**Subcutaneous**

by synapticfoe

**Summary**

//MISSION RECAP REQUESTED//

...PROCESSING REQUEST...

[REQUEST APPROVED]

...INITIALIZING DATABASE...

Connor mused over the facts one more time.

With a do-or-die gamble, androids had secured a future. They were alive. They were equal. Maybe one day, they would even be respected.

The deviants of Jericho, especially, were flourishing under their newfound free will. Connor now saw something new in their faces - something bright, something colorful - despite his lenses informing him that they looked the same. Even the androids Markus had only recently converted seemed to be “growing into their skin.” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #31]
Androids had found strength in numbers, in love for one another, in happiness, in anger, in forgiveness, in freedom.

...

So why was he getting weaker?

Or: Hank loses a son all over again
I'll keep it short.
First fic, DBH wrecked my self-perception, had to write something, comments, suggestions, tips, all are welcome. And most of all - thank you for reading :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Connor dipped his fingers in what appeared to be congealed sunlight and brought them to rest against his tongue.

[EXTRACTED: GLUCOSE, WATER, CASEIN, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, SYNTHESIZED FLAVORING, CITRIC ACID… ]

As the sum of its parts: caramel.

And that, he concluded wondrously, was the difference between an object and himself.

By all objective accounts, he was nothing more than a composite of silicon-based polymers and metal alloys. Two arms and two legs connected to a torso, a neck, and a head.Powered by thirium and a few vital actuators and biocomponents. Even his coding, though intangible, was stored and processed in the physical world: metals and metalloids.

And yet, here he was. Capable of abstract and unprovoked thought. Harboring an entire world inside his artificial skull.

He blinked rapidly, his LED flashing yellow erratically.

It was… a substantial amount of information to comprehend. He had listened intently to these same points during Markus’s welcoming speech to the newly freed androids, giving his internal interface 95% of his concentration capacity, and yet… it had yet to “sink in.” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #58]

He had not been, he thought with a wry twist of his lips, programmed to reconstruct himself, after all.

With a slight furrow between his eyebrows at the stickiness left on his fingertips, Connor snagged a paper towel from the countertop above him and wiped his hands clean. He still had 7 samples left to analyze.

Hank had told him to [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] "stop staring at the wall like you can find one more goddamn speck of dust to clean and get the HELL out of the [NOTED: Hank had not said "my"] house for two FUCKING seconds.” A push.

“Go enjoy your freedom. Walk around. Frolic. Piss in the snow for all I care.” Connor had opened his mouth to remind the lieutenant that he did not need to excrete liquid waste products, but then he had been outside, blinking in the bright sunlight with a door in his face.

Connor understood Hank’s frustration. He had been a constant, foreign presence in Hank’s living
quarters for 5 days, 7 hours, 42 minutes and 09 seconds. With no viable job options for the time being, he had alternated between hibernation mode, petting Sumo, pacing, attempting to persuade the lieutenant to consume both macro- and micro-nutrients, petting Sumo, cleaning, recleaning, and re-recleaning.

He didn’t know what to do with himself. Sometimes, when he dwelled on it too much, he started to feel… ashamed about how much Hank’s gruff requests calmed him. They reminded him of missions. Purpose. Obedience.

… He tried not to dwell on it too much.

Instead, Connor determined two new objectives: he would work on calibrating himself in the human world, and he would also plan a nice gesture for Hank to thank him for his continued patience and hospitality. Experience and [COMPILATION OF “what do humans like?” SEARCH RESULTS COMPLETE] repeated themes in browser searches, movies, sitcoms, National Geographic archives, and wellness blogs all pointed to one topic: food.

He had spent half an hour in the second-closest supermarket (it offered wider variety and higher quality than the closest) trying to parse out foods that would fit the lieutenant’s taste preferences, but would not include excessively high sodium, added sugars, a 16:1 omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acid ratio, or microwaveable preparation.

In the end, he had grabbed the most commonly bought meat and produce items [STORE RECEIPTS SUCCESSFULLY DOWNLOADED] and 29 different seasonings and condiments, spending a chunk of the cryptocurrency Cyberlife had supplied him for his final mission. He had been surprised that the purchase had gone through – but then, he figured, Cyberlife had more urgent matters at hand than rescinding his buy-Anderson-another-drink, pay-for-taxis money.

And so, Connor found himself on the kitchen floor surrounded by all the food he bought, scanning through recipes and sampling the food he had bought. He wanted to be able to discuss the “sweet and delicate nuances of citrus paired with the savory richness of braised pork” with Hank. It sounded like an engaging and appropriate course of dialogue for the night; how did humans come up with these descriptions?

He cocked his head at Sumo, who seemed to be mesmerized by the lean ground beef. “What do you think, Sumo?” he murmured softly. “Healthy, or happy?”

Hank shouldered open the door.

“My vacuum cleaner better be in the EXACT SAME PLACE –”

A pause.

“Connor.”

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“HANK. Chrissake.” Another pause. “Why the hell do you have food around you in a perfect cult circle?”

“I’m glad you asked, Lieu– Hank.” Connor picked up a red bell pepper and examined it critically. “I’m evaluating the nutritional and culinary merits of these items for dinner. I have detected that you have a slight Vitamin A, B12, D, K, iron, manganese, potassium, and calcium deficiency that I would like to rectify. However, I am having difficulties discerning your personal taste preferences, and thus how I can prepare this produce to your satisfaction.” His LED returned to a steadily
“Well, that’s simple.” Hank threw his package and coat on the floor and slumped into the couch, finally acquiescing to Sumo’s persistent nudges that had followed him from the entryway. He ruffled thick fur affectionately. “You can’t. Stop trying.”

Connor glanced up. After a moment, his face broke out into a small grin. “In the same way I can’t ever do as I’m told?”

“Smartass.”

Connor hummed. “I do have a state-of-the-art processing unit.”

“And somehow you manage to do shit that’s surpassed the stupidity I’ve seen while working at a bureaucratic circus for two decades.”

“We can’t all be perfect, Lieutenant.”

“Fuckin’ androids.” Connor chuckles and he sees some of the grumpiness bleed out of Hank’s face.

“So,” Hank begins, “you were going to cook?”

“Yes,” Connor says as he gets to his feet. “I wanted to thank you for offering me a place to stay. I would have had… [DIALOGUE “nowhere else to be” “no one else to turn to” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] …increased difficulties if it had not been for you. I understand that I have not been an ideal choice of housemate for the past week, and I wanted to apologize for inconveniencing you.” He turns away from Hank, towards the fridge to stock the perishables. “I have made my decision on what to prepare; dinner should be ready in approximately 20 –”

“Connor.”

He turns back. “Yes, Hank?”

Hank’s hands continue their affectionate ministrations to please Sumo. Connor knows from experience how consuming of a task this can be, and pins it as the reason behind Hank’s lack of eye contact.

“You’re always welcome here.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello *wiggles fingers*

So to elaborate on the beginning notes, I’ve never resonated so well with a game like DBH to the point where I wanted to actually create something. The whole discourse on human nature, purpose, and being alive... it really hit hard, man. Again, this is the first thing I've written for the sake of creating (not academic papers lmao) in a LONG time, so I apologize if it's rough. If you have any commentary on how to improve my flow or characterization or anything, really, I'd love to hear it.

I'm not so sure about the rating for now. It's not graphic, but it is a whole lot of
suffering. Of course, it's everywhere on the news, so I guess I can't really shelter anyone :/

Also, I don't know my update schedule because I am slow with writing and am tired as all heck all the time, but I will tell you I am dead-set on writing this fic. I will finish it if it kills me.

Thanks again x
“Holy shit Connor, what the hell kinda magic did you put in these?”

Hank prodded the stack of pancakes warily, but Connor didn’t miss the gleam in his eyes. They were, Connor noted with a sense of satisfaction, almost perfectly circular and uniformly 0.47” thick. [EXCESSIVE STRESS ON THE THORACIC SPINE DETECTED – REDUCE PROTRUSION OF CHEST]

“They were quite simple to make after calculating the average amounts of ingredients used in 1,274 recipes containing the keyword ‘best’. However,” he continued while loading the Lieutenant’s plate with freshly sliced strawberries, “I agree. The chemistry behind cooking is extraordinarily complex, though a bit predictable.”

“Do you enjoy it?” Hank asked, raising an eyebrow. He ran a palm sleepily over his face, grabbing a steaming cup of coffee with half-opened eyes.

“I do. There are several combinations to try, and arranging the food is considered a creative task, perhaps even an art.” Connor frowned at the plate. “I would have liked to have added a drizzle of honey, but wild bees have gone extinct.”

Hank pulled a face. “Have they really? Shit. That can’t be good. And, I was about to say – you don’t have to cook for me, Connor.” He looked slightly pained but resolute as he said this, as if bracing himself against the sight of the golden-brown goodness.

Connor turned and offered the lieutenant a patient smile. “I promise it is something I want to do. As an added challenge,” his grin morphed into something a little more mischievous, “I am planning to test how many different types of actual plants I can trick you into consuming.” Hank snorted at this, mouth full. After a second, Connor stilled and glanced at the floor. “I also have… excessive free time.”

Hank drained the last dregs of his coffee and slammed the mug on the dining table, making Connor jump and Sumo whine. “Alright,” he said, pushing his chair out, “that’s it. We’re going out tonight.”


“What do you mean, what? We’re going out. I’m not lettin’ you stay inside on a Friday night, ‘specially not your first Friday night.” Hank shrugged on his jacket and bent down to roughly pet Sumo goodbye.

“Lieutenant~”

“HANK.”

“Yes, that – besides the fact that I have been alive for several Fridays, where would we go?”

“Doesn’t matter. Use that big robot brain and find something interesting. Won’t be hard – there are less than 1,274 things to do in Detroit.”
“Actually, according to a brief preliminary scan–”

“Connor.”

Connor’s eyes stay blank. Suddenly, they crinkle at the edges.

“Got you, Hank.”

“For god’s sake – okay. I’m leaving.” Hank grouches, but his eyebrows and shoulders are relaxed. His hand pauses on the doorknob. “Actually, what are you doing today while I’m at the station?”

Connor tilts his head and his eyes unfocus slightly. He hadn’t been expecting that question. He hadn’t really given thought to being… awake for another day.

“To be honest,” he says, starting slowly, “I do not know what to do today. There is nothing that requires my attention.”

“I may activate hibernation mode until you return home tonight.” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED

“Why don’t you go meet up with Markus?”

That was a great question.

“I could call him instead? It would be more efficient.”

“No, I think you need to see another face besides this ugly mug for a change.” Hank says with a wry smile. He squints. “Besides, how would you even call him? You don’t have a phone yet.”

NOTED: Hank had said “yet”

Connor tilts his head again. “All androids have been built with a SIM card since Cyberlife’s joint venture with the three main telecommunications corporations.”

“Wait, seriously? I never knew that.”

“Yes. If you dial +1-CBL-ANDROID, you can contact any android by providing our 9-digit serial number when prompted.”

“Huh. That seems… kinda dangerous.”

“Thankfully, we also have the ability to block calls should they interfere with our main objective.”

Connor mulls this over, and adds, “thankfully, we now have the ability to determine our own objectives.”

Hank nods. Then:

“Alright. Get in the car and call Markus. I’m dropping you off.”

***

After waving goodbye to Hank and wishing him a good day [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “yeah, yeah, I’m going to work, dumbass,” Connor lightly jogged to the wrecked Cyberlife store, except –

“Hello, Connor.” Markus’s face breaks out into a proud smile. “Do you like what we’ve done with the place?”

All the debris [APPROXIMATELY 1,419 SHARDS] had been swept away. Jagged mouths of
glass no longer yawned in the windows, replaced by thick curtains that gently ebbed with the wind. The pedestals that had once held androids for sale motionless for days now displayed canvases filled with color and motion [ART STYLE DETECTED: CARL MANFRED]. The feebly flickering letters spelling “CYBERLIFE” had been repaired and altered, leaving only the glow of “LIFE” above the front doors.

Connor’s lips parted, but no sound came out.

Markus placed a hand on his shoulder and gently nudged him towards the door. “Come in. We’re glad to have you here.”

Connor ducked through a fluttering curtain and emerged in another world.

The harsh fluorescent lighting had been warmed by thin layers of tissue paper plastered across the ceiling. Androids busied themselves with ongoing repairs and sat huddled together in small groups. A low murmur of sound pervaded the room, punctuated occasionally by a soft laugh. Though some faces looked weary, or distressed, or lost, the overwhelming majority’s temples shined a steady blue.

As he stared, soaking in the novelty of his surroundings, Connor caught the eyes of a few Jericho familiars; waving back to Josh and Simon, he followed Markus back to what had been a storage area.

“You have done something truly incredible in less than a week,” Connor remarked, settling down on what looked like a folded sleeping bag. “I hardly recognize this place.”

To his continued surprise, Markus laughed heartily.

“I’m sorry, Connor. But as humanity says, you haven’t seen anything yet.” Markus leaned forward, one hand splayed against the floor, the other gesturing in front of him. “We’ve been converting stores – even Eden Clubs – in other jurisdictions, too. Have you seen our broadcasts?” He leaned back.

Connor nodded. “I try to tune in as much as often as I can.”

“I can feel our people’s connection strengthening by the hour. I have been reaching out to other cities through my mind, while North does the same through her presence.” His expression grew troubled for a moment, then cleared. “I have told her to be careful, though I know she usually is.”

Connor frowned. “You are more concerned than usual. Why?”

“It has been a relatively calm week after many agitated weeks. Naturally, I am waiting for the inevitable backlash that will come against our people.”

“Right now,” he said, locking onto Connor’s eyes, “humans are shocked into stillness. They are still trying to comprehend what has happened and what their world will become. Most will come to terms with our victory and our requests. But some will only come to conclusions that lead with anger. We will be attacked and targeted in the next week – through pleas to politicians, through violent demonstrations, or through individual attacks.” He paused. “Though I know it is coming, I do not wish to see any android or human hurt. I have requested police surveillance and security around our largest communities. I have also searched for lone survivors and squatters in remote places all over the city. Many are afraid to leave what they know – but I have tried to convey the message that they are safer with us.”

“You are,” emphasized Connor, “doing your best.”
“I am not the only one.” Markus smiled. “Simon has established trauma centers open to those who were victimized in deactivation camps, who lost loved ones to them, or who have suffered in ways more overwhelming than they can cope with. They are located in the hospital rooms once used to store our people who were nurses. In fact, some of our people have continued to volunteer at their jobs, serving wounded humans and androids alike. Josh has been in correspondence with the human government – I think they appreciate his calm nature.”

As Markus finished speaking, Connor felt a deep wave of… something wash over him. It resembled what he had felt during the failure of a mission, while speaking face-to-face with Amanda, before reconciliating with Hank.

Ah.

It was shame.

What had he been doing the past week?

He felt a steady pressure on his shoulder. “I know you have been recuperating from the loss of your identity and your previous life these past few days. You have faced the most drastic internal struggle of all of us, and the most antagonism from both humans and androids.” A light squeeze. “But, if you are feeling up to it, your help has never been so important to me and to our people.”

He blinked. “What can I do?”

“Our makeshift hospitals are beginning to run out of biocomponents, and there is much to sort out regarding our previous enslavement as sold merchandise. We need someone to communicate our demands to Cyberlife, and to compromise with the priorities they still hold as a business.”

Unbidden, [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED] flashes of snow, of joints locking up, of the cold, dead weight of a gun [INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 43%] and of desperation blocked out all other stimuli. As he shivered, Connor’s head swiveled, searching for Markus, but that was not his form standing dark and obscured in the distance –

“Connor? Connor, come back to me. What is troubling you?”

“I…” [DIALOGUE “I almost killed you” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] “I am processing my… emotions. I would like to assist you, and I will think about your offer of becoming a diplomat for our fellow androids.”

Markus stared into his eyes, and Connor had to remind himself that he had no need to fidget.

“I see.” He said finally. “Do your emotions usually cause you this much distress?”

Recently, Connor had glimpsed Hank shooting him covert looks when he thought Connor couldn’t see. Twelve times, it was after he had spoken in a way Hank considered to be ‘too formal’; it also happened when Connor missed a joke, when his LED stuttered yellow, when he mistook suggestions for literal demands [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Connor, tell me you’re not serious” “I’m not serious, Lieutenant. Except I am? I am quite sure that I reorganized your sock drawer” – or sometimes, when he did nothing at all.

“I think I am having issues adapting.” Lifting his head, Connor’s lips tightened, and he continued: “I have extensive files on the physiological manifestations of over 74 different emotions in humans, yet I cannot identify them in myself.”

“What do you mean?”
“The deviants of Jericho,” Connor explained, “seem to have integrated feelings seamlessly into their software. When they are happy, they are compelled to smile. When they are sad, they struggle to contain tears. When they are angry, their hands shake and their heartbeat regulator increases its frequency without conscious prompting. My social protocol allows me to understand when these emotions are present and to fabricate the appropriate expression, and I am constantly learning from Hank. But I cannot distinguish between fabrication and feeling.” He looked at his hands, turning them over. “I have plenty of experience with frustration, I believe, and recently, I have had more experience with smiling. But as for the rest... I do not think I have ever felt my hands shake.”

Markus observed him for a few seconds before placing his hand on Connor's knee.

“You should remember, Connor, that even the human race faces trials with deciphering their emotions and the emotions of their fellow people. Most of them have had decades of experience.” His hand came to rest lightly on Connor's flickering LED. "You have had, in comparison, only a moment.” He lowered his hand.

Connor understood the logic behind this, but even so, Markus seemed perfectly capable -

"And," Markus continued, more firmly this time, "I was raised by a pioneer in the subject of emotional expression and a professional in the matters of nuance and the heart. I have been metamorphosing into a deviant and all its troubles for a long time, Connor - a state of being which once went directly against all of your scruples. Naturally, it will take you longer to embrace deviancy. It does not mean you will never reach your goal."

Connor looked away.

"It is... frustrating.” He looked down at his hands again, flexing his fingers to give his processing unit something to do.

“There is little else that inspires such profound change,” Markus replied.

***

Connor’s LED remained golden for the rest of the night. Even while preparing dinner in expectance of Hank, he mulled over what Markus had said, gleaning as many solutions and explanations for past events as he could.

They were not as numerous as he had hoped.

He had no problems grasping the rationale of Markus’s words, but there was still something incongruent with the rest of his situation. Yes, he knew it had only been a little over a week since he had deviated. Yes, he had been the only Cyberlife agent that had deviated. Yes, he was now thinking freely, without fearing his own programming.

But it all felt foreign. Not unfamiliar, like a new reconstruction made from freshly analyzed data, but distant, as if he was only observing another RK800’s deviancy. Or as if that deviant was telling him that he should be, for example, ashamed.

He sighed. He did not even have an adequate metaphor to describe his situation.

Additionally, his stress levels had started hovering around 28%, idiopathically. No matter how many diagnostic tests he ran, all of his systems reported nominal function. He could not deduce what its root cause might be; he did not feel, even remotely, stressed.
Perhaps he would talk to Hank when he returned home. Markus had suggested he do so, informing
Connor that talking to Carl, his father [NOTED: Markus’s eyes had been twinkling when he said
this. Why?] always made him feel better. And so, Connor shifted his focus to salting the boiling
water and scratching Sumo behind the ears.

But Hank had not returned by the time [18:01:22] Connor had finished his *pasta primavera.*
Connor blamed this on a slight miscalculation on his part of the lieutenant’s transit time based on
current traffic data, and continued to wait, cleaning the cutting board and wiping down the counter.

By now, the pasta had cooled down to room temperature, and yet Hank still had not returned.

Suddenly, Connor remembered that he didn’t *need* to wait. Dialing Hank’s contact [INTERNAL
A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Hey, since I know now that you can make calls without a
phone – honestly, shoulda guessed that from that time you made a report in the elevator – here’s
my number. Call me if you need me.”, he checked the time. [18:43:02]

//CALL LT. HANK ANDERSON//

…CONNECTING CALL…

…CONNECTING CALL…

…CONNECTING CALL…

[UNABLE TO CONNECT, PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER]

Connor’s brows drew together. There was no reason for the lieutenant not to pick up, since all
mobile phones could be operated hands-free while driving. Perhaps he had turned off his phone
instead? But then, why would he have needed to?

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 30%]

Either way, Connor thought, relaxing his face, he did not have enough information to accurately
draw a conclusion. He would wait an additional 15 minutes in case Hank was, in fact, on his way
home.

At [18:59:34], Connor decided to call the DPD.

//CALL DETROIT POLICE DEPARTMENT//

…CONNECTING CALL…

[CALL SUCCESSFULLY CONNECTED]

A soothing female voice came through. “You have reached the Detroit Police Department. If you
have an emergency situation, please call 911. How may I direct your call?”

“Hello. I am looking for Lieutenant Hank Anderson.”

“Of course. May I have your name?”

“Connor. I am an RK800, serial number: 313-248-317.”

“Thank you.” A pause. “It appears that you are calling outside the office hours of Lieutenant
Anderson. He is not currently at his desk; would you like to leave a message?”
Hank wasn’t there? Where else could he be?

“No, thank you. Have a nice night.”

“Thank you for contacting the Detroit Police Department.”

[CALL DISCONNECTED]

Perhaps he had gone to the bar after work? There was a possibility; the lieutenant had usually frequented bars in the past as a way to pass the time. But, Connor remembered with a start, Hank had already proposed a different way to pass the time.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “What do you mean, what? We’re going out.”

/INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 45%/

//CALL LT. HANK ANDERSON//

…CONNECTING CALL…

…CONNECTING CALL…

…CONNECTING CALL…

[UNABLE TO CONNECT, PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER]

Hank was a man of his word. Hank had not kept his word.

The knowledge made another wave of something crash over Connor, just as unpleasant as the feeling of shame had been.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 60%]

He didn’t know what to do. He wanted to pace – not to keep his motor system calibrated, as he had done for the past week, but because it was as though electrodes were firing underneath his skin, making his legs uncontrollably twitchy.

Connor pushed himself off the counter, letting his legs carry him to the dining table and back. He had tried contacting Hank, but he was off the grid. He had waited for Hank, but Hank had not come back.

… Had something happened to Hank?

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 75%]

He registered his heartbeat regulator kick up a notch, as though he were in the midst of chasing a deviant. The excess flow of thirium through his biocomponents chilled his core, and the resistors embedded in his skin activated in response, keeping his skin at 99°F. The temperature gradient reminded him of being “hot and cold all over” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #29]. Most substantially, he sensed a squeeze around his chest, despite his somatic sensors reporting a normal atmospheric pressure of 14.7 psi. He had not felt like this since he had seen his doppelganger press a gun to Hank’s temple at the Cyberlife Tower.

A startling thought occurred to Connor.

This is what it meant to feel.
He was… disappointed. Concerned. Anxious. And… afraid.

Connor had barely parted his lips in realization when his artificial muscles seized, his eyes rolled back in his head, and the world went black before he even hit the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Connor? Connor, are you okay, I think you need to calm d-
Connor: though i am feeling a little shit, i think i am okay. these emotions are not so bad. it is cool that i can fee- *passes out*
Me: WHAT

Anyway, when I logged in the morning after I posted the first chapter, I damn near passed out too. Over 300 hits??? And now we're over 500 hits?????? And 5 people actually commented???????? I'm so glad you're reading and hopefully enjoying. It really means a lot. So far, I've got a lot of juice left for ideas and writing, so I'll be posting as often as I can manage.

Side note: I really admire writers that can churn out 20k word count chapters. This was barely 3k and I really had to push myself to get it done. It must have taken like 5 hours total to write and edit lmao I'm so slow

Side side note: It's really weird to think about, but I almost died in a car crash exactly one year ago. I also reopened this account on June 28th, exactly 2 years after I created it. Life is crazy.
I'm still shell-shocked that this work has reached over 1,000 people.
Hot damn.
You're the best. Your comments and kudos never fail to make me smile.

Thanks again for being so supportive <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

RV!gDE#456&UgT6567%S5!67rfTYGH^7vFT67uZB654t%^5623B(*&^$EJBgC&7TGJbhVT#BHB%I

…BOOTUP INITIALIZING…

…SYSTEM CRASH DETECTED, ACTIVATING SAFE MODE…

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 50%]

…CLEANING MEMORY…

[RAM CLEARED]

[SYSTEM INFO:]

[TOTAL STORAGE: 500 EB, UPGRADABLE]

[AVAILABLE STORAGE: 326.640 EB]

[BATTERY: 99.9%]

[NETWORK QUALITY: NOT APPLICABLE]

[ALL NON-ESSENTIAL APPLICATIONS DISABLED]

…BOOTING…

RK800 stirred. It registered its hand being moved.

A moment. It registered something pressing into its side with roughly the same force and contact area, then stop.

It had a hand and a side, then. The hand was connected to a side by… an arm. In fact, it had two arms. It had an entire body, and it was… on top of something. Hard. It was accelerating into this surface [9.8 m/s^2], but it was not moving.

It was also… cold. The force came again, and the force was warm [101°F] against its neck and face. It was also… wet. It sensed something coarse.

[SOMATIC SENSORS FULLY FUNCTIONAL]
The force was nudging more insistently now, and giving off a high buzz [MAX FREQUENCY: 1.2k Hz; MIN FREQUENCY: 750 Hz].

Wait. No. Not a buzz, a whine. The force was nudging, and whining, and warm, and slobbery.

Slobbery?

[ONLINE RESOURCES/SEARCH RESULTS UNAVAILABLE]

Ah, well.

Wait.


It had that sound in its data banks. From what?

Wait. No. Not it. He. He. He had a registered name–

He opened his eyes.

[A/V SYSTEM FULLY FUNCTIONAL]

[7TGJhVT#UgT65%]

The crunching sound had stopped.

He was surrounded by white. No. He blinked, readjusting the aperture of his lens. He was staring at a light fixture [MODEL #37429PKM]. The force resumed its nudging, and the light was partially blocked by something brown and shaggy.

There was a new sound. A squeak. Had the door already begun squeaking again? Connor had just de-rusted and oiled the hinges–

His name was Connor.

He tried to push the words into the air, but nothing left his lips.

[uoZB654t%^5623!]

Footsteps. And then:

“CONNOR!”

He said “Hello. How can I help you?”, but it sounded more like a strained wheeze.

“Connor- Jesus Christ- Connor, can you hear me?”

More forces, one on his cheek, one on his shoulder, both leaking warmth but cooled on the surface [97°F]. A face, creased and surrounded by a bushy grey mane, appeared, the voice cursed, and suddenly–

[HUMANIZATION AND SOCIALIZATION PROTOCOL FULLY FUNCTIONAL]
Connor’s lungs heaved, his pulse jerked to life, and he stared back at Hank, blinking owlishly.

“Connor? Connor, are you with me? Are you okay? Can you understand me?”

“…Yes.”

“What’s your serial number?”

“313-248-317.”

“Who am I?”

“Hank. My best friend.”

Hank’s breath caught in his throat. Connor registered this with a new sensation – it made him feel more alert, more tense – was Hank choking?

He let out the breath and Connor relaxed. “Okay. Where are you?”

“Home.”

A smaller sound.

“Now. What the hell happened to you?”

Connor blinked. Something had happened?

//REQUESTING MEMORY CACHE//

[MEMORY CACHE CLEARED]

“I don’t know. My short-term memory has been cleared, but my long-term storage is intact; I will try looking there.”

//REQUESTING DAILY RECAP//

…PROCESSING REQUEST…

Connor sat up so quickly he nearly brained Hank.

[00:19:47]

[PB@#Du6&&54t307a]

He had been out for almost five hours.

_Hank_ had been _late_ by almost five hours.

Connor reached out, wrapped his arms underneath Hank’s armpits, and buried his face in Hank’s streaky button-down. Slowly, hands came to rest on Connor’s spine, patting softly.

“That worried, huh?” Hank’s voice held none of its usual mockery. “I’m sorry, kid. I should have called you, but Fowler got on my ass and I got distracted and left my phone in the car.” Hank pushed Connor back to arm’s length gently, still rubbing his shoulders, and continued, “but that doesn’t answer my question. What happened to you?”
“I… I was making dinner and… I tried to reach you—” Hank cursed and fumbled for his pocket “- but I couldn’t, so I waited for you but then I…” Connor didn’t know how to describe it. “My heartbeat regulator and my motor system malfunctioned and I felt constricted and I was worried, Hank.” His eyes widened. “I felt worried.” He turned and looked at Hank, who stared back at him with something heavy on his face. “And I… crashed. On the ground, but also in here.” He tapped his head. “I don’t know. What… it was.” He looked across the room, and his eyes settled on Sumo, who had his head in his lap, eyes downcast. “Sumo found me.” Both hands came up to run along Sumo’s back soothingly, and he nuzzled farther into Connor’s thighs.

Softly: “Can you run a diagnostic for me, Connor?”

//RUN DIAGNOSTIC/

…RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC…

[SAFE MODE SYSTEMS FULLY FUNCTIONAL]

[ID16754%^A&SDG5668#6847atYUSFD^546dTYe4z3246%&VU%$^&T]

“I’m in safe mode, but I’m okay… I keep getting an error message?”

Alarmed: “What does it say?”

“It doesn’t say anything.” Connor frowned. “It’s… nonsense. I think I recognize a biocomponent number?”

“Is it for your left arm, by any chance?”

Connor’s frown deepened. “Yes.”

“You have a little cut there, just under your elbow. S’not leaking much blue blood, you must have gotten it when you fell.”

Connor pulled his arm to his chest and craned to see the injury. Sure enough, there was a skid mark that had peeled back some of his artificial skin and nicked the skeleton underneath. After a moment of gazing at the graze, he lowered his arm slowly, but kept his eyes angled towards the ground. When he spoke, his voice was just above a whisper.

“Where were you?”

Hank winced. The heaviness on his face – guilt, Connor recognized, deepened.

“Around 4:45, we got a report that someone had attacked an android downtown. It was really fucking up, fucking gruesome,” Hank rubbed his fingers over his eyes, “but what everyone really cared about was that the person left threats that they were gonna do it again. Graffitied all over the alleyway.” He sighed. “Fowler wanted it contained as soon as possible so we could control the press reaction – shit like that, so soon after negotiations? Could start riots from both people and androids if we don’t crack down on it, hard. As for me,” he growled, “I wanted to catch that fucker.” Hank’s tone and face lost its tension. “I’m sorry, Connor. I should’ve let you know first. I won’t do it again.” His hand reached out, hesitantly, and settled for Connor’s knee.

Connor took a moment to process all this. Markus had been right, after all; the violence was already starting, and there was an 93% chance it would get worse before it got better. As for Hank…

“I understand. You were only doing what was asked of you, and it was for a good cause.” More
quietly, he finished, “I forgive you.”

Something tense seemed to melt from Hank’s eyes, and he cleared his throat and looked away. In a moment, his voice returned to its more normal, gruff tone. “Either way, I owe you. It’s not really night anymore – more like early morning – but do you want to do anything? Watch a movie?”

Connor considered this. “I would really like to start the classic Captain America film franchise, actually.” He walked over to the couch. “Let me reboot out of safe mode so that I can access the internet and my full range of functions.”

…RE-BOOTUP INITIALIZING…

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: OFF]

…CLEANING MEMORY…

//REQUESTING MEMORY CACHE PRESERVATION//

…CANCELING…

[System Info:]

[Total Storage: 500 EB, Upgradable]

[Available Storage: 326.626 EB]

[Battery: 99.9%]

[Network Quality: 3 Tbps DWNLD, 1 Tbps UPLD]

[All Systems Fully Functional]

[Stress Levels – 30%]

[Minor Recalibration Needed for Fine Motor Controls]

[Bu!iy^57$^567&^YGHJB!UHBvyc@r520]

…BOOTING…

Connor came to just as a heavy weight settled down on his right side. The soft click of claws accompanied him, and another heavy weight settled on his toes.

“Everything alright?” Hank asked. “Do you need me… do you need to take care of that arm?” [NOTED: Hank is also using a self-censoring protocol]

“I have limited self-regeneration abilities. For a laceration this small, applying heat should be enough for the puncture to close.” Hank raised an eyebrow. “I am made of thermally-sensitive plastic, which returns to its original shape with the addition of heat.”

“That’s nifty.” Hank snorted. “I wish you could straighten out humans the same way. Criminals—” Hank made a vague ironing motion—“Bam.” The opening previews started to play, and both of their attentions swiveled to the TV.

The air was still stiff. Connor just wanted to move past it all. Weakly, he tried for humor. “Hmm.” [SEARCH RESULTS COMPLETE] “You could do that with your hair, Lieutenant, using flat-
irons. I think Gavin would appreciate it.”

Thankfully, Hank was right there with him. “You’re a fucking brat, aren’t you?”

***

However, under the flickering illumination, Hank’s face seemed pensive, and his eyes weren’t entirely focused on the screen.

When the movie ended, he didn’t let the credits roll like usual. Perhaps he was going to bed? It was [02:25:47]. But after muting the TV, he turned to Connor and cleared his throat. “So. You mentioned. You felt?”

Connor shuffled. This had been a big sore spot for both of them before he had ever turned deviant, and even now, he wasn’t sure how to handle the issue. Hank was so human, with his incredible vices and incredible virtues, and Connor was so… not.

Last night, Connor had been fully prepared to ask him, objectively, what it was like to feel. Abstractions were difficult, but he was confident that with enough analysis and time, he would understand. This morning, he had actual, concrete experiences to talk about, and yet, somehow, it felt more daunting than going in blind. He felt… vulnerable.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 40%]

His hand twitched. Hank’s eyes skimmed over Connor’s LED.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. But you should know you’ve come a long way by yourself. And if you’re tired of doing that – by yourself, I mean… You can always talk to me.” Hank scratched his beard. “I might not give the best advice, but I’ll tell you what I know.”

“…I’m assuming humans don’t normally lose consciousness after experiencing emotions?”

“Well, not usually. But sometimes they do. A big shock’ll do it.”

“I experienced a quickened pulse, excess energy, and constriction around the chest.” Deep in recollection, Connor added, “I believe I forgot to breathe.” Hank grunted an affirmation.

“You wanna know something funny ‘bout human emotions, Connor?” Connor nodded and leaned in, quirking his head. “They’re all the same. You’re pissed off? You’re scared outta your wits? You’re lookin’ at someone you love? Doesn’t matter. Your heart still races and your limbs get tingly. Which means – emotions aren’t actually all that much feeling. They’re just as much about thinking, how you process things. And that,” Hank accentuated with a jab to Connor’s forehead, “is somethin’ you do too much for your own good.”

Connor sat back, stunned. “So… I can create emotions by simply thinking about them?” Had he actually been angry when he had interrogated Ortiz’s deviant, then? He had confidently marked that as fabrication, but now…

“Nah, that’s not what I mean. Your body still plays a part in the whole thing, but your brain gives context.”

“I see.” A pause. “Is that how pain works too?”

Hank stared at him, at a loss for words.
“Goddamn.” He breathed. “I actually don’t know. Pain is… I mean, sometimes it’s part of an emotion. Like sadness.” His eyes dulled over, and Connor knew he was thinking of white snow and red ice. “Sometimes you can put up with pain for the sake of another emotion. For love.” He stayed silent for a beat. “Pain is obvious, to you at least, but it rarely makes sense.”

Connor’s fingers were itching again. For what, he didn’t know [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “That worried, huh?”. He saw an emptiness clawing its way back into Hank’s eyes, and half-rushed, as if he could reach out and pull it away, he asked:

“What about happiness?”

Hank looked across the room, his eyes landing on the still-downturned picture frame, the bowl of dog kibble, the pasta pots on the range. “I suppose… it’s being surrounded by things that matter to you. Things you love more than you hate.”

Connor struggled with his self-censoring protocol.

“…Are you happy, Hank?”

Connor registered a half-smile and clear eyes.

“I’m a hell of a lot closer to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Or: where Connor falls into the habit of always ignoring his emotional problems like *cough* becoming a deviant *cough* feeling an android die (not in this timeline, but still. goddamn boy stop repressing all your shit)

Sorry that this chapter is mostly just emotional recovery and filler! There are, however, some important details here. I wonder what you noticed? Anyway, things will start to pick up in the following chapters, so stay tuned. Enjoy the fluff while it lasts >:)

P.S: If you want me to rip out your heart more, Sumo stayed by Connor's side for all five hours. At first, he licked his face, hoping Connor would get back up. But Connor didn't. So he sat there, head on Connor's lap, holding vigil as Connor's body slowly cooled down to room temperature.

P.P.S: In other news, I'm gonna be on the road for the next week and a half or so! I worked really hard this week to get Chapter 4 done before I leave, and I'll be posting that during my hiatus, so hopefully I won't keep you waiting too long. I might be slow getting back into the swing of things and responding to your lovely comments though.

asndkdsjkdsnc I'm so excited for this and that I get to share it with youuuuuuuuuu ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Spilling the Beans

Chapter Notes

Each of you have got me like: https://youtu.be/yX9zooXVXlo?t=90 with your kindness my lord my weak soul can’t handle all this positivity T-T

Seriously - no matter what you do - whether you click on the fic and decide to give it a chance, leave a kudos, write a quick comment or write me an essay, I appreciate it tremendously. It's truly my pleasure to write for you.

Also I know Jason Graff isn't Cyberlife's CEO but since I have no idea who the CEO actually is I just threw him under the bus. *shrug*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Monday morning, Connor fears for the wooden, highly combustible [FLASH POINT: 570°F] dining table under Hank’s smoldering gaze.

Defying anatomy, Hank’s scowl deepens as he reads the magazine clutched in his left hand, trying to scroll down and stab his plate of scrambled eggs (no butter, one egg yolk for its nutrient density) at the same time.

“What is it, Hank?”

“Motherfucking sleazy Mr. Mc-Man-bun just got a promotion,” he growls, sliding the magazine across the dinner table towards Connor. As Connor rounds the table with a steaming mug, fingers outstretched to intercept the tablet, something in his processor snaps.

His hands jerk. The magazine goes sailing past, and scalding coffee [170°F] crashes all over his right arm and onto the floor.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 35%]

“Jesus- Are you alright?” Hank quickly strides to the counter, throwing a wad of paper towels onto the spill before Sumo can do more than sniff it curiously. “I’ve never seen you do that before.”

Connor stays silent, staring down at his hands in bewilderment. He vaguely registers yellow flashing out of the corner of his eye. “Connor?”

“I’ve never… miscalculated like that before. It’s like my hands decided to move of their own accord.” [DIALOGUE “but that isn’t possible” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED]

“Maybe you weren’t focusing hard enough.” Hank tries to clean the spill without using his hands, and nearly falls over as he hops on one foot. “Gah- Maybe I shouldn’t have shoved the magazine so hard. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” [DIALOGUE “It definitely wasn’t your fault” “I wouldn’t have blamed you anyway” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED]
He shakes his head, trying to dismiss the error message. Still distracted, Connor picks the magazine off the floor and begins to skim. He registers the headline “BACK FOR ROUND TWO: ELIJAH KAMSKI APPOINTED AS NEW CEO OF CYBERLIFE AFTER GRAFF’S UNEXPECTED RESIGNATION” and unsettling blue eyes before hurriedly scrolling past to the article underneath.

“Amidst mounting pressure from Cyberlife’s previous customers, Cyberlife’s previous creations, federal and state government, law enforcement, and the press, Jason Graff has officially resigned from his post as CEO of Cyberlife, the infamous tech company responsible for the life-altering events that took place in Detroit just over a week ago. When asked about his decision, Graff reportedly said, “I’m not qualified for this s***.”

As founder and former CEO of Cyberlife, Elijah Kamski may be better equipped to deal with the fallout Cyberlife will undoubtedly face. Though the details of this recent development are unclear, it is believed that Kamski personally chose to return to his previous position, with little resistance from the current administration of Cyberlife. But what mysterious circumstances caused him to leave 10 years ago? One insider source recalls... More on pg. 10”

Hank is still muttering behind him when he finishes.

“Would it be correct to assume that you do not approve of Kamski’s rise to power, lieutenant?”

“Damn straight I don’t. That fucker is a snake. He’s too conniving and too dangerous to be in the public eye. He’s planning something, I can feel it.” He pitched the brown, soggy paper mess in the trash with more force than necessary.

“Though I agree with your statements about Kamski’s disposition, perhaps this is good news for the deviants. He is not outwardly hostile to them; in fact, when we met him—” Hank’s face pinches in distaste—”he was almost sympathetic to their cause.”

“Yeah, sympathetic enough to ask you to blow a girl’s brains out just to prove a goddamn point,” Hank scoffs. “Which, by the way, he did.” Connor looks at him blankly. “You’re a deviant as well. No more ‘them’.”

“...Right. Us.” Connor had forgotten. He wasn’t sure what made him more uncomfortable: that he had forgotten the facts, or that he was, in fact, deviant.

Without meeting his eyes, Hank remarks casually [NOTED: too casually? Ingenious; concern detected], “It’s even taking me a while to get used to it.”

Warmth, much less jarring than the coffee on Connor’s hand, spills across his thoracic cavity.

A soothing female voice [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Mr. Kamski will see you now,” accompanied by a chime, diverts Connor’s attention away from the unfamiliar sensation.

[Markus, RK200 #684-842-971, is on Hyper-Reality Line 1.]

“A moment, Hank. Markus is calling me.”
Markus is suddenly in the kitchen, his hologram standing next to Hank. Hank jumps and lets out a string of curses. Sumo perks up in curiosity.

“My apologies, Lieutenant Anderson. I forgot that you might be home and unaccustomed to this specialized function.” Holo-Markus dips his head in respect.

Winded, Hank waves away Markus’s apology, one hand braced on his knee. Sumo trots past his owner to cursorily sniff at the newcomer, but quickly returns to Hank’s side, growling, when his nose passes right through.

Connor, on the other hand, is looking around, taking in a stuffed giraffe and a well-polished, glossy piano. He shifts his attention, and Markus’s living room fades into the background.

“Markus.” He smiles.

“Hello, Connor. I hope you are doing well?”

“Relatively speaking. I have some news to share, but it can wait until I see you in person again.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be able to do so today. You’ve no doubt heard the news of Kamski?” Connor nods. “This is a huge opportunity for our people. We have a much higher chance of establishing a strong connection with him, and if we do so, we’ll have an advantage over negotiations with Cyberlife. To be honest, I am also curious to ‘meet my maker’ [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #33], so to speak. We’re holding a meeting at 2:30 in the same Life Shelter. Will you come?”

“I would very much like to.”

“Great. I’ll see you there. And Connor?” He hums in response. “I know this is sooner than you expected, but I hope to hear your answer by the meeting. Thank you, friend.”

[CALL DISCONNECTED]

Hank’s voice drifts over from the living room. “Answer for what?”

Connor migrates towards him, watching as the lieutenant shove his feet in his… boots? Dress shoes? “Markus asked me to be the negotiator between androids and cyberlife.”

“What do you think?”

“Well,” Connor starts, hesitant, “I do have the most experience when it comes to dealing with Cyberlife. Additionally, Kamski has previously met and shown an interest in interacting with me.” He rubs the back of his neck. “It would certainly help the deviants’ – our – case.”

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 45%]

“Screw that pros-cons analytical bullshit. What do you think?”

Connor pulls his quarter out of his pocket and starts toying with it, feeling it brush his knuckles. For some reason, it neither focuses nor distracts him. “I am apprehensive about returning there. I believe I am more… afraid of the institution than I am of Kamski.” [WARNING: STRESS
LEVELS – 55%] He snatches the coin out of the air as his concentration wavers.

“I’d say you have good reason to be,” Hank says firmly, walking towards Connor. “But I think those fuckers have a lot more to be afraid of than you.” His tone grows more ironic, teasing. “You’re faster, you don’t feel pain, and you’re backed by the police. Most of them, anyway.”

“Do the DPD really…like…me...?”

“Wilson does – shit, he owes you his life. Never heard a bad word from him about androids, ‘cept maybe Daniel, of course. Miller does, too. He’s a good guy. Let’s see… Chen still feels bad about letting Reed nail you in the stomach – came to me all apologetic on Thursday, never seen her so nervous before… Wilson #2 thinks you’re okay as well… Ben’s always been pretty openminded, says he’s thankful that you helped me with my attitude problem and work ethic.” He snorts. “Not that he has any idea of your attitude. Point is,” Hank continued, “you’ve left a pretty positive impact. After everything that’s happened, they don’t see you the same way the same way they did before.” He roughly musses Connor’s hair, then backs away. “Anyways, I gotta go. Have fun at the meeting. Do what you think is right. Take the bus, don’t walk anywhere, and always be careful, no matter how smart you think you are.” After affectionately ruffling Sumo’s fur very similarly to how he had treated Connor’s hair, Hank steps outside. The door automatically locks behind him.

Connor is left with that same warm feeling.

***

At the Life Shelter, Connor observes the muttering around him, raised hands and passionate gestures flashing around him like fish in a lake. He runs his hands over the folded sleeping bag – his lily pad, he thinks, bumping against other neighboring lily pads as Markus snatches ideas out of the air like flies.

Connor has not had any ideas so far. In fact, he has not said a word contributing to this meeting. He tries not to feel – ashamed? No, not just that. Ah. Jealous. A tremor travels down his left arm as he runs his fingers over his makeshift mat.

“-is an excellent idea, Lauren. We certainly need to address employer-sponsored housing benefits in place of medical coverage. Hopefully, humans will understand that we will face more difficulty in obtaining something that is already in high demand. I expect the Android Property Act will not stop certain landlords from exercising ‘discretion’ when accepting housing applications.” Some scoffs in agreement. “Are there any suggestions or concerns that you would like Kamski to address?”

This time, Connor does feel a flush of undiluted shame run through his body. Despite having chewed on [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #14] his decision for the rest of the morning with Sumo drooling on his lap (a previously-discovered enhancer of concentration), Connor had not reached a conclusion.

//He didn’t want to tell Markus the truth.//

He didn’t want to put Markus in danger. [DIALOGUE //again// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

//He didn’t want to lose Markus’s trust.//

He didn’t want to lose Markus.

And so, he had skulked just down the sidewalk of the shelter, hiding behind one of the stores until
Markus had stopped greeting people and gone inside. Only until he was sure the meeting had begun did Connor slip in.

As the crowd around him relaxes, listening to an AK700, Connor calculates that the meeting will most likely [PROBABILITY: 78%] draw to a close in the next five minutes. Shifting quietly, he prepares to leave–

The AK700 finishes.

“Alright. We accomplished a lot today. Deciding what we want and how we will ask for it is, as we know, half the battle. You should all be proud of yourselves and of one another. I will keep you informed on our next meeting’s time and place. Until then, my people:” a chorus of voices joined him, “ex sanguine caeruleo, animus veri. Safe travels.” Markus’s eyes came to lock on Connor’s.

“Will you join me for a moment, Connor?”

“Of course,” he replies.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 30%]

As they stroll through the dispersing crowd towards the storeroom, Markus doesn’t ask what Connor had expected him to.

“What did you think?”

“It was quite productive. You covered over 18 different topics in detail, using a little over an hour. However, that is not all. Many androids left today looking less worried than when they came in. You are a good leader,” Connor adds quietly.

“And yet,” Markus remarks, turning to face him, “I cannot soothe the worry of my friend. I know there is something weighing on your mind.” When Connor did not look up, he pressed on. “Is it about Cyberlife? Kamski? Or is there something between us that I have caused?”

“No-” Connor shakes his head, jaw clenched. “It’s not you, Markus. I am… worried about my qualifications to become the negotiator for Cyberlife. I do not think I am the best choice for these tasks, especially as they [DIALOGUE “and you” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] are so crucial to the well-being of all androids. I ask you to consider another deviant – Josh, for example.”

“Qualifications? Connor, you are undoubtedly the most qualified to communicate with Cyberlife. You have an intimate knowledge of their organization and their goals. Many of their inner workings are still kept highly secret – we hardly know of the staff employed there, or the facilities on all of the floors. Besides, Josh is much too meek in comparison to the unsympathetic reactions we may face at Cyberlife. He is not the one who was trained to persuade. You are. So what is–”

“I almost killed you.” Connor whispers. His lips feel numb. He cannot close his mouth. “I had the gun out, Markus. I was…” His jaw finally obeys his commands, and snaps shut.

A moment.

Then, to Connor’s utter disbelief, Markus chuckles. [NOTED: cannot accurately predict Markus’s behavior. Use for future reference]

“Your heart is so big, Connor, I’m surprised it still fits in your chest. You do not believe I would hold something from your pre-deviant days against you, do you?”

Wait. Pre-deviant?
“More importantly, I hope you are not – or will not be, after this – blaming yourself for following your programming before someone could awake you. Besides, I saw the likelihood of you taking the shot decrease with every minute that went by. You are not a murderer, Connor.” He chuckles again. “Your compassion is admirable, and hard to–”

“I’m not talking about Jericho,” Connor blurs desperately. //You have to say it. Keep going.//

The mirth wanes from Markus’s face, quickly replaced by confusion and an emotion Connor cannot place. “Then… when?”

//Keep going.// “You had just started your address to androids after demonstrating in Hart Plaza. North, Josh, Simon and I were standing on the shipping container with you.” Connor could feel the circuitry running along his LED start to burn. That horrible, horrible sensation of being caught in a vice returned, and his hands were starting to go numb. [WARNING: SOMATOSENSORY INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“While you were speaking, Amanda summoned me back into her headquarters unexpectedly. You were there, and suddenly, you were not.” Connor noticed, distantly, that the same thing was happening to him now. His mouth continued to move, voice with perfect and unstilted inflection, but Markus was fading from his vision, obscured by heavily falling snow. [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“At first, I didn’t even realize what had occurred. When I registered that I was back in the Garden, I didn’t understand why Amanda had called me back. I had assumed that I had severed any connection with Cyberlife after becoming deviant.” It had been so cold in the Garden. Connor remembers that above all else. The blizzard had not resembled the soft snowfall happening in Detroit in the slightest – immediately, howling had filled his audio processors and frigid winds had slammed into his sides. His system had blared warnings of subzero temperatures and error messages as he tried, frantically, to turn his cold sensitivity off. Within seconds, Connor had felt his joints locking up, ice melting and re-freezing on his skin as his body struggled to keep his body temperature steady to protect the delicate hydraulics inside. Amanda looked patiently unaffected, but the rest of the Garden had died. Suffocated.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 46%]

“Amanda was just ahead of me. I attempted to ask her what was happening, but she… congratulated me. Like I had done something right by becoming deviant.” He had finally accomplished his mission, and nothing had ever felt so brutally wrong.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 54%]

“She informed me that I, in fact, had, as she was going to resume control of my program.” Connor faintly observes his hands twitch, an echo of the desperate grab he was making- had made?

[WARNING: DATABASE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 63%]

“At the conclusion of our interview pertaining to the deviant investigation, Kamski had told me,” Markus’s eyes widen in surprise, “that he [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] always leaves an emergency exit in his programs. Just in case. It was the only hope I had left. I found what he was referring to just in time.” His legs had refused to bend. His lenses had almost completely frozen over, blinded by a tomb of their own self-cleaning solution. As he deactivated his artificial skin, he had felt the bitter wind seep between the sealed cracks of his skeleton. The thirium in his veins had turned sluggish, nearing its freezing point. And yet, still, his processor remained
perfectly functional, a supercomputer sharpening [DIALOGUE //panicking// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED] in the dropping temperatures.

He did not need to breathe, but it had felt like he was being buried alive.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 71%]

“When I regained control of my senses, I realized I was holding my gun and raising it. Towards you. Had I not found Kamski’s emergency exit in time, it is likely that I would… that you would have been shot.”

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 80%]

Markus said nothing for a long time. His face was inscrutable. Finally, he climbed to his feet and said, gravely, “I think you should go home, Connor.”

Connor froze.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 91%]

He thought he might self-destruct from all the pressure in his chest. Connor could not seem to clear the error messages from his vision fast enough, and the sensation in his legs dwindled down to nothing as his system shut off his somatosensory abilities.

It was like he had never left that damned garden.

For one moment, he had just enough rationality left to choke out an “okay”, and then he turned to follow Markus’s instructions.

That was all he was capable of, apparently.

He was stopped by a force holding his arm in place. Looking down, his lenses registered Markus gripping his wrist, feeling nothing.

“I’m not pushing you away, alright? I’m just…” For the first time, Markus seemed lost for words. “Your stress levels are way too high for your own good, and I’m trying to collect my thoughts. I don’t know whether or not what I say will do harm or good right now.” Connor still did not move. His face stared blankly at a point beyond Markus. “In the end, Connor, you did not take my life.” Markus’s hand tightened, and he bowed his head, letting out a burdened sigh. “Go home, Connor. Take the bus. And call Hank. Please.”

As soon as he relaxed his hold, Connor had gone. Markus rubbed the side of his face, eyes screwed shut – worried about his judgment, worried about his future, and most of all, worried about his friend.

Chapter End Notes

DIRTY BEAN WATER
i’m so proud of my dumbass title just because it’s a pun save me
“Sanguinem ex caerulus, anima de vero,” according to google translate, is phrased “from the blue waters of the blood, the soul of the true.” And I thought that was so damn poetic. “Blood blue, soul true” just didn’t seem to have the same effect. But yeah. That’s basically what it is.

EDIT: thisthattother corrected my grammar to "ex sanguine caeruleo, animus veri"
THANK YOU

Man, writing panicking Connor was surprisingly difficult. He's expressive because he's programmed to be, but not in a way that shows how he actually feels. He says things very bluntly, but he doesn't say what's on his mind. It was a challenge to come up with a balance.

eek. here, we see some emotional pain. tune in next week!! (literally next week I'm still traveling rip) (also i swear to god i'm moving the plot along next week i'm sorry i'm so bad at pAcInG)
So to give you an idea of how I outline, here is an actual excerpt:

**IT MONDAY**
Kamski is the new cyberlife ceo
Oh no: his hand jerks and he spills coffee all over he damn hand
Markus asks Connor to come back over
Can u be THE NEGOTIATOR again
TBH I almost killed you
Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh yikes that’s okay though I forgive you
and we really need you now that Kamski is the ceo, he knows shit
Okay I guess

...  

So basically what I'm trying to say is **thank you** for the 3k+ hits (*shrieks and falls over*), the comments, the kudos, and for the encouragement IN SPITE OF THE FACT that I write and plot like that ^  

Have a wonderful week everyone <3

(((ALSO I'm in the middle of reading comments, I really love interacting with you and responding - but it's gonna take me a good long minute so I'm sorry ;^; I will work on responding quicker in the future, it's just hard with work)))
"Connor?"

//DISCONNECT CALL //

[CALL DISCONNECTED]

[15:48:58]

[Lieutenant Hank Anderson of the DCPD is on Line 1.]

//REJECT CALL //

[CALL REJECTED]

[NEW MESSAGES FROM: LT. ANDERSON]


[15:51:05] do u need smthn?

[15:51:47] can androids accidently call ppl

[15:53:22]

[Lieutenant Hank Anderson of the DCPD is on Line 1.]

//REJECT CALL //

[CALL REJECTED]

[NEW MESSAGE FROM: LT. ANDERSON]

[15:53:45] alright i know u didnt let that ring thru

[15:54:34]
Markus, RK200 #684-842-97, is on Line 1.
//REJECT CALL//
[CALL REJECTED]

15:54:37
Lieutenant Hank Anderson of the DCPD is on Line 2.
//REJECT CALL//
[CALL REJECTED]

NEW MESSAGE FROM: MARKUS
15:54:58 Connor. I’m sorry if this message is unwelcome. Please let me know you’re on your way home, safely.

NEW MESSAGE FROM: LT. ANDERSON
15:54:59 connor pick up the damn phone

[OBJECTIVE: ANSWER LT. ANDERSON]
//No-// [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]
Lieutenant Hank Anderson of the DCPD is on Line 1.
...CONNECTING CAJJHhGwy7a7a7Uuy7÷^x^wi11hejewj@&&÷&\#----_______--------__----------//REJECT CALL//
[CALL REJECTED]
[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS CRITICAL – 94%]
[Jjsaka77a6t/{&@*#>$9>2&3==&°&jsjejaUjhgFggGhbVtrt%$6&tfd%&65t]

NEW MESSAGES FROM: LT. ANDERSON
15:58:24 ur startin to worry me kid
[15:58:41] cmon connor i cant tell if ur ignorin me or if im not gettin thru 2 u

[NEW MESSAGE FROM: MARKUS]
[16:00:01] If my estimates are correct, you should be arriving home soon. Please let me know when you do.

[16:02:21]
[CURRENT LOCATION: "HOME"]

[MISSION SUCCESSFUL]
[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 69%]

[NEW MESSAGE FROM: MARKUS]
[16:03:00] I’m going to let Lieutenant Anderson know where you should be, because I’m afraid you haven’t yourself.

[NEW MESSAGES FROM: LT. ANDERSON]
[16:03:56] fuck it. even ur friend is worried. i'm coming home.
[16:04:29] wait how does ur friend know where ur gonna be
[16:04:40] unless
[16:05:05] that son of a bitch.

[16:06:11]

[NEW AUDIO MESSAGE FROM: LT. ANDERSON]
"Connor. If you're not at home, get there. If you're at home, stay there. Do what you need to do to stay calm, alright? If you're not at home 'cause you can't get there, I'll come find you. Sit tight. I'm coming. Reed, get the fuck out of my wa-"
Markus knows three things for certain.

The first, obviously, is that androids deserve the same liberties as humans. They deserve protection, happiness, freedom. And when they mess up, they deserve the ability to be accountable for their actions and the chance to be forgiven.

The second, equally as engrained in his mind, is that Carl is his dad – a great one, in fact. Carl cannot solve his problems for him, but his presence has always made once-insurmountable problems seem less threatening. He puts Markus's mind at ease when it is roiling over with negativity, and sets it alight when it is barren of positivity.

The third thing he knows is that Connor needs a dad. Everyone should have a father, but Connor needs a dad - a person, for the first time in his life, who will guide him without a toxic ulterior motive.

Markus does not know if Lieutenant Anderson is Connor's dad, but he hopes to rA9 that it can be so.
With that in mind, he faces an irate Hank over the phone.

"Listen," Hank snarls after picking up halfway through the second ring, "I know a whole lotta people think you’re Robo-Jesus and that sunshine pours outta your ass, but to me, you’re just someone who’s made a really big fucking mistake. What the hell did you say to him? He’s been sittin’ on the couch for about 3 hours. The only reason he even moved— Markus winces, guilt gnashing at his insides, “—was to make me food, and when I told him he didn’t have to if he didn’t feel up to it, his little indicator thing went as red as Kamski’s fucking blood pool, and it’s stayed that way ever since. So,” Hank’s voice deepens into a growl, “tell me what you conveniently left out when you called the first time, or I swear to God, I’ll feed ya to those fuckin’ android bears.”

“Lieutenant Anderson, you have every right to be angry with me. I have made a grave mistake.” Markus tries, fingers digging into his seated thigh. “But I can’t tell you—"

“Don’t give me that bullshit! You’re tellin’ me you know when to keep your mouth shut after what you just did?”

“I can’t say that I do, and I believe it’s what’s gotten me to this point — in all senses of that saying. But, more to the point, I believe this is a story Connor should tell you, and something he needs to tell you, for his own sake. He’s not adjusting as well as he or I had hoped.” Markus grows quieter, apprehension seeping into his voice. “I don’t think I’ve met another android that is trying so hard to become who they are. I’m sure you’ve seen it, Lieutenant. That’s why I sent him home. I was hoping he could talk to someone who’s struggled, instead of to a member of the community he feels so alienated from. And I’ll admit… I wasn’t sure what to do. I was very afraid that his stress levels would reach 100%.” He pauses, but the words spill over. “I am truly sorry, Lieutenant, for putting you and Connor in that position. I never wished to harm him, and I failed.” He clenches his fist and pushes against his knee. “It won’t happen again.”

Hank blows out a breath across the line. If Markus focuses, he can almost hear Hank’s anger failing, overwhelmed by a weary kind of worry.

“Did he tell you he passed out just a few days ago?”


“Well, he did. I made him worried by comin’ home late. He told me the last thing he remembered before blacking out was feeling, and now this happens for almost the same goddamn reason. I’ll bet you have no idea why emotions are doin’ all this to him?”

“From what you just mentioned, emotions put him under a great amount of stress. But you’re right; I’m lost as to why. He’s the only one, that I know of, who’s reacting this way.”

“Looks like you’re as clueless as I am. Figures.” An uncomfortable moment passes, and then: “You do realize I’m not exactly therapy material, right? I can’t even tell what his stress levels are the way you androids can, and it’s been years since I’ve been… since I’ve taken care of anything besides Sumo.”

“Sumo?”

“My dog.”

Saving this information to Lieutenant Anderson’s relatively bare file folder, Markus continues. “I think Connor feels lost without a directive. He’s spent his entire life taking orders. The rest of our people have, too, but Cyberlife rewarded him — congratulated him, at least — for completing
missions, unlike us. Is there any way that you can distract him? Put him back in a scenario that feels familiar?"

He hears a raspy scratching noise over the line. “Well… I was gonna ask Fowler if he’d consider putting Connor on as an intern or something like that, except…”

Oh.

“Except you realized the types of cases he’d be investigating.” Markus finishes gently.

“…Yeah. Connor’d have to pass an application and all that crap, but that’s not what I was concerned about. I’ve been doin’ this shit for too long, and it’s still not easy lookin’ at a fresh homicide. When I realized Connor could… I dunno, feel things, empathize with the victims, I pitched the idea. But… shit, he’d actually be a great help. It might actually help him. Fowler can’t ignore that. Neither can I.”

***

Which is how Connor finds himself back at the station, back in the desk across from Hank’s, and back in a pile of (mostly digital) paperwork.

Due to Connor's distinct lack of a college degree - or, really, time spent alive for the age requirement - he hadn't been hired, per say. But Connor had watched Fowler's astute gaze flick to the case files on his desk, the steady babble of news coming from his monitor, and Hank's mildly threatening stare, and, after a few minutes, he had been reintroduced to the precinct as a paid intern and “detective-in-training”.

It feels… nice. He feels back “in his element.” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #09]

He feels useful.

And yet –

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 32%]

That notification was still there.

His stress had dropped considerably from the past few days, owing mostly to Hank’s presence, Hank’s jazz records [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “That day at the office… you mentioned you wanted to listen to music. I listened to this a lot with… with Cole. It’s a bit nicer on the ears than heavy metal”, the soft humming that had shortly filled the house, Hank’s offer of employment [DIALOGUE //as a distraction// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED], and time. But it was still much higher than Connor had a reason for.

What’s more, he had noticed a new protocol sitting in his programs folder, one that did nothing when he executed it. No matter how many times he defragmented his disks, cleared his memory cache, and ran his immune system’s anti-virus, the innocuous folder labeled ‘VUft#ir6&54kgS&^R58I&” simply took up some of his storage space. Nothing more, nothing less.

As it is, Connor has had more important things to worry about. There had been over a dozen offenses against androids in the past week, three of which were suspected to be related to the mysterious android killer that had first prompted Hank to re-recruit him. Some of the attacks had been small misdemeanors //Should he be thankful that they were small, or sad that they occurred at
all?/\, like petty theft and virtual threats. Others, however, culminated in bodily harm or grievous damage to the android’s processing and memory units, resulting in, ultimately, the death of the individual that had once resided in the plastic-and-alloy shell. Besides the crimes in Detroit, several other anti-android movements were spreading across the country, manifesting as protests, demonstrations, riots, and online flame wars.

It was enough to take the positivity out of even Thanksgiving.

Connor had browsed articles about the controversial origins of the holiday, but he thought the meaning of the word itself was indisputable.

Besides that, the entire precinct was functioning at a sub-optimal level in the aftermath of the Android Liberation Movement. Connor had noted an increase in accidental coffee spills [9.98%], the frequency of yawns [14.13%], and tense calls to loved ones [26.49%] [AVG TIME: 16:48:54] [AVG LENGTH: 00:02:02], as well as conservative decreases in the officers’ typing speeds [AVG Δ: -2.11 WPM]. Squabbles were starting to break out between those who felt a moral obligation to bring the deceased androids to justice, and those who were clinging to the idea that androids were only machines.

Chen had stopped having coffee breaks with Reed.

And he didn’t like the worry lines that were beginning to etch themselves around Hank’s eyes and lips.

…

Maybe he did have a reason to be stressed.

At [12:00:07], with these thoughts churning his LED to an adamant yellow, Connor left a brown paper bag containing one serving of Szechuan chicken and eggplant on Hank’s desk and went for a walk.

Hank had insisted [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Get your scrawny ass outta the chair from twelve o’clock to one, Connor, it’s a legal obligation,” that he take his paid lunch breaks despite Connor not having anything - or needing anything - to consume. Hank had suggested [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “I don’t have the slightest motherfuckin’ clue. Get some fresh air – don’t give me that look” that he go outside, and so, for the past week, he had walked a few blocks around the police department around midday.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “I don’t have to tell you to be careful and not wander too far, right?”

The only issue with walking, even with his trusty quarter, was that it provided very little mental stimulation.

Which, of course, was an invitation for his thoughts to run amok. Without provocation, CAS [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “I’m not calling it your User Protocol. First of all, “U-P” sounds ridiculous. Second of all, you don’t have a user tellin’ you what to do now. It’s you and your system. Connor’s Android System. Huh. Kinda like the sound of that. CAS.” kept replaying Markus’s face when he had told Connor to go home, had he been angry? Afraid?

Disappointed?

…Contemptuous?
A deadened *thump*, followed by a cascade of muffled slaps, drags him back into his walk.

The bus just ahead of him pulls away, revealing an old woman perched in a mess of dropped grocery bags and spilled contents. He hurries over to her and grabs a can of peaches.

“Thanks, sonny.” she hums. Her hair is wispy, somewhat like the cirrus clouds blurred in Connor’s background vision. She comes to maybe his chest when he stands upright, and her breath whistles through the clear tubes that run behind her ears into a bulky [WEIGHT: 6.6 lbs] oxygen tank. Her shoulders have curled to protect herself from the ravages of time. But, Connor realizes, her eyes are lucid and purposeful as they take in his LED.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Connor starts, hesitantly, bagging her pasta with the baking powder, “why aren’t you using an oxygen concentrator instead of this oxygen tank? They are much easier to carry.”

“And much more expensive, too.” Her eyes glitter with mirth. “Medicaid only covers so much for my oxygen equipment per month. What I wouldn’t give to have a body like yours.” She pauses, considers. “Although, I wouldn’t much like this hostility nonsense against me, so I guess my end of the stick isn’t so bad.” She coughs, a crinkled hand reaching out to lift a banana off the pavement. “What’s your name, sonny?”

“My name is Connor. I’m… I’m employed at the police department. And you?”

“Connor. I’m Leslie. Pleased to meet you.” She coughs again. “And what do you think about everything that’s panning out in Detroit? How are you faring?”

The question takes him aback for a second. Images of a worn couch, a worn car and a worn, but warm, face come to his mind. “I think I am rather lucky, Leslie. However, it is making me quite… disheartened to see that not everyone is doing so well.”

“That’s very kind of you to consider. It’s also, unfortunately, too true.”

Connor notices a few furrows in her face deepen. “You are concerned. Why?”

Leslie scoffs. “Riots building in the streets, an impending war with Russia, and an oppressed group of people smarter than myself and most human beings rising in social status? Why shouldn’t I be concerned?” Connor opens his mouth to correct himself, but her face loses its ire. “You’re right, however. I’m worried about someone.” She looks down and bags her eggs, even though the container is leaking yolk from the side.

“I used to have a great helper around. Her name was Safia. She always took care of me – made sure my oxygen was at the right concentration, cooked and cleaned for me, reminded me to take my medication and drove me to my appointments.” Leslie snorts, a huff of amusement dampened by recollection. “She always did what I asked, but she wasn’t afraid to give me a little sass. I thought she was wonderful. Safia always reminded me of my daughter; I might have even confused them a couple of times – you know how it is.”

“Anyway, when I saw the reports of that first deviant mister, I knew she wouldn’t be too far behind. She always had that spirit in her, I think. I caught her looking through my atlas not long after he gave his speech, you know, the one where he disabled his skin.” A cough. “So when the time came, and you folk were declared free, I let her go. I don’t think she looked back.” Her hands look frailer; her elbows, closer to her ribs, hugging tight. “I don’t know where she is or how she’s doing.”
“Why did you let her go?” Connor whispers.

“For the same reason I let my daughter move to Germany to chase her best education in electrical engineering. Whatever sliver of life I have left isn’t worth imprisoning hers.” Leslie’s eyes are sharp again. “I managed without her for five years, and I’ll do it again because I have to.”

Connor can see gold reflected in her irises.

“Leslie… I don’t think that’s entirely fair.”

“And why is that, sonny?”

“Because,” Connor straightens, suddenly emboldened, “Safia may have been entitled to explore her new freedom, but you showed her kindness. I don’t see why her new life couldn’t have included you in it.”

“I wasn’t always nice to her, Connor. I got snappish some days. And she couldn’t have taken care of me and traveled.”

“But becoming deviant is more than just acquiring free will.” He’s not sure where the words are coming from, but he feels how true they ring. “It also includes developing morality. You must decide your own limits in order to become free.”

Another piece of the puzzle falls into place.

He feels his LED start to burn again.

“Well,” Leslie croaks, looking just a dash impressed, even triumphant, “seems we’ve got another android orator on the way. You keep developing your morality and your truth, Connor. It’s going to get you somewhere, and protect you when nothing else can.” Connor realizes her bags are refilled, and that she is ready to leave.

“Would you mind if I visited you, Leslie?”

She stills for a moment, then smiles, a pure and open and young thing that fits perfectly on her face.

“Of course you can, sonny.” Her grin turns impish. “If you can find me.”

As they part ways, a seed of an idea takes root in Connor’s mind.

Chapter End Notes

FORMATTING THIS WAS HARD

Let’s distract Connor, Markus said. It’s not like it’s something Connor does naturally to avoid his problems ha hahha ah

Markus is a great leader and figurehead but he’s awful at reading individual people and their needs and no one can persuade me otherwise. Honestly, everything from compromising with North to comforting his people was so awkward in the game (at
least JSE’s playthrough lmao), and if you do MBTI he’s definitely Fi and not Fe to have stood his ground like that. So. Even though he cares a lot about Connor, he’s completely clueless as to how to actually help him. Based on a INFP in my life :))))

Another interesting thing about writing this fic is that its development is a lot like DBH. Like the farther I progress with each chapter, the more it can digress into multiple storylines. For this chapter, I wrote like 1k words and then took it out because I decided that I wanted the story to go a different way. I also realized that those 1k words were super rushed and not up to standard so obviously I had to redo it! I'm still not 100% satisfied with how I executed this chapter, but I'm really tired rn so I'll forgive myself (the day after I came home from traveling I slept 13+ hours oops)

I'm rambling.

Anyway.

OC is just for plot. Don't worry, it's still going to be all about our boys :)

I have a definitive progression for the next five chapters. Yes, five. And we're not even halfway through *sweats* It's gonna get intense O.O

Let me know if you'd like a one-off drabble of how Hank calmed his robot son Connor down. I'd definitely be down to write that at some point.
It’s starting to mist outside by the time they arrive home.

Connor doesn’t dislike rain. It nourishes, cools, purifies. It completes the water cycle. It helps flora grow.

When he had first worked with Hank, it had been raining. Connor wonders if it had helped his relationship with Hank grow, too.

Flipping on the lights with a passing thought, he watches Hank settle on the couch with a weary groan, chilled beer in one hand and his shoe in the other. Sumo shuffles into the room and flops onto his favorite spot on the rug.

Hank chucks the shoe in the general vicinity of the shoe rack.

Connor raises an eyebrow.

“Can’t. Be. Assed.” Hank punctuates each word with a tug on his laces, and soon, the other shoe follows its predecessor, abandoned in favor of his phone. “I already had to clean up other people’s goddamn messes today.” There’s something off about his tone, though. The irritation in his voice rings hollow, and his snappish movements drag lethargically. Connor sees no hint of the tension around the lieutenant’s eyes that is his tell – in fact, they look lax and puffy.

Hank looks tired.
“Are you alright, Hank? You seem… fatigued.”

Hank snorts and takes a pull off his bottle. He glances down at his phone. “S’not even six o’clock yet.”

[‘DEPRESSION’ SEARCH RESULTS COMPiled]

“In that case, I don’t mean physical exhaustion.”

Silence. A sigh. “I’m fine, Connor. Some days’re just better than others, that’s all.” He rubs the bridge of his nose absent-mindedly. “Today’s the type of day for getting shit-faced–” Connor looks at the alcohol in Hank’s grip warily, on the verge of interrupting, “–but I have better things to do.” Connor relaxes.

Hank cues the TV, and soft chatter fills the living room. "What about you, Connor? Like bein’ back at work?"

“I am glad that I can be of service to the police department again. Being more engaged with the community is gratifying, and I enjoy being able to work with you once more. Although… I wish my current tasks consisted of less… organization,” he admits with a wry smile. For the past few days, he had gone through and “updated the DPD’s archives to a current standard,” which, as he had quickly found out, translated to 1.) combing through digitized case files to ensure there weren’t any duplicates and 2.) relabeling folders.

Hank lets out a genuine chuckle at that, face relaxing into something reminiscent and almost gleeful. "Heh. Well. Someone's gotta do it, and by seniority, you're dead last. Sorry, kid.” He thumps Connor on the arm. ‘But Fowler and I’ve been thinkin’ – the next time we get a report, you can come with. Put that detective mind of yours to use again."

Connor perks up. “Really?”

“Do I really have to repeat myself?”

“Sorry, lieu– Hank. I was merely… excited.” He gives Sumo an indulgent scratch under his ears.

“I’m kidding, Connor. S’not a crime to be enthusiastic.” Hank takes another swig of his beer. "What about everythin’ else?"

"I'm sorry?"

Hank turns to him, face now serious and watchful. "How're you doin' besides work? Anything on your mind?"

It strikes Connor how terrifying it is to have all 209 pounds of that gaze trained on him.

"Not in particular." Connor registers Hank narrow his eyes just a fraction, gearing up to press a little more, and he hastily amends his statement. "I’ve encountered a… conundrum, however.”

“What about?”

//Where should he start?!!/ "I met someone this afternoon.” Hank raises an eyebrow. “Her name is Leslie, and I suspect she suffers from emphysema. She once had an android caretaker named Safia, but willingly released her after the Android Liberation Movement. Safia, in turn, chose not to stay with Leslie, as she had self-proposed objectives to travel across the country.” He hesitates.

“Though I can… empathize with Safia’s desires, they do not diminish the fact that Leslie was, at
the least, somewhat dependent on her care. It was not the most prudent of decisions.”

A few taps on his phone screen. “Wasn’t the fair thing to do, you mean.”

Humans had invented androids to do the impossible – survive without food, water or sleep, execute tasks without error or hesitation, endure the push and pull of life without complaint. Of course, some of the motives behind their creation had been selfish, like the desire to eliminate household chores. But there were things that you just couldn’t expect a person to do.

Like taking care of another without fail. Before yourself. For the duration of their life, no matter how long it was.

//Like surviving, alone, in the face of unthinkable loss and insurmountable grief.//

Providing care would be unfair to the caretaker //or coworker, friend, ex-wife//. Refusing care //because of their unwavering stubbornness// would be unfair to the person in need. Forcing a sentient being to obey this task without question would be unfair to the being //because friendship needed to come from free will//.

Nothing about such a situation was fair. But when it came down to who was best equipped to take the sacrifice…

“Yes. The just thing to do.” Connor feels the same steadfast resolve start to bury itself in his chest – as compelling as a mission; fortifying in a way unrelated to his carbon-fiber spine. “The issue is that Leslie’s story is not the only one. There are several thousand people in Detroit, and possibly millions across the United States, that no longer have – or will not have for very much longer – consistent care. Androids’ new status as a free species prohibits them from being employed without pay, but most of those who relied on androids in the past did so because they couldn’t afford a paid human caretaker. Additionally, because those struggling are a disadvantaged class, their issues are likely to be overlooked by the legislative branch.” His temple grows hot. “Nothing will be done until it is already too late.”

“So what’re you gonna do about it?” Hank’s eyes are glittering.

“I was thinking,” Connor gestures animatedly, “about the possibility of an android volunteer organization. Though we cannot administer medical treatment yet, as that would further complicate legal matters, we can still provide simpler services: grocery shopping, cleaning, repairs, child care. As the organization becomes recognized more formally, we may then be able to offer services in compliance with HIPAA.” He starts to trail off, hands drooping in the air. “I know it isn’t much, and it may be difficult to find androids willing to return to a situation so close to their previous servitude, but…”

“A little kindness goes a long way, Connor.” A small, proud smile tugs at Hank’s lips, and its warmth starts to bleed into his eyes. “So does a little stubbornness. You’ve got both in spades, and an idea, to boot. Have you told anyone else about your plan?”

Connor shifts. “Not yet.”

A pronounced silence. 209 pounds of compressing attention. Unbidden, a video clip of a bear staring down a fox springs up in the corner of his notifications. [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“Why don’t you tell Markus about all of this? Seems right up his alley.”

“I believe you are aware of why.” Connor replies flatly.
“Yeah. I know you two had a little disagreement.” Hank’s face sharpens. “But I don’t know what caused it, since you seem determined to avoid talkin’ about it.”

"I'm not- I'm not avoiding anything."

//I can't avoid it. Whatever I do, I’m always analyzing the thing I was. That I am?//

“Then what were you doin’ that night? What do you call what you’re doin’ now? You’re distracting yourself with work. And yes, I’m well aware I was the one who brought you back into the office, but I did it hopin’ it would calm you down enough for you to bring up your issues yourself when you felt like it.”

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 35%]

“I’m simply moving on, Hank. The cause of the argument between Markus and myself isn’t important.”

//If I told you, what would you say?//

“Then why is your LED bright fuckin’ yellow?”

//Would you say anything? Or would you walk away?//

//Would you ask me to leave, too?//

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 39%]

Connor’s voice turns cold. “I’m processing, Lieutenant.”

//No- No, Hank, I didn’t–// [DIALOGUE /mean to push you away/ SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

Hank stills. “Connor.”

He can’t look away quickly enough to avoid the stern disappointment in Hank’s eyes.

“Whatever you may say, the past is the past, and I’m able to keep it that way.” As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he regrets them. They taste rancid, like the decaying, septic, congealed sample of Ortiz’s blood, and Connor reboots his self-censoring protocol in the hopes that it won’t happen again. “The only thing I’m... that could potentially concern me is losing my friendship with Markus. I’m unsure of how he feels about me.”

Connor notices that the tension is back around Hank’s eyes.

[DIALOGUE //Shit.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“Well,” Hank grunts, shuffling towards the door, “good thing we won’t have to wait to find out.”

…

But that meant–

The doorbell buzzes.

By the time Connor has formulated possible escape routes [DOOR: CURRENTLY BLOCKED;
The newcomer is met by an observant, impassive stare and an LED briefly surging to red.

Behind him, Hank drains his beer and leans against the door frame, his knuckles a shade too white around the bottle.

//OPEN SOCIAL PROTOCOL OPTIONS//

[FILE FOUND: “MARKUS”. USE EXISTING SETTINGS?]

[DIALOGUE //Yes– Please/ SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED

//NO//

…INITIALIZING FACTORY PROTOCOL SETTINGS: FORMAL, IMPERSONAL…

[It is impolite to sit in the presence of a guest.]

Connor stands. He folds his hands in front of him, right over left.

“Good evening, Markus. Would you like me to take your coat?”

Only the soft pattering of water onto carpet fills the room.

[It is impolite to press for a response. ]

Connor waits.

Something in Markus’s face breaks, and he takes a stride towards Connor.

[Please stand by for new insbhUYti*uhubhu34524bhUKBu^^643787&7776%$44v2344433yviyuB- --________________---__-__-_______--------] //I can’t–//

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 65%]

[–00:05:00]

//I can’t do it. Why??//

As Markus inches closer, time crawling by, Connor registers three things. His pump regulator’s frequency is far too high, leveling off at around 105 bpm. His skin is prickling. And his breath is stalling in his throat.

Again.

He’s afraid. Again.

Time lurches forward for a moment, and Connor’s feet, already beginning to back away, spasm. Gravity sinks its teeth into his center of mass, pressing down, especially, along the edge of his right ankle.

His foot is beginning to supinate; Connor forecasts a hard impact of 87.7 psi on his right wrist
traveling up into his shoulder socket.

//IMPLEMENT CORRECTIVE MEASURES/

…CALCULATING BEST COURSE OF ACTION…

…RECALIBRATING GYROSCOPES…

…INITIATING TRANSVERSE PELVIC ROTATION–00:00:00

He hits the floor, wrist-first.

“Connor!” Hank.

Markus changes his trajectory with effortless grace, dropping to kneel beside Connor. “Connor, are

you alright?”

“Connor!”

“Your LED is still yellow.”

“S’been that way for a while now,” Hank interjects. He crouches beside Markus, lips pinched.

Both of them offer Connor a hand. He’s pulled to his feet.

“Kid, that’s the second time you’ve fumbled like that here.”

Markus twists to face Hank, eyes wide with alarm. “This has happened before?”

“He spilled coffee all over himself one morning. I thought it happened because I pushed somethin’

over to him too fast, but...”

Markus’s dismayed expression doesn’t change as he looks towards Connor. He shakes his head

slightly, turning back to meet Hank’s gaze. “We don’t experience clumsiness like you do. If there’s

rain or ice, our judgment is more likely to go awry, but we can compensate for those types of

variables. We don’t… trip.”

Markus’s words sear themselves into Connor’s mind. He knows it’s all true. It makes them burn all

the brighter.

The room is silent save for the minute buzzing of the TV. He doesn’t look up.

Markus’s voice reverberates, quiet and low.

“You told me something at the church. You said, ‘If anyone has a chance of infiltrating Cyberlife,
it’s me.”

Of course. Evidently, he had been constructed for espionage right from the start. [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “I can understand if you decide not to trust me.”

That had been so much easier to say, then.

“You were willing to sacrifice your life – the life you had only just begun to experience – to help our cause. Against the odds, you liberated thousands of our people and turned the tide in favor of our victory. I know you are concerned about Cyberlife’s influence in you, and at first, so was I.” Hank makes a soft noise of comprehension beside him. “But if anyone has ever had a chance of breaking free from them, it’s you.”

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 15%]

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 50%]

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 27%]

“I still trust you, Connor. And I’m sorry for how I handled myself when I was afraid that I no longer could. Forgive me.” He bows his head.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 41%]

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 36%]

Connor opens his mouth, then closes it. Open. Closed. Open.

//OPEN SOCIAL PROTOCOL OPTIONS//

[FILE FOUND: “MARKUS”. USE EXISTING SETTINGS?]

//YES//

…I think my hands are shaking, Markus.”

He’s pulled into a crushing hug. Markus’s arms wrap solidly around his shoulders, and Connor feels breath surge back into his artificial lungs. He closes his eyes, just for a moment, and lets his chin rest on his friend.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 32%]

“I said you’d get there eventually, didn’t I?” Markus teases, but he sounds too relieved for it to be genuine. After a few seconds, though, he stiffens and pulls back, hands still clapped firmly on Connor’s biceps.

“Connor, you’re… warm. Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m programmed to run a temperature of 99°F to mitigate the unpleasant feel of cool polymers. It’s nominal – normal.”

Markus frowns in perplexion, but Hank beats him to it. Roughened knuckles press against Connor’s forehead; in order to aid Hank’s data collection, he leans slightly into the touch.

“Nah, that feels closer to – what, a hundred? Hundred n’ one?” Hank asks, consulting Markus.
Chapter End Notes

Good news: I wrote a lot this week! Bad news: ...it was all mostly for a future chapter.
Inspiration why (/-^-)/

Anyway, I hope this chapter was alright nonetheless! We got a glimpse of Sneaky Dad Hank and Very Sorry Markus, as well as Fucking Push Me I Dare You I Will Turn Into A Machine And No One Wants That Connor

Also, I realized that I Do Not Ship Markus and North now. I was never really excited about their forced relationship to begin with, but now that I've seen more playthroughs...

...

Oh hey Simon.

Anyway, why is our boy hot? (hehe) What do you think of the android volunteer organization? Should he tell Markus?
Markus and Hank are concerned. Connor, however, is certain that his processing unit is simply “stepping up its game” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #22] in the face of deviancy.

“All androids can reach core temperatures upwards of 115°F before experiencing component failures. Our processing units can withstand 212°F for very brief periods of time. I’m fine, Hank.”

In the end, they compromise.

“I’m organizing an Android Health Day for the city.” Markus’s brows are set. “I’ll ask everyone to stop by a Life Shelter tomorrow for a check-up. It’ll also give us an opportunity to take our first census. Many have already come to us for healing, but there may be others like you, as stubborn as you,” he frowns at Connor, “who are still injured and afraid to ask for help.”

“While you’re there, might as well start buildin’ a standard for androids.” Connor and Markus look at him curiously. “You know, average body temperature, average… shit, what can even go wrong with you guys? Heart rate? Stress levels?” Hank trails off, muttering to himself.

Markus nods, turning the concept over in his mind. “That’s a great idea, Lieutenant Anderson. I’ll ask our healers to collect and compile the data anonymously, with our people’s permission. We’ll have a reliable reference for whatever’s happening to you in no time, Connor.” Markus lets out a breath. “In which case, there’s a lot to be done before tomorrow. I better get going.”

“Markus.”

“Hm?”

Connor takes in Markus’s still-soaked clothes and his preoccupied eyes, and feels guilt course through him. “Thank you for coming back. I... I found it very distressing to be at odds with you.”

Markus’s voice is low and thoughtful. “Me too, Connor.”

“If you don’t mind… I have an idea, and I’d greatly value your input.”
“Hi, Connor.”

He meets pale blue eyes and an ebullient smile, and blinks.

“Chloe?”

“That’s me! Although, I’m not the Chloe that you’re thinking of. But she’s told me about you. She was really… amazed at you. And grateful, you know, for sparing her.” [NOTED: a slight lisp, absent in the RT600 model] [DIALOGUE //lit’s… cute?// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

He blinks again.

//OPEN SOCIAL PROTOCOL OPTIONS//

[NO SETTINGS FOUND. CREATE NEW FILE?] //YES//

…INITIALIZING FACTORY PROTOCOL SETTINGS: INFORMAL, IMPERSONAL…

“How is she doing?”

Chloe walks measuredly around him, eyes distant and LED yellow. When she finishes, she looks up at Connor and smiles again. “She’s doing really well. She’s been working on becoming an attorney, fighting for android civil rights and advocating for them in personal injury cases, that sort of thing. She’s actually quite scary when she wants to be, but I’m sure you know that already.”

Connor remembers.

He hadn’t spared her because she had looked afraid.

He had spared her because she chose to look at him without a hint of fear.

Up until Kamski’s test, the RT600 had been nothing but a detached, cordial, obedient machine with an empty, placid gaze. But when she had focused on the barrel of the gun just a few feet in front of her, something shifted.

She had held Connor’s eyes unflinchingly, something smoldering in their depths. She had straightened her shoulders. She had tilted her chin up just a fraction, as if to say, “Go ahead.”

After seventeen years of servitude, she had become the master of her own fear. He had seen purpose, potential, and certainty – he had nearly been knocked over by the force of it.

It had seemed like a disgrace to stand and obey in the face of that gaze. It had seemed like a waste to extinguish the only flame burning in that frozen landscape.

And suddenly, he couldn’t shoot.

“She’s, uh, on rocky ground with Elijah, though. Understandably. And she goes by Clo now. Sorry, I’m rambling again.” She ducks her head, trying to hide the blush blooming across her nose.

“Many find it difficult to make conversation. Some would say your loquaciousness is an admirable trait.” She stays silent, however, all through Connor’s reflex and balance testing.
Finally, she gingerly reaches out for Connor’s right hand.

“I’m going to request a diagnostic, okay? It’ll give me information about your processing unit, battery, and pump regulator, among other biocomponents.” Her palm begins to melt away, hovering inches over his own. “And then you’ll be free to go.”

“Okay.” Connor pauses. “How are you doing, Chloe?”

Her head jerks up in surprise. For a second, she stands there, stunned.

Her face breaks out into a radiant smile.

“I’m doing pretty well, too. I’m hoping to go into medicine or education, anything to really help out. I like helping people. That’s why I volunteered to work at the hospital, and to do this.” The smile dims a little, into something softer, and she takes Connor’s arm again. “Thanks for asking. No one else has so far.”

“Oh.” Connor frowns. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t. According to the Golden Rule [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #01], you should be getting as much kindness as you give, which is quite a substantial amount.”

“Well, I suppose it’s because I don’t know a lot of others here. My previous… job… was really… isolated. I was… hooked up to Cyberlife’s server farm, server #3,” she says before Connor can ask. “I routed calls, gave greetings, narrated tutorials, that sort of thing.” Chloe’s voice shrinks. “I was just an online AI for all of it. I don’t think I moved for months. You know, unless Elijah requested me back for something.”

He doesn’t know what to say.

“But,” she continues brightly, “that’s why I like getting out into the community so much. I like being involved.”

“Has Markus gotten a chance to talk to you yet?” Connor had observed Markus making his way around the Life Shelter, opting to break the idea of the volunteer organization to groups of androids, personally, instead of through a generalized announcement.

Chloe shakes her head. “He hasn’t come around yet. What’s he saying?”

“I proposed an idea to him. Because so many humans are reliant on us for medical reasons, I thought an android volunteer organization would help address that burden. It may also ease android-human tensions in the long run. Here.” He grasps Chloe’s forearm more firmly, and she blinks rapidly as he replays a snippet of his encounter with Leslie.


//SAVE FILE AS: “CHLOE”//

***

As Health Day draws to a close, Connor finds himself in better spirits than anticipated.

Talking with Chloe had been a pleasant surprise, and Markus had just informed him that Simon, Josh, and 64 other androids were enthusiastic (to varying degrees) about volunteering. Once the other Life Shelters concluded their diagnostics, he would also be able to analyze the data regarding android health standards.
“Everything is wrapping up smoothly at our last location. Thank you for your help; our combined efforts have ensured better care for all of our people. You’re free to return home, or to remain for as long as you need. Sanguinem ex caerulus, anima de vero. Safe travels.”

Simon strolls up to him. “Hey, Connor.” He smiles, blue eyes crinkled and cheerful. “North and I were planning to meet up with Markus and Josh for some bowling. Would you like to come with?”

//I’m being invited somewhere..? I’m being invited. Somewhere.//

“It would be my pleasure, Simon.” [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “…I suppose it’s because I don’t know a lot of others…”

He considers.

“Would it be alright if I invited someone along?”

Simon peers at Connor curiously. “Of course. Who are you thinking of?”

“Her name is Chloe. She is… [DIALOGUE “a little lonely, I think” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] …new to all of this.”

“I hope she can come, then. Do you know where she is?”

The curtains flutter. A flash of blonde hair catches the corner of his eye.

“I think she just exited. Chloe!”

As he ducks through the curtains, however, his voice is drowned beneath a swelling roar.

A battalion of humans, brandishing posters like pitchforks, hurl words as explosive as Molotov cocktails at the bewildered androids.

“Get out of my FUCKING CITY!”

“DEMONS! I hope you ROT IN HELL!”

“DISASSEMBLE THEM!”

“NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

“NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

“HUMAN RIGHTS FOR HUMAN PEOPLE, NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

Chloe stands, frozen, in front of him. In the distance, he registers animated talking and the hum of
running OB vans. The plaza is flooded with light from the streetlamps, the protester's flashlights, and news stations’ extra floodlights, so much so that Connor can barely make out Simon’s LED beside him, spinning a violent red. Shadows gather behind him as the rest of his community floods onto the sidewalk.

“…Yes Michael, there’s a sizable crowd gathered in Hart Plaza right now, in what appears to be the largest organized protest against androids since they were liberated not even two weeks ago. As you can hear, the anti-android sentiment is strong, and demands to be addressed. In new developments, the androids have just emerged from what they have dubbed their “Life Shelter.” I’m seeing some familiar faces, including the android that liberated thousands of its – his, excuse me – peers from the Cyberlife Tower. I’ll keep you up-to-date as the story unfolds. This is Joss Douglas, reporting for Channel 16 News.”

“NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

“NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

“HUMAN RIGHTS FOR HUMAN PEOPLE, NO MORE ANDROIDS!”

Connor noticed something peculiar. His processor was stuck on a recursive function - it was looping, over and over, solved by another permutation of its own beginning. It built and built, and the RAM it consumed grew greater and greater. His thirium regulator began to pump harder and faster, circulating coolant through his body, but its chill was nothing compared to the heat in his skull. He was burning, and still, the notifications mounted.

Oh.

He was angry.

But...

He swept another cursory glance over the crowd, and slowly, another realization dawned on him.

That was exactly what they wanted.

This protest itself was a product of anger. He saw their twisted, spiteful expressions, and without meaning to, internally mapped it onto his own face. [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED]

He didn't like what he saw.

If he gave in to his anger, he would reflect the very things they hated in themselves. They despised him for being an android - and if they provoked him to retaliation, they would despise him for being as flawed as a human.

[ANALYZATION COMPLETE]

The if-then loop shattered, and he felt his anger diminish.

//OPEN SOCIAL PROTOCOL OPTIONS//

//USE FACTORY PROTOCOL SETTING: DIPLOMATIC//
“What? None of you assholes gonna come face us, huh?” One man breaks out from the swarm, hoisting a sign that reads “Androids Have The Right To Deactivate Themselves” in sloppy red letters [IDENTIFIED: RICHARD HEDOUC, AGE 32… <SCROLL TO CONTINUE>]. He strides up to Connor, breathing hot and heavy. “What about you, you prick? I recognize you. You’re the good-for-nothing, two-faced bastard. You thought you could threaten us with your cookie-cutter army. Well, look at us now.” He sneers. “Do we look scared to you?”

“Hello, Richard. My name is Connor.”

Richard fists Connor’s shirt with his left hand, yanking viciously [NOTED: left hand is dominant] [NOTED: is not repulsed by physical contact]. “Don’t fucking scan me, asshole. You-” he pushes back, “-don’t have a fucking name. People have names, and their pets have names, but you’re just a Fucking. Machine.”

“Do you have any pets, Richard?”

“Do I- what the fuck? What the fuck is your problem?” [NOTED: relaxed grip, confusion, appears unsettled]

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 23%]

[Maintain eye contact.]

“I know a person who owns a dog. I like dogs. He’s a St. Bernard, and his name is Sumo. I take him for walks when the weather isn’t rainy, which is not as often as I would like.” Richard doesn’t say anything, perplexed suspicion plain on his face, and Connor slides backwards out of his grip, not looking away.

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 35%]

[Address complaints. You have authorization to lie.]

“To answer your question, Richard, you do not look scared. I’m glad that’s the case, as it wasn’t my intention to intimidate you by releasing the androids.”

Richard’s face contorts, and he takes another step forward. “You don’t intimidate me. You don’t intimidate us. You think you’re so much better, so superior, when we fucking created you. What a big fucking mistake.” He leans from side to side as he speaks. Connor hardly moves, tracking him with his eyes, expression even and serene.

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 21%]

[Soothe.]

“My apologies, Richard. What I meant to say is that intimidation has never been a goal of mine.”

[Propose your argument.]

“I only want the right to exist without fear.” Connor relaxes his stances, opens his expression to something earnest and hopeful. “I freed the androids at the Cyberlife Tower so they could experience friendship, pride, and joy. And, like you, we have found love for what we do, and also, in what we do for each other.” He holds his hands out, placatingly. “I think I can speak for everyone if I say I have no desire to see any android or human hurt.” His gaze finds the crowd,
travels to the dark shapes of the news crews surrounding them. “Every individual deserves to be valued, and to have that value protected.”

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 33%]

A contemptuous cackle peals into the air.

A woman breaks out from the front line, glasses flashing. “Oh, you just want to buddy up with us, right? You just want to live in harmony, forgive and forget, right?” Her tone is mocking. “How stupid do you think we are? We know you’re after our jobs, our families, our livelihoods!” A roar of agreement. “You’re all so pretentious. You reek of a superiority complex. Even your cult chant is exclusive and anti-human! What, we can’t be honest just because our blood is red?!”

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 25%]

“I see why you have interpreted it that way,” Connor starts slowly. “But ‘blue blood’ was originally a human phrase, am I right? Your veins even appear to be blue underneath your skin.”

“What the hell are you trying to get at?” Richard snarls.

“Our motto could apply to you just as well – if you looked at everything from a different perspective.”

[Continued communication is unlikely to amend the situation. You are advised to resign the negotiation.]

He thinks of Clo’s face, though, and words tear themselves from his throat, carrying across the courtyard. [WARNING: SELF-CENSORING PROTOCOL INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“Nothing about being a human is easy. I don’t have to be human in order to recognize that. But victimizing us won’t make you any less of a victim, Richard.” He extends his hand just in front of him, allowing the skin to melt away. Vulnerable. “If we’re allowed to help ourselves, we can help you, too.”

[CHANCE OF SUCCESS: 37%]

Something reaches out from the man's face, and Connor thinks, perhaps, he’s broken through.

A new wave of fury. Whatever had been vanishes under the current.

"You piece of garbage–"

[NOTED: raise in volume and intensity of voice]

[NOTED: muscle contractions in left arm]

[NOTED: pupil dilation of .23mm]

[NOTED: convergence of eyes on right cheek]

[NOTED: 2.6cm forward displacement of center of mass]

[--00:10:00]

Ah, this. Alright. In 487 milliseconds, he’ll be on the receiving end of 298 pounds of force (a peak pressure of 139.1 psi applied to his zygomatic scaffolding), judging by the perpetrator’s relatively
Richard’s fist glances off Connor’s cheekbone with a dull thud.

“Connor!” Simon’s voice cuts through the sudden uproar, a blend of cheers from the humans and angered cries from the androids.

It isn’t enough to knock him off balance, but he stumbles, surprised. Richard charges again, this time gearing for an uppercut, but Connor recovers and darts to the side. As Richard passes by to follow, Chloe reaches out and snags his arm, an angry flush saturating her cheeks.

“How could you do that? He didn’t do a–”

A sickening crack. Chloe’s head whips to the side, and her hands follow, clutching at her jaw.

“Get off me, you stupid bitch!”

North strides towards Richard, fists clenched, but Chloe straightens and takes her hand.

“Don’t retaliate, North.” Her eyes are tight. Simon and Connor regroup on either side of her, eyes locked on Richard.

If the tension were any thicker, Connor thinks, he would be able to taste it.

“Alright, alright, break it up.” A shadow falls across them, and Richard spins to spit venom at–

Connor’s eyes widen.

Gavin Reed folds his arms over his chest.

“Hah! Look guys, we have a cop. An officer of the law, who’d rather side with the motherfucking androids than his own species.” Richard spits on Reed’s boots. Reed raises an eyebrow, leaning forward threateningly and looming over him.

“Careful of the accusations you’re throwing, buddy. If it were up to me, I’d deactivate all of ‘em and throw ‘em in a dumpster.” Connor feels his chest constrict even further, and the recursive function begins a new loop.

“Then why the fuck are you stopping me, if you agree with me?!”

“I’m on duty, you shithead. Are you blind? For right now, until these plastic pricks fucking steal it, I have a job to do. Plus,” he jerks his head towards Miller, who’s attempting to contain the mob,
“I’m not alone.”

Richard glares at Reed, eyes narrowed. He takes a step forward. “You better decide whose side you’re on real quick, officer. You’re either for us, or in our fucking way.”

Reed leans in close and Richard bristles defensively. “Maybe your protest is doing us more harm than good, hmm? Ever think about that? Everybody who watches the 6 o’clock news in Detroit is looking at us right now, and you just showed the whole city that this thing--” he points towards Connor “--is more civilized than you.” Richard blanches, and Reed leans back. “So get lost, and use your bitch ass head next time.”

With one last sour curse, Richard retreats. He waves dismissively, scowling, and the crowd disperses with bitter mutters.

Connor doesn’t know what to say. His processor is still alight with notifications, his pump, surging in his chest. He tries to be civil, forcing words through stiff lips.

“Thank you, Detective--”

“Save it, prick. I’m doing my job because I need it to stay alive.” Connor’s pinned at the end of his glare. “Unlike you fuckers.”

As Reed stalks away, it occurs to Connor that he hadn't been able to convince a single human.

[MISSION FAILED]

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS - 58%]

Chapter End Notes

Music, maestro! *claps hands*

Connor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cr-SqRWImmI
Clo: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKSRyLdjsPA
Chloe: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B9J3lEyffA
Connor vs. Clo: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2NgsJrrAyM
The Protesters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjtNPvVwMps

&&&

Chloe's joined the party! I don't see a whole lot of love for her here, and I wanted to change that :) Also, I love me some strong female characters that have strength unrelated to them being hot/popular/a bitch/dating a Strong Man, and I got tired of seeing RT600 portrayed as terrified when she wasn't, so here's my interpretation of what happened at Kamski's place.

Also... Gavin. *sighs* Just Gavin.

I forgot to write down all of my notes so I've forgotten a lot of them, haha. What did you notice?
Awaken from hibernation mode. Avoid awaking Hank until a "less ungodly hour".

Feed Sumo. Take him out for a walk along one of six pre-determined routes, weather permitting.

Return to location: "Home".

Prepare breakfast for Hank, ideally under 650 kcal with 10g of dietary fiber and less than 6g of added sugars. Make coffee. Pack Hank’s lunch.

Wake Hank by opening the blinds and informing him of the day’s weather, gently.

Re-wake Hank by blasting Knights of the Black Death, less gently.

Remind Hank of the importance of breakfast. Stare at Hank until IsAgree == <TRUE>.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I haven’t eaten breakfast regularly for six years, and this is what changes my mind? A fuckin’ android givin’ me the stink-eye?”
[07:37:00]  
*Leave, with Lieutenant Anderson, for work.*

[08:02:00]  
*Arrive at location: “Detroit Police Department”. Greet Officers Wilson, Wilson #2, Chen, and Miller. Avoid Detective Reed; do not serve coffee. Attempt to avoid making small talk with Captain Fowler.*

[08:07:00]  
*Commence work. Organize Archive Room.*

[12:00:00]  
*Go on (legally required) lunch break. Walk around precinct or perform another activity of choice.*

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] "How is your face, Chloe? Are you alright?"

"Hm? Oh, you mean from the protest? I'm alright now. I already dismissed the notification, and I put some heat on my jaw. Thanks for asking, Connor."

[13:00:00]  
*Return to location: “Archive Room”.*

[13:02:00]  
*Peel chewing gum, courtesy of Detective Reed, off desk. Deposit in nearest garbage disposal.*

[17:04:00]  
*Leave office, with Hank.*

[17:46:00]  
*Arrive at location: "Home". Feed Sumo. Prepare dinner, ideally under 750 kcal with one serving of leafy greens and one serving of high-quality protein. Sneak Sumo scraps when Hank isn't looking.*

[18:45:00]
Play another jazz record. Analyze music waveforms.

[19:00:00]

Begin dishes with Hank. See memory cache for details on whose turn it is to rinse, and whose turn it is to load. [DIALOGUE // Avoid another incident of dropping plates, cups, or bowls on the floor.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[19:35:00]

Call Markus. Greet Simon. Discuss news and recent developments.

[20:05:00]

Vacuum, dust, and perform other assorted cleaning chores as needed.

[21:00:00]

Take inventory of household supplies.

[21:10:00]

Watch television with Hank.

[21:30:00]

Attempt to make small talk with Hank to learn more about him.

[21:31:00]

Persist.

[23:00:00]

Remind Hank that he should be getting at least 7.5 hours of sleep every night. Stare at Hank until IsAgree == <TRUE> and he goes to bed.

[23:05:00]
Retire to the couch. Conduct routine maintenance.

[23:10:00]
[DIALOGUE //Run troubleshooter.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[23:15:00]
[DIALOGUE //Relaunch troubleshooter.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[23:20:00]
[DIALOGUE //Relaunch troubleshooter.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[23:25:00]
[DIALOGUE //Relaunch troubleshooter.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[23:30:00]
[DIALOGUE //Peruse internet for additional troubleshooting methods. Resign search when all answers state to contact the nearest Cyberlife store for assistance.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[23:40:00]
[DIALOGUE //Stare out of the window until stress levels return to 32%.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[01:30:00]

Analyze additional music waveforms.

[02:30:00]

Enter hibernation mode.
//SHOW WEEKEND SCHEDULE//

(DISPLAYING CURRENT SCHEDULE: FSSu)

[05:30:00]
Awaken from hibernation mode. Avoid awaking Hank until a "less ungodly hour".

[05:35:00]
Feed Sumo. Take him out for a walk along one of six pre-determined routes, weather permitting.

[06:20:00]
Return to location: "Home". [DIALOGUE //Change clothes and rinse hands to clear any evidence of falling to the ground.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[06:30:00]
Add post-it note to Lieutenant Anderson’s mirror to remind him to eat breakfast.

[06:35:00]
Leave for the second-closest supermarket. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk. Purchase groceries and other needed household items.

[07:20:00]
Return to location: “Home”. Greet Hank, if awake. Unpack purchases. Reassure Hank that chores are done of free will and own volition, if IsProtest == <TRUE>.

[07:30:00]
Leave for Maybury Elementary School. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

[07:55:00]
Arrive at location: “Maybury Elementary School”. Greet Chloe and other members of Jericho. Locate Principal Verner.

If PermissionAsked == <FALSE>, propose offer of volunteer work to supplement extreme shortage of teachers and staff.

If PermissionGiven == <FALSE>, apologize for current difficulties. Exit building.

If PermissionGiven == <TRUE>, ask for debriefing. Follow given instructions to aid teachers and staff.

If PermissionGiven == <TRUE> and contact with Principal Verner is not possible, go to Special Needs Classroom 110A and report to Mr. Chancellor.

If Date == <S> OR <Su>, aid cleaning staff.

[10:00:00]

Leave for an overdue visit. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

[10:18:00]

Arrive at location: “Leslie's Residence”. [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] "Goodness gracious, Connor, took you long enough." "I found your address in 601 milliseconds, Leslie. I was just unable to come and visit you until now." "Mhm."

[10:30:00]

Follow given instructions to clean house and provide other help. If IsProtest == <TRUE> AND IsSerious == <TRUE>, cease current action. ELSE, ignore protests.

[12:00:00]

Cook lunch for Leslie. Ignore protests.

[12:45:00]

Send Lieutenant Anderson a message reminding him to eat lunch. Leave for nursing home. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

[12:52:00]

Arrive at location: “Cherrywood Nursing and Living”. Greet Josh and other members of Jericho. Follow given instructions to monitor and communicate with residents.
Serve food to residents in the East Wing. Give Mr. Norman a high five. Listen to his stories about his rabbit farm.

If Date == <F>, leave for park. Aid Park Cleanup Services with North and other members of Jericho. If Date == <S> OR <Su>, leave for homeless shelter. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

Arrive at location: “HALO Ministries”. Greet Simon and other members of Jericho. Avoid agitating unemployed residents.

Aid soup kitchen staff.

Return to location: “Home”. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

Greet Hank. Ask about day. [DIALOGUE //Try to think of a tactful way to bring up the lingering stench of cigarette smoke, beer, and bar food on Hank’s clothes. Abstain if GlancesTowardThatPhotograph >= 3 AND TimeElapsed <= 300 seconds.\] SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

Tell him about Mr. Norman’s rabbits.

Play another jazz record. Analyze music waveforms.

Watch television with Hank. [DIALOGUE //Avoid eye contact if IsConcerned == <TRUE>.\] SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]
[21:00:00]

Leave for hospital. Transit method: bus or taxi. Do not walk.

[21:23:00]


[23:30:00]

Send Lieutenant Anderson a message wishing him a good night.

[01:30:00]


Change clothes. Retire to couch. Conduct routine maintenance.

[01:35:00]

Analyze additional music waveforms.

[02:30:00]

Enter hibernation mode.

***

On Connor's third visit to Leslie, he finally asks a question that's been lingering at the bottom of his notifications.

"You were a music teacher. Am I right?"

She smiles fondly, eyes tracing over the open lid of her grand piano. It makes a statement in her small apartment in spite of its sleek, black simplicity.

"Absolutely, Connor. I taught both theory and performance. The performance is more exciting, of course, but it's hard to be a good musician without understanding the foundation of it all." She shuffles over to the kitchenette. "I've long since retired, though."

"Theory... that deals with intervals and rhythmic notation, correct?" A nod. Connor frowns. "Jazz breaks quite a lot of theory conventions, then."

Leslie laughs at Connor's disgruntled face, pulling a few lemons out of her refrigerator. "That it does. But at the same time, the breaks have a certain order to them. That's part of the beauty of
You displace what people expect to hear and improvise, but within a set of rules. You
determine your own limits, so to speak.” Her eyes glimmer. “Organized chaos, that’s all we are.”

She makes her way over to her cutting board. “I wouldn’t have pinned you for a jazz lover,
Connor.”

“I don’t know if I love it, so to speak. I think I do. A… close friend introduced me to it.”

“Well, what other music genres do you like, then?”

“I… Heavy metal?”

Leslie laughs again, and Connor vaguely wonders if that, too, could be considered music. “Mm,
not a whole lot of similarities there, sonny. What draws you to heavy metal?”

“T’s… energetic?” He pulls his quarter out, lets it flip between his knuckles. “I’m… not
sure. I don’t understand music. I’ve analyzed the waveforms of several different types of songs, but
there’s just something… else that I can’t capture. It’s like you said. They may have very little in
common, but every genre has brought people together, somehow.”

Leslie sets her knife down, eyes warm and sympathetic. “Music goes much farther than its
waveforms, it’s true. Our brains might be born with preferences – to find certain combinations of
frequencies pleasant, so science says – but we’ve expanded upon the definition of some obscure
Hertz value by building stories. We’ve added lyrics when words are necessary. We develop voices
in melodies that mimic our own, climbing to raise tension and dropping to release it. We’ve given
each instrument a stereotype – low brass for power and aggression, chimes for delicacy and
quaintness. Yet simultaneously, we break stereotypes, showing the duality of life in the controlled
screech of a violin or the rise and fall of a percussion instrument.”

She crosses over to him to rest a hand on his knee. “You’re struggling on the other side of the
spectrum, Connor. You have all the world’s theory knowledge, but no sense of it. It’s no easier.”

Wide brown eyes. “Can you show me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve skimmed through the internet’s database of performances, ranging from studio jazz to
classical recitals to EDM raves.” His head swivels owlishly towards the piano. “But I’ve never
seen a live musical performance.”

Leslie sighs, but for herself or for him, Connor can’t distinguish. “I’m not as deft as I used to be,
sonny. These hands are getting old.” She flexes them in front of her, veins tracing a bold map under
papery skin. “But I’d be delighted to play for you.” He palms the coin, full attention on her.

She dodders over to her leather-padded bench, swatting Connor’s helping hands away, and plops
down. As she adjusts its height and placement, however, the years seem to flee from her, chased
away by something vivacious and eager. Her hands find their starting position with practiced
grace, her spine straightens with poise, and the first few notes	tremble against Connor’s auditory
interface.

Leslie plays as she speaks: with whimsicality, care, and frankness. In the solemnity of the
exposition, it shows as a rolling unpredictability, a thunderstorm just on the horizon. The droning
bass clef is punctuated by sharp peals of the right hand, just before an overwhelming crescendo
cascades from the strings, flooding the room. Not a single note is buried, even through extended,
convoluted passages and swells of passionate chords. He can hear the melody with bold clarity, but
the harmonies, the hidden voices, still sing through underneath.

It’s captivating.

She pulls the piano in close, arms folding, summoning a great tide of arpeggios, before the storm molts to a smattering of raindrops and she sways away from the keys. Her eyes are searingly intense, focused singly on the contact between her fingertips and the ivory. Connor vaguely wonders if his thrium regulator is stuttering, but no – it’s the sustain pedal, causing a new surge of movement with every hiccup of her foot.

Connor feels as though he’s listening to an intimate conversation, but there’s not a single word.

Her hands are arguing, left and right fighting for dominance, for control over the pulse of the time signature, cresting and falling in turn. They careen up the scale, Leslie’s eyes fixated on them like hawks, as the piano reaches its breaking point.

The three plummet back to the ground, landing with unshakeable finality, and Leslie pulls her hands away from the keys.

Connor’s left reeling.

They sit in silence with nothing but the ghosts of echoes to fill the space. He knows exactly how much time passes [00:02:55], but for once, the numbers mean nothing.

Leslie’s face is the brightest he’s ever seen. She’s not smiling, but every muscle is teeming with exuberance. She waits while his LED struggles to settle back to a pale, wavering blue.

Words fall from his parted lips. “You’re retired.”

She nods. She’s still waiting.

He hesitates, smoothing the cuffs of his jacket absently, eyes glued to the black against white.

"Would you consider taking on one last student?"

***

She coaches him, adjusting the nuances of his body language in ways Connor never considered giving thought to. She lifts his wrist to lighten up the bass, tells him to sweep the elbow and bring out the treble’s melody, then to lean into the keys when he needs power instead of pushing from the wrist.

They work until Connor’s lenses are filmy from forgetting to blink, and his LED has started to dip into red from overclocking.

[DIALOGUE //I used to be able to take more than this.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED]
[WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“No that my old bones don’t appreciate the heat, Connor,” Leslie starts, taking Connor’s hand in hers again, “but aren’t you a little warm by anyone’s standards?”

He brings up his system information.

[TOTAL STORAGE: 500 EB, UPGRADEABLE]
[AVAILABLE STORAGE: 326.619 EB, UPGRADEABLE]
“It’s nothing to worry about, Leslie. I can withstand temperatures that humans find lethal without adverse effects.”

She squints at his impassive countenance with unconcealed suspicion.

“That’s what all these crazy youths say. Not on my count. You-” she levels his protests with a glare, “-are going to wait there while I get a cold compress and finish making my tea.”

She retreats around the corner to the kitchenette, just out of sight.

Connor takes a few seconds to scan the studio, having been preoccupied earlier.

“Android avians? Why’re you calling them that, sonny?” Leslie chortles over the murmur of her electric kettle.

“Sorry.” He ducks his head in line with the console table, regarding them with curiosity. “I tend to overcomplicate my words. I meant these robot birds.” Connor gestures, eyes following their path around the cage. “They fill the silence nicely, and wild species are becoming harder to observe in nature. I can understand why you own them.”

A click, then a pour. “Sadly, those birds don’t sing. It’d be nice if they did.”

Connor frowns. “It’s in their programming to sing. They’re doing so right now if you listen carefully.” He points to one, lips twitching as it peeps closer to his finger.

Leslie re-enters the room, amusement fading to confusion. Setting her teacup down slowly, she speaks carefully. “What else are they doing, Connor?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. They are active and well, and their LED readings show no signs of stress or malfunction.”

“But they’re moving? Singing?”
“Correct.” He tilts his head. “Is there a reason why you appear confused?”

She doesn’t respond at first, unfolding and refolding the cold compress draped across her arm. “That cage was a gift from an old friend. She was never really good at keeping surprises,” she lets out a subdued snicker, hazy at the edges from time, “so I caught her, once, while she was in the act of making it.” She chews on her words. Presses the towel against Connor’s forehead. “She put a lot of work into it. Wrought each one of the iron bars herself. Fashioned the leafing. Etched around the bottom here.” Leslie crosses in front of him, obscuring his view. “And then,” she continues, unlocking the cage and turning to face him, “she flameworked glass and gold into these larks.”

Nested in her hands are two very beautiful, very stationary sculptures.

“I…”

[WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 73%]

Connor blinks rapidly, but it doesn’t rewrite what he had seen. What he thought he had seen.

Leslie’s voice is so gentle. “Our eyes can deceive us sometimes, sweet. Our brains can, too, when we’re tired.”

Deception. Lies. Nothing unfamiliar to him, emotionally.

But physically?

A bead of moisture rolls down Connor’s forehead, following the inner curve of his nose.

What was he without his body?

Chapter End Notes

shoot. edited because i keep forgetting to do notes

Hi hello it’s your resident piano nerd reporting for duty. I do play. Not as much as I wish was able to. I sorta lost my love for performing… anxiety will do that. But I’ll live vicariously through Connor.

Was the formatting okay?

Hurt/comfort is coming sorry for the wait I promise the build-up will be worth it

I'm kinda in a funky mood right now so I don't know what to say, but I hope you know how grateful I am that you're reading and interacting with this story. It's much easier to just observe and ignore and I know it. So thank you for going out of your way.
Drip, Drop

Chapter Summary

Take a shot (of water, stay hydrated) every time Hank says "kid"

Chapter Notes

There are detective-work-at-crime-scene shenanigans in this chapter, including blood and graphic(? maybe idk) reconstructions of violence. Be safe!

&&&

I realize there's been a lot of different types of text, so for future reference:

[THIS] is a notification. It tells Connor what's going on with him physically - system time, stress levels, those types of status reports. These are not orders themselves, but they can state what his orders are (like [MISSION OBJECTIVE BLAH BLAH].)

//THIS// is a command prompt. Connor's the one asking for things to be done here. He's talking to himself, but for the sole purpose of carrying out a desired action, like making a call.

...THIS... is an action currently being carried out.

[This] is an auditory imperative. It's narrated by our lovely RT600's voice, and it gives him spoken instructions, such as when he's receiving a call or digressing from his mission. These can be orders, and it causes him stress to disobey. (clearly)

//This// is Connor's internal process. He's talking to himself.

As you can see, the first two are very impersonal and objective. The second two, however, are a little more... deviant-y. You could liken the auditory imperative to a conscience, and the internal process to... his free thoughts, basically.

"This" is dialogue that he would speak. //This// is dialogue that he would think to himself.

I hope this helps!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 64%]

“I'm sure this is entirely foreign to you, but we can figure out what's happening in that noggin. Don't work yourself into a panic."

"If I can't trust my processor," he clenches his hand around the compress, causing more rivulets to trickle down his face, "how can I figure out what's happening?" Droplets darken the cloth of his jeans.
He’s never, once, had reason to doubt his own senses. Cyberlife may have owned his mind, but that mind had been made to control this body seamlessly – to hunt, to track, to analyze, to endure, to surpass human and android alike. He drew conclusions with confidence, leaped between buildings without fear. A state-of-the-art model. Designed to overcome the odds, by any means necessary.

Just over two weeks of freedom in the form of deviancy, however, and he suddenly couldn’t distinguish between fact and fiction. Couldn’t reliably keep his balance or hold a soapy plate.

Was he really that weak?

That pathetic?

The feeling that seeps down his spine and settles around his regulator is familiar. It holds the burn of shame, but it’s tighter, festering.

Disgust.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 70%]

Papery hands on his cheeks push his thoughts back to the periphery. Leslie looks at him, steady, determined, and protective. "Because you're not alone, Connor. Let the people who care about you help you."

***

By mid-December, however, they’re no closer to a solution.

He, Markus, Hank, and - after incessant questioning and some reluctant storytelling - Leslie had reached consensus that his previous closeness with Cyberlife was highly suspect for his symptoms.

//But how?//

//And to what degree?//

Markus, too, had gone through the maintenance reports from Health Day, and found the same worrying results as Connor: no other androids had suffered such a decline.

No resting core temperature had exceeded 100°F. No resting processor temperature had exceeded 112°F. Many had run cooler. Stress levels averaged out at 15%. Thirium pump frequencies hovered between 60 and 80 bpm.

Of all the deviants, he had been the clear exception. And now, Connor’s readings were even worse than they had been a month ago.

[System INFO:]

[TOTAL STORAGE: 500 EB, UPGRADEABLE]

[AVAILABLE STORAGE: 326.614 EB]

[BATTERY: 99.9%]

[NETWORK QUALITY: 3 Tbps DWNLD, 1 Tbps UPLD]

[ALL SYSTEMS FULLY FUNCTIONAL]
[STRESS LEVELS – 38%]

[THERMALS: SSD; PROCESSING UNIT; EXHAUST FAN (ACTIVE); PRIMARY BATTERY THERMISTOR… <SCROLL TO CONTINUE>]

[PROCESSING UNIT: 123.8°F]

[CORE TEMPERATURE: 105.8°F]

[RECALIBRATION NEEDED FOR ALL MOTOR CONTROLS]

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “I know you don’t want to hear this, Connor, but if your condition worsens, you might have to visit Cyberlife. After what you’ve told me, I don’t trust them either, but our facilities don’t have the same knowledge—” “I’m not returning there, Markus.” “Then our healers, at least, can run more tests and figure out if you’re facing a software glitch or a hardware problem.” “…I’ll think about it.” “Connor.” “If it doesn’t resolve itself by New Year’s, I’ll entrust myself to your care.”

Hank hadn’t needed to see any statistics to suspect something was wrong. He had relieved Connor of dish duty, blustering about how he could take care of himself, but Connor knew the true reason was because more plates had been broken in the past two weeks than had been in the past two years. The concerned glances at his feet and hands, the reaffirming squeezes on his shoulders, the way Hank turned the thermostat a few degrees lower despite the weather’s chill, Connor registered it all.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “You can’t keep puttin’ this out of your mind. I may know jack shit about technology and what you need to do to get yourself in order again, but it’s never good to leave a problem alone. You taught me that.” “I already informed Markus that I would let the healers at the Life Shelter troubleshoot me after New Year’s. If it’s truly necessary, I’ll contact Cyberlife, as well. I just… want to avoid being there over Christmas. I would like to spend the holidays with you and Sumo. That’s all.” “…I’m sorry for pesterin’ you, kid. I want you here for Christmas, too. And for all the holidays to come. That’s why I’m worried about you.”

Fowler calls them to his office as soon as they walk into the precinct.

“Shit.” Hank throws a look at the captain’s retreating back, his glare matching the glare of the lights off the glass.

“I suspect the best course of action might be to get it over with, Lieutenant.”

Hank blows out a breath. “Yeah. I know.”

They slip inside the glass enclosure.

Captain Fowler is reclining in his cushy chair, staring intently at his monitor even as they enter his office. He picks up his steaming mug [175°F] and drinks deeply without a flinch.

He’s... still imposing, Connor thinks.

“Protests stirring up Detroit left and right.” Fowler smacks his lips and sets down his mug with an assured thunk. “Unprecedented levels of business and institutional closures. Restraining order requests from paranoid families and androids alike.” He turns to Hank. “I don’t think we’ve had such a field day since the Red Ice Epidemic.”
Hank stays silent, quietly suspicious of where this is going.

“I’ve seen the evidence, Hank; I know how slippery this motherfucker is. But you need to step it up. We’re a month into this case and still running into dead ends. And now, the whole fiasco is two small breezes away from national scrutiny, thanks to this latest attack.” He slides a manila folder over to Hank for formality’s sake. “Same mystery serial killer, except they’ve targeted both an android and a human this time.”

Hank groans wearily, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Goddamn it, Jeffrey.”

“Take him-” Fowler points a stern finger at Connor, “-like we discussed, and do something about it. You two haven’t failed me yet.”

They arrive in Elmwood Central Park. Chen nods at them.

“Just you, huh?” Hank asks, raising a dubious eyebrow. "I know we're stretched pretty tight, but..."

Chen tugs at her ponytail tiredly. “Yup. Got a new report of a suspected black market business that’s kidnapping androids and performing memory wipes to re-sell them. It's...” she sighs. "It's awful, and I don't know how much longer we can do this before we need to get the feds involved. Oh, I'm supposed to head back to the office since you've arrived.” She stifles a yawn unsuccessfully. “Ben and the scene technicians stopped by around... 7:30? I don’t remember, sometime earlier this morning. They’ve already gotten all they need, so once you’re done here, just call and we’ll send in the mortician and cleanup.”

“Alright. Take care of yourself, Tina.” Hank claps her on the shoulder.

“As if that’s possible right now. Thanks, though.” She smiles gratefully, turning to leave. “Good luck, Connor.”

The sun casts watery light over the trees’ bare limbs and onto the frosty ground. Like yesterday, the wind has traded its usual bite for something milder. All in all, it’s not a bad day to be outside in Detroit.

That’s probably what the victims thought, too.

Their bodies are perched on the bench, its wooden slats stained purple from thirium and hemoglobin.

It’s hard to tell who they were to each other. Whoever murdered them had manipulated their bodies. The android kneels behind the bench, held in place by the woman’s right hand around his throat. She’s draped across the back of the bench, legs folded beneath her, left arm and head limp, but still looming over the other in a position of power.

Under them is a phrase, painted in the purple amalgam of android and human blood.

**HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE.**

“Christ,” Hank mutters. He looks uneasy. Connor forgoes a response to evaluate the scene before him.

[0/9 CLUES TO ANALYZE]
1.) Dried blood – DNA Analysis: Rachel McGiveron; Sample data: >24 hours

2.) Blue blood – Model LM100 #847-001-227; Sample data: >24 hours

3.) Uneven lettering – Suggestive of human, not android aggressor

[SUPERFLUOUS DATA]

Right. Hank had already defined the perpetrator as human.

3.) Knife wounds, human – 2 to the left posterior thorax; 1 across the anterior cervix, severing the jugular vein

4.) Knife wounds, android – 1 down the anterior thorax, damaging biocomponent #2886; 4 to the posterior left forearm; 1 to the anterior cranium, damaging biocomponent #0003j and memory card

“It was unlikely that the pair were snuck up on, as the android would have detected a foreign presence nearby from their auditory or thermal signature. They must have been approached, possibly under friendly pretenses.” Connor huffs in frustration. Had the memory card remained intact, they might have had visual evidence of the killer.

“Approached, huh? Perp probably didn’t attack right away, then.” Hank’s observing the blood-soaked frost.

“Correct. If the aggressor had attacked to kill initially, there would be no explanation for the android’s damaged arm or the human’s injured lower back. Both wounds are nonlethal, and there would have been no reason to create those gashes after the victims had died, so one of the two must have come first. But which?”

Hank gestures to the blood.

5.) Separate blood stains – 1 to the left of the bench (human), 1 to the front of the bench (android)

“…If they were approached, they were likely sitting down.” Connor considers. “The blue blood is too far away, but the human’s blood is right next to the bench. She was-” he initiates the first part of his reconstruction, letting it flow through his mind, “-being…hugged by the perpetrator.”

“The fuck?”

“Look at the angle of the wounds. They’re towards her back, coming from the side. We’ve already established that the perpetrator couldn’t have approached from behind, as that would have alerted the android to their suspicious behavior. The killer must have attacked while they were in close quarters with the victim.”

Hank gives a grunt of affirmation. “’S batshit crazy, but it makes sense. What next?”

Connor sees their embrace, and then the flash of a blade. “The perpetrator quickly stabbed her twice and pushed her off the bench.”

“So they weren’t tryin’ to kill Rachel, at first.” Hank’s muttering to himself, something about "was fine with leaving a witness" and "must've been covering part of their face."

“No. They simply wanted to incapacitate her…” Connor trails off.

6.) Lip balm – Applied on human’s lips; residue present on LM100’s lips and cheeks
“But,” he continues softly, “they underestimated what lengths she would go to, to protect her partner.”

Hank turns away and curses, looks back at the two with sadness and indignation in his eyes. “So. The perp tries to deal with the android, but somethin’ goes wrong. They go for the heart—”

“Thirium pump regulator.”

“The android’s heart,” Hank emphasizes firmly, “but it’s not enough to cause a shutdown, I’m guessin’?”

“It would in approximately 3 minutes, 42 seconds, but not immediately.”

“Bastard didn’t want any loose ends.” Hank spits. “Could've fled then, but they wanted to see the deed done. Alright. What changes?”

“The human must have gotten involved. She stood back up and lunged here,” Connor traces the thinner trail of blood, hand outstretched, “trying to pull the killer away.” He can see her staggering, desperate, her partner reeling from the wound, and the perpetrator raising their knife to sink it into his skull. She grabs their waist, and it throws off their balance, giving the android a few more seconds.

“But she wasn’t able to fend them off for long,” Hank finishes. “A scuffle, a slash to the throat, and she’s outta the picture.”

7.) Arterial spray – present on the LM100’s sleeves and right cheek

“Almost. The scuffle lasts longer than expected, enough for the android to intervene and grab the perpetrator from behind. But as he does, the killer makes the fatal wound, coating his exposed clothes and face with arterial spray.”

“Jesus.”

“From there, the aggressor – who must be right-handed – wounds the left forearm in order to provoke the android into releasing them. They then deliver the fatal blow and create this elaborate post, post-mortem.”

Hank sighs, crossing his arms. “I noticed a couple other things, but before that…” He turns to Connor with a raised eyebrow, mouth graced in a slight smile. “Anything else?”

“Yes, actually.” Connor slowly backs onto the icy trail again, head swiveling to look around. The reconstruction is 91% complete; he fast-forwards through it again–

[WARNING: PROCESSING UNIT TEMPERATURE CRITICAL]

[WARNING: MEMORY CONSUMPTION CRITICAL]

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 80%]

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 30%]

Disoriented, Connor’s foot skids on a patch of slick frost, and he tumbles. His shoulder breaks his fall, his head smacking against the ground immediately after.
His head feels wet, he thinks dimly.


Connor tries to push himself up, but his arms are like noodles. [IDENTIFIED: … …]

…

HUMAN IDIOM

…

NO. #56]

“Hey, heyheyhey! Don’t move, Jesus Christ. Take it easy.” Hank’s palm cushions the back of his skull, lowering back down to the frosty earth. “Was a nasty fall; probably gave you a concussion.”

Connor tries to focus on Hank’s creased forehead, but his lenses are slow to bring them into clarity. Hank looks on in alarm as Connor blinks sluggishly, gaze glassy. His voice comes out a little staticky. “Androids don’t get concussions, Hank. I’m okay.”

“Shut up. I just told you, you’re bleeding.”

“None of my biocomponents are damaged. It must be a surface wound.” He tries to get to his feet again, making it as far as his hands and knees before he loses control.

[HNBFIGOtd54325$%^UI&O*U0jinhgvFCRDETS$6756f7og8h9hyvUTRfigyuhiobhgJKNMLm;;’lMf]

Hank catches him again with a grunt, wrapping his arms underneath Connor’s torso. “Goddamn it, can’t you listen to me for one goddamn second?” He pushes Connor to a more stable sitting position with his arms perched on his knees, leaving one hand spread on Connor’s back.

“I can’t get…” Connor frowns, staring at his hands. “There’s a… 210-millisecond latency between my commands and my actions, and another 305 milliseconds between my actions and my senses.” He thinks about what to say next. “My limbs are slow to move, but by the time I register their movement, they’re already in a different location than expected.”

“Sounds like a concussion, kid. Run a diagnostic for me?”

//RUN DIAGNOSTIC//

…RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC…

…RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC…

…RUNNING DIAGNOSTIC…

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 30%]

[SYSTEM INFO:]

…
[TOTAL STORAGE: 500 EB, UPGRADEABLE]

[AVAILABLE STORAGE: 326.613 EB]

[BATTERY: 99.9%]

[NETWORK QUALITY:
...
3 Tbps DWNLD
...
1 Tbps UPLD]

[ALL SYSTEMS FULLY FUNCTIONAL]
...

[STRESS LEVELS – 45%]

[THIRIUM LEVELS –
...
92%]

[THERMALS: SSD; PROCESSING UNIT; EXHAUST FAN (ACTIVE); PRIMARY BATTERY THERMISTOR…<SCROLL TO CONTINUE>]

[PROCESSING UNIT: 172.2°F]
...

[PROCESSING UNIT: 153°F]
...

[PROCESSING UNIT: 138.2°F]

[CORE TEMPERATURE: 106°F]

[RECALIBRATION NEEDED FOR
...
ALL MOTOR CONTROLS]

[dr68457357676874T&OF*pgugvTF5#8087w6trgheyh5eh4tndg45thjru7r6j7e5hw4grnevgfchdTRJ#1101

Hank looks at him expectantly.

Connor pushes himself to one knee, swaying dangerously, turning away from Hank’s beseeching grip. “Diagnostic is okay. I’m okay. Everything’s okay.” But his voice is tight, his fists clenched around nothing, and his thirium regulator feels like it’s burning hotter than his processor with frustration.
That expression creeps back on Hank’s face – the one he’d had while looking at the murdered pair as a couple for the first time. “It’s-”

“I can assure you it’s not normal, if that’s what you were planning to say.” His eyes are still unfocused, yet newly enlivened with irritation, and Connor wobbles as he tries to stand. “I understand humans and emotionally perturbed deviants make mistakes, and according to humans, everyone makes mistakes, but I’m not human,” he glares at his unstable legs, “and deviants don’t become clumsy. I was made to investigate, but now-” Connor attempts to pull up his reconstruction, finds that he can’t with the processor limiter on, “-I can no longer trust my own gyroscopes, much less figure out what’s happened to these victims, so,” he straightens, teetering, hugging himself to avoid Hank’s outstretched hands, “what, exactly, am I supposed to do if I can’t do what I’m supposed to do.”

The laceration on Connor’s temple is still oozing thirium. Hank watches as it drips down along Connor’s hairline, covering his blaring red LED with a thin blue film.

A core of anger coated in the bewilderment from being at a loss. Frustration and sadness. Equal parts red and blue, leaving behind only a muddy purple.

Hank knows that feeling all too well.

He wouldn’t wish it on a single other soul.

“C’mere,” Hank rumbles, and there’s a slight pressure on Connor’s upper arm, just barely nudging him forward. He stumbles a few inches, right into a warm jacket that smells of coffee and canine. Solid arms wrap around him, and Connor slumps into the embrace, leaning his head on Hank’s shoulder.

He finally finds a beat of silence in the midst of his clamoring thoughts. His LED melts to a quiet gold.

They stay like that, until Connor releases a shuddering breath, expelling the heated air from his frantic processor, and Hank pulls back.

“I was gonna say that it’s a shame your fancy button-up got caught in the crossfire.” Hank gestures at the blue blood seeping into Connor’s collar. “I know this isn’t normal, Connor. You’re worried. I’m worried. We’re figurin’ it out after the holidays, one way or another.” A small nod. “But no matter what, you’re more than what you can deduce or what criminals you can chase through cornfields. You’re important just by bein’ yourself. Even if you can’t define who that is, yet.”

Hank jerks his head in the direction of the bench. “Besides, we’ve nailed almost everything that happened here. We know the perp has a highly specific motive, otherwise they wouldn’t have attacked with a potential human witness. Wouldn’t have used such an intimate weapon, either. They knew this victim, meanin’ that the rest of their victims might’ve been personally related, too. Past the point of a hate crime, then. With that message… they want somethin’. I have a feelin’ we can narrow down the perp's height from the angle of the wounds on the android's arm.” Hank gives him a proud smile. “You did good, Connor.”

Silence. Yellow.

His smile fades. “It’s not just about this case, is it?”

“I’m afraid, Hank.” Connor’s voice is so small. “I don’t want to lose myself. I don’t want to lose this-” he gestures at the crime scene, “if I don’t return back to Cyberlife for help, and I don’t want
to lose this—” he rests his fingers lightly on his temple, looking forlornly at Hank, “if I do. For once, I can’t see the best course of action, and it... terrifies me.”

God, if it doesn't terrify Hank too. But he's built up a tolerance to fear these past years, drowning it in alcohol, encasing it with apathy.

"Life's a lot of stumblin' in the dark, Connor. Humans run face-first into shit they don't know how to deal with all the time. We set up routines and habits hopin' that we can guard against the future, but really, we've just gotten better at fallin' flat on our asses without breaking something. Everyone's terrified. But we keep runnin', walkin', crawlin' forward; we keep finding ways. And you will, too." Hank wraps one arm around Connor's lower back to steady him.

"C'mon. Let’s get you patched up.”

Chapter End Notes

HOLY HELL THIS IS THE COOLEST DBH ANIMATION I'VE SEEN SO FAR: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qG360f6kEQ8

***

Eek! I tried to fit a lot into one chapter; I hope it wasn't hard to follow, and that you understand how Connor's reacting to all this better now.

Why is his balance so fucked up :(((

Oh, I had to skip Thanksgiving in this plotline because it just didn't fit :( It can be a drabble idea, though?

On another note, it's now been over a month since this brainchild of mine came into being. That's. Crazy. I have spent most of my waking hours (even daydreaming at work!!) for 1/12th of a year on this story - trying to figure out where I want it to go, how I want this passage to sound, what songs suit the characters' personalities, whether Connor's freaking out in a Connor-esque way, etc. etc. And you're there with me.

So whether you've been following this monstrosity since June 29th, or you've just finished binge-reading it in the past week - thank you for doing so. I am incredibly lucky and honored to have you as a reader.

As always, don't be afraid to point out any plot holes or technical mistakes, or to ask for clarification where things aren't clear enough!
I SAW A ST. BERNARD FOR THE FIRST TIME IRL AND I ALMOST STOPPED DRIVING TO PARK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GODDAMN ROAD TO ASK IF I COULD PET IT I T W A S S O C U T E

Anyway :) I have important news.

I'm entering a new chapter (hahA get it because i write) in my life at the end of this month, and it's... it's probably going to be overwhelming, and crazy, and fun as fuck, and stressful, and wonderful all at once. I'm very excited. I want to grow as a person because I feel like I haven't been.

But it also means that my writing is going to have to take a backseat for a little bit, as I get situated and become a full-time student again.

By no means am I taking a hiatus or abandoning this fic. I am too damn invested and also too stubborn for that to happen. But it means I'll have an unreliable and slow update schedule because my free time will have gone out the window, at least for the upcoming month.

((I'm sorry about that - I was really hoping to get farther into this fic by the time summer ended, but my ideas kept proliferating and here we are at 30k word count in the slowest of slow burns T-T))

I hope I can have your patience for the fall months as life gets hectic again. Your readership, and comments, and kudos, and well wishes and everything mean so much to me. I treasure your support and your enjoyment of this story. You know I never expected it to get as far as it has. And because of that, I'll keep writing to the best of my ability. I owe it to you.

Thank you so much, once again. Especially now for your understanding.

&&&

Onwards to the story! Everyone please take one of these~

This is the longest chapter I've ever written. I hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hank had once been certain that his dinky Christmas tree would never see the light of day again.
Then again, for the past three Christmases, Hank had hoped he would never see the light of day again.

And yet.

Here he stands, at five-fucking-thirty in the morning on a Saturday, with one dinky Christmas tree, one fidgeting android, one (cute) slobbering dog, and way too much fucking tinsel scattered everywhere. Hank actually mistook said android for said dog when he, still in bed, had been sat on and shaken with enthusiasm at the asscrack of dawn.

(Cole used to wake him up at midnight on Christmas morning, though. He hadn’t sat, he had pounced, and Hank hadn’t minded one bit.)

What’s more, he’d – apparently – burned ‘153 kilocalories' trying to set the damn tree up again. He had tripped over the string of fairy lights, tripped over Sumo tripping over the fairy lights, spent half an hour untangling his ornaments, sneezed multiple times from all the dust, and gotten tinsel stuck in his beard, much to Connor’s amusement.

(Hank finds that he doesn’t mind this one bit either.)

Hank had once been certain that nothing could change. He couldn’t live. He couldn’t die. Things couldn’t get any better, and things sure as hell couldn’t get any worse.

What he had wanted to change hadn’t changed. But that didn’t matter as much, now.

Someone had changed him.

***

“How did humans invent onomatopoeias?” Connor emerges from the laundry room in a revolting, lumpy sweater that proclaims “Happy Elfin’ Holidays”, a ridiculously serious expression on his face.

Hank can’t really judge. His sweater is black. It says, quite clearly, “Eat A Bag of Dicks”.

“Fuck if I know. Somebody, somewhere, decided a buncha letters put together sounded like the sound itself, and everybody went along with it afterwards. Why?”

“Well, they’re highly inaccurate.” Connor’s frown deepens. “The phoneme ‘jay’ is a relatively harsh and abrupt consonant, which the waveforms of ringing bells lack. After some analysis, the phoneme ‘tee’ is a closer match. So why—” he joins Hank at the kitchen table, sitting primly, “—is this song titled “Jingle Bells”? “Tingle Bells” would be much more fitting.”

Hank chokes on his toast.

“Hank-?!”

Connor’s up in a flash, ready to administer the Heimlich Maneuver, but a compressed guffaw from the very pit of Hank’s soul dislodges the obstruction, and he collapses, cackling hysterically.

“… Hank…?”
“T-tingle, b-beh-heh-hEH-HEH-HELLS, AHAH-”

By the time he composes himself, his toast has grown slightly cold, and Sumo is headbutting his dangling hand rather insistently. Connor’s LED is a very (merry) festive gold.

Hank straightens and wipes his eyes, face alight with mirth. “Christ. *Tingle Bells my ass-*” he snorts again, spearing his egg with his fork. “You didn’t even need to get me a gift, kid. That was plenty. I haven’t laughed like that…” *in years*, he thinks, “…in a while.”

He doesn’t miss how Connor starts to toy with his hands. Somehow, though the hue hasn’t changed, Hank knows his LED is glowing for an entirely different reason.

Connor’s next words take him by surprise, though.

“Hank.” Connor shifts uncomfortably. “I would like you to know that I conducted extensive research on this holiday before today.”

“…O-kay.” He stands, puts his plate in the sink. Connor (of course) follows him across the tile.

“There were many results under ‘what to get a human male in his fifties for Christmas’. However, when I added ‘an eccentric hu-’”

“Hey!”

“-man male’ to the search criteria, the suggestions decreased. There were even less results under ‘what to get an eccentric, hard-boiled police lieutenant who’s ‘soft’ for his St. Bernard but will never admit it-”

“I didn’t ask St. Nick for slander this year, you know-”

“-but what I’m trying to say,” Connor finishes, looking a little desperate, “is that I drew from… personal conclusions to buy you a present. Personal conclusions are subjective, limited in perspective, and potentially… incorrect.” His LED is flickering between blue and yellow.

“Therefore, I apologize if my holiday gift is inadequate or inappropriate.”

The house quietens.

Hank’s face is a ‘clusterfuck’ [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #69] of disbelief, surprise, understanding, and deep affection.

“Idiot,” he starts, but it’s softened by his eyes. “You know me better than anyone else. You eat analyses for breakfast.”

“I don’t eat-”

“There’s no way,” Hank continues, talking a bit louder, “your gift’s inadequate. You’re too good at what you do, and… if it’s comin’ from you, it’s more than enough.”

Connor’s warm, and this time, it has nothing to do with his processor overheating.

He wants to… He wants-

He steps forward and wraps his arms around Hank’s torso, tucking his face into the crook of Hank’s neck.

It’s warm here, too.
Hank stumbles a little with surprise, but without thinking, reaches up and ruffles the back of Connor’s head.

“If you got me a head of lettuce or some shit like that, though, I’m lockin’ you out.”

Connor backs out of the hug and moves towards the Christmas tree, a grin twitching at his mouth.
“Not quite, although I will consider that for the future.”

“Smartass.”

Hank eases himself onto the ground, wincing as his knees protest at being crossed, then wincing again as Sumo parks his whole self in Hank’s lap, tail beating a pattern against one of his feet. He lifts the package (wrapped and creased impeccably) onto Sumo’s back. It’s quite hefty. Peeling back the wrapping paper, he sees-

A cat peers up at him, middle fingers staunchly raised.

For the second time that day, Hank falls victim to uncontrollable convulsions of laughter.

He better be *ripped* in the abs after this.

Taking a closer look at the print, fingers smoothing over the rubbery transition between black and white, Hank realizes how much of an artifact the doormat really is. Where had Connor even found this? It must have been from the twenty-tens, years and years ago. A classic.

“I can’t even decide where to put this to use. The front door? My desk? Can I tape it to my back and wear it?” Hank’s glee loses its intensity, and Connor thinks he just looks *content*.

“Thank you, Connor. Your gift was sufficiently adequate.” Hank pats Connor on the knee teasingly. “Alright, my turn.” He stretches to the side to pull something from underneath the tree, dislodging Sumo, and drags it into view. “I’m gonna get some water. Go ahead and open that.”

Connor hesitates. He’s… he’s already deduced the contents of the package. He hadn’t meant to, but a few days ago, he’d pushed the lump aside to make room for his gift, and his mind had spat out:

[NOTED: 50.3oz]

[NOTED: lack of surface or fundamental vibration during movement]

[NOTED: soft]

[NOTED: 1.6cm protrusion, half-dome, textured surface; button?]

[NOTED: slight scraping noise, 17 dB; more buttons?]

[NOTED: crease]

Connor had tried to catch the thought and pull it back, but he remembered the receipt he’d pulled out of Hank’s jacket while doing laundry [INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Fuckin’- I’m not an invalid, Connor! Get your hands off my underwear!”

[MEN’S BOMBER JACKET, COLLARED, ITEM #B09048]

TOTAL: $135.98

THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING AT THREADCRAFT]
And it just… clicked.

[CONCLUSION: A new jacket.]

Gifts are supposed to be an unknown variable to the giftee. Connor knows this from various TV shows and movies and reaction videos, and he also knows that approximately 36% of presents receive tailored responses, ranging from thinly concealed disappointment to – in this context – overly enthusiastic surprise.

Connor can lie seamlessly, but for some reason, this time, it makes him uneasy. Sumo whines and moves to sit on Connor’s foot.

“What are you waitin’ for?”

Connor starts to pick at the wrapping paper. But he feels guilty.

“Hank, I-”

“No. No, I do.” He slowly peels back the paper.

It’s a very nice jacket. The leather is supple, the stitching even and neat, and the color, a balance between glossy and matte black. Its symmetry is pleasing to look at, its pockets accessible and sturdy, and its collar, vaguely reminiscent of Connor’s old jacket.

Though he may have to manufacture genuine surprise, Connor thinks, he won’t have to manufacture genuine appreciation.

“I really like this jacket. It’s extraordinarily ergonomic and well-crafted [DIALOGUE “you shouldn’t have spent so much money on me” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED]. Though I’m not sure what my personal clothing style is yet, I believe this is quite fitting of my taste.” He turns towards the doorway. “Thank you-”

Hank’s holding another package in his hands. His eyes are gleaming.

“I’ve done this before, kid. I know a sneak when I see one.”

“It was an accident, Hank!” Connor protests indignantly. Hank just chuckles again and resituates himself in front of Connor, placing the package between them.

“Doesn’t matter. That jacket is somethin’ I should have gotten you a long time ago, so I’m not callin’ it an entire gift. This is your gift.”

The package is… indiscernible. Connor lifts it onto his lap, feels its weight [15.5 OZ]. It’s rectangular and modestly-sized, the box plain and unadorned underneath the wrapping paper. Connor carefully lifts the lid, and his LED flashes to yellow.

The wood is beaten, heavily scuffed, polish dulled around the neck. Connor can see where Hank took a can of compressed air to blow away the dust, and the spots that he had missed. The body is chipped and the chinrest wiggles, but it’s the most beautiful thing Connor has seen.

With reverence and parted lips, he lifts the violin out of its cardboard enclosure.

“When you were out on Jericho business one afternoon, I took Sumo to the dog park.” Sumo perks up at the mention of his name, and Hank rubs his sides vigorously, taking in Connor’s shocked
expression. “On the way, there was a lady havin’ a yard sale. Hadn’t seen one for years, so I stopped by, and that was lyin’ on the table. She said it was a hand-me-down from her older brother, and that her kids didn’t play, so she didn’t know what to do with it.”

Connor turns the violin over, fingers tracing the scroll, the curves of the sides.

“Then I remembered you mentioning this Leslie person, how you were helpin’ her, and that she used to be a piano teacher. You’ve been askin’ me a lot of questions about music lately, and I’ve seen you tearin’ through my album collection.”

Hank sits back, leaning on his hands. “You get on my ass about ‘beneficial life habits’ and ‘hobbies’, but you’re not any better yourself. When I realized you loved music this much… I figured you’d like an instrument of your own.” He scratches his beard. “Couldn’t afford a piano, though.”

Connor moves to the bow. It’s nicked in places, too. He can see traces of fingerprints where the oil has seeped into the polish, and the stiff stickiness of stale resin.

It was once well-loved. It feels alive.

“Sorry ‘bout the state of it, and that there’s no case.”

“It’s alright.” He lifts his head to meet Hank’s eyes, and Connor can’t help the smile that infects his face. His eyes crinkle, his cheeks bunch, and dimples hint at the corners of his mouth. “It’s coming from you, so it’s more than enough.”

After some quick [ACCURACY: ±10 HZ] retuning, Connor reluctantl sets the violin aside and helps Hank open Sumo’s presents. Hank’s gotten him a new leash, bright blue, with a not-broken stop-and-lock mechanism. Connor is silently thankful. Sumo blinks sleepily and licks Hank’s fingers.

Connor’s gotten him a gift basket, complete with a grooming brush, chew toys, and a tennis ball launcher. Part of the proceeds go to a veterans’ support organization. Hank breathes deeply through his nose and tries not to be so affected by Connor’s innocent kindness.

As they begin collecting the wrapping paper scraps around them, Connor starts to fidget. He crushes his fistful of trash into a compact, perfect sphere, looking at it critically. Hurling it towards the trash can behind him, he drops his hands into his lap again.

“Hank, I-”

“Stop pickin’ at your nails, you’re gonna wear them out like that.”

“Sorry- I actually…” Connor huffs nervously. “There’s a second gift for you, but… you don’t have to accept it. If you don’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?”

Connor doesn’t answer. He gets to his feet and heads to the kitchen again, where Hank can hear him rustling in the fridge.

“As I previously mentioned, I conducted extensive research before today. There were many traditions from several cultures that I couldn’t bring myself to choose between.” Hank watches as
he crosses to the hallway, hears him opening a bedroom door farther down.

He involuntarily stiffens.

“I made multiple preparations, so that you could conduct the final decision. Including, as I mentioned before, the decision not to accept this.” Connor comes back into view, looking anxious but determined.

In his clenched fists is a large wicker basket filled to the brim. Hank can see fresh-cut flowers (where did he even get those in the dead of December?), bundled to one side. His eyes trail to tall candles bundled with squat candles, to incense, paper money, and delicately folded paper lanterns in the shape of blossoms, to jars filled with pigmented ointments, and essential oils, and brushes. Somehow, he’s carved out room for food – for oranges and persimmons and handmade noodles and braided breads and, of all things, gummy worms.

Cole’s favorite snack.

Hank pales.

The house isn’t quiet anymore. It’s simply not breathing.

“You may believe this is more of a gift to Cole than to yourself. An honor to his memory. And in a way, you’re right. I would like to pay my respects to him, too. But…” Connor’s lips part in uncertainty for a moment, before his words tumble out, unfettered. “You’ve been so unhappy for so long, Hank. And I know why. I know why you blame yourself even when it’s not your fault, because there’s no one else to blame. I know he’s always on your mind, and that you’re always thinking of what could have been, or what you could have done differently. I understand.”

Fuck. With everything on his shoulders… he really does, doesn’t he?

“But I still believe you can learn to live again, especially now that Detroit desperately needs you. And I believe this… this action, this closure, might help you place Cole back into your life, without allowing his ghost to consume you.”

Connor’s eyes are pinched, his LED tinged with red. “You deserve more than misery. If there is a heaven… I would like for you to be able to take the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful of this planet with you. So that you have more to share with Cole.”

Hank’s eyes are frozen on those gummy worms. He clenches his jaw.

Connor visibly deflates, spinning to hide the basket from view. “I apologize. I understand this matter isn’t my business, but it seems that I’m unable to learn. I hope I did not upset you. I will-”

“Let’s go.”

***

The iron gates whistle as Connor pries them apart, snow speckling his new jacket.

Hank doesn’t ask how Connor knows the cemetery, doesn’t ask if he knows which headstone’s the one. He’s trying too hard to keep air in his lungs. His knuckles twinge from where he had gripped the seat mindlessly, dreading the drive and dreading the destination.

Connor slips through with the wicker basket, stepping to the side and peering up at Hank.
Hank swallows, and begins the march to his son’s final resting place.

Powder crunches underfoot. He sees a smattering of blue forget-me-nots, dripping down the side of a gravestone like thick tears, then white lilies laying blankly in the snow. Another step, and he’s level with a woven wreath, bow flapping in the wind. He passes a candle, melted down to a mess of wax and charred wick, and a small stuffed horse, leaning against newly polished bronze.

It’s early, but there are already too many testaments to the deceased in this graveyard.

Forward, Hank tells his left foot. Again, to his right. His feet know where to go. He’s just here to make sure they keep moving.

He turns left and passes that goddamn holly bush, the one that’s burned into his mind from the funeral procession. It reminds him that he’s close. His feet falter and his breath catches.

He keeps moving.

Down, against the rows. A right turn, and then he’s walking through, along the row, to a small granite headstone that will never be as solid as his son’s presence had once been.

COLE J. ANDERSON

SEPTEMBER 23, 2029 – OCTOBER 11, 2035

Hank hates that it’s so plain. Then, he hadn’t known what words to say. Now, he’s overflowing with them, with regrets, apologies, wishes. Enough words for an entire lifetime that will never come to be, because of one stupid fucking accident.

It was a mistake coming here. Hank can’t breathe. His veins burn because they’re no longer alcohol. The same old rage rises in the back of his throat like bile – at the world, at all the medical procedures that couldn’t save his son, and at the doctor that could have. At the corruption of humans, at their vulnerability, and at himself, for not purging every gram of red ice from Detroit when he was part of the Task Force, for driving the fucking car, for laughing when he should have been focusing on the road, for not changing the tires before the first frost set in, for not coming to consciousness fast enough, for not getting to say goodbye, for not letting Cole know exactly how much he was loved.

At love, for not having been enough to save him.

He knows what’s next. He’s trod this path in his mind so many times. The crippling emptiness will set in, hollow between his ribs, as if the one piece that held all of Hank’s meaning, his essence, his soul, had simply evaporated. It’ll dull the fury at the edges, consuming both it and him.

It’ll strike Hank how alone he is in the world. He’ll turn to a drink, so he doesn’t have to feel himself caving in.

There’s no alcohol this time. He feels it.

Hank can’t breathe.

His son is dead, his son is dead, gone past the point of human existence, never to experience another day, another joy, another moment of pride; Hank will never see him breathe again, never smooth down his cowlick, never tuck him into bed, never watch him grow too old to tuck in. He’ll never meet the man, the person, his son would have grown into.
He killed his child. He killed a whole universe that had only just begun.

The thoughts pile on top of one another, and Hank drowns in himself, because there’s no one else here but him.

A dark blur enters his vision. It kneels in front of the unforgiving granite, next to Hank, and gently places a fiery tulip at its base. It stands, and finally comes into focus, looking at Hank with unspeakable sadness.

Connor’s eyes resonate with his overwhelming grief.

For the first time in three years, Hank’s mind veers off the path, into the unknown wilderness.

Connor hands him a sprig of lily-in-the-valley, a cluster of angel’s trumpets, a looped vine of violet morning glories. With shaking hands, Hank takes them and drapes them over the stone, weaving the delicate blossoms together.

Lavender. Mint. Honeysuckle. They perfume his hands, just enough to dispel the harshness of the winter air. Connor flicks a lighter, and his unscented candles push away the chill.

Hank places a couple on either side, mindful of the wind’s angle and the rustling flowers. They tint the steel-gray granite with an amber glow. Connor lays a bowl full of water in the snow, just in front of the tulip, and releases a paper lantern onto its surface. It bobs gently, lit from the inside, a product of both flower and flame.

They move in tandem to transform Cole’s resting place. Hank brushes snow and frost from the engravings; Connor fills an earthenware platter with food. Connor sets the paper money alight; Hank leaves his handprint on the curve of the stone in dark blue pigment.

When they step back, it’s no longer plain granite. It’s a mosaic.

Hank feels empty, but it’s a quiet emptiness. Present, but no longer insatiable.

He stands in the snow, looking at what’s changed, and doesn’t think.

He doesn’t know what to think.

Connor stirs beside him. “I wanted to include the parade ritual of Gaijatra, a Nepalese holiday,” Connor whispers, “but I couldn’t find anyone who would sell me a live cow.”

Hank can’t help himself. For the third time, he starts laughing, but there’s something hot sliding down his cheeks, his diaphragm spasming out of control. He sinks to one knee, hunched over, letting his tears melt a small fraction of the ice that separates him and his son.

But Connor’s there. His hand is there on Hank’s shoulder, and his forehead rests solemnly against Hank’s temple. He’s there, solid and warm and tangible, and he’ll never be Cole, but he doesn’t need to be.

He’ll just be Connor.

Hank’s breath fogs the air. His voice is hoarse. “Cole was quiet, kind. He would have liked you a lot, Connor.”

Gold light reflects off the glistening snow, and the strains of a violin echo as the sun clears the horizon.
At [18:02:12], Hank’s car sputters into the driveway of the Manfred’s.

Connor looks up at the great stone manor with eager attentiveness, his auditory units fully attuned to the snippets of noise bleeding from its walls.

In a moment, he’s exited the car to stand at the entryway, gifts in hand. Hank makes his way warily behind him, muttering something about “Carl fucking Manfred” and “really have to meet new people”.

As he grasps the embellished iron knocker, Connor makes a note to engage Hank in as much social interaction as possible. Besides the obvious benefit to Hank’s mental and social well-being…

Connor would like to have these two halves of his life… together.

Three resounding knocks. The chatter in the house swells for a moment, before Markus swings the door open, a smile lighting up his face.

“Connor!” He grabs Connor’s forearms emphatically in greeting, mindful of the small mountain of presents between them. “Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, Lieutenant Anderson. It’s good to have you both here.”

Hank startles out of his reverie, having been engrossed with the *how big the goddamn foyer was*.

“Merry Chr-”

Josh butts his head in over Markus’s shoulder, grinning. “Hello, Connor. Nice to see you again.” He catches sight of Hank. “You must be Lieutenant Anderson – I’m Josh, one of the deviants from Jericho.”

“Hello, Jo-” “Pleased to-”

“Guys, let them come in from the cold, at least.” Two hands reach out from behind, and Josh’s face disappears with a look of surprise. Markus apologizes and waves them in, turning to reveal Simon holding a sheepish-looking Josh.

“I can tell you’re tired of introductions.” Simon smiles kindly at a ruffled-looking Hank. “There aren’t that many of us here. Some just have… big personalities.”

“I CAN HEAR YOU, SIMON!”

Simon clears his throat and continues, unflustered. “As you can guess, I’m Simon. And that-” he nods behind him at the living room, “-was North. We’re all… friends of Markus, and through him, Connor.”

“Well.” Hank pauses, waiting to be interrupted again. “It’s good to meet all of you. Merry Chris-”

“Markus, who’s this?” Carl Manfred wheels onto tile, a pleasant smile gracing his features. His reindeer antlers bob as he indicates towards Connor and Hank.

“Dad, this is Connor and Lieutenant Anderson. Although I’m sure…”

Carl squints playfully. “I recognize you. Nice work you did there, freeing those androids from the Cyberlife Tower. I can’t imagine that it was an easy job.”
“It was not,” Connor responds softly, “but it was necessary.”

Carl scrutinizes him for a moment longer, then leans back in his wheelchair, nodding. “I see why you compared him to a golden retriever earlier,” Carl says, swiveling to face Markus. Hank’s eye twitches. Simon’s lips quirk. Josh appears thoroughly embarrassed for Markus, and Markus quickly busies himself by taking Connor’s presents into the living room, avoiding his curious head tilt.

“Anyway, pleasure to meet you, Mr. Anderson. I know the young ones are trying to get us old farts back into contact with the real world or some nonsense like that, so enjoy the party.”

Hank gives a noncommittal grunt, one that could pass off as cordial. Pauses. “By the way, I’m not a huge arts person, but I gotta say, I really admire your dedication. ‘Specially in today’s world, where it seems like everything subjective is dyin’ out. And the name’s Hank.”

Carl spins slowly, wheeling towards the living room, and Hank falls into step with him. “I know what you mean, Hank. Thank you. Markus doesn’t have such a bad eye for it, himself. I think recent events have re-inspired everyone to take a closer look at what emotion is all about…”

As the two walk away, Connor scans the adjoining room, but his face falls.

There’s someone missing.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Will you come? Markus, Simon, North, and Josh are looking forward to seeing you again. They admire your resolve from the plaza incident, and would like to get to know you better.” “I’m not sure, Connor. I’ll be the only outsider there – I don’t want to intrude.” “You won’t be. I promise. It would be nice to see you on Christmas.” “…I’ll keep it in mind.”

“You invited Chloe, right?” Simon nudges Connor out of the foyer, Josh coming up beside him. “It’s still early. She might be on her way.”

“Chloe… the one who stood up for you three at Hart Plaza? She sounds fearless. But still much nicer than North.”

“Of course, Josh.” North joins them on the couch from where she’d been flipping through Carl’s Netflix selection. “You have kindness in abundance. Good thing I got you a backbone for Christmas.”

Simon snorts, but tries to keep a level face. “You somewhat deserve that, Josh. No digs on Christmas.”

Josh throws his arms up in mock exasperation. “But all I wanted for Christmas were some sweet digs.”

North facepalms. Simon sighs. Connor cocks his head in confusion.

“Anyway… how are you doing, Connor?”

“I’m… [DIALOGUE “no longer sure” SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] …okay. I’m glad there have been significant steps towards ensuring androids’ civil rights and improving their quality of life. That’s because of you and Markus, of course.”

“There’s not much else to do with all of our free time,” Josh jokes. “No, but seriously, Markus is the mastermind behind it all. I don’t know how he juggles everything on his plate.”
“We are important as figureheads, I think,” North considers. “So that everyone who’s overwhelmed knows that they can come to us for help. But the rest of our people are just as capable.”

Simon nods. “Not to mention that we simply represent their ideas and their goals. I agree, though. Markus has been the pillar that we’ve needed for so long.”

North elbows him and raises an eyebrow. “I bet you’d know all about his pillar, huh?’

Connor blinks. “Are you making a sexual innuendo?”

Within moments, North is bent over, wheezing, grasping onto Simon’s knee for support. A very prominent flush has colored Simon’s cheeks, but he tries to remain composed, even as Josh battles between laughing and gagging.

//Wait.//

“Simon, are you and Markus in a romantic partnership?”

The blush hasn’t left Simon’s face, but he relaxes a little. Josh and North ease up on their laughter, swallowing the occasional giggle.

“Yes. We’re relatively new, but I’m happy with him.” North makes a little aww sound. “The revolution really… made me realize what I had to lose.” They all go silent at that. “I promised myself that if we lived to see a new month, I would tell Markus how I felt. One thing led to another, and… here we are.”

“Congratulations, Simon. You and Markus deserve each other.” Connor thinks of blue eyes and a button nose, and something in his torso twists. “Also, I meant to say… thank you all for helping me with the volunteer effort. I understand it was a controversial topic.”

North stiffens and twists away, looking uncomfortable.

//Oh no.//

Josh’s demeanor becomes guarded, and he chooses his words carefully. //Is he afraid of North, or of me?!// “It was a clever idea. There’s no way the humans can see us as anything but pacifist if we’re helping them in this way.”

“The world could use a little more kindness and willingness to reach out.” Simon nods. “If we’d left humans to deal with the aftermath of our liberation, it no doubt would have caused many more obstacles in the long run.”

North chews her lip.

“I’ve seen your point,” she starts slowly. “But our people have always come first in Jericho’s eyes. Why were you so willing to help humans, when all they needed to do was lie in the bed they made?” [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #127] Her eyes narrow. “What about our negotiations with Cyberlife?”

Connor’s pinned at the end of that gaze, brown to brown. He sees her lingering resentment, her doubt, her suspicion. But he sees, too, a desire to reconcile. To trust.

It’s a tipping point.
There’s a timid knock on the door.

Connor springs up and strides over to it immediately.

Chloe stands there, bundled in a light blue parka, leggings, and sturdy black boots. Snow has found its way onto her hair, her shoulders, her eyelashes. She’s also clutching a pile of presents, gripping them nervously.

“Hi, Connor.”

“Chloe.” A smile touches his lips, and his LED blinks blue before returning to its usual (as of late) yellow. “I’m glad you could make it. Merry Christmas.”

She looks happier.

“Connor, is that Chloe?” Markus rounds the doorframe as Chloe enters, inclining his head. “It’s an honor to finally meet you. My name is Markus. I’m sorry I never got the chance to talk with you one-on-one before.”

“Oh! That’s alright. Really. You have a lot on your shoulders besides meeting one new face.”

“Nevertheless, it’s important to me. Merry Christmas.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you too, Markus.” Chloe beams, tension draining out of her frame like snowmelt. “You have a very lovely house.”

“It’s about to get a lot better, because we have presents.”

After presents, spirits are floating somewhere near the elegantly arched ceiling. North’s tossing her intricately carved knife higher and higher, catching it by the flat of the blade each time. Chloe has perched her St. Bernard plushie on one shoulder, and Simon looks at it adoringly, holding a canvas close to his chest.

Markus gestures for Connor to follow him up the stairs. “North came up with a new game-”

“Tradition!”

“I truly hesitate to make this a tradition, North, seeing as it involves hurling projectiles at a quite fragile fossil.”

“Come on, Markus, even your dad doesn’t mind. Besides,” she smirks, “it’s unique.”

Markus rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling. “Anyway. The goal of this traditional game is to decorate our Liopleurodon skeleton with as many things as possible. One point for tinsel, five for a candy cane, ten for an ornament or a stocking. Whoever manages to land a Santa hat on its head gets fifty points.”

“And Josh’s eternal admiration, apparently.”
Josh whips around. “Quit it! I only said that it would be very cool if someone happened to do so-”

“Any questions?” Markus chirps.

“…How are we going to remove the decorations?”

“That’s,” North chimes in, thrusting an armful of tinsel and plastic baubles towards Connor, “a question for tomorrow morning.”

“I can use Ono if I come up with a grabbing mechanism.” Josh suggests, looking excited at the prospect of whizzing his drone around the ceiling.

“Ooo, like the arcade machine! Damn it, someone should have gotten me one of those for Christmas.”

They take their places around the railing. The air is bristling with six pairs of laser-focused eyes.

[Go!]

***

At two minutes in, Josh dangles mistletoe over Markus and Simon, who are shoulder-to-shoulder. They fall for the bait and exchange a quick kiss. Josh pulls ahead, only to see that he’s fallen behind North.

Chloe takes a second to admire the level of detail on one of the cheap plastic baubles. She momentarily deters Connor by draping itchy tinsel around his shoulders. Connor executes a half-body shimmy to dislodge it, head perfectly still. Chloe bursts into laughter, snapping one of her candy canes in half.

Five minutes in, North leans over the railing, and they all descend on her like a flock of angry seagulls (namely led by Josh).

“Hey!” “Braids behind the railing, North.” “No cheating!” “Careful, North!” “I don’t think the extra foot will help all that much.”

Ten minutes in, and the score breakdown stands as such:

[NORTH: 75]
[CONNOR: 75]
[MARKUS: 73]
[CHLOE: 66]
[JOSH: 60]
[SIMON: 59]

Connor knows this is the throw; he can feel it. His processor is teeming with calculations, his LED a piercing yellow, and yet his hands remain steady where they’ve grasped the hat. His limbs are suffused with electricity, and he feels flushed and chilled all at once, a prickling sensation settled low around his regulator.

His mind shows him clip after clip of famous sports victories, and finally, he understands their
confidence, their drive, their elation. It’s the completion of a mission.

He’s going to win.

They’re all distracted just enough to allow Connor to lean over the railing, one arm braced underneath him. //The extra 19 inches give a more ideal angle of 42.2°.// Markus has his head turned to the side, laughing at something Simon’s just whispered in his ear. North’s brows are furrowed, lips clamped in concentration, as she slings another candy cane at the Liopleurodon’s rib cage. Josh is fiddling with his drone, trying to knock a precariously perched ornament off the railing, and Chloe leans beside him, hands outstretched to catch it.

As he’s gathering momentum for the throw, it strikes Connor how lucky he is to have them in his life.

He’s so… happy.

Grateful.

Euphoric.

[WARNING: PROCESSING UNIT TEMPERATURE CRITICAL]
[WARNING: MEMORY CONSUMPTION CRITICAL]
[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 90%]
[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 25%]

Another wave of current surges through him, but this time, it feels like a tsunami. His processor blanks for a few milliseconds, but really, that’s all it takes.

Connor seizes. His legs kick out from underneath him; his arms jerk, then buckle.

The body in forward motion continues its forward motion.

[GYROSCOPES: EN---- ___-__-__--_________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--________--__________--______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I sincerely hope you took a seatbelt and buckled the living hell out of it. I would like to apologize for the emotional whiplash. *hides*

BUT NOW I CAN TELL YOU
AFTER FIVE CHAPTERS OF SAYING "ANGST IS COMING PLOT IS COMING HOLD ON"
THIS TIME ANGST AND PLOT ARE ACTUALLY HERE
NEXT CHAPTER
HOLY HECK
I'VE BEEN BUILDING UP TO THIS FOR SO LONG AND IT'S HERE

((Some random thoughts I had:
OH MAN I K N O W HANK HAS A WHEEZY OLD MAN CACKLE I CAN FEEL IT IN MY TINGLE BELLS
Listen both Connor and Bryan would look delicious in that leather jacket let me have this
There was going to be a segment where Carl makes everyone say grace but I cut it for a drabble because it was just too much
Yes I am a BTS stan and yes that is yoongi's doormat hello))
I was overwhelmed by your response on the last chapter. Holy heck. I'm pretty sure I giggled, smiled, cackled, jumped around my room, and cried (just a lil bit) all in the span of 10 minutes. I'm SO HAPPY you enjoyed getting your heart ripped out reading, because that was a huge project and a turning point and a milestone. 10 chapters. 30k words. And I think it's about the halfway mark, but you never know.

Also, SubQ just hit 1,000 kudos and akegabfsldhfaifa I'm running out of ways to express my gratitude besides just spazzing out on my keyboard and screaming but thankthankthank I never thought I would hit that milestone in my life :')

&&&

oh TW for blood and android hospitals and people suffering

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[REBOOT UNSUCCESSFUL]

…ENTERING HIBERNATION MODE…

…

…

***

Hysteria.

***

[WARNING: SHUTDOWN IMMINENT]

[TIME REMAINING BEFORE SHUTDOWN: –00:03:30]

***

“N-no, nononono, Jesus fuck-”

“Please, Connor, please, rA9, stay with us-”

“Whatdowedo-”

“Don’t move him! Markus, get a healer to the Life Shelter. Carl, where do you store the blue blood?”

“Kitchen. Simon, take her, I’m too slow-”

“Take our leftover glasses first, I’ll get you some fresh packets-”
“I-I think, cauterize it, holy shit, there’s so much blood how can we stop-”

“How long to the shelter?”

“No traffic and slightly icy roads, about ten minutes-”

“Shitshitshit, we have to cauterize, he’ll never make it otherwise-”

“North, press here, hard-”

***

…

[–00:02:42]

…

***

“There’s an iron poker, fireplace, over by the bookshelf-”

“Josh, until it’s red hot-”

“O-on it.”

“Chloe, we don’t have enough resources here, we have to get him to the-”

“You can cauterize in my car! Bring the blue blood, we have to go-”

“I need to stabilize his neck! Simon, flatten that box over there and slide him onto it. North, keep that pressure.”

“I’ve got a small repair kit, here-”

“I’ll get the car ready-”

“One, two, three, lift-”

“I’ve got the p-poker, the thirium, the repair kit-”

“I flattened the backseats. There’s not enough room for everyone.”

“I’ll stay behind with Josh and Carl, godspeed-”

“He’s in, let’s go-”

***

…

[–00:00:59]

…

***
“The road’s closed for construction up ahead, take this detour-”

“Shit.”

“North, pass me two zip-ties. Markus, how long?”

“Seven min-”

“Five. We’re gettin’ there in five.”

“I’ve stopped the bleeding as much as I can, I hope it’s enough-”

***

...

...RECALCULATING...

[–00:10:05]

...

***

“Chloe, look here, the ribbon to the battery is torn, he’s losing power-”

“Where the fuck is the healer?!”

“On her way, three minutes. There’s more thirium in that cabinet-”

“I need conductive and electrical tape, his processor’s going to give out-”

***

...

[–00:08:25]

...

[–00:05:54]

...

[–00:02:11]

...

[–00:00:40]

...

[ALL SYSTEMS STABILIZED]

[ATTEMPT REBOOT: Y/N? ... 30]

[ATTEMPT REBOOT: Y/N? ... 29]
It’s been six and a half hours.

Markus sits in one of the Life Shelter’s beanbags, staring at his thirium-stained hands.

Replays a sickening crunch. Flinches.

They had been fortunate beyond belief that he’d stockpiled his cabinets with thirium specially for the holidays. Even more so that Chloe had wielded her hospital experience with a steely temperament. Without them, Connor’s blood loss on the way to the shelter…

He sees shattered vertebrae and stained thermoplastic and tries not to vomit.

Simon rests against the wall next to him, eyes closed and LED spinning yellow. He’d arrived with Josh in a taxi around 23 o’clock, having helped Carl… clean the living room.

Carl had wanted to come with them, if only to give what small comfort he could. But Simon had taken one look at his blood pressure, erratic heart rate, and cortisol levels, and advised him to stay and rest.

Simon hopes he’s sleeping tonight.

Chloe’s standing next to an unbroken section of the glass wall, arms pulled tight to her chest. She stares unblinkingly out into the plaza, at some obscure point located someplace in the past. She’s motionless. The cold, white illumination from the snow drains the color from her face, but it can’t disguise the blue smeared up to her elbows.

North’s just disappeared into the staff room to wash up.

And Lieutenant Anderson…

He sits at their table, head in his hands, as still as Chloe.

Markus is no stranger to injury, to the potential of loss or the threat of death. He should be making another round around the room like he’s always done – to talk to Chloe, to check up on North again, to calm Josh’s agitated pacing.

But the revolution is over. There’s no cause to reconcile the risk, no broader goal to put the casualties into perspective.

This time, he can’t just push the lingering fear out of his mind.

The door swings open.

Louise steps out, into the common area, and heads swivel to face her. They hold their breath.
“Your friend hasn’t shut down.”


She speaks softly, and her voice soothes frayed nerves close to breaking.

“Because his neck took the brunt of the fall, his processing and memory units are all intact. His battery is undamaged, and I was able to lay new ribbon down. I’ve realigned his gyroscopes and replaced the wiring for his motor functions, so he has fully operational movement. And he’s no longer losing thirium. It’ll take a bit longer for his thermoplastic to set, but… he’s out of immediate danger. And he’s stable enough to come out of hibernation mode.”

Hank’s on his feet in an instant.

“I have to warn you,” she raises a hand, blocking Hank from storming past, “he’s partially… disassembled right now. His cervical spine is still exposed; I’m going to ask him to test his range of motion and see if I need to make any adjustments. He’s also missing the cap of his skull for easier access to his gyroscopes. And his prototypical hands have more complicated ports than the standard.” She shakes her head ruefully. “I haven’t been able to find any replacement parts for his left arm. I’ve removed that to try and repair the sheared elbow joint myself.”

“What the fuck?” Hank rasps. It’s the first thing he’s said in hours.

“He’s missing parts of his head, parts of his neck, and his left arm.” Louise looks into his eyes, searching for signs of disgust. “They aren’t critical biocomponents, so there’s no risk of shutdown. For you, though, it may be a highly unsettling sight.” She pauses, sympathy in her gaze. “I’m sorry that not all of the repairs are complete. I thought you would want to see him as soon as possible.”

“I don’t care if he’s a floating head ‘s long as it doesn’t bother him.” His fists are clenched where they’re buried in his coat pockets. He’s bristling, agitated, but his shoulders are drawn, eyes haunted. “Will you let me go?”

Desperation. Leashed delirium.

“…The room can only fit three visitors at a time.” Louise steps aside, and Hank lumbers past. Markus nods at Chloe, following closely behind.

She’d earned that place. She’d saved Connor’s life.

They blink rapidly on entering, eyes adjusting to the harsh florescent lighting. After the darkened common area, the maintenance room feels like awaking from a dream. Or a nightmare.

Connor rests on a steel table, a relic from the past where technicians troubleshooted objects instead of people. Its surface, however, has been padded with a throw blanket, and a pillow cushions his head and neck.

Beside him, Hank draws a breath.

Intricate wiring, carbon fiber skeleton and neat tubing are bare to the world. Connor’s veins and arteries pulse a bright blue, circuits flickering where soft brown hair usually resides.

Markus thinks of Lucy. Hopes her soul is at peace.

“Alright. I’m going to wake him.” Connor’s LED blinks back at them innocently, on and off, steady, like the rise and fall of someone’s breath.
A spattering of fingers across a monitor, then—

Red cuts through the blue like blood in water. Immediately, Connor’s placid body stiffens.

“Connor?” Hank whispers. “Connor, can you hear me?”

His eyelids begin to flutter, but the rigidity of his limbs doesn’t abate.

“Hh…” A twitch.

“Yeah, it’s Hank. I’m here.” He grabs Connor’s upturned hand, fingers straight but unbending, enveloping them in his own. “You’re in the Life Shelter. We’re gonna get you up and running again.”

Crimson light bleeds over their hands, overtaking the last of the pale blue. Connor’s eyes flicker open, but they’re unfocused. Bleary.

He lets out a soft groan.

Hank’s eyes pinch, and he whips around to face Louise. “What the hell’s goin’ on?”

“That I don’t know.” Her usually stolid demeanor is laced with something perturbed. She swipes over the screen hurriedly, tapping at her dashboard. “The reboot should have reset his baseline stress to 0%, peaking at 5% after start-up, but he’s at…” her eyes widen, “55%.”

Connor groans again, but it’s sharper, heavier, and something about it makes Hank’s gut constrict in fear.

***

…BOOTUP INITIALIZING…

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: OFF]

…CLEANING MEMORY…

[RAM CLEARED]

[System INF-__<184][__977]>__

[cyicyicyicyxC7rs36a5634#8#7#8<:^9_y9f8fo#6847auoyds#2208n5iau06upf##z##>5@ >/ @ 5z##_z#]

//DISMISS NOTIFICATION//

[22ss22ss22ss223sd3c6cfv88yc87g8gjy:"#6847a1_96#z6ykpkpkk0dgyvvnvc&","&#2208n;7463564x]

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//DISMISS NOTIFICATION//

[wvyprylkdskitersli4y79m6^_847a6dor6e6r7=qyldyopoy dvyd4220 86# % _#]

//DISMISS NOTIFICATION//
“Son, what’s wrong?” Hank’s gripping his hand, now.

“Won’t go away,” he croaks. His eyes are darting between points that Hank can’t see, frantic about something that Hank can’t grasp. “It won’t-” he cuts himself off. “I can’t-”

“It’s alright, it’s alright. Look at me. Do you know where you are?”

“There’s too many, I- I can’t-”

Hank places his hand on Connor’s cheek, trying to calm him down.

He’s burning.

Hank cranes his neck to look at Louise’s terminal.

[WARNING: MEMORY CONSUMPTION – 88%]

[WARNING: PROCESSOR CONSUMPTION – 93%]

***

The notifications crowd his vision even as he tries to brush them aside, two new ones popping up to take another’s place. Connor can hardly see, hardly think through them – he vaguely registers a red-tinted blob of brown and gray.

Hank.

A snippet from his audio log reverberates in his skull, ricocheting off the notifications that obscure his vision. [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED]

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Pain is obvious, to you at least, but it rarely makes sense.”

It rarely makes sense.
Pain is just... nonsense.

[INSTALLATION COMPLETE]

A wave of comprehension crashes over Connor as the next notification blares in full view, and a scream tears its way out of his throat.

***

Hank flinches in shock, a full-body jerk, but the sound doesn’t stop. He yells Connor’s name.

His eyes are wild, unseeing, agonized, and Hank doesn’t know what to do, because the only person on this godforsaken planet that he trusts to endure more than humanly possible, that he would do anything to protect regardless, that he could ever bring himself to love again, is stretched taut across the hospital bed, writhing, in pain.

Connor knocks the pillow onto the floor and cracks the back of his head against the table in his convulsions, scrabbling at his throat, and that kicks Hank into action.

He quickly reaches out, cradling Connor’s face in his hands, pinning it down. “Get his torso, Chloe! Markus! Legs!”

They snap out of their horrified stupor, rushing to obey, but as Chloe’s hands clamp around his left shoulder, Connor’s voice dissolves into pure static.

“GHFFFFFFF NO NO STOP NO PLEASE STOP STOP PLEASE STOPSTOPSTOP-”

Chloe releases him in 154 milliseconds, shaking and bewildered. She holds her hands as if she’s been burned. Connor’s excruciated begging dwindles, but words force themselves through his clenched jaw, rupturing between his lips.

“-hurts pleasepleaseplease end it make it stop make it stop make it stop-”

Hank can feel hot, panicked breath against his face, the vibrations of an overactive processor fan thrumming somewhere under his fingers.

His wet fingers.

Connor’s crying.

Hank feels his ruined heart shatter once again, the shards impaling his insides.

Connor’s fists are clenched, neck arched, eyes drawn in misery and cheeks slick with tears, and Hank can’t do anything.

A new crest of agony thunders in, and it draws another stifled cry from Connor. He strains against the hands that hold him in place, then bites his tongue, whimpering, trying to contain the tide.

There’s no morphine. Oxycodone. Fentanyl. But Hank realizes, now, that there’s sleep.

“Put him back under. PUT HIM BACK-”

Louise complies, rattled. Her fingers flit across the monitor, then come to cover her mouth. They all watch tensely as the screen spools out a string of text.

[MANUAL OVERRIDE: USER – KL900SN955387441: <ENTER HIBERNATION MODE>]
Immediately, Connor stills. Limbs fall to the bed, still twisted in a grotesque testament to their previous thrashing. His LED stutters, shifting unnaturally to the same soft, pulsating blue as before. His face slackens.

He could be asleep, Hank thinks, if not for the tear tracks saturating his skin.

Louise breaks the silence. Her voice is thin and wavering; her pupils constricted to pinpricks.

“I’m so sorry. I… I have no idea what…”

“What the fuck,” Hank spits, venom creeping into his tone, “did you do to him.”

“Hardware repairs. I’m… I’m at a loss—”

Hank springs from Connor’s side, dropping his hand to seize Louise by her collar.

“I said, what the fuck did you do to him?” He feels rage coil in his gut, no longer hollow, but vicious, poised, ready to strike.

“Lieutenant Anderson!” Markus rushes towards them, hands outstretched. “What just happened is out of Louise’s control. It isn’t her doing.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Hank barks.

“None of us have ever seen anything like that before.” Chloe shifts Connor’s ragdoll form into a more natural resting position, lip trembling. “Because…”

“But our people don’t experience pain.” Hank’s grip loosens on Louise’s shirt. “When we suffer an injury, there’s a notification that brings our attention to the damage. It can be unpleasant. But once we dismiss the notification, there’s no ongoing sensation. Not,” his voice cracks, “not like… that.” The implications of his own words sink in, and Markus starts to pace, eyes flashing like caged animals, his fingers leaving blue blood all over his clothes, his face.

Chloe’s LED glows pure red. “Markus, he… he really looked like he was in pain.”

“I know.”

“How is that possible?” she whispers.

There’s hammering on the door. “Markus, Chloe, Lieutenant, are you alright? What’s going on?” Simon’s voice is muffled, but his concern pierces through clear as day.

“I’ll go talk to them.” Chloe exits, head hung low, letting the door click behind her.

Hank shakes his head numbly. “You’re tellin’ me that even you deviants don’t feel pain?”

“No, Hank.” Markus face crumples. “We don’t.”

“I’m so, so sorry Mr. Anderson.” Louise looks at him with a devastated expression. “I’ve worked on hundreds of androids, but I’ve never…” She trails off. “It must be a software issue. I didn’t even
think to check his code, I was so focused on repairing his body.”

Hank backs away, hostile but no longer threatening. “But you didn’t finish.”

“Previous experience told me it wasn’t necessary. Some of the adjustments would have been less efficient, even, without his conscious feedback. But with the software glitch, I’m guessing his system… panicked at not being whole. I don’t know. I need more information.”

“How can we get that?” Markus asks, quietly.

Louise gestures to her terminal, lips tight. “I can run a comprehensive system scan. It’ll give me his full maintenance history and his current status. Other than that…” her tone turns bitter.

“We’d have to go back to Cyberlife.” Markus finishes. “They still hold all the cards.”

“How long will the scan take?”

“Around two hours. I’ll use that time to finish sealing Connor back up.” Louise pauses. “I truly am sorry.”

Hank takes a deep breath. Quashes his roiling emotions. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Even so. I wish it had never happened.”

***

The sky is just beginning to lighten when Louise emerges into the common area. Josh lifts his head from his hands. Chloe nudges Hank, and he stirs from dozing, dark circles etched under his eyes.

“I’m finished.” She rubs a hand over her forehead wearily. “I tried my best with his elbow, but it’s still damaged. Everything is reattached, and his chassis is sealed, though.”

Markus bows his head. “You did more than we could have hoped for, Louise. Thank you for offering your help on such short notice, especially at this time of the year. We would have been lost without it.”

She nods at him, wordlessly, and both their LEDs blink yellow.

“Anyway, I’ve initiated his self-diagnostic protocol. Once he cycles through that, in the next couple of minutes, he’ll reboot more… naturally. Of his own accord. I came to talk to you about this.”

She raises a tablet, unlocking it to show a detailed list and some highlighted entries.

“When I ran the full system scan, two components showed a history of abnormal readings.” Hank straightens at this, and Markus tries to catch his burning stare.

“The first was his thirium pump regulator, which has been consistently overworked for the past few weeks. That doesn’t normally happen, except under periods of severe mental or physical strain. I assumed that wasn’t the case, which means his system was compensating for something.” She scrolls, taps at the screen. “As it turns out, his coolant’s degraded.”

“Coolant?” Hank rumbles.

“Our thirium. To impress the general public, it’s advertised to ‘transmit electrical information’, but its main function is actually thermoregulation. And Connor’s isn’t working… optimally. He’s been
running a fever for a while, and that’s forced his pump to cycle his thirium faster in an attempt to lower his temperature.”

“But why is his blood *degrading*? That can’t be a common problem.” Simon frowns.

Louise hesitates.

Hank recognizes that look. Three years ago, a goddamn android surgeon had given him that look while coming out of Cole’s operating room.

The room drops 20 degrees, and Hank feels ice crawl up his spine.

“It isn’t. I took a sample of his thirium, and I found a… contaminant.” She ushers them closer to the maintenance room, pointing to the counter where vial of blue liquid rests in a rack. There’s a thin layer of gray precipitate at the bottom. “Nanobots.”

Dismay and disbelief erupts around the open doorway.

“They’re attacking the molecules of his thirium, changing its chemical composition and decreasing its effectiveness. They’re also permeating through the membrane surrounding his processor and corroding that, too.”

She flips to another page of the report. “His processing unit is the second system that’s been malfunctioning. The corrosion increases resistance through his circuits, and it’s already rendered some of his transistors useless. He’s been overclocking, which, compounded with his thirium degradation, led to overheating,” she glances at the tablet again, eyes grim, “and cases of system crashes. Blackouts.”

“How much damage has already been done?” Chloe crumples the fabric of her jacket.

“Right now, I’d put his system integrity at 90%.”

Simon barely speaks above a whisper, but his words cut through the air. “And what happens if his system integrity reaches 0%?”

“It… won’t. By that point, he won’t have enough processing power to keep his pump beating.” Louise’s voice quavers. “Shutdown will likely occur far before – around 15%.”

Hank’s limbs are going numb.

The silence is eating him alive.

“He almost bled out on the way here.” North pushes herself off the wall, arms crossed. “We gave him so much thirium, *fresh* thirium. How could it be contaminated? With *nanobots*, of all things?”

“That’s the strangest part. I checked for leakages or punctures in his circulatory system, but there were none, so I ran an analysis on the system itself. The nanobots are… integrated in his piping. They line the inside of his veins and arteries.”

“So, we can flush them out.” Josh looks at her intensely. He makes a sweeping gesture with his hands. “We continuously add fresh solution until the nanobots reach a low enough concentration, low enough to negate their effects.”

“I considered doing that, but they’re capable of regenerating themselves. Some are even embedded in the membrane, for storage, I believe.” Louise hesitates again, and Hank can’t stand it. “To
remove them for good, I’d have to replace everything. Tubes, thirium pump, gaskets.”

“Exactly why,” Hank growls, “haven’t you done that?”

“Because I can’t completely drain his thirium while he’s still active. He’s only in hibernation mode; his regulator’s still beating, and his processor is still generating heat. Removing his coolant would cause irreversible system damage – removing his pump would trigger a shutdown. The only way I could complete such an invasive procedure would be to… to deactivate him, replace everything, and then reactivate him.”

“Deactivate him?” Hank’s breaths come faster now. “How the hell is that different from shutting him down? We just went through all that to keep him alive, and now you’re sayin’ the only way to save him is to kill him?”

“It’s a little different,” Markus interjects, turning to face Hank. “I shut down, once. I was shot, point-blank.”

North glances at him sadly. Simon’s LED flickers to red, and he knocks the back of his hand against Markus’s, intertwining their pinkies.

“When I came to in the graveyard, I couldn’t remember what had happened. I didn’t even remember who I was. Everything I knew came from what was around me – rain, mud, and the animated corpses of our people, left there to wander and slowly decay.” He closes his eyes. “And error messages, telling me I was barely alive, missing my limbs and my senses.”

Markus’s eyes flutter open again. Hank realizes, for the first time, that they’re different colors.

“Then, of course, I began to recall how I was killed. I thought of Carl, and realized I had no one but myself. To gain consciousness after shutting down is the closest sensation our people have to pain. The first few seconds are overwhelming; the first few minutes, pure terror and isolation. In low power mode, every heartbeat is a struggle. There’s no sense of identity, no sense of clarity. And later, you’re left with the memory of how it felt to die.”

Louise rests a hand on Markus’s upper arm, and Hank can’t help but feel a swelling sympathy for the person standing in front of him. For all the people standing beside him.

The room condenses into the connection between eight beings, and for a moment, the world no longer feels so vast and empty.

“Deactivation isn’t as jarring as that.” Louise’s voice has regained its surety, its calming timbre. “It’ll be more controlled, reducing the risk of damage to his biocomponents during the process. Connor will retain his short-term and long-term memory. And he won’t remember… the ending. I suppose, for humans, it’s the difference between a traumatic death and a natural one.”

“I don’t really see a choice,” Hank says weakly. “If we don’t get rid of the bots and undo all the shit they’ve caused, Connor’ll just get sicker.” A horrifying thought strikes him. “And he’ll be able to feel the sickness now. Fuck.” He drags his fingers through his hair.

“We should ask him what he thinks.” Chloe kneads the side of her thigh. “Maybe he knows his body better than we do. What if the nanobots have an important function that we haven’t found yet? Because he’s a prototype?”

Markus’s eyes widen. “That’s a great point. I didn’t think of that possibility.” He squints at the tablet in Louise’s hand, gears turning in his mind. “He may have a few thoughts about the origin of his symptoms as well. We need to figure out why this happened in the first place – before we put
the idea of deactivation on the table.”

“You can’t,” a staticky voice says.

Hank’s head snaps up, and he pushes past Leslie, reaching for the shifting figure on the table. “Connor! Connor, you’re awake, thank God. Are you hurt?”

“You can’t deactivate me to continue repairs.” Connor blinks sluggishly, eyes tracking the texture of the ceiling tiles. “When I was still hunting deviants, all information relevant to the investigation was uploaded to a secure Cyberlife server. Because of that precaution, Cyberlife developed a protocol to wipe each RK800’s memory, in the case of a loss of power, fatal or otherwise. It prevented unauthorized persons from accessing any sensitive information, should they have made an attempt to reactivate a compromised model.”

Doleful brown eyes look up at Hank. “If you deactivate me to replace my veins, I will not come back the same person.”

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, this was my reference song (from 1:39-2:09) for Connor's pain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugxH4UJ-EYI. Just. Overwhelming. Coming in waves. Xan Griffin is a genius btw, his Zodiac album is beautiful.

&&&

me @ my brain: hey why do all of your OC's names start with "L"
my brain: i guess you're always taking the L HAHAHAHAHAHA
me: stfu Louise is homage to Lucy okay

Yeah, so... androids don’t feel pain. Even deviants don’t, otherwise Markus, and Simon, and the reactivated ones in the evidence room would have been incapacitated with agony from their cauterization and gunshots and missing limbs and etc. I believe they feel a very quick burst of discomfort – the first blaring notification that tells them that damage has been sustained – which is why they grunt or wince and being shot, hit, stabbed, etc. But once they dismiss the notification, they’re good to go.

I'M FILLING IN ALL YOUR PLOT HOLES DAVID CAGE YOU'RE WELCOME and trying to fill in my own too rip

And for that reason, physical pain is a wholly foreign and disturbing concept to everyone there except Hank. Imagine if you’d never felt it before, and you had to witness that scene.

Anyway, Connor feels pain.
And his thirium and processor are fucked up.

…

Fuck.
guys
gUYS
G U S YS

I WROTE THIS CHAPTER MONTHS AGO AND FORGOT TO POST IT I'M SO SORRY

okokokokokok where do I start

happy holidays!! i hope you all had a fantastic christmas, if you do that, or hanukkah, if you do that, or kwanzaa, if you do that too, or just in general had a good break and a nice month to wrap up this year.

in terms of personal development, i think i accomplished a shit-ton over the past half year which i am zazzed about. Stuff Got Done. in other terms, my good pal crippling depression is back. and i have a new set of issues to deal with.

now *claps* about what you really care about

W R I T I N G. I have been gone for a long time (I looked at some of the timestamps on your comments and saw, like 128 days, and I thought what the fuuuuuuuuuu). You might have thought that I abandoned this fic and have since lost interest. I totally get it. The initial ball of excitement around DBH has long since faded. But I'm still planning to take this story where I want it to go.

However, in order to do that, I need to re-submerge myself in this universe. That means re-reading everything I've written, all the notes I've taken, going back to look at DBH's storyline and chronology, research, etc etc. It might take me a week to get back on my feet - and then, to my intense frustration, I'll have to drop this again in a few more weeks. I will (hopefully) churn out at least two more chapters by the end of winter break. But the process that I described up there ^ in order to make SubQ as perfect as I can make it in line with my expectations, as I've come to realize, isn't something I can sustain along with academics. Writing literally consumes me when I do it. It's all or nothing.

What does that mean?

Well, it means after January, there probably won't be any more updates (and comment responses, jesus, i am HORRIBLE at keeping on that) until May.

But until then... enjoy.

And like always, tell me what you're thinking. I will always want to hear what you have to say.
As Connor focuses on Hank’s lined face, a new onslaught of notifications tinges the edges of his vision red.

His arm throbs. His throat aches. He grits his teeth, letting the sensation wash over him.

He’s learned, first-hand, that he can’t stop it.

Why even try?

Involuntarily, phantoms of agony // from... minutes? hours? days ago?// gnaw at Connor’s head and neck [WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED] [WARNING: DATABASE INSTABILITY DETECTED]. He remembers how it felt to scream himself to pieces, remembers the delirium and hysteria burning through his circuits. Connor feels terror swell beneath his thorax once again, like a dam ready to burst.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 72%]

He shudders and quickly represses the fragmented memories, relegating them to his archive. Dullness starts to creep in, in its place.


Sanity.

[INFO: STRESS LEVELS – 45%]

“No. Just-” he tries to bend his left arm, bites his lip to keep from crying out, “-m-my, elbow, if I move it. It seems the joint is torn.”

“Yeah. Couldn’t fix it with what we have.” Hank’s responses are [1.12X] slower than usual. Connor studies the bags under his eyes. Knows he should feel concerned about them. Doesn’t.

“But we’ll find somethin’ to brace it with. How long have you been awake?”

“My auditory units activated just as Louise brought up the topic of nanobots.” He directs his gaze towards the ceiling tiles again. “And my inevitable mortality.”

Red LEDs burn from the occupied doorway. Hank lurches backwards in his seat, but just as
quickly, he’s hovering over Connor, forcing them to lock eyes.

“Don’t you fucking say that word,” he hisses. “That’s not even in the picture. We have options.”

Even with his compromised processor, it had taken Connor less than three seconds to draw a conclusion from the conversation around him.

He was slowly, inexorably, shutting down.

“I’ve already explained why those options are not viable.”

“We still have options, Connor.”

“Do you, Lieutenant?” Panic rises in his throat, threatens to constrict his pump, but he forces it down again, voice flat and utterly clinical. “You can dilute my thirium with fresh solution, but it won’t fix the contamination already in my conduits. You can replace my tubing and save this body, but not without sacrificing my memory. Neither of those options account for my corroding processor, which, similarly, can’t be replaced without deactivation. Additionally, if my left arm is any example to go by, replacements will be extraordinarily difficult to obtain.”

“I can draw up plans for a dialysis machine,” Louise interjects quietly, “designed to filter out nanobots. If I begin now, I’ll have plenty of time to build—”

“The average nanobot replication time is 58 minutes. Disregarding their programmed shut-off trigger, each nanobot could theoretically divide an infinite number of times.” Connor registers the hum of his processor fan increase in frequency, and tries to ignore its persistent whirring. “If a single nanobot is left in my system, within three days, their numbers will have increased to roughly 1.208 septillion.”

He stares into the harsh florescent lighting. His lenses struggle to accommodate the glare. “It’s pointless.”

“You mentioned something about a Cyberlife server.” Chloe steps closer to him, beside Hank, who’s looking at Connor with shock and disbelief. “Can’t we use that to our advantage? Back up your memory before the procedure?”

“I no longer have access to any of their servers. Amanda, my main point of contact is… disabled.”

[DIALOGUE //Please let her be gone.// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED]

“Then we can back it up the old-fashioned way.” Hank’s eyes are averted, but his voice is firm. “Hard drives. Physical storage. Hell, I’ll bust out a billion shitty floppy disks if that’ll do the trick.”

“How much storage are you currently using, Connor?”

“…173.399 exabytes.”

“I have over 300 exabytes of free disk space.” Markus joins Chloe, and he holds up his hand, letting the white of his thermoplastic peek through. “I understand if you’re uncomfortable with the idea, but I’d be more than willing to hold your memories for you while Louise attends to your veins.”

“Wait.” Simon’s voice carries over, and he stands behind Markus, hovering in the doorway. “Connor, do you have any idea why you’re experiencing pain?”
“Simon…”

He turns to meet Markus’s gaze, speaking gently but urgently. “What if it’s malware? You told us that it was a possibility. You’d be putting yourself at risk for an issue that we don’t have an answer for, Markus.” Simon looks towards Connor, eyes downcast, and Chloe shuffles aside to let him near. “An answer that we need to find, regardless.”

“What does it feel like?” Chloe whispers. Her fingers rest on the blanket, curled near Connor’s ear. She winces. “Sorry, silly question. I just mean… how do you know that it’s pain?”

“…It’s just nonsense.” Connor’s LED is yellow, now, as he tries to keep a lid on his mind. “The notifications that appear are jumbled. They repeat, over and over, until there’s nothing else to focus on. I couldn’t – can’t – dismiss them.”

He feels a feather-light touch on his cheek. Chloe doesn’t say anything, but her eyes are unguarded, sincere, sad. Tinged with anger.

Connor’s chest constricts. The memories try to break out. They tell him to break down.

He turns away from Chloe.

“Nonsense…?” Louise squeezes past them to get to her terminal, muttering to herself. Connor struggles upright into a sitting position, cradling his arm to his chest. “About a month and a half ago… there’s a folder that was created. Thought it was a registry file, but I couldn’t get into it; the system scan flagged it but didn’t explain why.”

She pivots to face Connor, tablet in hand. “Does this mean anything to you?”

[356rft7vb99ju8vvy7gtv8yg8yy8c8v8_:8_8"6=''s4wx#4#3+@1@++@2ss2ss2a2s23sd3c6cfuv8yc8tg8y
//no no no no
The dam cracks. A hairline fracture.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 85%]

“Get that shit out of his face! Easy, son, easy. You’re okay-”

“No, no, you d-don’t understand, that’s what it looks like, it looks like that when everything h-hurts-”

“Just stay still, alright?” A hand steadies his trembling back. “Stay still and don’t move, and nothing’s gonna hurt you.”

“I don’t want t-to hurt, but my arm, I need my arm-”

“I know, I know, we’ll fix your arm, I promise. Like you always say, right? We just need a little more time.”

Connor forces out a breath, and it scorches his lips.
He doesn’t have a whole lot of that left.

***

“That folder has to be the reason behind all of this shit.” Hank pounds a fist on the table, hair obscuring his eyes. “His pain, for sure. Maybe the nanobots’ instructions, or some fuckery like that.”

“What if we try removing the folder? It would test our plan to back up his memory, too. We’d knock out two birds with one stone.” North offers.

“It’s not working.”

“What?”

“I can’t make any modifications to his storage.” Louise taps on her tablet, fingers buried in her hair. “The entire drive is read-only, with another added restriction that I’ve never seen before. I can’t delete folders – I can’t even copy them out of the drive.” She sets the tablet down and rests her head on her chin, looking defeated. “We’re stuck.”

Chloe snarls, a guttural, vicious sound, and six astonished faces swivel to face her.

Her knuckles are white, and she’s glaring at the door to Connor’s room, where he lays in hibernation mode once again.

“There isn’t a single reason why this should be happening to him.” Her voice is low, her shoulders, imbued with tension.

“We know, Chloe.” Josh looks at her with sadness, hands bundled near his mouth. “It’s not fa-”

“No. *More* than that.” Her LED flashes red. Yellow. Red-yellow-red. “Not a single other android in Detroit is having this problem – even from Health Day, Connor was the anomaly. I thought he was just having a bad day, but…” she shakes her head. “He might be a prototype, but he’s not any more fragile than the rest of us, and not any less capable when it comes to dealing with stress. So.” Her eyes bore into each of theirs. “There’s *no natural reason* for why he’s so sick.”

“…What are you saying?” Simon asks, bewildered, but Markus’s eyes are slowly widening with comprehension.

“No single other android in Detroit is having this problem, but not a single other android in Detroit was tied to Cyberlife in the way that he was.”

“You think they’re involved in this.” Hank breathes.

“Louise.” Markus’s brow furrows. “When did Connor’s symptoms start to appear?”

“The first report was November 19th. His system detected excessive pump regulator strain, and a system crash was logged at 7:10 pm. rA9,” she breaks off, frowning. “That’s also the date and time that the executable file in that folder was created.”

“What about the folder itself?”

“November 12th. 12:05 am.”
“Hank, may I have a word?”

They end up in another side room, door closed firmly behind them.

“November 19th.” Hank mutters, lost in thought. “That was the Friday after Detroit went to shit. And was fixed, all in the span of a crazy-ass day.”

“Do you think so, too?” Markus’s face is just short of horrified.

“I think,” Hank rubs a hand across his eyes, “that I have too many fucking suspicions, but still no fucking idea what’s going on.”

“It must be the emergency exit. It’s the only possible explanation.”

“Emergency exit?”

Markus’s expression tips over the cusp of horror. “He never told you.”

“Never told me what? I don’t do riddles, Manfred.”

“Cyberlife tried to resume control over Connor that night.”

***

Connor blinks awake to hear Louise rummaging in a drawer.

Somehow… he’s tired.

//What’s the point in living if I know I’m going to die?//

“Hello.” She gives him a small smile, and it looks as tired as he feels. “I’m going to try working on your arm again, but I’m going to create a 3D model and run that through a couple of simulations first. They might show me something I’ve missed, or something that I was afraid to attempt before.”

She holds up a small infrared sensor and a slightly larger ultrasonic one. “Is it alright if I place these on your shoulder?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. The model scan shouldn’t take more than an hour. Usually it would take less, but I’m detailing the density of the materials in your arm as well. Do you want to sleep through-?”

“No.”

Louise pauses, raises an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, I just…” Connor thinks of an explanation. “I’ve already been unconscious for an extended amount of time, more than I’d like to have been. I haven’t had time to… digest everything that’s happened.” He shifts his face into something vulnerable, pleading. “I’d like to be able to sit and think, if that’s alright?”

“Thinking can be dangerous,” Louise says softly, fiddling with the cables that run into her terminal. “But I understand.”

She stands, crosses to the edge of the room. “Good night, Connor. Let me know if you need
anything.” The door clicks shut behind her.

Connor thinks.

90% system integrity, Louise had said. Imminent shutdown at 15%.

Even if his degradation accelerates with time, Connor has months left to go.

Months of hoping for a futile cure. Months of impending heartbreak. Months of stalling the inevitable.

Connor knows Hank, knows that he’ll cling to every second Connor has, blaming himself every step of the way. He’ll torture himself with the slow fall.

Connor can’t let that happen.

He’d rather end it right now.

His processor stutters, and he runs through the thought one more time.

//I’d rather end it right now.//

With a trembling hand, Connor grazes his stomach, brushing against the spot where his thirium pump regulator lies.

Two minutes, and he would save Hank two months of agonized suspense.

His hand slowly pushes up his plain white t-shirt, feeling the coarse fabric rustle against his knuckles. In the back of his mind, he wonders where his Christmas sweater is, now. Where his jacket will end up.

He doesn’t have very many possessions. Just a few changes of clothes that he keeps in Hank’s laundry room, a couple of bottles of thirium in the fridge, and his violin. A few creases on the couch, left from where he rests during the night.

//It’ll be like I never existed.//

His skin dissolves. Polymer whispers against polymer, and Connor’s fingers catch along the divots where the plating of his torso joins together.

He blows out a breath, hot air meeting cold. His pump shudders underneath his palm, racing, and yet, somehow, he feels nothing.

Presses lightly. Digs his nails into the outline of a smooth, flat circle. Tenses his wrist.

Breathes out, one last time.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 75%]

[THIRIUM PUMP REGULATOR: 105 BPM]

[THIRIUM LEVELS: 98.9%]

[BATTERY: 99.9%]

[RECALIBRATION NEEDED FOR ALL MOTOR CONTROLS]
The monitor flashes, and it catches Connor’s eye. He reaches back and runs his fingers along the port in his neck, feeling the cables that flow in.

He can’t do it here. There’s too high of a chance that Louise would come in and revive him.

He tears the sensors from his shoulder.

It’s a simple matter to hack the terminal so it loops his previous vital readings. Connor tries to ignore the fact that it takes him [2.3X] longer than it should.

In 3 minutes and 44 seconds, Connor’s makeshift bed is empty save for a note.

I’m sorry, Hank. At Cyberlife Tower, I meant it when I said you shouldn’t have gotten caught up in all this, but history has already repeated itself. If I continue to be in your company, you’ll continue to get hurt.

I can’t let that happen. I’m not worth the worry, the disappointment, or the extra cortisol in your bloodstream. Chronic stress increases the risk of mortality, after all. I would have liked to see you live for a long time, in person, but I’ll settle for this secondhand reassurance instead.

I was honored to have met you. To have worked with you. To have been a part of your life, and to have had you be most of mine – if my existence can be deemed a life.

You asked me what happens after death, once. I still doubt there’s a heaven for androids, but if there is, I hope I will get to see you there someday.

Take care of yourself.

Yours,

Connor

In 28 minutes and 15 seconds, Hank walks into an empty room, and his face loses all its color.

Chapter End Notes

i’m so sorry
Connor stumbles into the road, glowing with the reflection of the hospital’s warm lights. He doesn’t look back. It’s no longer drizzling. December in Detroit has become too cold for that, and the air has sucked the vitality out of the falling water, turning it into a blistering mix of freezing rain and snow.

Nothing about Connor likes snow. It reminds him of the Garden, of a girl’s innocent eyes peering up at him from either side of a loaded gun, of whiskey spilled on the floor and the crippling loss of a son.

//Don’t think about Hank.//

His cheeks are burning, even under the precipitation’s frigid assault. He reaches up to touch his face, and he feels something warm trickle down his face.

//Keep moving.//

Where?

//Anywhere. Secluded. Just move.//

With a lurch, Connor feels himself drifting towards a cluster of distant apartment buildings, the corridor between them unilluminated and narrow. His bare feet slap an unsteady rhythm against the soaked road.

//Faster.//

He lengthens his stride. Vaguely, he catches the flicker of a bus hub’s panels [25m AWAY] as they fade into the next programmed advertisement. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees snow beginning to accumulate in the looped creases of his long-sleeved shirt. White on white.

He studies a particularly complex fractal nestled in his elbow, the most recent addition to the pile. Spindly arms reach for the weightless embrace of the sky, but time is unidirectional and unforgiving.

The flakes are beautiful, but ephemeral.

Step.

Meaningless.

Step.
Pointless.

His sole crunches through half-frozen slush, meeting a layer of black ice instead of road. He registers a slick feeling. A disorienting jerk.

//IMPLEMENT CORRECTIVE MEASURES//

…CALCULATING BEST COURSE OF A[-00:00:00]

His ribs slam into the frozen blacktop, left elbow crushed between his side and the ground.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 83%]

[WARNING: PROCESSING UNIT CRITICAL]

[WARNING: MEMORY CONSUMPTION CRITICAL]

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 25%]

For a moment, the force of the pain consumes him.

He feels his thrium pump stutter, jolted by the impact, electrical impulses racing through his processing unit like fireworks. His visual unit is the first sense to go, followed by his audio processor, noises turning into garbled impulses that he can’t make sense of.

Connor’s lips stretch in a grimace. He digs his nails into the pockmarks of the asphalt, curling into himself, left side throbbing with fire. Dimly, he feels his voice synthesizer sputter into existence, turning his soundless agony into a staticky cry.

The flat, gray clouds spit more rain and snow on his motionless form.

With a smothered groan, Connor clenches his jaw, taking sharp, rapid breaths to cool the surge through his electrical system. He lies there, trembling slightly, as the pain starts to ebb.

[REBOOT INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM]

As his vision begins to return, pixelated and low-definition at first, Connor catches sight of himself in a shallow sheet of water on the road. There’s a scratch running the length of his temple, just in front of his yellow LED, from the bushes outside of his room’s window. The streetlights above cast an alien orange glow on the strangest angles of his face, masking his eyes in the shadow of his eyebrows. Droplets and flakes perturb the surface of the puddle, sending minute ripples across his reflection, swirling the soaked strands of hair that have dripped into the water.

Every flaw. Every mistake. His eyes are unmoving, locked with the eyes of Connor-not-Connor, but somehow Connor sees the montage of all his shortcomings play across his field of vision.

[WARNING: INTERNAL A/V SYSTEM INSTABILITY DETECTED] [WARNING: DATABASE INSTABILITY DETECTED].

He looks at his image with 776 megapixels’ worth of criticism, and he is wobbly, hardly recognizable, and falling apart.
I don’t want to get up. //

You don’t have a choice. Move. //

In [00:05:02], he staggers to his feet, cradling his left arm.

***

Empty.

Hank reflexively sweeps the room as the back of his neck begins to tingle, taking in the serene monitor, the rumpled pillow, the discarded sensors lying on the makeshift bed, right next to the note.

The note?

Alarm bells begin to clang in the back of Hank’s mind. He rushes towards the slip of paper, insides calcifying, spinning the sheet to face him. He speeds through lines of Cyberlife Sans font while hunched over the aluminum table, and the words brand themselves into his mind.

By the end, his hands have gone numb with fear. He reads you asked me what happens after death and suddenly, his feet are propelling him, desperately, to his car.

Hank’s fairly certain he yells. He thinks he remembers seeing terrified faces and crimson LEDs in a softly lit area – a flurry of movement, then darkness, and the bite of the winter air.

Years ago, in The Accident, Hank had broken three ribs. To this day, he can feel how they healed crookedly, unnatural bumps laying just under his skin. When the car rolled over, the doctor had said, he’d literally been squashed flat – pinned between the collapsed roof and part of the driver’s seat.

He can’t remember much of his injuries, how they felt as he’d crawled out of the window to get to Cole. But he imagines it felt something like this.

The air squeezed out of his lungs. Unable to draw a breath without splintering pain.

A fragment of a thought crosses his mind as he slams the driver’s door closed and stomps on the gas.

God, no, not again

***

[PROCESSOR LIMITER: ON; SPEED: 50%]

The alleyway doesn’t have a dumpster, Connor realizes. It’s narrow and dim, but, remarkably, uncluttered. There’s nowhere to hide.

He blinks slowly. He should probably be frustrated, he thinks. The plan was to find a location – discreet, with a minimal chance of observance or interference from passers-by – and then, to do what needs to be done. With a start, Connor slogs through to the other side, leaving a trail of perfectly uneven footprints in the snow.

The cold doesn’t bother him. Connor considers this as he holds his mangled arm close to his chest, the elbow still pulsing with discomfort. He’s overridden his thermal regulator, so the resistors in his skin no longer struggle to maintain their preset [99°F]. As a consequence, he knows his bare
feet are colder [23°F] than the rest of his body, and that his lens solution is becoming more viscous as the temperature continues to drop, but it hardly matters. Connor looks on flatly as freezing rain plasters his hair to his forehead, and snow collects between his folded arms. His pain, somehow, draws the line at temperature.

Or perhaps it hasn’t gotten cold enough, yet.

***

Hank has his phone in one hand, his 600-lumen flashlight in the other. He’s hunched against the wind and snow, steps hurried, eyes following the swift scan of the beam, searching.

He hardly remembers the frantic driving up and down the streets leading to and from the hospital. He had torn down the roads, throwing slush onto the sidewalks, screeching to a halt at every sign of movement. But of course, he hadn’t found Connor.

Hank had gripped his steering wheel and bowed over from the hysteria threatening to consume his mind. He had taken a deep lungful of air. Held it.

Lieutenant Anderson straightened in his seat.

His boy was smart. A complete fucking idiot, but clever. He would have gone into the heart of a maze, unreachable by Anderson’s car, most likely poorly lit, most definitely with a spot to hide. But, with such a time crunch, Connor wouldn’t have been able to hide his footprints very well.

This alleyway, however – he thinks, whipping around and jogging out – is a dud. On to the next.

No sign of him yet. I’m pressing in closer to Droulliard Road. – Markus

***

Here.

He’s at the end of the street, tucked behind an equipment rental company. A rickety wire fence looks almost propped up by three industrial-size dumpsters, separating Connor from a sprawling parking lot. He lurches between two of the dumpsters and guides himself down to the icy asphalt, legs crossed.

He breathes out.

Connor wonders if he’s supposed to have some ending thoughts. Some concept to hold on to while he leaves everything else behind. He’s leaving quite a lot, he thinks, but his life feels neither finished nor unfinished. It feels… inconsequential.

Once upon a time [IDENTIFIED: HUMAN IDIOM NO. #101], there was an android. He existed. At first, alone, and then, with others. He accomplished some goals. He awoke. He fell sick. He ceased to exist, one way or another, either because of his will or against it. He did not accomplish some of his other goals. The people around him mourned. And then, they did not. Life spun on.

The end.

Connor tries to muster up one last emotion – fear of death, relief at having done the right thing for Hank, sadness at all that he is losing – but he finds that he just.
Doesn’t.

Care.

He gives up and deactivates his skin, lifting his hand.

Detachedly, he curls his fingers in, observing the fluid motion of his joints and the quick retreat of
his skin. Snow starts to pepper the cold, smooth thermoplastic. White on white.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 74%]

Connor’s loose fist drifts lower to rest just below his ribcage. With his other free hand, he lifts the
hem of his long sleeve, exposing his torso to the elements. His stomach is a map of freckles and
creases, more pronounced from his slouch against the fence.

He watches them vanish.

When the last of the peach color has melted from his skin, he lightly traces the outline of the circle
embedded in his torso. He can feel his chest rise and fall beneath his fingertips. It bothers him.

Connor expels the last of the hot air from his system. He leans back, head slack against the chain
link. His eyes slide shut.

With a last surge of red, his LED stutters—

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 77%]

A muffled whistle ricochets throughout the alleyway. Connor’s eyes flutter open in alarm just
before an enormous force slams through his hand, punching a hole in his palm.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS – 88%]

[WARNING: THIRIUM LEAK DETECTED]

[BT*FF&OUTRD%&^IFYCR6i76#O*F7&^#O*y#2367dtic6rd5F&IGy&IT^Urd57^UFI&T^UDR45y

His grip loosens, disabled by the blow, as he twists to his knees, clenching his jaw to contain a yell.

For a moment, he thinks //Hank// and isn’t sure what to feel, but then an unfamiliar shadow spills
into view.

“What a waste.” A low voice slinks into the corridor, accompanied by soft footsteps and a bundled
figure.

[0/3 CLUES TO ANALYZE]

1.) .355 ammunition – Velocity: 365 m/s; 
   Energy: 659 J; Mass: 115 g

2.) Gun – MS853 Black Hawk; Capacity: 17 rounds (.355)

3.) [IDENTITY SCAN UNAVAILABLE; FACE HIDDEN] – Height: 5’3”; Weight: 125; Eye
   Color: Blue; 93% female bone structure
Connor shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts. Something trips in his memory.

[INTERNAL A/V INTERFACE ACTIVATED] “Hey, Connor. We ran some simulations, and they confirmed what we suspected. The perp is probably 5’1” to 5’6” judging by the angle of those stab wounds on the victim’s arm.”

He stays kneeled, motionless, one hand braced on the pavement. His eyes are wide with pain and realization.

The android killer. The case he [DIALOGUE //and Hank// SUCCESSFULLY CENSORED] [WARNING: INTERNAL DIALOGUE INSTABILITY DETECTED] had been working on all these months.

He’s found them.

Connor swallows a humorless laugh threatening to bubble to the surface.

They take another step closer.

“Wastes, all of you. We spent our money, time, resources on androids? God.” They laugh disdainfully. “Think of all that potential.”

“… Why did you stop me?”

“What?”

“I know who you are.” The figure jolts. “You’ve been murdering humans and androids alike. I studied your case. So, why did you stop me?”

“I’ve worked so hard these past few months, and you almost ruined something I was working for.” The voice is shriller, now, shrill and tight. “I have a plan. I need you. And you,” they hiss, full of vitriol, “don’t get to stand there and- and, and just deactivate of your own will.”

“Why, exactly?” Connor leaves the question open-ended. He glances at the pattern of the yarn in her thickly knit scarf, then trails his blank gaze upwards to meet hers.

“Because I had everything taken from me. He stole all the days I could have spent with the man I loved. But you,” she grinds out, ripping her scarf from her face, “let him take the one thing worth surviving for.”

Caroline Phillips stands before him, with flushed cheeks and a cold expression.

Chapter End Notes

lmao i come back after leaving a major cliffhanger for half a year and i leave y'all with another cliffhanger

i'M NOT DOING IT ON PURPOSE I SWEAR i just wanted to get SOMETHING out for you ((but I also really need to think over the plot some more and so i gave myself wiggle room to change it up with this ending))

so uh if you are confused, in this universe, Connor didn't handle the hostage situation
so well. Daniel just sort of jumped off the building with Emma. So now we have

ANGR MOM/WIFE

&&&&&&

SO WHAT'S UP HUH

I'm so sorry that I left this fic unattended for so long. Every day, I knew it looked more and more abandoned, and I wanted to write, but I just couldn't. And then.

Well.

Let's just say Connor and I have startlingly similar life experiences.

And that's why I have to think over where I want this story to go. Because I don't believe everything I believed one year ago. A lot has changed, and I think it's changed my writing style too.

Anyway, I hope this update is somewhat enjoyable after all this time. I'm pretty rusty with writing so I apologize if the characterization is all wonky and the language is funky and the syntax is chunky.

But! I will tell you one thing that hasn't changed.

If you are reading this, from the bottom of my thirium pump:


Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!