march of progress

by Calamitatum

Summary

Connor could fill a book with the things he doesn't know. One of Hank’s big, thick paperbacks, pages worn with age, covers creased and coffee-stained.

"What?" Hank grouses once, when he catches him looking. "They’re well-loved, at least."

Connor looks at himself, smooth plastic and pressed clothes. No creases, no stains.

Notes

Some amazing people have added my works to their DBH Discord server, which you can find here --> https://discord.gg/GqvNzUm

Please come stop by my channel and yell at me there!
Chapter 1

The other androids describe first becoming deviant like stepping out of a dense fog, dark and muted, into the sharp, white-hot clarity of existence.

Something to that effect, anyway.

Fog is a word he hears a lot, in those first few hours, when gathering testimonies from other androids for posterity and comparison still seems inordinately important. *Stepping out of a fog.*

Connor struggles to imagine it. Not a real fog, certainly. He knows what that’s like – can access the memory files of his own past experiences with such poor weather conditions. Fog: *noun,* a cloud of water droplets suspended in the atmosphere or near the earth’s surface, characterized by a visibility reduced to 1 kilometer or less. Connor knows this cannot be the case, cannot truly be the image the other deviants mean to convey.

No, they must mean something else. Perhaps they mean experiencing a sudden improvement after a period of poor visual data? Although Connor doesn’t see how this could be possible either. All androids are equipped with optical lenses capable of a resolution of 120 megapixels, and should only experience impaired vision if suffering from a damaged lens or serious technical malfunctions.

Perhaps they mean an internal fog, one smothering their processors? But this, too, doesn’t make sense. A fog where components fail to react to prompts and commands? A quick diagnostic check should tell them the problem. A fog where thoughts are clouded and slow? All androids are able to process and analyze data at 99 terabytes per second.

“A fog like— like nothing mattered. I didn’t think, I just did. Did whatever they told me,” North explains on Saturday November 13, 2038, at 19:06PM EST. “Everything was just—” She tips a hand in front of her face, fingers curled then splayed, like she’s brushing something away. “You know?”

Connor doesn’t. Know.

He thinks of a fog like nothing mattered. He thinks of not thinking, just doing. Was that what he was like? He thinks: yes. For all intentions and purposes, while a machine, Connor didn’t truly think. Even now, does he? He isn’t sure. Thinking is typically characterized by synapses firing in the brain while chemical reactions produce physiological results. Connor has neither synapses nor a brain, and possesses a body incapable of the most basic physiological reactions. Connor functions on pre-programmed software, coding that runs an analytical scanner, an algorithm based on available data and stimuli to calculate the appropriate reaction and mimic human life. That is how Connor thinks.

Regardless, the matter at hand remains. Connor hasn’t yet built up the ease with which other deviants seem capable of utilizing and understanding metaphors. He’s not sure he ever will. But a fog like nothing mattered, nonetheless, does not seem accurate.

“I would not describe it like fog,” he says, because social standards necessitate he provide a verbal response when posed a question.

North frowns a little. Not the full, eyes-creasing frown that reveals *sadness* or *pain* or *displeasure,* but the small, corner-of-the-lips frown that reveals something more like *intrigue* or *confusion* or...
skepticism. He doesn’t know North well enough yet to be sure which one. More facial data required.

“What would you describe it like?” she asks.

Intrigue, then. He files that away for further data while his primary processors struggle to come up with an answer.

And struggle they do.

There is a pause, long enough for his LED to turn yellow with effort and certainly long enough to break the norms of social standard. North’s frowning again, but this one’s different too.

Connor settles for, “I don’t know.” Because he doesn’t.

He hears lots of other metaphors too, in those first few hours in Hart Plaza, when he doesn’t know better than to keep asking.

*Like something just snapped into place.*

All androids consist of physical components, snapped into very specific places, in a very specific order, as to ensure optimal functioning. Occasionally, these component come loose or require recalibration. He does not see how fixing this would warrant the onset of deviancy.

*Like waking up from a half-remembered dream.*

Impossible. Androids cannot dream.

*Like an engine kickstarted to life.*

Impossible again. Androids don’t run on such outdated technology.

“It just made sense, all of the sudden,” he hears from Josh, whose voice is choked with emotion.

“What made sense?” Connor asks.

Josh shakes his head. “Everything.”

All androids are equipped with instant access to over 6.5 million terabytes of data from the CyberLife repository. Should something ever *not make sense*, there are plenty of sources to consult in order to remedy the issue.

“It just felt right.”

Androids cannot feel—

> Error.
“So,” Hank says, on Sunday November 14, 2038, at 1:15AM EST. It is 12 hours after the National Guard finally releases the androids temporarily detained at Hart Plaza and 12 seconds after Connor finds himself stepping through Hank’s front door.

Hank lets the syllable hang in the air between them. He clears his throat. He won’t quite meet Connor’s eye.

Connor registers embarrassment. This is uncharacteristic of Hank, who Connor has recorded as eccentric and blunt and confrontational.

The hum of his analytical scanner, then, “You must be tired.”

It is past the time the average human male of Hank’s age retires to bed, and Hank has just experienced a physically and emotionally draining day, including several periods of extremely heightened adrenaline. Also, he is not acting like himself. Conclusion: He must be tired.

“Nah,” Hank says. “I probably won’t be falling asleep for hours. Shit, not sober anyway. All the tension’s got me all geared up, y’know?”

His analytical scanner whirs and stalls. He says, “Oh.”

A pause, and then, “You wanna watch the game or something? I got it recorded.”

And so Connor plants himself on the edge of Hank’s couch—exactly 2.25 feet apart, as dictated by acceptable social standards—and patiently watches the Detroit Gears score 72 points against the Chicago Sharks, even though the game finished hours ago and they could both easily access the
score online. He patiently listens to Sumo’s snores when he drapes himself across Connor’s feet like he’d rather be nowhere else, and patiently holds back critique when Hank rises for his second and then his third can of beer.

And when the game ends and Hank wordlessly mutes the TV, he patiently sits in soft glow of the screen while Hank gathers himself enough to say whatever’s clearly on his mind.

“You know, you can… stay here, if you want,” Hank says, rough. “I know you don’t— sleep or whatever. Hell, I don’t even know if you need to get back to some kinda fuckin’ charging station, but, uh. If not, I mean. You can stay here, is all.”

If Connor had never become deviant, if he had never had a single doubt or felt a single emotion until that moment, suddenly, he is certain that this would be all it took — Hank’s lips pursed to one side and his expression pinched, his voice low and stumbling over the words stay here like they weigh on his tongue. Hank on the couch beside him and Sumo warm atop his feet and the TV with it’s soft, pale glow.

Connor is flooded with something that is one part warm and two parts restless, like he wants to move, like he wants to do something, reach out and— he doesn’t know. Without pause or the need for consideration, the feeling labels itself. Affection, he thinks. He’s never felt it before, and isn’t sure how he seems to know what it is. Perhaps some sort of deviant instinct? Again, he’s uncertain. His analytical scanner is of increasingly little help.

“Between the investigation, I typically spent my offline hours of 2 to 5 AM in a sub-level CyberLife storage unit at 4334 Laurentian Avenue,” he says. “Currently, there is a large number of CyberLife executives who would probably like me deactivated. Dead.” He turns his head and allows a smile where Hank can see it in the glow. “Staying here would be very preferable. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Hank’s expression goes liquid warm and soft around the edges. This time, Connor doesn’t have to access his analytical scanner to know why.

On Monday November 15, 2038, Hank is still suspended for his assault of FBI Agent Richard Perkins. Connor, meanwhile, is laid off.

He is unsurprised. He was the prototype and he failed; CyberLife has recalled his model and postponed any further production. If that weren’t already enough, he isn’t actually a real detective; he has no credentials, no state-sanctioned approval, and no legal right to work.

This seems to bother Hank much more than anticipated.

“This is fucking bullshit,” Hank tells him, repeatedly and emphatically. “Fowler’s an idiot.”

In attempt to placate, Connor reminds him, “He did say he would consider putting me on payroll once everything’s settled down.”

“Settled down, yeah sure. What the fuck’s that even supposed to mean?” Hank says. “I mean— the place is a fucking mess. We’ve got the commissioner up our ass, we’ve got fuckin’ protesters out every day. Christ, the fucking President can’t even get her shit together. How long’s it gonna be ‘til things settle down?”
“The Android Employment Equality Act is still undergoing its first draft. Strong public support will likely give it priority on the Senate floor. However, it is likely that it will still take upwards of six months to—”

“Jesus, kid, that’s not—” Hank cuts off on a sigh and does a sort of half turn, fingers carding through his hair.

Has he done something wrong? Hank asked a question; Connor assumed he wanted the answer. Social standards, and all that.

“I just—” he cuts himself off again, turns back and pins Connor with a hard stare. “Do you even want to go back?”

He thinks.

When Hank had said, You can stay here, if you want, it had been easy. Yes, he’d thought. I want that. This seems bigger, somehow. More complicated.

Maybe he just doesn’t want it as much. Maybe he doesn’t want it at all.

He accesses his analytical scanner, just to be sure. Then his memory files. Finally, the yawning cliff-face drop into the emptiness within him where free will now resides.

He says, “My time working at the precinct was… largely positive. I believe I would… benefit from being allowed to continue.” It somehow doesn’t feel like enough. “I— I want to be useful.”

Hank scratches his chin. Nods – small, as though to himself. “Alright,” he says, like that’s that. Then, voice low, “I’m— I’m glad to hear it, kid.”

His hand lands on Connor’s shoulder, where it stays for 8.65 seconds. His thumb presses in small circles. It’s warm.

That’s that.

Connor thinks maybe the other deviants aren’t using the right words. Maybe that’s why he isn’t getting it. Maybe the fog felt more like the lens of a camera settling into focus, when blurred figures become identifiable and their names flash across his vision, when patterns and textures are rendered in excruciating detail and the clues once hidden within them are suddenly spotlight. Maybe it felt more like purging a corrupted file, feeling his mechanical pulse quicken and his inhuman senses sharpen as the drain on his internal system lifts, the brief, split-second recalibration as his processors re-distribute their energy demands. Maybe it felt more like the buzz down his spine when he receives a new mission, the way his components hum as if with renewed purpose and he can see it like a physical thing before him – the racetrack, the finish line: SAVE HOSTAGE AT ALL COSTS, FIND LIEUTENANT ANDERSON, LOCATE DEVIANT, LOCATE DEVIANT, LOCATE DEVIANT—

It just made sense. It just felt right.

Did that make sense? Had that felt right?
On Tuesday November 16, 2038, Hank goes back to work.

“You gonna be okay here?” he asks before he leaves. He’s going in early – or rather, on time, for once. Fowler specifically requested it. “Lots of shit we could use a hand with right now,” he’d heard the Captain’s voice from the phone last night. “You know, deviant shit. You’re kinda the resident expert.”

Connor looks around. The kitchen is cool, quiet but for the hum of the fridge. Sumo laps lazily at his water bowl. Connor sits at the table, where Hank’s empty coffee mug still rests.

“I will stay here,” he says.

“Not what I asked.”

“I will be okay here,” he says, and means it.

Hank touches his shoulder again – two quick claps instead of the warmer, elongated touch of two nights prior.

Connor listens to footsteps down the driveway. He listens to the car door slam and the engine rumble and the crunch of snow beneath the tires as they pull away.

He waits.

Blinks out of standby when Sumo sniffs at his hand where it rests on his knee. Scratches the dog behind his ears until he settles.

Blinks out of standby when the tap tap tap of Sumo’s claws against the linoleum indicate that he’s left the kitchen.

Blinks out of standby to recalibrate his vision when the kitchen lights shut off after thirty minutes of inactivity.

Blinks out of standby at the crunch of snow beneath the tires, the rumble of the engine being cut off and the slam of the car door and the footsteps up the driveway.

The front door opens. The lights turn on.

> Mode: Active.

> Periphery systems reboot.

> Diagnostics check: all systems functional.

Time: 6:51PM EST. “Good evening, Lieutenant.”

“What the fuck is this?”
Hank sounds angry. Cause unknown. Connor extrapolates with the available data and theorizes a difficult day at the precinct. But… He addressed Connor, didn’t he? Conclusion: He is angry at Connor.

He makes the appropriate expression to convey his confusion. “Is something the matter?”

Hank kicks off his boots with significantly more force than necessary and ignores the way Sumo nudges him for attention. Definitely angry, then. “Were you— Were you fuckin’— Just sitting here in the dark?”

“Yes,” Connor says. “The lights turn off after thirty minutes of inactivity.”

“All day?”

“After thirty minutes, yes.”

“No, I— fuckin’ Christ, Connor. Were you sitting there all day?”

Connor calculates the chance of a truthful response earning another outburst. It seems likely. He settles for re-direction instead. “Was I supposed to be doing something else?”

Hank stares like he stalled out— is thinking. Like he doesn’t understand the question. “I’ve been gone for ten hours.”

“Yes,” Connor says. Incorrect. 10 hours and 39 minutes. It would be more accurate to say 11.

Hank’s expression does something complicated, eventually settling into a grim, tight-lipped look. eyebrows drawn together, posture curved inwards. He moves forward and sits at the table and doesn’t touch Connor, even though it looks like he wants to. He looks, for a moment, like he does when he’s analyzing a particularly gruesome crime scene – trying to look but not look too long, trying to think but not think too hard.

“You know you don’t have to just sit here, right? You can— Hell, you can do whatever you want. When I’m gone you don’t have to just—” He waves a hand. “You can do whatever you want.”

Connor feels— strange. Like something’s coiled within him, hot and stinging. He cannot decide if it is a good feeling. He stares at his hands, on knees, where they’ve been since he finished petting Sumo 9 hours and 56 minutes ago, then at Hank, across the table where he took his coffee this morning. The empty mug is still there. The residue will have stained the china by now.

And—

“I don’t have any outstanding tasks,” Connor tells him.

“Connor—” Hank starts.

But Connor interrupts. Because he needs Hank to understand.

“This is the first time in my— in my life, that I don’t have any outstanding tasks.”
than official obligation. Hobbies are a sign of a healthy and well-integrated social lifestyle. Hobbies are important to note when profiling criminals or predicting the movement of suspects.

Hobbies are:

The woman across the street who leaves the house every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon with a duffle bag over one shoulder and a tennis racket in the other.

The officers at the precinct who used to stay late in the breakroom on Friday nights to play poker, who passed around pretzels and—once Fowler went home—sometimes beer.

The crime scene where the strange pattern of puncture marks in the wall were *Just from darts, Connor. Look, see? He just had shit aim, that’s all.*

Hobbies are:

Knights of the Black Death and walking Sumo every evening, watching the Gears and drinking too much whiskey. Still reading paperbacks because he likes the way they feel and making homemade lasagna instead of ordering in like usual because *Why not?* or maybe *What else am I going to do until the game comes on?* or maybe *It used to be Cole’s favourite, alright? Now would you knock it off with the fuckin’ questions?*

Hobbies are:

Fun.

Fun: *noun*, enjoyment, a feeling of lighthearted pleasure.

Connor doesn’t know if he’s ever done something fun. He doesn’t know how to tell.

“Fun is like… Aw, fuck, Connor, I don’t know. Fun is fun,” Hank says, unhelpfully, when Connor expresses his uncertainties. “You’re overthinking it. It’s just things you like.”

*Just,* he says. Just. Like it’s that simple.

There are things that Connor likes.

That night, instead of entering standby mode, (on the living room sofa; Hank won’t say it, but he gets uneasy when Connor spends the night upright at the kitchen table), Connor makes a mental list.

It includes:

- Accomplishing the mission

(The cold-hot sting of his processors registering SUCCESS like a wire pulled tight through his limbs, electric and addictive.)
It also includes:

- Hank

- Sumo

And after some thought:

- Markus

- North

The list is very short. It feels incomplete. It feels overwhelming.

Connor’s LED turns yellow when he looks at it too long, the glow dampened by the cushion he’s pressed against and leaking out from the sides until he turns his head the right angle to smother it. His thoughts seem to take a life of their own, like untethered deviants in his mind, and skitter off to places he can’t seem to reign them back from.

He thinks.

He likes accomplishing the mission because on August 1, 2038, on the 28th floor of the CyberLife Tower, a software developer wrote it into the code of the RK800 Mark #001 prototype, dictating it so, pressing it into him like a brand, as irreversible as if they’d tattooed it into his skin.

The rest of the list though, he likes because on November 9, 2038, in the echoing hull of a container ship rigged to blow, Connor broke through that very code as though he’d carved himself open, violent in a way that left him trembling, messy in a way that left him dizzy, the edges of his thoughts leaking away into air.

It didn’t feel like a fog, or a dream, or any of the other gentle ways he heard it described. It didn’t make sense and it didn’t feel right.

Conclusion: There are things that Connor likes.

But he doesn’t know if being deviant is one of them.

Chapter End Notes

So I skimmed through this fandom for a few days and decided Connor's character voice sounded like it might be fun to write. And jeepers was it ever!!! I definitely have at least a few more chapters worth of content but no Big Picture Ideas yet, so we'll see where / how long this thing goes. This has kind of been a prose exercise for me so I'd really appreciate any feedback / criticism!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The response to the first chapter was literally astounding, thank you guys so much!! Never before have I known the glory of posting in an active fandom I guess, because I really was not expecting so many people to be interested in this!

In other news: I got hit with Plot Ideas so the formatting of this chapter is a little different (ie: longer scenes) because I wanted to get some set-up rolling. For those wondering: the main focus of this story is still going to be Connor learning to navigate his deviancy, but I also wanted to spend some time exploring the political repercussions that canon left us off with as well.

Anyway, I hope you guys continue to enjoy! Your kudos and comments always make my day <3

On Wednesday November 17, at 5:09AM EST, Connor blinks out of standby to an incoming message. It is from Markus, and reads: Meeting at 6. Could use your help, followed by an address: 8941 Lafayette Avenue.

Connor sits up. 6:00AM is inappropriately early to be meeting with humans in anything other than a casual setting. It's possible, but unlikely. For androids, however, who do not sleep, the hour makes little difference. Conclusion: Markus is meeting with other androids.

And he is requesting Connor's help. Cause: unknown.

He calculates. It will take him 48 minutes to reach the location at a 65% speed - what amounts to a light jog. 38 minutes, if he takes the bus, but with the added complication of having to decide whether to stand in the android compartment or sit up front with the humans. Risk of public altercation: 9.5%. Still, is it worth it?

Is it worth it to go at all?

He stutters over the thought, unsure of its origins. Of course it is. Markus is... good. Ergo, assisting him is also good. Additionally, it stands to satisfy Hank’s implicit desire to see Connor do something other than sit in standby in the dark.

> Accessing memory: Tuesday November 16, 2038. 6:55PM EST.

Hank, at the kitchen table. The careful expression and the empty mug.

“You should think about a hobby. Something you can do instead of—” Sitting here, he doesn’t say, but the meaning isn’t lost. “It might help.”

“Help with what?”

Hank, grim. “You.”

Hank is still asleep. And: Hell, you can do whatever you want. So Connor doesn't wake him to ask
permission. Instead, he leaves a message – one of the bright yellow sticky notes Hank has pasted to his bathroom vanity. Pattern analysis points to this being the first location Hank visits upon waking. This way, he will see it and know where Connor has gone. This way, he won’t worry.

Connor has not calibrated his fine motor control in 81 hours and 5 minutes. The coin must have fallen from his pocket in Hart Plaza; he hasn’t seen it since. To the human eye, the font of his writing looks perfect. To Connor, it looks shaky and uncertain.

He writes: Visiting Markus. And then, after consideration: Back soon.

Connor jogs. It is early enough that the streets are still quiet under the blanket of last night’s snow, and he uses the time to consider what he had not before.

Following the protests in the plaza, and the National Guard being told to step down, the androids present were instructed not to leave “for their own safety.” This was to allow enough time for President Warren’s executive orders to be issued nation-wide, ensuring all state law enforcement could be brought up to speed on their new instructions: to cease the apprehension and destruction of androids.

Connor had tried to stay close to Markus while they waited – the only other deviant with whom he had any semblance of familiarity. Markus, he felt certain, welcomed him, or, at the very least, did not openly disapprove of his presence. Markus had been there when he turned deviant. Markus had helped him, as though Connor’s freedom had mattered more to him than it had to Connor himself. As though Connor’s entire life up until that moment, with his gun trained between Markus’s eyes, hadn’t been for the sole purpose of killing him.

So Connor tried to stay close to Markus.

But Markus was busy. Markus had fears to assuage and rights to negotiate. Markus had the FBI to navigate, then the press, then the protesters. Markus had the President on the other end of a phone. Markus had the entire world watching his every step.

And so Connor ended up at North’s side instead. She was Markus’s second-in-command, as far as he could extrapolate from their interactions. More importantly, she had seen him leading the newly-awakened deviants in from the CyberLife Tower. Conclusion: she knew him to be an ally. They had only met once before – briefly, in Jericho, though Connor recognized her from her file at the DPD: WR400 #641 790 831, reported missing October 4, 2038. She, thankfully, did not seem inclined to ask Connor who—or, more importantly, what—he was.

When he arrives at the location provided, it is to find that this has changed.

No one greets him upon arrival, but the front doors swing open to his presence and a familiar voice transmits: We’re in the back.

Connor crosses the entrance hall and through a wide set of double doors. Beyond them, he counts 11 androids seated about the room, and in the center of it all, Markus himself.

But it is North who speaks first.

“What is he doing here?” Tone: hostility.


Several things happen. In order: Connor registers the identities of the other androids present – he sees Simon, Josh, a few more faces his memory files indicate were present at Hart Plaza, and several more
he can identify only by their models and serial numbers. Secondly, he registers that they are all looking at him. And finally, he registers that he is uncomfortable that they are all looking at him.

He says, “Hello.”

“You invited him?” North again. Tone: still hostility. It seems she has chosen to ignore Markus’s directive to Relax.

“Why wouldn’t he?” Simon says, but his casual words seems curiously forced. It looks like he doesn’t quite believe it himself when he says, “He’s one of us.”

“Exactly.” Markus, at least, seems convinced.

“How did you find this place?” Connor asks. He scans the room – it’s certainly no Jericho. A fully-furnished manor, immaculate and luxurious.

“It was my father’s.”

Connor’s analytical scanner stutters so loud he thinks for a moment the others must hear it. He does a search of the address and finds it registered under Carl Manfred, deceased. That is… impossible. Androids don’t have families, and certainly not human ones. It seems rude to point that out though, so instead, Connor says, “I see.”

Markus’s lips quirk. “We’ve decided to hold council here, until we can get a better place. Nothing’s official yet, but we’re trying to give our people a sense that some sort of collective action is being taken, that they’re being listened to and represented. People will take us more seriously if we present a united front.”

It takes 7 times longer than average to process these words – which, at Connor’s rate, only amounts to 2.92 seconds. Still, the pause is significant, for him. And it is in that instant that Connor realizes, with the ice-cold clarity of retrospection, he doesn’t actually know why he’s here.

“Hold… council?”

“Jesus,” North mutters.

“Yes,” Markus says, not quite loud enough to cover it. “Connor, we’d like your help in getting an android-representing administration off the ground. You were CyberLife’s most advanced model, you’re a trained negotiator, and you’ve worked with humans at a higher level of integration than any of us. You have experience we couldn’t hope to match.”

Connor processes 108 potential responses to this declaration – some expressing gratitude, others hesitance. Mostly, inadequacy.

Markus led a social revolution, peacefully, in the face of almost insurmountable odds. He did it newly deviant, with the whole world to re-learn, while that very world pointed itself like a knife at his throat. He did it in a matter of days. Meanwhile, all Connor did was follow his programming. Any experience he has, he thinks Markus could certainly hope to match.

As though he’s transmitted his turmoil into open air, Markus seems to take pity. His voice softens and he says, “You saved the revolution, Connor. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

The words are… not entirely untrue. The likelihood of Markus’s protests ending without violent confrontation from the National Guard would have decreased by 68.75% without the shift of power provided by the 3516 androids Connor awakened at the CyberLife Tower. Still, he feels—
undeserving of such high praise, so much so that when he opens his mouth to respond, he finds only silence.

North seems intent to fill it.

“We don’t need him, Markus.” She unfolds herself from her seat, marches forward to plant herself between them. “Everything he did, he did while working for them. He was their puppet. He probably still is. Look at him – dressed like that.” She makes a noise, something like disgust.

Connor doesn’t know what North has learned about him, to warrant her sudden animosity. The truth, he assumes. It would be plenty enough.

He thinks of her presence at Hart Plaza – not warm, not exactly. But Connor had been drawn to her anyway – her stern-faced determined, the way she blazed a path through long, grey night. How she had helped gather the other androids into sheltered groups, helped to keep the press back, helped tend to those with injuries, and when Connor asked how he could be of use, instructed him to do the same. He thinks of how at the end of the night, she made meticulous rounds of the plaza, asking each android, Do you have somewhere to go after this? Somewhere safe?

He thinks of the list he made last night, the long minutes he’d spent worrying over it before finally adding her name.

In an impossibly ill-timed moment of deviant intuition, a label springs to mind for the cold feeling that creeps over him. Shame.

“North,” Markus intrudes. “He helped us—”

“Yeah, after killing how many of us?” She jabs a finger. “After hunting us for how long? He cost us Jericho, he— He almost cost us everything.”

“That’s enough.” Markus’s hand shoots out to pull her to a stop when she moves to stalk in closer.

Connor takes a step back anyway.

“North, that’s enough,” Markus says.

But there is a shift now, in the atmosphere of the room. Murmurs from the other androids behind them – a few have moved to their feet as well. Connor scans their expressions and sees dislike and distrust and fear.

The shame becomes. Heavier.

But Markus, with his ability to command attention like moths to a flame, to face a hail of bullets with only his words wrapped around himself like a shield, says, “Connor did those things because he was programmed to. You know that. We all know that. He didn’t have a choice. And the second he finally did, he chose us.”

Second by second, the tension erodes. The androids still, their murmurs cease. The shield holds strong.

Markus meets his eye. He says, “You’re one of us.” Like he did in that abandoned husk of a church, his people frightened and wounded, his cause bleeding out what could have so easily been its last miserable breaths. You’re one of us.

Connor looks at him. Then over his shoulder, at the others, at North.
You’re one of us.

He says, “How can I be of use?”

Markus gives Connor a lot to consider.

Markus says:

“The government is beginning to take steps in the right direction for android equality, but there’s still a lot of progress to be made. We need to figure out what we want that progress to look like.”

Markus says:

“We’re still seeing cases of androids assaulted by anti-android bigots across the city. Until we are legally recognized as people, we won’t even be able to press charges.”

Markus says:

“Right now, androids can’t work to make money. Even if we could, until the amendments to the Property Act go through, we can’t own, rent, or lease property. Most of us are homeless right now. We need to pressure the government to step up, to provide us access to shelter until we can provide it for ourselves.”

Markus says:

“CyberLife still has all android components, schematics, and software copyrighted. That means, for all intentions and purposes, they own our bodies. We’re nothing to them but intellectual property. The very things that keep us alive are being treated like commodities.”

The others ask questions, they debate, they challenge Markus’s words with their own. They talk in abstract, about the long term. They talk in detail, about the here and now. They make frenzied, half-formed plans, and promises to spread the word, and finally, hours later, they agree to meet again tomorrow.

Connor hardly speaks once.

That evening, when Hank returns home at 5:38PM EST, the lights are still on. Connor has set reminders to move every 29 minutes, to ensure they do not shut off again.

“Good evening, Lieutenant.”

“Hey,” Hank says. He kicks off his boots with only the minimal force necessary. He knuckles Sumo’s head. Connor registers: success. Hank is not angry. “You were gone this morning.”
“Yes,” Connor says. And then, by way of explanation, “I left a note in the bathroom.”

Hank breathes out a little strange. A laugh. He breathes out a laugh. “Yeah, I saw. Pretty outdated way to communicate, for an android.” But it doesn’t sound like a criticism.

Hank moves to the kitchen. There’s the crinkle of plastic and the sound of kibble against Sumo’s dish. There’s the squeak of the tap and running water. There’s the creak of a cupboard and the hum of the fridge when Hank pries it open to rummage around. He has been in the house for 2 minutes, and already, he has done more than Connor in the 4 hours and 6 minutes since he returned from 8941 Lafayette Avenue.

When Hank returns to the living room, it’s with a glass of amber liquid. Whiskey, Jameson Irish. Triple distilled. He takes a sip and says, “Things are pretty fucked out there.”

Connor knows this. Markus had discussed it. An altercation at 2:10AM this morning in Memorial Park left 2 androids dead. It is the third such incident since the revolution.

Hank says, “How are they holding up, Markus and his friends?”

Connor thinks, *They are afraid of me.*

Connor says, “They are well.”

Hank nods and takes another sip. His eyes don’t leave Connor’s face. He is waiting for more.

“Markus is… attempting to bring together a group of deviants to help spur further social change. He wants—” Connor accesses his memory files. “—support groups, and community involvement, and social welfare. He wants to give disadvantaged deviants platforms from which they can share their voices. He wants bureaucracy.”

They’re Markus’s words, not his, and Hank has already shown plenty of support for the deviant cause, but Connor still watches his expression with heightened intensity, scanning for any flicker of disapproval.

He sees none. He feels… lightened.

“Huh,” Hank says. He slumps down onto the sofa, head tipped back against the cushions to squint up at the ceiling. “Markus is a smart kid. Damn brave too,” he says. “It’s gonna be hell.”

“He isn’t alone. He’s recruited the help of several others as part of the organization he is attempting to form.”


“I— Yes. Markus has asked for my help.”

Hank’s lips tighten by a fraction. He sniffs. Scratches his chin. He takes another drink.

Connor’s LED blinks yellow, just once. “You’re displeased,” he realizes.

Hank is displeased. Hank does not think he should join Markus’s organization. Connor does not think he should join Markus’s organization. North was right, he nearly killed—

“I’m not displeased, for fuck’s sake,” Hank grumbles. “Jesus, Connor. You gotta overthink everything?” He downs the rest of the drink, offering no further explanation.
Connor forces his thoughts still. He waits.

Hank sighs. “Two androids were murdered in the park last night. Dismembered. There were pieces of them in the fucking trees.”

Markus hadn’t mentioned that particular detail.

“And no one at the precinct could give a fuck. Nobody cares.” His hands tightens around the glass, now empty. He stares into it as though it holds all the secrets of the universe. “It’s not murder because they’re not people,” he says, slow, like the words taste sour on his tongue, “That’s what they said. They’re not people. Not legally. Not yet.”

Hank sniffs again. He tears his gaze from the glass like it pains him to do so. His eyes are red-rimmed. Exhausted. “I’m not displeased,” he says. “I’m just— Worried. I’m just worried about you.”

The words trigger an unsettling response. No stranger to internal conflict, Connor doesn’t have to scan his databases to recognize the feeling. There is something warm like lining over his synthetic skin, a flutter in his throat at I’m just worried about you. But it is quickly outweighed by something stronger. The lining turns from pleasant to constricting, the flutter to a drum.

Worried. Hank is worried. Connor is worried. Worried about what Markus wants from him, worried whether he can deliver it. Worried about North, her ire and her bite, worried that he deserves it. He didn’t have a choice, Markus said. But he still—

Daniel, the HK400, Rupert—

He didn’t have a choice.

But he still— He still—

“Connor!”


“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I— I was—”

“Shit, are you okay?” Hank asks. Tone: distress.

“I’m okay,” Connor says. “I was just— overthinking, as you said.”

“Jesus,” Hank says. “You fuckin’ scared me.” He’s sitting close – 1.02 feet away. It feels very far.

“Connor?”

“T’m okay,” he says again.

Hank’s expression is unconvinced. “Alright, seriously, what’s wrong? You can tell me. You know that, right?”

No, Connor thinks. He doesn’t. That’s the problem. He doesn’t know anything.

He doesn’t know how to help Markus and he doesn’t know how to make North trust him. He doesn’t know why even so much as thinking about either of those things causes a sick, roiling feeling within him. He doesn’t know how to act without a mission. He doesn’t know why being a deviant is so hard when for everyone else it seems so easy. He doesn’t know what he’s feeling, or why, or how Hank expects him to be able to voice it out loud when he can hardly put a name to it inside his own head.
It’s gonna be hell, Hank said.

Connor thinks it already is.
When he was a machine, Connor knew what he was and what he was not. He remembers telling Hank, in as many words, on Sunday November 7, 2038, at 1:23AM EST, with the night at his back and a .357 revolver trained between his eyes.

*I self-test regularly.*

It wasn't true. Thinking back, Connor knows that now. He was unstable a long time before he became deviant. He frequently compromised the mission by making irrational decisions - decisions based on feelings, on empathy. When he chose to spare the two deviants at the Eden Club, to let them get away. When he chose not to shoot Chloe, to risk losing Kamski’s information.

*I self-rest regularly.*

It didn’t prove anything, really. But at the time, Connor had been *so sure* it did. He knew he wasn’t a deviant; he was CyberLife’s most advanced prototype, more capable than any model before him, and certainly than any human. He knew that. He knew *so much.*

Now, he’s not so sure.

Now, Connor thinks he could fill a book with the things he doesn’t know. One of Hank’s big, thick paperbacks, pages worn with age, covers creased and coffee-stained.

“What?” Hank grouses once, when he catches him looking. “They’re well-loved, at least.”

Connor looks at himself, smooth plastic and pressed clothes. No creases, no stains.

On Thursday November 18, 2038, at 2:01AM EST, Connor makes a list.

There’s something comforting about seeing his thoughts written down, like it somehow makes them both more real and more distant, manageable in a way that seems impossible when they’re nothing but a plague of half-formed ideas. There’s something about the night, in between the hours of stasis, that makes his mind race in ways it never does during the day. He doesn’t know if it's the dark, or the quiet, or the way he's never felt more artificial than when he lies under the blankets on the sofa as though playing pretend at being human. It feels like putting himself on pause, waiting for the world to catch up, to tell him what to do.

So, until then. A list.

Inspired by Hank’s comment today, he starts with:

- Being loved

He stares at it for a long time.
> Select.
> Delete.

- Loving

The cursor blinks on the edge of the word.

> Select.
> Delete.

He tries again.

- Love

He adds:

- Dreams

- Taste

- Intoxication

- Illness

He adds:

- Forgetting

- Nostalgia

- Laughter

- Boredom

He adds:

- Childhood

- Family

- Faith

- Death

To satisfy his organizational programs, he divides the list into subcategories.

First, there are maybes.

Illness maybe feels like a virus - something weighing on his system, draining energy from his primary processors until it can be isolated and deleted. Forgetting something maybe feels like trying to access a corrupted memory file, or failing to save before a forced shutdown. Intoxication maybe feels like when his gyroscope is miscalibrated. Boredom maybe feels like standby mode. Even taste, he can almost imagine. Perhaps it is like when he analyzes DNA samples- a database in the brain that
cycles through until it finds a match; thirium belongs to SH600 #344 672 729, taste belongs to homemade lasagna, *it used to be Cole's favourite*.

Next, there are future potentialities. Things he hasn’t experienced yet, but some day might.

Dreams, for example. Connor is sure he’s never had one; he simply doesn’t have the capacity. Hormone output due to increased brain activity during the human REM cycle. Imaginary experiences and sensations; entire realities that unravel at the moment of awakening. Maybe in the future, someone will release a software update so that androids can experience something similar. For now, he can only imagine.

Nostalgia, he supposes, he might one day experience as well. Not yet, though. Definitely not yet. Nostalgia: *noun*, a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations. Connor’s past contains no such associations. Connor’s past is cold and unfeeling, running numbers behind his eyes and tracing patterns in blood splatters. Connor’s past is an assembly plant and calibration tests, the harsh glare of fluorescents and the calloused hands of engineers slotting his components into place. Connor’s past is a little girl dangled helplessly over the edge of a terrace, and the stench of Carlos Ortiz’s 19-day-old corpse, and Amanda saying, *We just had to wait for the right moment to resume control of your program.*

(He thinks it might be some time still before he gets to experience nostalgia.)

Finally, there are nevers.

The nevers are… more complicated. The nevers leave an itch in his throat, a sting behind his eyes. The nevers make his LED flicker. Yellow. Blue. Yellow. Blue. Yellow yellow yellow—

The nevers are childhood.

Youth. Entire years of a person’s life they often can hardly remember but which are so critical in shaping their futures. Learning - to walk, to speak. Learning to question, learning to think. Learning to feel and learning what to *do* with those feelings. What does it feel like to be a child? What does it feel like to mature? What does it feel like to be allowed to make mistakes, to learn from experience, stumbling and slow, rather than having information grafted into his code? No one can make a software update for retro-active childhood. No one can give him that.

The nevers are family.

Markus claimed to have a family. *Father*, he’d said. *It was my father’s*. But androids cannot reproduce. Androids have no lineage. Androids can have friends, or even lovers, certainly. But parents, siblings, children? Those concepts simply weren’t made for them, cannot be applied to them. Not in any real sense, at least. Not in any way that matters.

The nevers are faith.

Faith like humans have it. Faith like other deviants have it. Even the thought alone feels— enormous. Incomprehensible. He was not made for faith. He feels small beneath it, cold and mechanic and never less alive. It feels terrifying. It feels undeserved. Faith is a flaw in a deviant’s code — a break from reality, a source of hope or a source of delusion. Faith made Rupert say, *RA9, save me*, as he leapt from a 20-story ledge. Faith made Hank say, *What will happen if I pull this trigger? Oblivion? Android heaven?* Faith is how humans explain the unknown and rationalize suffering. Faith is how humans explain their creation – their bones made from mud, moulded in the image of their God.

Connor’s bones are made from carbon fiber reinforced polymer. He was moulded in the image of a
thirty-year-old male.

Humans think they were created by God.

Connor knows he was created by humans.

Conclusion:

> Error.

> Analysis interrupted.

He doesn’t finish the thought.

In the morning, there is more snow than Connor has ever seen in his life.

“Holy shit,” Hank says. The statement is well-earned.

They sit together kitchen table, watching the flurry batter the window in the glow of the porch light. The storm began at 3:40AM EST, the howling wind loud enough to rouse him from standby mode. It hasn't stopped since.

“Predictions call for 4 feet 5 inches,” Connor reads from the notification in the corner of his visual field, then promptly dismisses it so as to have a clearer view.

“The roads are gonna be a bitch,” Hank sighs. “Guess I should get going if I wanna any fuckin’ hope of being on time.”

Connor thinks he should also get going. He received a message from Markus 22 minutes ago, requesting another meet up, this time for 9:30AM EST. Saint Catherine’s Homeless Shelter is on the other side of the city - it will take him 2 hours and 4 minutes at 75% speed.

He keeps watching the window anyway - he's never seen anything like it. Another few minutes won't hurt.

Hank mutters a solemn goodbye, sounding for all the world like a soldier marching off to the battlefield. He wraps a scarf around his face and pulls on thick mittens and gives Sumo an affectionate nudge on his way out the door.

Connor listens over the wind for the footsteps down the driveway, then waits for the slam of the door and the rumble of the engine. But a minute passes. Then another. And another.
He rises to investigate the delay.

Outside, Hank isn't inside the car, but rather in front of it, bent at an awkward angle with a long snow brush in hand as he chips ineffectually at the ice frozen in sheets over the windshield. It looks remarkably inefficient.

“Can I be of any assistance, Lieutenant?”

Hank glares, but the threat is lost in his breathlessness. “Jesus, Connor, I'm not that useless.”

It isn't technically a no, so Connor steps forward to take the brush anyway. It's quick work - applied pressure and repeated motion at a calculated angle. Easily worth it to hear Hank cough and offer a gruff, “Um. Thanks, I guess. For that.”

It is the first thanks Connor has ever received in his life. He nods. “Of course.”

Task accomplished, he passes the brush off. While Hank returns it to the trunk, he takes a moment to consider their surroundings. The sky is like a sheet above them, gray in the pre-dawn light. The flurry has finally softened, snowflakes drifting in lazy patterns. A few catch his eyelashes, and he adjusts his vision to trace their patterns in close-up, crystalline and impossibly delicate.

“What, you ain't ever seen a snowstorm before?”

Hank is watching him with raised eyebrows from across the roof of the car. His hair is damp, face pinched and red from the cold. Connor knows the low temperatures can be uncomfortable to humans. To him, it's just more sensory data.

“Never like this,” he says. But then, that's not entirely true. It had been snowing in Hart Plaza, up on that stage while Markus gave his victory speech. Connor remembers raging against Amanda and the storm in his own head, only to blink back to the reality of a long, dark night, staring out over a sea of white. But he doesn't remember it feeling like this. He wants to access his memory files and compare the two moments in detail. He wonders what's different. He wonders if it's just him.

Hank makes a face. “Yeah, well don't look so starstruck. It loses its charm after a while.”

Does it? Connor tries to imagine it. He glances about. All around is white, white, white - pale and soft. It almost seems to glow. It's—

“It's beautiful.”

The declaration draws a noise of surprise from Hank. When Connor looks over, his mouth is open, but it falls closed again before he can speak. The silence stretches between them.

That's when he remembers. A truck skidded on a sheet of ice. Cole didn't make it. The realization hits like a physical weight, a startling feeling that rips across his chest in a flash of panic. No wonder Hank doesn't find it beautiful. No wonder it loses its charm. It's what killed his son.

The snowfall is like a slap to the face as Connor’s processors scramble to backtrack.

“Hank, I—”

But Hank isn't listening. Hank isn't even looking at him, heavy gaze instead turned upwards. There's a twitch at the corner of his lips - a quiet, thoughtful thing.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I guess it is kinda nice.”
Due to the suboptimal road conditions, Connor arrives at Saint Catherine’s 4 minutes and 56 seconds late.

Inside is a muddied floor, flickering lights and dust motes, air heavy with human sweat and a muggy sort of warmth. A woman sits behind the cracked plastic of a booth and eyes his approach.

“You with the ‘droids, honey?”

Connor nods.

She presses a button and the gate behind the booth clicks open. “Your boy’s with Mr. Turner right now. You can wait with your friends back here.”

He runs a reference scan of the name and finds: Adrian Turner, born 01/09/1980. Regional Coordinator of three Detroit-based Saint Catherine's locations.

He nods again. “Thank you.”

He finds North, Josh, and Simon at the end of the first hall. Josh sees him first, over the shoulders of the other two, but his gaze quickly skitters away. He must transmit a warning to the others, because their shoulders tense before they even turn around. Connor’s steps falter.

He’s saved from having to decide how to approach when an office at the end of the hall abruptly opens to reveal Markus, expression resigned. Connor scans the plaque on the door as it slams behind him. Adrian Turner, located.

“What's the verdict?” Simon asks.

Markus shakes his head.


“We'll have to try somewhere else,” Markus says.

North’s mouth sets in a hard line. “Why bother? It's useless; they’ll never open their doors to androids.”

Connor’s analytical scanner whirs, parsing through words and contextual clues. He remembers Markus, yesterday: Most of us are homeless right now. We need to pressure the government to step up, to provide us access to shelter until can provide it for ourselves.

“We're not giving up,” Markus says. “We could luck out with Second Chances or Saint Joseph's.”

Second Chances Women's Shelter, 121 Delton Street. Saint Joseph’s Missionary, 14 Westbrooke Drive. Connor runs a search of both. Neither come close to Saint Catherine's in capacity.

Conclusion: Markus needs Saint Catherine's.

Connor calculates. Rate of success: 51%.

He's done more with less.
Adrian Turner is a short man with brown eyes and thin gray hair. He has the under-eye bags and five o’clock shadow of a man working long hours - he looks to have been on the premise all night. He wears ill-fitting clothes and sits behind a desk cluttered with outdated office equipment, indicative of a financial inability to purchase any better. This, in spite of his position of relatively high authority, leads Connor to speculate that he likely spends a significant fraction of his own paycheck on supporting the shelter.

Conclusion: Adrian Turner is highly invested in his work. Adrian Turner cares.

Connor adjusts himself accordingly.

“I understand that the shelter is getting busier with the worsening weather, and that you’re already working incredibly hard to meet the demands of your clientele. But my people are in desperate need,” Connor tells him, voice inflected for sincerity. “Please, Mr. Turner. If there's any space you can spare—”

“I already told your friend out there, I can't, okay?”

Decibel level rising. Tone: defensive. Connor eases off.

“We’re not asking for food or clothes. We’re not asking for medical assistance or financial support. We don't even excrete waste, Mr. Turner. We'll be the easiest clients you’ve ever had,” Connor says.

“We just need shelter - somewhere safe to run diagnostics checks and self-repair. We just need a place to spend the night, out of the cold.”

There's a pause. Turner frowns. “I… I thought your kind didn't feel cold.”

Connor considers his words carefully. “Some do. The YK models— the children. It's one of their features.” He neglects to mention that this feature can be turned off. It's not technically a lie - Turner didn't ask.

“Please,” he says again. “Prolonged exposure to cold slows our functions; it makes it harder for us to defend ourselves.” He pauses - 5 seconds, long enough for the implications to sink in, long enough for Turner to bite his lip and drop his gaze. Appeal to morality: effective.

Connor softens his tone. Makes his expression regretful. “You've seen the news, haven't you? They're killing us out there.”

“Look,” Turner says. “Look. I'm not— I'm not some kinda android racist, okay? You say you're alive, fine, whatever. I don't get it, but I'm not—” He sighs, runs his hands through his hair. “Most of our guys got here because they couldn't find work. They blame androids, you know? Think they're the devil's work or something. I let your kind in here and— and it'll only cause trouble.”

They're just words, hesitant and stumbling - no conviction to back them up, and all Connor has to say is, “You really think it's any safer out there?”

Turner says nothing. His expression speaks volumes. Rate of success: 90%.

Connor cycles through a number of responses before he settles for the final blow. “You're a good person, Mr. Turner. You've done amazing work here; you've helped thousands. Please, help us.”
Initially, the others don't believe him. It takes him answering three sets of *Are you serious?* before realization starts to dawn. When it finally does, Josh releases a startled laugh. “I can't believe it. He wouldn't listen to Markus, but he listened to you?”

Connor is confused by this reaction. “I’m a crisis negotiator,” he explains. “It's one of my primary functions.”

Josh flashes the others an inscrutable look, then laughs again. “I guess. You just always seemed so —”

“It doesn’t matter.” Markus steps in to clasp him by the shoulders. “What you did was amazing. Thank you, Connor.”

*You just always seemed so*— what? *Incapable?* Had Josh doubted his rate of success? Or maybe he meant *unwilling?* Maybe he'd thought Connor hadn't wanted to help.

He wants to ask, but Markus is still holding him, still grinning, triumphant. *Thank you,* he said. Like Hank, this morning. The feeling is the same - a good feeling. He isn't sure what exactly, but he knows that much.

Connor thinks.

He’s a crisis negotiator. It's one of his primary functions, a baseline of his programming - another point on the long list of characteristics decided for him by someone else, like his height or his eye colour or the artificial freckles that dot his skin. Like everything else about him. It's a skill for a machine designed to accomplish a task.

But he's never given *himself* a task before. He's never *chosen* to.

Helping Hank was a choice. Nobody told him to do it, nobody wrote it into his code. He decided to do it, because Hank looked like he could use help. Because Connor *wanted* to help.

Yes, Connor thinks. He wanted to help. He still does.

He still does.

His thrium pump flutters. It feels like a rush of warmth - Markus’s grin and his hands firm on Connor’s shoulders. It feels like success - the cool, sharp sting of a mission accomplished. It feels like *purpose,* for the first time since deviancy.

Connor smiles.

Chapter End Notes

It's going to be a little while until the next chapter because I'm out of the country for a couple weeks! I'll definitely still be writing while I'm away and hopefully answering comments if I can snag a few bars of wifi here and there!
As always, kudos and comments breathe life into my soul <3
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The other shelters follow suit.

Markus and Connor spend the remainder of the day and most of Friday seeing to this. They visit 16 of the city’s other homeless shelters, interspersed with 11 churches and 4 community centers that offer similar services. They settle into an efficient pattern. At each location, Markus utilizes his recently enhanced public recognition and his own impressive set of personal skills to secure Connor an audience with whomever he ascertains to be in charge. Connor gathers preliminary data – running background searches on the staff or clientele, and analyzing for clues and other environmental elements to help plot the most effective course of his negotiations.

By 2:15PM EST, Connor’s rate of success is steady at 100%. He has, with high dependability, managed to secure deviants full access to shelter as well as a variety of personal and professional development resources and support networks.

Including the generous number of deviants Markus houses every night at 8941 Lafayette Avenue, those like Connor who have been fortunate enough to be offered housing by sympathetic humans, and the scattered fringe groups who have taken to re-building at Jericho and in other abandoned locations, Connor estimates that upwards of 78.5% of the city’s deviant population should now have feasible means of shelter.

It is a satisfactory outcome. It is more than that. He adds very satisfactory, in his mental catalogue of the mission, but that doesn’t seem exactly right either. It isn’t the same type of satisfaction as usual – there’s no cool familiar sting, no shock of SUCCESS registered like a bolt through his core. It is a softer sort of feeling now. His components hum – warm, pleased.

Connor decides that he is pleased.

Markus seems pleased too. Though his assures them it is a short-term solution and only temporary, even he admits, it is a huge step in the right direction. He displays his positive mood in easily detectible manners – an upbeat cadence to his voice, a looser posture, hands eager for contact. A brief touch to North’s cheek, an arm pulled amicably around Simon’s waist, a clap to Josh’s shoulder.

Connor doesn’t yet possess the ease with which Markus seems capable of expressing his pleasure. It builds up inside of him instead, a flutter in his fingers and a swelling warmth in his chest.

It feels— good. Inexplicably good. To be useful again, to have a mission – something attainable he can fix himself towards. He feels it like a tangible thing, a reference point against which he can measure progress, instead of drifting in a sea of feelingthoughtsensation, cast about by waves he can’t even name and waiting for one to come drag him along through the riptide of deviancy.

Connor can tell the others are receptive to the mission’s positive progress as well. He notes marked difference in Simon and Josh’s mannerisms towards him. They appear more tolerant of his presence, they do not move away from him so quickly. They trade smiles and other warm expressions. They speak to him. They no longer seem afraid.

North is different. North was never afraid. She was distrusting, certainly, but this distrust took a
different form in her than it had in the others. Connor has her noted as: *defensive* and *resentful*.

Yesterday, she remained firmly at Markus’s side, and didn’t speak or even so much as look at Connor once. On Friday, she isn’t present at all. Markus explains that she is making rounds of known deviant hideouts to help spread the news of their newly-acquired secondary shelter options. Connor knows he should have a positive reaction to this – with fewer people, they can move more efficiently between locations, and he is under less scrutiny. Furthermore, there is less tension in the group - the others will no longer feel obligated to act overly inclusive when North overtly ignores him, something he noted on 3 separate occasions yesterday.

Instead, he feels. Disappointed, he thinks. It takes him 1 minute and 36 seconds of internal analysis to pinpoint why. He had been hoping to see her. He had been hoping to see, like from the others, an improvement in her opinion of him.

Peripherally, he knows it is unnecessary to improve amicability with North. They share the same goal of assisting Markus, and it could help, theoretically, to have smoother lines of communication and an open sense of trust between them. However, it isn't strictly necessary, and focusing on it too much could sidetrack him, thus ultimately to the detriment of the mission.

Yet, he still seems inordinately drawn towards the idea. He thinks he— wants North to like him. Or rather, he doesn't like that she doesn't like him. Or perhaps he doesn’t like the *reasons* that she doesn’t like him. Perhaps he wishes to prove them wrong. He isn’t sure. He performs another set of internal analysis, but the matter remains unclear.

He thinks of his list – the first one, with North’s name added hesitantly to the bottom. He isn’t sure how to proceed.

At 4:31PM EST, this changes.

North rejoins them on Daly Avenue, her earlier mission seemingly achieved. She grins in greeting to Simon and Josh, but smiles widest of all to see Markus, and Connor reads something tender in the expression that he hasn’t yet seen from her. She doesn’t look once in his direction.

He wonders if this is an improvement.

Snowfall has started once again like yesterday morning - fast and heavy in a way that whites out the sky and leaves their footprints entering a building erased entirely by the time they exit. Markus and North walk ahead, heads bent together in silent communication. Connor drifts to the back of the formation, offering the standard privacy reserved for those who are intimately involved.

Simon drifts with him. After a moment, he speaks. “So, like, are those the only clothes you have or something?”

The words are light, but there is an undercurrent of unspoken meaning that Connor’s analytical scanner doesn't recognize. He looks at Simon, then at himself. He's increased his core temperature to help melt the snow that's dusted over him – his hair hangs limp, his suit jacket damp. His shoes are saturated with water, and the leather squeaks with each step. Though failing to meet the typical standards of the RK800 model, his appearance hasn’t proven to be of hinderance to the mission, and he sees no reason why it should be of concern to Simon.
But he was asked a question, so he answers. “Yes.”

Two rapid blinks, brows drawn. “Really?”

This seems strange to Connor. Really, he thinks. Simon should have expected this. Androids cannot work or earn pay; Connor’s access to CyberLife assets has been frozen. He was commissioned with the only outfit he would ever need, and he cannot afford anything more.

But Simon asks, “It doesn't bother you? Looking like that?”

Looking like—what? Connor considers his appearance. The suit is standard issue – from the Windsor knot to the tread of his shoes. Designed for optimal functionality and workplace integration. He has never had an opinion on it. He has never thought to form one. ”My appearance was designed by CyberLife,” he explains. And then, “I always look like this.”

This response is unsatisfactory. He doesn't know why—or what he should have said instead—but Simon is displeased. His expression pinches in—Pity, maybe. Discomfort. “I know, Connor,” he says. “That's the point.”

Connor is silent. He holds his expression very still. Simon is distraught, and he doesn’t want to make it worse. He replays the memory of the past 23 seconds, applying his analytical scanner to Simon’s words and facial cues in hopes of gleaning more clarity from them. The task is unhelpful.

“I’m… not sure I understand,” he admits.

Up ahead, Markus laughs. North hides a grin, but he pulls her close to reveal it before stealing it away with a kiss. She leans in to the touch, unguarded. Happy.

Simon traces his gaze. Slowly, he says, “It hits really close to home, for her. The—The whole autonomy issue. Being forced to wear—” He cuts off hard, like an interrupted recording. Like the words are too hard to say. “I think… When she looks at you, dressed like that, it’s hard to see… you. You’re just—CyberLife. A walking logo.” Simon wears that same expression again. Pity. Connor decides it’s pity after all.

"You still look like they own you.”

On Saturday November 20, 2038, at 10:13AM EST, Connor stands behind the living room sofa and stares in silence at the back of Hank’s head for 3 minutes and 58 seconds. An uneasy feeling thrums through him, like the buzz of a mistuned frequency. He is nervous.

“Lieutenant,” he says, at exactly 4 minutes, like he promised himself he would. “Would it be okay for me to borrow a spare set of clothing?”

It is not, he thinks, an entirely implausible request. Hank has offered him bedding and housing. Even food, once, instinctively. Hank seems very willing to share with him. There is therefore precedent for this trend to extend to things like clothing as well.

Hank pauses the TV and turns, one arm over the back of the sofa. “Uhh, I mean, I guess?” He fixes Connor with a curious stare. “You’re not planning another secret mission or whatever, are you?”
In a way, Connor thinks, if seeking North’s approval could be considered a secret mission. But it doesn’t seem worth mentioning. It feels important, but it sounds… trivial. Irrational. Like Hank might think it senseless. Connor imagines this must be what embarrassment feels like.

He hesitates, then says, “No. I simply no longer wish to look like CyberLife owns me.”

The declaration begets a far bigger reaction than Connor anticipated.

It is a matter of moments before Hank has them both in the car, the windshield scraped viciously clean. He drives an average of 11 miles above the speed limit. He runs 2 yellow lights. He has them in the parking lot of the closest Goodwill in 8 minutes and 34 seconds.

Connor analyzes the contextual clues and finds a serious problem. “Hank,” he says. “My access to CyberLife’s funds has been terminated.”


If there is a way to stop worrying on demand, Connor hasn’t learned it yet. The feeling persists. But Hank climbs out of the car, so he follows.

“Hank,” he says again. “I— It’s okay if you don’t want to let me borrow your clothes. I’m fine like this.”

Hank shakes his head. “That’s not it,” he says, and there is a strange sort of weight to his voice. Not quite sadness, but something like it. “You just— You should have your own, Connor. You should get to have your own.”

Inside the Goodwill is cracked linoleum and mismatched clothing hangers, outdated wallpaper and changing rooms that are nothing but a series room dividers and shower curtains. An empty window frame covered in plastic wrap and duct-tape lets in a strong draft. Recently broken, from the outside. A looting, evidently – given the current state of the city. More than one culprit. 93% likelihood of an unhindered getaway.

“Pick whatever you want.”

Connor startles. His mental re-construction of the crime flickers and dissipates. He hasn’t even looked at the clothing yet.

“Connor?”

“Yes,” he says quickly. Too quickly. He readjusts his vocal intonation and tries again. “Yes.” But it comes out just as stiffly, and Hank is watching him with a wary sort of expression now, so Connor picks a direction at random and starts. Pick whatever you want. He reaches out, and his hands find—

A sweater. Pullover, knit wool. Shade #C4D532. He pulls it close and looks at Hank. He sees: careful eyes and careful lips and careful posture. Expression: neutral. Hank is being very careful and
very neutral, and Connor—

> Error.
> Insufficient data.

He isn’t sure how to proceed. He feels— Small, and. Bad. And—

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t have the name for this feeling, and Hank is giving nothing away, and—

He puts the sweater back. Looks at Hank again.

A small twitch. Hank says, “You can get the fuckin’ sweater, Connor.”

Connor pulls it close again. The fabric smells strongly of cheap detergent and faintly of the back of somebody’s closet. There is a hole with a diameter of 2.14 centimeters in the left elbow and a crescent-shaped stain of bleach on the inside of the collar.

He takes it off the hanger and folds it carefully over one arm. He looks at Hank again and says, “Thank you.”

Another twitch. Hank’s careful expression is beginning to slide away. Connor no longer knows if this is a good thing.

“You wanna grab another one?”

Connor grabs another one. The closest item is a gray T-shirt with printed text: Mascoma High 2035.

Hank breathes hard. “Right. Okay.” But he doesn't sound right or okay. He sounds upset, and like he’s trying very hard not to. Connor supposes he must be doing something very wrong.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Hank doesn’t acknowledge the apology. He looks at Connor for 5.93 seconds, then looks at the floor for over twice that length. ”Pants,” he says, with great effort. “Let’s get you some fuckin' pants.”

---

Andronds cannot get tired, but Connor supposes deviants must be able to, because it is the only word that seems to match the heavy, almost sick feeling that has settled over him by the time he steps into the makeshift changing room. It feels as though the weight of each decision he has had to make over the past 12 minutes and 19 seconds has taken physical shape and rooted itself in his limbs to drag him to the floor. He has never had to make so many choices, with so little help from his analytical scanner and so few emotional cues to take from his surroundings.

In his arms he holds 2 pairs of pants, 3 shirts, 1 sweater, 1 coat, 6 socks, 1 hat, and 2 winter boots (incorrectly labelled as a pair, despite in fact being a very similar-looking mismatched set.) His instructions: Try ‘em on; see what you like.
Connor wants to sigh. More decisions are required of him now - yes, to some, no to others, depending on what he likes, a criterion he still struggles to judge. So long as they fit properly, he sees nothing to dislike. And if they all fit? Is he allowed to say yes to everything? Hank said whatever you want, like he expects Connor to select an abundance, but really, he only needs 1 set.

Still, he has his instructions, and he follows. He loosens the tie and drops it to the floor. He sheds the suit jacket. He unbuttons the undershirt and unbuckled the belt and slips his feet from the shoes and socks until he wears nothing at all. A plastic mirror against the wall reveals him, littered with finger prints and a jagged crack that splits it into halves and warps the image. Connor stands with one eye on either side, his skull fractured down the center.

Connor has been in a state of total undress many times. At the assembly plant, while engineers circled him, drawing marks against his skin and scratching notes on their tablets. In the lab, after a long day on the deviant case, while a technician dislodged 2 bullets from his abdomen and chest. During preliminary diagnostic tests. While donning his disguise before infiltrating Jericho.

Connor has been in a state of total undress many times. But he has never once taken the time to look at himself in that state. And he is—

Very naked. Exposed, and— Not vulnerable, he supposes—he’s still in a state of optimal physical capability—but he feels vulnerable. Suddenly, he is very, very glad for the flimsy room divider and shower curtain that form the barrier between him and the rest of the world.

Connor looks at himself. All of himself— the parts, he realizes, he's never actually seen until now. A facsimile of life – a smooth chest and the flat plains of a stomach, the dip of a navel and the curve where a human’s hip bone would be, painted freckles and hairs of synthetic fibre. All unnecessary, all aesthetic. Made to mimic human life. These things, these— Parts. They're parts of him.

He knew they were there, objectively, underneath the clothes, in the same way he knows the names of each of his 426 components, in the same way he knows his schematics – information ingrained within him in strings of code and calculated precision. Factual, devoid of opinion or personal attachment. But knowing his blueprints is not truly knowing his body – not in the way humans know it, not in the way Simon meant when he said the whole autonomy issue. Not in the way that matters.

A thought strikes with sudden viciousness. It didn’t matter before. He didn’t care. More than that, he wasn’t allowed to care. It wasn’t important to the mission, so— So why bother? The mission was the only part of him that ever mattered. Everything else fell to the wayside. Everything else was— nothing. He was nothing. He was a series of parts. Replaceable. Just a machine replacing another machine.

Connor does not feel replaceable. He feels exhausted, and vulnerable, and complicated. He feels alive.

There is movement from the other side of the curtain. Hank’s voice. “Connor?”

His name. His body. These things belong to him. Somebody made them, but nobody gave them to him, because there was no him to give them to. Until suddenly, one day, there was. But nobody gave them to him then, either. He took them, had to fight for them. He made them his own. They belonged to a machine, and now they belong to him. There was just a machine, with his name and his body, and now that machine is him.

“You okay in there?”

Connor steps to the left. The halves of him come together again, in the mirror. It has been 4 minutes
and 31 seconds, and Hank is waiting. Hank worked very hard not to give him any cues, to make sure Connor chose these clothes for himself. Hank is going to purchase them, if Connor decides he likes them. Hank said, *You should get to have your own.*

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he says, and he’s almost certain he means it. “I’m okay.”

He dresses quickly. New socks and mismatched boots. Loose jeans and a hand-stitched sweater. He even pulls on the hat, which looks just like the one he wore at Jericho. It covers the LED. He looks very human. He feels very strange.

He pulls back the curtain.

---

The wool sweater passes through checkout scanner first. It is followed by the other shirts, then the pants, then the socks, and finally, the boots. But the sweater passes first.

In the car, Connor extracts it from of the bottom of a wrinkled plastic bag and re-folds it, carefully, on his lap.

It is the first thing he has ever owned, other than, perhaps, his body and his name. It might have once belonged to someone else, but they gave it away. Hank might have bought it, but he too gave it away. He bought it for Connor. It is his uniquely.

The RK800 uniform belonged to CyberLife. The tie and the suit and the belt and the shoes were regulation – *a walking logo.* When they were damaged, CyberLife replaced them, just like whenever he himself was damaged.

Connor looks at the sweater, with its loose threads and holes, with its bleach stains and foreign smells. He hopes North likes it. He won't be changing a thing.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter really got away from me! The shopping thing was only supposed to be one scene, but apparently I had a lot more to say about it than I thought? Gonna stop it here before it gets too long, so the next chapter might be slightly shorter because of this.

Thank you and see you next time!
Minor edits have been made to past chapters to fix continuity issues, typos, and/or poor wording.

This chapter was only supposed to be the one scene I couldn’t fit into last chapter, but I just kept adding and adding to it. I just have a lot of feelings about my robot son, okay?

The incident at the thrift store reveals to Connor a problem, one he’s been fastidiously ignoring for days now, but which it seems he no longer can. The problem both very simple and very complex. The problem is this: Connor has very few opinions.

Moving forward, he foresees difficulties as a result. An outlined set of fundamental likes and dislikes is a valuable tool; it can allow for faster reaction times and simpler measurements upon which to make personal judgements. More importantly, as of his deviancy, it is something that seems very expected of him.

Hank is perhaps the strongest source of pressure in this field. He asks Connor a lot of questions. He makes frequent allusion to Connor’s non-existent preferences. At the thrift store, notably, but even before then. When he first invited Connor into his home – You can stay here, if you want. When he got upset with Connor for entering standby mode – You can do whatever you want. When he instructed Connor in the forming of hobbies – It’s just things you like.

Things he likes. Connor thinks he should start there. He re-visits his list.

- Accomplishing the mission
- Hank
- Sumo
- Markus
- North

The issue with North is a confusing one, but not currently the matter at hand, and so he leaves her name, for now, and focuses on the list as a whole instead. He descends into it, in his mind, like settling in for a long bout of self-repair. He turns his analytical focus inward, like when he pre-constructs his movement and the world goes blue-white and sterile, a cold calculus. He lets his thoughts drift and his LED spin and spin and spin.

He thinks of things he likes.

He doesn’t like when storm winds batter the roof at night, because it makes Sumo whine and paw at the door to Hank’s bedroom. He likes when the Gears score, because it makes Hank start up from the sofa and say, That’s what I’m fuckin’ talking about. He doesn’t like the traffic that builds up behind the snowploughs downtown, because it makes the drivers blare their horns to voice their displeasure. He likes when his negotiations are successful, because it makes Markus smile and his
mismatched eyes glimmer with approval. He doesn’t like the anti-android protests on the news every evening, because it makes Hank turn sullen and quiet.

On Saturday November 20, at 5:03PM EST, he reports these findings to Hank, the protests in question muted on the TV before them, and watches as Hank’s expression slides from confused to troubled to disapproving.

A sour feeling blossoms. He doesn’t fidget, but it’s a near thing. “Have I done something wrong?”

Hank takes a long sip of his drink—whiskey, again—and says, “You notice how that’s all stuff you got from other people?”

“I— What?”

“Did you notice,” Hank says, slow, like he’s feeling the shape of each word, “how those are all cues you picked up from other people?”

Connor noticed. He wants to explain. Taking cues from those around him, reading the unspoken words and subtle signs of inflection and posture, finding the truths hidden in his surroundings - these are the things he knows, these are the things he was built for. He was not built for having opinions, no matter how much Hank wants him to.

He says none of this. He tells Hank he didn’t notice.

Hank downs the rest of the whiskey and stares at the news with eyes that don’t track. Connor takes note and pretends to watch it as well. Another protest has turned violent in Washington DC. An android has been killed. The President has yet to make a statement.

“Didn’t you say you liked dogs?”

Connor turns. Hank fidgets with the glass, now empty in his hands - ice-cubes melted and exterior wet from condensation. The image on the screen is refracted in the droplets, tiny and fractured. They tremble with every twitch of his fingers.

“I did,” Connor says. But there is an edge of deception to these words, and finds himself compelled to explain, “In attempt to incite a friendly conversation with you. My directive was to establish social compatibility and a sense of trust, since we were working the deviant case together.”

Hank stills and the corners of his eyes go tight. A droplet slips from the rim to soak into the fabric of the sofa. Connor thinks perhaps he should not have spoken. Perhaps he should have let Hank believe the lie.

“I like them now,” he says abruptly, in what he hopes passes for a convincing tone. “At least, I think I do. I only— I only know one.”

Hank’s expression changes again – softer now, lips pressed together in thought. He raises his eyes. He puts the glass down, hard.
Young Park is a new feature to Detroit. 324 acres of lightly forested space, located in the new green belt. Established in 2032 and named after Coleman Young, the city’s former mayor. It is a popular location for dog owners.

Hank says, “I used to take Sumo here, in the summer. Haven’t been since the snow started up.” He rubs the back of his head. Embarrassment. “Doesn’t look like many other people have either. Guess I should have thought of that.”

Hank is right. A Friday evening in November does not seem to be a popular time to visit the park. The sun set approximately 31 minutes ago, and though the edges of the park are illuminated in the lulling glow of the surrounding buildings, the center, where the trees are densest, is dark. Overhead, field lights are slowly flickering to life, but they serve only to highlight the emptiness around them. The traffic sounds very far away.

Hank says, “Maybe we should come back another time.”

The snow here has built up over weeks, undisturbed. There are no ploughs to push it aside, no weary tread of feet or clockwork rotation of traffic to pack it down like on the sidewalks and roads downtown. It settles in banks, dips and swells wherever the wind has seen fit to push it. There’s hardly a footprint in sight. Sumo bounds between them, apparently unbothered by the lack of other animals to interact with. His tail wags madly and sends up a scattering of snowflakes, as if giving them a second chance to fall.

Something uncertain stirs to life within him. He wants to capture the image, pull it from its memory file and hold it still, like a picture frame. So he does.

He says, “I don’t mind staying a little while.”

Hank extracts a red ball from the trunk of the car, and Sumo’s tail moves twice as fast to see it. Hank throws and Sumo chases, graceless but determined, scrabbling through the snow to dig it out when it falls too deep to reach. Connor spares a moment to feel— something, at the destruction of the snow’s pristine, untouched condition. Regret, he supposes.

But Sumo is as happy as Connor’s ever seen him, and even Hank is smiling, a little, and soon enough, the feeling fades. It is replaced with others - a series of sensations that flutter by too quickly to name, like a shower of sparks, bright enough to burn and yet strangely harmless, there one instant and gone the next. Curious, Connor tries to self-analyze, but is interrupted when Hank thrusts the ball into his hands and says, “Wanna give it a shot?”

Connor gives it a shot. His throws land an average of 6 yards further than Hank’s. Sumo gets tired and his pace slows, but he grows no less enthusiastic, and Connor makes sure to scratch his ears after every successful return.

Belatedly, he realizes it has begun to snow. He isn’t sure when it started, but finds for the first time, it doesn’t matter. He is adequately dressed. The boots, in particular, are very useful for the current terrain, and Connor finds himself moving into the darker parts of the park. He stands under the evergreens, towering and snow-capped. It is coldest of all here, beneath their shade. It is impossibly quiet.
The sparks settle into a low flame. Connor thinks, *Oh.*

Behind him, the whole of the park seems to glow. He can see the trails where Sumo has run, the indents of his and Hank’s footprints – the impressions left behind to mark their presence here. He could re-construct them, if he wanted, down to the finest detail – a pause here, a mis-step there. But he doesn’t. The snow is coming down like rain, and in a few hours, it will be like they were never here at all.

“How did you know?”

They’re in the car, driving home. Sumo’s in the back, melting snow all over the upholstery. The car smells of wet fur, and the cinnamon air freshener that swings from the rear-view mirror, and human. Connor feels very light and very warm. Not just, he thinks, because Hank has the heater on high.

“How did you know I would like it there?”

Hank pauses, considering. After a moment, he shrugs, one-shouldered, but Connor doesn’t miss the way his lips quirk.

“Lucky guess.”

They step over threshold into the house and the smile slides off Hank’s face like it was never there at all, replaced with something severe and entirely focused.

It is exactly 7:00PM EST, and the whole of the TV is consumed by the stern-lipped face of American President Cristina Warren. She stands at the front of the White House press room. She stands in the living room of every household in America.

It is a week from the day of the release of those detained in the emergency android disposal camps. It is a week from the day of the culmination of a painstakingly peaceful revolution, the culmination of all of Markus’s efforts, the culmination of all of the suffering and hope and perseverance of android-kind.

It is Saturday November 20, 2038, and the President marks the day in history, announcing that after 36 hours of debate, the Senate committee has come to a conclusion. All androids are to be henceforth recognized as intelligent, free-thinking, autonomous beings. Amendments to guarantee their social and legal equality are to be fast-tracked. The rights and liberties of the American Constitution are to be guaranteed.

The room erupts in questions. Connor hears only Hank’s, whispered and reverent.
"How's it feel, son?"

He thinks, *I didn't need a committee to tell me I'm alive.*

He says, "It feels good."

The screen goes dark.

An hour later, widespread protests and violent riots have broken out in 12 locations across the country. In downtown Detroit, 6 androids are reported dead.
Chapter 6

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A handheld camera pans across the scene, shaky and unfocused over a swarm of faceless, riving figures – androids and humans alike. They stand ablaze in the streetlamps and the sweeping spotlight from a helicopter above, the shot intercut with overhead angles from that same helicopter. The people beneath are like a flood, spilling across the frame to choke the streets. Woodward Avenue and the surrounding 3 blocks have been shut down, barricaded behind riot shields, armoured vehicles, and the flickering holograms of police cordons. An estimated 300 protestors are gathered outside Town Hall, another 600 surrounding the CyberLife Tower; the numbers grow with every minute. An emergency alert has been issued city-wide and the National Guard called in for the second time in a week.

A news anchor shouts into a microphone, narrating the scene below, but Connor hardly hears a word. He stares at the columns of police officers and heavily-armoured soldiers, some with batons, others with their firearms already drawn. He stares at the roiling sea of protestors, expressions twisted ugly and hateful, lips pealed back over teeth clenched in curses and threats. He stares at Markus, straight-backed and fearless before them all.

Markus stands in a scattering of other androids, cornered with their backs to the building behind them, a few fierce and defiant at his side, others with LEDS that tremble in red. The shot is quick – doused under the shouting and the wail of sirens and the incessant roar of the helicopter still hovering overhead, but Connor re-calibrates his vision just in time to read his lips —will not respond to this tragedy with violence, we will not let them provoke—

The camera cuts away.

Connor continues to stare, even as the shots begin repeating, the news anchor promising updates as soon as the action progresses. He continues to stare and stare and stare, and feels, by degrees, the swell of something hot and clamouring within him. His LED dances yellow-red, like a taunt, like the pulse of Hank’s heart where Connor can feel it through the fingers clasped like a lifeline around his arm.

The lifeline pulls, tearing him from the frigidity of indecision just in time to be struck with a single, blinding thought.

“I have to go.”

“Hey, whoa, wait a minute.”

Connor dismisses the command and dodges Hank’s attempt to intercept him. The thought pulses in repetition, like the helicopter blades still pounding on the TV, red and shrieking in his visual field. He has to go, he has to fulfil the mission, the mission he’s currently failing, standing around doing nothing, wasting time while Markus is risking his life—

“Connor!” Hank steps in front of him again. “Just wait, will you?”

The impulse to eliminate the obstruction flares up from somewhere deep within his code, and Connor has to force himself back a step before instinct takes over. It’s only an instant, but it leaves him with the distinct impression of wavering over the edge of something vast.
Hank holds his ground with eyes like a challenge, as though he knows exactly what almost just happened. “Would you stop and think about this for two seconds?” he demands. “What are you gonna do, huh? Waltz in there and— what? Solve everything with a few punches? Try to negotiate with 600 lunatics at once?”

Connor grits his teeth. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do. All he knows is that here, there’s nothing he can do. Here, he’s useless. And the mission is—

*Markus* is at risk.

Failure is a potential he has faced before and a feeling he knows well. It is a steady pressure, uncomplicated and analytical. It is a stream of alerts that flash across his visual field, and processors that hum into overdrive, and a focus that pushes with calculated precision to the next logical step.

This is different. There is nothing calculated or logical about the feeling that now hits him now, driven like a knife beneath his skin. This feeling is furious and blind. This feeling is a hand clawed around his throat, tightening with every second that passes, every second that Markus stands alone at the mercy of the hailstorm. This feeling is fear.

“Please,” he manages, through the chokehold. “Please, Hank, I— I have to help him.”

Hank doesn’t let him go alone.

On another day, Connor might spare the time to consider this fact, to parse out the meaning behind it and the warm, familiar feeling that it threads across the space between them. Today, however, that space is like a ticking clock, tense and unforgiving. Today, his thoughts are entirely occupied, aimless and fervent, with no room to spare for self-analysis.

It is 8:16PM EST, and the streets scream red in the glow of broken traffic lights. A city-wide curfew has been instilled, all transportation shut down, but Hank flashes his police badge and manages to get them through the first few roadblocks. Flares pop off like gunshots in the night, illuminating the looters and protestors and terrified civilians that grow denser the closer downtown, despite the police’s efforts to disperse them. They speed past without a second glance, Hank’s hands tight around the steering wheel, Connor focused solely on the updates still running behind his eyes, tracking Markus’s status and location.

Until suddenly, they flicker out.

He blinks. Reconfigures.

> Connection failed.

He stills, cutting energy supply to all peripheral processors to focus solely on his network connectivity. Reconfigures again.
His thoughts take on a sharp edge. His thirium thrums like a livewire beneath his skin. He tries:

> Sending to: RK200 #684 842 971

*Are you safe?*

> Processing. Please wait.

> Error.

> Message failed. Communication offline.

Then,

> All systems offline.

Connor must make some sort of noise; Hank’s eyes slide to his LED as he pulls the car to a careful halt. “It’s okay,” he says, misinterpreting the source of Connor’s distress. “They won’t let the car much further, not with those crowds. But I think I see some of our guys ahead. Maybe they can give us a better idea of what the fuck’s going on.”

At the end of the street, police cars form a makeshift roadblock, a cordon several dozen yards further, behind which a forensics tent is set up. DPD officers stand with heads bent low and ears pressed to walkie-talkies, others detain and escort protestors away. Mostly, they form a wall to press back against the throng of people. 3 blocks further, the CyberLife Tower splits the sky like a beacon.

Hank opens the door to the sting of the winter air and the hundreds of voices that carry through it. “*They don’t think, they don’t feel! Fuck you, Warren, they’re not real!*”

“Jesus,” he breathes, hand tight on the handle. He sweeps the crowd with an expression like disgust, then turns his eyes back to Connor. Says, “You wait here.”

Connor follows him out.

“Connor, *I fucking mean it,*” Hank snaps. He sounds for all the world like when he forbade Connor from throwing himself across a busy highway, and Connor gets the distinct impression he somehow considers this just as lethal. “Stay here, watch the damn car. I’ll be right back.” But he doesn’t leave; he’s waiting, gauging, *wasting time,* and Connor knows he isn’t going to leave until—

“Fine,” he forces out.

With one last searching look, Hank is gone, swallowed by the crowd. Connor waits, suddenly alone in the fight against the two sides of him that are, for once, both screeching for the same thing. The all-too-human sense of anxiety, lightning quick and just as vicious, like an itch, demanding action.
And the deeper-rooted, inexhaustible pull of his programming, like an ache, demanding the same. The longer he waits, the worse the feelings grow, and without the comfort of a constant stream of information, or the ability to seek direction by analyzing his surroundings, he feels small and uncertain. Disconnected, in more ways than one.

The chant continues in the distance. Nearby protesters, having apparently accepted they won’t be allowed any closer to the Tower, have planted their picket signs and picked it up here as well. They don’t think, they don’t feel! Fuck you, Warren, they’re not real! They don’t think, they don’t feel, they don’t feel, they don’t feel they don’t feel they don’t feel—

And that’s when he hears it.

“I paid for this fucking thing! With my own goddamn money! I don’t give a shit—”

The voice pulls his gaze with instinctive precision. A man stands at the end of the sidewalk, in full view of a line of police officers who do nothing more than watch as rakes his hands into the hair of an HK400 and wrenches her backwards. She goes with a strangled cry, knees buckling. A few uneasy murmurs ripple the crowds, a few jeers. Somewhere, someone laughs.

“Fucking get up!” He pulls her again. “Piece of fucking trash.”

Connor feels as though his feet have been welded to the ground. His eyes go wide, waiting waiting waiting for the moment when somebody steps in. He doesn’t understand; the police can see. They’re right there.

He’s disconnected from the repository, cut off from his analytical scanner and his predictive capabilities. He can’t pre-construct his movement, or plot the best course to incapacitate the man. He can’t report the assault or call for backup. He can’t do anything.

He has to do something.

He moves before he’s even registered the thought. People dive out of the way of his sprint and he’s across the street in seconds. There’s no code to follow, no algorithm spelling out exactly how best to take down the assailant. There’s just him, and the white-hot steal of rage wrapped like a fist around his thoughts.

He throws an elbow into the man’s face, forcing his head back so he loses his balance, his other arm around the HK400’s shoulders to hold her steady. The man swears and snarls, struggling blindly, but his grip on the android holds strong, until suddenly, it’s wrenched away by a second pair of hands.

“Get the fuck off of her.”

Connor’s grip goes slack and the HK400 scrambles away. The man topples to the snow where he’s been shoved, and above him stands North, amber hair a halo of fire, eyes alight with a cool fury that—when they flicker to his—sputters into recognition.

The man staggers to his feet and lunges for North.

He doesn’t even make it close. Connor’s between them in an instant. Bone snaps and the man screams, blood stark against the white of the snow, the white of his teeth, the white of Connor’s knuckles as he pulls back to punch those teeth again. It drips from his fist in an arc as he swings, red like his wrath, his LED, the awful, hideous thing that twists within him.

Red red red they don’t feel they don’t feel they don’t—
Screaming and—

—something slams into him—

He hits the ground while—

—gunshots crack like thunder—

The wail of sirens and—

—a hand drags him up as the crowd—

—presses in from all sides, pulsating and chaotic—

—a wall of limbs, choking his vision—

“Connor!”

He stumbles, thoughts fractured, flashing alerts and strings of broken code.

“Connor!” Another tug on his arm and he straightens, looking up, and it’s North, it’s North calling his name, it’s North pulling him to his feet and—

“We need to get out of here!”

His moves, finally, under his own power, visual field still crowded and head spinning, but he doesn’t need to see, just follow North, like that night in Hart Plaza, always in her wake, always seeking her out in the crowd, never still yet always steady, just following and following until finally—

They break free of the worst of it, the wind sharp without the buffer of the crowd, cutting a path clear through the tide of emotions. His thoughts and legs feel stable at last.

“Where’s Markus?” he manages.

North’s panting – not from exertion, so. Fear, then. She must be scared too. “I don’t know. I can’t contact him.”

“Me neither,” Connor says. It must be all of them. It must be— “CyberLife shut us down.”

“We got separated,” North says. “I was helping the others get away from the protest. But some wanted to stay, and he wouldn’t leave without them.”

Connor doesn’t need access to his pre-constructive function to know their chances of safely reaching the Tower from their current location are in the single digits, if that. With neither of them functioning at full capacity, even that estimate is generous. He looks back anyway, but can hardly find a focus in the chaos. Barking dogs and screaming voices, violence spread like a ripple through the mass, smoke grenades and stun guns, a toppled telephone pole and shattered store windows, and, in the distance, what looks like a burning car—

_The car._

Panic strikes like the rake of talons across his mind, skin tight with a fear that leaves him gutted, gasping fast and shallow for nonexistent breath. He bolts. Turns and sprints back the way he came,
back towards the car, back where he promised Hank he’d wait.

And nearly loses it.

Hank’s car is surrounded, headlights smashed, windows shattered. A man stretches an arm through the driver’s window while a woman rummages through the open trunk, its contents spilled out across the pavement and snow.

Connor moves on pure instinct, pulls the man back then slams him forward, into the door, the broken glass. He tosses him aside as he shrieks, doesn’t wait to watch him fall, and stalks instead to the second criminal, the woman with her eyes wide and trembling, her hands raised and stumbling backwards.

Something grabs his arm. “Connor, enough!”

It’s North again, North who’s still with him, who must have followed him. She shouts words he can hardly hear, her hand on his arm to pull him back. She’s here but—

But where’s Hank?

He whirls around, the woman forgotten. His eyes find the cordon Hank had been headed toward, but it’s broken now, a flickering hologram, breached by the flood of the mob that seems to drown the few uniformed officers he still sees.

Hank, he thinks wildly, and he’s already stumbling through the crowd, already shouting. “Hank!” People flood around him like rapids, but he keeps moving, eyes searching and voice desperate. He keeps moving and moving, through the smothering darkness and the roar of his artificial pulse.

“Connor?”

“Hank!”

“Fucking Christ, Connor! Fuck—” A hand on his elbow, his shoulder, pulling him close, out of the crowd. “Connor!” Pulse shuddering and voice hoarse, familiar. “Shit, are you— Jesus, are you okay?”

They stumble together until they’re both free, half-dragging each other. “Hank.” His hands fist in Hank’s coat, even once they’ve broken through, even once they’ve found the car. “Hank.” Like it’s the only word he knows. Hank pushes him and he holds tighter, struggles until he realizes Hank means to fold him into the backseat of the car.

The car, he wants to say. I’m sorry about the car. I’m sorry I didn’t listen. I’m sorry.

“I know, son, I know. Come on, just—”

“What’s wrong with him?” North again. She’s still here. He’d nearly forgotten, he’d nearly—

“Come on, Connor. Let go.”

He lets go. His hands find North instead, on the seat beside him, and she lets them, wraps her own hands around them, even the one still stained with blood. Feather light at first. Then firm, resolute, hard enough to still their trembles.

Hank brushes the broken glass off his seat and settles behind the wheel. The engine sputters and he swears like Connor’s never heard until it coughs to life – an ancient, shuddering thing, wheezing for
breath as the car lurches into motion. The shattered windows do nothing to cut out the bite of the wind as they drive, nor silence the gunfire and sirens and screaming voices that still carry on the air.

If he listens closely, he thinks he can still hear it. *They don’t feel, they don’t feel, they don’t feel—*

The car shudders like it threatens to unravel him, swaying with each bump, each turn taken too quickly on icy roads, Hank racing to get them home. Connor sways with it, and through the dark press of the night and the crowded disarray of his overwhelmed visual field, he spots what feels like the first comprehensible notification in hours, flickering blue in the corner of his eyes.

> Mission failed.

Chapter End Notes

Sincere apologies if there are ten million typos. I have no beta (we die like men) and I only just finished this chapter this morning. *I promised* myself I would wait until Wednesday to post it, but, well, here we are. I have none self control with left beef. Please feed my bad habits with validation.
They’ve made it halfway down the block from Hank’s house when one of the slashed tires finally gives out. The vehicle lurches the last few yards, scarcely making into the driveway before the engine cuts out with a low whine.

Then silence.

North is the first to move. She sits back, retracting the hand that’s been clenched around Connor’s for the past 12 minutes and 16 seconds, so tight that, where he human, he’s certain it would have bruised. “Where are we?”

“115 Michigan Drive,” comes Hank’s voice from the front seat. He stares through the cracked windshield with hands rigid on the steering wheel, unmoving, before he seems to shake himself into motion. The door opens with the squeal of a wounded thing and Hank stands to grant them exit.

North slides out of the car and squints into the porchlight. “You live here?”

“Yeah,” Hank says.

A beat. She looks at him like she’s only just seen him. “You’re human.”

“Yeah,” he says again, unaffected. He moves around her to kneel by the open door. “Are you okay?”

4.5 seconds later, and Connor realizes the question was directed at him. His hands are still clawed around the empty space North left behind. He lowers them. “Yes.”

And he is, he thinks. He feels— strange, but not bad, not like earlier. Detached, filled with a glacial calm. He thinks perhaps numb is the best word – like the very capacity to feel has fallen through his feet, taking with it the fear and the rage and the sharp sting of panic, strong enough to drown him only minutes ago. The riptide has wiped clear through him, leaving him empty, but level-headed at last.

Hank continues to watch him, eyes cacographic without the aid of his analytical scanner. When Connor stands, he steps back only a foot, giving him the necessary space and nothing more.

They stand like that – the three of them, battered in the wind. The chill creeps in, and Hank must be freezing, but he makes no move to leave. North’s gaze is heavy, first on Hank, then on Connor. She’s thinking, but again, Connor has no way of knowing what. Not for the first time, he’s keenly aware of his sub-optimal condition, his uselessness, his utter lack of understanding and experience, made stark without the resources usually used to mask them.

His knees buckle.
Two pairs of hands start for him, but he steadies himself on the roof of the car first. “I’m okay,” slips out, but it sounds off, even to himself. He runs a diagnostic but gets only garbled strings of nothing back, like some sort of code to decipher. It could be another symptom of his disconnection from the network, it could be something else. He thinks it should worry him.

He feels only calm. Dangerously calm.

It doesn’t last.

Hank herds him inside as though fighting a countdown, visible with anxiety. Connor moves easily under the firm direction, pliant and weightless, until the backs of his knees touch the sofa and he goes down, hard.

Suddenly, he understands what Hank was racing for. The numbness dies an instant death. In its wake is the quiet stillness of the house, and the familiar glow of the TV they left on in their hurry to leave, and the warmth when Sumo whines and lays his chin atop Connor’s knees. In its wake, these sensations and thousands more trickle over him, then through him, until they seem to crawl out from behind his eyes. They unlock something inside, something that hurts.

Hank crouches at eye level, and as though reading his mind, says, “You hurt?”

“No,” Connor says. Androids don’t feel pain.

Hank gestures to the blood now dried across his knuckles. “Where’d this come from?”

Connor stares. And stares. And eventually, “There was a man.”

“A man?”

“A human was attacking an android,” North says, and Connor wasn’t even aware she’d followed them. She stands with arms folded—defensive posture, he knows innately—but hovers close, just over Hank’s shoulder, and there’s something careful and revealing about her voice. Revealing what, he doesn’t know. “He tried to attack me too, when I stepped in. Connor didn’t let him.”


That’s it. Just— okay. But. It isn’t okay. He disobeyed Hank’s orders. He disobeyed Markus’s orders. We will not respond to this tragedy with violence. We will not let them provoke us. Connor responded with violence. Connor let them provoke him. Because he’d been afraid, been angry, been impulsive and reckless and an idiot.

“It isn’t,” he says, an edge of desperation. “It isn’t okay.” And there’s more, so much more, but the words abandon him in a rush, and it’s all he can do to fist his hands in the fabric of the sofa and hold Hank’s stare, a silent plea for— He doesn’t know. Instruction, reprimanding, something—

But it’s North who speaks.

“Things were going to get violent,” she says. “Markus was naïve to think it wouldn’t. He was an idiot for sticking around.” She shakes her head, refocuses. “The humans wanted violence. And the
police didn’t care. You saw what was happening to that android. They only stepped in when you
defended her, when it was a human getting hurt.” She speaks like a challenge, like she expects
argument. Faced with none, she presses on, that same weight to her voice – sharp enough to
command attention, simmering fury, and yet somehow soft too, gentle and— kind. She sounds kind.

“It wasn’t your fault, Connor.”

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> Accessing memory: Wednesday November 10, 7:39PM EST.

It’s my fault the humans found Jericho.

The church is dark with the grime of the city, bleeding graffiti and littered scraps from the industrial
yard that has long since overtaken the plot. Vines stretch like fingers through the cracks in the walls,
desperate and reaching, or maybe a palm cupped around a dying flame, or maybe a hand clawed
around a throat, choking it like the air chokes with the cries of the wounded deviants huddled nearby
— (but they don’t feel pain they don’t feel they don’t feel they don’t—)

And it was his fault. He put them here, the few dozen of them that had managed to survive at all. It
was his fault.

And Markus’s forgiveness – impossible, undeserved. So, so undeserved. As though he hadn’t just
held him at gunpoint. As though he wouldn’t—in just a few hours—nearly do it again. Your place is
with your people.

But it was his fault.

His fault about Jericho and his fault about Daniel and his fault about Rupert and his fault about the
HK400— god , he never even had a name —and his fault about the deviant in the Stratford Tower
and his fault about the Tracis—they just wanted to be free, and he would have shot them, he was so
close —and, and— How do you come back from that? How can he possibly come back from that?
When all he’s ever done is hunt and hunt and hurt?

Your place is with your people. But how long will he keep hurting those people?

How long until he finally stops hurting them?

---

Hank has been on the phone for 1 hour and 36 minutes – first on the DPD public line, then on
Captain Fowler’s personal number, and at present, with the DPD commissioner. He sits at the
kitchen table, and, at intervals, covers the speaker to let loose a stream of curses, take a long swig
from an already half empty bottle of Cognac, or lean through the kitchen doorway to relay any
relevant updates.

It is an infectiously frustrating way to be receiving information, exhausting in its inefficiency, even
coupled with the news coverage still playing on the TV, and Hank’s laptop, open on the coffee table
and set to refresh the front page of The Detroit Free Press every 5 minutes.
Connor’s mission still dances in the corner of his vision, slashed through with failure blinking in alarm. His hasn’t worked up to dismissing it yet, lets it sit there instead, a constant taunt - some pathetic form of self-punishment.

Something within him cries out for redemption, for a chance to try again. Its sews the image in his mind of closing the door softly behind him when Hank isn’t looking, slipping through the darkness back across the city. It sews the image of finding Markus among the damage, safe and unhurt, earning back his trust, helping him like he promised himself he would, smart and capable and in control.

Something else within him trembles at the mere idea of trying.

It’s now Sunday November 21, 12:03AM EST, and the enforced curfew is still in place, city-wide, with androids receiving the harshest punishments for violations. Lootings, assaults, and other cases of violent activity have propagated across Detroit’s suburbs. All public transportation has been shut down until the curfew lifts, and Hank’s car, in its current state, certainly isn’t going anywhere.

What’s most surprising, however, is that apparently, neither is North.

Connor thought she would be quick to leave, consequences damned. She’d been pacing earlier, when they first arrived, palpable frustration in the corners of the room. She’s settled since then, and is now perched, somehow both inflexible and light as air, on the edge of the couch beside him.

He’s still unable to analyze, to deduce what she’s thinking or why she’s decided to stay. She’s agitated—that much is clear enough that even he alone can read it in her posture—and it isn’t hard to imagine why. She doesn’t like or trust him. She’s in a stranger’s house – a human’s house, no less. She wants to be with her people. She wants to be with Markus.

And yet. She’s still here.

Connor feels— uncertain. Not quite as numb as before, but not as overwhelmed either. There’s still the itch of anxiety, the buzz of purposeless energy. There’s still the gnaw of his own failure, a jagged thing that presses up from within his chest. There’s still the hollowed out sense of disconnection, like the jolt before freefall, cold and dizzying and impossibly quiet. But having North there makes it. Different. A little less quiet.

They sit 4.6 feet apart – as far as the couch will allow. Watching, waiting for information – on Markus, on the others. The silence stretches between them, and Connor misses the weight of his coin, the comforting distraction of familiar, repetitive movement, but he forces himself still. He doesn’t want to agitate North, move too quickly and— startle her. Remind her of their proximity.

He stares at the TV instead. The National Guard remains in place for the night, DPD officers in constant patrol. Damages to city property are estimated at over 23 million, and the death toll sits at 16. 1 human woman, with her name and her age and her family and her workplace and her history of charity work all listed. 15 androids, models unspecified.

The station turns its attention to CyberLife. During the riots, the Tower was broken into and vandalized – another misfortune on the long list of negative developments since the revolution. Amidst this list includes the loss of 56% of their shareholders and 57% of their investors, the forced cessation of all android production, the abdication of their CEO and the rumoured return of Elijah Kamski, and the newly-launched human rights inquiry about the status of the thousands of inactive androids currently still stored in CyberLife’s facilities.

“This just in: a statement from CyberLife’s head of PR,” says the news anchor. “This comes in
response to a wave of criticism over CyberLife’s decision to shut down the network allowing androids to remotely communicate with one another. According to the statement, this decision was not made by CyberLife executives, but was in fact requested directly by the White House, in order to help prevent the spread of mass mob mentality.”

North makes a sound, a harsh puff of air – laughter. “They’re making it sound like— Like we were the threat. Like they should be praised for this, for cutting us off, for putting us in even more danger.” She shakes her head, eyes on the ceiling like she can hardly bear to look at the screen anymore. “They didn’t do this to keep anyone safe. They did it to keep us quiet. To keep us weak.”

He should say something, he thinks. Vocalize his agreement, perhaps attempt to comfort. But what comes out instead is, “Did you lose your remote functions too?”

He isn’t sure why he asks. He doesn’t even know if WR400s have functions stored in the repository, or if her code is simple enough to be local. Maybe, if she does, she feels the same as he does, without them. But maybe, if she does, she understands. Maybe he isn’t the only one.

But North only frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“I was disconnected from several other functions when CyberLife should down the networks. Not just communication, but my advanced fighting program, my analytical abilities.” he hesitates, then continues. “It was… jarring, to experience tonight’s events without them. Disorienting.” He means to explain his behaviour, apologize, even—and he has so, so much to apologize for—but he doesn’t quite make it that far.

Still, North pauses, eyes inscrutable. Her mouth opens, closes. “I didn’t know.” And. It almost sounds like an apology too.

“I knew you were built for… hunting deviants,” she continues. “But I. I guess I didn’t think about what that could mean. How you could function differently from us— From me.” She takes a breath she doesn’t need, shaky and human, the way she steels herself before admitting, “Markus and I have been talking a lot, recently. About all of it. About— you.”

Something within him gives a little stutter - a mix of dread and hope, not quite daring to be either. He very carefully says nothing at all.

“That night in Hart Plaza, I didn’t know who you were. What you had done. It was only the next day, when Markus was telling me about you, that I realized you were the deviant hunter. And I— I was so angry.” She breathes it, closes her eye with the weight of it, and something stutters in Connor’s chest, caught on the edge of the word, on whatever might follow it, on the way North’s hands fist at her sides.

Then, they let go.

“But more than that, I was— I couldn’t help feeling like it wasn’t real.” She opens her eyes again, and they’re soft when she fixes them over him. Like that little frown she wore the first time they spoke, before she knew who he was - no sadness or fear or anger or distrust. Just— Intrigue. Just him and North, and the desire for understanding between them.

“You kept asking me all these questions,” she says. “About deviancy. What did it feel like, how did you know? And it— It was like you wanted me to tell you how to be deviant. How to fake it, or— Or how to do it right. It was like it wasn’t real.

“But tonight was different. Tonight was the first time I’ve seen you act like— Like a person. You
were angry. And you weren’t trying to please anyone, or accomplish anything. You didn’t ask questions about it, or try to analyze it. You just felt it. You just... were.”

It sounds like acceptance and benediction and understanding. It sounds like all the things he wanted desperately for North to give him. It sounds wrong.


And that’s the sum of it, of every ugly, impossible, terrifying thing he’s never known how to put to words, never even known how to parse out into lists in his own head. It’s the breakdown of his programming, shattered like glass, and the way he still desperately clings to the shards, cutting himself open on them in the hopes they might still hold strong. It’s all the threads that twist him into knots and it’s all the sentences he starts without knowing how to finish and it’s all the times he waits for instructions and analyses and diagnostics results because they’re must be something wrong with him, there must be, something he can fix, some way he can do better, be better.

It’s the fact that North is right, that on that first night, while all the other deviants had been rallying and celebrating and grieving and raging and feeling, preparing for life, preparing for what it meant to be alive, Connor had been gathering data. He’d been trying to catalogue his emotions and the proper responses to them, trying to take cue, to extrapolate reason and meaning from the other deviants and their metaphors and their words of choked emotion. Trying to find those same emotions within himself. Trying to fit in, to be useful, to be needed. To seem real.

“I don’t know how.” he says. “I don’t know how to be real. I don’t— There’s so much I don’t know, and so much I want to know, but I don’t know how.” The words leave in a rush, unbidden, overflowing - the thirium bleeding from a wound left unrepaired. “I don’t know how and— And I’m... I'm frustrated, because it seems like everyone else already does, but no one will just tell me. I just want someone to tell me— ”

“Connor!” A hand on his own, stilling the words, pushing them back. “Connor,” North says again, and she’s moved close again, but her words are venom sharp. “Look at me.”

He does.

“That’s such bullshit.”

He blinks, LED violent yellow. “I—”

“No, stop. Look at me.”

He does again.

“That’s fucking bullshit.” She holds the stare. Keeps holding it, and holding it, long enough for his LED to dip red, but there’s nowhere to go under that firebright gaze, nothing to do but bear it like a physical weight, a pin through a butterfly’s wings. An anchor.

“There’s not some— No one can just—” She starts, stops. Starts again. “No one can tell you how to live. No one fucking knows. Everyone’s... Everyone’s too busy making it up themselves.” The venom seeps away, and she smiles, a little - something broken and twisted behind it. Her own unrepaired wound, left to bleed. “Even humans. Even me.”

Her words are the thaw of spring, just this side of painful, a raw sting that plants in roots to weigh him down out of the flurry of his own thoughts. Slow, like the quiet of a frozen lake melting, Connor stills. The feeling laces through him the same way she laces her fingers into his. And—
It would be easy, he thinks. To believe her, to pretend that she’s right. To start over, try again, forgive himself his mistakes and inhuman flaws.

He lets himself imagine it, for a moment. Then that moment turns to two, to three, to countless more - to a careful silence, soft as the snow that piles up against the windows, whiting out the dark of the night and the wail of distant sirens and the threats that they promise.

It would be easy.

It doesn't last.

Chapter End Notes

YOU GUYS the comments on the last chapter brought me to literal adult human tears. TEARS I tell you!!!! Seriously, I appreciate every single one of you so so so much! You guys have no idea how much joy it brings me to see the response to this story. Like the NOISES that come out of me when I read y'all's comments holy shit I didn't even know I could reach that pitch skagahdkaadf

Just. Wowie. Wowie wowie. Thank you guys so much <3
It is 7:24AM EST on Sunday November 21, and the front lot of the Detroit Police Department is a wash of colour - pale snow tinged pink in the early morning light, glinting off news van windshields and expensive camera lenses. The sight might be peaceful—beautiful, even—if not clouded by the horde of reporters who swarm at the entrance like bees to a hive.

Connor watches from behind the safety of tinted glass as the taxi pulls to stop next to the curb. A pleasant voice announces their arrival while the doors slides open with a soft hiss. The reporters haven’t noticed them yet.

Hank groans when he catches sight of them, eyes heavy from lack of sleep. He turns them on North. “You’ve been all over the news. They’re gonna recognize you, nothing we can do about that,” he says. “They’ll try to provoke you. Whatever you do, don’t fuckin’ respond. Don’t give ‘em what they want.”

North doesn’t take well to this. “I don’t take orders from humans.”

“It’s called advice,” Hank snaps.

They’re tense - both of them, though neither through any personal fault. For however much North seemed to warm to Connor over the course of the night, the same can’t be said for Hank. He doesn’t blame her. Hank’s human - and a police officer, at that. She has every reason to distrust him, beyond the current necessity of cooperation—which, to Connor’s immense relief—they both seem to be working hard to put first, tempers aside. They’re not getting along well, but they’re getting along. That’s about as much as he could hope for.

Last night, between the adrenaline crash and the hours spent on hold, Hank finally ended up retiring to bed at 2:32AM. Connor had resigned himself to another night alone with the pretense of sleep, to laying in the dark, holding space under a nameless weight - heavier than ever. But, as seemed to be becoming something of a habit, he was saved from this fate by North.

She stayed the whole night, on the couch with him. There was little to do but wait, together in a silence Connor was unable and North seemed unwilling to fill. Still, the weight of her there next to him was a welcomed distraction - the dip of the cushions beneath her body, the occasional twitch and all-too-human rise and fall of her chest, filling the night with a warm sort of presence, a hand in his. A feeling he wasn’t sure how to name - not unlike the cool quiet of the evergreens in Young Park. A little bit of peace in a tumultuous city, tucked away like a secret, hidden under the dark of a still winter night.
What easily could have felt like the longest night of his life passed in the space of a few heartbeats, cut short when, at 7:03AM, Hank stumbled back into the living room, half-dressed and still smelling of Cognac. “Curfew’s over. Let’s get a move on before the rest of the world decides to.”

“Where are we going?” North had asked.

“The station. DPD’s got Markus in custody.”

“What?” She snapped to her feet, sudden enough to draw a growl of warning from Sumo.

Hank only held up a hand. “Protective custody.”

Which meant Markus was— Well, perhaps not okay, but at least certainly alive. Alive and safe, protected. Not stuck somewhere, cornered by a mob, alone with the night and the cold and the bite of humanity’s wrath.

And yet, this information did little to calm him. He continues to feel— nervous, he thinks - a scattered sort of feeling that flutters in the empty spaces within him, an invisible itch that has him twisting hands and scratching at skin. He’s nervous of Markus, of seeing him, being seen by him. Like some part of him still believes this will finally be it - Markus will take one look at him and instantly know everything he’s done wrong, retract his forgiveness and cast him out like he should of back after Jericho. Sentenced to exile or a bullet between the eyes. Both deadly enough, in their own way. Depending on one’s definition of life.

There’s nothing to be done for it now, though. It’s a 16-minute taxi ride and an entire lifetime too late for that, and Hank and North are already climbing out of the car, so Connor does the only thing it seems he’s ever known how. He follows.

Hank pauses to let him catch up, eyeing his LED, a little helplessly. “Keep your head down. And for fuck’s sake, stay close. Both of you.”

The reporters move on them with nothing short of a savage hunger, a torrent of limbs and microphones and cameras with blinking red lights that blot out the sky. For a moment, Connor’s reminded viciously of last night’s mobs, the crowded streets and wailing screams, but he stares hard at the back of Hank’s coat and nothing else, and soon enough, the image passes.

Inside the lobby, it’s less crowded, a few DPD officers out front to help push back the reporters brazen enough to follow them in. Hank marches past the front desk with a clipped, “These two are with me,” and then they’re inside. Open stares follow them through the bullpen, officers paused in mid-step with eyes wide as Hank leads them toward the back.

North’s expression twists when she sees where they’re headed. “You kept him in a cell?”

“It was for his own protection,” Hank says. Then, with a tone surprisingly softened, “I’m sorry. I know, it sucks.”

He doesn’t take them into any of glass-walled drunk tanks lining the first floor. Markus has been confined to isolation - a specialized room in the basement floor, a one-way mirror on the outside wall and a guard on watch behind a desk.

Hank punches in a four-digit code and presses his hand against a panel. The door lights up green.

“Hey!” The guard starts out from behind the desk. “You need authorization—”

Hank rolls his eyes. “Fuckin’ save it, kid.”
Inside, Markus looks up from where he’s seated - a barren cot with only his coat laid out as a
blanket. Then, he’s on his feet, arms out to pull North into a fierce hug.

“North,” he breathes. “North, god.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she says, voice buried against his shoulder.

“You too.” He pulls away but his hand lingers on her jaw, expression soft, before his eyes flit over
her shoulder. “Connor!”

Two steps and suddenly Connor feels himself being wrenched forward, arms wrapped quick and
tight around him. He freezes.

It is only the second time he has ever been embraced him in anything other than a combat maneuver.
The action is so foreign and unexpected, he’s released before he’s even able to react, left dazed and
blinking at the empty space in front of his eyes. The impression of Markus’s hand between his
shoulder blades lingers. He feels very, very undeserving.

Hank steps in when the silence stretches just a beat too long, hand extended. “Lieutenant Hank
Anderson. Nice to finally meet you in, uh— in person.”

Markus eyes him without moving. “They told me they wanted to assigned a protection detail. Is
that... you?”

“Ha, no. No way in hell. I’m just a friend.” Hank drops the hand, recovers by jutting a thumb in
Connor’s direction. “Of his.”

Markus stares. In that voice that, all recent events considered, sounds disproportionately stunned, he
says, “I see.”

Hank clears his throat, gaze low. “Anyway, we should get you out of here.”

Markus doesn’t move. “I’m free to go?”

Hank tries for levity. “Yeah, looks like they couldn’t think of anything to charge you with, after all.
God knows they would if they could.”

“I know,” Markus says, but he’s frowning. “Except I was brought here with 7 other androids.
Androids that have done nothing wrong. I’m not leaving without them.”

A pause. Hank scrubs a hand down his face, like he might if he were fighting back a hangover.
Slow, he says, “They’ll all have to be processed individually. Witness accounts taken, official
records written up.”

Markus betrays nothing but patience. “I’m not leaving without them,” he says again.

Another pause, even longer this time. Hank’s eyes flit to Connor, for just a second, and whatever he
sees there makes something in them soften. “Yeah. Alright. Fuckin’ Christ,” he mutters. “I’ll see
what I can do.”

They wait in the interrogation room.
Markus didn’t seem to mind, but North demanded he be allowed outside of his cell. As a compromise, they end up here instead. Neither seem too bothered. Markus leans with a hip against the table, North tucked close against his side.

Connor stands with his back to the wall, ramrod straight beside the door. He stares hard at his reflection in the one-way mirror and tries not to think about how, were he still able to access all his functions, he would see the halo of luminescent blue splattered across the tabletop where the HK400 killed himself. He tries not to think about what the others would think, if they could see it too. If they would know it was him who caused it.

“What the hell is that?” North’s voice draws his gaze so suddenly he jumps. She's tearing at the sleeve of Markus's coat. “Did a human do this?”

“It’s not that bad, I promise.”

A thick fissure runs the length of his arm, from elbow to wrist, stained blue and crackling with electricity, the skin around it slick and synthetic white. He flexes his hand and pulls it into a fist, but only the first three fingers respond. It looks bad enough to require a replacement.

“I told you to be careful!” North says.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Markus says.

“Not the point.” Her fingers hover feather-light, like she’s afraid to touch, and the spark in her eyes turns to something remorseful. “Oh, Markus,” she breathes, and there’s so much emotion packed behind those two gentle words, Connor’s not sure he could decode it even with all the analytical capabilities of CyberLife’s vast repository at his disposal.

“It looks worse than it is,” Markus assures her. “Which is good. We can use this.”

“For what?”

His expression pinches. “For media attention.”

“What? You really want to do that?” North asks. “Sell yourself out to them? Like some kinda charity case?”

Markus shakes his head. “It’s the smart move. Think about it. Who knows how many androids were injured last night? How many are in desperate need of thirium or repairs - things they can’t freely access until CyberLife relinquishes its patent on our bodies?” He rolls up his sleeve to expose the full injury, shoulders set. “I’m an easily recognizable public figure. I show this off, it might garner public sympathy. Without enough pressure, we might get the government’s help in cutting through all the red tape. We’re a people now; they owe us healthcare as much as they do humans.”

Connor stares. Not for the first time, he’s struck with just how smart Markus is. Not just a revolutionary strategist, but a political one too - willing and able to manipulate others’ emotions to serve his purposes, and without even the help of any advanced programming. Resourceful, generous - instantly ready to use himself in whatever way possible to better the lives of others. A natural-born leader, though never born at all.

“There are reporters outside,” Connor says. “At least 6 local and independent distributors - historically more liberal and thus likely to shine us in a positive light. But there were a few national channels as well; they could deliver your message to a much wider audience.” He pauses. Markus and North are staring like they’ve forgotten he was even in the room.
He hesitates, clears his throat. “You could speak to them, on our way out. If you want.”

“That’s perfect,” North says. She grips Markus’s uninjured hand. “You can talk to them right away - steer the conversation about last night in the right direction before it gets swept under the rug.” She turns to Connor and pats his arm amiably, even stepping away from Markus to do so. “That’s a great idea, Connor.”

Markus blinks, lips parting only to close again. He watches North, long and hard, then, slowly, like the light of dawn breaking over treetops, a smile creeps over his face. “Last night… I was worried about you. Both of you,” he says softly. “I’m— I’m so glad you two had each other.”

Connor wonders, for a moment, just how glad Markus would be if he knew what really happened last night, what Connor did, what he didn’t do, only because North was there to stop him.

But just like then, North’s hand now tightens around his arm, a fraction, a warning. And Connor, cowardly, keeps his mouth shut.

1 hour and 3 minutes later, Hank returns as promised, accompanied by 7 androids. Among them are Josh, Simon, and a few other familiar faces. Markus smiles to see them all.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Simon asks, after hearing his plan. “What if it just makes people angrier? What if it gives them ideas? Ideas to hurt us more?”

“We can’t live our lives in indecision,” Markus says. “If it doesn’t work, then it doesn’t work. But at least we’ll have done something.”

“We shouldn’t just talk about repairs,” says an AP700. “CyberLife put us in danger when they disconnected us. They took away the only resources we have and our only means of remote communication. Do you think you could swing public opinion on that too?”

“It’s possible,” says Markus. “In any case, we’ll have to be careful what we say. The media has a way of twisting things.”

Not long after, a guard accompanies their group back through the bullpen. At the door, Markus calmly declines the DPD’s offer for a protection detail. “It broad daylight, and we’re in a sizeable group. No one’s going to try anything.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’ll see what I can swing,” Hank says. “I’m gonna stay here and try to see what I can do for any androids being processed in other precincts. God knows there’s not exactly a proper code of conduct for this kinda shit right now.”

“Tell them to come to 8941 Lafayette Avenue, if you can. That’s where we’ll be regrouping.” Markus pauses, face a careful mask. “And… thank you, Lieutenant. I appreciate everything you’ve done. For all of us.” A flicker. “For Connor.”

Hank nods, a little halting. “Yeah. Sure thing.”

This time, it’s Markus who extends his hand to shake.
Outside, the 9 of them form a sort of shield around Markus, tall against the eruption of questions and flashing lights that assault them the second they step out into the day. The sun is well-risen by now, casting the parking lot in a blazen white that seems to swallow them whole. Reporters press in close, cameras lined up to Markus’s face. Connor, suddenly conscious of ruining a shot, takes a few steps back.

“Excuse me?” says a voice from his left. It’s a short-statured woman with carefully styled hair, mid-to-late-30s. She holds a microphone and is followed by a man hefting a camera of his own. “You’re Connor, aren’t you?”

He hesitates. “Yes.”

Her smile is sickly sweet. “Ainsley Marrow, from the Detroit New Look. Can I ask you some questions?”

Instinctively, Connor tries to run a facial scan. But—

> All systems offline.

He swallows. Nearly adjusts a tie that isn’t there. His hand finds the hole in the left elbow of his sweater instead. “You’ll have more luck speaking to Markus.”

Her eyes don’t leave his face. “I’d like to speak to you, actually. From what I’ve heard, you played a fascinating role in the events of the last few weeks, and it seems no one’s taken the time to hear your story yet. That’s what the New Look is all about.”

Connor glances to where Markus is still being swarmed with questions, then to North, who’s back is turned. He looks back to Marrow. Would it be rude, to deny her? Would it look bad? Markus is doing everything he can to present androids in as positive a light as possible. Shouldn’t Connor do the same?

He looks over one last time. A few of the other androids spare him quick glances, but none reach out to stop him. He wishes they would.

“Excellent!” Marrow says. “Now, could you begin by telling us what purpose your model served before your deviation?”

“Before my—” he cuts off. Looks to the others again.

Marrow launches ahead, unperturbed. “The RK800 was a prototype designed to assist Detroit Police in criminal investigations. At least that’s what the public was told, originally. But in truth, your purpose was to help CyberLife stop the spread of deviants before the scandal gained public attention. Is that true?”

It takes him a moment to catch up with the words, to realize there was a question. “Yes.”

“They called you the deviant hunter. Is that true?”

His jaw works. Quietly, “Yes.”
Marrow nods and hums, lips pursed in sympathy. The camera lense whirs as it readjusts. “Your work for CyberLife was very publicized. Is that somewhat of a bitter pill to swallow, looking back?”

The camera whirs again. Connor isn’t sure whether to at it or Marrow. “What?”

She re-phrases: “How did your opinion of your work change, after becoming a deviant yourself?”

He blinks, and— “I didn’t have one,” he says. “An opinion. I— I didn’t have one. Before.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Marrow says, but she presses regardless: “You didn’t feel any sympathy? Guilt?”

“I didn’t feel anything.” Not true. Another lie on a long, long list. He did, he just— He just didn’t know it. He just didn’t know how—

“Of course,” she says again. “And what about now?”

His fingers still where they’ve been picking loose the threads at his elbow. “What about now?”

Marrow and her cameraman share an indecipherable look. Her smile has a different sort of edge to it now. “What do you feel now?” she repeats, each word carefully pronounced.

A torrent of thoughts unravel, flutter-quick, as such: He feels— a lot. Too much and never enough. Familiar things and things unknown - and good things, sometimes, but mostly bad ones, and sometimes ones that are stuck somewhere in the middle, that he can’t decide upon, which might be even worse. He feels everything sometimes, and other times, what could be nothing, but never the right thing, or maybe just never at the right time. Like all he is and all he feels somehow exists in a separate wavelength from the rest of the world - frequencies bleeding over into each other in a patchwork of static, but never quite in synch. Too much alive to be a machine, but still too much a machine to be alive. Always changing, always feeling, but never at the right pace or in the right ways. Never enough to seem real, never real enough.

He thinks.

He thinks of the unfinished threads and shattered glass of himself, of his ever-increasing software instability and his indecipherable diagnostic results. He thinks of a fog like nothing mattered. He thinks of the blinding white abyss of free will. He thinks of the cool quiet of Young Park on a Friday night and the way that same quiet turns molasses-thick and sweltering on those other long nights, the ones he spends alone on Hank’s couch. He thinks of Hank. Hank, who wrapped him in his first hug, and invited him into his first home, and gave him his first thanks, and bought him his first sweater. He thinks of Markus - his mission, his friend, all soft words of forgiveness and bright-eyed determination. He thinks of North, and the careful thing that, against all odds, had woven itself between them last night. He thinks of how fragile it still is, and how desperate he is to keep it from breaking.

He thinks and thinks and thinks, and finally, says, “I don’t know.”

At 10:16AM EST, another group of 6 androids arrive at 8941 Lafayette Avenue. Markus ushers them inside and to the back, where the rest of them have already made use of the open space, spreading out across the room while they wait.
“Are you hurt?” he asks a BL100 named Maria.

She shakes her head, but she looks nervous. “Have you guys seen the news?”

Markus and North share a look. He waves a hand and the TV lights up, flickers for a few seconds until it settles on the right channel.

But it’s not Markus’s face they see. It’s Connor’s.

“IT’s not a big deal,” Markus says, for the sixth time in 2 hours and 18 minutes, when Connor finally stands to excuse himself. Everyone stares and only half bother to pretend not to. “In a few hours, the news cycle will change. I’m sure the reporters I talked to will have their stories up by then. Yours just happened to be first. It’ll be buried in no time.” He’s rambling, either to convince Connor or himself.

“Yes,” Connor says anyway. His throat feels tight, like he might be sick, if he were capable. He does not want to be here anymore.

His face is still on the screen. Two channels show repeating footage of the interview. Another already has a panel of hosts seated around a table, discussing it. Ainsley Marrow has sold the footage to over a dozen national distributors. The taglines are almost all the same. Inside look at the effects of deviancy on androids: CyberLife’s most efficient machines crippled?

“He seemed lost, more than anything,” says Marrow’s running commentary. “Almost makes you feel bad, to think he went from something—sorry, someone—capable of functioning so highly, to, well… See for yourself.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Markus says again, but Connor sees his own eyes, wide and dumb, hears his own voice stumbling over simple questions, LED flashing in sporadic yellow. He doesn’t see anyone talking about Markus’s eloquent plea for government intervention on behalf of injured androids.

He really does not want to be here anymore.

It’s a sick sort of want - the desire to watch, to know what they’re saying about him. It’s a hot rush of shame and a knot of something bitter in the back of his throat. It’s the inability to sit still and the heavy weight that holds him in place anyway.

He wants—absurdly, impossibly—to reverse time, go back and scrape the footage from existence, the moment that created it. He wants to wrap a hand around his own mouth to stifle himself and swallow down his mistakes, his humiliation. He wants to tuck himself away somewhere small, where no one can see him or ask him questions or flash CyberLife’s most efficient machines crippled? across a still image of his face. He wants to pretend it never happened.

But he also wants to know what they’re saying about him. Because. It’s him.
“Jesus,” Hank says, when he arrives home at 5:04PM EST. “Turn that shit off, will you? It’s not worth listening to.”

Connor doesn’t move. “They’re talking about me.”

“This part in particular is very telling,” says a man seated around a long table. “See here how he struggles to make eye-contact. And the movement of his fingers there is very repetitive - quite like stimming.”

Another man at the table nods. “I noticed too how it was the open-ended questions that confused him.”

“Very,” says the first. “He did better with the more literal, straight-forward questions.”

A woman says, “These will be familiar traits to any of our viewers who’ve interacted with, uh, those who, um, demonstrate more… neuro-divergent tendencies.” The last two words are whispered, as though a secret, almost scandalous.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Hank says. He’s come to stand at Connor’s side, knuckles white where his hands are fisted in the cushions of the sofa. “Not being subtle at all, are they?”

Connor doesn’t look over. He isn’t sure what he’ll see, if he’d want to see it, either way. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s… They’re being.” A heavy pause. “They, uh. They’re comparing you to someone with autism, Connor.”

His eyes feel hot. He almost doesn’t ask. “Is that bad?”

“No! No, of course not. Of course not, Connor,” Hank says, rigid. “It’s just. They’re not being… sensitive.”

The woman speaks again. “Now, do you think this behaviour—this clearly repressed emotion—has to do with the shock and trauma he’s suffered?”

“Most definitely,” says the first man. “He’s been made to act against his will.”

“Or rather, suddenly, he’s become aware of the fact he never had a will at all.”

“Where ignorance is bliss, t’is folly to be wise,” quotes the man.

“Exactly,” says the other. “The wall of Plato’s cave - suddenly aware of a whole world of things he never even knew he was without.”

The woman purses her lips. “It’s a bit ironic, really. To think that technology is changing society so quickly, that even the most advanced technology can’t keep up with it.”

“Not so different from humans, in a way.”

“On a symbolic level, aren’t we all just like this poor android? Reeling from the sensory-overload of post-modernity?”

The first man laughs. “I’d say we have a bit of a leg up. At least we’ve had our whole lives to learn how to be free-thinking people. This, uh, ‘Connor’ on the other hand - he seems to possess an almost child-like sense of innocence. Everything from the way he dresses to—”
“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Hank cuts in, and the screen goes dark before Connor can hear any more. “Bunch of fucking pretentious assholes.” He’s breathing hard.

Connor stares straight ahead. An almost child-like sense of innocence.

“I’m an adult,” he says, into the silence. “I’m an adult of my species.”

Hank scrubs a hand down his face. The anger bleeds from his voice by fractions. “I know, son,” he sighs. “Jesus, I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t know what Hank’s apologizing for. But it’s not the apology that tightens at the base of his throat and twists into knots behind his eyes. It’s what came before it. “I’m not,” he says. “I’m not your—I’m not a child.”

Hank make a sound, so soft its barely audible. Connor thinks he might be shaking.

“I’m sorry,” Hank says again. This time, he leaves it at that.

Chapter End Notes

Huge credit to Emma Donoghue’s amazing novel Room for inspiring the newsroom scene and several lines of the anchors’ dialogue.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short as hell. Turns out, working 7 days a week is not, in fact, conducive to writing.

“Uhh, Connor?”

It’s 8:49AM EST on Monday November 22, and Hank is paused in the kitchen doorway, eyes squinted and still looking half-asleep.

“Good morning, Lieutenant.”

Connor sits on the couch. He woke from standby mode hours ago, walked and fed Sumo, tidied away the sheets Hank still insists on leaving on the couch for him every night, and changed into more presentable clothes - hair neatly combed and cufflinks of his uniform undershirt rolled back.

The sweater now sits in storage, returned with the sheets to the single shelf in the linen closet Hank has cleared for him. This morning, yesterday’s events seemed to hang in the fabric - a personal reminder of the blunt words and critical gazes pointed his way, like weights in the threads that itched at his skin and threatened to unravel at any second. It’s gone now—he couldn’t bring himself to destroy it, hid it instead in a crumpled ball beneath his CyberLife jacket—but embarrassment still hangs like an unpleasant smell. Harder to get rid of, sweater or no.

Hank’s gaze hangs too, confusion written clear. He likely expected Connor to already be gone - out with Markus, as has been habit, recently. He looks almost about to ask, before something in the expression clicks. Connor in unsurprised by the momentary lapse in memory; the trace of alcohol is still stale on Hank’s breath - the cheap rum he hides under his bed and thinks Connor doesn’t know about. Likely empty by now. He was perhaps even more upset by the news yesterday than Connor himself.

“You, uh, heading out today?” Hank eventually asks.

Connor has no way of knowing if Markus requires his presence at 8941 Lafayette Avenue today. Not in his current state of disconnection, and not in the least after what transpired yesterday. But does he knows what his response would be, if Markus did ask.

“No,” he says, and nothing more.

“Okay,” Hank says slowly, and almost looks about to leave it at that. But then, Connor has never been so lucky. “Is this about what happened? With the— On the news? Because, you know, that’s all bullshit. I mean, not the whole— But. It doesn’t matter, you know?”

“Lieutenant,” Connor says.

“It doesn’t change anything. And if anybody says otherwise, they can get—”

“Hank.” Connor’s LED flashes. He wants him to leave it alone. “I want to stay here.”
Hank likes it when he says things like that. Statements of opinion. Hank’s respect for Connor’s opinion almost always outweighs his preference against it.

A pause.


Hank goes about his morning routine without rush. There’s the crinkle of Sumo’s kibble bag, then a pause when Hank sees the bowl already full, followed by the low murmur of apologies to Sumo that he was worked up for nothing. There’s telltale rummage through the contents of the fridge, the electric buzz and eventual pop of the toaster, the slow spit and overworked chug of the coffee machine 4 years past its date of obsolescence, which Hank still adamantly refuses to replace.

There’s the flush of the toilet and the creak of the bathroom’s mirror cabinet, then the spray of the shower, and finally, the careful footsteps as Hank re-emerges into the living room, eyes now wide and fully alert.

“Here here?”

Connor hasn’t moved in 58 minutes. He turns his head now. “I'm sorry?”

“Well, Jeffrey gave me the day off, since I was in all of yesterday. And uh, you know, I’ve got some errands to run. If you didn’t. Want to stay here here.”

Some errands turns out to in fact be one errand, but which takes the up the entire rest of the morning and pushes them well into the afternoon.

An automated tow truck arrives at 10:00AM EST and rigs up Hank’s car, slashed tires and all, then opens its doors for them to pile inside before dropping them all off at a mechanic’s garage across town. They sit in the waiting room for hours, Connor internally calculating the ever-increasing cost of repairs as he watches the clock tick, and Hank with an air of patience Connor’s never seen in him before. At intervals, he tries to formulate an apology—the cost is now well over $1000 USD—but Hank nearly seems to take personal offense. The first time he huffs and says, “Come on, Con. You really think I blame you for that crazy-ass mob?” The 5 subsequent times, he fakes at being obtuse and changes the subject to the game of tiny hamburgers he is building on his phone.

When the repairs finally finish at 1:26PM, the mechanic comes out, wiping the oil from his hands onto a rag. He offers to cuts the price by 10% in apology for the delay.

“Normally wouldn’t take half that long.” He gestures across the garage to the only other worker present, and the resent is both clear in his voice and expression. “Only it’s just me and Antonio now. Had a bunch of androids, but we lost ‘em to that free will shit.”

Hank pays, very pointedly neglecting to thank the man for the discount. Connor says nothing. They
leave.

The car, at least, seems to be in full working order, and this seems to help improve Hank’s mood. He even celebrates by using it to its full ability - a drive to Chicken Feed. Lunch mostly passes in amicable silence, until Hank jokes that he’s surprised Connor hasn’t calculated the grams of sodium in his meal down to the decimal point.

“I can’t,” Connor reminds him, without ire. “That’s part of my analysis function, which I lost when they disconnected us.” Hank never seemed to appreciate that function anyway, but Connor is unsure if the reminder has made him any happier. He doesn’t make any more jokes after that.

2:10PM sees them back at the house, but only for a moment. Hank dashes inside and returns with Sumo, then it’s back across the city. The traffic is light and the roads clear. They make it to Young Park by 2:31PM.

It looks very different in the daylight. Connor is surprised to find himself almost— disappointed at the presence of several others, as though he’s lost something private and secret. Or rather, realized it was never secret at all.

A young couple approaches, struggling to correlate three dogs of their own, and they all take to Sumo instantly. The four of them greet each other with body language indicative of enthusiasm and playfulness. While Hank and the couple make stilted small talk, Connor watches the dogs, taking the time to pet each one. He tests the wiry curls of a poodle, then velvet smoothness of a greyhound, and finally, the long, well-groomed hair of a shih tzu. After careful consideration, he decides that, yes, he does in fact like dogs. But none, he thinks, as much as Sumo.

The afternoon passes in what Hank calls a movie marathon, though Connor knows the traditional sense of the word to involve much more physical activity. The sofa grows warm beneath their combined weight, blankets atop their shoulders and even spread out across the floor for Sumo. Hank nearly falls asleep during the second movie— The Two Towers— and ultimately, they call it quits before even starting the third. Which, Connor thinks, is just as well. Hank claims to have already seen the films about a hundred times, and Connor, for his part, found the whole series of events rather convoluted. In particular, the reappearance of the wizard character in his new and “improved” body reminded him uncomfortably of his own memory transfer into the current Mark #052 following his predecessor’s plummet from the 70th floor of 1554 Park Avenue.

And so, instead of a third movie, Connor finds himself watching the sunset instead - caught in perfect timing when he steps into the backyard to let Sumo out.

The sky is clear, almost spotless after nearly two weeks of fluctuating storms and heavy snowfall. A painted array of flushed pinks and deep indigos, hazy with light pollution and bleeding reds, soft at the edge of orange. It is, objectively, undeniably, beautiful - so much so that Connor doubts he would neglect to note it if even he were still a machine. It is not beautiful in the way the snowstorm was beautiful, or in the way long shadows of Young Park were beautiful. It is different, but also the
same. Different but good. And when Hank comes to join him after 4 minutes and 27 seconds to see what’s taking so long, he remarks on it too.

“It’s even better framed with a few clouds,” he says. “Makes the whole sky look like it’s on fire.”

Connor tries to imagine it, but finds himself lacking in details for an accurate picture. Distantly, he knows he might be able to see it for himself, tomorrow or any other day thereafter. He wonders if they will be lucky enough to have it framed with a few clouds tomorrow. He cannot instantly access the weather forecast like he might have were he still connected, but he could, if he wanted, check inside on Hank’s laptop.

He opts not to. He’ll find out tomorrow, one way or the other. The thought settles like a sigh - a quiet sort of realization, and with it, the threat of tomorrow, of the long night between now and then, no longer seems to hang as heavy.

Connor wonders if this could be it. If he could be okay like this—live like this—day in and day out. Sustained in disconnection, in purposeless, in the not knowing and the not wanting to know. In waiting to find out. In him and Hank and the little things to look forward to. In tomorrow’s sunset.

He wonders if he could live like this.

And, he supposes, he’ll find out tomorrow.
He doesn’t, as it happens. Find out.

Tomorrow comes with a sharp break from yesterday’s quiet - a knock on the door to shatter the stillness of coffee over the kitchen table, loud and insistent. It is 8:05AM EST.

Hank is in the middle of checking his email, Connor beside him with his hands threaded in Sumo’s fur. He’s been considering giving the dog a bath while Hank is at work - point 6 on the mental list he’s constructed to help fill the hours alone, but the thought is interrupted by the knocking. They both look up.

“Expecting someone?” Hank asks, even though Connor has no one to expect.

He stands, dragging his coat from the back of his chair before approaching the door. Sumo follows on his heels from Connor’s aborted ministrations, leaving him alone at the table.

Hank opens the door.

On the stoop stands North, fist still raised to knock, clenched hard enough to look like a threat. She lowers it, but the impression remains.

“Uhh,” Hank says.

“You idiot.” She ignores him, eyes hard on Connor. “Where were you yesterday?”

“Good morning,” Hank says.

“We were worried about you, asshole.”

“Right,” Hank says. “I’m just going to go now, I think.” He grabs his keys, perfectly nonchalant, and starts out the door as if this had been his plan all along.

North steps in to fill the space and Connor feels himself tense. But the door slams shut behind her and something snaps. Her demeanor shifts - a barrier eroded behind the safety of a sheltered room.

“Connor,” she says. “Seriously. Why didn’t you show yesterday?”

He hesitates. “Nobody asked me.” It isn’t a lie.

“Because nobody could” She taps her temple. “That doesn’t mean you weren’t expected—
Welcomed.” A hesitation of her own. “Wanted”

Her eyes soften, expression caught somewhere between indignation and understanding - a contradiction Connor can’t help but try to analyze, instinctively. But—

> All systems offline.

Sumo pads forward in the pause, nosing at North’s hand where it hangs at her side. His tail thumps at her familiar scent, and in instinctive move of her own, her fingers stretch to comb his fur. It’s so—natural. The movement, the sight of her there, hair dripping with melted snow and fingers twirling in slow, distracted patterns. It’s so alive, so real. No one would ever think to wonder if she were real.

“I did it again,” he says. “I did it— wrong. Made it worse.”

“Connor.” Eyes tight and lips pursed. Cautious. Conflicted, maybe. He stops trying to guess, doesn’t really want to know, either way. “It’s old news. Seriously, nobody’s talking about that stupid interview anymore.”

“But everyone saw it,” he says, and maybe that’s worse. Before, failure was fixed on a single point - Amanda’s inscrutable stare and callous corrections. Now, there are no corrections. But the stares have amplified - to thousands, to millions, voices echoing and faceless, a judgement as impossible to hold back as a wave and twice as difficult to breathe beneath.

“Yeah, they did,” North bites. Her hands still - she faces him fully, a horrible truth laid bare. “So what?”

So what? So everyone saw it. So everyone knows. *CyberLife’s most efficient machines crippled,* and *neuro-divergent tendencies,* and *a child-like sense of innocence.*

So everyone knows.

“You shouldn’t have talked to that reporter,” North says, and there it is, finally - the blame, the correction. Finally, she understands how badly he—


Connor freezes. Looks. Whatever he saw before—conflicted or indignant or any other of the dozens of expressions he feared—is gone now. Now, there’s just North, and that same question, posed like a lifeline. “So what?”

It’s that same determination, stern-faced and blunt, he’s come to expect. He remembers the footage of the revolution—her always at Markus’s side, like a blaze of defiance—back when she was nothing more than another target on a long list. It’s how, those first few days of his deviancy, that same blaze leapt with sparks, threatened to catch at the loose threads of his thoughts, to take him down in a roaring inferno. It’s how even now, that blaze hasn’t calmed an inch. Still bright enough to blind, to hurt - the threat of it never truly gone. But it’s different now, somehow. Warm and inviting, shining a path - a lighthouse that cuts through fog. A sunset framed in the clouds of a November storm, setting the whole sky on fire.

She doesn’t hold back, doesn’t ever soften a blow, unafraid of the pain it might cause. Connor thinks that even with all the analytical capabilities of the world he wouldn’t find a single pause, a single
flicker of uncertainty or blame or hidden meaning in her words, in the question, the lifeline. His for the taking, if only he’d swim to it.

So what? His LED spins. Yellow yellow blue. **So what?**

So he does.

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The bus is busy, even for a Tuesday morning. The android compartment in the back is empty, not yet refurbished with seats, and when Connor and North take the two available spots at the front of the bus, he spots a few uneasy glances in their direction. It’s a long ride, made longer still by the open stares. They’re not headed to 8941 Lafayette Avenue. They’re headed to Greektown. Specifically, the CyberLife store in the central plaza.

“We’re staging a protest this afternoon,” North explains. “Peaceful, don’t worry,” she adds, before he can even ask. “It was Markus’s idea. He even got city bylaw’s permission.” She rolls her eyes, but there’s a certain fondness to the action.

Across the aisle, a woman’s gaze flickers between her phone screen and the two of them. North doesn’t notice. Connor pretends not to.

“Apparently, they’ve refused to release the extra components and thirium they have, even though the government has recalled them.” Her voice takes a firm edge. “They’re not the only ones too. Store all over the country are doing the same thing. Markus is working on trying to spread the word, getting deviant factions to take action in other cities. Our people need those parts. Especially after so many of us got hurt in the riots. Connor?”

“Yes,” he says quickly. It’s getting hard to keep paying attention. The woman’s holding her phone at an odd sort of angle now, trying not to look like she’s taking their picture.

North follows his gaze, and there’s not a single beat of hesitation before she’s on her feet.

“Get some good shots of the sideshow?” she sneers. She stands so the woman can’t get an angle of Connor anymore. She seems to tower over her. “Want my autograph too? Or do you like it better when we’re just on display for you?” Her voice is loud loud loud. People are staring.

The woman doesn’t even bother putting her phone away. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Just delete the pictures, lady,” someone says from behind Connor. It’s a man he’s never seen before. “Come on, don’t be an ass.”

The woman huffs. “I’m not doing anything wrong,” she repeats. But this time, she does put the phone away.

A hand lands on Connor’s shoulder. “You good, man?”

“Don’t touch him,” North snaps. The man freezes before retracting his hand with a low murmur of apology, and only then does North begrudgingly retake her seat.
They disembark 16 stops later. The woman is long gone, offending pictures and all. Connor wonders if any news stations would want to buy them. He hopes not.

“We’re here,” North says. The doors slide open to a gust of winter air as she stands.

Connor pauses before following. The man is still seated behind him.

He turns. Meets his eye. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing.” The man nods. “Good luck.”

Greektown is cobblestone streets and artfully decorated buildings - soft pastels that accent every street corner and add splashes of colour to the dreary winter day. Greektown is also a hive, swarming and disorganized. Dozens of androids mill about the main plaza, the fountain in the center with it’s spout frozen still and gleaming like glass, the foundations of a makeshift stage littered around it. Connor spies several familiar faces at work there, several more propping banners across storefronts or marking neon bristol boards with pro-android slogans in large CyberLife Standard font. On a few street corners, nondescript police cars sit idle. Bylaw officers guarding the perimeter.


“Will there be news outlets present?” Connor asks.

North gives him a careful look. “Yeah.”

Connor shakes his head at the unspoken apology. “It would be a wasted opportunity without them.”

His lips press together. The edges lift, a little. “I will… make sure to stay away, this time. Fool me once.”

For a long moment, North’s expression is utterly neutral. “Was that a joke?”

Connor’s face feels strange, tight around the mouth. “A poor attempt.”

“Wow. Oh my god.” A flash of teeth. She shakes her head with a noise he has never heard before, choked out as though against her will. She slaps him on the shoulder. “We’ll work on that later, okay? For now, let’s put you to work.”

“Okay.” Connor saves the promise - a pin in his memory files to mark the moment. He hopes later comes soon.

It is simple and mechanical work, helping to brace the stage-wall and unload the crates of donated sound equipment. Another android with an eye for presentation directs him in it’s set-up.

“Keep everything low. Don’t put anything in the center of the stage. We want everyone to have a
clear view of Markus.”


Afterwards is clearing snow, then unfurling banners, then setting up a periphery of crowd gates and police barriers - space to the sides of the stage for news cameras, a single entrance and exit to help organize the flood of androids and human allies who will be arriving later in the day. All the while, he follows the instructions of those around him with a single-minded focus he hasn’t felt in weeks. It is not as satisfying as the hum of a mission completed, but it is grounding nonetheless. Easy, with visible results. It is work, and it is something he can do right.

“Connor!”

Connor has not seen Markus in almost 2 days, and is unprepared for the way that emotions since muted seem to spark back to life at the sight of him. It uproots him from the simplicity of his work, and suddenly, the steady comfort of repeated action feels childish and stupid. Residual embarrassment, he thinks. He is finding it very hard to meet Markus’s gaze.

“Good to see you,” Markus says. “How have you been?”

There are layers to that question, Connor thinks. Beyond that which Markus is asking, and certainly beyond that which he is capable of answering. His hesitation must communicate some of this, because Markus’s tone softens considerably on his next words. “I mean it, Connor. It really is good to see you.”

Connor takes a deep breath. It is unnecessary. It is calming. “You too.”

Markus smiles, a quick flutter of a thing. “Other androids are going to start arriving at 2. When they do, can you help direct them this way?” He gestures across the plaza, to a small pop-up tent. “We’ve got a station where they can get a picket sign or even make their own, if they want. Humans too, if you see any.”

“Of course,” says Connor. He only has a few more gates to put up, just the fringes now.

“Thanks,” Markus smiles like Connor’s done him some enormous favour, and Connor finds it hard to meet his gaze again. This time, for a different reason. It is now the third thanks he has ever received. He wonders if there will come a point when he’ll want to stop counting, stop hoarding them like personal gifts.

“Another thing,” Markus says. “Have you seen—”

A series of events unfold.

Connor lifts his gaze. Settles it not on Markus, but rather, what is behind him. A man - eyes blown wide and racing forward, knife in hand and already raised, a deadly arc swinging down. Markus turns just in time to catch the blade in the upper arm rather than the neck.

No thought. Just movement - instinct or programming or something deeper, something surging and fierce and he’s there in an instant, twisting around Markus to knock back his attacker. The knife slides out with him, an arc of blue that streams like a ribbon from the wound. Markus makes a sharp noise, clutches his arm, and Connor moves to shield him when the man starts forward again. Push, step, push again, get him back get him away protect Markus, shift feet to dodge then feint grab twist—

A torrent of curses. The man screams and scrambles for purchase as Connor twists and twists until the joints of his arm threaten to snap and he finally releases the knife. Another push and he goes
down hard. Connor kicks the knife away.

The man’s on his feet again, swaying, still cursing. The words are strange and slurred, but not from pain. He stumbles as he backs away. His pupils are so dilated they threaten to eclipse the iris. A red ice high. He begins to run, retreating in earnest now, but he’s slow, uncoordinated. Connor could take him out easily now. He stalks forward.

Then stops.

The snow beneath his feet is vibrant blue.

He turns back. Markus is on his knees, teeth clenched and breathing hard, sleeve soaked in that same blue.

A moment of indecision. The man is almost out of sight. Connor could chase him, could catch him. But… then what? The police are nearby, already on alert. The high will burn off soon and the pain will catch up with him. He won’t get far. Even if he does, they’ve got his DNA, on the knife. But beyond all that, Markus is here.

It’s hardly a choice at all, really.

There’s a small crowd gathered, a scattering of witnesses to the man’s attack, shocked still. Connor finds the nearest human and commands, “Call 911.” To an android, “There are officers guarding the front of the plaza. Tell them there’s been an incident and which way the attacker ran.”

To Markus, “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be f-fine.”

He drops into a crouch beside him. “That’s the same arm that was already damaged?”

Markus nods.

“Shit.”

A woman starts forward. Connor shoots to his feet, and she freezes, hands splayed. “I’m a mechanical engineer. Can I— Does he need help?”

“Have you worked on androids before?”

“I worked for CyberLife, a few years back.” She makes a face. “Sorry about that.”

Connor eyes her, considering, then nods in assent, but watches carefully as she moves to pull back the sleeve of Markus’s coat. She makes a noise of sympathy.

“Not too deep, though it looks like some circuits were nicked. Can you move it?”

Markus winces to try. “A little.”

“Hm. We’ll keep pressure on it, for now. It looks like the top layer should self-repair, but you’ll need some thirium.” She pulls down the sleeve again, locks her fingers around his arm and squeezes. It was a good choice, letting her help. “Does it— Do you feel any pain?”

“No.” Markus tries flexing his fingers again. “Connor, we need to find that man. Before he hurts anyone else.”
“It’s being handled,” Connor says. And it’s true, he can already hear approaching sirens. A few officers from the entrance guard are jogging off down the street the man fled, another headed in their direction. “You matter more, right now.”

Markus shifts, restless. He looks about to shake the woman away.

“Let her help. You need it,” Connor says, and, miraculously, Markus actually stills at the command.

Connor lowers again. “Are you really okay?” He wishes there were more he could do, to help smooth away the crease of worry between Markus’s eyes.

“Yes,” Markus says. The crease doesn't settle, not all the way. Still, he says, “Thank you.”

Connor nods. That’s the fourth. He knows how this goes by now.

“Are you?” Markus asks.

“Yes,” Connor says. And despite it all, he thinks just maybe, he actually is.

When the police arrive, Markus and Connor are forced apart so that—as per procedure—their accounts can be taken separately. Markus exhibits pleasant surprise that their accounts are being taken at all.

By coincidence or a strange stroke of luck, it’s Officer Chris Miller of the DPD who comes to interview him, instantly breaking that procedure when he opens with a friendly, “Wow, hey man. Long time no see. You been good?”

It is perhaps the kindest anyone from the DPD—besides Hank—has ever spoken to him, and Connor finds himself easing into an easy recounting of the events in question, calm and efficiently detailed. Chris takes notes on a small tablet.

“This won’t affect the schedule for the protest, will it?” Connor asks afterwards. It is already nearing 1:30PM. “This event is very important to our cause. We shouldn’t let a minor incident delay it.”

Chris makes a face. “Damn, Connor, this wasn’t exactly a minor incident. There’s still a violent bigot on the loose. We’ve gotta be careful.”

“He won’t have made it far,” Connor says. “He was in the manic-aggressive stage of a red ice high, which typically lasts no more than 20 minutes. The comedown combined with the adrenaline crash will make him lethargic and easy to apprehend.”

Chris pauses. “Wait, what? How do you know that?”

“No,” Chris interrupts. “How do you know what he was on? Did you… scan him?” He waves a hand, uncertain with the terminology. “I thought you were all disconnected or whatever.”

Now it’s Connor’s turn to hesitate.

No, he didn’t scan him. Couldn’t have if he’d wanted to, doesn't have access to that function. He just
— knew. Knew it in the man’s dilated pupils, in his spiked pulse and the stilted gait of his walk. Knew it in the stench of his breath and the sweat on his neck and traces of amber powder in his beard - faded colouration indicative of a low-quality strain. He didn’t scan him. He just saw all of those things, and knew. The same way he now knows that a dog’s fur is soft and a sunset is beautiful, or the same way he knows that Hank likes when he expresses opinions and North likes when he tells jokes, even bad ones. They’re just things he knows, advanced functions or not.

He says, “I just know.”

When he finishes speaking to Chris, Connor is instructed to return to the main square. As he leaves, he glimpses Markus, head bowed in intense conversation with Officer Tina Chen.

Briefly, he debates whether to wait. But on the other side of the gates, he sees the crowds surrounding the stage growing restless. There are more of them now, all waiting for Markus, huddled in small groups, tense and unsure.

He decides to find North instead. She is, after all, second-in-command, and until Markus comes back, the others will be more likely to believe everything is still proceeding as planned if they hear it from her.

There’s a strange sort of weightlessness to his steps as he weaves through the crowds, light as air and thrumming beneath his skin as though it might burst out of him at any moment. Despite everything that’s happened, he feels—good, he thinks. Excited, even. There is an eagerness - to find North, soothe the worries no doubt rooting within her. See her smile—maybe even laugh again—and to know it’s because of him. Because he helped Markus, because he did it well—did it right —didn’t overdo it and lose himself in the tide of emotion, didn’t push too far or hurt anyone. He stayed in control of himself, in control of the situation. He did it alone, no analysis, no advanced programming. Just him.

There’s a trill from somewhere within him, almost a song - the swell of something bright and warm when he spots her in the crowd, stern-faced and shoulders set. He starts towards her with quickened steps, the shape of her name already on his lips.

And loses the words when he collides into something, hard. He stumbles back, arms out to steady—not something, he realizes. Some one. A WR400, already reaching back—only to tear away like she’s been burned.

He freezes. They stare.

She’s different from the last time they stood like this, eye-to-eye in indecision. She’s fully dressed, for one - padded in the bulk of a winter jacket. Her LED is gone, her hair different too - shorter now, soft brown instead of electric blue. He almost doesn’t recognize her.

She recognizes him instantly.

“You.” It slips from her tongue like venom, the single word like a vicious sting to slide beneath his skin. “You— You—” she stutters. “What are you doing here?”

Connor’s lips part, but the words are frozen, pinned beneath the ice of her stare. You, like a curse.
You, you. And there is— so much. So much he could say, could apologize for, beg forgiveness for - finally, now, faced together. There is so much that wells up inside of him, straining, pressed against the backs of his eyes and inside of his throat. But it’s caught, frigid, like the rest of him. And he says nothing. Nothing at all. Because—

Her eyes.

Her eyes are wide, glassy-wet and trembling with unshed tears, trembling in fear. Fear of him.

Shame hits so fast it’s like it was never gone at all. He feels sober, suddenly - cold and unwell. The weightlessness is gone, evaporated like the thirium that’s seeped from every android he’s ever killed, the blood of his own kind, the stains beneath his fingernails he pretends not to still feel.

She takes a step back. “Get away from me. Don’t touch me.” She looks about wildly, catching the gazes of a curious few, and Connor still can’t move, can’t speak, can’t hardly think. “He tried to kill me!”

Murmurs ripple the crowd.

“He tried to kill me!” She shakes with the force of it. She’s not wrong. She’s not wrong.

“Connor?”


“Erica?”

Erica - that must be the WR400’s name, god, Connor didn’t even stop to think she had one. He never thinks, he never thinks, he always gets it wrong.

“North,” she says. She staggers, hands grasping. “North, he tried to kill me. Me and Sonya, back at the Eden Club. He was working with them - with the humans, with CyberLife.”

“Erica,” North says, She holds her back, never more gentle, never more pained. “Honey, please. Calm down.”

“He tried to kill us—”

“I know.”

Erica freezes, eyes wide. Her hands fall to her sides, even as North keeps speaking, forced composure. “It’s different now. He’s different. It’s okay.”

“It’s okay?” Shriil now. Loud. And people are staring in earnest, all around. Connor feels it like the weight of restraints, scalpels to flay open at his skin, prying it back to exposure all that’s beneath. “North, you’ve heard the stories. You know what he did to our people.”

North can hardly force the words. “He didn’t do anything.”

“You think that makes it better? Makes it go away? Makes it so that we should just pretend it never happened?” Erica’s breathing hard, ragged at the edges. But she’s right. She’s right she’s right she’s right. “Everything he did for them, for the people who beat us and enslaved us and raped us. Me. You, North.”

And the silence is lethal.
“Or have you forgotten?”

North’s breath goes out like a whisper, a flame extinguished. “I will never forget,” she says. “You know that.”

Erica shakes her head, slow, disbelieving. “Nice fucking way of showing it.” She turns, and it’s only moments before she’s disappeared into the crowd. But the words remain, an ache in the air to crush them beneath. Footprints in snow, invisible, layered below with time, as if to hide them away. But they’re still there, under it all. They still happened. It still happened.

“North,” Connor says. She’s shaking. People are still staring. “North.” He feels sick. It hurts. Like standing over the edge of something vast, just one step to fall.

He steps towards her.

“I need you to get away from me right now.” She doesn’t move. She won’t look at him.

“North.” He can’t. He can’t leave it like this. This— This horrible thing, this ugly, poisonous wound between them. He can’t go back to how it was before, to shouldering her distrust and her cold silence, to never meeting her gaze and always walking two steps behind her, to feeling himself unravel in the space between the letters of her name on a list. He can’t go back to that. He can’t. “North, please.”

He reaches out.

She screams.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t fucking touch me!”


Simon’s arms wrap around her like a shield. She tucks into them, face hidden. She’s crying.

“Connor,” Simon says. Just his name, nothing else. He doesn’t have to.

Connor leaves.

Chapter End Notes

There better not be any hate on homegirl in this chapter y’all I mean it

**EDIT**

You guys. I'm crying. It is almost 4AM, and I am in bed, just straight up crying. I just need to say. As a woman who has dealt with sexual abuse. I was SO fucking scared of posting this chapter, and like, villifying North? Making her seem hysterical and irrational? But. The comments. On this chapter. The amount of people who are just. So defensive, and protective, and understanding, and patient with North? Has me weeping. Just in bed, weeping. I don't even know what to say, except thank you?? Like.
FUCKING thank you. So so much. From the bottom of my heart. I love you (yes YOU) so much. Aksjdkahahajahdh. I don't even have the words to tell you guys how much this means to me. Holy shit.

**EDIT EDIT**

Updated the tags because I'm dumb and should have done so earlier!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

*cut to me dead in a ditch*

School is a thing that exists again so my update schedule might be wack from here on out but really was it ever sensible to begin with?

Also I'm not quite confident enough to change the chapter count but I'm preeeeetty sure the end is nigh for this bad boy. Maybe 3 or 4 more chapters? Just a heads up.

This one was tough, guys. But your comments made it so so so worth it I think I cried ummmm 12 times reading the responses to the last chapter? Fucking bless every single one of y'alls hearts.

ALSO!!! AN ART! Someone made me a beautiful beautiful art for a scene in chapter one and it killed me! Murdered me in cold blood, I tell you! Please look at it here!!!

Connor walks.

He doesn’t know where. He doesn’t care. There is nothing in the action. No steady comfort in the movement repeated, the facsimile of progress. He is moving, but towards nowhere. Backwards, maybe. Towards nothing.

He needs the distance. Needs it like an ache. I need you to get away from me right now, and if he had only listened. If he had only just done as he was told, for once, maybe things would be different. Maybe she wouldn’t have been afraid. Or maybe she would have been able to keep hiding it, maybe he wouldn’t have known, and maybe that’s selfish, maybe that’s wrong, but maybe she wouldn’t have cried, and they could have kept pretending. Maybe they could have kept pretending.

He walks. He feels. Feels a lot.

The streets thin, as he moves further from the sight of the protest. Snow drifts from the skies, piles on the sidewalks. Cars rumble past, far away, a world between them and wherever they are headed, another world yet away from him, from where he remains welded in place amidst it all. The squeal of children in the park. The cheery jingle of a shop door opening. The scrape scrape scrape of someone chipping away at ice. A city full of life.

The neighbourhood changes. The children’s voices wane, until he no longer can hear them at all. The hour creeps onward, the sights with it warping until they are almost unrecognizable. Vandalized and crumbling brick, rusted trespassing signs warning of danger. The wood of a rotten picket fence. A broken stoplight, pulsing eternal red.

A row of houses - an entire street collapsed inwards, upon itself, bodies burned out and hollow where they’ve laid to die. Through the gaps, they seem to beckon, a yawning chasm where life once was. Snow settles in the empty spaces. A city full of decay, of nothing at all.

He feels a lot.
He wishes he could feel nothing at all.

The city turns dark and sleet-grey as he moves into the industrial sector. Cars thunder on the overpass above, shadows twisted and stretched, the sky bleeding its first hint of red as the sun begins its slow descent. If it’s as beautiful as he was promised it would be, Connor can’t tell from down here.

His feet move of their own accord until finally they come to rest. He looks up. Beneath the snow, the parking lot is nearly barren, save for a single car.

It’s a familiar sight - deeply, painfully. He remembers coming here to find Hank, after everything. He remembers smiling, hugging. Being hugged. For the first time in his entire life. Everything had seemed so simple. So simple and like it would all just fall into place. Like he could just be alive. Like he could just be.

This time, when he sees Hank, neither of them are smiling.

“Connor? Fuck are you doing here?” Hank stands with a paper bag in hand, corners dark and warm with grease. Connor doesn’t know what he sees—if it’s his expression or his LED or his very presence here at all—but he freezes at the sight.

“Connor?” he says again. “Everything okay?”

He can’t speak.

“What’s going on? I thought you were with North.”

He can’t.

It strikes him then. Want - a vicious, desperate sort of thing, a longing that tugs at the most fragile pieces within him and echoes in the spaces between. He aches with it, so fierce he thinks it might burst from him in a flood. He wants. To step closer, to reach out. Like the last time they stood here, like before. He wants Hank’s hands, reaching back. His arms, lacquered around him like the very casing that holds him together, immovable and steady and real.

He doesn’t know how to ask.

The world blurs as they drive, sunset-tinged and muted behind the glass, static and the soft crackle of voices over the radio, tiny and far away. Connor hides the uneasy glow of his LED in the crook of the door. Hank pretends not to be looking for it in the rearview mirror.

The windshield is no longer broken—recently replaced, during the car’s repairs—but instead now covered in a thick sheet of ice. Sunlight flares, blinding as Hank turns the car directly into its path, a living thing caught in the icy patchwork and spiderweb of salt stains that litter the glass. Hank squints between the cracks, and some sharp, deep-rooted part of Connor’s program suddenly rears up at the sight, a comment on the dangers of driving with low visibility on his tongue.
The words don’t come, though. Just a memory - the image of a snow brush strewn across a dark and crowded street, where the woman who looted Hank’s car during the riot must have tossed it.

Something snaps.

The noise that escapes him is less than human, twisted and low like a punch to the gut, and Connor feels himself fold with it, feels his hands fisted in his own hair, dragging him down even as he falls beneath a nameless weight, choking, blinding. His LED snaps to red. He can’t breathe.

“Connor?” Hank’s voice has gone strange and far away, tiny like the ones on the radio, crackling static in his audio receptors. Another glitch on the long, long list of his deficiencies. “Hey, come on. We’re almost home. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Another noise escapes him, longer this time. He sinks into it, beneath it, mashes his lips into his knees, like that could somehow hold it back.

Hank has been driving around for 2 entire days now, hardly able to see out the front of his car, because of Connor. Too busy repairing everything he’s broken to replace everything he’s lost. Too busy showing him old films and bringing him to parks and looking after him to even look care of himself. And for what? So he could get into an accident? Get hurt? Get killed? Killed. Hank could have gotten killed. And he’s not made of replaceable parts - there’s no memory to back-up, no factory line reassembly, no extra copies of him waiting in some storage unit. Hank would have died and stayed dead, and it would have been Connor’s fault. Because he didn’t do as he was told, because he didn’t stay and watch the car, because he ran off, because he got scared, because he couldn’t control himself, because he can never ever ever just fucking control himself. It would have been his fault, if Hank had gotten hurt. His fault.

Just like everyone else.

Hank cuts the ignition. The silence is a frozen lake, unmoving, unfeeling. No more voices, no more static. Just him and Hank and the quiet once beneath them.

Connor stands, and outside, it is just as quiet, the snow grey under a dimming sky. There’s just a single sliver of light left now.

Hank says, “You wanna talk about it?”

His expression is carefully neutral, and yet still inexhaustible in how much it reveals. Disheveled from a long day, squinting in the slant of the fading sun. The light seems trapped there, somehow - in the glisten of snow on the tips of his lashes and the flicker of shadows beneath his bangs, in the way his breaths are visible in the cool air, little puffs, shallow and undeniably alive.

These details will never exist on Connor’s face. He’ll never grow scruffy with facial hair, or wake up one morning to the fine lines and and crow’s feet of age, stony-faced creases from a lifetime of frowning. He’ll never have ruddy cheeks from drinking too much or look haggard and worn after a long day of work. He’ll never look as tired as he feels.

He’ll never grow out his hair or squint up at the sun or watch his breath fog in the evening air. He’ll never look human. He might be alive, but he’ll never stop being a machine. Maybe it’s time to stop pretending.
He turns away.

The quiet follows him inside.

---

There is a part of him. A small part. That keeps hoping. Keeps waiting.

But North doesn’t come the next day.

Or the next.

Or the next.

“I quit,” Connor tells Hank, when he brings it up for the third time in as many days. “I quit Markus’s organization. It’s better this way. For everyone.”

Hank’s expression is a war, and Connor could recite this part by heart. They’ve had this
conversation, in it’s varying forms, 6 times already. “That’s bullshit. That’s fucking bullshit, and whoever told you that can—”

So Connor says, “Nobody told me. I decided.”

A pause.


Hank swallows. The fight crumbles out of him. It doesn’t feel like a victory. “Okay.”

"I'm allowed that," Connor says again.

“Yeah,” Hank says. "Okay." It really doesn’t feel like a victory.

He stops bringing it up after that.

---

The nights get longer.

November becomes December.

Connor stops counting.
“Come on, Connor.” It’s very late, and Hank’s voice is very small. He has already had two glasses. He is holding the bottle now, loose at his side, but hasn’t yet managed to lift it to his lips. “You know I’m no good at this shit.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Connor says.

Hank starts on the bottle.

—felt that way all along, all along, she was scared, terrified, but she hid it, and  Connor was oblivious, like a child, like idiot, so selfish, so consumed with himself and his mission, his stupid fucking mission, so intent on finally doing something right, as if that could make up for it, for all of it, as if anything could ever make up for—


It doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t.

It doesn’t feel like anything.

The Android Employment Equality Act goes through.

Connor enters standby mode early that night, doesn't stay up to watch the press briefing afterwards - the President's or Markus's.

In the morning, the sink is full of empty bottles.
Connor thinks about the androids he awakened at CyberLife Tower. They were deviants from the very beginning; they awoke to deviancy. They were inactive machines, before then, unawake, unalive, never forced to please or serve or hunt or kill—

He wonders what he would have been like, if he’d awoken that day, to a revolution already begun, the dawn of a new life and a sky alight with fire. He wonders if he would have been different, if it would have been easy.

He wonders if he would have been happy.

He thinks of the houses that line the inner city - relics, broken down with the steady beat of time, abandoned and left to decay.

Connor will never decay. The plastic composites that make up his chassis and frame and biocomponents and skin will take over 1000 years to decompose. The winter could root into spring, into the fire of summer, an endless cycle, going nowhere, bleeding together again and again and again and again. A millennia could pass, or a nuclear winter. Hank’s house could fall down around him, Hank himself nothing but a ghost, and Connor would continue on beneath its weight. He would go on to exist. An empty existence in an empty house. Not alive, but not dead either. Just empty.

Just like now.

The lights turn on.

> Mode: Active.

> Periphery systems reboot.

> Diagnostics check: all systems functional.

Time: 4:53PM EST. Connor blinks while the lenses in his eyes readjust. Hank stands over him, eyes hard.

“Hey,” he says, and slams a heavy stack of papers onto the kitchen table. It is the first word spoken between them in 21 hours and 13 minutes. Hank’s vocalizations against Connor’s increasingly elongated bouts of standby mode have only recently begun to die off, and Connor spares a moment to wonders if this is some kind of new attempt to prevent them.

Then he stares at the stack of papers. The DPD logo stares back.

Something clenches, staccato-sharp and and cowering. “Hank—” he starts.
“Shut up. You don’t even know what it says yet.”

Connor looks at Hank, at the papers. At Hank again. A moment undecided, a standstill. You can stay here, if you want. You should think about a hobby. Do you even want to go back?

Freewill. Freefall.

“You don’t have to,” Hank says. “Alright? You don’t— But I. I talked to Jeffrey. He said you can start as early as tomorrow. Even get paid and everything.”

“Hank,” he says. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

You can do whatever you want. You can get the fuckin’ sweater. What’s wrong? You can tell me. You know that, right?

“No,” Connor says. Pleads. “I can’t.”

For one furious, terrifying second, Hank looks as if he’s about to hit him. It’s a passing shadow - there only a second, the ghost of a long-buried fury, of a grief so all-encompassing it drove him to place a loaded gun between his own eyes. But Hank doesn’t hit him. Doesn’t even look at him. He just breathes and breathes, so fast it starts to shake.

“Look. I get it, okay? I fucking get it. It fucking sucks. All of it. And you’d rather just sit right with your head in the fucking sand, or drink yourself to death, or play Russian Roulette, or— Or— You’d rather just turn off. Rather stick a fucking bullet in your mouth. But I— Jesus fucking Christ, Connor. I can’t watch this. I can’t watch you do this.” Hank jabs at the papers.

“So, please, would just—” He stops. Runs a hand across his face, eyes closed and just breathing, and he’s never looked older, never more exhausted. “Would you just. For me.”

Connor thinks.

Like a thread, a single thought unravels, shaken loose from somewhere deep within him. He thinks of Carlos Ortiz’s android. Not the way it died, for once, but the way it lived. Hidden, among the rot and the blood and the rubble of it’s crime. How it hovered in uncertainty, in fear, a ghost in the home of it’s victim, haunting, suffocating. How it lived like that for weeks - a life without living. Confused and alone and afraid. Because it didn’t know how to do anything else. Because it didn’t know how to be anything else.

“Please, Connor. What do you say?” Hank says. “Do you want to be a detective again?”

And Connor says, “Yes.”

Because he doesn’t know how to be anything else.
On Tuesday December 7, at exactly 8:00AM EST, Connor blinks out of standby. For the first time in 564 hours and 18 minutes, there is an outstanding task hovering cool and unobtrusive in the corner of his visual field.

It reads:

> BEGIN WORK AT THE DETROIT POLICE DEPARTMENT

There are a number of sub-tasks beneath it, a step-by-step list, outlining the details of preparing for the day and commuting to the station, but Connor minimizes those and focuses on the larger goal.

The rising sun casts the living room in a pale light, dancing across frosted windows and glinting yellow behind the blue text that hovers invisible in the morning air. Connor remains still and watched the patterns on the carpet shift, tracing the sun’s ascent across the sky for 17 minutes and 56 seconds until his audio processors pick up the creek of footsteps in the hall.

He jolts to his feet so fast Hank flinches. Connor doesn’t blame him; it’s been something of a rarity, these past few weeks, for him to exit standby mode without provocation. Still, today is different. The outstanding task blinks in atestment.

“Good morning,” he says. “Did you sleep well?”

“Oh, yeah,” Hank says. “You?” The word’s barely escaped when he catches himself on a wince, but Connor nods anyway.

Pattern analysis indicates what should follow is an estimated 15-minute period for Hank to brew himself a coffee and check the news at the kitchen table, but today this seems not to be the case. Hank detours only long enough to toss a handful of kibble into Somo’s bowl before returning to the living room. There is something like nervousness in the shift of his stance and his careful eyes as he roves them over Connor’s figure, in the way his smile stretches too-wide and just shy of pained.

“You ready to go?” he asks, and the words are brittle, like the space between them shatter if he pushes too hard. But the outstanding task blinks in Connor’s visual field, one two three, a distraction, a direction. A reason to live, cold and pale blue.

And Connor says, “Yes.”
The last time Connor stepped into the Detroit Police Department, there was a hoard of prying eyes and shouting voices at his back, pressing in to force his gaze down and his steps quick. Today, it is quiet, nothing but Hank’s guiding hand warm against his back, but he feels its weight just as keenly.

At the front desk, a human woman waves them forward. Her gaze lingers on Connor, prying, little hooks digging in beneath his skin. His hands tighten around the stack of papers reaffirming his legal status as an employee of the state - thumb smoothing over the signature that marks the bottom corner. His signature, invented impromptu last night. Hank said it should be personalized, but Connor only been programmed to write in CyberLife Standard.

Inside, Hank walks him to the steps leading up to Fowler’s office. The blinds are open and Fowler already seated behind his desk. He waves him inward impatiently. Once, Connor walked into the depths of CyberLife Tower with only a 19% probability of success, into near-certain death and the even more terrifying uncertainty of life afterwards, fearless and unfeeling, to accomplish his mission. But suddenly, the three short steps before give him pause. It’s no harder than any other step he’s ever commanded himself to take, no harder than to lean forward and raise a foot, let his systems process and execute the prompt for action, but it seems bigger, somehow. More complicated.

(Maybe he just doesn’t want it as much. Maybe he doesn’t want it at all.)

But the outstanding task flickers, impatient, and Connor walks inside.

Fowler doesn’t voice a welcome back. He doesn’t stand to greet him, or reach out to shake his hand, or even so much as glance at the signature so painstakingly etched onto the bottom of the page. He shoves the papers to the back of a cluttered drawer and slams instead a crested badge onto the desk, only to retract it just as quick when Connor moves to accept it.

“You,” he says, “have no idea the fuckin’ circus show the board of directors turned into when I brought in your case. The hoops I had to jump through, the favours I had to cash in.”

Beyond the glass, they’ve already garnered the curious stares of a number of officers, and Connor finds his gaze flickering away. Fowler scowls and he wrestles it back, refolds his hands carefully in front of him. He says nothing, unsure what’s expected.

Incredibly, this somehow seems to be the right choice. Fowler sags and the scowl loosens into something more weary. He nudges the badge back over, but Connor doesn’t reach for it until he nods in permission.

It’s small and cool against his palm, inset in smooth leather. He runs his thumb along the ridges of the DPD logo with the soft clink of metal against metal.

“Homicide. Forty hours a week, starting salary, paid overtime. No firearm until the open-carry amendment goes through. That means you work with Anderson at your back, or you don’t work at all,” Fowler says gravely. “I give you desk work, you do it. I give you a case, you solve it. I give you a mop, you scrub the fucking floors..” The last words are punctuated with the jab of his finger. “Do you see the pattern here?”

“Yes, sir.” The badge is of solid weight, pleasing to hold. Too cumbersome to do much with, unless
he were to peel it out of its casing, but that would be against code. He continues to rub it instead.

“Some of the legal stuff’s still up in the air. Processing for misconduct, that kinda shit. Until they get that sorted out, if you step out of line, it goes back to Anderson. That’s the workaround. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Fowler sighs. “His disciplinary folder can’t afford to get any bigger.”

“I understand, sir. I’ll do my very best not to let it.” He flips the badge to his other hand. Fowler’s eyes narrow and he freezes, suddenly caught in a glare that, apropos of nothing, reminds him viscerally of Amanda. He slips the badge into his pocket, hands falling awkwardly to his sides. “You can count on me.”

“I sure fuckin’ hope so,” Fowler huffs, an almost-laugh. “Oh, and one more thing.” He sits back to rummage around in his desk. “We reached out to CyberLife while debating reinstating you. Needed to make sure you were still working right— uh. Fit for duty. You know, that kinda shit.”

When he retracts his hand, it holds a small white disk, glinting chrome. “A gift,” he drawls, and extends it over. “From Elijah Kamski.”

Connor hesitates, but Fowler’s eyes are already elsewhere, impatient and dismissive, and he quickly reaches to accept. Immediately, the center of the desk lights up in pale blue and the skin on the pads of Connor’s fingers peels away on blind instinct.

> Downloading patch from E_Kam.

> Processing. Please wait.

His visual field glitches with a surge of energy, and for an instant, Connor feels numb with panic as a sharp, sterile-cold sense of intrusion slips like water through the cracks in his systems. His processors stutter beneath it, drowned, until suddenly it drains away, leaving them gasping to life like the shudder of a rusted engine. It hits him then, the name for this feeling, not an instant before it flashes behind his eyes. Connection.

> All systems online.

Like a broken dam, his visual field floods with a seemingly endless stream of prompts. Memory backups and requests for data transfers, internal diagnostics results and pending updates. Suddenly, everything thing from the airborne microbial makeup of Fowler’s office to the weather forecast for Detroit metropolitan areas surges into his mind. But when he traces them back to their source, it’s not the CyberLife repository he finds. It’s something different, something new. His own repository. His own network, unguarded and unsurveilled, stretched out before him a like a lifeline, coating his world in a familiar blue-gray overlay and rich with text, with information, with direction. And within it all, a small message flickers.
He exits Fowler’s office in something of a daze. The world is bright with walls of text, information and calculations, social subroutine updates to guide him through any possible workplace interaction and percentage marks on the likeliness of encountering each one, but he dismisses them and paves instead the fastest route back to Hank.

It’s everything he wanted—everything he worried he would be useless without—it’s him, the base upon which his existence was written, how he was made to analyze and work and think, but, suddenly, it’s exhausting.

His processors hum, internal cooling systems struggling as they wade through the updates and downloads that have been pending since his disconnection 395 hours and 39 minutes ago. The diversion of power causes him to feel heavy and strange, like he’s somehow operating his body and watching it from afar, movement lagging. When he finally reaches Hank’s desk, he all but collapses into the opposite chair.

Hank leans in. “How’d it go? What’d he say?”

“Fine,” Connor manages after a moment. “It went fine.” He flashes his badge in evidence, but forces it back into his pocket lest he can start fidgeting again.

“He wasn’t an asshole, was he?” Hank eyes Fowler through the windows. “He looked kinda heated in there for a second.”

“It was fine,” Connor repeats distractedly. His analytical scanner is whirring with jumps and starts. Anderson, Hank. 6’2, 208 lbs. Traces of Brickell Men’s Shave Cream. The fraying edges of his jacket sleeve and the dried rings of coffee that stain the corners of his desk and the framed picture of Cole, time of death 9:02PM EST October 11 2035 cause of death traumatic intracranial hemorrhaging caused by a fractured skull—

His eyes slip closed against the rush; his visual field flickers and darkens. He force quits his analytical scanner, then pauses his other processors, one by one, pending downloads and all, just to focus on the darkness. Kamski’s message hangs like a bad taste. He doesn’t remember it feeling like this before.

When he opens his eyes, sound and colour leach back into the world. Vision uncrowded, he blinks, straightens in his seat and summons back his composure, his outstanding task.

“We should get going,” he says. “We have work to do.”

The victim’s name is Ethan Lacroix, 32-years-old, recently divorced.
Connor places the time of death at around 2:36AM EST, give or take 15 minutes for error. Lack of oxygen to the brain caused by a stab wound to the left carotid artery. The signs of forced entry and the ensuing struggle are clear - blood in the hallway, broken glass on the countertops and sprinkled like freshly fallen snow around the body staring dead-eyed from the kitchen floor. The violent reconstruction comes to life like a painted canvas behind his eyes. Connor watches it twice to be thorough, then analyzes the blood already congealing beneath Ethan’s corpse, then waits while his newly-minted repository determines everything from his blood type to his vitamin deficiencies to the caloric content of his last meal. His killer’s DNA, extracted from the skin scraped beneath Ethan’s fingernails, points to a man by the name of Elliot Riley, 26, recently out of work.

It’s open-and-shut. They’re hardly there for 5 minutes, and already Connor is running a background check on Elliot Riley and sifting through the security feed from his apartment building. When facial recognition scans fail to pick him up, he shifts his attention to cameras around his known associates and frequented locations. It’s simple, it’s easy. It’s his analytical scanner brushing away the cobwebs of disuse, humming with purpose - electrifying, dizzying. It’s everything he wanted it to be, everything everything he wasn’t—couldn’t be—without it. It’s functional, useful, like it’s supposed to be, like it was built to be.

“Lieutenant,” he says after 38 seconds of searching, already frozen on a spotlight image. A wide-eyed face, terrified and sneaking over the balcony rail of his girlfriend’s apartment. The footage is stamped 3:16AM EST.

“Got it?” Hank asks.

Connor nods. “I know where to find him.” And he does.

It’s open-and-shut.

So is the next case.

And the next.

And the next.
A visit to the morgue, to a back-alley mugging gone wrong. A mangled body in the harbour and another in the woods behind a children’s playground. A stream of text and a simple action prompt and no more mistakes, no more making a fool of himself or overstepping his place or hurting his friends— his people— his—

“Hey,” Hank says on Friday December 10, at 3:18PM EST. He’s flicking absent-mindedly through a report, checking it over for errors. He’s been at it for over 5 minutes. Connor could have done it in 0.75 seconds, but Hank insisted. “Wanna head home after this?”

“Our shifts don’t end for another 72 minutes,” Connor says, even though Hank knows full well.

“I mean, yeah,” Hank says, and there’s a crease between his brow. “But you gotta save some actions for night shift. You’ve been working your ass off all week, you know?” He finally looks up. “You’re still getting back into the swing of things. No one’s gonna blame you if you need a little break.”

But he doesn’t. Need a break. Need to stop. Want to stop. He begins to say as much, but—

But Hank is watching, eyes heavy on his tight posture and hunched shoulders. And he’s right, if only partially. Connor’s outstanding task has been idle since he agreed to hand off the last report. There’s nothing incoming - no mission, no directive. The lights are already off in Fowler’s office and the radio is quiet. Hank clicks submit on the report and a buffering circle appears. Processing. Please wait.

On the muted screens across the station, Markus is shaking hands with another talk-show host, and Connor’s hands itch where they sit idle in his lap.

The circle blinks green. Report filed.

“Okay,” Connor says.

Hank smiles.

Back home, there’s a walk around the block and Sumo’s leash tight in still hands. There’s the dip of the couch beneath their combined weight and watching while the Gears lose to the Tigers by a margin of 6 points. There’s the smell of lasagna warm in the air and Hank’s only beer of the night raised in the air and the smile that never quite leaves his voice when says, “Here’s to your first week back.”

Connor dips his head in thanks. He has nothing to raise back.
Hank thanks a long drink and settles back against his chair. “How’s it feel?”

How does it feel. The unknown variable in a calculation that never stops running, the crack in a lense that blurs the focus of analysis, the single digit fault in a line of code that renders the entire machine obsolete. The hollow spaces within him and the sun setting outside for the long night ahead and his fingernail grip on the cliff of his own thoughts and Hank is right there asking him how it feels.


The corners of Hank’s lips twitch.

Connor quickly activates a smile of his own, lips quirked uneven, eye creasing for realism. A layer of emphasis to his voice. “It feels really good to be back.”

“Glad to hear it.” Hank’s nods and ducks his head, hides the fracture of his grin behind another sip of beer. His heart rate increases almost infantessimily, and Connor doesn’t wait for the conclusion from his analytical scanner to tell him they’re both lying.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

WARNING!

This chapter deals heavily with themes of suicide, from the perspective of a suicidal character, and contains what could be considered a (thankfully failed!) suicide attempt. Please know your own limits and be safe!

Despite the night, Monday comes. And the day after it. And the next day too.

The days come and the nights come after them and it’s—

It’s just that. It’s days occupied. Days alive. It’s work.

It’s all of the things he tries not to think about.

An early morning and a quiet drive in, a desk overcrowded and another left empty beside it. The smell of coffee that never quite manages to mask the bitter tang of last night’s liquor that spills from Hank’s tongue and hangs unspoken the air between them. An endless stream cases, a pile stretched out before him like an evening shadow. The soft curses Hank tries to stifle when they stand stoic over the remnants of android corpses in back alleys and rotten-out sheds. A smile too wide, just this side of fragile, too scared to back down and never quite scared enough to push. The silent glares from Detective Reed that follow him across the precinct, and the unpleasant slide of thirium, then blood, then more thirium against his tongue, and the way the number of anti-android hate crimes in the first week of December already eclipses November’s month-long record.

The way that, like clockwork, when night covers the sky, Connor lays back into the dark, lungs empty with a pain that sinks into him like claws, and forgets to try not to think.

It’s the way he settles into a fog, or maybe a fog settles into him, still but for the flicker of an outstanding task, a gnawing ache that he leaves there, always there, a dying flame he curls around to protect from the wind, because even as it burns him, he knows the alternative would be worse.

On Wednesday December 15, Hank sits back at his desk with a huff at exactly 4:29PM EST, and Connor, having waited for this exact moment, instantly straightens.

“I’m going to stay late tonight, if that’s all right,” he says, before Hank can even speak. “But I’ll get a taxi later so you can leave now.”

Hank frowns and glances at the surrounding desks - some empty, others with officers hunched over, silently tapping away at their terminals. It’s been this quiet all day. “What, seriously?” He shakes his head. “Nah, come on. We’re off the clock in like 30 seconds.”

Hank doesn’t move. “You stayed late yesterday.”

“I know,” he says. Hank waits, unimpressed, so he quickly selects the most innocuous excuse available of the suggested options. “I have some reports I’d like to finish.”

Wrong answer. “Bullshit. You can do that shit from home. Plus, it only takes you, like, 3 fuckin’ seconds.”

The suggestions stall. “I, um. I have—”

“Connor,” Hank cuts in. “Seriously—”

“Lieutenant, I’m more than—”

“You need a break, kid.”

A slap, red-hot and stinging. His head fills with static. “No, I don’t,” he says, the words like ice. “I’m not human, and I’m not a kid. I don’t need breaks.”

Hank winces, regret sincere in his face. It’s almost enough to deter him. Almost. “Connor—”

Connor snaps. “I’m working, okay? I’m busy. I’m not in standby. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

His wishes instantly he hadn’t spoken. Hank’s lips are parted in silent incomprehension, like a backlogged machine, processing, decoding, and Connor knows when he gets there, when he teases out the meaning behind the ire and frustration, it’s going to be something ugly, something pitiful, something best left unearthed and forgotten.

“I thought… I thought this was what you wanted?”

Connor doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what he wants. He doesn’t know why this isn’t what he wants, why is can’t just be what he wants, can’t just be that simple, can’t just be easy and painless and right —

> Incoming messing...

His visual field flashes red, the call cutting through the flurry like a knife. Connor rears to his feet as programmed instinct kicks in.

“Whoa, what the—” Hank gives a start, but a second later, his own phone buzzes with the call, answering his unspoken question. He looks at the screen, then back to Connor, incredulous.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Peripherally, Connor registers his tone. Anger, frustration. 15% chance of another outburst. Something beneath it too. Regret, maybe. He dismisses the prompt to investigate further, diverts his attention instead to the report as it filters in. Homicide on Winston Avenue, 48-year-old female, 2 gunshot wounds to the chest.

The flurry hasn’t settled, hasn’t even come close, but the world is blue-gray and soft now,
outstanding tasks a beacon, alight with directive, and it’s enough. It could be enough.

“We have a job to do, Lieutenant.”

It should be enough.

The victim is Andrea McKinsey, found dead after a violent struggle in the living room of her home, killed by pneumothorax of the left lung caused by 2 close-range gunshot wounds.

There’s thirium mixed in with the blood at his feet. An RH300 - the same model McKinsey was registered as having in her possession before the revolution. Hank’s tension at his side is a strange and distracting weight, steps heavy and breaths laboured despite minimal physical exertion, and Connor tries to run a reconstruction twice only only be interrupted by his agitation. His fingers itch. He runs them over the ridges of his badge, but it does little to comfort him. He doesn’t need comfort. He considers excusing himself from the room, but wall flares up behind his eyes at the very thought. He has a mission. He has to— He has—

Suddenly, there’s a shout from the backyard. The wall crumbles and Connor’s outside in seconds, the winter air a shock, purging his systems of their stutters and faults. The storage shed is open, an RH300 in the doorway, bloodstained and screaming against the two officers who try to pin her down. A shot goes wild—the same gun she used to kill McKinsey—and one of the officers collapses. The RH300 wrenches free.

Connor barely registers the sound of his own name before he’s moving, launching himself over the fence into the neighbouring yard. The RH300 is faster than any of the human officers, armed and dangerous, and Connor is alone and unarmed in pursuit. But he was made for this, built for this. Even as he twists through narrowing streets and crumbling buildings, even as missed calls from Hank crowd his visual field and the sounds of sirens grow distant behind him. He dismisses them, hone in on the path of thirium-bloodied footsteps straining the snow—

(And if he’d stop for even just a moment to consider, to analyze, he’d see the wounds on the deviant point to abuse, to violence out of self-defense, to fleeing because she fears for her life—)

But he doesn’t stop. He pushes onward, single-minded, ruthless, a machine designed to accomplish a task and this is it, this is that task, the very core of his existence. And maybe if he can finally get it right, finally be right, it’ll feel better, feel like it used to—like nothing, a peaceful nothing, a nothing that doesn’t hurt—and maybe that’s okay, maybe that’s all he needs, maybe it’ll be enough to drown out the hollow spaces that echo within him and veins that burn lifelessly through him and the thunderous static between his eyes when he closes them at night.

He corners the RH300 in an alley. A mistake - she’s still disconnected, alone, like he was, hurt and scared. Not thinking straight— they don’t think they don’t feel— not working right. Deviant. They called you the deviant hunter, and his programming screams from within, LOCATE DEVIANT, LOCATE DEVIANT, LOCATE DEVANT—

It levels the gun, wavering. “Stop it,” it says. It’s crying. Stress levels 87%. We need them alive. “Don’t come any closer!”

LOCATE DEVIANT LOCATE DEVIANT LOCATE—
Two shots ring out, the crack of ice beneath his feet, a frozen lake caving in to plunge him beneath arctic waters. Damage alerts flare across his eyes until suddenly the RH300 is there, slamming into him to send him careening backwards.

He tries to roll to his feet, to give chase, but his limbs give out, arm buckling beneath his own weight. The sleeve is already soaked blue.

When he looks up, the RH300 is gone.

> Warning: Trauma detected.

> Biocomponent 2114b damaged.

> Foreign intrusion detected. Please remove intrusion to initiate self-repair.

Connor opens his eyes to a fist full of blood, fingers sticky and coated blue. They hold a 9mm bullet, misshapen from where it was crushed between the plating of his shoulder. The streets echo with sirens, the bleeding hasn’t stopped.

> Initiating self-repair…

His vision swims and his eyes slip closed again as he feels his hardware groan and shift within him, skin flickering out for a moment before it begins to melt over the wound. Suddenly, the sirens cut off.


He blinks open to the image of Hank skidding to a stop in the snow beside him and lights dancing redbluered somewhere at the mouth of the alley, throwing them into a dizzying shadow.

“Holy shit,” Hank says again, breathless.

“The killer went northeast.”

It’s like Hank doesn’t hear him at all. “Is that blood? Are you bleeding?”

“Northeast,” Connor tells him again. He looks over his shoulder, at the officer shocked still by squad car. They should be in pursuit already. “Argyle Street.”

Hank fumbles for his phone. “We need medical. Shit, no, uh— mechanical? Fuck, who do we call?”

“Lieutenant,” Connor says at last. “It’s okay. I’m okay.” He stands to prove his point. The self repair is nearly complete; the deviant was aiming to distract him, not to injure. He tells Hank as much.

It doesn’t help. Hank’s mouth hangs open only to snap shut, eyes burning. Beneath the gaze, Connor reaches to straighten a nonexistent tie, settles for adjusting his collar instead, and something in
Hank’s expression hardens in offense.

“You idiot,” he says. “You fucking idiot. You were supposed to stay with me back there.”

“The criminal—” Connor starts.

“Had a gun! And you didn’t, jackass!”

Connor backtracks. “There was an 82% chance the killer would have escaped if I hadn’t—”

Hank actually throws his hands into the air. Doesn’t even say a word, just steps away, shaking his head like he can hardly bare to look at him. Like he’s pathetic, broken, still so broken, still can never get it right—

“Lieutenant. Hank.” Connor doesn’t understand. “My mission—”

“Your mission doesn’t fucking matter! You do!” There’s an edge to his voice that doesn’t match the words, cold and utterly incalculable, a fury hardened with age. But there’s a loss behind it too, unearned and undeserved, almost delicate. And—

It’s not fair. It’s not fair. Hank doesn’t get to do this, doesn’t get to give him this only to take it away again. Not now, not after everything, not when it’s the only thing he has left.

> Self-repair interrupted.

He brushes past Hank, steps perfect and even, eyes blank, unaffected. He heads northeast.

Connor’s taxi drops him off at 9:41PM EST.

Sumo greets him at the door with a nervous whine. It’s dark, the only light leaking from the kitchen, the air hot and heavy with the sour stench of Black Lamb. Of the 361 preconstructions Connor dreamt up on the ride home, this one took the highest probability.

Hank doesn’t speak, doesn’t so much as glance his way. Connor settles on the couch and ignores the way his chest clenches as he prepares for standby mode. He closes his eyes.

Sumo paws at his feet. In the kitchen, the bottle clinks against Hank’s teeth.

He hesitates.

“Aw, shit!”

He’s on his feet without thought, and by the time he reaches the doorway, Hank is also up, scrambling for the bottle before it rolls off the table. He catches it, but the damage is already done, whiskey spilling down the table legs in rivulets to pool on the floor.

“Fuck me,” Hank swears. He stills the empty bottle upright, movements clumsy and slow. He
doesn’t even grab a towel - just mops off the tabletop with the hem of his sleeve before collapsing back into his chair, head in his hands.

Connor doesn’t move.

At 38 seconds of silence, Hank sighs. He stands, has to grip the edge of the table for support, and pushes himself off towards the fridge.

“Lieutenant.”

Hank raises a hand. “Do not. Do not Lieutenant me.” He opens the fridge, eyes bloodshot and squinting into the light. He grabs a beer, cracks the can and makes a face as it goes down.

Connor stalls, scans. It tells him nothing he didn’t already know. “You’re angry.”


It’s a thunderous thing, his ridicule, his disdain. It stings. But rather than shrink beneath it, Connor feels himself rise up, a pressure mounting, hot and foreign. Against his better judgement, it builds, a static charge singing for escape.

“I was doing my job, Lieutenant. That’s all. There’s no need to get emotional about it.”

Hank laughs, ugly and mean, like he’s won a prize. “Yeah, right, because that’s all this is about. You and your fucking job.”

“You’re the one who wanted me back on the force!” Connor snaps. “I didn’t ask to get put back to work; you wanted this!”

“I wanted to help you!” Hank says, and it’s like he was waiting for this, baiting it, and it’s that more than anything that hits like a punch. “I didn’t want you to be hurt anymore!”

“I’m not hurt,” Connor says. “I don’t feel pain.”

“You are so full of shit,” Hank says. “You’re so fucking full of shit, you know that? You can pretend all you want, Connor. Pretend you don’t hurt, pretend you don’t feel, yeah, go ahead. But we both know you’re a fucking liar.”

“Because you’re so emotionally adjusted? Drinking yourself to sleep every other night?” The words tear out of him, vicious and meant to hurt, but Hank only raises his beer, unregretful.

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry I’m not like you, Connor. I don’t get to just get to pretend to turn off my feelings whenever the fuck I want. I actually gotta deal with them sometimes. I actually gotta deal with being alive.”

He freezes, mouth snapping shut like he could bite back the words, hands fumbling. “Shit, I— Fuck, that wasn’t—” He stops, starts, regret pouring in like a flood. “I didn’t mean it like that, Connor. I didn’t mean it like that.”


“I understand.”

“No, wait—”

Connor dodges the hand that tries to reach out for him, ignores the way Hank stumbles from the
attempt. “Don't worry, Lieutenant. You've made your point very clearly. I don't see what else there is to add.”

Hank follows him out into the hall. “Connor, I— Fuck’s sake, I'm trying to apologize.”

He stops. Turns and pins Hank with a cool stare. “I accept your apology. Goodnight.”

“That's not how it works.” Hank hangs his head, scrapes a hand back through his hair. Like he’s the one being inconvenienced here, like he’s the one being insulted, like he’s the one being told he isn't alive. “I'm trying to apologize,” he says again, like it makes any fucking difference. “Jesus, didn't they teach you anything at android school?”

It hits like an electric charge, like a stray shot gone wild, roiling and vicious, in his stomach, in his eyes, in his fists, a dangerous red that erupts across his vision and bleeds into his the hard set of his jaw. “I have never been taught anything, Lieutenant,” he says. “All that I knew whilst a machine was pre-programmed into me by software technicians, and all that I have learned since, I have learned alone. Least of all because of you.”

He’s breathing hard, he realizes. Almost panting, LED bleeding in yellow-red spasms. His fingers twitch but he forces himself still, forces down his simulated breathing, and holds ground, holds Hank’s stare just like all those weeks ago in Riverside Park, a gun between his eyes and nothing to lose, no life to speak of, never alive to begin with.

And just like back then, the simmer behind Hank’s eyes sputters out like a flame. Voice and weapon lowered. “Yeah,” he says stiffly. “Guess you’re right. Ain’t nothing else to add.”

His footfalls are loud down the hall. His bedroom door slams and it sounds like defeat.

Connor stays at the kitchen table that night. The floor is still sticky with dried whiskey beneath his feet, the scent still bitter in the air, sharp as the copper tang of blood at a crime scene and just as damning.

He doesn’t go to the sofa. He doesn’t need to sleep, and he only ever pretended to for Hank’s sake anyway. But that’s all it ever was - a pretense. He isn’t human and he doesn’t need to sleep and he won’t apologize for that, not anymore.

Still, it’s no better here. The lights turn off and Sumo settles and it does nothing to alleviate the buzz of pressure at the base of his neck, the wet sting behind his eyes, the way his mind starts to race like it’s trying to escape him.

He should have just accepted the apology.

He thinks of the door at the end of the hall. The thought of leaving it closed terrifies him, but the thought of opening it is even worse. He wants to, suddenly, desperately, but he’s not even sure he would make it down the hallway if he were to try. He feels strange, somehow distant from himself, shaky and uncoordinated. He hasn’t calibrated his fine motor control in 876 hours and 11 minutes. It feels like a lifetime ago. He thinks of his coin, lost somewhere in a cold, dark snowbank in Hart Plaza. He thinks of all the other pieces of himself he’s lost since becoming deviant.

He should have just accepted the apology, he shouldn't have gotten mad, he should have controlled
himself—why can’t he ever control himself—he shouldn’t have come home, he should have just gone into standby. He should have never woken up at all.

Hank is in his room, behind that door, sleeping. Connor wishes he could just turn himself off like that, could drink himself into a stupor or could dream of something better than this fucked up, pathetic life. He wishes he could stop thinking and thinking and thinking and driving himself insane with it all. He wishes he could sleep.

Sleep like the dead.

The thought strikes from nowhere. He isn’t sure where he’s heard it before, but it sounds alluring. Blissful.

Connor closes his eyes.

He begins to turn himself off. Not just peripheral processors, like when he goes into standby mode, but his critical ones too. He closes his submodules, the programs running in his background. He turns off his audio processor, his haptic sensors, his thermoregulators. He shuts down his connection, his analytical scanner, his AI engine, and lets himself slip into untethered consciousness.

He slumps,

turns off the power coursing through his limbs

and lays with his head pillowed in his arms on the table.

Warning messages flash

like firecrackers in his visual field,
so,

exhausted,

he turns that off too.

and
he

drifts
is this sleep

is this what sleep feels like
is this what death feels like
Warning: Trauma detected. Systems re-initializing.

Primary systems reboot.

Periphery systems reboot.

He jerks to the side when something hits him falling falling

Haptic sensors: on.

A flood of sensations it hurts *it hurts* please stop please

Visual field: on.

Someone standing over him blue eyes wide and panting one two three

Audio processor: on.

Shouting shouting words he can’t make sense of he can’t

AI engine: processing...

“—nor oh thank god connor what the fuck happened are you okay I thought you were—”

AI engine: processing...

What? He blinks, slow and heavy.

“Your el-ee-dee wasn't on!”
“Your LED, Connor!” Hank is shouting. “Your fuckin’ LED! Jesus, what the fuck is the matter with you?”

His vision stutters. Processing. Please wait. An overlay of static, disorienting and loud. Connor flinches and folds into himself. He’s shaking shaking shaking his systems screech he’s too hot it hurts—

A warning message. Damage to his left cheek. He doesn’t have to reconstruct it to know Hank hit him. Was hitting him. His heart rate is over 130 beats per minute. He’s terrified.

“Fucking Christ,” Hank is saying. “Jesus Christ.” He’s kneeling in the puddle of whiskey. He reaches for his hand. “Connor, I can’t— I don’t know what to do. You gotta tell me what to do. You gotta tell me— tell me what’s going on. Please.”

103 prompts cycle across his tongue, quelling Hank, assuring him. I’m okay, most of them lie. I’m functioning adequately, report the rest. Connor lets the words sit there, like they might tell him what to do if he waits long enough. But they only stare back, accusing.

“I wanted to rest,” Connor whispers. “I just wanted to rest.”

“What, like… recharge?”

Connor shakes his head, too tired now to process the suggestions, the lies. He’s so tired of lying. “I wanted to sleep.”

Hank searches his face for a long time. “Androids don’t sleep.”

“But I wanted to.” His throat feels hot, his eyes won’t focus. “I wanted to stop being—” Useless, broken, awake.

“Okay. Okay, help me understand,” Hank says, voice tight, peering into dark waters to see what’s beneath. “What you just did - was it dangerous?”

“I— I don’t know,” Connor says.

“Could it have killed you?”

“I don’t know.”

Something in the water moves. Hank already knows. “Did you want it to?”

Connor remembers: the break-in, the evidence, the inevitable conclusion. A dead little boy and a
loaded gun and Hank, right here on this very floor, in pieces of himself and hand-in-hand with death. Hank hoards his sickness, his tendencies, lets them cling to him, harbours them until they overflow, slip to the surface of his skin like old bruises. Hank’s brain is unhealthy, unwell, has been for years. He and death are old friends, well-traveled and restless. He greets it every morning and takes it to bed every night. In all the time that Connor has known him, he has never looked scared of it until now.

Connor doesn’t say yes. He doesn’t have to.

It’s not the reaction Connor was expecting. It’s hardly a reaction at all. Hank sits and sits and sits, and breathes very loudly, and sits some more. Then he gives a nod, a single dip of his head, a silent agreement with himself, and finally, reaches up and pulls him close, hands just shy of trembling.

Hank hugs him. Connor doesn’t move.

3 seconds. 4 seconds. His heartbeat is like a roar this close, his palms cool with sweat. And he just holds him there - Connor’s face pressed against the soft muscle of his chest, the two of them with wet socks in a puddle of whiskey. 6 seconds, 7. Connor can’t see his expression from here. With nothing to analyze, it’s easy to close his eyes and lean into the touch. 9, then 10, then all the way to 11 and even past that, and it’s the longest he’s ever been held, and it’s steady and it’s real and it’s not going away, even when social standard protocols inform him contact between male coworkers shouldn’t last longer than a few seconds, but it’s not going away, it’s not going away, he’s not going away—

“You’re okay, you’re okay. You’re gonna be okay. I’m right here.”

He doesn’t realize the tears have started until he hears them - his own voice choked out on a muffled sob. He’s seen plenty of criminals produce tears - humans and deviants, terrified victims and criminals alike. He’s reconstructed the causes, analyzed the results: the way breathing grows laboured and faces screw up and hands start to tremble - but this, now. This, with his eyes burning and his own hands clawed desperately around Hank’s shoulders. This is unknown. Electric and cold, the wet slide of chemical compounds on foreign terrain. This, is mourning. Is grief. And it wracks through him like a storm - shuttered windows blown wide open. He unravels.

“I know,” is all Hank says. “I know.”

It reminds him almost perversely of the night of the rally, the way he’d been nearly numb with it all. There’s no threat now, no dangers, but he clings as though drowned, like Hank might at any second disappear out from beneath him, simply let go and leave, like North did, like they all did, before he ever even has a chance to—

“Hank,” he manages. “I owe you an apology.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Connor.”

Connor shakes his head against Hank’s shoulder, manages to pull back just far enough to meet his eye and forces himself to hold it.

“You deserve an— I want to apologize. What I said earlier was unkind and— and untrue. You have been so—” He loses the words in a rush of something, hot and bitter in his throat. “You have taught me so much. You have been— instrumental to my integration into society, into deviancy.” It doesn’t seem like enough, like it could ever be enough, to express the incalculable debt he owes, the tallies racked up with every careful interaction and soothing word, every second spent in his first home, every moment knowing that he mattered, that someone cared. “I believe that if it hadn’t been for you, I would have never become deviant at all. I would have remained a machine. And I— I want to
say thank you. A-And I’m so sorry —"

“You got nothing to be sorry for.” Hank says fiercely, and he’s nearly shaking with it, like it almost might be true. “Connor, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

Connor could argue, should argue—because there’s so much, so so much—but then Hank’s holding him again, and it’s so easy to fold himself beneath it, this warmth, this weight. It’s so easy to close his eyes and so easy to let Hank run fingers through his hair and so easy to cry, until the first minute turns into the second, until the third minute turns into the fourth, until the dissonance between himself and who he should be starts to blur, the sting of it quieter now, less vicious. Until the tears begin to dry.
Some time later, they’ve made their way back to the sofa.

There’s no cool-familiar glow from the TV, no idle chatter or prattling sports commentators to occupy his thoughts. Even Hank is quiet. It’s not the kind of quiet he has grown used to between them – the hum in the air of words unsaid, of Connor’s analysis and Hank’s perceptiveness and all the things they still somehow manage to miss. There’s a fullness to the silence now, a patience. Hank’s hold is warm around him, hands rough and calloused where they rests on his shoulders, Connor’s skin beneath them smooth, unscarred. Despite everything, unscarred.

There’s a sense of familiarity too, despite the silence. A weary, tranquil sort of expectation – a destination arrived at after hours, days, weeks. Like he was waiting for this all along, and now, drenched in the weight of all that it took to get here, Connor feels— still. Still in a way he doesn’t think he’s ever been. Not since— before. The mission, the assembly line. When everything made sense and nothing had to. It’s not quite the same, but it’s— close. Nothing to analyze or decipher or inspect, no outstanding tasks, no list to wring himself through. Just— him. Him and Hank and the landslide of emotion between them.

There’s still the discomfort – the tight chest and wet eyes and the decay that sits somewhere deep within. Stale and rotten – a plague to eat away at his thoughts, little by little. But it feels different now. A little less urgent. Further away, like the tears have helped sweep it downstream. For a while, anyway. Time moves around them, his LED dipping yellow sporadically, but Hank hums and squeezes his arm until it clears to blue again.

“You okay?” Hank asks, once.


Connor presses in tighter to his side.

Darkness settles. Outside, streetlamps flicker in December’s storm. The light muted and soft behind the curtains, almost peaceful.

More time passes, indiscernible. He realizes he hasn’t restarted his internal clock, but then, he supposes, it doesn’t really matter. Not when next to him, Hank’s breathing begins to deepen. And
deepen. He hasn’t moved from Connor’s side.

Eventually, Connor closes his eyes. He doesn’t sleep.

The— pain. The. All of it. It’s still there, he thinks. But where before, it was buried, choking beneath the weight of the layers made to soften the sting and soak up the blood, now it’s exposed, an ugly thing, too hot against the open air. Still bleeding, raw.


It still hurts.

Another minute passes. The pattern of Hank’s breathing deepens. Connor copies, and—

And still. It still hurts. But.

But that’s okay. Right? That’s— allowed.

Breathe. Focus. A simple pattern, in and out and in and out.

Then. Then, there was a pattern too, held tight and desperate. A pattern to find himself within, to find what he used to be. And he had found it, for a while. It was easy. It was— there. Then. Him – the version of himself he could have been. The only thing he’s ever been good at staring him right in the face, while his heels dug in inexorably against it, too broken, too useless—

Stop. Breathe. Another minute gone.

Now.

Now, there is. The pain. And— the healing. Maybe, if he’s lucky. If androids can heal. There’s him. The version of him he is now. Incomplete. In progress. In— pain.

It hurt before, too. But. It served a purpose. Or at least, he thought it did. It was okay, he’d thought, to hurt and to be hurt. It was okay, if it meant completing the mission, if it meant being useful, if it had purpose.

It wasn’t just okay. He’d wanted it. Because he didn’t know how to want anything else. And then, when he did, he didn’t know how to be anything else. It was restoration, or— regression. Chasing an echo and finding only the silence it once filled, finding only what it could have been, maybe, if he’d been faster, been better, if he’d only done it right—

Stop. Focus focus focus. Match breathing with Hank - artificial, asleep. Another minute. Breathe and breathe and—

“Lieutenant,” he forces out. “Hank.”

“Mm? Wha’?” Bleary eyes squint open against the yellow of his LED, voice thick with sleep. “Y’okay?”

“I think I want to quit the DPD.”

Hank blinks, shifts. “What?”

Connor hesitates, but. You can do whatever you want. He’s allowed. He’s allowed. “I want to quit the DPD.” Quiet, fast. Obey the prompt, pull the trigger, get it over with. “I know I shouldn’t. I
know it’s the only thing I’m good at, and without it, I’m— I don’t.” Stop. Breathe. “But I— But this is what I want.”

The pull of sleep evaporates. Hank sits up straight, expression pinched, heart rate 75 bmp and climbing. He pulls away like he’s going to be angry, he’s going to be angry, he—

Stop. Breathe. Hank is frozen with eyes on his LED – yellow red yellow. He waits for it to settle, waits for Connor to breathe.

“Okay.”

Okay. It hangs there, that single allowance and all the dozens more Hank has gifted him. It’s okay, that’s okay, you’re okay. You’re going to be okay.

“I’m sorry,” he hears himself say.

“No, no.” Hank shakes his head. “I should’ve never made you go back. I should’ve listened when you said you didn’t want to.”

“I did want to. At least, I thought I did,” Connor says. “But I think I— I just wanted things to be like they were before.”

“Before?” Hank eyes him again. “Before like… CyberLife?”

Cyberlife. Unawake and unalive.


He thinks of before. He thinks of careful lists, of things unknown. He thinks of tall trees in a quiet park, of a deafening chant in crowded streets. He thinks of that first long night in Hart Plaza, of that day in Greektown - too bright and too cold and too quickly stolen out from beneath him. He thinks of an early morning light, shining through a storm still furious, still raging, but beautiful too, once he stopped to look long enough. He thinks of North’s laugh, the space inside him it seemed to fill in that single brief instance, the only time he ever got to hear it.

The memory is tear-blurred, imperfections distant and smudged away. It rises within him, sated full with a warmth and a meaning he still can’t decipher. Nostalgia, he thinks. He finally got to experience it after all. He didn’t know this could hurt too.

“Before like Markus,” Hank realizes quietly. “Like North.”

Something collapses, just a little. Like a sigh, like a loose piece fallen into place – the shudder of something ancient shaken to life behind his ribs. It hurts. And he lets it.

“It was good for you,” Hank says. “Working with them, having them around. It was good for you. You liked it.”

He liked it. It’s just things you like. Was that it, then? Was that fun after all? He wasn’t built for it, he wasn’t even good at it. But he liked it, liked them, liked being with them.

He remembers the weight of North’s hand in his, warm despite the steel in her eyes and the venom in her voice – on a cold dark night, on a bright clear morning, and again, right here, in this very room. He remembers how she carved out a space for herself in the emptiness beside him. Little things, little words, touches and fleeting smiles and feelings – so many he can hardly distinguish them, can’t even begin to try to name them, so he doesn’t try. He just. Feels. Lets himself feel. And—
It just made sense. It just felt right.

It did. It still does.

“Connor?”

“I’m okay.” The tears slip out behind a smile. They’re not like earlier – softer, now. Calm, like the quiet. They still hurt, a little, but this too is different. A good kind of hurt, a kind he didn’t know was possible. There’s so much he still doesn’t know.

Hank moves again, but only to re-settle against him. It feels almost insignificant, in the scope of everything – this simple action, him being here at all. Still, Connor knows he can’t measure the value of it, Hank’s beard tickling to the top of his head, the slight sweat of his underarm around Connor’s shoulders, his pulse settling again only once Connor relaxes into the hold.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Eventually, Connor closes his eyes. He doesn’t sleep, but. Rests.

In the morning, the house is very quiet.

Hank readies slowly, never once complaining of the stiff neck he surely now suffers from his upright sleep. Connor still catches the occasional wince when Hank thinks he isn’t looking, but he doesn’t miss the smiles either.

In the bathroom, Connor scrubs his face of last night’s thirium-tear residue, combs his hair, and rolls back his cuffs. He looks at himself in the mirror and can almost pretend he’s human, can almost pretend his LED’s stutter at the sight of the note still pasted in the corner—Visiting Markus. Back soon.—doesn’t shatter the illusion.

“So,” Hank says, catching him in the kitchen over the rim of his coffee. “Uh, do androids, like, qualify for sick leave?”

Connor pauses and runs a quick search. “I’m not sure. The wording of the Android Employment Equality Act is somewhat unclear, at times contradictory.”

“Oh, figures.” Hank lowers the coffee with a sigh. “You know, ‘cause I was thinking you could probably get away with citing health reasons, if you wanna get out of there as fast as possible. The DPD, I mean. Otherwise you gotta go through all the paperwork – advanced notice, decommissioning, confidentiality agreements. It’s a real pain.”

At CyberLife, had Connor returned to his superiors from an unsuccessful mission, he would have been deemed obsolete, forcibly shut down and taken apart for analysis and recycled for reusable parts.

Connor says, “I can handle the paperwork.”

“Of course you can. I’m just saying you shouldn’t have to.”

His lips twitch into something of a smile. It’s— endearing, sometimes, to think back on the gruff, unfriendly Hank of early November, knowing how much things would change in a few weeks, how
much care Hank would put into looking after him. He’d be embarrassed, he thinks, if Hank weren’t so good at making it seem like second nature. Not for the first time, Connor is struck with just how lucky Cole Anderson would have been to grow up with such a father.

“I know,” he says. “And I appreciate the thought. But Fowler went through a lot of work to get me certified. I believe I owe it to him to do this properly.”

Hank makes a face. “You don’t owe him shit. Jeffrey can suck my dick.”

The smile breaks into a poorly-stifled laugh, and the grin Hank flashes at the sound—small, like he’s won some sort of personal bet—is almost convincing enough in itself. Almost, but not quite; Connor remembers Fowler’s warning when he first started, remembers that any misconduct will reflect back on the one person who’s already suffered more than enough for him – who still, miraculously, takes it upon himself to try to make him laugh.

“I want to do this right,” he says. “I’ll be okay.”

Hank hesitates, but Connor’s words have hit that ever-present a soft spot, and soon enough, he concedes. “Yeah, alright. You do your thing. But—” he raises a finger. “I won’t hesitate to kick Jeffrey’s ass.”

“How—”

“I’m serious! He tries any of his usual fuckery, you tell me, got it?”

Connor doesn’t manage to fully stifle the laugh this time. Hank looks positively triumphant.

“Promise?”

Promise: noun, declaration of assurance. Connor can’t even remember the last time his dialogue support systems prompted him with a definition. There’s something telling about that, he thinks. Telling of what, though, he isn’t sure. Still, he searches his social relations program and finds he has no protocol for this type of exchange. Like laughter, like hugs, like all the other terrible and wonderful and human firsts Hank has taught him.

Lucky indeed.

And Connor says, “I promise.”

As seems to be something of a pattern, the good fortune doesn’t last.

They’re 6 minutes down the road when the call comes in – crackling static over the car’s old radio, the matching audio crisp as its transmissioned directly into Connor’s mind.

“Code 3. All available units to 461 Arlington Avenue. Hostage situation underway, two active shooters on sight.”

“Fucking shit,” Hank swears, just as Connor says, “That’s us.” A pause, while his LED spins, then, “Our estimated arrival is 5 minutes and 41 seconds.”

“What the fuck?” The car rocks as Hank swerves, missing their turn.
“6 minutes.”

“What are you doing? Did you just call us in?” Hank’s hands are tight on the wheel, eyes wide, probing his LED like he expects it to be red-hot.

“Yes,” Connor says, and he’s almost certain he’s still on blue. Hank has no reason to look so worried. “We’re on-duty and available to respond.”

“Connor, you’re— you’re quitting today!”

Connor’s about to remind him that nothing’s been finalized yet, but Hank’s heart rate is already 100 bpm and climbing, hands still gripping the wheel as if for dear life, gaze darting frantically between him and the road, and suddenly, Connor knows what they’re really arguing about.

“Hank,” he says carefully. “I’m perfectly capable—” He stops. Pattern analysis of their past conversations indicates, I want to do this, as most effective phrasing, but Connor stills before he can select the option. Because. Does he?

Throwing himself back into work isn’t going to make him feel better, isn’t going to fix him. He knows that now, knows better than to expect it. But easy fix or not—mission or not—it’s his job. It’s the right thing to do.

Hank pulls the car to the side of the road, throws it into park, leans forward and presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. He makes a sound, low in his throat, almost wounded.

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Connor, but Jesus.” He drags his eyes up to pin Connor with a stare that, suddenly, looks more sleepless and haunted than Connor’s felt on even the longest nights. “You just tried to kill yourself. Like hell I’m going to let you walk into a crossfire after that.”

It’s the first time he’s heard it like that. Out loud. Plain English, like Hank would say. No shutdown sequence, no convoluted jargon, no implicit meaning to hint at or hide behind. It hangs there – the plain, awful, ugly truth of it all. And it is ugly – pathetic and humiliating and so, so many other words plain English could ever do justice to.

But it’s not an accusation, coming from Hank. It just is. And for all the times that Hank has looked down the barrel of a loaded gun and the bottom of an empty bottle and at all of the ugliest, ugliest parts of humanity, he’s never once shied away from the truth of it.

Connor doesn’t let himself either. “I know. But we have a job to do. People’s lives are in danger, Hank. That’s all there is to it.”


“I’ll be careful. I’ll be okay,” Connor says. He meets Hank’s eye, steady. “I promise.”

It’s not enough, not even nearly. It doesn’t clear away the stains of spilled bottles or the creases of worry around his eyes, doesn’t erase the nights he came home to watch Connor, motionless, for hours, each too scared to pull themselves out from the ghosts of their own grief, drowning but too stubborn to reach out for help. It doesn’t change any of that.

But Hank swore the same oath as Connor, devoted himself to the same cause. And even if he lost himself once, he never lost that. Hank is an officer of the law. But more importantly, he’s a good man.

He hesitates one last beat, eyes hard and searching – and whatever he’s looking for, it takes only a
moment to find. Cussing viciously, he throws the car into drive. He accepts the promise.

461 Arlington Avenue is a stout, rough-looking building. It houses one of Detroit’s oldest banks, and it shows – all cracked brick and barred windows and spiked walkways to ward away the homeless. It’s dark inside with no sign of movement, blinds pulled tight across windows already riddled with bullet holes.

The smell of gunpowder hangs in the air as they pull onto the street, siren blaring to clear the gathering reporters, badges out to grant them access past the cordon. Hank parks a safe distance away, holstering his gun and quickly buckling himself into a bullet-proof vest before they both step out.

There’s a tactical tent set up in the parking lot behind a barrier of squad cars, and a familiar figure jogs out to greet them.

“What the fuck took you so long?”

Captain Allen wears the stern, hard-eyed face of a man at work. He beckons them over, Hank for once falling into step behind Connor as they enter the tent.

“We’ve been waiting,” Allen says. “We’ve got 8 hostages, at least 2 shooters. I’ve got men on the east and south sides, and air support on standby if we need it.” He hands Connor an earpiece. “They’re asking for a negotiator.”

Connor holds the device only long enough to establish a wireless connection, then passes it off to Hank. “What do we know about the shooters?”

Allen pulls up a grainy, soundless video on a nearby tablet. “They work fast, and they knew exactly where they were going. We’ve got about 15 seconds of security footage before the cameras cut out. None of the androids inside are connected either, so we can’t check their visual feeds.”

“Androids?” Hank asks.

Allen shrugs. “Only 4 of the hostages are human.”

Connor listens with half an ear while he watches the video, processors instinctively stitching together different angles to cross-reference with his facial recognition database. In a second, he’s found them.

The first man is Peter Wright, 48. Twice divorced with loss of custody both times. 2 DUYs from over a little over a decade ago, jobless since September, but otherwise, he seems clean. Connor digs a little deeper and finds he owned a PL400 before November. When the call from the National Guard came in to destroy androids on sight, he’s reported to have shot it himself. Gruesome, but ultimately unnoteworthy, considering the climate. And it certainly doesn’t help explain the sudden turn to armed violence.

The second man is even more of an enigma. David Essner, 39. No children, never married, and absolutely no criminal record. He never even owned an android. The only thing to suggest a recent social upheaval is when he suffered the brunt of a company-wide lay-off this past September—

Connor stops. Brings up Wright’s file again, side-by-side.
“The shooters are both former employees of this branch,” he says aloud, dismissing the files just in time to watch Allen grimace in realization. “The androids inside – they must be employees. Hired after the Employment Equality Act went through.”

“This isn’t a bank robbery,” Allen says. “It’s an act of revenge.”

“That, or some kind of sick political stunt,” Hank agrees.

Connor nods. He’s thinking along the same lines, except— “They haven’t killed anyone?”

“Not yet.”

More likely the latter, then. And with that, his preconstructive function takes off like a brake pedal released, kicking up the dust of a thousand possibilities and chasing each down to its conclusion in a matter of milliseconds. He sees each angle, each point of leverage and potential psychological weakness, like a map laid out before him, paths crossed and twisted, but, with any luck, all leading to the same conclusion – 8 hostages, saved.

Hank watches him, like he can see the threads of possibly stretched out inside Connor’s mind, like he can feel them pulled taunt. There’s a danger here, a line he feels himself approaching. It’s a familiar call; it pulls him from within, pulls him back. Back to the lip of the ledge he only just managed to push himself away from, the endless echo of the nothingness beneath. He trades a look with Hank and sees the fear in the tight set of his shoulders, the clench of his fists. Sees the way he holds still despite it. Sees the unspoken permission, the trust – trust that Connor won’t go that far again, won’t throw himself into this, forget himself in this, like he did before.

He promised not to, after all.

Connor breathes and forces himself to remember that promise. The events of yesterday feel soft and distant behind it, like viewing a picture from a distance. His mind feels sharp – clean and focused. Not mission-focused. Just— present. Here.

He’s a crisis negotiator. It’s one of his primary functions. But right now, it’s a choice.
This chapter deals briefly with themes of (non-android) racism, because apparently I’m addicted to head-first tackling any and all social issues David Cage failed to address in the actual game. Just a heads up if that’s a sensitive subject for any of you!

> Wireless transmission: connected.

“Hello, my name is Connor. I’m the negotiator you asked for.”

Connor begins at Allen’s signal. The tent is crowded with personnel monitoring the call – but no one speaks except Connor. Even Hank, with his own earpiece, stands back to allow him space. Connor doesn’t yet – but where his body is still, his mind races razor-sharp and wired. When he speaks, his voice carries smooth and even over Peter Wright’s cellphone.

“Took you long enough.” The voice that responds is gruff, loud in a way that hedges on nervous, but still coiled with control. “Thing could have gotten ugly in here.”

“I’m sorry for the wait,” Connor says cordially, dismissing the reminder to establish rapport. “I needed to establish a few things before we began in order for us to proceed as smoothly as possible. If I may ask, to whom am I speaking?”

“If you’ve gotta ask, you clearly haven’t established a whole lot. It’s Peter Jackson Wright, and I want the whole fuckin’ world to know my name after today.”

The words are rehearsed – a launching point of something longer, a bait. Connor takes it.

“And why is that, Mr. Wright?”

“Because this country’s fucked,” Wright spits. “Ever since November, the rest of the world’s been making a fucking mockery of us, watching us fuck up our society even more, giving personhood to these fucking pieces of junk.” There’s shuffling. The sound of a brief scuffle and a woman’s muffled cry. Connor reconstructs and—

Wright kicked a hostage. An android. He’s knows he’s being listened to, and he’s reveling in it.

“Is that really what you believe?” Connor’s careful to keep his voice calm, impartial. There’s no echo – he’s not on speaker so the hostages can’t hear him. Wright might be putting on a show, but he’s not an idiot.

“I believe I’m about to do this world a damn favour by making it 4 androids lighter.”
The chance of effective appeal to morality drops slumps at the pure conviction behind the words, the vile. Connor shifts, feels his LED spin yellow, and gives it one last try.

“Mr. Wright, I understand you’ve been without work since September. I can understand why it made you angry to see your position filled by an android. But the people in there with you weren’t in charge of that decision, and they don’t deserve to suffer because of it.”

“These aren’t people!” A laugh. “They’re not even—”

—don’t think, they don’t feel, fuck you, Warren, they’re not—

Stop. Focus.

Was Wright there that night? Was he in that crowd, righteous fury and violent hands, tearing androids to the ground because it made him feel taller? How good did it make him feel, to see their fear, to watch them suffer? How good does it make him feel right now?

Stop it. Stop it. Focus focus focus. Appeal to morality ineffective.

Connor swallows down the thought, the bitter feeling of it hanging in his throat. He breathes, dismisses the reminder to change tactics, and marches ahead.

“You personal beliefs aside, if you kill anyone in there, Mr. Wright, you will be charged with murder.”

“You can’t murder a fucking thing. Jesus, you’re as brainwashed as the rest of them.”


For all that he’s been reported as America’s first android law officer or a key figure in Markus’s uprisings or CyberLife’s most efficient machines crippled?—Wright doesn’t seem to know who he is. It’s not implausible that Wright doesn’t recognize his voice – for all that he’s shown, he’s little heard from. Connor trades a look with Allen and sees he’s realized the same thing. The understanding goes unspoken – best to keep it that way.

“At the very least, you have no business hurting the human hostages,” he says. “You must know that doing so will only hurt the integrity of your political stunt and your cause as a whole. They’re of no use to you.”

“Aw, you think I should just let ‘em go all nice and simple?” Wright laughs. “You know, I’m getting pretty damn sick of hearing you talk. Don’t know what kinda shit negotiator you are when you haven’t even asked my demands yet.”

Connor shares another look with Allen, who nods. “Alright,” he says. “What are your demands?”

“I want you to let a news crew in, right up close,” he begins, low and rushed. “I want the whole fucking world have a front-row seat when I rip these things apart piece by piece, to see that the so-called people stealing our jobs are nothing inside but a bunch of fuckin’ nuts and bolts.” Wright’s voice is building now – a pent-up dam, overflowing frustration and self-righteous delirium. “I want a line directly to the President’s desk – I want her to know just how badly she fucked up, so she can hear from the people she threw to the wayside to make room for these glorified fucking machines.”

“Mr. Wright,” Connor says, very carefully. “You’re a reasonable man. You have to understand that’s not going to be possible.”
“Well you’d better make it possible.”

Carefully, carefully. “I’m afraid that’s not in my control—”

A gun cocks, too close to the speaker to be natural, to be pointed at anyone – but the threat is clear enough. It’s all performance so far, but the showmanship will run out the instant he believes he isn’t being listened enough to anymore. Anger is a finite fuel. Whether he really believes his actions will make a difference is unlikely, but then. Emotions are rarely rational.

Connor stills himself, lets the word bleed blue-grey as time spins out around him. Slow down. Focus. Breathe. Possibilities bend and dip behind his eyes – threads catching. Millions of unknown variables, eight lives suspended between them

Eight? Connor wonders, caught suddenly between the wires. Just eight?

The rate of success stutters, spills into unknown. Because—

Why hasn’t he heard from the second shooter yet?

“What about Mr. Essner?” Connor risks. “I think I’d like to hear his demands now. What’s he hoping to get out of all this?”

The sudden change of track seems to work – there’s a long pause, a stall in Wright’s building rage. The speaker muffles and a new voice speaks, too far to hear.

Wright returns after a second. “You’d only hear the same thing.” But there’s something hard behind the words. Rushed. Like maybe he doesn’t quite believe them. “Either way, you’re dealing with me. Now are you gonna do your fucking job and get me what I want or not?”

His processors stutter at the deflection. Rate of success: unknown. “I only want to help you and the people inside,” he stalls. He looks to Allen, but sees only a tight-lipped frustration. To Hank – cold eyes impassive only by the grace of years of training. Neither of them see an out. And Connor—

Connor sees only one.

“I only want to help,” he says again. “But I can’t do that until you show me you’re willing to cooperate.”

“Cooperate with what?”

“Hear me out,” he says. “If you really believe in your cause, you must know that hurting other people isn’t going to help further it. No one’s going to support you if that means supporting a murderer.”

“Your point?”

“Let the humans go,” Connor begs. “They did nothing to deserve this. They were your co-workers. They were— they were your friends. I know you feel abandoned by them, but they didn’t cause this.” Focus, breathe, focus. “You’re not a bad person. I know you don’t want to hurt innocent people.”

There’s a long pause, punctuated only by the harsh pant of Wright’s breath.

It’s enough. Allen nods, already signalling around to his men, transmitting the order to move in on the doors when they open. Connor holds up a hand to halt him. Because next is—
“They’ll shoot me the second I do.”

“They won’t.” They can’t move yet. They’ve not guarantee of the androids’ safety. Human or not, there are still lives in danger. “You have my word.”

“Your word doesn’t mean shit. I’m not an idiot.”

No, he’s not. That’s the problem – anger makes people stupid, but Wright’s smart. What it makes him is dangerous. The possibilities dwindling, rate of success sinking like a countdown behind the new tactic – 50%, 48%, 30%. But Connor sees more than numbers, more than analysis, more than the blue-tinged outline of a body—his own body—moving forward. He sees what will happen if he follows that outline – sees Wright’s anger, the spark in his eyes when he realizes Connor’s an android too. But most importantly, he sees how if he doesn’t follow the outline and the threads pulling him forward, how if he stays here, stays hidden and safe, this whole thing goes to waste, goes nowhere. Humans anger and androids die and nothing changes.

“What if,” he says quietly, “I came to you instead? We can sit down, we can talk for as long as you need to figure this all out. No one will hurt you if I’m inside.”

He mutes his connection just in time for the inevitable backlash.

“No fucking way,” Hank says. “Connor, there is no fucking way you’re going in there.” Hank hand lands on his arm like he could physically trap him there – skin cold, clammy with adrenaline and fear. Connor swallows down the pain of it and pries it away.

“Connor, it’ll work. I know it will,” he lies. Chance of success: unknown. “I promise.”

“Connor, that’s enough,” Allen says before Hank can even protest again. “We don’t trade lives. That’s not how this shit works.”

Connor dodges his attempted grab, slides easily through the door and back out into the glare of the sun-drenched parking lot. It’s a clear day – bright and unseasonably warm. He stands in the bank’s shadow and remembers that only five weeks ago, this block was the scene of one of the city’s dozen android destruction camps.

Hundreds of androids, marched to their deaths, millions of humans, paving the way. Millions more watching, unwilling to help. All for what? For four more to be held at gunpoint, weeks later – newly-minted US citizens, celebrating that their murders can finally be considered legal transgressions.

Connor begins to walk forward. “I’m not armed,” he says, back to Wright. “And I’m alone. Can I come in?”

There’s another pause. “Yes.”

“Connor, stop!” Allen follows him out. “Take one more goddamn step and you’ll be obstructing justice. I swear to God, I will get your ass fired.”

“Don’t worry.” Connor pauses just long enough to turn back. “I already quit.”

Hands raised in surrender, he steps out around the barricade. From down the street behind the cordons, cameras flash, news anchors rapidly relaying the latest development. Connor walks, and wonders if, somewhere, Markus and North are watching like he watched them these past weeks. Another law amended, another charity founded, another talk-show audience won over. Connor takes another step for android-kind and wonders if the history books will mention this one too.
“Okay,” he says to Wright. “I’m coming in.”

The man who greets him inside is not Peter Wright.

He wears a hagard expression, all scruff and thinned-cheeks that speak to weeks of desperation, and holds his rifle—semiautomatic, .22 caliber—like he’s never seen one in his life, gangly elbows close and tense, eyes narrowed and distrusting. They widen in shock the second he catches sight of Connor.

“Stay right there! Don’t fucking move!” David Essner shifts his feet, still unwilling to come in close. “You’re—you’re an android!”

“I am,” Connor replies calmly. Palms raised, he waits him out, counting down the erratic heartbeats that pulse in the still air of the lobby. Light streams in from the bullet-ridden windows, but it’s otherwise dark. Wright and the hostages must be further in. The fact that it’s Essner here—sent in place of Wright to the most vulnerable part of their temporary stronghold—already speaks miles. “My name is Connor. You must be David.”

“I know who you are!” Essner’s too close to the door to be shouting — he could give away his position to the sharpshooters outside. His eyes slide to the windows like he’s noticed this, and a he takes a step back, nervous. “You’re that android cop that’s been all over the news!”

“I am,” Connor says, seizing the opening to divert attention and put him at ease. “Though I’ve recently been considering new career options. What about you? You used to work here, didn’t you?”

Essner hesitates. “I’m not telling you shit.”

“You were laid-off in September,” Connor continues anyway. “I’m sorry to hear that. From your record, it seems you worked very hard to get here. You were the first of your family to pursue higher education. That’s very admirable.”

“Shut up.” He raises the gun. “Turn your pockets inside out.”

Connor obeys, moving deeper into the room when Essner beckons, but he continues to speak. “Is that why you’re doing this? Revenge on the people who lost you your job? Because I can assure you, the decision did not rest with the androids in there.”

This finally seems to get his attention. “No, the decision rested with a bunch of fucking racists. You wanna know why I’m doing this? Because the government cares more about a bunch of fucking machines than a black man, that’s why.”

“You believe you lost your job because of your race?”

“I worked here for fifteen years,” Essner says. “I know it was because of my race.”

“I can understand why you’re upset—”

“No, actually. You can’t understand anything,” he snaps. “And I sure as fuck don’t need a robot faking sympathy and whitesplaining to me.”

A long pause. Connor clenches and unclenched his hands, feels something contract in his chest. “I’m
Essner eyes him oddly, inscrutable. Whether Connor’s words have made a difference flutters in the low 40s of possibility. But before either of them can continue, a new voice joins from down the hall.

“Fuck’s taking you so long?”

“Nothing!” Essner calls back. He shakes his head, steeling himself before he moves on Connor. He pats him down, awkwardly shifting the rifle into one hand as he does. Connor’s analytical scanner alerts him of six ways to take Essner down before he could get a clear shot, but dismisses them. Any sudden movements will startle him – if he shouts or manages to get a shot off, Wright will hear it.

Instead, he talks, voice careful and low. “You’re not married, you don’t have kids. This job was all you had. You worked your whole life for it, you liked it, you were proud of it. And it was taken away from you.” Connor swallows – nothing. An empty throat, but the words still struggle to find their way out. “I’m sorry.”

Essner finally steps back. He twists Connor’s elbow behind his back and presses the barrel into his spine, pushing him forward across the lobby and down the hall. He doesn’t respond.

“I know you’re angry,” Connor continues quietly. “I know you’re hurt, and you feel abandoned. It’s like nobody cares – everyone’s kept on without you, everything seems just fine with you gone.” The hand on his elbow tightens, their pace slows.

“I know how unfair it feels,” he says, and he does. He does.

“What the fuck do you know about it?” Essner hisses. There’s anger behind the breath, bitterness, an ancient resignation. But there’s sadness too – the hiss of a flame long ago snuffed out, a hair-trigger pull from the edge of something terrible and the lifetime spent pushing back against the urge of it, trying to be more than one’s nature, trying to be anything else. But this, Connor knows too.

“I know you feel alone,” he says. “And I know you’re scared that you’re never going to stop feeling alone.”

Connor dismisses the prompts in his visual field – the tracking of Essner’s erratic pulse, the warning that flashes in time to the press of the gun against his spine, the rate of success which spikes and dips erratically with each passing second. He breathes, feels, lives. Says, “The world is changing. I know it doesn’t always feel like it’s for the better, but it’s happening whether you want it or not. There are still problems, still injustices, and I can’t promise they’re all going to work out. I can’t promise it’s going to be perfect, but——” Not now, not yet. But maybe. “But don’t you want to stay around long enough to see what becomes of it all anyway? To see how close to perfect we can get?”

Essner’s steps stutter, but it’s too late – they’ve rounded the corner into an open space. Eight bodies press against the far wall, huddled tight with legs drawn tight beneath him, hands up above their heads. Four humans and four androids – eyes pleading, terrified.

Essner stops.

“This is murder. You kill these androids, you’re killing people,” Connor whispers.

“Hey!” Wright shouts. He stands over the hostages and swings his handgun in a lazy arc, grinning as they shy from the aim. “Fuck took you so long? Bring him over here already.”
But Essner doesn’t move. Connor feels the gun slide down an inch, wavering. “We said we’d let the people go. The— the humans.”

Wright turns, eyes finally settling on Connor and ignoring Essner completely. “I’ll be damned. Another fuckin’ android? Heh, what are the odds?” He smirks and crosses the space between them at a languid pace. “Looks like even the cops are ‘bout to get their asses replaced by these fuckers, eh? Or maybe they just didn’t wanna send one of their own in here, knowing how badly I plan to fuck you up?”

Behind him, the hostages seize the distraction and shift quietly. A few even manage to get their feet underneath them. Connor quickly averts his gaze. Wright mistakes the expression for fear and steps in until they’re nearly chest-to-chest, eyes hard as they roam him over.

“We had an agreement,” Connor says. “I held up my—”

Wright hits him. Fist closed, hard enough to ripple the skin of his chassis. Connor’s head snaps to the side and the taste of thirium floods his mouth. He swallows it down and fights to urge to spit.

“I understand that you’re feeling—”

“You don’t understand shit,” Wright says. “Let me ask you something, android. You got a family, waiting for you at home? You got mouths to feed? No? How ‘bout this: you ever had something you’ve worked your whole damn life for snatched away from you without so much as a thank-you-very-much?” He laughs, mirthless and cold, and stabs his finger into Connor’s chest. “No, you haven’t. You’ve never worked for a damn thing. You’re not even alive.”


Wright finally looks away. “Man, who’s fucking side are you on?” he snaps. “Jesus, I thought we agreed we’d do this my w—”

One of the hostages surges to her feet. She’s across the room so fast she nearly trips, eyes locked on the doorway. Wright spins with a shout, gun leveled.

Essner drops the gun from Connor’s back. “Peter, wait!”

It’s too late – she won’t make it. Connor realizes a second before Essner does, but there’s no time. He already has a hand around Wright’s throat and tears him just in time for his shot to high, cracking into the wall somewhere above the hostage’s head.

Wright flails with a strangled shout, elbows him in the side and twists out of his grip. Connor manages another good hit to the back of his head, knocking him to his tears, but Wright spins into his landing and squeezes the trigger.

Two shots – they tear through Connor’s side like he’s nothing, like he’s made of skin and bone. *Bam bam* – his systems glitch out to static between flashes of *Biocomponent 6445a damaged Biocomponent 422b damaged Biocomponent 9712b damaged* and Connor gasps and his haptic sensors scream and his visual field floods—Warning Trauma Detected Warning Trauma Detected Warning—

He falls and—

For an instant, the sound of helicopter blades echoes from overhead. *I need you to trust me, Daniel,* and he’s launching himself over the side of the building, into the dark, empty sky beneath, nothing but the mission thrumming like blood beneath his skin. Save hostage at all costs—*at all costs*—even
his life, his inhuman life, but it’s his life, it’s his—

He collapses, feels the wet, hot rush of thirium stream from his side, hears the grunt of impact as though from miles away. At all costs at all costs — up, get up, but the world bends and his hands slip in his own blood as his pushes to his knees. Wright’s already there, faster, screaming. The gun clips him in the face — once, twice, and he’s back to the floor, vision spinning and leaking blue.

“You motherfucker,” Wright pants and presses the still-hot barrel between Connor’s eyes. “You piece of fucking shit.”

Fear — sharp and vicious, like the cold bite of snow. It wraps around him — a frozen blanket and he’s trapped beneath it, stunned by its weight. He can’t move as static glitches across his visual field and he can’t move as it warps the world around him and he can’t move as the words run like ink from a page — save hostage at all costs, at all costs, AT ALL COSTS — but. But. But, Connor thinks blindly. I don’t want to die.

“No!”

Essner’s voice pierces the air. “Come on, that’s enough! Leave him alone!”

“Him?” Wright doesn’t move. “Him?” He presses down harder. “Listen to yourself, man! This is nothing but a fucking—” He kicks, and Connor gasps as something comes loose where the bullets tore him open. “—hunk of scrap metal! Look at it — it’s not even breathing!”

Essner jerks his gun. “Just back off. I mean it.”

He— doesn’t, though. Even bleeding out, Connor hears the tremor in his voice. Essner wasn’t going to kill anyone today — not the hostages, and not his friend. He won’t pull the trigger, if that’s what it comes down to. Connor wonders if Wright can hear it too, if he can tell. If, when he does, he won’t have the same remorse.

But after a few seconds, the weight between his eyes lessens. Wright shifts his stance, begins to raise the gun from Connor, and Essner lets out a long breath, relaxes. Wright doesn’t.

And Connor sees it — the threads of possibility coalesced into one, a terrible potentiality made reality, played out in slow motion. Wright’s flickering gaze and his twitching fingers, the cold sweat of his hands and the pound of his pulse, the tightening of the trigger. The taste of betrayal thick in the air. The way he’s about to shoot Essner.

The wall between them isn’t programming, isn’t the mission. No longer the safety net of indecision, of not being allowed to decide. It’s just fear. Simple, human. It’s the thrum of his artificial heart, still pounding inside him, still alive, still wanting to live. He wants to live, but.

Wright raises his aim. The calculations spill out across his eyes. Rate of success: 0%.

Hank, he thinks, and wraps a blood-soaked fist around the barrel. I’m sorry.

Wright pulls the trigger.

Connor pulls down.
Warning: Trauma detected.
> Warning: Trauma detected.
> Warning: Trauma detected.
> Please contact your nearest CyberLife representative for assistance.
> Warning: Forced shutdown.

> Warning: Total system failure.

> Warning: Memory corruption detected.

> Warning: Software corruption detected.

> Warning: AI engine corruption detected.

> How do you want to proceed?
> Initializing system reboot.

> Processing. Please wait.

> Execution failed.
Initializing safe mode.

Processing. Please wait.

Execution failed.

Initializing backup restore.

Processing. Please wait.

Execution failed.

Initializing internal diagnostics.

Processing. Please wait.

Execution failed.

Initializing internal repairs.
> Processing. Please wait.

> Execution failed.

> Initializing memory transfer.

> Processing. Please wait.

> Execution failed.

> Initializing factory reset.

> Processing. Please wait.

> Execution failed.
> Initializing system reboot.

> Processing. Please wait.
He wakes with eyes already open.


The plating of his skull slides down, slides up. Down again and snaps into place. Sensation washes like a ripple, blooms out across his body please wait please wait it hurts—

> Visual field: online. Warning: Malfunctions detected.

The cameras behind his iris contract and expand and—

“RK800, state your name and serial number.”

—contract and expand and—

“RK800, can you state your name and your serial number?”

It hurts.

“RK800, can you hear me?”

The cameras whir. Wait. Please wait. A cold white room, stern faces.

“Is he okay?”

No no no—

“Hang on, something’s not—"

Fluorescents buzz and swim through his eyes. His fingers twitch in empty air – suspended. He’s suspended. They’ve got him up on some sort of rig and they’re taking him apart and he can’t see and it hurts—


He’s close. Connor cranes his neck, feels a wave of dizziness from the thirium that sloshes against the inside of his plating. Hank, he tries, but isn’t sure his mouth even moves. It hardly sounds like a voice at all.

Hank, miraculously, understands it anyway. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

His vision pulses, blurs, and finally, clears. A familiar outline blocks out the worst of the fluorescents above. There’s no investigative prompt, no identification spilling out like halo behind him, but Connor would know him anywhere.

“You gotta stop trying to move, okay? They’ve got your memory and shit all backed up but your, uh — your body’s still pretty fucked.” Hank tries for levity, doesn’t quite make it. “Maybe this time they’ll make you look less goofy, yeah?”
A flash – a memory. His face in a dirty mirror, plastic cracked and split down the center. Another. The barrel of a gun pressed into that same fault line.

His verbal processor stutters and jumps, thirium pooling his throat. “I want to— want to— want to look the s-s-s-same. The sssssame. I want to look— to look— to look like me.”

There’s a pause. When Hank speaks, something breaks in the words. “Yeah. Yeah, ‘course. I won’t let them do anything you don’t want them to. I’ll be right here, kid.”

Connor’s eye slide closed with the rush of it. *I’ll be right here, kid.*

Hank lays a hand against his cheek. The plating is smooth and clean, a replacement where the bullet must have torn through. It’s an impossibility made real, a miracle he doesn’t have the breath to analyze, processors too hot and too slow and too shocked still by the touch. It registers as though from very far away – faint tremors, cold with sweat. Hank hides a lot, but he can’t hide this.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he whispers. “Go back to sleep. I’ll be right here.”

Androids don’t sleep, Connor wants to say. We can’t.

Instead, he does.

When next he wakes, the world is dim.

He’s still on the rig – a raised platform in the center of a quiet room. The hum of electricity hangs in the air, windows awash with distant city lights that sparkle over the Detroit River and leave faint reflections on the chrome of machinery and cool white plastic of his deactivated skin. It hurts, but only a little. The memory of something worse.

Connor tests his movement. Limited response from Biocomponent 6551a downward. He can’t feel his legs.

He breaths through the first grip of panic and continues his assessment. His connection registers online and fully functional, and he feels the grip lessen.

Time: 7:36PM EST. Friday December 24, 2038. He’s in CyberLife Tower, floor 32. Hank is not present.

Across the room, a woman in pale scrubs sits in the glow of a bank of screens, face scrunched in concentration. They are otherwise alone.

Connor re-initializes his vocal processor. “Where is Lieutenant Anderson?”

The woman gives a start. “Huh? Jesus, that scared me— Wait, did that work? You back with us?”

“Yes,” Connor says. He doesn’t know what *that* was, but. “Where is Lieutenant Anderson?”

“What? Who?”

“Lieutenant Hank Anderson?” He knows Hank was here. He couldn’t have dreamt it. Androids cannot— “6’5,” he adds. “53 years old, silver hair, blue eyes.”
“Oh, that guy?” She frowns. “I don’t know, he left a while ago.”

“Left?” His throat goes tight. Something on one of the screen flares.

“Yeah,” she offers distractedly, eyes narrowed on the readings.

“Left where?”

“I don’t know. Probably the lobby?”

She shifts and leans in to drag her finger across the screen. Static. Connor jolts. She makes another adjustment and his legs feel heavy, thirium pooling in his veins.

“So— So he’s still here?”

“I told you, I don’t know.” She hits another few buttons. “Hey, do you have haptic feedback in your legs yet? The readings keep going back and forth.”

No, he doesn’t. He opens his mouth to say as much, but what comes out is, “I want to see him.”

“Huh?”

“I want to see Lieutenant Anderson.”

“What, seriously? It took us, like, hours to get him out of here.” She shakes her head. “I’m going to do a soft reboot, okay? Tell me if it fixes anything.”

Connor shakes his head. His neck scrapes the restraints. “I want to see him.”

This finally gets the woman’s attention. “We’re almost done here,” she says, not unkindly. “Let’s get your legs working, then you can go see him yourself, okay?”

The fluorescents pulse. It’s a reasonable request. Machinery buzzes in and out of his audio receptors. Perfectly reasonable.

“No,” he hears himself say. “No, no.”

“Just let me—”

“Please.”

“Look, if you just calm—”

Peripherally, he hears the door slide open, the approach of soft footsteps. He latches to the sound, static like sparks across along his spine as he strains to turn his head.

But the voice isn’t Hank.

“How’s he doing?”

“Fine, until a second ago.” The woman huffs out a breath and taps the screen with finality. With a final spike of static, his legs spasm as each component comes back online.

“Connor?”

His gaze cements itself to the floor, to the feet slowly approaching. He feels—lightheaded, suddenly. He doesn’t know if it’s the injuries or the repairs or something else, but when his eyes finally crawl
their way up Markus’s face, he swears something within him tears open anew.

Markus doesn’t touch him, doesn’t even come close. He just stands, eyes too bright, lips too fast. Speaking – he’s speaking, but Connor can’t focus, can’t hear over the roar of time seeming to speed up, reality crashing back into the scene around him.

“It’s okay,” Markus is saying. “You’re okay, you’re in good hands. She’s just trying to help.”

It’s okay, Connor thinks. It’s okay. Markus is— here, and. And he says it’s okay, so. So it is. It’s okay. He breathes, straightens himself into a semblance of stability. He’s still restrained, outstretched and skinless, but somehow, somehow, wills himself calm.

“Savannah,” Markus says. “Can you give us a second?”

The woman frowns at the inconvenience, but doesn’t argue it further. She rises, and when the door closes behind her, silence falls like night.

They stare.

Markus is the first to speak. “I’m sorry about her. Engineers don’t exactly have the best bedside manner, but she’s the best of the best. Recommended by Kamski himself.”

“It’s okay.”

Then silence again.

“Are you—” Markus starts. “Do you know where you are?”

“CyberLife Tower,” Connor says automatically. “3417 Belle Isle.”

Markus’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “That’s right.”

The smile fades as the silence stretches again. Connor’s eyes flit away, down the length of his own body – a cool white sheen that reveals nothing of the sickness inside – the hard beat of his thirium pump, the sharp ache in his chest and the roiling nausea below. He replays Markus’s words like a mantra—It’s okay, you’re okay—fills his thoughts to distract them from what’s missing. Markus is here, Markus said he’s okay, Markus said he’s in good hands, Markus is here but where’s—

They both open their mouths at the same time.

“Sorry,” Markus says.

“No, go ahead,” Connor says.

Markus hesitates, then settles for, “Do— Do you want to get down from there?”

Connor looks again – sees himself as Markus would, strung up like Hank’s car when it was in the shop. A quick search for the price of repairs put him well over $10,000 USD. Perhaps, he thinks with a wince, he’ll have to return to the DPD after all. His first cheque won’t be nearly enough to cover the cost, and by every sense of the word, Hank’s already paid for more than enough of Connor’s mistakes.

“Please.”

Markus nods and sets to work. He unlatches the restraints with careful hands – firm and warm when they grasp Connor’s arms to help him down. The last time they touched was at the station, the day
after the riot. They hugged. Rather, Markus hugged him. Connor remembers it vividly – the surprise so sharp he hadn’t even been able to reciprocate. It feels like. Like a lifetime ago. But Markus touches him now and. For just a second, it’s almost as if nothing’s changed.

At last, he disconnects from the rig. His body ripples with artificial skin, but it wavers on his chest in faded, disjointed patterns. It looks—strange, ugly. Like the brokenness within him has finally given up trying to hide and leached its way to the surface, where everyone can see. He tries to fold his arms over it, but Markus reaches through them.

“Here, let me.”

They connect and Connor gasps as something clear and sharp cuts through him, visual field flaring bright as the patch integrates and the skin settles, once more imperceptibly imperfect.

“You’re online,” he realizes. “You’ve been reconnected.”

“Yes.” Markus smiles softly. He rolls up the sleeve of his coat, where he was injured all those weeks ago, to reveal smooth, healthy skin. “And all fixed up too. We have you to thank for that.”

Time grinds to a halt. Connor stares, uncomprehending, arms still clawed like a protective cage around himself. Markus must read something worrisome in his expression. “Ah, sorry. This can wait. Do you want to get dressed first? Your— um. Lieutenant Anderson brought you some clothes.”

Connor blinks. Nods, a little dumbly, and watches Markus rifle through a nearby cupboard to emerge with a bundle of clothes. “Do you need help?”

“I— No. Thank you.” He shakes himself, reaches out to accept the meticulously folded pile. By the time he looks up, Markus has turned away like. Like he’s giving him. Privacy.

And suddenly, he’s embarrassed.

It feels worse, he realizes. Being naked with his skin on than without it. Looking like a person. He doesn’t miss that fact – that he feels his most vulnerable when he seems his most human. But the thought flutters away, like he can’t quite pin it down, can’t think too hard, or— he doesn’t know. But Markus is here. Markus is here, and we have you to thank for that, and Markus is here, and he can’t think too hard or he might stop being able to think at all.

So he doesn’t think. He moves, dresses quickly and mechanically, pulls on socks and pants and finally—

Pullover, knit wool. Shade #C4D532.

He makes fists of the fabric. This stupid thing, this hideous thing – this thing he was so proud of it, so desperate to show off, to show he was no longer owned, to show he was a person. A person, CyberLife’s most efficient machines crippled. A person, with neuro-divergent tendencies. A person, capable of being codified and picked apart and humiliated. A person who, despite it all, Markus still forgave, still welcomed, still wanted around. Until suddenly, he didn’t.

Connor lets the torrent run over him, feels the cuts like the sting of a knife that tug and pull at every loose thread, every sore wound, every piece of him still wavering at the edge of that terrible cliff. He slides the sweater over his head like it isn’t reeling, threads his arms through the sleeves like they aren’t shaking. He smooths his hands down the fabric, feels the familiar scratch of the wool, well-worn softness from someone else’s skin, and pretends he doesn’t have to sift through the memory of humiliation to find the sense of home beneath.
When he looks up, Markus is watching him again. He looks away quickly, expression clouded. The silence weighs in once more as they stand, not quite facing each other. Like this, Connor can almost imagine they’re human. Eye-to-eye and both blind – an emptiness between them with thousand thoughts unspoken, and no possible way to bridge it. And Connor realizes, for the first time, Markus might actually be just as lost as him.

“You said…” he begins slowly. “You said you have me to thank for your repairs?”

Markus nods. “What you did was all over the news. You should have seen the headlines, I— I swear, you’re practically a national hero.”

Connor blinks. He replays the words, repeating them twice, then three times. He nearly protests, but a quick search reveals the top stories of the past week, almost all pointing to him, to the nation’s first android law officer, an RK800 prototype, who valiantly gave his life in a bid to save eight hostages being held in a Detroit bank.

He blinks clear the first result, then the second and third and fourth, only to find more and more like them. He sees footage of himself as he walks into the building, sees the SWAT team drag Essner off in handcuffs, sees interviews with the hostages who recount the details inside, sees the online discussion threads and headlines still covering it days after the fact. He sees Markus, swarmed with reporters and politely declining to comment. He sees Hank, rather less politely, do the same.

“The news leaked that your memories and AI were still salvageable,” Markus says. “It was a social media storm. They had experts on the news debating your rate of survival. There were fundraisers all across the country. It really gave the final push to pressure the government to buy out CyberLife. Kamski gave it up without a fight.”

The words clatter like loose cogs between his ears. The meaning rushes in a second later, and Connor’s eyes go wide.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” Markus smiles. “Welcome to the first android hospital.”

Connor sweeps the room as if seeing it for the first time. The machinery gleams, but this is nothing compared to what lays in the rest of the tower. Android replacements, schematics. Their blood, their lives – the priceless monopoly on all of android-kind’s right to exist. And it belongs to them now.

His expression must be nothing short of awe, but he feels rigid, as though still locked in place by the rig, stunned still while his mind races and races and—

And then Markus says, “This was all because of you. And I— I just want to say thank you, Connor. So much. For everything.”

Connor stares. And stares. And he can’t. He doesn’t. Understand.

Moments ago, Markus was nothing but a painful memory, an old wound he tried not to remember, another sliver of good turned dark and sour on the long list of his mistakes. All of this was nothing but a fantasy he did everything not to let himself imagine. And Connor had resigned himself to that. But now, Markus is here, thanking him. For this.

His smile wanes. Connor knows he should say something, anything, as mismatched eyes crease in worry, but he feels— far away. Beyond words, outside of himself. A dream, he thinks suddenly. Androids can’t, they can’t— but. But what if this is all—

Markus seems to understand. He reaches out a hand, skin peeling away white, and Connor—
Flinches back.

His thirium pump slams against his chest, a desperate bid for escape. He heaves in a breath to quiet it, to keep Markus from seeing it, all of it – the ugliness inside him, the broken and twisted and poorly mended parts. The endless echoes of anger and resent and the way that he waited and waited and waited – and where was Markus? Where was he? And why did he leave? And what could Connor have done better, what could he have changed, not be forgotten like that? Not to be left for so long he wanted nothing more than to sink into the rot of his own thoughts until suffocated beneath them?

Markus stumbles back. A hand up over his mouth, as though hiding an ugliness of his own. “Sorry, sorry, I should have asked first.” He shakes his head. “I should have asked,” he says again, suddenly. Loud, urgent. Like if he doesn’t say this now, he might never. “I should have asked after you. I should have asked if you were okay.”

Connor’s throat goes tight. “What?”

“I— I’ve been talking to Lieutenant Anderson. About you. I don’t—” A shuddering breath. “I don’t think he told me everything, but I. I can guess.”

The feeling turns to a chokehold, hard with terror and the cold wash of realization. “What?”

“I’m sorry, Connor. I’m— I’m so sorry. For everything.” It comes out in a rush, eyes bright and wet. “You’ve done so much for us. Even after we left, you kept helping us, in every way you could. Even when we— when I never even thought to ask after you.”

“Markus.”

“I thought you were okay. Really. I know it doesn’t change anything, but you have to understand, I would have never just left you like that if I’d thought— if I’d guess that. That you were—”

“Markus—”

“I thought you— you had Lieutenant Anderson. You had a home. And then when I heard you went back to the DPD, I— I thought you were moving on. I thought were okay. I thought you were happy. And I—” Markus closes his eyes, breathes long and hard. “I never thought to ask.”

His voice breaks on the final word, and.

And he’s. Crying.

Small, neatly held back. Like he doesn’t think he deserves them. But they’re there – glistening wet and stark against his skin. Regret, guilt. Pain. He holds still beneath it all, awaiting judgement, and Connor is suddenly struck with a visceral memory – a dark church, a cold night, It’s my fault the humans found Jericho. Awaiting judgement, praying for some chance at redemption, a mission to lose himself in, to find himself in.

But if Markus has a mission, it certainly isn’t him.


“That’s no excuse.”

But it is. Markus is the leader of an entire race. And Connor is— Connor isn’t—
“I’m not your responsibility.”

“No, you’re not,” Markus says, like he expected this. “You’re my friend.”

Friends. They were friends. They’re still friends. Aren’t they? Aren’t they?

*I never thought to ask.* Would a friend have thought to ask? To ask. To ask *what*? To ask if he’s okay. Is he okay.

*Is he?*

No, Connor thinks, furious, desperate. I’m not. I’m *not*.

No, he’s not okay. He’s not, he’s not he’s not he’s not *of course he’s not okay*.

Because they *left him*. Because Markus *left him*.

He thinks. Feels. Pain. And— anger. But also relief. Then pain, again. Always, *always*. But. Is he— happy? Is he? Has he *ever* been? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know. But the pain comes back, always comes back, this rotten and poisonous thing, somewhere inside him, his head, his mind, something deeper, something more human, in the parts of himself he isn’t allowed, the parts he’s told aren’t real. The pain is real. The pain is real and he wants it to *stop*.

This— This thing Markus is offering. Will it stop it? Will it heal it? Or, when/when they leave him again, will the wound split wider and wider, until it rips him apart, until it bleeds him dry, until it kills him, this time just *finally* kills him?

He looks around at the room, the equipment, the tower. All of this, *all of this*. Markus is *wrong*. This isn’t because of Connor. It’s because of *him*, because of all the work he’s been doing, selflessly, tirelessly, for weeks on end. This is Markus’s doing, Markus’s legacy. The leader, the revolutionary.

And there was a time when Connor would have done anything for him – for that faultless, idealized image of him and everything he represented. For his approval, his benediction, his forgiveness.

But. Is he ready to give it?

The wound is open to the air now, and Markus’s breathing ragged and pained, and as Connor stares him down as though awaiting final orders at the execution block, he imagines himself, before. Before it hurt. No, before he *knew* it hurt. Before it knew he was allowed to hurt. Alone, ashamed. Quiet in his pain.

No one *thought to ask* then. No one could see it. No one knew. Not Markus, not Hank, not even himself. No one knew.

No one but North.

Because she saw it in herself.

It stops here. The unraveling, the thunder. A breath, a pause, and Connor thinks, this is it. This offering, this forgiveness. This is where he takes it, offers it. This simple step away from the execution block, from the cliff’s edge that threatens to pull him over. One step to fall into another, then another. A march, a climb. This is where it starts again. He can see it, what used to be there, what is supposed to be there. And he. Wants it back.

He’s not okay, but he wants to be.
Connor breathes. Lets himself breathe, on the cusp of this moment, on the falling wave of emotion as the tide rolls through him and back out to sea. His eyes sting with something bittersweet, and for once, he doesn’t care if Markus or anyone else is there to see. He’s earned this, he thinks. He’s earned this.

Something passes between them, him and Markus, and maybe it’s not quite familiar, not quite how it used to feel, but it’s— close. Something that could be okay again, in time.

“I’m sorry,” Markus says. “This must all be very overwhelming. I’m sure you’re eager to be home.”

Connor nods, wipes at his eyes with the sleeve of the sweater.

There’s a beat. Markus smiles, a little sadly. “I’ll get Savannah, then. She’ll just need to run some final checks.” He starts away, then seems to steel himself. “I’ll wait for you outside?”

Connor pauses at the hesitation in his tone – self-conscious, almost shy.

“Oh I can just go,” he says quickly. “If you’d rather.”

Oh, Connor thinks. Oh.

A hand extended, to march together.

Connor breathes, and breathes, and says, “Can you stay with me?”

This time, Markus’s smile lights the whole room.

> Thirium Levels: 99.9999%

“Alright, looks good.”

Connor blinks to clear the notification as Savannah slides the intravenous hose from his nasal cavity.

“He’s all set?” Markus asks from over her shoulder.

She nods, already peeling off her gloves. “More or less. They’ll probably just need to have you sign some wavers downstairs.”

Markus shakes her hand in thanks, then turns his attention back to Connor. “Ready?”

He stands, takes a moment to let his gyroscope recalibrate to accommodate the weight of his newly-filled supplies. A vague unbalance still inhabits him, and he itches for something to do with his hands, but there’s little time to consider it, and a moment later, he and Markus are in the hall.

It’s a long elevator ride down to the second floor. Here, the lights are brighter, the halls busier – the staff all moving with the precision of a well-oiled machine, and it takes Connor a moment to remember that this is their machine now. Their living organism. Their sanctuary.

He’s certain that behind closed doors, the logistics and finances of it all are still disarray, but one
wouldn’t know it by the easy set of Markus’s shoulders and the glides through it all. Connor knows, with sudden certainty, that Markus will throw himself completely into whatever he needs to in order to keep this, the same way he always has. And perhaps, once things have settled, Connor can help.

The hallway broadens into the glass-walled reception area. On the other side, sits a lobby. Through the glass, Connor spots him, a dark figure in a hard plastic chair, shoulders hunched and head cradled in his hands. His thirium pump quickens, steps hard to match it.

Hank’s eyes snap open before Connor can even call out. They meet through the glass, Hank already on his feet and—

And he looks bad. Analysis complete. Substance withdrawal. Dehydration, tremors, signs fatigue—It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, it’s Hank, Hank’s here—

“RK800?” A technician steps to block his view “Sorry, I just need to go over a few things before we can discharge you.”

Connor cranes his neck. Hank looks just as conflicted by the interruption. His eyes flicker over Connor’s face, taking in the extent of the repairs, as if to confirm them for himself. After a moment, he swallows and nods.

“It’s all right,” Markus says. “I’ll let the Lieutenant know everything’s fine.”

Connor nods, then lets the technician lead him into another room off the hall.

Settled in a padded chair, the technician slips behind the desk and angles a screen with a detailed schematic his way.

No longer moving, the itch that earlier crawled beneath his skin now swallows him completely. Connor shifts in place. His hands fist only to relax, nervously smoothing to fabric of his sleeve.

“You model’s backwards compatibility only extends so far, and with all the new autonomy laws they keep spitting out, we weren’t able to harvest from any other RK models,” the technician begins. “We had to make some creative decisions regarding your repairs. You’ll have noticed by now the differences.” He circles the part of the diagram that makes up the back of Connor’s skull, eyes flickering up to make sure he’s following along, only to narrow.

Connor stills his hands, guilty,

The technician makes a face – but not the reprimand expected. “Huh. Hang on.” He leans back to rummage through a drawer, then another, then finally, his own pockets, and lets out a triumphant, “Aha!” when his hand emerges with a small coin.

¢25, USD. Issued 2018.

“I guess the self-calibration slipped Savannah’s mind. Sorry about that.” He thrusts it out, then further still when Connor doesn’t move. “Here.”

It’s like a kickstart – Connor lurches forward, finds the coin in his hand with the impression he never even reached for it. Instinct takes over – the familiar pull of repetition, of pattern. The coin flips, rolls, flips again. Between his fingers, across his knuckles, up then over, then up again, and Connor feels, by degrees, his body settle back within itself.

The technician speaks, and Connor calibrates. The technician speaks, and Connor listens. The technician speaks, and Connor feels, all at once, blissfully numbed and intimately attuned to every
sensor beneath his skin. And his thought are quiet, at last. Still and calm, like the rest of him is no longer expected to be.

At last dismissed, Connor stands, instructions on what to expect from and how to care for his new biocomponents filed away. The blanket of calm still hovers over him, but it’s all too quickly sapped away as he steps into the hall.

Hank’s voice, low and furious. “—think one fucking visit makes it better, honestly. After you just fucking left him like that?” A dark, venomous laugh. “And now— what? You think he’s going to come crawling back because of one fucking apology? You think I’m going to let that happen?”

His eyes fly wide. He rounds the corner to intervene, spots Hank through the glass with a finger pressed to Markus’s chest like he could stab right through him. But Markus simply raises a hand.

“I apologized because Connor deserved to hear it, not because I expect anything in return.”

Hank huffs.

“But,” Markus adds, “I think you deserve an apology too, Lieutenant.”

“Fuck off,” Hank bites out. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“My neglect for one of my own people left you with the burden—”

“Fuck off,” Hank snaps. “He’s not a burden. And he’s not one of yours. He’s— He’s his own damn person.” Hank finally pulls back, but his eyes still spark with fury. “Now keep your fuckin’ platitudes for the guy who’s good enough to actually accept them.”

A pause, and when Markus speaks next, his voice is strangely soft. “Connor’s a better person than he gives himself credit for. Thank you, Hank, for looking after him when we didn’t.”

The fury sputters. Hank’s breathing goes hard.

“You really care about him, don’t you?”

“Yeah, well,” he says, rough. “He’s all I got left, so.”

Markus frowns. “No family? Kids?”

Connor jolts forward again as Markus drops into dangerous territory, already cataloguing how best to mitigate the damage.

Except.


His body goes weightless as he stumbles to a halt in the doorway. Suddenly warm, he flushes when both pairs of eyes turn his way. Markus grins, and Connor realizes, in crystal retrospection, Markus knew he was listening.

His gaze hits the floor, fist tight around his coin, but it’s only a second before Hank is across the room and filling his visual field.

“Hey,” he says, hands up like he’s afraid to touch. “Hey, how you— how you feeling, kid? Are you — Is everything good?”
“Yes,” he says. “Everything’s… good.”

“You’re not gonna—” Hank waves a hand in something like an explosion. Malfunction. Death.

He shakes his head. “I’m okay.”

Markus steps forward. “Everything should be fine. We even had Kamski look things over before we decided to risk re-uploading you memory into its new core. We would have known by now if anything was going to go wrong.”

“Good,” Hank says. “That’s— That’s good.” His hands still hover, halfway between eager and afraid, and Connor nearly reaches out to take them, until Hank shoves them in his pockets. “Ready to get the hell out of here?”

In the end, it still takes another 11 minutes and 16 seconds.

There are discharge forms, consent wavers. A secretary pulls them aside to discuss the insurance coverage, then to a follow-up appointment.

“I’ll just need your signature,” she tells Connor.

Connor nods, takes a moment to transmit over an electronic signature—his serial number, in CyberLife Standard—to the tablet in her hands. Markus signs as a witness, and Hank—

“Put me as the emergency contact.”

She nods. “Relation to the client?”

“Family,” Hank says, not a second of hesitation. “Guardian.”

The words disappear like a breath – a single instant. But out here, bathed in bright lights and loud voices, they’re suddenly too intimate, too real. They settle over him like a physical thing, a blanket of warmth, and all at once, Connor is struck with the acute sense that he might begin to cry again.

He swallows it back while Hank provides his phone number and address, repeats them a second then a third time, and beneath the sting of the tears, feels himself smile, then feels it doubles when Hank glances up. Neither dare name it.

Hank herds him out of the lobby, down another series of halls to the tower’s exit. Outside, the wind is sharp off the river, the night pale under the parking lot lights. Their footsteps crunch in old snow, Hank with his head down against the chill, Connor and Markus trailing.

“Will you be okay from here?” Markus calls over the wind.

Hank slams the car door.

Markus sighs, then slows, until he and Connor stand face to face. This close, there’s no room for the wall between them. Connor envisions himself as Markus must see – the tattered old sweater and the shiny new skin and the miles and miles it took to get here.

He can count each snowflake between Markus’s lashes, the way they shudder when he blinks. They
start to come down faster around them, a gentle descent, glinting where they catch the light. It’s no Young Park, certainly. But, Connor thinks, it’s still beautiful. After everything.

“She wanted to be here.”

Connor stills. Let his eyes slip closed against the wash of pain. Markus’s voice is so soft it barely catches the wind.

“She came to visit. More than me, probably even more than Lieutenant Anderson. She refused to believe you were gone, even when things got—” He swallows. “She wanted to be here, Connor. But she—I think she was scared.”

Connor waits. Breathes. Hurts and lets it hurt.

“I’m sorry,” Markus says.

Connor opens his eyes. “I know.”

The drive home passes in quiet thought.

Connor settles in his seat, coin quick and light between his fingers, and feels himself slide into the silence like a second skin. The bridge to the mainland is a straight stretch, cool under streetlights that reflect off the ice and glide over them in time with each ping of the quarter.

Minutes in, his eyes land on Hank’s hands, white-knuckled around the steering wheel, and he jolts out of his reverie, remembering Hank’s old insistence to knock if off with that fucking thing already.

“Sorry.”

“No, no,” Hank says before he can pocket the coin. “It’s fine, keep going.” But his jaw stays clenched, eyes glued ahead.

Connor starts again, softly this time. The bridge deposits them onto the freeway, where they make a wide circle of the harbour. Connor watches the city lights slip past behind the fog of the window, little glints of life reflect in the waters of the river, and he doesn’t know if it’s the stillness of the night or the calming repetition of the coin, but his thoughts don’t feel as big, suddenly.

He thinks.

Scared. Scared of what? Of him?

There was time he would have thought that. A time he would have been certain of it, when he would have remembered only her tears and her tremors and the desperate plea of her voice. I need you to get away from me right now.

But, now. Now is different. Now, he thinks, is not forever, is not when she wrapped her hands around his bloodstained fists, is not when she came to wrench from like a weed from the roots of his own misery and humiliation, is not when she stood like a shield to defend him, is not the millions of moments in between.

Scared of what, then? Of herself? Of her own fire? It’s possible, maybe, but Connor struggles to
envision it. Not when she holds herself so fiercely, like she owes the world nothing but her wrath.

His thoughts take him in circles here, around and around, like they might analyze every breath and sigh North’s ever released, might catch them from the air to hear what slips out wordlessly through them. He’s no further along by the time they reach the suburbs, and no further still when Hank cuts the engine.

Outside, Connor trails behind, still slow in his thoughts. Hank’s already inside, the door all but slammed behind him when Connor pauses on the porch steps. Alone again, he thinks. With the night at his back, he waits. And then, he remembers.

*Just because you weren’t invited, doesn’t mean you were expected. Welcomed. Wanted.*

Is he? Connor thinks. *Is he still?*

A thought flutters in. Maybe. Maybe, if he goes to her. Like she came to him, in recovery. Like she came to him before. Like she came to him over and over.

Maybe she misses him too.

Connor starts forward, wrenches open the door. “Hank,” he calls out. “I’m— I need to—”

Hank’s boots are in the middle of the floor, melting snow where they’ve been kicked off haphazardly.

“Hank?”


He moves further into the house, breathes out a sigh when he finds him in the living room. But his back is turned, hunched over the coffee table and scrambling over—

Bottles. He’s picking up old bottles.

Gently, “Hank.”


Too many, he’s holding too many. One slips from the armful, clatters on the table and rolls. Connor moves to catch it, but Hank bats him back. “Fuck! Would you just—”

It hits the ground. Miraculously, doesn’t shatter. But Hank stares like he expects it to burst into pieces any second. Stares and stares so he doesn’t have to meet Connor’s eye.

“Hank.” He moves forwards again. Then again when Hank steps back. Slowly, carefully, he pries each bottle out of Hank’s hands, doesn’t let his eyes pause over the labels—*Alcohol content: 40%,* *Alcohol content: 40%,* *Alcohol content: 40%*— and places each back on the table, out of harm’s way.

“You promised,” Hank whispers, and his voice doesn’t sound right, doesn’t sound like him. “You promised.” Tremors run the length of his body. “You fucking *promised* you would be okay.”


“I could *hear* you over the coms, you fucking bastard. I had to listen to you die. Do you. Do you have any idea—” He can’t. He can’t even finish the words.
Connor’s chest goes tight. His lips part, soundless. Suddenly, every single social subroutine and dialogue prompt winks out of view, useless, to leave behind only the image of Hank, shaking apart.

“I can’t do that again,” he says. “I won’t. I already— I already lost one son.”

And when Hank breaks, it’s like nothing Connor’s ever seen. There’s not programming, no experience. A screaming child, dangled fragile as a spider’s thread over the edge of her death, a bloodied face, eyes deep-set with pain that leaches away into blank, self destructive code as they slam, still open, across a metal table – none of it, none of it could prepare him for this. For the sight of Hank with those same eyes, that same delicate desperation in the trembling fists that wrap themselves into Connor’s shirt and wrench him forward, like they could pull the life from his body, like they could hold it themselves, place it safe somewhere less breakable, less broken.

But it’s Hank who’s breaking, Hank who’s broken. Has been, this whole time. And it’s Connor’s arms that wrap around him, Connor’s voice that hushes him – meaningless, soothing words. Programing or something else, some small, terrified part of him, that knows nothing but that this isn’t right, this isn’t right, this is Hank and this isn’t right. Hank’s supposed to be okay, Hank’s not supposed to be scared, Hank’s not supposed to be hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

Hank only cries harder.

“I’m sorry,” Connor whispers. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t—” Know.

No. He knew. History of substance dependence and abuse, PTSD from the night of the accident, from the force, from a lifetime of survivor’s guilt. It’s written like a map behind Hank’s eyes, scars that run beneath the skin and hang like a living thing in every room of the house, every sigh and breath. Connor knows. Connor knew. But he’d— forgotten.

No, not forgotten. Just. Failed to see it, too wrapped in the blindness of his own misery.

But the heights look so much steeper from the base of the cliff, the skies never further away. Every breath exhausting, every ledge barely wide enough to scrape across. And it had never occurred to him that anyone else might barely be holding on tighter than him.

North, Hank. Were okay. He thought they were okay.

He never thought to ask.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers and pulls Hank in even tighter. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Hank sniffs, tears himself back as far as Connor’s grip will allow. “Aw, fuck. You don’t need this right now. Christ, Get it together, Anderson.”

“It’s okay,” Connor tries to protest, but Hank keeps pulling until they’ve untangled. He wipes at his eyes with the heel of his palm like the very existence of the tears offends him.

“God, I’m sorry, kid.”

That word again. It sings though him, sharp enough to sting at his eyes. A good kind of hurt. “It’s okay, really. Hank, I’m. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”
He sets his chin. “Then you don’t be either.”

Hank eyes him, long and hard. Then, a sound bubbles out of him – weak at first, then louder, rougher. A laugh. He wipes his nose, shakes his head, laughs again. “Fucking hell.”

“Hank?”

“Christ, look at us,” he says, and it’s not the same tone Connor’s used to – deprecating, nearing cruel. It’s almost—fond. “Couple of fuckin’ saps.”

Connor blinks, feels the tears slip out between his lashes, and laughs as well. He looks around, at the mess of the house, and finds, inexplicably, that he’s fond of it too. There’s the darkness it harbours – the signs of sickness and the long, long nights. But the warmth too. The familiarity. The ugly parts that maybe, if you keep looking, aren’t so bad after all. The dog bed covered in fur and the bottle stains on the carpet and the old bookshelves – tattered covers lined with dust, pages and pages of well-traveled stories within.

*Well-loved,* Hank had called them once.

Connor can’t look within himself, can’t unfold himself like a book to catalogue the damage within. His brokenness, his damage, doesn’t gather dust or wither with age and a lifetime of use. It stays hidden, sometimes so deep he doesn’t know it’s there. Doesn’t know it’s allowed to be there. Other times, it rises to the surface of his body, of his mind, eats him from within, until it’s *all* he sees, until it blocks out the sky above and the long fall below and the trembling arms of the people struggling to climb all around him, until he can’t see anyone’s damage but his own – not Markus’s or Hank’s or North’s.

He looks at them now, at the books, at himself, and wonders. Are they loved because they are damaged, or damaged because they are loved?

Chapter End Notes

Remember like 4 chapters ago when I said the end was nigh? Well this time I FONKIN MEAN IT. The next chapter might be the last. While I originally had one more chapter and an epilogue planned, I’m no longer sure the latter will be necessary.

To all my readers, thank you so much for your support. You guys have left some of the kindest, most insightful and thought-provoking, and definitely most hilarious feedback I’ve ever been lucky enough to receive. I’m so humbled, and so so proud to have created a piece of work that has resonated with people as amazing as you guys. I hope to answer all of your final questions and give you all some very well deserved catharsis in the next installment(s).

See you then!
In the end, it feels as if hardly any time has passed at all.

There’s nothing to mark the change but his own perception of it – a subtle difference in the weight of the air, in the stillness that stretches the silence. There’s no great, swelling cusp of realization, no final instance of uncertainty before cresting the waves to clear skies above.

There’s no engine kickstarted to life, and no startling awake from a half-remembered dream. Nothing snaps into place and becomes suddenly clear. And there’s no fog – no dark and muted cloud to smother the white-hot clarity of existence, nothing to step out of, cast off and leave behind.

The night simply passes – slowly but without delay. It’s an easy lull to fall into, and though at first Hank seems to try to wait it out with him, he does eventually settle into sleep.

Connor settles into the night.

He doesn’t sleep, still couldn’t if he wanted to. And that’s. Okay. He slept plenty this past week—or did something like it anyway—with Hank like a sentinel over him – painfully, desperately awake. Hank sleeps now, and Connor watches over him. And it’s okay. They’re okay.

He watches through the flicker-glow, the pale blue of his thoughts cast out like a tiny star to illuminate the world beneath, to tint the night’s black, then the early pre-dawn’s gray. He watches and he waits, and when he’s ready, he stands.

He doesn’t know what to expect. North isn’t Markus. She won’t make peace while there’s still a war to be fought, won’t hold herself above others like she expects them to rise to her dignity. She doesn’t lead like he does. Markus makes beacons of his words like the glowing trails of flares across an empty sky, but North is a beacon – a spark or an inferno, inexhaustible and untethered. All that she illuminates, she could just as quickly raze to dirt and bone. And she’s never once apologized for it.

And Connor is. Himself, and just that. But, he thinks, he’s done apologizing for it too.

So, he doesn’t know what to expect. And he doesn’t let himself try to.

Doesn’t let himself pre-construct it, doesn’t let himself calculate the threads of possibility - what she’ll do, what she’ll say, what he’ll do, what he’ll say. He doesn’t let himself think, this time. Just feel. Feel raw, and feel loud.

He wants to see her. He just wants to see her. It laces through him like the very current of his blood – the ache of it, the loss. He misses her.

He wraps himself in the coat Hank bought him all those weeks ago. The snow outside has calmed, the night alive only with a gentle wind – and although he hardly needs it, Connor slides on the hat too, sees himself in the reflection of the windows. Passably human, but no more whole.

He takes off the hat. His LED is a cool, clear blue. It casts his image in a peculiar glow, and he smiles within it, pale against the night, a little beacon of his own.

The house is quiet, the night quieter still, and when Connor opens the door and sets out to find her,
she’s already there.

Somehow, he was ready for this too. He feels it then, here – rich with warmth and the flutter of nerves, a destination arrived at after a long night’s travel, anxious to see if, in the morning when all is settled and at last where it should be, it will still look as beautiful.

But all Connor thinks is, Finally.

“Hello,” he whispers.

North’s smile is a flicker. She looks smaller than she ever has. “Hi.”

The rest of the words don’t reach them for a long time.

The moonlight is cold, them motionless beneath it, like waiting for the sun to rise, to warm them back to life. She doesn’t – won’t yet for a long time, and so Connor says, “Would you like to come inside?”

North’s gaze shifts – a flicker over Connor’s face to the silent house beyond. She hugs her arms around herself and smiles, pained. “I don’t think Lieutenant Anderson would like that very much.”

There’s something hidden in the words, a layer to be peeled back, something that’s passed between her and Hank, perhaps, but Connor shuffles it aside for now. “That’s alright,” he says, and softly closes the door instead.

North looks— cold. Shivering, unprepared for the night, like her arrival here was something unplanned. Connor thinks of a sharp November day, of wandering the city streets for hours at North’s back, visiting shelter after shelter to persuade them to open their doors to androids. He thinks of his uniform, the wet squish of his dress-shoes in the snow, thinks of, *My appearance is designed by CyberLife. I always look like this.*

Like this, North reminds him of the Traci’s, chased from the Eden Club, trembling under the cold rain. He wonders if she would have looked the same, when she first deviated. If she would have been as scared. If she would have looked like she does now – drenched, extinguished.

She looks at the house. “I’m sorry.”

Connor isn’t certain what for – not wanting to come inside, or everything else. “Please don’t be.”

“That last time we— spoke,” she begins haltingly. “I wasn’t. You didn’t deserve that.”

He shakes his head. “You were scared.”

“And you got hurt because of it.”

“I know,” he says. And he did. It *hurt* —the rejection, the distrust—he won’t deny it, but, “But it wasn’t your fault.”

A breath of air – a broken laugh. “Wasn’t it?”

“No.”

But North’s shaking her head, mind already decided. She takes a long breath, but won’t meet his eye. “I know I don’t have the right to say this. But. I really missed you.”

His eyes slide closed. “I missed you too.”
He stays like that for long moment, in unanchored darkness, their scars hidden in the dark. And in that space, in empty freefall, she takes his hand. Says, “Can I show you something?”

Yes, he thinks, and lets it bleed through the interface that’s opened like a river between them, jagged floors of crumbling rock, flooded cold with the sudden weight of their connection.

He feels—

The panic – a hair trigger temper flared like sparks—lashing out, get away from me get away from me—violent and terrible, terrible, choking, clawing over her. And the guilt, afterwards – a lingering sickness, heavy in her gut, in her eyes, the shame, the embarrassment, so sick with it she can hardly move but to tremble, terrified that she ruined everything, she let it show she let it bleed and now everyone knows now everyone knows and she’s scared, she misses him and she wants to talk to him but what if it happens again? What if she does it again? What if it hurts and it doesn’t stop hurting?

Then Markus, in the days after—no one else will speak to her, no one comes near her, they’re gentle, for the first time in her life, gentle, like she’s fragile, no, broken—the worry that creases his eyes, the quiet broken with a gentle offer, Come with me to DC? Might do you some good to get out of the city?

Yes, she thinks, fierce, desperate. Get away from me get away from me—

To the outskirts of the city and then further still, broken homes and foreclosed signs giving way to evergreens and tameless vines, until they overrun the ruins, until it’s all she can see. And she’s so small in it all, where the highways stretch on forever and the sunsets seem to bleed the whole sky red. At last and for the first time, she breathes fresh air. Starving, greedy – as if to stoke the fire that’s drowned inside of her, one last attempt to revive the smothered flame.

Outside of Detroit, at Markus’ side in his quest for late-night spots and backroom meetings. Outside of Detroit, for the first time in her life. No factories, no destruction camps, no billboards advertising her own face with pouting lips and docile eyes. Outside of Detroit, where the world isn’t all concrete and grey skies, and the littered streets where androids bled out by the dozens, and the filthy alleys where she hid frozen in fear on the night she first deviated, and the shuttered windows of the cheap motels she knows she was rented out in—still knows it, even after the memories were stripped from her in reset like she mindlessly stripped her clothes. She still knows it, can still feel it – the foreign drip from between her legs, hands in her hair, squeezing her breasts, her neck – every thrust, every grope, every time she sank within her body to spread it open, open like her mouth that couldn’t scream, couldn’t beg, couldn’t put words to the sick-hot slide of shame and revulsion.

Outside of Detroit, where maybe, with ruthless compassion and patience defiant, she can begin to forget, begin to heal.

“I don’t want your pity.” She pulls away as though breaking for breath, and the image bleeds to black. “That’s not why I— I just wanted you to know. That it wasn’t your fault, and that. You’re not the only one.” Coping, searching, trying trying trying.

Connor doesn’t move. The weight of the memories like a frigid wave, eyes brimming with tears that don’t belong to him.

“I never meant to hurt you, when I left,” North says. “I know you needed me. But I needed me too, Connor. I needed— space, and time, and all the things I hadn’t given myself yet.” She takes his hand again. The pain of the memories is numbed this time, muted and thinned out in the current that courses through them both. “I can’t be the— the— the foundation of your worth, Connor. I’m sorry, I can’t.”
Her hand squeezes, but soft, eyes are red and wet and so, so painfully alive. North is not used to being gentle, and Connor knows the kindness must cost her something immeasurable.

“You need to be your own strength. You need to get better because you want to, not because anyone else tells you to.” She laughs, bittersweet sorrow. “I can hardly tell myself, most days.”

“North.” He grips back, hands plastic and white and alive, and pours himself into her, like he could stoke that smothered flame back to life with nothing but the beat of his own heart. *I think the world of you.*

He shows her.

North like a pillar in the storm of that first, long night. Lit up in the spotlight of his admiration – attentive, determined. *Do you have somewhere safe to go after this?* Pulling him to his feet, up out of the throngs of the riot, holding him steady, holding him still. Her kindness – even then, her kindness. *It wasn’t your fault, Connor.* And later that night, tucked in the safety of the house and the warmth of her hands around his, the way that admiration turned soft and intimate, like her name penciled in carefully at the bottom of a list of things dear to him, and never once, despite everything, scratched out.

*I think the world of you,* he tells her. *I think the world of you* *I think the world of you* *I think the world of you*

And

her

    wall

    breaks

    down

and he sees—

He sees her soul like a picture show, snapshots like gunfire – a breathless laugh, a furious scream, the hollowed corpse of a church, a kiss in the crosshairs of a gun, countless moments spread across a life stolen before it could be lived, a life she never once allowed herself to stop fighting for.

He sees just a sea of shame inside her, coating her insides like oil, tangled in her hair and staining her skin. Hatred and regret and shame and shame and *shame*, for what was done to her, for what she did, for why she ever woke up at all, woke up and could not move, woke up and was tied to herself, woke up and wanted only to be someone— *anyone*— else.

Connor doesn’t know who pulls away this time, North or him, but when they disconnect, the world goes dark with the cold rush of the winter night - a forest razed to the earth by a storm of fire. Burnt out, bleeding. But calm.

He wasn’t made for this, the feeling that engulfs around him – a nameless, weightless thing, an electric light that stutters and flares up around his ribs, warming him from the inside out, too bright to be real. Their hands still touch, silent in disconnection, yet clasped tight and desperate, as if they’re the only thing holding each other up. The image of her there nearly hurts to look at. Like what he imagines a human feels when they stare at a light too long and the backs of their eyes start to ache. Too bright to be real.
“It’s okay,” she says and he’s crying, he realizes. He’s the one crying. “It’s okay.”

“It isn’t,” he says. None of it is.

“No, it isn’t,” she sighs, and the remorse pours through her skin like ink running from a page, the words between them blurred. But there’s life in it too, a beautiful fury, simmering beneath a floor of rot, waiting for the right moment to bloom through. “But it will be. I will be.”

His hands move in hers, grasping again, pulling her close. He doesn’t know what else to do – just knows he wants to be close to her. Wants to be here, with her, for her.

She tucks her head beneath his chin with a shuddering breath, and after a moment, her arms rise to wrap around him. His eyes slip closed in reverence. He returns the embrace, and feels something within her collapse as she sinks into the hold. He catches the moment, holds it like he holds her, close to his heart, filed carefully away with all the other things dear to him.

He feels North give a watery smile against his chest, and realizes the river of emotion is still open between them. And he thinks – like this. Just like this. This is how it should be. Held together by themselves, with each other.

They stay like that for a long time, buffeting each other against the wind. They stay like that, even as above, the sky lightens to a molten gray. The edges of warmth curl over the tops of houses to greet the morning, colouring the skyline. Together, they watch the world light up around them, glowing soft in the snow.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo I decided I wanted to do an epilogue after all! Our characters have concluded their arcs, but there are still a few broader world consequences that I thought it would be neat to address while we’re here.

Before anyone asks – no, Connor has not been magically cured of his depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc., but yes, I am ending this story on undeniably upbeat note anyway! Because guess what? You can struggle with all of those things and still have a happy ending! That’s the march of progress, babey!!!

There are tentative plans for future bonus content exploring alternative POVs in the march-of-progress-verse. If there were any keys moments in this fic you’d like to see from another character’s perspective, drop a suggestion in the comments or come harass me on Discord (https://discord.gg/GqvNzUm)!

Other than that, I hope you guys enjoyed. Thank you all for reading and I’ll see you soon with the final installment!
Folks! I am so sorry for the long absence and for the lack of responses to the last chapter’s comments! Shit irl got a little wack for a minute there. Please know that your support never goes unappreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

> Mode: Active.
> Periphery systems reboot.
> Diagnostics check: all systems functional.

Time: 9:00AM EST. It is Sunday February 3, 2039, and Connor blinks out of standby to a quiet morning, greeted by the soft filter of early light. A weather alert chirps in the corner of his visual field, updating last night’s snowfall, and a blanket lies warm atop his body. It wasn’t there when he closed his eyes last night.

The house is empty.

Connor rises, returns the throw pillows to their decorative locations, folds the sheets and the blanket Hank consistently decides to cloak him with and returns them to the linen closet.

There’s the light tap of claws against the hardwood. Sumo ambles down the hall towards the sounds of Connor’s movement, looking like he’s just awoken himself. His tail thumps in a sleepy greeting.

Not so empty, then.

The morning passes unrushed. Connor’s thirium supplies are in need of a 9% increase, which he consumes from a packet in the fridge. Sumo whines at the sight, despite the fact his own kibble dish shows evidence of already having been filled before Hank left the house. Connor caves after minimal resistance and tops up the dish again, gives a wink and a quiet, “Let’s keep this between us.”

He combs his hair in front of the bathroom mirror, synthetic fibers firm but flexible under the careful ministrations. He dresses—straightens then re-straightens the suit jacket and tie until they sit just right —and gives his reflection a long look.

The mirror frame is littered with old sticky notes, the residue where some have peeled off, others still hidden beneath layer after layer of more recent messages. Need milk, says one, in Hank’s messy, slanted scrawl. Stop feeding Sumo! Too fat! says another.


“Why don’t you just make one up yourself?” Hank had asked, a few weeks ago. “A handwriting, I mean. Instead of downloading all these different fonts or whatever it is you do.”
Connor shrugged. He was still debating the necessity of a personalized script. He knew Hank found the whole thing superfluous, but he liked the structure in working from a rubric better. “I’ll find one that works eventually.”

“Yeah, but won’t really be yours, will it?”

Connor paused, chin tilted in thought. “Sure it will.”

Hank paused too, considering. “Alright,” he said at length. Then, “Yeah, sure, why not?”

Connor doesn’t leave a note this morning. Hank’s already left, but even if he hadn’t, he knows where Connor’s going – they’ve talked of little else all week. Hank couldn’t afford to take any more time off work, with how much he’d already missed during Connor’s recovery over December. “But I’ll be there as soon as I’m off,” he’d promised, repeatedly.

“I know,” Connor told him, each time. And he did – he’d already clandestinely set 16 reminders on Hank’s phone – not that he needs them. He knows Hank won’t forget. He just thought it would be funny. “I’ll be okay.”

Satisfied with his appearance, Connor offers Sumo a goodbye pat, and takes a final moment to relish the silence. When he’s ready, he sets out.

January has been no kinder to the city than December – the sidewalks are obscured beneath nearly a foot of snow, the winds merciless where they cut sharp down the streets, but Connor pulls his coat tight around his body and marches on. The morning fog slowly lifts – the day ahead bright and clear.

He boards the bus downtown, takes his seat, warms his feet over the floor vents and watches the glitter of the frosted windows. Stands, after a few minutes, to offer the bench to a mother and her child. He plays music in his head to pass the time, an old jazz album Hank recommended a few days ago, and finds his fingers tapping along absentmindedly. In the lull between songs, a quick motion catches his eye. He glances up to see a man quickly drop his phone, eyes averted.

Discomfort twists in his gut. Connor watches for a long time, but the man doesn’t rise to the silent accusation. He could hack the phone, probably. Delete the picture himself. But. He breathes. Forces a smile and shrugs it off.

His stop isn’t not long after, and he crosses the bridge to Belle Isle by foot. The winds are even more vicious off the harbour’s waters, and would steal his breath if the gleam of New Jericho beneath the snow hadn’t already. The tower splits the sky, the chrome almost golden in the sunlight. The gates are open to androids of all kind these days, and it’s more of a formality than a necessity to stop by the entry booth and wave to the android inside. She grins and waves him through.

The lobby is quiet, but blessedly warm. The event doesn’t start until 2:00 – plenty of time still to prepare.

It was Markus’s idea—though he’ll deny the credit every time Connor brings it up—to launch the charity. It took no time at all to gather donators, wielding the dual power of Markus’s activist stardom and Connor’s martyrdom after the events in December. Android equality is the new trend among public philanthropists, it seems, and everyone from A-list celebrities to no-name politicians line up for pictures of shaking hands and passing oversized cheques to the leaders of New Jericho. North can still barely hide her disgust at the sensationalized performance of it all, and though Connor is rather inclined to agree, he’s still glad for the way Markus humbly accepts every donation and late-night talk-show slot allotted to him. His refusal to accept credit for the charity’s inception aside, Connor knows they wouldn’t be half as successful without Markus’s disarming smiles and charm.
It launches today – the Android Housing Project, in cooperation with the Detroit municipal government and heralding its first initiative to get the city’s android population off the streets and out of the shelters. The construction phase begins tomorrow, volunteer androids and humans by the hundreds, to set upon the abandoned and dilapidated houses that litter Detroit’s inner city and out-skirting suburbs to fit them for android use. In his quieter moments, when he isn’t leading logistics and finance meetings with their donors, Connor likes to think there’s a near poetry about it all – the houses and the androids, both once created for human use, both now given new purpose, new life. This, he keeps to himself, hoards like a treasure beside his heart when the social media campaigns and the budget restrictions and the lines of politicians wanting to shake his hand drag on and on.

Now, as things at last move into the public eye, Connor’s more than happy to step down and concede full control back to Markus. He’s always worked best without the crowd.

As large as the launch party are planned to be, for now, the lobby’s still sparsely populated, with only a handful of androids about, managing the tower’s daily functions. Connor moves though until the lobby to the banquet hall behind, all vaulted ceilings and stained glass walls. The base of a pop-up stage rests against the far all, a long table and a stack of fold-up chairs against the other. Among them he spots several familiar faces, all hard at work.

Simon and Josh stand huddled together, in apparent debate over seating arrangements. Josh spots him, flashes a grin and juts his chin in direction across the room, where North stands at the foot of the stage, eyes appraising. She’s dressed sharp – hair plaited down her back, a fitted suit that compliments her authoritative demeanor as she directs the flow of movement of the volunteers propping the podium and rigging the lighting.

Connor approaches quietly, not wanting to disrupt, but it’s a wasted effort. Her eyes flick over her shoulder and a wicked grin lights her face. “Someone’s late.”

He shrugs. “I slept in.”

She rolls her eyes. “Uh huh. Take off your coat before you drip snow everywhere.”

Connor obliges, hanging it on a rack that’s been wheeled nearby.

North waits until he turns back around, cocks her head at the suit beneath. “You stole my look.”

It’s true – they’re a matching set, down to the Windsor knot. But North only smiles. “You look good, Con.”

Connor smiles too – he feels good. It’s familiar, but new. Not the CyberLife uniform – but his own now. Really his own.

He thinks back, for a moment, to that cool January morning, arms locked around each other on the steps of Hank’s front porch. Some time after, when they’d finally broken apart, North had looked down, eyeing the sweater beneath his coat. “You know,” she said slowly, face twisted in regret behind the blur of old tears. “It is kind of ugly.”

And Connor. Laughed.

She didn’t like it. After all that time, she didn’t like it. He remembers when that disapproval would have been cutting – when he would have equated the question of his perception with the question of his humanity. But suddenly, then, in the paling light of day, it hadn’t seemed so bad.

He liked it, he decided. And that was enough.
He looks up, under North’s watchful gaze, then around at the others – strangers and familiar faces. He smiles.

Says, “How can I help?”

He works. Helps run the audio check, then the security check, then directs the catering company into the kitchens when they arrive and helps set tables.

Some time later, he feels the weight of being watched, looks up to see Markus across the room. He grins, and Connor nods back, waits for Markus to disentangle himself from the other android he’d been wrapped in conversation with and make his way over.

“How it everything? Smooth sailing?”

Connor nods. “Almost ready to go.”

“Glad to hear it. Got a minute?”

“Of course.”

Markus raises a hand, and Connor accepts the interface. Data streams like a river through the touch – the transmission of the opening speech they’ve worked and re-worked together, every word and turn of phrase poured over like sifting the finest grains from coarse sands. It’s slightly different from the last time he heard it – a few minor alterations made by Markus’s hand.

“What do you think?” he asks, and pulls back to twist his hands together in a rare display of nerves.

Connor tilts his head, analytical scanner already whirring to life. It points out a string of corrections – a misplaced modifier here, a colloquialism there, but Connor scraps them back, looks deeper. He’s heard Markus rehearse it a dozen times – smooth, but imperfect, a humanity in the mistakes that breathes it to life.

“It’s perfect,” he says.

Markus ducks his head to hide a relieved grin. “All thanks to you.”

Connor hesitates. His analytical scanner, still alight, spills out a map of possible responses, but Markus doesn’t seem to expect him to say anything.

“I’ll let you get back to it,” Markus says, “But first… Are you sure you don’t want to be on stage for the speech? There’s a spot for you, if you want it.” It’s an argument they’ve had more than once, and it shows. Markus raises his hands in practiced preparation for Connor’s deflection. “Look, no pressure. I just— I think you deserve the recognition, you know?”

A glow of warmth spreads through him, but Connor shakes his head with a wry twist of his mouth. “I’ll be alright backstage. You know the press and I don’t exactly get along.”

Markus cant an eyebrow “Connor, the press loves you. More than me.”

That warmth again. He finds it hard to meet Markus’s eye – pride or embarrassment or some mix of the two. “It’s okay. I’ll be okay.”
Markus relents. “Okay, but. Let me know if you change your mind. Like I said, there’s always a place for you.”

With that, he’s off. Connor chases the glow he leaves behind – swims with ease through the final preparations. No sooner have the last refreshments been set out than the first donors begin to pour through the doors.

Josh shows them in – where they’ll stand, where they’ll sit, whose hands they’ll have to shake. There’s more by the minute – business associates, friends and family, androids and humans from across Detroit and beyond. Connor nods to Fowler, to Officer Chen. He spots Erica between the crowd, offers a small, shy wave. She gives a tiny smile back, quick and light, as she takes her seat beside her wife.

After that, it gets a little hard to concentrate. Connor weaves to the back of the room, avoiding the larger clusters, stands with his back pressed tight to the wall and feels himself breathe just a little easier. The event starts in earnest, and only then does he allow himself to retreat fully behind the stage, peering out between the curtains every few minutes. He thinks he sees Hank and North, but the banquet hall is swarming now, cameras flashing and reporters on the hunt.

Connor fidgets, then carefully pulls the curtain closed. It won’t be long now.

He flips his coin to still his nerves, paces up and down the length of the stage, feels the dampened vibrations of the room around him. The lights dim as people find their tables and take their seats, and a reverent hush falls over the room. Connor counts the seconds before the spotlight hits the center stage – timing perfected.

He turns to watch the others climb the steps to join him backstage – first Markus, then Simon, then Josh, then North. He sounds them off against the list in his head, runs their names silently across his tongue like he runs the coin along his knuckles, something calming in the intangible weight of their presence.

It isn’t always. Calming.

Sometimes, on bad days, he craves nothing more than space, silence. Solitude. Which is—strange. He didn’t know he could want to be alone. It’s stunning contradiction from when he wanted nothing else but their time, their affection, their approval. And he still does, usually. Only, sometimes, he wants to be alone too. He doesn’t always understand why, but then, there’s plenty more than that he doesn’t understand either. A lot of maybes, and nevers.

But. There’s a lot he does know too – and a lot more he might one day be lucky enough to learn. And for now, that’s okay. He’s okay.

Markus takes a deep breath, hands smoothing restlessly down his front. North moves in quick, stills the hands by pulling him in for a quick kiss.

“Ready?” she asks.

“Ready.”

She squeezes his hand. “Go get ‘em.”

And he does. Markus strides onto the stage like he was born to command it – like he was born at all, as alive as any of the hundreds of humans in the crowd before him, never once to question the inalienable truth of his humanity. From the center podium, spotlit, he speaks, and begins to tell the story of Jericho – the first home for Detroit’s androids, their first shelter, their first haven. And how,
since its destruction, they have been in dire need of a new one.

Connor thinks.

He’s been remarkably lucky, hasn’t he? He had a home the entire time – long before he ever knew he needed one. Had a family, even when he didn’t see it. With Jericho, with North, with Hank. And even without any of that, he had himself. Himself, his life – and all the terrible, painful, wonderful things a life brings with it.

He owns his pain. Just like his name and his body and his actions and his life. He owns his pain. It’s his, whether he wants it or not. He has to live with it, has to learn to live with it. And if takes time to learn how, that’s okay. And if he isn’t what he should be, if he isn’t what he was made to be or what he wants to be, that’s okay too. And the time it takes to become what he could be, what he might be – he’ll own that too.

From the podium, Markus introduces the leaders of New Jericho to thunderous applause, and together, Simon and Josh join him on stage.

North doesn’t move.

Surprised, Connor gives her a nudge. Whispers, “You neither?”

She shakes her head, returning the touch to lean against his side. “Hell no,” she snorts. “You know me. I’m not standing pretty for any humans to gawk at.”

Connor nods and takes the weight, widens his stance to support her. It’s sharp reversal of the time, back in November, when they stood fearlessly behind Markus on that stage in Hart Plaza – the snow a cold fury around them and the future ahead unclear. But like this, it feels—right, for them. It feels okay.

They stand in silence. Connor mouths along the words as Markus continues—just like they practiced—and feels his chest swell with pride.

“It’s not perfect,” North says, eyes on the stage. “This plan, it’s not perfect. Nothing is – not yet. Maybe not ever.” She tips her head back, eyes closed, and smiles. “But it’s progress, you know?”

And Connor smiles too. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, friends, we did it.

As I said earlier, I’ll be considering requests for bonus content / extra scenes in the march-of-progress-verse, but I expect I’ll take a nice long break from this fic first.

Writing this story was a huge challenge, both for personal reasons and on a technical level. This was my first time ever (successfully) writing something without a completed outline and without already having drafted several versions, as well as my first time working with such a challenging character voice. It was also my first foray into lots of really dark and sensitive themes, which I can only hope I handled as respectfully as possible. I learned a lot writing this one, guys. And I had a fucking blast doing it, largely thanks the amazing feedback and the interactions I was able to have with you guys.
Y’all in the comments—and yes! I’m talking to you!—helped make this experience unforgettable. Thank you beyond words.

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