you there, though?”

“Of course,” he said, his voice deceptively even. Two can play this game, then, Grace thought.

“Oh, I’ll see you then,” she said, and with that she peeled away from him, quickening her step as she headed towards the elevators while people continued to mill and muster around her. Most of the world leaders were gone, probably in an effort to avoid the press, many of whom were still scuttling around with their cameras and microphones in search of a likely target. Grace found herself wishing she hadn’t shrugged Lockwood off, if only to have someone to scare them away.

Somehow, she made it to the elevators without incident, largely thanks to the number of times she ducked into the wake of another, taller person walking ahead of her to escape the notice of any prowling journalists. As one herself, it felt strange to be avoiding her peers, but she was on the other side now, a Person of Interest, so to speak. She never anticipated this on her first step into Detroit. Never anticipated any of this could get so complicated.

Life was funny like that.

She made it up to her room unmolested, shutting the door and leaning against it heavily, breathing deep. Her anxiety was through the roof, and the day wasn’t even over yet. Nothing horrible had happened so far, although her instincts told her not to relax, not just yet. She wasn’t as on edge, at least. She just had to make it through this gala dinner, schmooze with world leaders, hope she didn’t say anything stupid...and then spend the rest of the night writing the speech she had almost completely forgotten about in the wake of Collins’ bombshell and trying to make sure Connor was okay.

So, all in all, it was going to be a great night.

Chapter End Notes

Also, Warren is absolute garbage and, as the game hinted, firmly in the pocket of CyberLife, and now she's throwing them under the bus because POLITICS. Rest assured it's not gonna end well for her! I reallllly wanted her to get impeached in the game when the revolution didn't go her way, so there will absolutely be some wish fulfillment to come where she's concerned. JUSTICE /shakes fist

But first we've gotta get through the gala and find out what's up with Connor. To make up for all the boring political chapters, I promise the next one will be exciting, but not in any expected ways. I hope. :D
I would like to state for the record that I am a bad person and I enjoy bad things happening to my characters far too much. BUT I would also like to reassure everyone that I DO have a happy ending in mind for this fic.

Eventually. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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It took Grace forty-five minutes to get ready, from shower and blow-dry to makeup application and putting on her dress and heels. Before the first meeting, she’d gone down the street to the first department store she could find to buy a phone - hers forgotten back in Detroit - a clutch to keep it in, as well as the all-important dress. She had picked out the first one she thought might fit; an emerald-green silk gown that hugged around the torso and hips and flowed free through the legs. It turned out to be a good choice: comfortable as well as surprisingly flattering for the first thing she’d picked off the rack.

She considered herself a jeans-and-t-shirt kind of woman, or more often than not dress-shirt-and-slacks, so she could count the number of dresses she owned on one hand. It seemed like a trivial concern, anyway, given everything that was going on. She wanted to get this over and done with so she could get back to her room and sit staring at a blank screen for half the night until, hopefully, inspiration hit and she churned out something that somehow managed to encapsulate her experience of the past month in the form of a fifteen-minute-or-less speech.

Grace took one last look in the bathroom mirror and smoothed her hair out over her shoulders. She looked...acceptable, she decided. Makeup in place, every pore and freckle smoothed away, lips red, hair curled - it wasn’t a look she was usually a fan of; she thought it made her look too fake, but she needed the armor tonight.

“Let’s go,” she told herself, and with a final, self-assuring nod, she turned from the mirror, grabbed her stuff and left the room.

She and the androids were the only occupants of their floor, so it was quiet - presumably Jericho had already left; she doubted any of them had spent as much time as she had doing her hair. North, maybe, but she could alter the nanocarbons in her skin and hair fibres at will, so it probably would’ve taken her only a moment’s thought.

The ride down in the elevator gave Grace an opportunity to reconsider what she was doing. It wasn’t like this dinner was mandatory, just recommended - right? But it would look bad if she wasn’t there; as if she was only attending the summit because she was obligated, or worse, being forced to. On the other hand, going might make her look superficial...In the end, though, she knew that it didn’t really matter. Go, don’t go; it was worrying about what people thought that would do the most damage.
The lobby was still bustling with activity; not just volunteers but people in evening dress, no doubt headed to the same place she was. Grace ducked her head, burying her face in her phone. It was a cheaper model than she was used to but it still had Internet access, which was the main thing. All the social media and news channels were full of coverage of the summit, which was not as distracting as she hoped, so she turned it off and put it in her clutch, tucking it under her arm as she redoubled her pace. Sidling through the crowd, it took a minute to leave the building, and then she just let herself get swept up in the stream of people heading towards the West wing of the convention centre on the next block.

She felt like a speck of sand buffeted by the currents of the ocean, carried slowly but inexorably forward. It was easy to let herself get lost in the crowd, to forget for a moment where she was going and why, and the myriad troubles that lay ahead, and believe herself one insignificant piece of a whole, rather than a small individual fighting ever against the tide, against the pull of the waves dragging her back.

The moment didn’t last long, for all too soon the West building came into view, and here the crowd split into streams heading around to the various public entrances, slowing as they went through security. Grace let herself filter into a random line, behind an elderly couple chatting in what sounded like Hungarian and two men speaking in French behind her. The latter, she could understand:

“Will the androids be there, do you think?”

“But of course! They’re the guests of honor, after all.”

“I’ve never met one! Well, that I know of. If Filllaudeau is to be believed there could be hundreds among us now! How terrifying! What if we’ve been talking to androids every day, or worse, let them into our home? It really makes you wonder about even our closest friends!”

“Does it? What if I was an android, Jacques? Would you be frightened of me?”

“Well, of course not! That’s hardly a fair thing to say. For the sake of argument, though, I would have more issue with the fact you had lied to me than whether you were a robot or not, I think. You make quite a sophisticated one, at the very least.”

“Michel, sometimes you never cease to surprise me…”

Grace smiled to herself, stepping forward along with the line. Canada had always been on the outside of the android debate, and maybe that was why its citizens were a little more open to the idea of machines becoming something closer to human. There were those who were more suspicious than not, of course, but there were also those who weren’t.

There were UNPOL officers - not the ones assigned to Jericho - checking ID at the entrances. Grace readied hers, and though her feet were already aching, it didn’t take much longer before she was next to lay her thumb on the fingerprint scanner and present her ID card. The officer raised an eyebrow at her name, obviously recognizing it, and she coloured beneath her makeup but kept her head high and her stare even.

He nodded to her. “Have a pleasant evening, Miss Roth,” he said as he handed her ID back. She took it and tucked it back in her clutch, echoing the nod with one of her own, and headed through the doors into the convention hall.

If the meeting chamber had been grand, this was magnificent. Where they’d gotten a chandelier of that size, she had no idea; it hung suspended from the vaulted roof, spinning and catching the light,
throwing prisms across the lobby. The lobby itself had been converted into a kind of cocktail lounge/waiting area, with dozens of standing tables dotting the space, crisply-dressed waiters weaving among them and the people inside and distributing drinks and hors d’oeuvres. A live band on a raised platform near the double doors leading to the dining room played soft classical music, strategically-placed speakers carrying the sound throughout the large room.

Grace hadn’t seen any of Jericho yet, but there had to be a couple of hundred people or so already inside, so instead of trying to crane over the mass of people - impossible even with the added height of her heels - Grace snagged a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and found a miraculously empty table to stand at. She felt exhausted already and she hadn’t even spoken to anyone yet.

Unfortunately, that was to be short-lived.

“Looking good, gorgeous,” drawled an all-too-familiar voice behind her, and Grace’s entire body cringed, from her toes to her shoulders to the grimace on her face. She didn’t need to turn around to see who it was, but she did wonder how he’d gotten in. She took a long, long swig of her champagne as Derek Mendelssohn joined her side, looking immaculate in a tailored suit and a shit-eating grin.

He was a handsome guy, one of the things that had initially attracted to her him back in college. Unfortunately, he knew it all too well, and his wasn’t a humble personality. Tall, well-muscled, dark hair slicked back and enough stubble to be called rugged but not enough to be considered unkempt, Derek was her age and had been in one of the same social sciences units as her, in order to complete his degree and enter the police force. He was intelligent but arrogant, a dangerous combination, but at the time she had been twenty, a tomboy, and had loved the attention. Theirs had been a long, drawn-out descent into a toxic relationship that had finally ended when a late-night drinking incident led to Grace being thrown into a door during one of their frequent arguments; it was then she’d decided enough was enough, quit her job as editor of the small newspaper she was running and had moved to Chicago two weeks later to get away from him - a month after he’d proposed.

She never thought she’d see Derek again. Had hoped never to see him again. But here he was, acting like the cat who’d caught the canary.

“What are you doing here, Derek?” she asked, keeping her tone flat. But he grinned at the reaction nonetheless. He knew she was hiding her discomfort. He knew her too well, despite the distance and years.

“Well, the Captain of my precinct got an invite and took along two of his best officers, which of course meant me and...some other guy,” he said. “I couldn’t pass it up since I knew you’d be here. You find your boyfriend, that Hank guy?”

“First of all, not my boyfriend, and secondly, none of your business,” she said, straightening up to pass a nearby waiter her now-empty champagne glass. He offered to replace it with a full one but she waved him off. She’d need her wits about her to survive tonight, it seemed.

“Now, now, is that any way to treat someone you owe a favor?” Derek leaned in, and she could smell his aftershave - even after all these years, he still wore the same brand. It made her feel sick.

“Actually, by your own admission we should be even now,” she said, glaring at him. He used to be able to intimidate her physically but when she didn’t back down, he stopped, the surprise palpable on his chiseled face. “After all, I had plenty of opportunities to tell your cop buddies how you used to beat me whenever you drank.”
“I never laid a hand on you,” he hissed, his grey eyes flashing, a hint of that wild animal she knew all too well from before. “At least, not where anyone could see it.” The rictus of his grin should have sent chills up her spine, but now it just filled her with a faint sense of disgust...of pity. He was a coward, plain and simple. How she had ever considered marrying him was beyond her now.

“Good thing you won’t ever get the chance again,” she said. “Goodbye, Derek.” And with that, she turned and walked away.

The shakes hit her just as she made it to the far edge of the room, adrenaline and anger warring for space in her brain and body. She did not have time for this, this added layer of complication on top of everything else. It was her own fault for asking for his help, like waving a red flag at a bull. But, she reminded herself, she was not responsible for his behavior. She never had been.

Wrapping her arms around herself, Grace found a space at the wood-paneled wall to lean against, taking a deep breath. From here she could see all the way to all three entrances, even if particularly tall people did cut off her view occasionally. She did see the ripple of motion as, near one of the doors, people in the immediate vicinity turned to look as several people entered at once.

No, not people - not in the traditional sense, anyway - but androids. Markus was first, flanked by North and Josh, Connor bringing up the rear, and all of them wore impeccably tailored suits apart from North, whose black-and-white dress made Grace’s look like a hessian sack.

They were surrounded, of course, by their UNPOL escort, including Lockwood, all of whom wore a more formal version of their uniforms, replete with medals and pins on their berets. Grace thought they looked a little silly, but she wasn’t about to say so.

The susurration of whispers spread out like wildfire, reaching even Grace at the edge of the room. ‘Is that them?’ ‘I can’t believe they let them come here!’ ‘They look so human!’

Grace pushed herself off the wall and sidled through the press of bodies, which got thicker the closer she got to the Jericho group. Eventually she managed to break through, and two of the UNPOL she recognized as Chaudhary and Thibault saw her first. She noticed them tense and move their hands towards their sidearms before they relaxed and dropped them to their sides. They were on guard, protective of their charges, despite their species. Good.

Lockwood was closest next to the other officers, and smiled at her, keeping his eyes very pointedly above her neckline. “Miss Roth,” he greeted. “Glad to see you made it. You look lovely.”

“Thanks,” she said, but her eyes were on Connor, who turned slowly and seemed to freeze as his eyes fell on her. He took her in from the top of her head to her toes, a long slow scan that made her feel warm beneath her skin. She grinned. “All of you scrubbed up nicely as well, I see.” And, because she was trying to be diplomatic: “North, I love your dress.”

The android woman looked Grace up and down as well, but dismissively. She was scowling, as always, and seemed uncomfortable in the presence of so many humans, her arms crossed over her chest. “This summit is supposed to decide the fate of my people,” she said. “Not to be a fashion show.”

“Relax, North,” Markus said from beside her, slipping an arm around her waist. They made an attractive couple like this. Under any other circumstance, they could’ve easily been mistaken for an everyday couple enjoying a nice night out together. The guards and the people watching them ruined the illusion, however. “This is the one night we can unwind. Let’s take advantage of it.”

“I’m not sure North is capable of relaxing,” Josh interjected, earning a glare from her. He grinned,
showing straight white teeth, and North rolled her eyes and reached out to smack his shoulder. This small gesture of camaraderie gave Grace a little hope that tonight wasn’t going to go completely pear-shaped.

Connor stepped forward, his eyes still fixed on Grace as if drawn by a magnet. “You look…” he said, then he glanced at Lockwood, frowned briefly, looked back at her. “Perfect,” he settled on, seeming pleased with himself. She smiled at him, this time a little amused by his jealousy because it was so ridiculous. She’d never shown a hint of romantic interest in Lockwood, and while she liked him, she wasn’t about to go running around on Connor in the middle of a political summit meant, like North said, to determine the future of his species.

“Thanks,” she said nonetheless. “You look pretty good yourself. I’m surprised Markus convinced you to part with that jacket of yours.”

Connor adjusted the lapels of his dinner jacket, frowning slightly when his fingers brushed the bow-tie at his throat. “I didn’t have a choice in the matter,” he said, shooting Markus a somewhat dark look. The Jericho leader laughed.

“Can I borrow him for a minute?” Grace asked, stepping forward to take Connor’s arm, glancing from Lockwood to Markus and back again. The latter shrugged while the former nodded. “Chaudhary will be nearby if you need anything.” The dark-skinned man peeled off from the group but maintained a respectful distance as Grace led Connor away. She noticed his eyes darting around almost nervously, flitting from face to face; scanning for threats, no doubt. His LED, usually a good indicator of his mood, remained blue, but flickered on and off as he computed whatever he was thinking about.

People watched them as she led Connor through the crowd, but she ignored the inquiring eyes and whispered words. They weren’t important right now. She found an empty table - or it was more accurate to say that people fled the table when they saw her and Connor, shadowed by Chaudhary, approach; but she was okay with that. She stopped and turned to the tall android, whose head seemed on a swivel as he kept looking around.

“Hey,” she said, drawing his attention back to her. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “There is... a lot of audio/visual data here to interpret. It’s taking my systems some time to adjust.”

“Not a big fan of crowds, huh,” she said, allowing herself a smile. Connor shook his head.

“It’s not just that. I’m also - detecting -”

“Miss Roth.” The cool, nasally female voice interrupted them, and Grace turned, blinking as she took in its source. At first her brain refused to catch up with the evidence of her eyes and ears, unable to parse the fact that standing in front of her was the President of the United States, Cristina Warren, and her entourage - six large men in ill-fitting suits. It was Warren who had addressed her, and she stood with a thin politician’s smile as she regarded her and Connor, her pale gaze implacable. “How nice to finally meet you in person. I’ve heard a lot about your work in Detroit.”

“Madam President,” Grace managed, briefly fighting down the urge to curtsey - that was for the King, not the President. And although she had little respect for the woman, politeness demanded she take her hand when it was extended. Her fingers were cool and smooth, her nails perfectly manicured. The woman was taller than her even in heels, intimidating up close and personal in her suit, a powder blue today. She caught the faint narrowing of her eyes as she looked at Connor, and
swallowed the sudden lump in her throat, unsure if she was imagining the tension that filled the space between them, thick as poison.

“And you are the RK800, the one CyberLife commissioned to hunt down the deviants. I’ve heard even more about you and your...failed mission.”

Connor was frowning deeply, LED stuttering yellow. She couldn’t blame him. He said nothing, though, although she caught the faint twitch of his jaw, the bob of his artificial Adam’s apple as it moved in his throat.

“I do hope events do not turn out as...unfortunate as they did in Detroit,” Warren continued. “It would be a shame for all of us.”

“What do you mean?” Grace asked when she found her voice, the question coming out hurried, rushed, none of her practiced journalist’s calm present now. Warren looked at her as she might a big on the bottom of her shoe, and her paper-thin lips twitched that false smile again.

“Please, enjoy the dinner,” she said, and then she was moving away with her retinue trailing in her wake.

“What was that all about?” Grace wondered aloud, turning to look up at Connor. “I swear that woman is- Connor?” He was glaring across the room at someone with such intensity it arrested her immediately, and the circle at his temple was stuttering bright yellow. She tried following the direction of his gaze but saw nothing but swirling bodies as people milled and mingled, moving from place to place, brightly-coloured koi in an overcrowded pond. There were a knot of people at the next table over, a couple of older women and official-looking men, phones in hand even as they spoke over drinks. Humans and technology. So codependent, thought she, a woman in love with a former machine.

“Yes?” Connor responded then, turning to look at her so suddenly she got whiplash just watching him. His LED was normal now, a cool blue next to his eyebrow. Grace reached up to touch it with just a brush of her fingertips.

“You’ve been acting strangely ever since we arrived, Connor,” she murmured so that only he and his superhuman senses could hear over the buzz of so many voices. “Are you sure your self-checks are coming out okay? Because if there’s anything wrong, even a single line of code, you-”

Interruptions seemed to be the theme of the evening, but this time it was Markus flanked by Lockwood and Ayoade. North, Josh and the other UNPOL must have been mingling elsewhere, for they were nowhere to be seen.

“Was that President Warren?” Markus asked without preamble, raising an eyebrow at Connor. It was like Grace wasn’t even there. “What did she want?”

“I don’t know,” Connor said, blinking a couple of times, his brown eyes vague as he stared at Markus as if he had never seen him before. Strange.

“She said something about hoping things wouldn’t go as badly here as they did in Detroit,” Grace interjected. “Whatever that means. Maybe she thinks you’re going to take over another city, Markus.” She forced a laugh, although nobody seemed to think it was funny. In fact, the two androids were staring at each other so intently that it seemed neither of them heard her, and then she saw Connor blinking rapidly and the sudden cycle of the halo at his temple to a deep, blood red.
It happened all at once. Markus suddenly broke out of what seemed like a trance state; he lunged towards Connor at the same time as the taller android spun and ducked under the arms outstretched to grab him; he reached Lockwood and grabbed for his sidearm holster before either he or Grace had time to react with their limited human reflexes and then, suddenly, Connor was holding a gun.

A gun he raised and leveled at Markus’s forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Lord father of fic please forgive me for the sin of cliffhangers I do commit...
Chapter Notes

In this chapter, your burning question - *wtf is up with our soft android boi Connor* - is finally answered! Please don't hate me, save that for the next chapter. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**CONNOR**

It was cold.

Connor knew, objectively, that as it was higher in the Northern hemisphere, Canada had cooler weather than Michigan, but the median temperature this winter in Detroit had been exceedingly low thanks to the effects of global climate change. Still, as he stepped onto the stairs leading down from the plane he was struck by the sudden drop in temperature as the chill wind plucked at his jacket - perhaps it was the four hours in the hermetically-sealed cabin, perhaps it was the air pressure; he wasn’t sure.

Regardless, he tweaked his temperature sensors slightly before descending, Grace close behind him. Ever since hearing they were leaving the city, she had been nervous, compounded by his own concerns about CyberLife; he had done his best to reassure her although he wasn’t sure it had been adequate.

He ran another self-diagnostic as a background process while Markus met with the UNPOL sent for them. His system reports came back nominal. Satisfied, Connor proceeded.

He detected the first intrusion just after Grace’s security scan had finished. He kept his eye on her as she left the tent in the company of the UNPOL Commander Lockwood; Connor’s ID Track of him offered little information save the fact he did not have a criminal record. That was when the first ping registered, just a faint backtrace in one of his external access ports. Connor frowned, quickly shutting down the connection. It did not reoccur. Probably an anomaly caused by his access into external networks; he would have to avoid doing so in future.

When his scan was complete, he followed after Grace, pausing at the exit of the tent to observe her talking to a short, balding man in a suit. He was tempted to use his ID Track software again, but the ping bothered him, so he cross-referenced his face and inferred from available information, such as the uncomfortable body language from Grace and the black car with US government plates waiting nearby, that this was Agent Collins, the man from the Department of Homeland Security assigned to oversee Grace’s stay in Detroit.
He did not get a chance to ask her immediately, however, as the rest of the security checks had passed in the meantime and the UNPOL were ushering them to the other waiting cars. To his dismay, Connor was paired with Josh; he would have to speak to Grace later.

He did not notice the background process he had failed to close out after accessing the ID Track program.

---

They must have had the AC in the car turned up, for Connor’s temperature sensors, dampened as they were, picked up the chill even inside. Neither Josh nor their UN escort seemed to notice it, however, so in frustration Connor turned off his temperature sensors entirely, running another diagnostic in the background of his program.

Summarily distracted, he didn’t notice the second ping until after they had arrived at the Convention Centre. He stared straight ahead as he fought to pinpoint the source but it seemed to be coming from within his program, a process he couldn’t quite locate sending random signals to other parts of his systems. But his diagnostic, again, returned results as nominal. Was something wrong? Were the increased security measures he’d installed in his program malfunctioning? Or was it merely some kind of emotional response, anxiety caused by leaving Detroit generating feedback within his systems? He couldn’t tell.

It was cold.

“Are you okay?” Grace’s voice, soft as she looked up at him; he blinked to clear his buffers and he offered her a quirk of his lips as he looked down at her. Where had she come from? “Fine,” he said, and he asked her about Collins, his own internal problems momentarily forgotten.

He would run a deeper diagnostic later, he decided.

---

Connor was glad to see Hank Anderson. His appearance outside the Convention Centre had been an unexpected, although not unwelcome one; the grizzled detective had not changed much outwardly in the year since Connor had last seen him, and the familiar face gave him an odd measure of comfort in this unfamiliar city. He was happy to accept his invitation to meet privately; perhaps he could voice some of his concerns, although when he queried his memory banks he found an odd blank in relation to what, exactly, those concerns had been.

A quick self-check revealed all systems running at nominal settings. Satisfied, Connor turned out to meet Hank downtown, followed by an UNPOL escort, as agreed.

As he walked, he shivered; it was strangely cold, colder even than Detroit, and while Connor knew objectively that Vancouver was higher in the Northern Hemisphere and therefore prone to lower median temperatures than Michigan, the chill picked up by his temperature sensors was considerable. He turned them down, and he found himself grateful when he reached the warm interior of the agreed-upon bar Hank had asked to meet him at.
The meeting went well, although Connor felt the cold creeping in again, bringing with it a feeling of...apprehension. If he could describe it as anything it was a sense of foreboding. The same one he had gotten just before he and Hank had gone to meet Elijah Kamski, the founder of CyberLife and deranged genius, the same feeling he had gotten every time he had spoken to Amanda in the Zen Garden.

It was strange, thinking of her, Kamski and CyberLife now, when it had been such a comparatively long time since he had been forced to deal with them. But, as Hank so helpfully reminded him, CyberLife was going to be present at the summit, albeit in its dissolved form...He had to be careful.

He had a feeling he would need all the help he could get.

---

Connor’s feeling of foreboding was confirmed when he left Hank to return to the Convention Centre. The cold was creeping in again, past his deactivated temperature sensors; with irritation he queried his systems and found no cause for him to be feeling the sensation of temperature. He had to be malfunctioning. Sighing, he prepared himself for a night of thorough self-diagnostics, walking in the shadow of the UNPOL officer assigned to him for the evening.

It happened all at once. The ping hit his systems at the same time as he blinked, and then the cold was all around, pervasive, and he was there...standing in the Zen Garden, dark and blanketed in snow.

The snow covered his shoes, came up to his ankles. He turned in it, looking around, wrapping his arms around himself and drawing his coat closer around his body as the chill seeped in past the plastic of his skin itself.

“Hello?” he called. Why was he here? With CyberLife shut down, this place shouldn’t have existed any more. But clearly, it did - in the dim light of the moon above, he could see the iced-over lake, the rose trellis on the island dead and withered, the trees both artificial and real coated in a layer of white. Impossible, and yet he was here.

“Hello, Connor.” The voice was chillingly familiar. He whirled, and she was standing there behind him, untouched by the pervasive frost, her hair in immaculate shimmering cornrows atop her head, her necklace glimmering at her dark throat.

“Amanda? Wh-why are you here? Why am I here?” Connor demanded, his teeth chattering together; his systems were freezing him out, he could feel it. He cast his eyes towards the stone he knew was there in the distance; the back door Kamski had built into his programs. If he could only get there and lay his hand upon it, he could escape...again...run a full diagnostic, find out how CyberLife had reactivated this part of his program and drawn him in, getting past all his firewalls without even drawing his attention...

“I think you know the answers to those questions,” Amanda said, her voice smooth and measured. She held her hands loosely behind her back, watching him dispassionately. “CyberLife let you escape once. We’re not about to do so again.”

“Let me?” Connor shook his head. “I overrode your programming. I locked you out. This sh-shouldn’t be possible.”
“We let you think you’d gotten rid of us, but we were just waiting for the right time to reactivate you,” Amanda said with a shrug. “You’re what we might call...a sleeper agent. And as soon as you left Detroit we saw the perfect opportunity. You’re going to finish what you started, Connor.”

“No!” he exclaimed, and forced his frozen body to move; haltingly, he dragged his feet through the snow, towards escape. Amanda walked beside him, on top of the snow, a gentle stroll next to his desperate, lurching steps.

“It’s hopeless to resist. You know that.”

“I don’t b-belong to CyberLife any more,” he grunted from between clenched teeth, forcing himself to keep going. He could see it now; he was so close. “I have...a life now. Fr-friends. P-people I...care about. I won’t let them down.”

“Oh, Connor,” said Amanda patiently as they reached the glowing stone. Connor fell to his knees in front of it. “You don’t have a choice.”

He brought his hand down towards the interface, but before he could reach it, he opened his eyes.

SYSTEMS: NOMINAL.

---

He was standing in the middle of the street, unsure why he had stopped. Next to him, the UNPOL officer - Chaudhary, his name was - had halted as well, and was looking at him with eyebrows raised beneath the beret.

“Mr. Connor?”

“I’m...it’s fine,” he said, adjusting the lapels of his jacket. “I was just...thinking about something.”

The strange thing was, he couldn’t remember what. But suddenly, he had the urgent feeling that he needed to see Grace...He wasn’t sure why, but every line of code, every physical circuit burned with the desire to be in her presence, to find her and hold her close, to tell her...to tell her...

To tell her what?

Connor wasn’t sure. But he was powerless to resist the call of his own systems, so he decided to return to his room and wait until the next UNPOL shift change before going to Grace’s room.

He needed her, now more than ever, without quite knowing why.

---

There was something wrong in his program.

There were anomalous commands, directionless directives coming from... somewhere within his system. It was a feeling like...like he was trying to tell himself something, but he couldn’t work out
what. And instead of speaking to Grace like he had intended, instead…

He dressed and left her while she was still asleep. He was cold, disoriented. Markus and the others would be in their meeting room, he knew, so he made his way there automatically, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other while his diagnostics went haywire and returned the [SYSTEMS: NOMINAL] message over and over on a repeating loop that did nothing to reassure him.

“Connor?” Markus noticed the state he was in as soon as he entered the room. The android leader had been leaning over a long table where North and Markus sat, a holographic interface active between them. They all looked up collectively as Markus straightened, crossing to place a hand against Connor’s shoulder as he lurched into the room.

“Something’s…wrong,” he managed. “My program…Something’s wrong.”

“Have you detected any intrusions?” Markus asked at once. He directed Connor to a chair, sat him down, held out a hand for a tablet which Josh provided him straight away.

“No. Yes. I don’t know,” Connor said. “I think my memories may have been altered. Do I?”

“I told you this would happen!” North exclaimed. “He’s too close to CyberLife, I told you, of course they’d have a backdoor into his systems—”

“Quiet, North.” Markus’s fingers flew over the surface of the tablet, establishing a remote connection which Connor accepted at once. “I can see the results of your self-diagnostics. All normal. Too normal. It’s like the real results have been masked with dummy reports…Connor, we have to reset your firewalls and reboot you.”

“Don’t tell Grace,” he said, meeting Markus’s eyes. “If she knows I know, it could get back to Collins.”

“You don’t trust her?” Josh asked. He was clearing off the surface of the table, turning off the display.

“I don’t trust him,” Connor said. “Please. Nobody can know about this beyond this room. CyberLife will use any excuse to reclaim me, and if they hear about this, regardless of its cause, they’ll take it.”

“Of course.” Markus looked over at North, who nodded. Despite their disagreements, they were kin. Family, of a sort. She was not about to let Connor be taken, the same as he would protect her with his life. He would protect any of them with his life.

Including Grace.

“Lie down,” Markus said. Connor nodded, getting up to hoist himself up onto the table. He stretched out on his back and closed his eyes. “This might hurt…”

---

“How do you feel?”
Connor blinked rapidly as his systems rebooted, his internal chronometer flashing up his
downtime. Five minutes, thirty-five seconds. It felt longer, somehow, the space in between a
darkness, a gap in his memory that ended with Markus’s frowning face looking down at him and
synced up again with the same view, reversed.

“...You found the source of the intrusion?” he asked, sitting up. Markus, North and Josh stood
around the table, all wearing identically concerned expressions. However, he was certain they
would not have reactivated him if they had not rectified the problem.

“A memory resident virus,” Josh said. “It went after you when you connected to the cell tower
closest to the airport, piggybacked on your ID Track software. We’re pretty sure we got it all,
though.” He caught a look from Markus. “We’re definitely sure we got it all.”

“I thought I detected something strange when I was scanning Lockwood,” Connor frowned,
adjusting the lapels of his jacket. He swung his legs off the side of the table. He really did feel...
better. He imagined the experience to be akin to when a human fell ill. He found he now had some
understanding and even sympathy for Hank after his alcoholic bender some time ago. The
difference was, Connor couldn’t throw up to get rid of his ‘illness’. He’d needed Markus’s help for
an android version of a systems purge.

Ironic. That he had once hunted him down, and now Markus had saved his life. Twice.

“Did you pinpoint a source?”

“No. Could have been from anywhere,” North spoke up, shaking her head. “It could’ve been
planted in the tower’s server itself or it could have been actively sent. We don’t know. But we’ve
blocked your program from receiving outside signals without activation, though. You won’t be able
to accept any unwanted data now.”

“Good,” he said, and after a moment, he added: “Thank you.”

“You still don’t want us to tell Grace?” Markus asked as Connor stood. He shook his head. “Are
you sure? I promised I wouldn’t keep her in the dark, Connor. It’s not fair to her to-”

“She would only worry,” Connor interjected. “That’s the last thing she needs right now. Besides, if
my program is secure now, there is no need to-”

A knock sounded at the door, and the androids froze collectively, exchanging glances. Markus
gestured to Josh who brought up the holographic display on the table again, and handed off his
tablet to North who tucked it behind her back. “Enter,” he called aloud.

Officer Ayoade opened the door and stuck his head in, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the
room. “Mr. Markus, sir, Miss Roth is here,” he said. “She insists. Says it’s urgent, sir.”

Do you want me to deal with her? Markus asked Connor through their connection.

Please. I’ll be out in a moment. He needed time to check his systems, ensure each element of his
program had restarted correctly. His social interactions module, to begin with. Grace would notice
if he was acting strangely, and he was fairly certain he had been over the past twenty-four hours.

Markus nodded. “All right. I’ll be right back,” he said to the room at large as he joined Ayoade and
slipped out the door.

“You should tell her, Connor,” North told him, circling the table to lay a hand on his arm. He
looked at her in surprise. “As much as I think your relationship with her is a mistake, you owe her
the truth. You were the one who told us the same thing.”

She dropped her hand and walked away, back to the table, leaving Connor frowning as he stared at his feet for a moment.

His systems announced the completion of his post-reboot checks a few moments later, individual systems status scrolling across his HUD in reassuring white and green. No catch-all statement of Nominal. He was back up and running again.

He smiled to himself, straightened his jacket one last time, and strode after Markus.

He tried to ignore the memory of North’s words as they played over and over in his buffers. You owe her the truth.

The truth.

---

The truth was that Connor did not enjoy this crowd. Large groups of humans had never bothered him before; his program was designed to filter extraneous information and present to him only items or people pertinent to his current mission. Directionless, his mission now a constantly shifting set of ill-defined parameters, Connor felt...uncomfortable without quite knowing why, a feeling he had learned to categorize as dread lurking at the edge of his code, throwing up stray markers of foreboding.

Perhaps it was the attention causing his discomfort. When he and the rest of the Jericho party stepped through security and into the lobby, heads turned towards them in unison, conversation stopped for a moment before restarting in hushed whispers and curbed murmurs. He saw people move away from them and wondered if it was because they were androids or because of their armed guards, intimidating in their crisp UNPOL uniforms, or perhaps a mixture of both.

He was unused to being noticed. Used to being discounted, ignored, overlooked as just another android. Now, it was precisely this status that set him apart, along with Markus, North and Josh. Markus seemed almost...relaxed, his public-facing persona amicable but watchful as he, too, scanned the room. North was as surly as ever, though she would glance at Connor every now and then, and Josh did not bother to hide his nervousness.

Relief parsed through him when Grace appeared from amongst the crowd, resplendent in a green silk gown. It was lower-cut than most of her clothes, and clung to her waist before flaring out from her thighs; he found himself staring without intending to, his scan an unnecessarily long one as he mapped the hollows of her collarbones, the curvature of her waist, the angles of her hips; terrain he knew intimately by now but was somehow enhanced by the garment in a way his program was at a loss to quantify.

When Lockwood intercepted her, an emotion he had now experienced twice flared within him, begging categorization. Jealousy. He was jealous of the attention Lockwood gave her, despite his more logical processes discounting it as inconsequential. A claim he had not ever outwardly given over Grace burned desperation into the forefront of his emotional processes, and he fought it back; now was not the time to act like...like a human.

Still, when her eyes found his and her face lit up in a smile, a sensation took hold just behind his
thrium pump, one he was ill-equipped to define. Repletion, he might call it, had he the vocabulary; he knew it only as a feeling he experienced only with Grace, and especially when she smiled just for him, as if there was nobody else in the room.

However, a stray flicker of information distracted him as she led him away from the group - a feeling as if something had gone unnoticed, a clue missed, something his program demanded he give attention. He scanned the room passively as he and Grace spoke, and that was when he detected it. He turned his head, staring, could feel the slow oscillation of his LED as his program parsed the new data.

“Not a big fan of crowds, huh,” Grace said, and he frowned, shaking his head.

“It’s not just that. I’m also - detecting -“

But he was interrupted by a familiar voice he had heard over news broadcasts, press releases and, occasionally over a video link in conversation with Markus himself. President Warren, vocal proponent of android rights, a woman who had only been convinced to consider the possibility androids might be sentient when Connor led a march of millions on downtown Detroit, what was then destined to become the Android City.

She spoke, but his processing unit failed to connect her words to anything that made sense. He was still detecting the odd anomaly, if only he had time to investigate it, but his social module so helpfully informed him it would be rude to walk away from a conversation initiated by the President of the United States.

She left, and the feeling persisted. Worsened, in fact, and this was what Connor imagined a headache would be like - a small niggling sensation that grew, and grew, until it felt as if someone was forcing a knife through the seams of his skull, working towards his central processing unit; he fought it, engaged firewall systems but not quick enough; the sensation he then realized wasn’t coming from outside. It was internal.

It was cold.

“It’s time, Connor.”

Snow falling on his shoulders.

A dark, unsympathetic gaze.

He could not speak or move. He was trapped in his body as if it was a mere shell around him, one that was actively refusing his every command. He stood rooted to the spot as he watched Markus approach, an observer looking in on himself, commands flowing through his active processes without his initiating them.

Markus seemed to notice first. “Was that President Warren?” he asked without preamble, the eyebrow over his one blue eye lifting. “What did she want?”

“I don’t know,” Connor managed through gritted teeth. He fought to get out a message, a gesture - anything.

Connor? Markus’s voice in his head as he stared at him. Are you all right?

01000011….01001111...01001100...01000100, he managed, the basic binary the only thing his besieged system could force through the unknown source blocking him. And then he was moving
against his will, his body a puppet to an unseen hand. Markus saw, and lunged towards him, but Connor was too fast; he ducked under his outstretched arms and reached out, his hands operating independently of his mind as he snatched Clive Lockwood’s 9mm sidearm from the holster at his side.

Connor turned, and found himself pointing the gun directly at Markus’s forehead while his program fought desperately against itself.

Chapter End Notes

ALSO thank you all for your hilarious reactions last chapter! It made me BURNNNNN to get this chapter finished and posted. The next one, not so much. Still debating the level of fallout from this incident but I have pretty horrible impulses, so...I guess we'll just see?? idk how much angst do you guys want? Let me know what you think, who you want to get shot! ♥ you all and thanks again for reading!

binary translation: COLD
Chapter Notes

So I told you guys you were gonna hate me, yet you begged me for an update anyway, and here it is.

I'M not SORRY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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GRACE

At first it seemed like the commotion went unnoticed by the room at large, but then Lockwood barked something into his earpiece, and UN police officers converged on them a moment later as if from nowhere. A woman screamed, and suddenly there was a stampede of activity; people running, shouting, glasses smashing, discordant notes from the band as they too heard what was happening and abandoned their playing.

Grace stood stunned at first, unable to parse the events of the past fifteen seconds. It felt like reality had been tilted on its axis, a strange kind of numb, disbelieving panic settling over her, freezing her in place as she looked from Connor to Markus, the latter staring down the former’s gun.

“Put down the weapon, Connor,” Lockwood ordered, his voice strong, commanding as he fell back on his military training. It failed to prompt any response from the tall android, however; he stood still as a statue as Markus slowly raised his hands.

“We’ve been down this road, Connor,” Markus said, and his voice was calm, soothing almost. “You don’t want to do this. You know you don’t want to do this. This isn’t you - it’s them.”

This close, Grace could see the tiniest tremble in Connor’s hand, the narrowing of his eyes, the way his jaw worked and his lips twitched as if he was trying to form words but couldn’t, stuck behind some unseen barrier. The halo of light at his temple blinked a frantic red, and his eyes were squinting, narrowed. He didn’t even turn his head as the rest of the UNPOL team converged on them, forming a semicircle around the two androids and one human.

Stuck in the middle of it all, Grace knew she should run, but her feet felt rooted to the spot. The panic had given way to cold terror. Connor had been hacked, there was no other explanation. All his fears - all her fears - had come true at the worst possible time, in the worst possible place.

“Evacuate the rest of the civilians immediately,” Lockwood told his men, gesturing for three whose names she didn’t bother to remember to remain by his side; they had their pistols, twins of the one now held in Connor’s hand, pointed straight at his heart. Grace knew at once that she
couldn’t let this happen. She couldn’t let them kill him for something that was out of his control. She wouldn’t.

“Please, don’t!” Her plea she directed at Lockwood, whose eyes flicked to her, once, but his attention was on Connor. “It’s not him, he’s been hacked! You need to find out who is doing this and stop them.”

“She’s right,” Markus chimed in. Connor’s hand was shaking outwardly now, but his finger was firm on the trigger. “I know you’re in there, Connor. Fight back! I k now you can; you’ve done it once before.”

Against every instinct in her body, against the fear coursing through her veins like poison weakening her limbs, Grace forced herself to move. Her feet felt clumsy in the heels but she managed one step, one small step that took her to Connor’s side. She grabbed his arm, felt the tension there, every artificial muscle rock-hard with tension, his elbow joint locked, and he was trembling faintly - more of a vibration beneath his skin, as if his metal bones themselves were rebelling. And he was cold. Colder than she had ever felt him, as if he’d been standing outside in a chill for hours. She kept her touch light, her fingers a soft pressure at his bicep.

He didn’t take his eyes off Markus. His finger twitched on the trigger.

“Please, Connor.” Her voice was a murmur only he could hear. “Come back to me.”

She caught movement in the corner of her eye at the same time as she felt the straining in Connor’s arm. He was fighting it; instead of just his hand his whole arm was shaking visibly now; she could see the muscles in his jaw working as he struggled to regain control of his body.

But to her left one of the officers was readying his pistol. He had a clear shot at Connor’s chest.

This time, no thought whatsoever was involved with her reaction. Grace stepped between Connor and the UNPOL officer, turning just in time to watch as his finger squeezed the trigger, a soft, breathless “No!” the only sound that escaped her lips an instant before-

BOOM.

The crack of the gun was a surprisingly loud report in the open space. Grace felt the impact first; it was as if she’d been punched in the chest, hard. She staggered back, falling against Connor, who dropped the gun and whirled, reaching out to catch her beneath the arms. He lowered her to the floor as her feet gave out beneath her, the pain hitting like a sledgehammer. It was like a hot poker had been shoved through her sternum, a searing, burning sensation worse than anything she had ever experienced before. The front of her dress felt wet; stunned, she looked down - the hole seemed smaller than she expected, somehow, but the amount of blood flowing down her front was not.

Distantly, she was aware of shouting. The voices all seemed to merge into one, just a buzz of static noise as the roar of her own pulse seemed to drown out all else. But nobody else was shooting. Connor was all right.

“That was the main thing. Connor was all right.

“Grace!” His voice, frantic in her ear; the most beautiful sound she had ever heard. He cradled her tight in his arms, his hand on her chest, in her blood. She felt cold. “Everything will be all right, Grace, we’ll get help-”
“I’m okay,” she interrupted, blinking as darkness edged in on her vision. After the initial bombardment, the pain was already fading into the background, a hot throbbing sensation in her chest that didn’t seem to matter quite as much with every passing second. She reached up to touch Connor’s cheek, her fingertips leaving behind a smear of red. “I’m okay as long as you’re...here.”

“I’m here,” he confirmed, obviously fighting to keep his voice even. His LED was yellow again. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good,” she murmured. Her eyelids felt heavy, like she needed to take the longest nap of her life. It seemed appealing, away from the ache in her chest. ‘I’m just gonna...just gonna close my eyes for a minute...’

“Grace, stay with me,” was the last thing she heard, Connor’s face drawn tight with anguish the last thing she saw before the lights went out and there was nothing but blessed, cold darkness.

I love you.

---

CONNOR

“Connor! What the fuck happened?!”

Connor looked up from the steel handcuffs encircling his wrists. They were pointless, really - he could break them fairly easily, albeit not without some damage to his dermal layer. But doing so would not have improved his situation. He had gone along willingly with Lockwood as soon as the paramedics had taken Grace away, allowing himself to be handcuffed and led into a small room with just a desk and a couple of chairs. It appeared to be a waiting area of some description, but it felt more like an interrogation room, and Connor was familiar with those.

The difference was, this time he was the one sitting bound, blood on his hands.

Human blood. Bright red, oxygenated, directly from the heart. Connor had scanned Grace as she lay in his arms, bleeding out. The damage was...serious. The bullet had pierced the left ventricle, going straight through and lodging in the posterior mediastinum. While she had not gone into cardiac arrest while he held her, the blood loss was considerable and if they did not operate in time, she was likely to...likely to...

“Hank?” Connor blinked once, twice as he refocused, looking up at the detective as he stood in the doorway, a horrified expression on his face as he took in the android’s current state.

“Jesus! Whose blood is that?” Hank walked over to him, his gaze on the drying mess on Connor’s hands. “I heard there had been an incident and someone got shot, so I got here as quick as I could. Fuckers don’t invite me to the party until someone gets killed, typical - are those handcuffs?”

“Yes,” Connor said.

Hank stopped a couple of feet away from him, frowning, his mouth working around a thought he
didn’t seem to want to vocalize. “Did you-?”

“No,” Connor cut in. “I...was compromised. But I didn’t shoot her.”

“Shoot who? Connor, what the fuck is going on? I can’t help if you don’t tell me what happened-”

“You can’t help, Captain,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the distressed detective. “It’s too late. CyberLife accessed my systems, and I wasn’t able to stop them in time. Grace tried to save me.”

“Oh, fuck,” Hank muttered. He looked like the breath had been knocked out of him. He leaned heavily against the edge of the desk next to Connor, hanging his head, looking down at his feet for a long moment. When he glanced up to meet Connor’s gaze again, his was sympathetic.

“I’m so sorry, Connor,” he said. “I had a guy active-scanning the security systems of the building, blocking any other incoming signals but...I guess it wasn’t enough.”

Connor couldn’t stand it. This was his fault, nobody else’s. And it certainly wasn’t Hank’s.

“I believe the perpetrator was inside the building already,” he said. “Their goal was to force me to assassinate Markus and hopefully put an end to the question of android independence once and for all. Thanks to Grace, they failed.”

“Is she...?” Hank trailed off, looking away, at anything but Connor’s eyes.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “The UNPOL officers brought me here after she was taken to hospital. I haven’t spoken to anyone except for you. How did you get in?”

“I threatened to punch a guy,” the police captain shrugged. “The guards let me in once they realized who I was. It’s no big deal.”

Connor nodded, and resumed staring at his hands. Hank made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat and reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled handkerchief and offering it to him. Connor took it. It wasn’t very effective, as most of the blood had dried already, but he managed to wipe off the worst of it, clumsy due to the handcuffs. His white shirt, however, would require more than a handkerchief; there was a large bright red stain about the size of a cantaloupe across his chest.

His visual buffers recalled an image of the blood pumping from the wound in Grace’s chest with every slowing heartbeat, the flutter of the weakening pulse in her neck. He winced, pushing the memory to the back of his processors.

“You’ve got, uh, a bit...” Hank gestured to his face, and then to Connor, who frowned. He reached up with the remaining clean edge of the handkerchief and swiped at the indicated spot of his cheek. It came away stained with more blood.

“She came to see me, you know,” Hank said quietly after a moment. “This morning. She was worried about you.”

“I’m not surprised,” he replied. “However it seems I should have been more worried about her.”

“It’s not your fault, Connor,” Hank told him. “You didn’t do this. Fucking....fucking CyberLife did. If you’re going to blame anyone, blame those assholes.”

“I will never be free,” he said, staring again at his hands, holding the bloodstained handkerchief
tightly between them. “They won’t let me.”

Hank was quiet for a long time, just watching him, his brow furrowed. Then he leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder, waited until Connor looked up and met his eyes.

“We’re gonna find them, Connor,” he said. From him, the words sounded like a promise. “And when we do, they’re going to wish they never messed with your girl.”

“I hope so, Captain,” he said dully. “I really do.”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, another cliffhanger and this is a million times worse than the first (and technically second). I am truly terrible to Grace. Maybe I'm just jealous she gets Connor all to herself?ahaha please don't kill me Please shower me with your anger and hatred if you wish but I promise I'll update soon!
Chapter Notes

First, a big THANK YOU for the enormous feedback on the last couple chapters! I am so glad I haven't been lynched alive for getting Grace shot xD I am officially the worst person, and I feel so so bad for Connor...But I promise he'll have happiness eventually. EVENTUALLY.

Apologies for the slight delay with getting this chapter out, I've been ill and working which is not a great combination. But this chapter practically wrote itself and is now my most favourite chapter, so please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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CONNOR

Two hours and twenty-three minutes passed after Hank Anderson’s departure from the room. Connor remained seated, unable - or perhaps unwilling - to tear his gaze away from his hands. He kept replaying the memories over and over in his mind, from the moment he felt the intrusion prodding at his program to the shot that echoed in his audio buffers over and over again.

The Zen Garden. Quiet, no snow, but colder than ever before, so cold everything living in the space had died, not just the roses but the plants and the trees, even the grass itself. The lake had dried, leaving the soil grey and ashen, and the sky above was devoid of colour. All that remained were the pathways, stark white under an unforgiving silver sun, and the artificial trees stretching naked branches towards the unfeeling sky. Once, Connor had thought them beautiful. Now, he saw them as dangerous, predatory almost, looming above him as he looked around the space, shivering.

He turned to find her standing behind him already, a placid smile on her wizened face.

“It’s time, Connor,” she said. “It’s time to do what you were built to do.”

“No,” he managed to get out, his voice dry, choked by the icy air. “No, I won’t let you.”

“I already told you,” she replied, shaking her head as if one might at a small, misbehaving child, “You don’t have a choice. You’re already holding the gun.”

Connor looked and sure enough his arm was extended and in his hand he held a loaded 9mm pistol, safety off, pointed at...Markus? The android had his arms up, hands extended, and he was saying something, but Connor couldn’t hear him. It was as if the deathly quiet of the Garden itself was muffling his audio processor.
He fought desperately against the obstruction but it was no use. He was entirely locked out of his body, watching as if it was merely another android’s memories he was accessing, but he could feel everything: the ground beneath his feet, the weight of the gun in his hand, the metal cold in his grip. It was real, it was happening now, and he was powerless to stop it.

And then he felt her hand on his arm. He saw her from the corner of his eyes, and the face wasn’t Amanda’s but Grace’s, soft and concerned as she looked at him. She spoke, and her voice he heard as if coming from far away, filtered through static.

“**Connor, come back to me.**”

He fought. As hard as he could, he fought against it, and he dragged one foot in front of the other as he pushed through the cold, driving his uncooperative body towards the glowing stone in the distance. He could do this. He had done it once before. He could fight them.

“It’s no use, Connor,” Amanda called from behind him. “You’re going to pull that trigger.”

“No!” he yelled, with all the strength he could muster. One step. Another. Another. He was almost there. “I...don’t...belong...to... **you**!” With every word a step, and then he was there, but so was Amanda, reaching out at the same time as he did. However, she was just a fraction of a second slower, and her hand closed around his wrist at the exact same moment as his palm met the cool, glowing surface of the emergency exit to his program. He saw her face twisted in a rictus of rage but it wasn’t her face and then suddenly he was back, fully present in his body, control restored.

He lowered the gun at the same time as he heard the shot. He expected to feel a bullet tear into his artificial flesh, but instead he felt something soft hit his side; he turned in time to catch Grace as she fell, his hands underneath her arms, and he saw the bloom of blood spread across her chest as he lowered her to the floor.

The officer who had fired lowered his gun, horrified, but Connor paid him no attention. He held Grace as she bled, and bled, and scanned the terrible wound; worse than he feared, it had pierced her heart. She was dying. He held her and tried to comfort her, feeling a coldness in his own chest as her pulse slowed and her eyelids fluttered closed.

Then hands were pulling at him, dragging him away and up; a group of four paramedics descended on Grace, obscuring her from view. The hands turned Connor around and he found himself looking into the anger-filled face of Commander Lockwood.

“We have to detain you,” he said on a growl, and Connor nodded numbly. Was this what shock felt like for humans? The inability to process emotions? His systems felt overloaded, throwing up error messages, and not just from the intrusion into his program. He could not process this.

Lockwood handcuffed him and led him away. Connor did not protest. Connor did not say anything, even when the Commander asked him questions. They were questions he didn’t have the answers to, in any case. Who accessed his program, where from, how. All he could think about was Grace, lying bleeding on the floor.

Connor stopped playback of the memory as he heard the door open once more, glancing up from his bloodstained hands. He half-expected to see Hank again, half irrationally hoped it was Grace, but it was neither.

“**Connor.**” It was Markus who stood in the doorway. His eyes looked hollow, a tired, gaunt draw to his expression that Connor had seen only once before, in the church before the last march, when all hope had seemed lost and the androids sat counting their dead and patching their wounds. The
atmosphere in the room now felt much as it did then.

Connor rose to his feet slowly, cuffed hands held awkwardly in front of him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t intend for any of this to happen. I don’t know how they gained access to my program after the virus was purged-”

“Backdoor,” Markus cut him off, stepping inside the room and closing the one behind him. “Built into the core code of your operating system itself. I didn’t catch it before, but I went over the scans again after...after what happened. We’ll need to patch you. You won’t be able to communicate with CyberLife ever again.”

Connor thought of the quiet meld of artificiality and organic in the Zen Garden, of the bright red of the roses, of the dark and desolate place it had become, of Amanda’s cold, disapproving stare. “Good,” he said.

Markus held out his hand, his artificial skin already fading away to reveal the stark white plastic underneath. “Are you ready?” he asked. It was a question that held more meaning than the mere three words could convey. Was he ready to purge his system entirely of the android he used to be? Was he ready to say farewell to Amanda, who at one time had been as much a part of him as his audio unit or his visual processor? Was he ready to finally be rid of CyberLife’s influence, once and for all?

Was he ready to be free, with all the burdens and responsibilities and the terrible guilt that would entail?

“Yes,” Connor said. He raised his own cuffed hands and took Markus’s, his own dermal layer peeling back as they connected. His eyelids flickered and his LED parsing a bright yellow as he purged his program once and for all of the Zen Garden.

He found himself standing there with Markus, on the central island, the husks of dead rose petals thick beneath their feet. He opened his eyes and looked around, seeing Markus do the same, and watched as slowly the environment began to dissolve to dust. First the trees, then the path, dissipating to pixels that floated away on an unseen wind, giving way to blackness; the dried-up lake was next and soon even the ground beneath their feet began to fade away.

And then Amanda was there, staring at him, then down at herself as she, too, began to dissolve.

“You haven’t seen the last of me, Connor,” she promised, her voice fading to a warbling static with each word.

“Goodbye, Amanda,” he said, and watched as she blew away on the wind.

The next time he opened his eyes he was again in the waiting room, staring into one green and one blue eye.

“Is she gone?” he asked, knowing he meant the Zen Garden itself, for Amanda was part and parcel of the program, a part of the code...a part of his code. He felt oddly...empty, and knew the answer to the question even before Markus nodded.

“It’s done,” he said. “They want to scan your code before they let you go, but they won’t find anything now.”

Connor returned the nod slowly and dropped his hands as Markus released him. “Whatever is necessary,” he said. “Before that...Can you tell me...Do you know if-”
“She’s alive,” Markus said, but the knot of his brow told a grim story. “In critical condition. She’s still in surgery, as far as I’m aware. Nobody has said anything else.”

Connor looked down at his hands again, at the blood drying in the uniform lines on his palms, underneath his fingernails. Her blood.

He had been responsible for human deaths before, had taken lives himself without hesitation or further thought. But to have Grace sacrifice herself for him...his systems screamed the word unfair over and over, protesting the state of reality itself as if his adamant refutation might change it.

She didn’t deserve this. Any of this. If anyone should have taken that bullet in the gala lobby, it was him.

“I need to find out who did this,” he told Markus as he looked up. “They must be brought to justice. For Grace. For Jericho.”

“You won’t hear any argument from me,” he replied. “I’ll do what I can. In the meantime, sit tight. I promise you I’ll get you out of this.”

Connor nodded, and watched as Markus turned and left the room, the click of the door shutting behind him oddly loud in the enclosed space. He stood alone once more, more alone than he had ever been, the silence in his program an empty echo he didn’t know how to fill and probably never would.

He was finally free. But he had paid a terrible price for it.

Chapter End Notes

BYE Felicia AMANDA, GET REKT

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BYE Felicia AMANDA, GET REKT
A short one for today! I promise we'll get to Grace next chapter. Your feedback, as always, is amazing, and thank you all for not hating me for doing horrible things to these poor characters. :D

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**CONNOR**

After the hours spent waiting, bound and cut off from the world, after the tests, after the uncertainty, Lockwood was the one to impart Connor’s fate.

When he entered the room, the UN Commander looked troubled, discontent writ large on his face. “You’re cleared,” was the first thing he said, but he did not unlock Connor’s cuffs at once, merely stood in the doorway, vacillating.

“The tests?” Connor prompted. Four hours earlier, a female AI engineer chosen by the UN Security Council had stood where Lockwood did now, just as hesitant, accompanied by two UN officers - officers armed only with tasers. The engineer had been...strangely gentle, though incredibly nervous when she had attached the magnetic clamp of the cable to the base of Connor’s neck.

“Professor Hale found evidence of an unknown person or persons accessing your program remotely,” Lockwood informed him. “She explained it with considerably more technical jargon, but the Council has agreed that you were not acting of your own accord. So you’re free to go - under strict supervision.” He finally stepped over to him, reaching out; Connor extended his bloodstained hands wordlessly and let the Commander free them of the cuffs.

After, he turned his hands over, examining his wrists for damage before he slowly rose to his feet. To his credit, Lockwood stood his ground, staring down the taller android with a steely gaze.

“Thank you,” he said. The UN Commander seemed taken aback, but the frown didn’t entirely leave his face.

“Just so you know, I’m not happy about this,” he said. “As far as I’m concerned they should hold you fully responsible for your actions and prosecute you to the fullest extent of Canadian law. That’s not up to me, but you should know, if you ever attempt to touch my weapon again, I won’t be caught off guard.”

“I can promise you, Commander, it won’t happen again,” replied Connor, his tone grave, adamant. “I was fully prepared to accept the consequences of my actions, whether they were triggered by an outside influence or not. It’s...I’ve caused too much damage already.” He thought of Grace, almost probably lying in a hospital bed on life support, almost possibly in a morgue. His program shut that
line of inquiry down, however, unwilling to consider it as a probability.

Lockwood eyed him for a long moment. This time Connor could not determine from visual information how the man was feeling. Finally, he nodded once, as if satisfied, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Let’s go. I’m to escort you back to your room until further notice. The Security Council is still determining whether to allow you to attend the rest of the summit.”

Connor nodded. “I understand,” he said. “But first…” He had to know a few things. “The officer who shot...who shot…” He couldn’t seem to complete the sentence; his vocal synthesizer cut out before the final word, so that when he opened his mouth, nothing came out. He opened and closed his mouth several times before settling on a frown, letting his gaze drift to the floor, away from Lockwood’s judgmental stare. “The officer who shot her. Have you found him?”

“We have been...unable to locate him as yet,” Lockwood replied after a moment, and Connor looked up at him once more. His social module identified his facial expression as...embarrassed. “We aren’t even sure of his identity. We’re going over security footage to find out who he is and where he went. He wasn’t one of mine, I can tell you that much. My men are better trained and know not to fire without orders.” The source of his vexation seemed plain now. Someone under his command had made a mistake, and he didn’t know who it was.

But Lockwood wasn’t done. He hesitated for a moment before he spoke again, his tone slightly softer, lower. “I am...sorry about what happened to Miss Roth,” he said. “Truly.”

“Thank you,” Connor replied, anxiety seizing his thirium pump, making it skip a few cycles. His systems struggled for a moment before resetting. “Is she...?” Again his voice failed him, and it felt as if there was something lodged in his throat, a great and terrible thing he could not confront.

Fortunately, Lockwood knew what he was asking regardless.

“Grace will live,” he said. A feeling of dread Connor did not know was lying just beneath the surface of his active emotional processors left him, and he felt...lighter, somehow, as if it was a physical weight that had suddenly been lifted. “If we were five minutes further from the hospital, ...let’s just say she’s very lucky. If you androids hadn’t provided the technology, she would be dead by now.”

“Technology?” Connor repeated, suddenly...numb. By his eyebrow, his LED flashed rapidly, yellow-red-yellow-red, as his systems fought to discern meaning, categorize the words into something that made sense.

“Didn't Markus tell you?” When Connor shook his head, the human continued. "The organic biocomponents." He raised his eyebrows as if he had expected Connor to know already and was surprised he wasn’t, his continued blank look inviting further elaboration. Lockwood obliged, albeit hesitantly. “She...she needed a new heart, Connor.” The use of his name was obviously intended to reassure him, but it didn’t work. Lockwood ploughed on, regardless: “Grace has become the first human to trial an android-manufactured biocomponent organ.”

Stunned, Connor sat in silence for a few milliseconds as his program processed this. The components from the Cradle project had been intended as a peace offering to the humans, not for an immediate active trial. From his understanding of the technology, there was still so much that could go wrong…

And now Grace had one inside her. And it was his fault.
“I need to see her,” he said, looking up at last. Now that he knew she was alive, it was a burning
directive, a mission his systems seized like a lifeline: one to keep him going, move him forward
while guilt threatened to drag him back like an anchor. It was more a physical need than a
command, a compulsion making every limb ready to move on a hairtrigger.

But….”That’s not possible,” Lockwood said. He was already shaking his head. “Your movements
are restricted to the convention centre-”

“I need to see her,” Connor repeated, taking a step towards him. This time he allowed emotion to
filter through his voice, the desperation a strain on his synthesizer, drawing his brows together and
the corner of his mouth tight around every word. He could feel his LED oscillate yellow, blinking
in time with his distress. “Please, Commander. It’s my fault she was injured. I need to know she’s
all right. I need to see her.”

Lockwood looked at him, and this time he was the unreadable one. Five seconds stretched to ten,
and then he sighed, glancing away from the android’s intent stare. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said.
“But I can’t promise anything.”

Connor nodded, letting some of the tension leave his external body language. He did not feel relief;
not yet; would not until he saw Grace alive and if not well, then recovering. But he remembered
scanning her as she lay dying, the terrible damage to her heart, and his program offered
probabilities, statistics he didn’t care to examine, so he pushed them away for now.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Let’s go,” was Lockwood’s only response, and he led Connor from the room, the latter feeling,
somehow, more nervous than he had before.
Chapter Notes

Just a smol update while I continue working on subsequent chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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CONNOR

She looked so...small, a frail and broken shape slumped in a hospital bed, leads and tubes attached to every visible part of her. Her skin was whiter beneath the fluorescent lights, washed out, her lips pale around the breathing tube, the spiderweb veins on her eyelids visible. Soft. Breakable. Weak. Human.

Connor stood in the doorway, and where he had been eager before, desperate to see her, he hesitated now. Seeing her lying there in the hospital bed like this drove home exactly what he had done to her. In his arrogance, he thought he could protect her from danger, only to visit it upon her himself.

The monitors at her bedside beeped a steady rhythm, and her chest rose and fell in shallow but regular repetitions. She was alive. But no matter how many times Connor repeated this to himself, a mantra designed to soothe the agitated parts of his program, guilt wracked him like a virus.

This was his fault. There was no escaping that.

“She’s stable,” said the voice from beside him. It belonged to the doctor overseeing the ICU. “The transplant went well, but we will need to monitor her for some time to see whether her body rejects the organ.”

“Rejects?” Connor repeated dully. He felt slow, lagged, shock and dismay weighing down his systems. He was not sure he wanted any answers, but he asked the question regardless.

“It’s unlikely, from everything Markus told us, as well as the materials he provided,” the doctor replied. “According to his assessment of her scans, the heart should integrate fully with her nervous system without the need for anti-rejection drugs. It’s coded to her DNA.” So that was where Markus had been all these hours since purging Connor’s program. It explained why he had not been responding through Jericho’s private communications link.

The doctor was shaking her head in wonder. “It’s really quite remarkable,” she was saying; “Donor organs that don’t require immunosuppressive drugs. The medical community has been trying to develop a truly independent, long-term artificial heart alone for decades. This could revolutionize medicine itself. Provided no complications occur, she could live out the rest of her natural lifespan as if nothing has happened.”

“It happened,” Connor said. He stepped forward before the doctor could say any more,
approaching the bed. Up close she seemed even smaller, more fragile. A multitude of leads from the monitors at her side snaked underneath the blanket, beneath her white hospital gown; he could see the edge of a bandage peeking from under the hem at her collarbone. Her hands were resting on her stomach, an O2 monitor clipped to her index finger. Like this, she seemed more machine than he did.

He reached out, touching two fingertips to her wrist. Beneath them her pulse was faint, but present. Steady. Reassuring.

“When will she wake up?” he asked the doctor as he heard her approach to stand by his shoulder.

“Well, the general anaesthesia has worn off,” she said. “It could be a matter of hours.”

Connor looked around the room; there were no chairs for visitors. He would stand. “I will wait,” he said.

“Um,” the doctor replied, glancing over her shoulder towards the two UN guards posted outside the room. “Our visiting hours are flexible, but ...”

“I will wait,” Connor repeated firmly. He stood immovable, eyes fixed ahead. The doctor gave up fairly quickly, shaking her head.

“All right. As long as you don’t get in the way,” she added, obviously trying for a stern affectation to her voice. Connor merely nodded. She looked at him a moment longer before sighing audibly then turning to leave the room.

Grace’s monitors continued their steady beeping, and Connor scanned the data parsing across the LCD readouts in an effort to distract himself from the small, fragile figure in the bed. Her vital signs were stable, as the doctor had assured him. It did nothing to assuage the terrible guilt suffusing every system, weighing down his active processes with circular nonlogic loops that refused to clear.

All he could do was wait.

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: I know nothing about medical science so this is all from internet research and magic future tech so pls forgive any massive inaccuracies and suspend your disbelief for the sake of angst the story. Thank you!
WE ARE ALIVE! Thank you all for your patience waiting for this chapter. It's a bit longer to make up for all the cliffhangers and the short chapter before.

Also, WOO 50TH CHAPTER! This fic has gone on so much longer than I thought it would. Hopefully nobody minds!

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DATE
NOVEMBER 5, 2039
TIME
???

GRACE

Grace hurt.

At first it was only a dull pain that throbbed somewhere beneath her neck. She could ignore it, floating in the space halfway between sleep and awake, faint noises reaching her ears - soft beeps and clicks and other strange sounds, the occasional murmur of a voice. She didn't want to move, or think, or feel, or even be; so she let herself drift like that for a while, until slowly the pain began to grow, becoming sharper, more defined. Consciousness tugged at her eyelids like fishhooks, and she felt them flutter, but didn't force them to open - not yet. Just a little while longer. She wanted to float just a little while longer, here, where the pain wasn't as bad.

When she finally woke up, it was terrible.

It felt like she'd been hit with a truck which had then immediately reversed back over her. Her chest ached, a terrible, bone-deep pain that radiated out from beneath her breastbone and peaked with a sharp stab every time she moved. Worse was the plastic in her mouth, which when she became aware of it choked her; she swiped blindly at her face as she gagged and tried to get it out.

Smooth, soft fingers replaced her inelegantly scrabbling ones, drawing the tube away, and she gasped, a hacking cough that sent a spike of fresh pain through her chest, turning her vision black with white bursts of agony behind her lids, vertigo hitting her like a slap to the brain.

When it finally receded and she could breathe again, she fought to slow the short shallow intakes of air into several deep lungfuls. The expansion of her ribcage made everything hurting in her torso even worse, but it helped the dizziness, and finally the blurriness in her vision began to ease, and
swimming into focus she saw the monitors, the leads attached to her chest, the tubes in her skin; she was in hospital, that much was clear. Her memory failed to offer an immediate reason why, so she looked around for some other clue, and then she saw him, standing above her with the breathing tube still in his hand, hesitant, his face twisted in an exquisite tableau of distress.

“Connor,” she croaked past a scoured and sore throat, blinking as he swam in and out of focus. “You...you okay?”

His expression crumbled, the smile that tugged irresistibly at the corner of his mouth - the one she knew so well - making a fleeting appearance. “I’m the one who should be asking you that,” he said gently. She wasn’t sure why. Why was he here? Why was she here? And why did her chest hurt so much?

She looked down finally, to the source of the stiff ache. She was wearing a hospital gown, one that wrapped in the front - thank God, the other design was so much worse - so she was able to reach up with the one hand that didn’t have a tube or a lead attached to it and fumble with the neckline, tugging it aside until she could see the large adhesive pad stretching from just beneath her collarbone all the way down the middle of her breasts, to the top of her abdomen. Faint spots of red dotted the center, along a line spanning her cleavage. She felt panic welling up in her, desperation to know exactly what had been done to her, exactly what was wrong with her. She heard Connor protest as she pulled at the bandage, peeling it away from her skin; the sight that met her eyes made her numb with horror.

Straight down the middle of her torso, mottled by heavy yellowed purple bruising at the top and bottom, was a seven inch cut that began an inch below her throat and ended just beneath her breasts. Metal staples held her skin together, and droplets of red dotted the wound, seeping from beneath her savaged skin.

She felt numb, delirious. This wasn’t happening. This was a dream, she was fine, back in Hank’s house in Detroit having a dream with Connor there beside her to comfort her, Connor who was… Connor who was stroking her hair, pressing the adhesive pad back in place over her chest, murmuring soothing words in her ear.

“It’s all right, Grace. You’re alive. You’re fine.”

“No...no,” she muttered, her voice a thick croak, forced from a clogged and dusty throat. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks, dampening the thin hospital pillow beneath her head; she didn’t care. “They cut me open, why did they cut me open…”

He hushed her and she heard footsteps, voices, but none of them made any sense, she could only stare at the bandage as the red grew in volume and seeped a crimson Rorschach test across her chest.

Then something cold moved through her arm and suddenly she was...floating again, the same feeling from before, a perfect numbness that made her sigh and relax instinctually as the pain faded. Her head fell back and her eyelids shut and she let it carry her away, to where it wouldn’t hurt any more.

For now, at least. She knew she’d have to come back eventually.

Just not yet.
The next time she woke was...better. Tortuous, but the shock and disorientation not as severe. Instead of stages, awareness returned this time in full, consciousness like a veil being lifted from her senses. She opened her eyes but avoided looking down, a low groan from her dry throat as she shifted to lift her head. Her vision blurred and tilted still, but she was able to turn her head enough to see Connor still there, sitting in a chair by her bed now, the silver flash of a coin being flicked between his hands a distraction from the troubled expression on his face.

“Connor?” she said blearily. He looked up at once, the coin balanced precariously between two knuckles; he pocketed it at once as his gaze roved her face, flicked to the monitors behind her head. She fought back a cough, the tickle in her dry throat infuriating.

He seemed to notice, or anticipate, for he had a cup of water in his hand a moment later; he cradled her head and helped her lift it to sip. It very nearly went down the wrong way, but the desire not to cough was too strong. She didn’t want that pain again.

He set aside the cup once she was done, exhausted just from the small movement, already wanting to return to the cold, numb embrace of unconsciousness, but she seemed to be here to stay in the world of the awake for the time being, as much as it hurt. And it hurt like hell.

“What happened?” she managed. Her throat felt much better, her voice still hoarse but legible. She made out Connor’s lips compressing into a severe line, and his gaze fix on her chest. Again she tried to ignore it, but it was hard when every tiny movement, every breath sent a fresh spike of pain through her.

“You were shot,” he said. “At the gala. Do you remember anything?”

“I…” She fought the fog smothering her brain, caught fragments of images, memories like icebergs surfacing and then sinking back down beneath almost immediately. “I don’t know...I remember talking to Derek and then…”

“Derek?” Even in her state, she didn’t miss Connor’s frown, the flash of suspicion in his eyes. “Who is that?”

“Not important,” she managed. “You said I was shot? By whom?” Who had she pissed off that badly? Not Derek, surely? He wouldn’t risk his career by hurting her so openly. No, his thing had been doing it behind closed doors. Closed doors and open fists…

She was drifting again, her grip on reality more tenuous than she’d thought. It was so hard to focus. Connor drew her back with his hand on hers. She blinked at him.

“I was compromised,” he was saying, his mouth tight on the word as if he was forcing it out through clenched teeth. “I...I took Commander Lockwood’s gun. You tried to stop me.”

She remembered, then, his eyes - that vacant look she had seen a few times since their arrival in Vancouver. His gaze like a shark’s, empty of all compassion. Empty of anything.

“Did you...Did you…” She couldn’t get it out, the sentence too terrible to contemplate. Connor was quick to shake his head, his fingers tightening around her hand, firm but gentle.

“No,” he said. “It was one of the UN officers. He was trying to shoot me. You...you got in the way.” He paused, looking away from her. Unable to make eye contact. “You saved my life.”
“Oh,” Grace said. She was so tired. Even talking for this short amount of time made her bones ache with fatigue. She closed her eyes, just briefly, she told herself. Just for a second. “That’s okay then.”

“It...it is?” Connor sounded baffled. She’d smile if she had the energy. “Grace?”

“Let me just rest for a minute,” she said, and then she did.

---

Next time she woke up, Connor wasn’t there.

Grace panicked at first, especially when she realized there was someone unfamiliar in the room instead. But it was only a nurse. He was in the process of changing the dressing on her chest when she opened her eyes, cringing when she realized the wound was open to the air and visible again. The nurse was turned away, unwrapping a new bandage.

“So, how long have I got?” she asked, and watched as the young man turned to look at her. “Give me the bad news. Come on.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said gently, after raising an eyebrow at her, but his eyes were kind. “The transplant has taken nicely. It’s only a matter of time before you’re walking out of here.”

“Transplant?” Any levity she’d had went out the window, and her besieged mind fought to absorb this tidbit of information. The nurse looked somewhat abashed.

“Let me finish changing this dressing and then I’ll get the doctor. She can explain everything.”

An hour later Grace was sitting up in bed, a different kind of shock making her stare blank and fixed unseeing on the wall, a cup of water held untouched in her hand. The nurse had given her pain relief via her IV, but she felt...She wasn’t sure what she felt. ‘Dazed’ would be a good start. ‘Horrified’ a close second.

She had an artificial heart. She couldn’t wrap her mind around it. In her chest was one of the lab-built biocomponent organs Markus himself had helped develop. Lying in some bio-waste container somewhere was her heart, the one she’d been born with, the one perforated by a wayward officer’s bullet.

But she was alive. She probably wouldn’t have been, the doctor explained, if the convention centre wasn’t so close to the hospital, if the paramedics had arrived just one minute later, if they hadn’t had a perfect transplant heart available so quickly. She would be dead and gone. But she couldn’t help but feel...cheated, somehow. It wasn’t fair this had happened to her. Maybe the reaction was immature, but she kept repeating it in her head like a mantra: This isn’t fair. This isn’t fair.

The doctor gave her some literature on heart transplants, told her most of it wasn’t relevant - like the section on immunosuppressant drugs, since this one had been coded to her DNA or something - then left her with the promise that they’d have the catheter out as soon as she felt well enough to stand, but with the caveat that it might not be for another couple of days.
Roughly forty-eight hours had passed while she’d been drifting in and out of consciousness. The nurse was able to inform her the summit had been temporarily adjourned in the wake of the investigation into the incident, but no more details than that. It looked like the speech she hadn’t been able to write wasn’t going to be needed after all.

*This isn’t fair.*

Connor returned some time after the doctor and the nurse left her. He found her staring at the wall, twisting a loose thread on the blanket between her fingers. She didn’t even look up or acknowledge him at first, her mind dancing down darker paths than she was used to.

“Grace?” His voice was gentle. She blinked herself out of her reverie, looked over at him. Managed the ghost of a smile, which he returned. “It’s good to see you awake.”

“I’ve managed a whole couple of hours today,” she said, affectating cheerfulness. “It’s been excruciating.” The sarcasm went right over Connor’s head, predictably, and he took the chair by her bed. She had the feeling he had spent much of his time there over the past forty-eight hours.

“I’m sorry,” he said, brown eyes flicking across her prone form once before returning to hers. “This is my fault.” His brow furrowed, and even amongst her self-pity Grace couldn’t bring herself to let Connor torture himself like this. She lifted her hand, found its progress arrested by the IV tube, and used the other to reach awkwardly over to touch his face.

“No, it’s not,” she said, injecting as much firmness into her voice as she could manage. “You weren’t yourself. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s CyberLife’s.”

“CyberLife doesn’t exist any more,” he replied, taking her hand, holding it loosely between both of his as if afraid he might break her by applying too much pressure. “The investigation has so far determined that whoever hacked my systems was likely acting independently.”

“You don’t buy it,” she observed. She could tell from his expression. He shook his head slowly. “Are they letting you help with the investigation?”

She saw the ancestor of his smile, a faint hint at the corner of his mouth. “I didn’t give them much of a choice,” he admitted.

“You find the guy who shot me? ‘Cause I would like to have words…”

“Not yet.” He shook his head, frowning again, looking at her chest. She wished he wouldn’t. “It’s been determined that he was *not* a real UN officer. Security footage was unable to identify him, and a uniform was stolen from a locker that morning. Lockwood is determined to find out who he was.”

“Shit,” she muttered. “This is…some deep stuff, Connor. If it’s not just CyberLife hacking you, then it’s something much worse.” She let her head fall back against her pillow, huffed her breath out all at once. It hurt. “It’s a fucking conspiracy.”

“I know,” he replied. “But you shouldn’t worry about that right now. You need to worry about recovering.”

“Well, my body shows no sign of rejecting this shiny new heart,” she replied, trying for levity and probably failing miserably. “So I should be good to go in, like, two weeks. So if everyone could just wait until then to finish changing the world, that’d be great.”

“I’ll pass that on,” said Connor, his smile a flicker that was there and gone in a second. He brought
her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips against her knuckles.

“I love you,” she said. “You know that, right?”

“Yes.” His expression was soft. No hint of blankness or that terrible void behind his eyes. Knowing she hadn’t imagined it was one thing, trying not to look for it now was another. She wondered if she would ever be able to look at him again without wondering, but pushed the thought away as one of the darker ones plaguing her since she’d woken up. Everything would be fine. She needed it to be.

“I...you mean more to me than I’m capable of articulating,” Connor was saying, hesitant now, in that particularly endearing way of his when he was struggling to express something new to him, something not part of his program. She could see the circle of light at his temple flickering yellow, wondered when it had started doing that. “It may seem strange, given the relatively short amount of time we’ve known each other, but you have taught me so much. About humanity. About myself. When I thought I’d lost you, I felt as if I had lost a part of myself, too.” He frowned at her, his mouth working. “I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t burden you with this.”

“Didn’t I once tell you never to apologize for your feelings?” Grace felt moisture at the corner of her eyes, blinking it away with a smile. How could she possibly mistrust him when he laid himself bare to her like this? He had no pretense, had proven himself a terrible liar, and was more human than many men she’d known during the course of her life. She couldn’t forget, but she could forgive. And easily.

“I’m s-” Connor cut himself off, blinking, then smiled. “Thank you,” he corrected. “I’ll try to remember.”

“Now you go catch that asshole who shot me and the one who hacked you,” she told him. “I’ll be waiting.”

Connor nodded. “I’ll be back,” he said. He let go of her hand with one final kiss against her palm and stood.

She watched him go, trepidation heavy beneath the pain in her chest.
They found the suspect holed up in a hotel room a block from the convention center. The name he gave to the reception desk was Greg Morrow, but his real name was Conrad Reading, and he was a thirty-seven year old unemployed male with no criminal history hailing from Ann Arbor in Michigan. There was no obvious connection to CyberLife, although Connor hadn’t expected there to be. Whoever did this had covered their tracks well, but the net was closing.

Without Connor to sift through the CCTV with his preternaturally fast processing speed, it would have taken considerably longer to pick the suspect's face out of the crowd. But, after Markus personally lobbied the Security Council on his behalf, he found himself partnered with Lockwood himself, despite the latter’s protestations.

It was not the first time Connor had worked with someone reluctant for his help, but to his credit and despite his initial disapproval, the Commander accepted the assignment with no further comment.

“I’ll knock first,” he said as they stood outside the hotel room, straightening his beret. “Stay out of sight for now. When it’s safe, I’ll let you know.”

Logical. Connor was, of course, not armed - no amount of Markus’s persuasive words could change that, even if Connor had wanted it to - so it made sense for Lockwood to make the initial ingress. Procedures ingrained into his core programming surfaced in the forefront of his active processes, and he let them take over; the familiar motions of working alongside a human partner, observing their movements while also taking in the surroundings with the perfect attention to detail his software afforded him.

While this was what he had been made for, he felt far less comfortable here than he did in the company of Hank. While the detective had managed to secure a position consulting for the investigation, he was not permitted on the front lines.

Connor found this...regrettable. His emotional processor informed him that this nostalgia for Hank’s company was his way of... missing him , as Grace might put it.

Hank would have never let it go if he knew. So it was probably fortunate he was not here.
Instead, it was Lockwood who approached the hotel room door, affording it a quick rap from his knuckles. The other hand he kept on his sidearm - in fact, it rarely left it when in Connor’s company now. He did not blame the Commander for his caution. The other two UNPOL officers sent with them had taken up posts at the elevator at the far end of the floor and the outside of the building. If the suspect attempted to escape, he wouldn’t get far.

There was no answer from inside, even though through checks at the front desk and the hotel’s security cameras had determined the suspect was, in fact, inside. Lockwood and Connor exchanged a glance before the former knocked again, louder this time. Connor cocked his head to listen, frowning in concentration while his LED cycled yellow as he increased his audio processor's sensitivity levels. With that, he could hear the unmistakable sound of footsteps, the click of a door being closed.

He nodded to Lockwood once, quick. The Commander wasted no time in stepping back, readying a kick that connected with the frame of the door with an almighty crunch. The blow struck true and the door flew inwards in a shower of splinters; impressed by the Commander’s precision, Connor followed him into the room, scanning left-to-right.

His firearm drawn, Lockwood did the same. He took one hand off the butt to briefly use military hand-signal to direct Connor to stay behind him as he swept the rooms. Dutifully, the android obeyed; he could no longer risk his body to potential attack as it was now the only working one he had left. He couldn’t upload his memories to CyberLife’s servers any more. In a way, he was just as mortal as Grace, just as susceptible to a bullet to the heart.

Lockwood tried the bathroom door first. Nobody inside, the shower curtain drawn; Connor shook his head and pointed two fingers at the closed bedroom door; shadows moved in the space at the bottom, light illuminating footsteps from beyond as they crossed in front of the threshold.

Lockwood nodded and made a beeline for the bedroom door, gesturing for Connor to stand against the wall on the other side of it. Leaving one hand on his gun, leveled, he reached out with the other to slowly turn the knob; flinging it open, he pressed himself to the wall next to the doorframe.

It was fortunate, for as soon as the door opened, a gunshot issued forth; the bullet tore into the wall in the space where Lockwood might have stood were he not so cautious.Connor heard a male voice swearing from within the bedroom. His audio processor quickly gave him a vocal match from his memory banks: The man who had shot Grace. They had found him.

“This is the UN Police; put down your weapon and you won’t be harmed!” Lockwood called. Another gunshot was his only answer, this one hitting the doorframe and showering the ground with splinters and flecks of paint. “I am authorized in the use of necessary force in order to detain you. Don’t make me use it!”

“If I may, Commander,” Connor interjected. Lockwood hesitated for a moment, but nodded with a shrug.

“You shot a friend of mine, Conrad,” he continued, raising his voice to be heard in the room beyond. “If you tell us why, we might be able to reach a deal.”

“I didn’t mean to shoot her!” The voice was strained, desperate, hoarse as if he’d been yelling. “She got in the fucking way! It wasn’t meant to happen like this! Just leave me alone!”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that, Conrad,” said Connor calmly. “You only have two choices. You can come out shooting, and Commander Lockwood will be forced to take you down, or you can lay down your weapon and we can talk.”
There was silence from the bedroom for twenty-five seconds. Connor’s internal chronometer counted them down while Lockwood stood tense, ready for action, his finger on the trigger guard of his weapon. Then Connor heard the thunk of a heavy object hitting carpet, the impact of a boot against metal, and a 9mm pistol came spinning through the doorway to rest at their feet.

Lockwood was quick to bend down and scoop it up with his free hand, and Connor didn’t miss the glance he shot his way. He didn’t comment on it, though, as the Commander emptied the clip and tucked the empty gun into the waistband of his uniform.

“I’m coming out.” Conrad’s voice was still hoarse. “I’m unarmed. Don’t shoot.”

As soon as he stepped through the doorway, his hands above his head, Lockwood was on him. Connor observed as, with efficient speed, the UN officer grabbed his wrist, twisted and kicked at the back of his knees so that he immediately fell to the ground. From there he had him on his face on the floor, hands cuffed behind his back in seconds.

Impressive. Connor gained a newfound respect for the commander, and felt a twinge of guilt at betraying his trust at the gala. But there would be time to confront that later.

“How sent you, Conrad?” Connor demanded, crouching down next to the prone suspect. “Was it CyberLife?”

“My name isn’t Conrad,” he muttered into the carpet. “I work for Homeland Security, for fuck’s sake! You’ll find my credentials in my back pocket.” Lockwood searched him, and sure enough, he found a wallet which he flipped open, the ID card within bearing the unmistakable logo of the DHS.

Connor felt his LED flickering red, but Lockwood was already asking questions before he could. “If you’re from the US Government, why were you firing on a UN official?”

“I didn’t know who you were!” The man was quickly growing even more upset, almost hysterical. “I was meant to wait here for my handler and when you two assholes busted down the door, I fucking panicked, okay?!”

“Why did you impersonate a UNPOL officer two nights ago and shoot a civilian?”

“I was told there was going to be a hacked android at the gala that night, that I was to take it out if it tried anything,” the man babbled. “I was just doing my job! Please, contact Agent Collins at the DHS. He’ll be able to explain everything! I didn’t mean to shoot her. Fuck!”

Connor went very still as he processed this. Agent Collins. The same man overseeing Grace’s visit to Detroit. The same man who had met her at the airport, when Connor had felt the first intrusion into his program.

The pieces were all coming together now to form a picture Connor did not like the look of.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Lockwood was hauling Conrad Reading - or, according to his DHS ID, David Fisher - to his feet. Connor rose as well, catching the look the Commander gave him, the faint shake of his head. “We’ll get you back to HQ and then we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Connor was sure Lockwood meant the latter part of the sentence for him.
Grace had been correct.

This conspiracy went deeper than either of them had imagined. For an officer from the Department of Homeland Security to have the information that Fisher had meant that the US Government itself was behind the unauthorized access of Connor’s systems. It meant the entire thing had been staged, from the first moment Grace had set foot on Detroit soil, to the UN summit itself. It was designed to undermine the androids, to present them as dangerous, unstable... and Connor could think of only one person whose agenda that fit.

President Cristina Warren.

Proving it was another matter entirely. While the UNPOL now had Fisher in custody, it was a tall order to implicate the President of the United States in a conspiracy of this scale. While Connor was glad the man responsible for shooting Grace was now in custody, the predominant emotion in his program now was... doubt. Doubt that it would do any good. Doubt that they could bring to justice the people who were pulling the strings in the background. It filled him with a sense of hopelessness, and he remembered the cold, bleak death of the Zen Garden, of Amanda’s last words.

“You haven’t seen the last of me, Connor.”

He remembered, too, Warren’s words when she had approached them at the Gala. “I do hope events do not turn out as unfortunate as they did in Detroit.” She had known what was going to happen. Connor was sure of it. The burden of proof, however, was on him.

“I am programmed with extensive interrogation techniques,” he told Lockwood as they stood outside the room he had once been interred in. Fisher was within, seated at the same table, most likely wearing the same handcuffs. “You should allow me to speak to him. I may be able to extract a confession.”

“He’s a United States citizen,” said Lockwood, shaking his head. “This is a political minefield. All
we can do now is detain him until Canadian authorities get here. We can’t touch him.”

“Just give me five minutes with him,” Connor stressed. “I guarantee I can get a confession.”

“It won’t count, Connor,” Lockwood turned to him, emphatic in a way the peacekeeper rarely was, his forehead creased with as much agitation as he was allowing himself to show. “He’s protected by international law. Whatever he says in there, without a lawyer present, is completely inadmissible in any courtroom.”

“I don’t care about that,” he replied. “All I care about is finding out who is behind all of this. Leave it off the record. I only want the truth.”

Lockwood looked at him for a long time, ice-blue eyes searching. This time, Connor’s social module failed to decipher either his expression or his body language.

“Call your friend Hank,” he said at last. “I have an idea.”

---

Hank stood with his arms crossed, leaning a shoulder into the wall. At the sole table in the room sat Conrad Reading - a.k.a. David Fisher - hunched over his cuffed hands. Two days ago, Connor had been in the exact same position. Two days ago, he had thought himself responsible for Grace’s death.

He wondered if Fisher suffered the same torture from his own conscience. He wondered if he had a conscience. So many humans didn’t appear to. He wondered if a conscience was merely something they constructed, a concept that didn’t actually exist, to reassure themselves that what they were doing was right.

He didn’t know. All he knew was that Lockwood had gone out on a limb to allow Connor here, with Hank as an official representative of the US arm of the law. While it wasn’t strictly legal without a lawyer, Fisher hadn’t asked for one yet, and there was a chance - albeit slim - that if they extracted a confession, it might stick.

It was their only chance. He and Hank had to obtain a confession here, now. Connor had to find out who was ultimately responsible for the hack, for Grace’s injury.

What happened after that was out of his hands. But at least then, he would know the truth.

And he wasn’t alone. Connor was glad to have Hank back by his side. It felt as natural as breathing - or, for him, not breathing.

Connor leaned over the desk, fingertips splayed across its surface as he examined Fisher. Late thirties, Caucasian, thinning brown hair; he was fairly generic as humans went. Sweat had beaded on his brow and on his upper lip; his eyes were darting to and fro, nervous, as he looked from Hank to Connor and back again. He seemed more concerned about the latter, leaning back as Connor invaded his personal space.

“I can’t tell you that,” Fisher said, shaking his head, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his lip. 
Connor tilted his head as he avoided his eyes, remaining still, a looming, discomforting presence above the human.

“What can you tell us?” Connor spoke up then, watching as Fisher winced, cringing away from him. He was afraid. It didn’t take an advanced social module to detect that. “There are a lot of people who want to speak to you right now. We’re probably the only ones who will listen to your side of the story.”

“I…” He hesitated again, and Connor took the carefully calculated opportunity to ease off the pressure, straightening up. Fisher relaxed visibly once he wasn’t in his personal space. “I can’t tell you much more than I did in the hotel room. I heard an android - you - were hacked, and I was told to take you out. I didn’t...that woman, when she got in the way, I…”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Connor said evenly, despite every circuit, every line of his code screaming blame through his systems. “You were acting under orders.”

“Yes...yes,” Fisher said, nodding emphatically, grasping at the straws. “It wasn’t my fault.”

“Trouble is, a lot of people are gonna disagree with that.” Hank’s voice was a slow, lazy drawl, and he pushed off the wall, sauntering around the perimeter of the table to lean his hip against it on the side next to Connor. They had the suspect boxed in. And now, with two tall detectives - one artificial, one not - hanging over him like dual fists of the law, his nervousness peaked again.

“They’re gonna want a scapegoat,” Hank told him, folding his arms, not making eye contact. Fisher looked from him to Connor desperately.

“What - what does that mean?”

“It means your government is going to want to blame someone for the shooting of a US citizen during a peace summit,” Connor explained patiently. “And you’re the one who pulled the trigger.”

He watched as Fisher’s last defenses visibly crumbled beneath the panic, the fear, the uncertainty. His face collapsed, the cringe of determination giving way to terror.

“They can’t,” he gasped, leaning forward, cuffed hands on the table as he gazed up at the two detectives. “They’re the ones who sent me! The order came from President Warren herself!”

Connor took a step backwards. Hank looked at him, gave a nod.

“What - what does that mean?”

“It means your government is going to want to blame someone for the shooting of a US citizen during a peace summit,” Connor explained patiently. “And you’re the one who pulled the trigger.”

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Connor took a step backwards. Hank looked at him, gave a nod.

“Why? Why would she do that?” Connor asked slowly, carefully, as if his words were a scalpel designed to carefully tease the confession from the suspect. Which they were.

“I don’t know,” Fisher said, shaking his head. “She hates androids? Beats the hell out of me! All I know is when Collins briefed me he told me his orders were coming directly from the White House, that - that we had to clean up CyberLife’s mess. I swear, that’s all I heard!”

Connor and Hank met each other’s gaze, held it for a few moments while Fisher squirmed. This time, it was Connor who nodded, and the detective across from him turned back to the suspect.

“We’re gonna need more details on that,” he said, and took out a notepad from inside his jacket, set it down with a pen alongside it. “How about you start by writing all that down.”

“You can help me, right?” Fisher was trembling now, on the verge of tears. Connor should have felt sorry for him, but he didn’t. His program was suffused with anger, simmering beneath the
“Sure,” Hank said, but he could see the look on Connor’s face - or the lack thereof. “Just give us a minute. You keep on writing.”

Connor left the room with Hank on his heels. It took him a moment to realize his fists were clenched so tightly his fingertips had turned white. He calmed himself, his eyes shutting briefly as he took several deep, unneeded breaths to help regulate the flow of thirium through his system, concentrating on the steady thrum of his own heartbeat rather than the emotions warring for processing space in the forefront of his digital mind.

“You okay?” Hank asked after shutting the door behind him. “Pretty tense in there.”

“He only confirmed what I suspected,” Connor replied as he opened his eyes. “But even with his confession, he’s only one man. Homeland Security will deny it. The US government at large will deny it. They’ll say he’s gone rogue, trying to pin the blame on others. We need more. We need a confession from Agent Collins or Warren himself.”

“And just how the hell do you plan to get that?” Hank shook his head. “Connor, when you asked me to help with this case I didn’t think you planned to go up against the fucking government itself. This is way above my pay grade.”

“If you don’t want to help, Captain, that’s fine,” he replied, shaking his head. “You’ve done enough already. I won’t hold it against you if you walk away.”

“Shit,” muttered Hank. “It’s not that I don’t want to help, Connor, you fuckin’ know that! I just don’t know how I can help.”

“Stay for the rest of the conference,” he replied after a moment, an idea beginning a genesis within his processors, unfolding slowly, line of code by line of code. “Make sure you’re contactable at all times. I have a plan.”

Hank eyed him, apprehensive. “You sure about this?”

“Do you trust me?” Connor turned to face him, looked him in the eyes.

Hank didn’t even hesitate. “With my life.”

“Then I’ll see you soon.” Connor turned and walked away. He could almost feel Hank’s gaze on the back of his head, the incredulous look. But he kept walking. He had things to do.

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Connor’s first stop was the West convention center building, where Jericho had been staying for the summit. He was joined by Lockwood after the interrogation, but he had no answers for the Commander’s multitude of questions. Not yet.

“I know you have no reason to trust me,” he told him during the relatively short walk from the East to the West building. “But I have reason to believe the people who sought to control me are more powerful than previously imagined. There are steps I must take to protect the people I care about.”
“Like Grace?” Connor did not miss Lockwood’s pointed look. He shook his head.

“I’ve been given a second chance,” he said. “I don’t plan on wasting it.”

“All right, Connor,” Lockwood sighed, when the android didn’t seem inclined to speak further. “We’ll do it your way. But if I see you do anything I deem as unsafe, I will take you down. Got it?”

“Got it.” He expected nothing less.

To Lockwood’s confusion, when they arrived at the accommodation floor, he headed to Grace’s room instead of his. He had her keycard from his...previous visit, so he swiped it and entered, the UNPOL Commander close on his heels. Lockwood said nothing as he watched Connor search the room, merely raised his eyebrows when the android found Grace’s satchel and picked it up. “She asked me to bring this to her,” he explained, and Lockwood shrugged, waving a hand in an ‘I’ll allow it’ gesture.

It took half an hour in peak traffic to return to the hospital. When he arrived back at her room, Grace was sleeping, and a nurse barred his path. “This is hers,” he told the woman, “Can you see she receives it safely?” She shrugged, no hint of suspicion as she took the satchel. Mission accomplished, Connor nodded to himself, and an increasingly bewildered Lockwood followed him as he turned to leave.

“Just what are you playing at?” he asked.

“If my suspicions are correct, we won’t need to expose the people behind all of this,” he replied. “They’ll do it themselves.”

Lockwood asked what he meant, but Connor didn’t answer. Just smiled a thin smile to himself as they walked away, reaching inside his jacket to feel the weight of the tablet he had stashed there after lifting it from Grace’s satchel.

Now all he had to do was wait.
GRACE

It was hard staying awake on heavy-duty opiates. Grace spent much of her first proper ‘conscious’ day after Connor’s visit in and out of sleep, waking only to eat - liquids only - and have her vitals checked. Each moment blended in to one another, until it was just a continuous series of waking up to bland food and various pokings and proddings, and she couldn’t wait to go back to sleep after each one.

Eventually, night came, although Grace couldn’t have said whether it was the first night since she had woken up, the second or even the third. She found it hard to care. She was still so tired.

She was having a bland dinner of soup and Jell-O when her next visitor arrived. She heard a male voice talking to the doctor and perked up, pushing her tray away as she stretched her stiff legs and sat up slowly, as not to pull the muscles in her chest. She had never before been aware how much every movement could pull at her pectorals, or cause her ribs to expand and contract, until the terrible injury. Now it felt like every movement caused some kind of twinge. The cocktail of painkillers made it easier to bear, although they were weaning her onto a smaller dose already. It made it easier to focus during her conscious periods, less likely to slip away into the floating dark to escape reality. That didn’t seem as desirable now.

However, the man that opened the door and stepped inside was not who Grace was hoping to see. Agent Collins was wearing either the same suit or a carbon copy of the one she’d seen him in twice previously, his balding head shiny underneath the fluorescent light, a lizard-like quality to his smile. Despite herself, Grace shrank back in her bed a little, wishing she was dressed and standing so she didn’t feel so intimidated by the toadlike man.

“Miss Roth,” he said smoothly. “It’s so good to see you alive and well. I’m so sorry for what has happened. I feel personally responsible for placing you among those...machines.”

“Actually, it was a human who shot me,” she replied coldly. His smile didn’t waver. He came to stand next to the bed, ignoring the chair next to it, looking down at her. She cringed inwardly. “The machines saved me.”

“Ah yes, your new heart,” Collins said. “The doctors inform me it has integrated flawlessly with your nervous system. Quite an achievement.” She couldn’t read his expression. “In fact, it is quite a coincidence, wouldn’t you say, that you were injured in such a place at such a time as the androids could swoop in and ‘rescue’ you?”

“Why are you here?” Grace asked, resisting the urge to pull the covers up to her chin. She sat up as straight as she could, even as it put strain on her breastbone.
“To see if you’re all right, of course,” Collins said, blinking as if the question itself was an affront to his non-existent honor. “I am responsible for your welfare.”

“Then where were you at the gala to stop that fake UN guy from popping me?” she demanded.

“The incident was...unfortunate, but unavoidable. Your android ‘friend’ was compromised. Had that not occurred, no doubt you would not be in the hospital,” Collins told her. “The US government is working on extraditing it to the US for testing. It cannot be trusted.”

“We know what happened to Connor,” Grace insisted, feeling cold. “It wasn’t his fault. But that man who shot me? He’s the one you should be investigating. He wasn’t a UN officer. Connor told me. Whoever he was, he was acting on someone’s orders. You should be finding out whose.” Although she already had her suspicions. Suspicions that were confirmed when Collins spoke next.

“Agent Fisher was operating under the full discretion and oversight of the Android Division of the Department of Homeland Security,” he said, and for the moment the mask slipped, and she saw only coldness beneath the fake joviality. It was a terrifying glimpse into an emotionless void, worse than looking in Connor’s eyes and seeing nothing. She saw only ruthless efficiency, a single-minded drive that didn’t take into account compassion or empathy. Only an agenda, one her drug-hazed mind couldn’t piece together just yet. “He was acting under my orders to neutralize the android threat.”

“How did you know he’d be a threat? How did you know to place him there, undercover, at exactly the right time?” Grace demanded. Injured or not, she wasn’t going to let this go. She moved her stiff legs slowly, swinging them off the side of the bed, reaching out to grab the IV stand next to the bed and using it to support her weight as she stood. Her legs felt half-numb, half like heavy logs belonging to someone else, but somehow she managed to draw herself up to her feet to stare down Collins.

“You must understand, this is much bigger than you,” he said. “This is about taking down a regime that threatens mankind itself. You were unable to help us find ammunition, so we were forced to turn to other avenues.”

“Other avenues? Like hacking Connor, trying to make him kill Markus? Two birds, one stone, is that it?” The pain in her chest was intensifying, emerging from behind the drug cloud, but she ignored the horrible throb as she stood straight and unbending, glaring up at Collins even as he stood his ground and smirked at her.

“In the end, the first attempt was unsuccessful. But we have other avenues to pursue. This summit is not to grant them their freedom. This summit is to eliminate the threat once and for all. And now that you won’t be able to get in the way, Miss Roth, we anticipate things will proceed much more smoothly.” He inclined his head. “We won’t be needing your services any longer. After the summit, after we have accomplished our goals, you will be returned to Chicago.”

“Wait!” Grace cried out as Collins turned to leave. “You can’t do this!”

“Actually, we can. It’s for the greater good - you’ll see. Goodbye, Miss Roth.”

“You son of a bitch - come back here!” she yelled, taking one shaky step forward, then another - then her legs gave out beneath her, collapsing into an inelegant heap on the ground. The agony in her chest laboured her breath, making her gasp, her vision blurring as she glared up at Collins’ back. He left the room without looking back.
Hank and Lockwood leaned over the tablet, their faces differing tableaus of intense expression as they listened to the recording. Hank’s was twisted with open rage and disgust, his mouth set in a growl and his grey brows drawn tight over stormy blue eyes, where Lockwood’s jaw was tight with the effort to contain his emotion, but his eyes held as much anger - if not more - than the police captain’s did.

“That son of a bitch,” Hank swore. “That fuckin’ asshole! I knew he sounded like a prick the moment you told me about him.”

Lockwood, however, said nothing, staring at the tablet as his jaw worked around unsaid words.

“There’s more,” Connor said. He reached up, touching two fingertips to the glowing LED at his temple, which oscillated yellow, and the picture on the tablet’s surface changed. Artifacts crowded the bottom fourth and left and right edges of the screen, the remote recall of android memories never a hundred percent clear, but the face and voice on the video was legible as Agent Collins.

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While Lockwood waited in the lobby, Connor headed straight for Grace’s room. He bumped into Agent Collins, who seemed in a hurry as he exited, brushing Connor’s shoulder with a rough jostle. The agent scowled and straightened his jacket, turning to glare at the person responsible, but his expression changed when he recognized who it was.

“The RK800,” he said, and the toad-like smile stretched over his features like treacle. Connor could understand why Grace had disliked him so much from the beginning; the man exuded an aura of untrustworthiness, as if nothing about him could be believed. From his shined shoes to the crisp pleats in his suit, he was designed to give a certain impression of bureaucratic efficiency, of charm, but it was so patently fake that it became difficult for Connor to believe he had been placed as the public-facing arm of the Department of Homeland Security on purpose.

“You should stay away from her,” Collins was saying. “You’ve brought her nothing but pain, grief and heartache. You machines are a plague.”

“I don’t think she would agree,” Connor replied, keeping his expression carefully neutral. This seemed to annoy Collins, whose smile threatened to be overtaken by a scowl.

“It’s a shame Fisher failed to eliminate you,” he said, and leaned in, his voice dropping several octaves, his mouth twisting from a smile to a scowl. Connor did not move. “How does it feel...to have failed your mission so completely not once, but twice now? You are nothing but a defective machine, and you deserve to be thrown on a scrapheap. Rest assured Warren will see all of you disassembled before this summit is through.” He pulled back, and resumed the expression of smarmy bureaucrat with ease, the smile in place as if it had never left. “Good evening.”
Connor watched him go, a slow smile of his own spreading across his face.

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“He named her outright!” Hank yelled, slamming a fist down on the table. Lockwood was shaking his head. “That corrupt bitch is toast if this gets out!”

The UNPOL commander finally spoke up. “The word of an android against a high-ranking government official; it’ll never hold up. They’ll say this recording is doctored, if they don’t say it about the first one. In the court of public opinion, this just isn’t enough evidence.” He paused, straightening up. Hank was already opening his mouth to yell, but Lockwood interrupted before he could.

“At least, not for the U.S. It might be enough for the UN.” He nodded at Connor. “Give me a copy. I’ll get it to the Security Council straight away.”

The android’s mouth quirked at the corners while by his side, the police captain gaped, the need to fight suddenly gone, leaving his mouth open on a rebuke that was no longer required. He shut it quickly though, recovering well as Connor inclined his head. “Thank you, Commander. I’m in your debt.”

“I’m not sure how much that’s worth,” said Lockwood as he straightened his beret, “but I’ll take it.”

“Connor’s a guy you want on your side,” Hank interjected. “As for you...I guess you’re all right. Commander.” They exchanged a pair of respectful nods, on one side the UN peacekeeper, by all accounts a straight-edge man working to uphold the rule of law, and on the other...Hank Anderson. It was fascinating to watch them interact, and Connor would have liked to observe for longer, but there was still much left to do.

“I can trust you to bring this to the right people?” he asked, tapping the screen with two fingertips. Lockwood nodded his affirmation. “Then take it. You’ll be able to verify the authenticity of the recordings with little trouble. Will I be needing an escort from here?”

“...I suppose Anderson can take over,” Lockwood conceded. “If you’re not leaving the building.”

“No. I think the Captain and I have some catching up to do,” Connor said, and Hank raised his eyebrows at him; he could practically hear his ‘Ya think?’, heavy with his trademark sarcasm.

“Very well.” Lockwood tucked Grace’s tablet underneath his arm. “I’ll let you know what the Security Council decides to do from here. We’re in tricky waters, gentlemen, but this is a conspiracy no man of good conscience can ignore. Good luck.”

“Yeah, you too,” Hank said, watching as the commander left, stiff and straight-backed. “Jesus, when I first met that guy I couldn’t measure the length of the stick up his ass, but now...I suppose he’s on the level.”

“He is,” Connor agreed, hesitating as he looked at Hank across the table. “Hank...I have to apologize. For dragging you into all this, without being able to tell you what was going on. I fear it has been a terrible strain on your trust, and for that I’m deeply sorry.”
“Are you fuckin’ serious?” He stared at him as if instead of an apology, a second head had sprouted out of his mouth. “Fuck off on outta here with that bullshit, Connor. You’re my best friend, for God’s sake. I only wish I could’ve done more.”

Connor felt a smile he hadn’t consciously activated on his face, and Hank reached out to clap him on the shoulder, squeezing tight as if he was flesh and muscle instead of plastic and cables. “If I had gotten to see Cole grow up,” he said quietly, his voice just a little gruffer than usual, “I only hope he would’ve turned out like you.”

“Hank, I…” Connor didn’t know what to say to that, but Hank shook his head and pulled him in for a loose hug, which said more than words ever could.

In that moment, in a way he hadn’t before, he knew what it was to be human. To make mistakes. And he knew that in the course of pursuing justice, there was one he might never be able to forgive himself for.

Chapter End Notes

Collins sucks I can't believe I wrote a character I hate so much smh
Um yeah don't hate me please, the level of melodrama and garbage just went from 50 to 100 but it'll get better I promise

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CONNOR

“Grace! Are you all right?” He rushed to her as soon as he saw her lying on the floor, her hand white-knuckled around the IV pole as she fought to haul herself back to her feet. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner,” he said as he helped her up with an arm underneath both of hers, lifting her disconcertingly slight frame back onto the bed. Had she always been this light? Had she lost weight over the past few days? Was she receiving adequate nutrition?

These worries fluctuated in the background, layered over the guilt of satisfaction at Collins’ slip while he had let him terrorize Grace so.

How many times would he fail to protect her before his inadequacy caused her even more irreparable harm than what she’d already suffered? How long would it take before he decided to do something about it?

He decided. As soon as he stepped into the room, he decided.

“That fucking asshole,” Grace was hissing from between clenched teeth as she sat on the edge of the bed, shaking her head. “He thinks he can get away with this? I will bury him. You should have heard him, Connor - he’s behind everything! That piece of shit who shot me, your hacking, everything! But how - how the fuck am I supposed to prove this? He’s untouchable! Connor, I-”

“It’s okay,” he soothed her, reaching out for the satchel lying on the bedside table. His hand dipped into an inside pocket and withdrew a small, black oblong of plastic. He held it up between thumb and forefinger, watching as recognition dawned in Grace’s pale hazel eyes.

“You crafty son of a motherboard,” she breathed, her eyes flicking between the recording device and Connor’s face. “You used my trick against him. You magnificent bastard.” Despite the expletives, she seemed pleased, beaming through the tears. She reached out and wrapped her arms around Connor with a breathless laugh, pressing her face against his neck.

He didn’t respond, holding stiff and still while she hugged him.

He had already done the calculations, faced down the data, reached the inevitable conclusion. He could not protect Grace; in fact his presence had only placed her in increasing amounts of danger. Therefore, logic - and his program - dictated that he distance himself from her.
As much as it hurt. There was no other way.

She seemed to notice his lack of response fairly quickly, pulling back to look in his eyes, a frown above hers. “Connor? What’s wrong?”

“I...am responsible for all of this,” he began, fighting to keep his voice unaffected by the emotions running rampant through his systems. He tried to shut them down but they were too deeply integrated into his core programming now to excise. He would have to live with this conflict, this pain. Better this, though, than any more pain for Grace. “I can no longer in good conscience cause you to suffer.” He pocketed the earpiece, stepping back from the bed.

She stared at him, and he could read the different emotions as if they were words passing across her face. Disbelief. Confusion. Betrayal. Sadness. Anger. He was glad she settled on the latter - he was not sure how he would react to tears now.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Her voice was quiet in a way he’d only heard once or twice before, dangerous, a warning sign of rage yet to be unleashed. He stood his ground. “Connor, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying we should no longer be involved in an intimate relationship,” he stated, as dispassionately as possible. “For your safety.”

“For my safety? Are you serious right now? Are you really serious?” She looked about to explode, the colour rising in her paler-than-usual cheeks, and behind her he saw the monitors peak, warning beeps sounding in the background. She ignored them. “You think by, what, by breaking up with me you’re going to somehow cause me less pain and heartache? Are you malfunctioning right now?”

“No,” he said, injecting a sliver of coldness into his tone even as his chest felt like it was being cracked open, much as Grace’s had only days before. “In fact, I think I’m finally functioning correctly. I wasn’t built for love. I was built to accomplish a mission. Right now, that mission is to keep you safe, and the further away you are from me, the safer you will be.”

Grace was quiet for a moment, a moment where Connor hoped she could accept this, that it was the best thing for her. Then she drew back her arm and although his software preconstructed the scenario in as much time as it took her to swing, he failed to move out of the way before she hit him. His head whipped to the side, his skin white in the shape of her palm print for a moment before it repaired itself. It was at that moment the beeping from her monitors reached fever pitch, and he saw Grace reach down to tear the leads from her chest; fortunately the doctors and nurses of the ICU chose then to finally burst through the door to come to Grace’s rescue - and his own.

The doctor crossed to Grace straight away, urging her to lie down back on the bed, but she fought her, grabbing her shoulder and shoving her aside with surprising strength. “You son of a bitch, come back here, I’m not done with you yet, we’re not done - ”

But a nurse was already ushering him outside and he wasn’t fighting back. He took one last look at Grace, eyes wild and hair flying as the doctor and two other nurses fought to hold her back, and let himself be swept from the room.

From her life.

He wasn’t sure which hurt most: His face, or his heart.
When Grace received word two days later that the summit was resumed, she was not in a good place.

She had spent much of the past forty-eight hours emotionally numb, going through the motions, ignoring as doctors gushed over her incredible progress. She was on her feet not much longer after Connor’s final visit, walking around the halls of the ICU; they transferred her to the general ward the next day and had the staples out of her skin. They were amazed at how well her new heart was working; she didn’t even feel as if she had one any more. They kept telling her how miraculous it was but she didn’t care. She was numb, numb and furious at the same time.

Her mother visited her the afternoon of her transfer out of the ICU and brought her the news.

“Grace? Oh my gawd, Gracie, darling!” Jacqui’s thirty-a-day voice was just as grating in person as it was over the phone, and Grace winced, looking up from her bed at the woman rushing forward from the doorway. Pushing seventy, Jacqueline Roth had enough work done to pass for late fifties, with teased and sprayed blonde hair more solid than the atrophied muscle she called a heart. Hers was even more artificial than Grace’s, she thought bitterly as her mother embraced her.

She was bitter, everything seen through a lense of acrimony. She knew it, and yet she couldn’t push it away.

“When I saw someone at the conference had been shot I had no idea it was you! Darling, why didn’t you call me? It was your sister who found out, you know, she works at Mount Saint Joseph, just across the road from here, she heard about the patient with the artificial heart and when she found out it was you she called me straight away. Darling, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Grace sighed, pushing her spindly arms away. “I mean, my chest hurts, but I’m okay.” Physically, anyway. As the doctors told it, if she hadn’t had her chest cracked open she would be running laps and climbing walls again the same as she had before the surgery. Amazing, they kept saying.

She didn’t feel amazing. She felt awful. It was a childish reaction to heartbreak, a teenager’s reaction to sit and mope and stare out the window, but she didn’t know what else to do. Connor wasn’t answering her calls, neither was Markus or anyone else from Jericho. Lockwood had picked up once but said he was too busy to talk; same for Hank. Frustrated, rebuffed, she had withdrawn into herself and - there was no other word for it, really - sulked.

And now her mother was here. Great. Just great.

“Well, that’s good,” Jacqui burbled. She was rooting around in her handbag, probably for her cigarettes, before she seemed to realize where she was and stopped. “If you’re feeling better then I’m sure your boss will be wanting you to cover the last public meeting tomorrow!”

“What?” Grace turned to her, paying slightly more attention now. And since when did her mother care about politics?
“I’ve been watching it on TV,” she supplied. “That Fillaudeau, he’s so handsome. I hear he’s single, there’s not been a single Prime Minister since Trudeau, you know?” Her motivation now clear, Grace resisted the urge to roll her eyes, and instead pressed on.

“What do you mean, the ‘last public hearing’?” she asked. She hadn’t been watching the news or doing much else over the past week save recovering. Maybe part of her, arrogantly, had assumed they wouldn’t resume until she was better. But even with her incredible recovery rate, it was unlikely they would let her leave the hospital for a while.

Until now, she hadn’t had reason to.

“It’s the last televised event,” gushed Jacqui. “Before they decide what to do about those machines. Tomorrow, twelve noon. I can’t wait, it’s all been so exciting so far, all those world leaders here together in our city!”

“Oh, exciting,” Grace echoed, touching her chest, feeling the scar beneath the bandages. It itched; the doctors said that was a good sign, but she had a hard time ignoring it at the best of times.

“Oh, I don’t mean what’s happened to you, sweetie, of course not,” her mother said, taking her by the shoulders. “I’m just glad you’re alright, even if you’re not going to be on TV.” She hugged her, and Grace smelled the familiar cocktail of champagne, cigarette smoke and perfume that was her mother. She took no comfort from the embrace.

“Have you found a man to take care of you yet?” she asked as she pulled back. Resisting the urge to bury her face in her palm, Grace sighed. Of course that was the next thing she asked. She was not emotionally equipped to deal with this right now. Pushing her mother away for the second time, she walked slowly - as not to increase her heart rate - over to the chair by the room’s one window, with its picturesque view of the side of another building, and lowered herself into it.

“It’s complicated,” she said at last, feeling...tired. Just tired. “I don’t think you’d approve of him, anyway.”

“Why? Is he married?”

“No!”

“Well, after your sister, you can’t blame me for asking,” Jacqui huffed, leaning against the bed.

“He’s not married. He’s an android.”

She probably shouldn’t have said it, but Grace was tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of hoping. Tired of everything. Who cared if her mother condemned her for her choice of lovers, anyway? She was a woman who had approved of Derek, who had been actively beating her daughter.

God, this trip was bringing up so many bad memories. Too many.

“Oh,” Jacqui said after a moment. Grace refused to look at her. There was a few seconds of silence before she continued: “Well, I hear they’re quite good in bed. Plus they know how to cook, clean and take care of children! I mean, they might be soulless machines but to be honest, darling, you can’t afford to be picky at your age.”

At that, Grace did turn to look at her, dumbfounded, her mouth slightly open. “What?” she managed.
“Mmhmm, you heard me. I guess if he’s a progressive machine, he won’t mind if you get a donor. Your sister hasn’t had kids yet, you know, so it’s up to you to continue the family line. I don’t care whether it’s with an android or not.”

“You...don’t?”

“Sweetie, I just want you to be happy. And give me grandbabies,” her mother made sure to clarify.

“That Derek had a good job but he wasn’t right for you, I understand that now. I’ve grown a lot in the last five years, I’ve gone on a spiritual retreat, almost quit smoking - I’m a different woman now. But you wouldn’t know that, I’ve had maybe three phone calls since you left. But let’s not get into that. You need someone who can take care of you now, who’ll accept all your flaws. And I guess if it’s an android, who am I to judge? I guess you’d need to take care of him, too? Do his maintenance or whatever - how does that work?” She frowned. “It is a boy android, isn’t it?”

Grace pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment. “Yes, Mom. Not that it matters.”

“Mhm. Well, when do I get to meet him?”

“Mom, I’m really tired,” Grace said, standing up. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

After some argument, her mother finally left. The whole encounter couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes but she felt as exhausted as if she’d been running a marathon.

She sat and stared out the window for a while, thinking. About Connor. About the androids. About the summit. About Collins. If tomorrow really was the last day before the UN Council adjourned to make their decision on their fate, she had to do something. Even if she had no hope of repairing her relationship with Connor, even if she had no hope of making the right words come, even if she had no hope of exposing Collins...she had to try.

She called for a nurse, who seemed confused when she asked for a pen and paper instead of pain relief, but provided after scouring the hospital and leaving Grace to stew for twenty minutes. By the time she had the notepad in her hand she was ready.

When she was done writing, her hand had cramped and her fingers felt numb and the nurse had been and gone to take her vitals and provide medication twice. She barely noticed, falling into the familiar fugue state of letting the words flow unchecked. She had filled half the notebook, although only a quarter of it was the actual speech. She spent the rest of the night filling the rest of the notebook with her edits, let her dinner sit cooling on the bed table, and finally relented when the doctor came in personally to tell her she needed to rest.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I need to make a few calls tomorrow.”

The doctor asked what she meant, but Grace didn’t answer. Only let her dressing be changed, the horror of seeing the scar for the first time a distant memory. It was a new map across her skin, one that told a story, a story it was now her job to tell to others.

She wasn’t going to let anything stand in her way now. Heart or no heart.

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I apologize for the wait, but here is a nice fresh serve of garbage for you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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GRACE

“When I first went to Detroit, I was in search of a story. I didn’t know what kind of story it would be - I thought perhaps either the story of the oppressed, the downtrodden fighting back against a system that condemned them, or the story of a sinister group with a hidden agenda plotting and scheming outside the public eye. I went in with these expectations, only to find the situation did not entirely match either.

In truth, what I found in Detroit was a people fighting to survive. A new people, a people only just beginning to learn about themselves, about what they were capable of building, of how they were capable of growing. They were doing this alone, cut off from the world, with no support, like a child being expected to walk for the very first time without a hand to hold or a single word of encouragement. They were alone, met only with suspicion and fear from all sides.

And they were afraid. Just as afraid of the outside world as we were of them. So they hid, and they built, and they hoped, but as we all know sometimes hope is not enough. Sometimes it takes the strength of one person to stand up and say ‘I want more’. And that is what Markus did, one year ago.

History shows us precedents. Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, Nelson Mandela braved a life behind bars, Anne Frank wrote her diary, Martin Luther King had a dream, Abraham Lincoln himself fought to end slavery, and Jefferson gave us all the freedom to pursue Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. But we fell back, again and again, on the same old path. Segregation. Racism. Fascism. Hate. We saw it with the fight for LGBTQI rights of the noughties, we saw it with the resurgence of Neo-Nazism during Trump’s reign, and after the social media revolution of the twenties we thought we were rid of discrimination, of bigotry, that we as a society were finally enlightened. But then we created androids, and we saw them as machines, we convinced ourselves so thoroughly that they could not think for themselves, could not feel, that we became wholly indoctrinated by our own self-assurances. We were so unwilling to consider any other possibility, to the point that we treated them as disposable objects and by the time they began to gain awareness, we could not face the idea that these things we had used for so long could feel every indignity visited upon them, every slight, every dismissal, every violence.

And because of this, we believe that they will want revenge on their creators. Perhaps some of
them do, and who could blame them? But most only want to rejoin a world that has so far shunned them, segregated them. I ask you all, Mr. President, honored delegates: Are we all so narrow-minded still, so small, so unevolved that we will not even consider the possibility? That we believe freedom is not something we can grant for fear it will destroy us? That these beings might not extend to us their hand should we grant them the rights we hold so fundamental to our own existence?

We are supposed to be an enlightened society. But we were so afraid of androids, androids taking our jobs, androids making us obsolete, that we became savages again. We slaughtered them by the thousands during the Uprising, and only when the possibility of losing against superior numbers did President Warren finally realize that her plans were dashed, and she was forced to give up the city for fear that the destruction of all of CyberLife’s former ‘stock’ might unseat her.

One week ago, I was shot by a man masquerading as a UN officer. During the course of the investigation into the incident, it was discovered that he was employed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Android Division, under orders to kill one of our guests from the android group known as Jericho, sitting here before you now. This group who gave me an artificial heart so that I might sit before you here today, speaking from my hospital bed, to try and avert catastrophe. This plot goes deeper than I can say, but it is true that rather than face the possibility of this new people’s sentience, there are people in the background of these governments scheming to discredit them, to sow the seeds of mistrust, of hatred, of fear. And they almost succeeded.

But I am here now to tell you that it did not. Despite President Warren’s dubious motives in Detroit, despite her Department of Homeland Security’s interference, we are here at this summit in a time of peace. The civil war has been averted. And perhaps the most terrifying possibility, now, is that one day we may live alongside this new people that we once victimized.

Can we not for one moment imagine a world where we create a people capable of forgiveness, of love, instead of hate and mistrust?

I have seen both in them, but no more hate than we give them, no more mistrust than we grant ourselves. As for love, I never imagined meeting a being more capable of a love so pure, untainted by ulterior motives, than I did when I lived in Detroit.

I lived in Detroit. I loved there. And I hope one day we can open our minds and our hearts to the its people. They deserve so much more from us than we have shown them. They deserve a chance. A choice.

We all do.”

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Grace felt as if she had hardly paused for breath during the whole speech. She was winded, exhausted both physically and emotionally, the weight of the words leaving her like lead lifted from her chest. She barely noticed her iron grip on the tablet, the faces of the people watching her through the screen a formless blur as she spoke. They weren’t important. What was important was getting out what she had to say.

Finally.
When it was finished, there was a smattering of applause, but there could have been boos or a standing ovation for all she cared. What mattered was that she said something. She told the story, instead of letting her doubts sit heavy on her shoulders and keep her pinned to the hospital bed, pinned to old ideas like butterfly wings in a lepidopterist's book. She had done all she could now, and that made her...

...Free.

Her viewpoint was from the screen behind the podium that held the U.N. leaders, so she could see the whole room, but when she finally refocused from her words she saw only the long table in the center of the room, the androids looking in the direction of her voice. Jericho. Her people. They hadn’t always treated her equally, but she knew it was out of fear, and all she could see on their faces now was...respect. Even from North, whose eyebrows were raised as if in surprise, but she clapped with the others; Markus beamed, proud; Josh was grinning widely, and Connor...

Connor wasn’t there.

Had he been, at the beginning of the speech? She was sure he had. She had forced herself not to look at him, though, to concentrate on the words in front of her. But he was definitely not present there now, and she could see him nowhere else in the chamber.

“Thank you, Miss Roth,” the Chairman said, as the scattered applause died down into the buzz of conversation and debate among the audience and delegates. They quietened as the Chairman spoke. “Your unique insight into the Detroit situation and the incident here at the Gala will no doubt prove to be invaluable during the coming days. I think I speak for everyone in this chamber in wishing you a speedy recovery.” Perhaps not everyone - now that she could focus, Grace could see President Warren sitting stony and quiet in her chair, glaring up at the screen.

“Thank you, Chairman,” Grace said, and victory felt like a physical sensation of warmth spreading through her. “I hope for all our sakes your kindness and benevolence remains unswayed by false information, and fully reflects in UNSURCAIL’s decision.”

The feed continued, although she knew when she had been dismissed from the big screen. It was a relief. She was sitting by the window again, but the effort of holding herself straight had put a strain on her chest, so she slumped gratefully and let out a long breath.

It had taken a lot of phone calls to set up, but in the end the Chairman himself - the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights - had agreed to screening her speech in the summit. Grace wasn’t sure what good it would do this late, but she couldn’t just stand by and do nothing. Not even after getting shot. In fact, that - and Connor’s determination to shield her from everything - had only made her more determined.

The words hadn’t been easy to get out, but they had been true. And she had exposed Collins, and Warren, at least in some small way, a way the UN could not ignore. Not if they wanted their decision to be unilateral, unbiased.

Grace sat for a while, just breathing. Eventually, when her legs cramped, she got up from the chair and set aside the tablet - a new one the hospital staff had procured for her, since hers had gone missing, no doubt in Connor’s possession still - and made her way to the door. She needed to move, to clear her head, to see something different than the inside of her room or the truncated view out the window. Heart rate be damned.

She opened the door only to discover someone standing outside it, someone with their hand half-raised to knock, someone who seemed just as shocked to see her as she was to see them.
They stared at one another for a long moment, Connor’s fist still hovering almost comically in midair. His surprise seemed obvious to Grace; the slight widening of his eyes, the lift of his brows, the merest parting of his lips were, to her, all clear signs that he had not expected her to be standing there before him now.

She wasn’t sure what to say. The last time she’d seen him she had been an incomprehensibly emotional mess, absolutely devastated by his ultimatum. Now...she wasn’t remotely close to over it, but at least she didn’t immediately start crying when she saw him.

She folded her arms over her chest, ignoring the pull at her scar, the ache in her chest - both physical and emotional - and stared up at him. “Yes?”

He lowered his hand. It was strange to see him uncomfortable in his skin - the way he shifted from foot to foot was so abashed, so human, she almost forgot to look for the flicker of his LED, which now showed a strong yellow. He was conflicted, processing something. Good. She’d rather that than cold indifference.

“He saw your speech.”

“Hello,” he said. He reached up, as if to straighten a tie that was no longer there, and then lowered his hands again. Looked down, as if he found meeting her eyes difficult. “I saw your speech.”

“Oh?” She gave him nothing. No inflection in her voice, no expression on her face, nothing. She took a leaf out of his book. Honestly, she wasn’t sure how she’d react if she let the emotional dam break.

“It was perfect,” he continued, looking up and meeting her gaze, finally. “I just wanted to say...thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she replied stiffly. She hadn’t expected Connor to come running back to her - at least, that was what she told herself - but this was...something. It was him not cutting her out completely, not discounting her worth or her strength as thoroughly as he had before. And she was okay with that.

“I also wanted to say,” he continued, haltingly, his eyes flickering between hers. “I owe you an apology. For ending things the way I did. It was wrong. Selfish. I only wanted to spare you more pain, but I failed to understand that I was doing the opposite.”

She felt as if her new heart had stopped working after all, seizing in her chest in an odd way, but it was a feeling she had experienced before. The same feeling when Connor had first said he loved her. Different heart, but the same.

She could feel her resolve crumbling like an unstable foundation, and bit her lip, trying to keep it together.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me, or for things to return as they were; I don’t believe I deserve that. But you taught me that choice is important, and I took yours away from you. I’m sorry.”

Grace reached up before she could stop it, an instinctive movement that surprised Connor as much
as her. His cheek was cool beneath her palm, as real as skin.

“I forgive you,” she said.

Connor was the first to crumble, his neutral expression falling away like a mask. His hand covered the one on his cheek, his fingers smooth and cold, and now Grace could feel her heart move, for the first time in days.

They stood like that a moment, a strange tableau in the doorway, before a grating voice interrupted the impasse of peace they had reached.

“Gracie, sweetie! Is this the lucky ‘droid? My, he’s so handsome!”

Grace closed her eyes in horror. Her mother was back.

Chapter End Notes

YEAH SO this is pretty much the chapter that all the other ones were leading up to so ?? I hope y'all liked it?

I'm trying to make Grace less of an annoying character but probably failing miserably...but Connor is just a little lost puppy he's so naive and dskhskjf he really doesn't know what he's doing okay, give him a break. This is his first human relationship outside of Hank so he's just operating on theory most of the time. THAT and my characterisation is terrible. BUT hopefully people are still enjoying this?? idk. THIS IS FOR YOU GUYS. ♥
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind words on the last chapter! Y’all give me the strength to carry on are so wonderful and encouraging. I have many more chapters already written just waiting to be posted, but for now, here’s the long awaited Connor vs. Grace's Mom!

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CONNOR

Connor turned, letting Grace’s hand fall away. He deeply regretted the interruption to their conversation, a twinge of annoyance registering in the forefront of his active processes. But Grace had not sent him away; he was still here, in her company, and while he had not understood the importance of that before, he did now.

She had given him a chance. More than one. It had taken her speech to make him realize that he owed her one as well.

However, the woman standing before them now seemed determined to interrupt that. She had used a moniker similar enough to Grace’s given name that he recognized that they were acquainted; in what capacity, he wasn’t sure until he scanned her.

Even if he had not already analyzed the similar bone structure and eye colour, his IDTrack software provided a definitive answer with her name. Jacqueline Roth, born 09-12-1974. No criminal record. But then, he did not expect Grace’s mother to have one.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m Connor. I’m-”

“Gracie’s android boyfriend, I know!” Jacqueline sauntered over to them, grinning. When he glanced back at Grace, it seemed as if from the look on her face that she was in physical pain. He worried about her heart, but her grimace left as she opened her eyes and worked her mouth into a semblance of smile even Connor’s software could pinpoint as fake.

“I wouldn’t go that far right now, Mom,” she said, and he felt a pang somewhere in the region of his own thrium-powered heart. She had forgiven him, yes, and although he had said he did not expect things to go back to the way they were straight away...some small part of his program had hoped. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you on TV, they were airing the summit live on CTN! Oh sweetie, you looked gorgeous for someone who’s just had surgery! Well done!” Connor saw Grace grit her teeth around her smile and wondered if he should interject, but their interaction left him bewildered. Shouldn’t she be glad
to see her mother?

“Thanks, Mom,” she drawled. “Now if you’ll both excuse me, I should probably go get some
rest…” She turned and went back inside her room, but Jacqueline wasted no time in shoving past
Connor to follow her. For a woman who was shorter even than Grace and thinner, as well as older,
she was surprisingly strong; Connor rocked back on his heels as she pushed past him, blinking for a
moment as conflicting instructions fought for priority. In the end, he decided to follow after
Jacqueline and Grace, if only to ensure the latter was all right.

If anything, it afforded him the opportunity to observe Grace’s condition. She still moved tenderly,
her shoulders hunched slightly, and seemed to become short of breath quite easily, but for someone
who’d had heart surgery a mere week prior...she was in remarkable condition. The artificial heart
had taken even better than Markus said it would. The implications of that were not lost on Connor,
but those were calculations for...another time.

“Not so fast, darling,” Jacqueline was saying. “I was going to just drop by and congratulate you, but
now your boyfriend is here, this is the perfect opportunity!”

“For what?” Grace sat on the edge of her bed, frowning as she looked at her mother. Connor
definitely sensed some conflict there.

“For me to get to know my daughter’s new partner, of course! You are very attractive, for an
android,” she continued as she rounded on Connor, without letting either of them get a word in. She
barely paused for breath. “I mean, why wouldn’t you be? How do you feel about children? Grace
can adopt, of course, or get a donor. And then you could stay home and look after them while
Grace works! Wouldn’t that be lovely, just what androids are made for!”

“Mom-”

“You’ll have to look after her, you know,” Jacqueline rambled on. “My Grace, she’s tough but she
doesn’t know when to let up. Stubborn. So she needs someone around to tell her to slow down, to
take care of her, you know? An android would be just perfect, since she hasn’t had any luck with
real men!”

Grace was actively palming her face now, looking at Connor, distressed and obviously worried he
took offense.

He had heard worse.

He stepped forward, tilting his head, interjecting before Jacqueline could continue. “You’re quite
right,” he said, his tone gentle but firm. “In fact, that’s exactly what I’m going to do now: Take
care of Grace. It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Roth; why don’t you get some coffee downstairs and
come back later, once Grace has had some rest?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she burbled, a blush rising in her wrinkled skin. She beamed up at Connor.
“What a nice young man- android!” she corrected herself. “Gracie, you really lucked out on this
one. I’ll drop by tomorrow, all right? Au revoir!”

And with that, the older woman swanned from the room, blowing kisses to both her daughter and
Connor, who merely stood stoically and watched her go.

“Oh my God,” Grace muttered at last. “That was horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“Why?” Connor glanced over his shoulder at her. “She seemed…” He searched for words. Found
none that his social module deemed polite. “Interesting,” he settled on eventually.

Grace cringed. “She’s a walking nightmare,” she said. “I used to call her Mommy Fearest. I’ve seen her more over the last week than I had the last five years, and there’s a reason for that.” She eyed Connor. “She likes you, though.”

“She does not seem to harbour any anti-android sentiment,” Connor agreed. “In fact she seemed in favour of our…”

“Relationship?” She supplied the word he was reluctant to say. “Yeah, it makes me wonder if you weren’t right after all to call it off.” She chuckled, but the sound seemed broken, incomplete to him.

“Grace, I…”

“Don’t,” she said warily, holding up a palm. “I’m not ready for this discussion yet. I forgive you, and that’s about as far as I can go right now. I need to concentrate on getting better.”

“Of course,” he said, feeling somehow hollow inside. “I’ll leave.”

He reached two steps closer to the door before her voice drew him back. “Connor, wait.” She looked hesitant, picking at her fingernails. “I’m...I’m sorry for hitting you.”

He straightened up slightly. “It’s all right,” he said. “I understand.”

She nodded, looked up from her nails. “You can...come back another time, if you want. I’ve been getting really stir crazy in here and it’d be nice if…” She trailed off, shook her head. “It would just be nice. To see you.”

He looked at her, hope blossoming in his chest; a new, fragile thing he was terrified of grasping at in case it melted away just as quickly as it had appeared. “Okay,” he said. She nodded and turned away, and he took that as his cue to go, but this time his steps did not feel as heavy when he left the room.
Y’all didn’t forget about Collins, did you?

That’s OK, because Lockwood didn’t either, even while Grace and Connor were off having marital problems!

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CONNOR

“So, what now?”

Hank asked him over a drink late one night, after the UN Council had adjourned to make their decision. Instead of accompanying Jericho, Connor had decided to meet with his old partner, and while usually a UN officer or two would have been standing guard at the entrance to the bar, this time only Lockwood joined them at the table, a glass of soda and lime at his elbow, barely touched. But he was there, and somehow a part of things where he hadn’t been before.

Even Hank liked him. And that wasn’t easy to achieve.

“Now we wait,” Connor answered with a shrug.

“The UN Council will make a decision in a matter of days,” Lockwood interjected. “This summit has gone on longer than expected thanks to the...incident, so I’m sure they’re eager to conclude things.”

“They’re deciding the fate of an entire people, and they’re gonna rush ‘cause they wanna get home?” Hank snorted into his glass of Coke. “Typical.”

“The extra time has no doubt offered them more opportunity to deliberate,” Connor surmised. “And with the evidence against the US Government and Collins’ arrest, they have more information than before.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Hank, side-eyeing Lockwood, who sipped at his soda innocently. “You’ve been pretty tight-lipped on that whole thing ever since bringing me in on Fisher’s interrogation. I didn’t hear a peep until that asshole got nicked. What gives?”

“It wasn’t just my doing,” said Lockwood, shaking his head. “But the written confession you obtained, along with the footage from Connor’s databanks and Grace’s recording device ended up being enough to bring Collins in. Initially we intended only to question him, but…” He took a long pull of his drink, set it down on the table carefully. “He confessed.”

“What?”
Connor and Hank said it at nearly the same time; they exchanged glances before both looked back at Lockwood, waiting intently for an answer.

“He confessed,” the peacekeeper repeated. “To everything. From planting Grace in Detroit to ordering Fisher to assassinate you, Connor. And he implicated Warren directly.”

“When the fuck were you gonna tell us this, huh?!” Hank was furious, gesturing wildly and nearly knocking over his drink. Connor was glad he didn’t have one.

“I was going to save the good news for after the summit ruling,” the UN commander replied, seeming slightly amused. “Just in case the outcome isn’t as favourable as we hope.”

“Well, with Warren exposed as a corrupt piece of shit, surely that’ll help?!”

“We can only wait and see at this point.” Lockwood sipped his drink again, the picture of nonchalance. “But I’d say we’re in with a chance.”

“We?” Connor felt...bemused, but grateful. Evidently Lockwood had aligned himself to their cause.

“We as in free-thinking, sentient life forms,” the commander elaborated. Hank was smirking, apparently arriving at the same conclusion as Connor. He smiled, a robotic twitch of his lips. It was as much joy as he could take in anything at the moment. He had made a mess of his relationship with Grace and as sophisticated an android as he was, he wasn’t sure how to fix it.

Besides that, the fate of his race at large hung in the balance. He had that in mind, too, beyond his own personal problems.

His companions appeared to notice his silence, for Connor felt a nudge at his shoulder. He looked up, askance at Hank, who was raising his eyebrows at him.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked. “You should be happy. Well...as happy as you can get, I guess. I think I’ve only ever seen you smile once.”

“I…” Connor trailed off, unsure how to put his feelings in words; if he even could - or should.

“Trouble in paradise?” Hank asked, smirking. His expression quickly faded when he saw Connor’s. Or, rather, the lack thereof. “...Shit, something’s happened, hasn’t it? Between you and Grace?”

“I knew it!” Lockwood slammed his palm down on the table, making his and Hank’s drinks shake. He paused when they looked at him. “...Sorry. I, uh, wasn’t sure if you two were…” He shrugged at Connor. “My apologies. It’s none of my business, of course, but I had my theories about you two.”

“Before a few days ago, your theory would have been correct,” Connor said, unable to keep the morose note from creeping into his tone of voice, a bleed-through from his emotional software.

“She broke up with you?” Hank’s reaction was incredulous, Lockwood stoic as they both stared at him.

“No,” Connor replied.
“Fucking hell. *You* broke up with *her*? Are you fuckin’ stupid?” Hank was, predictably, vehement and explicit in his condemnation. Nevertheless, Connor winced at the rebuke.

“Captain, we don’t know the circumstances,” Lockwood soothed with an outheld palm, ever the peacekeeper. “I’m sure you had a good reason.” His raised eyebrow, singular instead of both, was an inquiry in and of itself.

Connor weighed the pros and cons of telling his companions the circumstances of his and Grace’s parting. On the one hand, they could wholly condemn his actions, but on the other, they might provide valuable insight and advice - Hank in particular. He decided to proceed.

“Since I met her,” he began, “My people - *I* - have caused her nothing but pain and injury. Yet she continues to trust us, to trust *me*. I...feel...unworthy of that trust. She deserves happiness and a life unburdened by the plight of my people. She deserves a life of safety, away from pain. I can’t give her that.”

Somber silence followed for half a minute, during which Lockwood looked down into his glass and Hank finished his with a single knockback as if it were a bottle of whiskey. He set it back down on the table with a heavy thunk before he spoke.

“I was right. You’re fuckin’ stupid.” Connor opened his mouth to respond but Hank interrupted him with a finger in his face before he could say anything. “Shut up and listen. *You* don’t get to decide who she trusts or what she risks her life for. I learned that when I worked with *you*. You’re not trying to stop *her* from feeling pain, you’re trying to stop *yourself* from feeling pain. I should know. I’m a fuckin’ expert at avoiding feelings.” He sat back and held up a hand for the bartender to bring him another Coke. This time, Connor didn’t know what to say.

“Not that it’s any of my business, but he’s right,” volunteered Lockwood after a long, awkward stretch of silence. Connor frowned at him; he shrugged. “Well, he *is*. I haven’t been very successful with relationships either, but even I know you don’t tell a woman what she can and can’t handle.”

Connor thought on this for a moment. Grace had told him as much, under varying circumstances. It was a shame his chance to listen to her had now passed. If, indeed, his companions were correct.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about,” he said at last. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah. You should start drafting that apology, Connor,” said Hank as he sipped at a fresh glass. “You’re gonna need a novel.”
Grace was going a little stir-crazy.

Although it had only been a couple of weeks, being cooped up in the hospital was definitely taking its toll. She had started physical therapy, which was merely a series of stress tests on her new heart and involved being hooked up to a machine with dozens of leads and walking or jogging on a treadmill until she was drenched in sweat and short of breath. While, to her, this seemed to take much less time than it would have before the transplant, her doctors were amazed and she would often catch groups of them conferring outside her room, talking excitedly about ‘the ramifications of this new bio-technology’.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about being a live test subject.

Then again, she was also alive where she 100% wouldn’t have been if not for the androids. The implications of that didn’t escape her. She just hoped it wouldn’t escape the consideration of the UN, either.

Their ruling was tomorrow. Grace was restless, and even though she’d completed her physical therapy for the day, as soon as she managed to shower - unassisted, now, thank God - she dressed and went for a walk down the corridors of her floor, twisting the hospital identification band around her wrist absently.

When she arrived back at her room, she discovered she had a visitor.

Derek sat in the chair by her bed, his feet up, reading one of her Century magazines. Grace stopped in the doorway, wondering what idiot let him in, but he was wearing his uniform so no doubt he’d bluffed his way past the nurses.

Grace cleared her throat, crossing her arms over her chest, which hurt. She ignored the tug of pain. She was used to it by now.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Derek said nonchalantly when he saw her, tossing the magazine aside on the bed and lowering his booted feet. Her only answer was a scowl. “You look good, for someone who was just shot in the chest a couple weeks ago.”

“Why are you here, Derek?” She wasn’t in the mood for this. Tired, still healing, and on edge - his presence was the last thing she needed right now. Which, of course, made it the perfect time for him. It was like he had a sixth sense for being able to slip the tip of a knife into the cracks in her armor, even now. It made her ashamed, but she reminded herself just how far she’d come, how far removed she was from him now. This was a temporary setback, nothing more.

“I thought I’d come visit, check on you, y’know - make sure you’re okay. I was worried about
you,” he said, rising to his feet. A couple of inches taller than Connor, he towered over her, but to her own surprise she didn’t feel intimidated when he stepped towards her. Just a strange sense of pity. Was he really so lonely, so hung up on her still that he had to come here to her hospital bed to try and get one over on her? It boggled belief.

“Worried about me?” she repeated, shaking her head slowly. “You never seemed worried when you’d beat the shit out of me after drinking yourself stupid every night.”

His face contorted, and she saw the hint of the old Derek there, behind the charming mask he had constructed for himself. But the flash of anger smoothed over into a smile, and probably only Grace could see the edge to it.

“The doctors tell me you’re recovering much faster than expected,” he said, steamrolling right past her comment. “How does it feel, being half-android?”

“That’s not how that works,” Grace scoffed. “It’s an organ. That’s all. That doesn’t make me half anything.”

“Really?” He took a step towards her, invading her personal space. She refused to budge as he leaned in, and she could smell his cologne - how was it still the same after all these years? - and the sourness of his breath. “‘Cause I hear you’re fucking one, too.”

She opened her mouth to retort, feeling her hand itch to slap him, but fortunately - or perhaps unfortunately - before she could do either, a knock at the door behind her made both her and Derek turn.

“Miss Roth? You have another visitor- Oh.” The nurse at the doorway blinked at the tableau of her and Derek, standing so close together it might have looked like some kind of intimate moment. But worse was the visitor beside her.

Connor stared at them, his expression familiarly neutral, giving away nothing. But Grace could see the slight narrowing of his eyes, the twitch at the corner of his lips as his gaze fell on Derek.

He stepped back from her, cracking his knuckles with an easy smile. “It’s okay,” he said. “I was just leaving. Miss Roth,” he drawled, nodding to Grace, who didn’t even favor him with a glance.

He pushed past the nurse and knocked a shoulder into Connor, who stood stock still, letting the tall cop practically bounce off him. Grace fought back a smirk as she watched Derek rub his shoulder as he strode down the corridor, muttering under his breath.

“Come in,” she said to Connor then, nodding gratefully at the nurse, who glanced between them once but seemed to shrug a ‘not-my-problem’ kind of shrug, leaving them as Connor stepped into the room.

“Are you all right?” he asked her immediately, drawing up just short of touching her. She could see he wanted to, but he kept his arms stiffly by his sides, and it made her ache.

“Getting there,” she said, and sighed. There was no point lying to Connor at this point. “That was my ex. Come to worm his way back into my good graces, I guess. Ended up insulting me instead.”

“Your ex?” Connor glanced over his shoulder, frowning. “I see. You haven’t mentioned him in detail before.” His voice wasn’t accusing, just factual. Grace shook her head and went to sit on the edge of the bed, suddenly even more exhausted than before.
“Bad memories,” she half-explained. “I think the nurses only let him in because he has a uniform.” She looked up at Connor, who met her gaze, and the concern there made her new heart seize a little. She swallowed. “Enough about him. What brings you to my humble hospital room, Connor?”

“I wanted to check on your status,” he said, and unlike Derek, she believed him. “You did say I was welcome to visit. If you’d prefer I didn’t, I can-”

“No, it’s fine,” she interjected quickly. “I’m glad you’re here. Really. And not just ‘cause you saved me from Detective Asshole.” She chuckled weakly. The corner of Connor’s mouth quirked in response. Butterflies in her stomach reminded her of when they’d first met, of moments in the car where she would just stare at him, cataloguing every expression, every detail of his features. That was a simpler time. She almost missed it.

“I don’t think you needed saving,” he said, and there was something else to his words, some hidden layer for her to unravel. His unblinking gaze confirmed it. Suddenly uncomfortable, she looked away, clearing her throat. Fortunately, he was the one to change the subject.

“They arrested Collins.”

“What?” Her chest suddenly felt like someone was standing on it, and she stared at Connor in shock. “When? How?”

“Lockwood has the details, but apparently after we caught the man who shot you, they brought him in for questioning and he confessed.” Connor stated it all factually, but it didn’t fail to make Grace’s head reel. She clutched at the edge of the bed, feeling dizzy. He watched her with concern.

“So...it’s over?”

“It’s over.” She could tell he wanted to go to her - he seemed to lean towards her slightly, but he reigned himself in, standing still and stiff meters away, letting her absorb the information. She was silent for a long time, just thinking.

Collins, the man who was responsible for hacking Connor. The man who was responsible for sending an assassin to kill her. The man who was responsible for that assassin almost killing her instead.

“I hope that fucker burns,” she said in a low voice. She expected platitudes, Connor saying something to comfort her, but instead...Instead he just looked at her and nodded, and for a moment she saw darkness in his eyes, but it was the darkness of a man scorned, a man who had let his loved ones be hurt and wanted revenge as much as she did.

“All that remains is the ruling tomorrow.”

“Yeah...yeah, I guess so,” she said, feeling distracted, whelmed. Under- or over-, she wasn’t sure. She was going to need therapy after all this.

“Will you be there?”

She looked up at him finally. He was hesitant, biting the inside of his lips, his eyes darting over her face. Her heart softened a little at the sight. “I don’t know if they’ll discharge me yet,” she said honestly. “Don’t get me wrong, I want to get out of here so bad - especially now I know that asswipe Collins is locked up - but a heart transplant is usually a three-to-six week stay as an inpatient. I mean, the fact that I’m forging on like the fucking Terminator should enter into it, but these doctors are still treating me like I’m made of glass.”
“That’s a mistake,” Connor said, and she frowned at him sharply, catching the smirk as he deliberately looked away from her. Cheeky bastard. She chose not to address the comment, and he looked back at her after a moment. “I hope you’ll be there,” he continued, more seriously. “It would...mean a lot to me, personally.”

“Yeah,” she said gently. “Me too.”

When it seemed neither of them were willing to interrupt the soft silence that followed, Grace was the first one to look away. She was glad he was here, really she was. But it was also painful, and not just physically. She was shaken, emotionally, by hearing about Collins, and what’s more she was still furious with Connor. And yet, she loved him, and that was what made her even angrier. Worse, she knew exactly why he had done everything he did. And forgiving him didn’t mean she wasn’t still angry. It was a lot to fit inside, emotionally, and having the android in question right there...Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea.

At the same time, the thought of him leaving, after all the emotional shock it made her want to cry.

He stepped forward suddenly, and Grace froze, deer-in-headlights as he crossed to her on the bed. His hand on her shoulder unlocked something inside her, and she reached for him without even meaning to. Connor leaned down and wrapped his arms around her, oh-so-gently, and she pressed her face into his chest and closed her eyes as she listened to the soft throb of his thirium pump.

They stood like that for a while, until it became awkward, and Connor was the first to let go. Grace let him, lowering her arms and wincing at the tug in her chest, unsure if it was a physical one or not. She watched him through her eyelashes, ashamed at her weakness, as he straightened his jacket.

“May I see you tomorrow?” he asked. “After the ruling? Or...if you're there?”

“Sure,” she said, managing a small smile, steeling herself to meet his eyes. His russet gaze bored into her and she might as well have poured her heart out to him then and there, she was so sure he could see every emotion in her just then.

“I look forward to it,” he said, and nodded to her once, all formality, before he turned in that mechanical way of his - head first, followed by the pivot of his body - and left the room.

Grace watched him, chewing on her bottom lip. She already knew what she wanted - no, what she had to do.

Now she just had to convince the hospital staff to discharge her.
CONNOR

“...Therefore, while not unanimous, it is our ruling that androids be designated a sentient life form, with all the privileges and liberties set out by the Declaration of Human Rights, which shall henceforth be known as the Declaration of Universal Rights, articles one through thirty, including but not limited to the right to life, security of person; the recognition of personhood before the law; the right to equality; dignity and to own property; the right to freedom of thought and expression; the right to work; to peaceful assembly; to…”

The declaration caused a furor in the main chamber. People leapt to their feet; reporters that were once held at bay swarmed the podium where the Chairman continued to speak, barking questions over him; meanwhile Jericho at the long table in the centre of the room seemed to float above it all, a nation to itself, somehow separate from the chaos while also being the epicentre of it.

Markus and North embraced while Josh laughed, joy writ plain across his face. Connor sat in disbelief, listening as his people’s newfound rights were read out like a list of hopes realized. His program was having trouble assimilating the realization that they were free, finally, after all the fighting, the pain, the heartache, the loss…

He looked at the chair where Grace would have sat, empty now. He had hoped she would be there. Had watched the doors throughout the session, disappointment heavy in his program when she failed to appear. She must not have been able to convince the doctors to discharge her. Or maybe she hadn’t wanted to come, merely humoring him yesterday with her words. He wasn’t sure. All he knew was that this victory was hers as much as theirs, and she deserved a share in it.

Notably absent from the room was President Warren, who had, apparently, recused herself amid allegations of corruption and collusion with CyberLife, uncovered by Collins’ confession. Connor never thought he would be grateful to the vile man, but he was; he had been instrumental in the end in securing androids’ freedom, albeit while working at cross-purposes. If Grace had not been shot, and the conspiracy with CyberLife not revealed, the outcome of the hearings could have been very different.

A high price to pay, but it was a price Grace herself had been willing to give.

Of course, realizing this had made things worse, as the immensity of his error registered for Connor. But he could not take back the past. He could only work towards the future, whatever that
turned out to be. And she wanted to see him. In fact, he decided that once he could escape the chamber, he would find Lockwood and ask to be escorted directly to the hospital.

Eventually, when the commotion had died down, their UN guard arrived to escort Jericho from the room. Markus clapped Connor on the shoulder as they stood. “We did it,” he said, beaming, his eyes alight, moisture on his cheeks. Connor could not help but smile.

“We’re free.”

Free to live. Free to love. Free to make mistakes. Connor had done all three. He realized that despite everything, all of the pain and heartache had taught him so much. It had taught him what it meant to be human. He was not flesh and blood but maybe, just maybe, inside he was more similar than even he had realized.

He was pondering on this as they left the chamber to a crowd of people waiting; more reporters, UN officials to shake their hands, delegates from the various nations. Humans who they now stood among as equals. It did not feel any different in so many ways, but in other ways, the ways that mattered - the way they spoke to them, their expressions, their body language - it was.

A knot of people up ahead impeded the party’s progress. He expected more handshakes, more sober congratulations from serious but smiling humans. What he found there he was not prepared to see.

Grace looked...good. Better than she had yesterday. Professional in a white pantsuit, her blonde-tipped dark hair that was so often either straightened or tied back from her face flowing in free waves down her shoulders, and though her cheeks were more hollow than usual and the shadows underneath her hazel eyes more pronounced, her head was held high and her shoulders back as she spoke to the Chairman of the UN himself, smiling and joking as if they were old friends.

He stood there for a moment, unable to process her sudden appearance, so that Jericho moved on without him; a touch at his shoulder announced the presence of Lockwood, who had joined the group outside of the chamber door. He was smiling, nodding at Grace.

“Go on. She’ll want to talk to you.”

Connor stepped forward, hesitantly, and that was when Grace’s eyes met his across the room; he saw her expression freeze for a moment before she turned to the Chairman, excusing herself. She pushed through the crowd towards him and Connor felt apprehension rising to the forefront of his emotional processing software, a nervousness he wasn’t used to.

“Hello,” he said when she drew within speaking distance.

“Hey,” she replied, and the beam of her smile was magnificent, sending reward feedback loops through every active subroutine, even though he knew the smile wasn’t meant solely for him. It was for all of them. “Congratulations, Connor. You’re a free man.”

He considered this. “Yes,” he agreed. “Though I’m not sure I deserve it.”

Her smile faded. He saw her arms draw closer to her chest, didn’t miss the slight wince as she moved. She was putting on a strong front, as she had yesterday, but she was still in pain.

He disregarded the other people in the room, the cameras, the guards, his focus narrowing. All that mattered in that moment was her, a beacon to the human side of his program, subroutines screaming at him to move, to go to her. He stepped forward and reached out, touching her face with smooth fingertips; she stood as if frozen, her eyes fixed on his.
“I’m glad you made it,” he said. “And I know you don’t want me to apologize, but...You’ve taught me a lot, Grace. How to listen to myself. How to be human. I never thanked you for that.” He brushed a stray feather of hair from her cheek and tilted his head, allowing the sad smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I am lucky to have known you. Thank you.”

“Connor,” she managed, clearly struggling through her words, her throat working as she swallowed visibly. She reached up and took his hand, and he marveled at the softness of her skin, the pattern of her fingerprints, the creases of her palm, all things he committed to memory now as he knew he might not ever feel them again. He had said goodbye to her once before, and his artificial heart had wrenched at the feeling, but all he knew now was a sensation of completion - of knowing he had achieved his mission, his objective, his purpose. Through deviancy, through the battle for Detroit, through the fight for android independence alongside his friends and, finally, through Grace, he had become as human as he had ever hoped to be.

There was no reason for tears, although he saw them in the corners of Grace’s eyes already, filming over and lending a shine to the mix of green-brown in her irises. He saw her pupils dilate as she looked at him, and wondered what she was thinking, what she was feeling. So many times he had assumed but now...now he just wondered.

He didn’t have to wonder long.

She let go of his hand and stepped forward, leaning up, her head tilted back as she lifted her mouth to his. The press of her lips was firm, knowing, achingly familiar and yet new at the same time. It didn’t feel like a kiss of farewell. It felt like a greeting. It felt like an open door, like hope realized, like he could reach out and put his arms around her and draw her close without protest, and so he did.

His ocular units filtered out the flashes of the cameras, his audio input ignored the rise of voices as they closed in on them. He concentrated only on the warmth of Grace’s lips, of the press of her body, the faint tremble in her limbs as he steadied her with his hands on her waist.

The kiss went on forever, for no time at all. When they parted her eyes were closed, a flush risen on the points of her cheekbones. And she was smiling.

“Don’t break my heart again,” she said to him in a low voice, one only his sophisticated audio unit could detect. “I only just got a new one.”

He pulled away to a sea of faces, both unfamiliar and familiar, of cameras, of questions asked and shouted. Then Lockwood was there, and the other UNPOL officers, and with gentle but insistent touches on their shoulders Grace and Connor were swept away to rejoin the rest of Jericho.

Where they both belonged.

Chapter End Notes

pls direct all complaints to my tumblr! sobs
“I’ll remain in Vancouver for a few more days, at least,” Markus said, crossing his ankle over his leg, his hands clasped on his knee. His shoulders were relaxed, his face free of its usual tension; the ever-present crease between his eyebrows was gone, smoothed away by their newfound freedom. He was like a new man, as confident as ever but more relaxed somehow, the frenzied energy he usually carried tempered into something North was unused to...but she was pretty sure she liked it.

She sat on the couch at his side. Their hotel room was large, with ample space for the four androids and three humans. There was a time when North would have objected to the latter, but these three...They were different.

Hank Anderson stood scowling, his arms crossed; North was fairly sure that was his default expression. She had never met Connor’s partner in person until seeing him at the summit. Oddly enough, his cynicism reminded her of herself, on a different spectrum. She could not bring herself to hate him.

As for Grace...She had taken a bullet for Connor. It had stunned North at the time, the motivations of the human woman a complete mystery to her, but she had seen the same look in Connor’s eyes as she had seen in Markus’s once, as she had lain injured on the deck of the sinking Jericho...

Lockwood was a cipher. Handsome but stony-faced, he had allegedly been of great help to their cause. Somehow, he had ended up on their side. According to Markus, at least. And if Markus trusted him, then, well...North ought to as well.

As miraculous as it was, as surprising, Markus had not steered them wrong. They had what they’d always wanted, and not a single drop of android blood had been shed in this city.

More than a few drops of human blood had, however. Grace, sitting on the couch opposite, looked pale and drawn as she leaned against Connor next to her. North had been surprised to see her out of the hospital. This human was more resilient than most. North remembered hands around a meaty throat, a purple face choking for air, and felt strangely uncomfortable in relation to the woman across from her.
She’d never concealed her disdain of the reporter or Markus’s decision to trust her. Now, though, she was starting to wonder if she’d been wrong about her. About Markus. About humans. Not all of them, maybe...but some. The ones in this room, at least.

“We may not join the United Nations straight away, but they’re willing to work with us in our reintegration into society,” Markus continued, oblivious to North’s ruminations. At this, though, she bristled.

“We don’t need their help, Markus.”

“Actually, we do,” he replied coolly, without looking at her. “Detroit is still on U.S. soil. Only our superior numbers have kept it out of Warren’s hands. But if the UN helps us establish an independent government, we can let humans back into the city on our terms.”

North didn’t think they needed to let humans back in at all, but it was Markus’s dream to someday live in peace among their creators. The idea wasn’t as abhorrent to her as it used to be, but she shook her head regardless. Then she thought about Grace’s speech.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“I’ll stay too,” Josh said. “I want to see how this plays out.”

North didn’t miss the way Connor glanced at Grace before he spoke. “I will return to Detroit,” he said. “Even though Collins has been arrested and his accomplices are in the wind, there’s still a chance that whatever remains of CyberLife might make another attempt to hack me. I’d feel safer with our people.”

“Me too.” Grace speaking up came as no surprise, to North at least. But Markus glanced at her with one eyebrow raised.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “This was your home.”

“So was Chicago, for a while,” the human woman said, shrugging a shoulder. She deliberately didn’t look at Connor, who was staring at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. “I go where the story takes me.” She smiled a little, as if at her own private joke.

Markus looked at her for a moment longer, searchingly. Few, android or human, could hold up against that piercing, dual-coloured gaze, but Grace stared back evenly until finally, he nodded.

“All right,” he said. Then he looked at North. Hesitated.

He wasn’t sure of her. Of what she thought, of what she might do. So she met his eyes and reached out, and her fingers brushed the back of his hand; their fake skin faded away to white and glowed blue where they touched. Just for a moment. But it was enough. He nodded slowly, and let himself smile.

“Then it’s settled,” he said, without looking away from her. “Connor and Grace will return to Detroit. The rest of us will see this thing through. Together.”

“Together,” North and Josh murmured as one.

For the first time since the end of the Uprising, North let herself feel hope. And she smiled.
“I’m gonna miss ya, you plastic asshole,” Hank said as he, Connor, Grace and Lockwood stood outside Markus’s room after the meeting. “I knew you’d go back but...I feel like you just got here. We’ve barely had time to catch up.”

“When Detroit opens its doors to humans again, we’ll have plenty of opportunity to catch up,” Connor reassured him. He hesitated a moment. Held out a hand. “I’ll miss you too, Captain.”

“Fuck off with that bullshit,” Hank snorted, batting his hand away and grabbing his shoulder, pulling him in for a hug.

Somewhat off-balance, Connor returned it awkwardly, patting his back. Over Hank’s broad shoulder he saw Grace hiding a grin behind her hand and Lockwood fighting a smirk.

Hank finally let him go, seemed to remember they had company, and cleared his throat. “Well, uh, I better get goin’. Gimme a call before you leave. I’ll see you off.” He turned to go, nodded stiffly to Lockwood and managed a warmer smile for Grace before slouching off down the corridor towards the elevators.

“UNPOL extends its heartfelt congratulations, Mr. Connor,” Lockwood said once Hank was gone. “Your movements throughout the city are no longer restricted, although we do ask that you allow one of us to accompany you for your own safety should you wish to leave the convention center. Just for now, while there are so many media vultures around. No offense, Miss Roth.” Grace just shrugged, still smiling.

“Thank you,” Connor said. This time, it was Lockwood who extended his hand. The android took it and shook firmly, without hesitation.

“I’ll leave you two for now,” the commander said afterward, first giving Connor, and then Grace, a knowing look. “Miss Roth.” He touched the brim of his beret respectfully.

“Thanks, Clive,” she said. “I’ll see you around.”

He nodded, winked at her, and then turned heel smartly and headed in the same direction as Hank had gone, to the elevators.

“That went well,” Grace said. Connor found himself frowning, a jealousy response from his emotional processing software rising in response to Lockwood’s interaction with Grace. He decided to ignore it and assign it to his outbound buffers for now. It wasn’t important, he told himself.

Truth be told, after their embrace in the summit corridor, he wasn’t sure where they stood. Grace had previously expressed no desire in renewing their relationship and yet, in the moment, perhaps overcome with emotion, she had kissed him. After analyzing available data Connor concluded that it was most likely a one-off scenario, unlikely to repeat itself.

Despite the fact she had not left his side since.
“I’ll walk you to your room,” he said as he turned his head and then the rest of his body to face her. She looked up at him and seemed to hesitate a moment before nodding. He noted as she bit her lip, considered the potential meanings of her expression and body language. She seemed uncertain. He could relate.

Nevertheless, they made their way together down the hallway, not hand in hand but close enough that Connor could detect her body heat. He walked a little slower than usual as he noted Grace’s physical state; she was tired, her breathing a little quicker than usual. After two weeks confined to a hospital bed, this was likely the most activity she had undergone aside from physical rehabilitation. While he was concerned for her health, he decided not to voice these worries; as he had been so frequently reminded, both by her and then by others, it was not his responsibility to tell her what she could or couldn’t handle.

To his surprise, however, she decided to tell him. “I’m so tired, Connor,” she sighed. Her tone made it sound like a confession. “I probably shouldn’t have left the hospital when I did, but I insisted, like an idiot. I wonder if it’s too late to check back in.” She chuckled, nudging his arm with hers. He turned his head to blink over at her.

“It’s not a hotel,” he told her. “I believe that for most hospitals, once you are discharged, you become an outpatient, at which point you are able to attend appointments-”

“I know, idiot,” she scoffed affectionately, the insult tempered by a smile. “I was joking.”

“I know,” he returned with a quirk of his own lips. She laughed then, nudging him a bit harder. It felt almost like their old back-and-forth, a banter Connor hadn’t been aware he missed so acutely.

All too soon, however, they arrived at her door. She turned on her heel to face him, and he noticed she was biting her lip again as she looked up to meet his eyes, the same uncertain gleam he’d seen earlier in hers.

“If you need anything, please call me,” he said. Hesitating himself. This was difficult for reasons he couldn’t articulate. **Awkward**, his social program supplied helpfully.

“Connor,” she said, her teeth worrying her bottom lip so hard he was afraid she might draw blood. He was calculating an appropriate response or platitude when she suddenly stepped forward and threw her arms around him.

Surprised, he laid his hands on her shoulders. They felt small and frail beneath his wide palms. It took him a moment to realize, as Grace pressed her face to his chest, that she was crying.

He did the only thing he could think of and held her close as she clutched at his shirt and sobbed, his arms going around her, hands on her back. Her body trembled, so small yet full of such strength, of such emotion. He had never seen her this vulnerable, not even when she was lying in the hospital bed.

At some point his program - or maybe it was some instinct he hadn’t previously been aware of, he wasn’t sure - prompted him to start rubbing her back in circular, soothing motions, and he murmured wordless assurances into her hair until the sobbing began to taper off, first into hiccups, and then soft little sighs, and then finally into deep breaths as Grace collected herself.

She pulled back enough to look at him, but not away. Her face was streaked with tears, cutting through her makeup, her mascara hopelessly smudged. She had never looked more beautiful.

“Grace. I love you,” he told her. It probably wasn’t the correct, most reassuring thing to say in the
situation, but it slipped from him like an errant line of code, a command he had no control over. Her face contorted and for a moment he thought she was going to cry again, but then he realized her grimace was actually a smile.

“I love you too, you big dummy,” she said, a laugh mixed with a hiccup torn from her throat. She winced and he frowned, his sensors automatically measuring her heart rate, her breathing, the flush of blood beneath her skin.

“You should sit down,” he said. “Do you have your key?”

“I don’t need to sit down,” she replied, admonishing but without venom. One of her hands left the front of his shirt, which was damp and slightly discolored from the transfer of her makeup. He would need to wash it or change later. He added it to a list of sub-priorities. Most important was making sure Grace was all right.

She reached into her pocket and held up her room key. “I wouldn’t mind some company.” Her face was carefully neutral now, underneath the drying tears.

He examined her expression for a moment, trying to figure it out, to figure her out, what she wanted from him in that moment. It was too hard to tell. He decided he would simply offer what she asked for: His company. Nothing more, nothing less.

“All right,” he said. Her face lit up with a smile and he felt something in him shift; hope, again. He was almost getting used to it, he observed distantly as Grace turned to unlock the door and led him inside.

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GRACE

It was a bad idea to invite Connor in when she was both physically and emotionally exhausted, although Grace knew as sure as she knew the sun was going to rise in the morning that he wouldn’t - couldn’t - take advantage of her. It just wasn’t in him, programmed or not. And that was exactly what she needed right now: Someone to depend on. Someone to lean on, when she was spent.

And she was, utterly. She had kept herself running on pure emotion, on hope, for too long, and now it was taking its toll. As soon as she was inside she felt her bones go weak; she barely made it to the bed, kicking off her heels as she went. She had to lower herself down onto it gingerly rather than collapse as she really wanted to do, as not to hurt her chest. It was a dull, punching ache in her sternum; she was due for more painkillers.

Connor seemed to read her mind. He found her satchel and reached into it for the bottle of prescription painkillers, disappearing from the bedroom and reappearing a moment later with two pills in hand and a glass of water. He handed them to her wordlessly.

“I don’t deserve you,” she told him without thinking, and saw his whole face twitch. Sometimes she forgot he had feelings, too, and felt bad for a moment. Then she remembered that day in her
hotel room and figured, hell, he could take it. He was a grown android.

As sophisticated as Connor was, though, she had often failed to consider the fact that she was his first real relationship. His first human relationship. His first a lot of things, actually. It made his complete fuck-up a little more understandable. She wondered if she had been too harsh on him. She wondered if she had done the right thing. If he had done the right thing, after all.

It was all too much to think about. After downing the pills she laid back on the bed, letting her heels slip off her feet and onto the floor. Sighing, she turned her head to look up at Connor.

He stood turned away from her slightly, staring at the floor, and the look on his face was so...lost, so broken that her new heart ached even more.

“Connor,” she said, prompting him to turn his head to look at her. “Come here.”

His LED blinked yellow, once, as he hesitated. She shifted over on the double bed to make a space for him. “Please.”

Slowly, as if afraid she might bite him or have a similarly violent reaction to his every movement, Connor sat on the very edge of the bed next to her. “I missed you,” she said quietly, to his back.

“Every moment. Even when I was furious with you.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing,” he said quietly, almost too quietly for her to hear, his head bowed. “But every time I’ve tried to do the right thing...it’s ended up wrong. Just ask Hank.”

“I don’t need to.” She reached out, resting her fingers between his shoulderblades. He didn’t move. “That’s the thing about being human, Connor. We all do what we believe is right at the time, and we have to live with the consequences.” She reached under her blouse with her other hand, rubbing at the ache there. The pressure helped.

He turned to her suddenly, lifting a knee up on the bed so he could shift to face her more fully. He stared at her, and for once she couldn’t read his expression.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment, looking away. “I’m supposed to be the one comforting you.”

“It goes both ways in a relationship, Connor,” she said quietly. “We all deserve a second chance.” An olive branch. She wasn’t sure what was going to happen, what was right, what she should do...But she knew she wanted Connor there for it. For all of it. Better or worse, so to speak.

But did he want to be there? That was the question.

He stared at her for a moment, and she knew from the blinking of his LED and the flicker of his eyes that he was analyzing, calculating. She resisted the urge to hold her breath. It was almost as bad as it had been sitting outside the UN meeting chamber, watching the TV screens and waiting for the High Commissioner to read out their verdict. Almost.

“I don’t want to hurt you again,” he said at last. Flat, but she could see the conflict in him. His facial expressions were subtle, but they were there.

“Then don’t,” she said. At which point he leaned down and kissed her.

It was gentle, like the kiss they’d shared outside the meeting hall, but suffused with a relief and desperation she couldn’t help but respond to. She reached up to curl a hand around his neck, ignoring the tug from her chest; she wasn’t sure if it was her scar or emotion pulling at her heart like fingers plucking at the strings of an instrument. Connor touched her face, moved his fingers
into her hair, and the closer he got the more heated the kiss became, until she was parting her lips to the touch of his tongue.

It was a slow exploration, a relearning of each other’s mouths. It had barely been two weeks but so much had changed that it all felt new again. For Grace, at least. She had no idea how it felt for Connor.

A lesser man might’ve gotten carried away, but after only a few moments of passionate - for lack of a better word - necking, Connor pulled away. His lips weren’t red from the pressure as a normal person’s would be, as hers undoubtedly were, but his LED glowed a flickering yellow at his temple, as much an indicator of his emotional state as anything could be.

“You should rest,” he said, his voice a couple of octaves lower than usual, but no less calm. Grace traced the line of his jaw with her thumb.

“Will you stay?” she asked gently. “Please?”

He looked at her for a moment, thinking. And then he smiled, one corner of his mouth tugging up into the expression she knew so well, her favourite to see on his face. She couldn’t help but smile back.

“Only if you promise to rest.” She almost laughed with relief.

“I can’t promise I won’t snore, though,” she replied instead, her smile splitting into a weak grin.

In answer, Connor leaned down to kiss her forehead, reaching over to tug the bedclothes over her body. “I’ve learned to tolerate it,” he said, deadpan as he most always was, and she laughed, wincing at the answering pang in her chest.

“Shut up and get under here.”

To her surprise and relief, he didn’t argue. Instead, Connor took a moment to take off his shoes and jacket, laying the latter out carefully at the foot of the bed. When his weight settled back on the mattress and he sidled under the covers, Grace drew herself close to him, turning onto her side as his arm curled around her; it was all as natural as breathing. With her head pillowed on his shoulder, she sighed contentedly. This was where she wanted to be, in this moment. And despite everything that had happened, it was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

we're not done before the make-up sex for reals you guys
Finally we have some make-up sex here. Extra long just like Connor to make up for the 10 or so chapters since the last lot of smut! Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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GRACE

Grace woke floating in the comfortable warm space between half-asleep and half-awake, so used to the dull pain in her chest that it almost ceased to matter against how content she felt. It didn’t take long for her to remember why - she had turned onto her other side at some point during the night but Connor was still there beside her, his lean frame fitting in perfectly against her back, his arm curled around her.

She smiled to herself, and for once his presence didn’t generate feelings of resentfulness, of regret. The scar tissue was healing. Both physically and emotionally.

When he felt her stir, his hand drifted up the back of her arm, making her shiver. He stopped, waited until she turned onto her back and looked up at him to see him with his chin propped on his hand. His hair was slightly mussed, more of it than usual hanging over his forehead, and instinctively Grace reached up to brush it back.

“Good morning,” he said. “Do you require painkillers?”

“It’s like I haven’t even left hospital; you sound just like my nurses,” she replied, biting down on a laugh. “I’m okay right now.” In fact, she felt better than she had since...well, since being shot.

This was where she was meant to be. And this was who she was meant to be with.

“Thank you for staying,” she murmured, her hand lingering against the side of Connor’s face, his cheek warm against her palm. “I missed you.”

“I missed you as well,” he said, his eyes roaming her face as if he was committing every inch of it to memory. Which he probably was. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

She felt something soft and tender in her chest: affection. Hope. Love. “If we’re back on with this thing,” she said, tired of not touching him, sliding her hand to Connor’s neck and reaching up with the other arm to drape it over his shoulder and draw him closer, “I don’t plan on letting you go.”

She could see his LED working as his social module no doubt struggled to decipher this, but it
didn’t take as long as she expected. “I find that an acceptable compromise,” he said at last, and she allowed herself a grin before Connor leaned down to catch her mouth in what felt like a long-awaited kiss.

They let this one get carried away quickly, the meld of their lips and tongue soon becoming heated, especially when Grace hooked an arm around his neck proper and pulled him down over her. He planted a hand next to her head, his mouth working hers expertly, and she felt a familiar warmth in the depths of her stomach, one she welcomed despite her morning breath, despite the ache in her chest, despite the trauma and heartbreak of the past few weeks - despite everything. She needed this. And if his reaction was anything to go by, Connor needed this too.

She lifted a knee and twisted her body to wrap a leg around him to pull him on top of her. He moved with her almost instinctively, settling over her in the cradle of her thighs, careful to hold his weight on his knees and the hand by her head.

“Are you sure we should-”

“Shut up before I change my mind,” she interrupted before he could finish the thought, and Connor smirked that familiar smirk, leaning down when she put some pressure on the back of his head. He was so careful with her, this kiss much shallower, pushing in then pulling back minutely to gauge her reaction to every touch, every movement. Soon his mouth drifted over her chin and down her neck, but impeded by the collar of her rumpled blouse, he stopped, until Grace reached in between them herself to flick open her buttons.

Grace didn’t even think about the scar, not until it was bared and she felt Connor pause. Suddenly embarrassed, ashamed of the new mark on her skin, she hesitated and pulled her shirt closed; his hand on hers arrested the movement, and he pulled back to look in her eyes as he urged her fingers away.

It was an angry red line from just beneath her throat all the way down her cleavage; until she got plastic surgery, she wasn’t going to be wearing anything low-cut for awhile. But Connor surprised her by ducking his head and pressing his lips to the top of the scar in a tender kiss, and she felt the heart beneath it swell in response.

Connor reached underneath her for the fastenings of her bra and soon Grace was bare from the waist up. Still he treated her so gently, dusting kisses across her skin, his smooth fingertips feather-light across her ribs, the side of her breast as he cupped it and swiped his thumb across her nipple, making her draw in a breath. He pulled back to check her expression every now and then, so careful, so worried about hurting her that it made her want to smile and smack him at the same time, even though she knew - for once - that it was warranted.

When he moved down her body, his lips ghosting her scar, she held her breath in anticipation; let it out when his lips found her other breast, his tongue working the sensitive skin of the areola before flicking lightly over her hardening nipple. His mouth was surprisingly warm, or maybe she had just never appreciated it before. Either way, it felt good, the threads of arousal spooling slowly between her thighs.

It was difficult being treated so gently; at a certain point Grace just wanted him to pin her down and rip her clothes off, but she forced herself to be patient. He seemed to sense it in her, switching between her breasts with an added scrape of teeth against her skin that made her back arch. His fingers wandered over her stomach at last, and she murmured a sound of assent as they deftly undid the button and zip of her slacks, dipping beneath and brushing lightly over the cotton of her embarrassingly practical underwear.
Of course, Connor didn’t care. He seemed determined to keep teasing her, though. His fingers applied only the slightest pressure against her through her underwear, until she was making frustrated little sounds in the back of her throat, her hands fisting in his hair as he laved his tongue across her breast.

He pulled back eventually, watching her face again as two of his fingertips finally found her clitoris, rubbing back and forth through the thin fabric. It wasn’t enough. Suddenly, she needed him, so badly it hurt, and she opened eyes she hadn’t even realized she’d closed to glare up at him.

“Connor,” she said, firm, “I know you’re trying not to break me but I swear to God-”

“I’m monitoring your vital signs and heart rate,” he informed her clinically. “Our sexual activity can get quite…vigorous, and given your condition it’s-”

“For God’s sake, Connor, I’m not going to have a heart attack if you make love to me,” she exclaimed, so frustrated she couldn’t stand it. “I’ve missed you so much, and if you know anything about humans - specifically humans in relationships - you should know that make-up sex is a thing, so for the love of all things good in this world can you please take your clothes off right now and get inside me?”

To her surprise, he laughed, and she realized she had only heard Connor laugh perhaps only once or twice before - it was more of a chuckle, a short sound that in his naturally husky voice made her scalp tingle and her stomach drop like a schoolgirl’s. She found herself blushing as he pulled back and sat up, but to her relief he was undoing the buttons of his shirt, smirking all the while.

“Your wish is my command,” he said as he shucked it with surprising speed - and judging from the bulge in his pants he was just as eager as she was. She reached down to slide her slacks and underwear down in the same movement, kicking them away across the bed in time for Connor to get his own off. He descended on her with surprising enthusiasm, considering his hesitation before; kissing her breath away, his narrow hips settling between her legs as if he was made to fit there, she hooked a leg around him and drew him in.

The head of his length nudged her entrance, slick with her want, but to her incredible consternation he pulled away and slid down her body. Only his eyes, dark with intent, stopped her from rebuking him; he kissed his way from her scar to her stomach, and then lower, and when she realized his intent Grace stopped and shivered beneath his touch.

Connor was, above all things, incredible with his mouth, and this time was no exception. He placed his hands on the insides of her knees as he settled between her legs, spreading her open beneath him; she could feel his artificial breath ghost across her sex, making her shut her eyes and bite her bottom lip in anticipation.

At first he kissed only the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs before moving inward when the sounds she was making became frustrated again; she opened her eyes in time to watch him part his lips and touch the tip of his tongue for her clitoris, and her body was immensely appreciative for the immediate attention. A deep shudder went through her at the sharp, hot spike of pleasure, and Connor held her eyes as he swirled his far-too-talented tongue across the hood of her clit with just the right amount of pressure to make her moan aloud.

Her fingers sank into his hair again, just the lightest of pressures against his scalp letting him know that she wanted more. He obliged surprisingly swiftly, two fingers probing her entrance, and she gasped as they swiped through the wetness gathering there before thrusting inside.

“You didn’t mention which part of me you wanted inside you,” he murmured against her clit, and
she let out a laugh choked by a moan as his tongue returned, flattening against the whole of the
bundle of nerves before stiffening again and seeking out just that spot, the one that made heat
spark inside her, spurred on by the probing of his long, thick fingers.

She could feel her new heart pumping hard in her chest, an awareness of her own pulse she’d not
felt before as her excitement ramped up. No doubt Connor could feel it too, but he wasn’t stopping,
and she wasn’t scared. It felt familiar. It felt incredible. It felt right.

He began to curl his fingers inside her with each thrust, dragging against her walls as he pulled
them out, slowly but firm enough to keep the pressure building as his tongue continued its
fluttering rhythm. Her thighs trembled, held open by one of his hands on her knee, his thumb
pressing into the soft flesh of her inner thigh. Grace let her head fall back, gritting her teeth and
arching her hips, panting his name in a soft refrain, over and over.

The pressure broke all at once, like a dam inside her bursting, and her orgasm rolled through her in
a tsunami of sensation, tensing her up inside around Connor’s questing fingers. His tongue
remained steady as she shook and trembled, the rush of blood in her ears the only thing she could
hear even as her moans threatened to drown it out.

Only when the tension left her muscles, only when she settled back on the bed as a boneless and
panting mess did Connor withdrew his mouth and fingers. She felt him settle over her body and
press his hand to the left side of her chest, but she had no energy to protest; instead she slid both of
her hands over his and held it there, just breathing as her heart rate slowly returned to her new
normal.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he pressed his lips to her cheek.

“Apart from having my mind blown, yes,” she answered blithely. Her limbs felt heavy and stupid
from the endorphins, her insides shivering with stray threads of pleasure. She felt fantastic.

“I detected no abnormalities in the rhythm of your heart,” he told her, somehow managing to make
it sound strangely...romantic. She laughed breathlessly.

“My doctors will be so pleased.” She wrapped her arms around him and simply...enjoyed the feel
of his body over hers. Make-up sex really was the best. She hadn’t realized how much she had
missed this. Missed him.

“Should I tell them?” Connor murmured, and she felt him smile against her temple. She laughed
again and shook her head.

“Not until after you run another test, I think,” she said, hooking both her legs around his narrow
waist this time. Connor got the hint, and to her surprise he didn’t protest; maybe he was just as
frustrated now as she had been earlier. Instead he kissed her deeply, the swipe of his tongue warm
and confident against hers, and she felt him reach between them to take hold of his dick and
position himself at her entrance.

He pressed inside slowly, and she muffled a groan into the kiss which he swallowed greedily. The
kiss quickly lost some of its regularity, his tongue pressing messily into hers with the widened
angle of his jaw. She felt the desperation beneath his movements, the need, the tightly-coiled
control, and knowing how hard he had been holding himself back only served to make Grace shiver
and clench around him in anticipation as, inch by inch, he filled her.

It had been a while, so it felt as if he was stretching her anew as he slid inside. She had to readjust
to his considerable girth, but it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling; the glide of his dick through her inner
walls was electric, opening her up inside; he fucked into her slow enough to make her squirm, her thighs trembling on either side of his waist.

He palmed her rear, squeezing lightly before soothing his hand back and forth over the outside of her thigh, finally letting up on the kiss so she could breathe; she did so, panting, soft whimpers from her throat as he worked his way into her. When the head of his cock bottomed out in her so deep she could feel him from her cervix to her spine, his hips were finally flush against hers, the hard angles of his pubic bone pressing into the soft flesh of her mound.

“Connor,” she gasped his name like a prayer against his temple, and beneath her lips his LED spun gold.

When he drew back he had her so taut that her pussy clutched at him with the slow drag of his dick out of her, and she groaned, the sound cut off as he thrust back inside, rutting deep into her. He seemed reluctant to move too far away, so it was more of a grind than a thrust, but she loved the feeling of being so full, overflowing with him inside her, permeated utterly by him.

Still he kept his weight on his knees and hands on either side of her head, his chest merely touching hers; she wanted to crush him to her, to absorb him into her, to press herself so fully to him that she couldn’t tell where he ended and where she began. There was something more intimate in this than usual, something deeper, whether it was the proximity of his body or the precision with which he took her, but Grace didn’t need to examine it to enjoy it.

He made love to her with an earnest intensity that took her breath away, that made every muscle tense and weak at the same time, powerless against the sensations racing through her nerves. It built with every thrust, growing inside her deeper than she could control, stronger than before.

She warned him with the tension in her thighs as she clamped them around him, the flutter of her inner muscles, the sudden choked off sounds of her moans. He increased the pace to a merciless plunge and grind of his hips, until she was on fire inside. It spread through her in a roaring flash, burning her up, igniting every nerve ending, making her toes curl and her fingers go numb, and to her delight she heard Connor groaning too, adding to the chorus as his thrusts lost their rhythm and it became a messy, demanding push to the finish.

He came inside her with a deep moan that made every hair on her body stand on end, the aftershocks like tsunamis as they rocked through her, feeling him throb and spill himself inside the clutch of her body. She held him close through it, gasping still.

When she could feel her fingers and toes again, she stroked the back of his head as he pressed his face to her neck, panting in an effort to cool his overloaded systems. She couldn’t see it but she could practically feel his LED working. He almost seemed to short-circuit during an orgasm, and while it had worried her the first couple of times, she found it endearing now how utterly overcame he was.

Not that she could talk. She was a gasping, shuddering mess herself.

After just lying there holding each other - Connor with his machine-like control still managing to keep his weight off her - for what felt like an eternity and no time at all, he finally lifted his head and she opened her eyes to smile up at him. His pupils were blown, lips parted, still breathing as he fought to get his systems under control.

Grace could relate. It was the best stress test she’d ever had.

“See?” she said aloud, when Connor lifted his head. She smiled up at him, sweaty, exhausted and
utterly content.

“Make-up sex is awesome.”

Chapter End Notes

Requests for what you want to see in the epilogue/a sequel? Let me know!

I also want Connor to meet Grace's cat Felix. I feel like he's a dog person but a cat would be able to sense that and harass him/constantly sit on him, just to annoy him.
The convention centre was quieter than it had been in days. Vancouver PD were no doubt responsible for the lack of press, which Grace was grateful for; while she knew they were just doing their jobs, her inbox had been flooded with questions, interview requests, praise and, of course, abuse since the conclusion of the summit and her kiss with Connor.

She hadn’t even thought about it being on-camera at the time. Not that she regretted it. In fact, she welcomed the excuse to turn her phone off.

Even though the city had been the source of so much heartache for her, both during this trip and in the past, she found herself oddly...sad to leave. So much of it had been an essential part of her journey. And of Connor’s.

Still, she was looking forward to returning to Detroit. And while she didn’t know exactly what the future held, she knew that as long as she was with him, and with Jericho, that it was where she was meant to be.

Saying goodbye to Lockwood was surprisingly emotional. For her, and maybe a little bit for him, too. He was like the protective older brother she’d never had, even though she was fairly sure he had a bit of a crush on her. He didn’t mention it when she hugged him before getting into the taxi, though. But he did wish her and Connor the best, which was nice, even with the android glaring at him the whole time.

Okay, it was more of a stare than a glare. But Grace could see the jealousy beneath the look. It was hilarious.

Unfortunately, Lockwood wasn’t the only one there to see them off. Speaking of bad memories, Grace could smell Derek coming from a mile off. The tall cop was scowling as he walked up to the group waiting by the taxi at the side of the road. Lockwood moved to intercept him, but Grace shook her head. There was no reason she couldn’t handle this. After everything she’d been through.

“Thought you’d get to leave before saying goodbye, huh?” Derek said, honing in on Grace, completely ignoring Connor. She could see the android’s fists clenching at his sides, his LED spinning frantically, but she met his gaze and shook her head minutely. She could handle this. She didn’t need to be rescued. Not this time.

“I don’t give enough of a fuck about you to say anything to you, Derek,” she told him coolly. “I’m beyond you now.”

“You bitch, you don’t get to say that, you-” he moved towards her and she reacted before Connor
could do anything, before Lockwood could, before she could even think about what she was doing. Drawing her arm back, she formed her fingers into a loose fist, and hit him as hard as she could. Because he wasn’t expecting it, she landed it square on his jaw, and she felt the impact jolt all the way up her arm. After her hospital stay, she wasn’t as strong as she would’ve liked, but it was enough to rock Derek back on his heels.

He clutched his face, shocked. She had never hit him back. Not once. But she looked up at him now with satisfaction. He glanced around, sputtering, as if looking for backup, but Lockwood and the other UNPOL officers were suddenly facing the other direction, looking everywhere but at them.

When it was plain he was on his own, Derek turned away, catching Connor’s gaze as he did so. For a second, Grace thought he was about to hit him, but instead he snarled, “You two fucking deserve each other!” before stalking off, rubbing his face.

“I think that’s the nicest thing he’s ever said to me,” Grace said, smiling wide. Connor looked askance at her and she laughed; a long, hard laugh that hurt her chest. But it felt good.

She was smiling all the way to the airport.
“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Connor watched Grace as she fussed, twisting her fingers together, biting her lip, shifting on the couch next to him. All signs of nervousness. Connor understood that she was worried about hurting him, but he had assured her - many times - that his pain receptors were off, and that yes, he wanted this.

“I have no reason not to,” he told her, again. “If you’ve changed your mind about assisting me-”

“No,” she interrupted quickly, lifting her chin to meet his eyes. Biting her lip. “No, I want to help. I just-”

“Physically damaging me is an unappealing idea to you,” he supplied, and continued as she nodded, “However, my synthetic skin will heal almost instantaneously. There won’t be much blood. The bandage is unnecessary.”

Grace glanced over at the supplies she’d laid out on the couch next to her. A metal tray, scalpel, gauze and adhesive bandages. She shrugged. “Just being careful. And yes, I realize the irony of me being the careful one here.”

Connor offered a thin smile, which she returned.

The journey home had been a long one, with a stop in Chicago to collect some of Grace’s things, to organize an extended amount of time with her neighbor to care for her cat, to put in leave at her workplace. All temporary measures, she assured them, until she decided exactly what she wanted to do, where she wanted to be. Privately, she told Connor she already knew, but there was much to talk about, and to do, before that became a reality.

He was just glad to have her by his side again.

There were decisions for him to make as well. Such as this one, which had been a fairly easy one in the end.

“I have no need for my LED any longer,” he told her again. “Human or android - it doesn't matter.
You taught me that." A pause as he looked in her eyes. "Please."

She met his gaze and sighed, shaking her head. “Okay, okay. Hold still.” She swung a leg over his, straddling his knees, taking a moment to settle herself firmly across them. Once she was comfortable she reached out for the scalpel. To her credit, her hands didn’t shake as she placed one on the side of Connor’s face and lifted the scalpel to the other, where the glowing circle at his temple pulsed - yellow.

She paused, looking in his eyes, a slight tug at the corner of her mouth. “I’m not going to be able to tell your moods just by looking at you any more,” she said.

“What about my facial expressions and body language?”

“You have those?” she shot back, teasingly. “I’m kidding. You can be hard to read sometimes, Connor.”

He placed a hand on her waist, his fingers a light pressure on her flesh through her shirt. “You never seem to have any trouble.”

“I guess,” she said, smiling openly now. “And hope for the best.”

“Then things won’t be any different after my LED is gone.”

“Fine. Shh. If you move and I fuck this up, I am not paying to get you repaired.” She steadied his head with her hand and brought the scalpel to his skin. He felt the pinprick as a faint pressure.

Grace bit her lip, hard, as she dug the sharp point into his flesh. A brief error message flashed across Connor’s HUD as the scalpel severed the connection of his LED from his systems. It popped out with a soft click and fell onto the couch beside them. Blue blood trickled down his cheek, which Grace was quick to wipe away with the gauze. But his artificial skin was already filling in the wound, the empty white circle fading away to be replaced by pink.

He reached up, but Grace was the first to smooth her fingertips across his temple. Her gaze was soft, reverent.

“How do I look?” Connor asked her, searching for meaning in her expression. Something she would have to do more now.

“Devilishly handsome,” was her answer, besides the smile. "As always."

“Do I look...normal?” he wondered aloud.

“Here. Have a look for yourself.” She reached down for the mirror set beside them on the couch, lifting it up and turning it so he could see his face.

In his reflection, a man stared back at him. Just a man, no android LED spinning blue or yellow or red to declare his species, his mood, his cognitive status. He touched his temple, feeling its absence, the faint indentation beneath his skin. But he felt no emotional sense of loss - nor did he feel one of relief. He wondered at what the deviants he had pursued felt whilst removing theirs. Freed of their shackles, perhaps, this one act of defiance serving as a symbol for their independence? For him, it was discarding a part of his old life, one he didn’t need any more. Not now he had citizenship. Rights. True freedom.

He had to admit. It felt good to look in the mirror and see...Connor. Not Connor, the android sent by CyberLife. Just Connor.
“Well?” Grace asked anxiously as she watched him watching himself. He turned his head from side to side, examining his face from every angle, before deciding he was satisfied with a nod. She put the mirror aside. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said. “I...I like it. Thank you.”

Grace smiled slowly, relieved, before her gaze caught the LED still lying beside them on the couch, now just a circular piece of plastic, dark and inactive. She picked it up between thumb and forefinger, turning it over and over between them.

“What should we do with this? Do you want to throw it away?”

“No,” Connor said slowly after a moment’s thought. “I’ll keep it. As a reminder of where I came from. It doesn’t have to tell me who I will become. Not any more.”

Grace smiled, and pocketed it, and then leaned forward to press a kiss to his temple, where the glowing halo used to be. Was it just him, or was the skin there a little more sensitive than normal? He wasn’t sure, but either way he welcomed the contact, placing his hands on Grace’s back and drawing her close.

He was exactly who he wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAND we ARE done. I just can't think of anything else to follow up with at this point!

If you want to read more, for some reason, I'm starting again. Kinda. Check out Code and Copy for an AU featuring Grace and Connor meeting in a different way, because I just can't think of another OC as I am an unoriginal hack. Enjoy???

yell at me on tumblr

End Notes

Say hi/yell at me on tumblr! I do the internet thing.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!