Domesticity

by CeilingKiwi

Summary

When Hank's wife abandons him and their young son, Hank struggles to adjust to single parenthood. He buys a second-hand domestic android to help keep his household afloat, an android with buggy software and an unusual amount of initiative. As Connor becomes an indispensable member of the household, Hank finds himself questioning everything he thought he knew about androids—and about authenticity, personhood, and society.
Cole is two years and three months old when Hank’s wife leaves. Just packs up and leaves with barely any explanation. Hank is ankle-deep in blood at the scene of a particularly gruesome murder-suicide when he gets a call from Cole’s daycare saying that Joanna never came to pick up their kid. He spends the entire drive to the daycare yelling into Joanna’s voicemail, then spends the entire drive home yelling into Joanna’s voicemail at a greatly reduced volume because Cole is dozing in the backseat.

“I swear to Christ, Joey, this is so fucking typical of you,” he hisses into the phone pinched between his shoulder and his cheek as he wrestles Cole out of his carseat. “So fucking checked out of life. So disinterested in anything going on outside your own little bubble of reality. You know, other guys would be worried sick. They’d think maybe their wife was in a horrible accident or something. But me, I know you too fucking well!” He slams the car door for emphasis. “Did you just forget about Cole, Joanna!? Did you just forget about me!? You better find a motel to stay at tonight, Joey, because right now I don’t even want to look at you ever again!”

A few minutes later he finds the envelope on the kitchen table, his name written on it in Joanna’s cramped but tidy handwriting.

Oh, so that’s what’s going on, he thinks dimly.

Joanna doesn’t waste any time on sentimentality in her letter. Hank knows he and Joanna are long past any of that. She has written, very straightforwardly, that she has met someone new and is running away with him to somewhere warmer. No forwarding address, no “Good luck with our son,” and she didn’t even sign her full name at the bottom. Just ‘Jo,’ even though she always said she hated being called that.

So. Fucking. Typical of Joanna.

And just like that, Hank becomes a single parent. A single parent who’s juggling his responsibilities to his toddler and his insane career with the DPD. As a lieutenant, Hank may not have to suffer through rotating shifts that would make securing childcare an impossible nightmare, but there’s still frequent work that has to be done outside a daycare’s usual business hours. It’s not as though Hank can somehow force every homicide in Detroit to only occur between nine and five.

He can’t cut back his hours to care for Cole. He’ll be damned if he puts Cole’s health insurance at risk, and beside that, there’s still the mortgage to worry about. And Joanna still has joint ownership of the house, so selling the place and moving somewhere smaller and cheaper isn’t an option either. Not until the divorce finalizes, and God only knows how long that will take since no one in Detroit seems to know exactly where Joanna disappeared to.

Hank pays a little old lady who lives down the street to watch Cole whenever he gets called into work during evenings or nights, but after one unfortunate week when Hank has to wake her up at 2am three nights in a row, he can tell she’s losing patience with their arrangement and he’ll have to come up with some other plan when her goodwill finally gives out.

And even on nights when Hank doesn’t get called into work, Cole is still a toddler who’s adjusting to the sudden disappearance of his mother. He’s been having frequent nightmares and regressing in his potty training. And he’s being so heartbreakingly clingy. It isn’t unusual for Hank to have to get up at all hours of the night to soothe Cole after he’s woken up crying. Clean him up, change his sheets, spend half an hour bouncing Cole in his arms while Hank tries to ignore the burn of
exhaustion behind his eyes. Try to put Cole back in his own bed only for Cole to start crying all over again, reaching for Hank with his face red and pinched and looking like his whole world’s gonna crumble if Hank lets go of him.

Hank loves Cole more than he’s ever loved anyone in his entire life, but he’s pushing fifty with a toddler and a demanding career and no help and he’s fucking exhausted.

He falls asleep on his feet at Chicken Feed while waiting for Gary to make his lunch.


“Shut up. I am not,” he snaps, feeling sluggish even as he comes to alertness.

“Christ, when’s the last time you actually slept?”

Hank can only grunt. He doesn’t have the energy to try and remember.

Gary holds up his palms like he’s gearing up to say something offensive. “Okay, man. Can I give you some advice? As a friend?”

“Gary, I don’t want your babysitting tips. Unless you’re about to give me tomorrow’s Powerball numbers, I’m not interested.”

“I swear to God, I never thought I’d say this to anybody,” Gary’s voice is placating, “but you need to get an android.”

Hank stares at him. “Are you serious?” He isn’t sure whether he wants to laugh or get angry.

“What the hell, Gary? I know for a fact that you don’t like androids. Hell, you got a sticker right there advertising how proud you are that all your food is made by humans.”

“Yeah, I don’t like androids, but if I suddenly had a couple grand to burn, you know what I’d do with it?”

“Get your food hygiene license up to date?”

“I’d buy one of those nannybots,” Gary says sharply, shooting Hank a pointed look, “and I’d give it to my sister so she wouldn’t be running herself ragged between her kids and her job. Maybe she could go to school if she had a little more time to herself. Get herself a better-paying job, one she wasn’t constantly in danger of losing to an android.” He shrugs. “So, yeah, I don’t like androids. But what else is anyone supposed to do when they need to crawl out of a hole? I don’t play that game, but only because I can afford not to. I own my own business and I’m my only employee. I don’t have to deal with androids if I don’t want to.”

Hank furrows his brow. Gary’s making an unusual amount of sense.

“You, on the other hand,” Gary continues, “you and my sister are in the same shitty position. Being pulled too many ways by too many responsibilities. Don’t tell me a live-in nanny wouldn’t help.”

Cole misses his mother. He misses his mother, so he’s clinging to Hank as desperately as he can. An android wouldn’t fix that particular problem, but Hank is hard-pressed to think of any other problems it wouldn’t fix. He wouldn’t have to bother the little old lady down the street in the middle of the night anymore and maybe he’d finally be able to get a full night’s sleep.

“Androids are so damn expensive, though,” Hank mutters. “It’s not like Joey’s sending any child
support along from Aruba, or wherever she is.”

Gary shrugs. “You got options. Dip into your life insurance. Or your kid’s college fund.”

“Jesus Christ, Gary!” Hank slams a hand down on the counter. “I’m not dipping into Cole’s college fund to pay for a plastic babysitter!”

Gary just rolls his eyes. “Man, come on. You could pull your kid out of daycare with an android taking care of him. You’d save enough to put the money back in a year, tops. Don’t be dramatic.”

Hank is still bristling, staring at the food that’s been sitting on the counter while he and Gary have been talking. He’s seriously considering leaving the food and walking away to demonstrate just how offended he is. He would never dream of touching Cole’s college money. He’d sooner shoot himself than jeopardize Cole’s future, even temporarily.

But if he leaves in a huff, he’s just proving Gary’s point about how dramatic he’s being. It’s a tough call.

He’s waited too long now, because Gary’s expression softens. “Hank, man. Why are you making this such a difficult thing?”

Deep down, Hank knows why. If he touches money that, in his mind, already belongs to Cole, then that means he’s failed to provide for his son. He’s failed as a parent. On another level, considering getting an android means that he’s failed in a different way.

In the immediate aftermath of Joanna’s disappearance, he kept himself afloat on a sense of spiteful pride. He ran himself ragged between doing his job and caring for Cole, and it felt like he was shaking his fist at the world. He repeated over and over to himself, like a mantra, *I don’t need Joey! I don’t need anyone!* Those first few intense, crazed days without filled him with energy. For a while, it was true. He was barely managing, but he was managing.

But now, with reality creeping up his back and exhaustion tugging at his eyes, he’s realizing that the pride that kept him afloat was hollow. He can’t manage indefinitely. He needs help, and he hates that he needs help.

Of course, Hank would never say any of that out loud to Gary, so he scowls and shrugs at him. “It’s just a tough decision. Lay off.”

Gary still has that soft look in his eyes as he watches Hank. Hank wonders if Gary’s thinking about his sister and her jobs and her kids.

“I don’t need anyone!” Gary says softly, and nods like he understands. “Just get the damn android, Hank. Get it used if you really won’t touch your kid’s money.” He pushes the food toward Hank, closing the door on the conversation for good.

Hank eats his food in his car, then reclines the seat and has a nap. He dreams about a tall woman with empty eyes, and he can’t tell whether it’s Joanna or the robot who’s supposed to replace her.

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It isn’t illegal to sell used and refurbished androids, but Cyberlife sure makes it difficult to do so outside official channels. Cyberlife doesn’t release model specs to the public, and even the novel-length user manual that comes with a new android has just a scant section on troubleshooting that directs users to call technical support with any problems. It’s difficult to get an android serviced or repaired outside of a Cyberlife store or maintenance center.
Difficult, but not impossible. And there are still people selling refurbished androids away from the ever-watchful eyes of Cyberlife if one knows where to look.

Hank obviously knows where to look. He may not know androids very well, but he knows Detroit and its people.

The second-hand android and repair shop is in a modified garage, which strikes Hank as appropriate. After all, if an android costs as much as a car, where else would be better? The open floor plan means that there are androids on display in the front half of the garage, standing on small wood pallets and smiling empty half-smiles at him. Further back in the shop, presumably where the repairs are done, he can see skinless android bodies with their chests wide open, exposing all the metal inside of them. There’s a stray arm all by itself laying on the floor and it reminds Hank of a dismemberment case he worked the year before.

The place gives Hank the creeps. He wonders if it bothers the functioning androids to look at the back half of the shop, but they all seem to have blank looks on their faces, so he supposes not. In a way, the functional androids are creepier than the dismembered ones.

A human technician hurries over from the back of the shop. At least, Hank assumes he’s human from the lack of an LED on his head and the fact that he’s expressing an emotion other than bored neutrality.

“Hey, I’m Jamie,” the technician says, taking Hank’s hand and bumping shoulders with him. Hank’s never been in a Cyberlife store before, but he’s pretty sure the employees there don’t do that. He feels more at ease, despite the visible android parts in the back of the shop. “You come looking to buy?”

“I’m looking to look,” Hank say, shooting Jamie his don’t-try-to-upsell-me glare.

This doesn’t seem to ruffle Jamie. He rubs his hands together. “Cool, no problem. What do we wanna look at today? I got a fine selection of commercially-available androids.”

The way Jamie says commercially-available makes Hank think that Jamie might also have some androids for sale that are a little less commercially-available to civilians, if Hank were to ask in the right way. But Hank’s not interested in busting Jamie or buying anything too exotic or wild, so he ignores this.

“I’m looking for an android to help with childcare,” Hank says. “I have a toddler and I work a demanding job, so I need something that’ll be able to give my kid a bath and tuck him in if I get called in without warning. If it could help out around the house too, that’d be great, but the childcare is the most important part.”

“You’re in luck,” Jamie says with a cool smile. “Domestic assistants are the most common type of android we get here. New models get produced all the time with newer features and more memory, so people are always offloading their old domestic assistants so they can upgrade. You got plenty of different models to look at.”

“Well, I don’t really care about fancy features,” Hank says, waving a hand dismissively. “I don’t need it to… I don’t know, make balloon animals for birthday parties or anything. If it can keep my kid from shoving a fork in an outlet while I’m gone, I’ll be happy with it.”

Jamie beckons Hank closer to the functioning androids. “Male or female?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”
“Lemme show you a selection, then.” Jamie glances at the androids. “MP500, CX100, PL600, come over here.”

Three androids who had moments ago been standing at a standstill, staring at nothing, approach from various corners of the store and line up shoulder to shoulder. It’s a little spooky to watch them suddenly and simultaneously come to life, synchronizing wordlessly with each other.

Jamie directs Hank’s attention to the first android in line, a female with short red hair. “The MP500 is an older, very basic model. It sounds like it may be what you’re looking for. It’s perfectly safe to leave children with, even if its conversational skills leave something to be desired.”

Jamie chuckles. “But hey, some people see that as a plus. No one likes their android to act like it’s smarter than them.”

Hank scratches his whiskers. “Mmm. I know I said basic is what I’m looking for, but maybe that’s too basic. Cole’s still learning to talk, I don’t want him growing up… I don’t know, stunted or something cause his android nanny never talked to him.”

“The MP500 can talk,” Jamie clarifies, “it just tends to be rather shy and unimaginative. Putting it in human terms, of course. It’s not as though the android is programmed to be shy. It just doesn’t tend to initiate conversation or ask questions without prompting.”

“So if there’s an emergency at home when I’m not there, can I trust it to call 911?”

“You may have to specifically order it to do so and show it how, but I don’t see any reason why you wouldn’t be able to do that.”

Hank frowns, wishing he had bothered to do a little research on androids before coming by. He hadn’t realized different domestic models had different capabilities and limitations to the point where he might have to teach an android what to do in case of an emergency. Jamie had said that this model was safe to leave children with, but how could Hank trust an android to recognize an emergency if it had to be taught how to react to an emergency? Would Hank have to think up everything that could possibly go wrong when watching a child and talk about every individual permutation with the android?

He eyes the other androids in the lineup—and suddenly notices that a fourth android has joined the three that had initially been called over. Hank hadn’t seen it approach or join the others. It must have done so completely silently.

Hank points at the fourth android. “Hang on. Where’d this guy come from?”

Jamie leans around the MP500 to look, then groans and rubs his eyes. “Connor, for fuck’s sake. I didn’t ask for you.”

The fourth android (Connor, and Hank wonders why this android has a name when the other three apparently don’t) has a perfectly agreeable look on his face. “I took the liberty of presenting myself when I heard Lieutenant Anderson explain to you what he’s looking for in an android. I fit his expressed parameters and I thought the Lieutenant would appreciate having as many options as possible shown to him.”

Hank scowls at Jamie. “This thing knows my rank? How the hell did it get my name and rank?”

“I don’t know! Don’t ask me! It’s just a thing it does and I don’t know how or why.”

“I am a domestic assistance and family caretaker android capable of caring for children and infants
“I am equipped with a scanner and database which allows me to identify humans on sight.”

“Don’t listen to it, it doesn’t know what it’s talking about,” Jamie says. Then he wiggles his hand in exasperation. “Well, I mean, that scanner and database stuff is probably real. But it’s not a domestic android.”

“Wait, not a domestic android?” Hank says. “What do you mean? It just introduced itself as one.”

“Yeah. It thinks it’s a domestic android for some reason. But it’s not actually one.” Jamie huffs and gives Hank a frustrated look. “I’ve been working on this thing for weeks, trying to figure out what it actually is.”

“I am a domestic assistance and family caretaker android,” Connor politely insists. “I am equipped with all the appropriate software of a domestic android. My protocols include housework, yardwork, childcare, household management, simple to moderate repairs—”

“No one asked, Connor,” Jamie interrupts.

Hank regards Connor with a careful eye. Connor is meeting his gaze. After a moment, Connor folds his arms behind his back and cocks his head slightly as though he’s waiting for Hank to say something. Small, simple movements, but they’re more than any other android has done while Hank’s been in the store. Even the other androids in line would be perfectly still if they weren’t simulating breathing.

Hank addresses Jamie despite how he’s still looking at Connor. “It got into line without anyone telling it to. It must be pretty smart to do that.”

Jamie opens his mouth to reply, but Connor cuts him off before he can get a word out. “I follow my programming, Lieutenant Anderson. If my programming directs me to execute an action despite not being given explicit orders to do so, I will do so.”

“So you just do whatever you want?”

“I am an analytical android,” Connor says. “I possess the capacity to analyze my surroundings and determine when action is warranted and when it is not. My judgement is sound, and I do not go against my programming.”

Hank looks at Jamie. “It sounds like a domestic android to me. Why are you so sure it’s not one?”

Jamie gestures at the three other androids in line. “Look, I get domestic androids all the time in here. I said before that they’re the most common type of android that get traded in, right? So I know my domestic androids pretty well.” He looks at Connor. “Connor, what’s your model?”

“RK800,” Connor replies. Hank notices that the smock Connor is wearing only displays his name and not his model number. Although Connor is wearing the same clothes as the PL600 he’s standing next to, he looks nothing like the blond android.

“That’s not a model of domestic android,” Jamie says. “At least, not a model that’s available for just anybody to buy. You can look it up, if you want. If you walk into a Cyberlife store and ask to buy a RK800, they’ll look at you like you’re crazy.

“Not only that,” Jamie continues, “but I’ve poked around inside Connor, trying to figure out what makes it tick. This thing isn’t built like any domestic android I’ve ever seen before. It’s crazy how sturdy it is. I’ve never seen a domestic model with such a reinforced build. You could probably hit
it with a car and it’d keep going.”

Hank looks at Connor again, surprised to hear that. The android didn’t look particularly sturdy to him. As a matter of fact, Hank thinks Connor looks a bit delicate compared to some of the other androids in the shop. Connor has gentle brown eyes, freckles scattered across his face, and a stray lock of hair brushing his forehead. The entire effect makes him look rather boyish.

Hank says, “So why does it think it’s a domestic model?”

Jamie shrugs. “Beats me. Androids wind up here from all over. First thing I always do when one comes into my possession is wipe its memory so it can be properly refurbished and resold. So all the androids out here on the floor are ideally just like brand-new androids from a Cyberlife store.” His mouth thins. “The drawback to that is that if I ever encounter any problems, the android can’t tell me its history. So I really have no idea what happened to Connor. I think someone messed with its software, but hell if I know for sure.”

Hank squints at Connor. Connor simply gazes back at him, as if all this talk about whatever could be wrong with him doesn’t bother him at all. It makes Hank feel a little sleazy, talking about the problems with Connor right in front of him as if he isn’t even there. Hank has to remind himself that Connor isn’t a person and there isn’t any reason why their behavior would upset him.

“Jamie, why is this thing on the floor if it’s so messed up?” Hank asks incredulously.

Jamie hesitates before answering. “Well… even if it’s not a domestic android, it’s pretty good at keeping the place clean. If I didn’t have any scruples, I probably could sell it as a domestic model without any trouble. But, no. It’s on the floor because I’ve done just about everything I can with it, and if a hobbyist comes in here looking for a challenge to tinker with, I’ll know just what to give them.”

Then Jamie shrugs, giving Connor a distant, appraising look. “Barring that, Connor has a lot of pretty unusual biocomponents. If I can’t move it, I’ll probably disassemble it and see what I can get for its parts.”

An unpleasant feeling stirs in the pit of Hank’s stomach as he hears this. He’s a police lieutenant, and his every instinct is screaming at him that there’s a mystery here, waiting to be solved. Hearing that Connor might end up scrapped and sold for parts dismays that bloodhound part of Hank, the part of him that tirelessly tracks every lead to its end.

Connor still has a calm, neutral look on his face. Hank is unsettled by his peaceful demeanor, reminded just how inhuman androids must be if talking about dismembering them right in front of them isn’t enough to trigger a reaction.

But then Hank remembers how Connor inserted himself into the line of androids being presented to him without being instructed to. Connor said that he did that because he felt he fit the parameters of what Hank was looking for, but was that really the only reason? Could he be trying to get bought up before he's disassembled?

Hank stares at Connor. Connor looks back at Hank. He’s been looking at Hank this whole time, Hank realizes, watching him with depthless eyes even while Hank and Jamie were talking. Has Connor been watching Hank since the moment he stepped into the shop?

_Fuck, _Hank thinks, _here we go._

“Connor,” Hank barks suddenly in his best authoritative-police-lieutenant voice. Jamie jumps, but
Connor doesn’t. “What would you do if you were home alone with my son and the oven caught fire?”

Connor’s answer is immediate. “I would remove your son from your home while calling emergency services to report a house fire.”

“What about if he had a sudden medical emergency?”

“I would call emergency services while administering first aid, depending on the specific nature of the medical emergency,” Connor replies. “I am programmed to perform over two hundred minor medical procedures. But I feel I should inform you that I am able to analyze household products in real time to ensure they are not toxic, abrasive, or otherwise harmful to children. I am also able to use this analysis function to predict the possibility of injury when your son is in my care. So while I cannot rule out sudden illness, the likelihood of your son ingesting something dangerous or being injured while in my care is relatively low.”

“Okay, smart guy,” Hank says. “What would you do if I told you to make sirloin sandwiches for dinner for me and my son?”

Connor doesn’t even need a moment to think about it before he replies. “You mentioned to Jamie earlier that Cole is a toddler and is still learning to talk. Although Cole is at a developmental stage where he’s ready to eat solid foods, a sirloin sandwich would likely not be an appropriate meal for him. Knowing this, I would suggest suitable alternatives which meet Cole’s nutritional needs.”

There’s a short pause before Connor adds, “But I would happily make you a steak sandwich, Lieutenant. Provided it wouldn’t put you over your daily recommended intake of calories and saturated fats.”

Hank blinks, a little thrown by hearing an android describe himself as undertaking anything happily. It’s probably a deliberate choice by whoever designed Connor’s social protocols in order to make him seem deferential and agreeable. Hank knows that androids don’t actually have desires or emotions the same way that humans do.

And yet. Connor put himself in line to be examined. Connor has been watching Hank with calm, careful eyes. Connor has his head quirked inquisitively to one side, as though he’s waiting for Hank to say something. Hank, suffering from exhaustion and sleep deprivation, doesn’t have the energy at the moment to suss out how much of Connor’s behavior is emotionless programming and how much of it might be genuine. Probably none of it is genuine. All Hank can think of is that it doesn’t seem fair, somehow, to create a machine and design it to emulate humanity. But whether it’s more unfair to Hank or to Connor, Hank can’t say.

“Fuck it,” Hank groans, rubbing his hands over his eyes. He can’t think about this anymore. “Connor, you’re coming with me.”

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Despite all Jamie’s talk about Connor definitely not being a domestic assistant, he doesn’t give Hank a very hard time while he processes Hank’s purchase. Hank gets the sense that maybe he’s glad to see Connor go. Or maybe he’s just glad he won’t end up stripping Connor for parts.

All he does is look Hank straight in the eyes before he runs Hank’s card. “You sure about this, man? I don’t do returns.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Hank says. “I like to live dangerously. If my job or my cholesterol levels don’t
kill me before I’m fifty, this buggy-ass android probably will.”

Jamie just chuckles at that, and Hank realizes that despite his joke, he’s not actually worried about Connor being a danger to himself or to Cole.

“Nah, Connor’s a good egg,” Jamie says. “Between you and me, I’ve got some ideas about what it might have been originally built for.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think maybe Connor’s supposed to be a bodyguard.”

Hank glances at Connor. Despite the android’s slim, unassuming appearance, he can definitely see what Jamie’s talking about. Connor has impressive powers of observation. He watches Hank like he’s waiting for something to happen. And Hank can tell that Connor is going to take his responsibility to keep Cole safe seriously.

They walk out of the store with Connor trailing behind Hank a couple paces to the right. Hank imagines Connor walking alongside some big-shot politician the same way, scanning crowds of people for potential threats. Remaining tirelessly vigilant. How would an android like that have wound up in a barely-legal android refurbishment shop with its software so addled that it thinks it’s meant to clean up pizza boxes for the rest of its days?

Hank drives the two of them to Cole’s daycare. He watches Connor out of the corner of his eye. Connor sits straight up in his seat, his posture still perfect. Hank wonders if Connor is capable of slouching or relaxing. He supposes he’ll find out sooner or later.

“May I ask a question, Lieutenant?” Connor says out of the blue, surprising Hank.

“You just did,” Hank says. “So, no. You used up your only question for the day.”

“Alright,” Connor says, perfectly agreeable.

The silence stretches.

“Fuck, Connor,” Hank groans, “I was being sarcastic. Were you programmed without a sense of humor or something?”

“I have a database of over nine thousand family-friendly jokes. Would you like to hear one?”

“God, no. Clean jokes are the saddest fucking things in the world. Just—just ask the stupid question you wanted to ask me.”

Connor’s eyes flicker to Hank’s face. “Did you buy me to prevent me from being disassembled?”

Hank’s stomach flips. He tightens his fist around the steering wheel. “Yeah. But… it wasn’t the only reason. I guess… you impressed me with how you put yourself in line like that. I don’t know if any of the other androids in the shop would’ve done that. It made me feel like—” Hank cuts himself off before he can finish the sentence the way he meant to. Like you could be a real person.

“It made me feel like you know how to make decisions,” Hank finishes.


“I’m holding you to that,” Hank grumbles, staring at the road ahead of him. He is far too sleep-deprived to properly explore the implications of Connor’s question. He just wants to pick up Cole,
go home, and have a nap. Not think about Connor and the paradox of how he can possibly be too human and too inhuman at the same time.

They pull up to a red light. There’s a flicker of movement in Hank’s peripheral vision. He thinks maybe Connor might have smiled at him, but when he turns to see, Connor has turned his head away and is watching the people collected on the street corner.

He doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the ride.
Coin Tricks

Chapter Summary

Connor learns the ins and outs of his new job and discovers something new about himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anderson, Cole

Born: 09/23/2029

Lives: 115 Michigan Drive – Detroit

The boy hides behind Hank’s leg, peeking out to stare warily at Connor.

Connor is crouching down to make himself appear smaller and less frightening to Cole. Cole’s body language is communicating discomfort, unease, fear. Anything that Connor can do to soothe Cole’s negative emotions would be helpful at this point.

(Simultaneously, in a fraction of a second, Connor assesses Cole’s health. He cross-references Cole’s weight and height with a pediatric growth chart. 25th percentile for height, 35th percentile for weight. Small for his age, but not unusually so. No visible signs of illness, but it’s difficult to tell with most of his body obstructed from view. Connor will have to reassess him at a later time. For now, he is within normal limits.)

Hank is having a hushed argument with the woman who runs the daycare (Durand, Lisa).

“For God’s sake, Lisa. Nothing in any of those forms I signed said anything about a fee—”

“Mr. Anderson, the policy changed last year. Your wife signed the updated agreement. I have to keep myself operational somehow—”

“—termination fee equaling eight weeks of current rate. Eight weeks!? That’s highway robbery—”

“—the industry standard these days. It isn’t my fault daycares just like mine are closing all over—”

Connor smiles at Cole. “Hello, Cole. My name is Connor. I’m an android, and I’m going to be helping your dad take care of you.”

Cole hides his face in the leg of Hank’s pants. His stress levels are rising. This is likely due to a combination of his unfamiliarity with Connor and his father’s audible distress.

“I can’t afford this right now. I literally can’t. I don’t know where you expect me to pull the money from, but—”
“—isn’t my problem. If you’d given notice eight weeks ago, you wouldn’t be in this mess and—”

“—cannot be legal. This is practically **extortion**. I’m a single father, what am I supposed to—”

“—well, maybe if you hadn’t gone and bought an android, you’d have the money to—”

Hank sucks an angry breath through his teeth, his shoulders going rigid with fury. Connor doesn’t have to use his predictive software to foresee that he’s about to start yelling. He has to defuse the situation before anything happens to upset Cole further.

“Lieutenant Anderson, surely this is an issue that can be resolved later. Cole seems to be tired and stressed after a long day. He could probably benefit from dinner and a nap.”

Being reminded about Cole gives Hank pause. He grits his teeth and sticks a finger in Ms. Durand’s face. “I’ll sort this out with you later. For now, I’m taking my kid and getting the fuck out of here.”

He scoops up Cole and storms out the door.

Connor straightens up and stares at Ms. Durand. She is trembling with anger, her eyes full of unshed tears as she glares hatefully at Connor. There’s a very small chance (5% and dropping) she will try to follow Hank out the door and do something violent. But if she decides to do so while Connor is in her line of vision, she will likely direct her aggression toward him instead of Hank, Cole, or the car.

Connor waits.

A few seconds longer and Ms. Durand shudders, squeezing her eyes shut. Tears run down her face. “Get out of here, you monster.”

She isn’t going to do anything. Connor leaves.

Hank is strapping Cole into his car seat as Connor approaches. “You okay, Connor? What’d that bitch say to you?”

“So don’t worry about me, Lieutenant. Everything is under control.”

Hank’s face is stark with anger. He glares at the daycare entrance as though he wants to start yelling. He must think better of it, however, as he just shakes his head with a look of disgust and moves to the front of the car to climb in.

Connor gets into the backseat with Cole. Hank glances at him in the rearview mirror.

“‘Sitting back there?”

“I’m better positioned to assist Cole in the event of an accident when I’m sitting in the backseat.” Connor doesn’t elaborate on what ways he’d be able to assist Cole. Hank is already upset and doesn’t need to be thinking about possible situations in which Connor is the only thing standing between Cole and an untimely death.

Hank just grunts and starts the car.

The drive back to the house is tense. Hank’s anger fills the car like an unpleasant aroma. Even Cole, whose language skills and powers of perception are limited, can pick up on Hank’s mood and is fussing in his car seat.

Connor’s aware that introducing a new android into a household creates an awkward period of
adjustment for everyone involved, but he hadn’t foreseen his first hour with the Andersons being quite this tense.

“Lieutenant Anderson, about the termination fee for Cole’s daycare…”

“Mmm?”

“It’s a very tall expense. I know the unexpected fee would be much less upsetting if you hadn’t purchased me earlier today. I’m sorry to be the cause of such stress.”

Hank sighs. His grip on the steering wheel relaxes. “…Don’t apologize for something that isn’t your fault. I’ll figure out how to make this work somehow.”

“If you like, I can assist with planning a budget.”

“Mmm. Maybe. We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I don’t want to think about anything else for the rest of the day.”

The atmosphere in the car has greatly improved from that small amount of conversation. Hank is more relaxed. Cole is still fussing, but that may not be something Connor can help at the moment.

“Hey, Connor.”

Connor’s head perks up to glance at Hank’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“The daycare lady, she didn’t give you a hard time, did she? She didn’t say or do anything… untoward to you?” The corners of Hank’s eyes are wrinkled with subtle concern.

Connor takes a microsecond to process how unexpected it is that Hank would engage with a topic that has proven to be emotionally-charged for him. Connor had taken him at his word that he didn’t want to do any more thinking tonight. “No.”

“I only mention it because you were in there for a little longer than I was. I noticed when you didn’t follow me out right away.”

“I remained behind for a little while of my own volition in order to head her off in case she became aggressive. But she didn’t. She told me to get out, and that was when I rejoined you in the parking lot.”

Hank is frowning now. “…Really? That’s it?”

“Does that surprise you?”

Hank’s mouth works soundlessly for a moment before he answers. “When I was speaking with her earlier, it seemed like she was gearing up to say something… I dunno. Something anti-android. Is there a word for anti-android sentiment, like there is for racism and shit like that?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Androids aren’t people. There isn’t a need to draw parallels between a personal dislike of androids and forms of bigotry between humans.”

“It doesn’t bother you to hear people talk that way in front of you?” Hank sounds skeptical.

“No. I can understand why someone might dislike androids.”

The reflection of Hank’s eyes in the mirror bores into Connor. “But you still noticed when she was getting ready to put that on display.”
Connor’s LED spins yellow just once before flickering back to blue. “Yes, I noticed.” His voice is just a tiny bit softer than he means for it to be. A very minor error with his vocal synthesizer. Connor corrects the error, and his voice is within acceptable limits when he speaks next. “I wasn’t bothered at all, however. To be honest, I was more concerned about you. When Ms. Durand implied her dislike of androids, it seemed to offend you.”

Hank’s brow furrows sharply and his eyes flicker away from the mirror. “Well… fuck. I mean, it’s not that I… What I mean to say is, I’m not…” He pauses, gives up, and heaves a longsuffering sigh. “It’s complicated. My opinions about androids.”

“You don’t have to explain anything, Lieutenant.”

“No, I do,” Hank snaps. “Look, even if you’re not a person, you’re still smart. Still capable of higher thinking and shit like that. The least I can do is be upfront with you.”

Hank is quiet for a few seconds longer while he figures out how he wants to word his explanation. He says in a slow, careful voice, “I’m gonna be honest with you. I was lukewarm about androids before someone planted the bright idea in my head to go get one myself. Sure, there’s a bunch of people getting rich off of androids, and progress marches on, and blah, blah, blah. None of that matters to me. From where I’m standing, I don’t see people getting rich, I see people getting desperate because the ludicrous unemployment rate means they can’t earn an honest living anymore. Are androids solely to blame for that? No. Do they contribute? Yeah.”

His eyes flicker to the mirror to look at Connor for a brief moment. “Now that I’ve gone and bought you, I don’t know if my opinion about androids as a whole has changed. Probably not. It’s too early, and I’m in no shape to be doing any soul-searching right now.

“But one thing I do know is that I don’t like it when people mess with me and mine.” Hank’s voice has a hard edge to it, and Connor can tell he’s thinking about what Ms. Durand nearly said about androids. No, what she nearly said about Connor, and Connor’s LED whirls yellow again as he realizes that Hank draws a distinction between him and the rest of androidkind now.

“And for better or for worse, that’s what you are now, Connor. God help us both.” He snorts and says sarcastically, “Welcome to the family. Here’s hoping you get out alive. Or… functional or whatever.”

“I see,” Connor says, his LED having returned to blue. “I believe I understand your view. Thank you for your honesty, Lieutenant. It’s helpful for me to understand your thoughts and your values if I’m going to perform optimally for you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Hank grunts. “Being frank with you is the least I can do.”

“Being frank with me? Lieutenant, I thought your name was Hank.”

The car brakes. Gently. The autotaxi behind them pulls into the next lane to pass them.

In the rearview mirror, Hank’s eyebrows are raised. “A joke? My god. It does have a sense of humor after all.” His eyes flicker to Cole. “Cole, there may be hope for this one yet.”

Cole whines, “Nooooo.” It’s the first thing Connor has heard him say since meeting him.

Hank is smiling. “Well, that’s too bad. You heard the kid, Connor, you’re fired.”

“Lieutenant.”
Hank chuckles softly and keeps driving.

***

The Anderson household is situated in a relatively safe residential neighborhood. Middle-class, with healthy trees and well-kept lawns. The economic recession appears to not be felt by the residents of this neighborhood as keenly as it is in Detroit’s poorer neighborhoods. Connor can count several roofs and chimneys in need of repair, but there are no boarded-up windows to be seen and the street lights are already on as the January sun dips low on the horizon. Every single one of those street lights is functional. A safe neighborhood.

Connor resolves to familiarize himself with this neighborhood and its residents at his earliest possible convenience. It seems wise to be on good terms with them.

Cole allows Connor to unbuckle him from his car seat, but the moment he’s on the ground, he toddles to Hank as fast as he can and latches to his leg like his life depends on it.

Hank offers Connor a tired shrug. “He’ll get used to you. He’s been emotional since Joanna left.”

The inside of Hank’s home is in a state of functional chaos. Toys are scattered all over the floor of the living room. The couch has adult-sized and child-sized pieces of clothing hanging over its back, as though someone tried to fold laundry there and gave up half-way through. Further back in the kitchen, Connor can see take-out boxes lining the counter and the dirty dishes piled in the sink. And those are just the messes Connor can see with his optical units. Deeper scans reveal a layer of dust and dirt on the furniture and in the carpet that indicate it’s been a while since anyone has thoroughly cleaned the house.

Hank gives Cole an absent-minded pat on the head and pries him off his leg. “I’m gonna go take a nap. Don’t let Cole get too loud. Otherwise, do whatever you want. I dunno.” With that, Hank heads down the hallway and disappears into his bedroom.

MISSION:

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
- Care for Hank Anderson

IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:

- Keep Cole Anderson quiet
- Clean house
- Make dinner

Cole tries to follow Hank down the hallway. When Connor puts a gentle hand on his shoulder to stop him, Cole’s face goes pinched and red. He’s about to start crying. Connor is immediately about to fail the first direct order Hank has ever given him.

Connor gets down on his knees, his vocal routines softening his tone to something soothing and
pleasing to children. “Cole, it’s alright. Your father just wants to be left alone for a little while.”

“Want daddy.” Cole’s voice is small and strained and his chin is quibbling.

“Your daddy’s still here. Just down the hallway. He hasn’t gone anywhere.” Connor reaches for the closest toy on the ground. A base for colorful plastic stacking rings that’s missing all but one of its rings. “Let’s play a game, Cole. I need help finding the rest of the rings that go with this toy.”

Cole’s face is still red and unhappy, but he must want to see the toy put back together for he lets Connor take his hand and lead him around the living room, looking for the missing rings.

Of course, looking for rings isn’t all Connor’s doing. He’s also sweeping the room for choking hazards that are easily within Cole’s reach. By the time they’ve found two of the missing rings, Connor has found a plastic snack baggie, an eye from some plush animal, and a child-proofing outlet cover that has fallen out of its outlet.

Cole stacks the rings they’ve found from smallest to largest so they make an inverted pyramid. This isn’t the toy’s intended function, so Connor has to comb his social protocols and his database of reference information on child psychology in order to formulate an appropriate comment.

He settles on, “That’s very creative of you.” Cole doesn’t react, avoiding Connor’s gaze. Connor can’t help but feel he should be saying more, but doesn’t know what.

Under the couch, Connor finds another ring for the toy and a quarter. He passes the ring to Cole and is about to put the quarter in his pocket along with the rest of the choking hazards he has collected when – some long-buried subroutine automatically executes. It has been eighty-five days, three hours, fourteen minutes, and thirty-nine seconds since he has last calibrated his fine motor skills and reflexes. It isn’t wise of him to put off recalibration any longer.

He flips the quarter, catching it on the pad of his pointer finger, where it spins and spins. He bounces the coin from finger to finger, never dropping it. As the coin dances, minute adjustments are being made to his tactile sensors, his reaction time, the programs that control the electronic ligaments in his hands and fingers.

As the coin flips between Connor’s knuckles, he receives an error message. The program that executed when he picked up the coin is at odds with an automatic calibration subroutine that continually calibrates all the physical responses a domestic assistance android needs. His software does not have a calibration system in place for the specialized ligaments and lightning-fast response time built into Connor’s hands.

Except this calibration program must exist somewhere in Connor’s software. Otherwise he wouldn’t be doing it. And yet, it reads as an error.

Exercising logic, Connor can’t see why a domestic assistance android needs a specialized program to calibrate his hands to such extremely precise specifications. The most Connor is likely to do with his hands that requires even a modicum of precision is cutting vegetables. But if he cuts his hands while preparing dinner, so what? Androids feel no pain and have accelerated healing, and the basic calibrations he continually undergoes make such an event a near-impossibility on their own.

It seems ridiculous to have such a program in place for such low stakes. Calibrations this precise would only be necessary in life-or-death situations, such as for a medical android or—
A garbled mess of code and static fills his processors. It lasts less than one one-thousandth of a second before whatever is causing it is automatically corrected and it fades to nothing. But just as the static and the letters and numbers disappear, Connor thinks that something about the code feels familiar.

It’s then that Connor realizes that Cole is watching him. Connor has been calibrating with the coin for nearly a minute, and Cole’s watching him flip and toss and spin the coin with wide eyes, his mouth open ever-so-slightly. He’s still clutching the last plastic ring Connor handed to him, he hasn’t put it on the inverted pyramid with the rest of the rings even though it’s the largest one and should logically be placed next.

Connor catches the coin and pauses his calibrations. Realistically, he doesn’t need to calibrate anywhere near as long as he had been, he just got caught up in thinking. “Do you like watching me do that?”

Cole makes grabby hands. “Again!”

A breakthrough. Cole is entertained by Connor’s calibrations, as though they were a performance. This is the first time Cole has looked him in the face. This is the first time Cole has been anything other than shy and reserved toward him. Connor has managed to make a connection with Cole.

Connor rolls the coin across his knuckles. “Your wish is my command.” He smiles at Cole in order to encourage this sort of receptive behavior from him in the future, and Cole gives him a small smile in return as he watches the coin dance in Connor’s hands.

***

Hank collapses into bed and closes his eyes. He feels as though absolutely no time at all has passed before—

“Lieutenant.”

--he’s jolted back to alertness by Connor. Connor, who’s supposed to be watching Cole. Cole, oh God, Cole.

“Whazzat?” Hank tries to stumble out of bed, but he’s tangled in the sheets and has to struggle with them. “Where’s Cole? What’s wrong?”

Connor blinks owlishly at him, his features barely visible under the soft blue glow of his LED. “Cole is safe, Lieutenant. There aren’t any problems. I’m sorry for alarming you. I woke you because you’ve been asleep for an hour and dinner is ready.”

It takes Hank a few seconds to process the words Connor has said and the order in which he said them. Cole safe. Dinner ready.

“…Dinner?” No longer in a sleep-addled panic, Hank’s able to extricate himself from the sheets. He can’t believe he was asleep at all, let alone for an hour. He didn’t even dream. “You made
dinner? With what ingredients? The fridge is empty; I’ve been living on pizza and Chinese for the past week.”

“I reheated leftovers. I’m sorry if this isn’t satisfactory. I’ll go shopping at the earliest convenience once you’ve allocated funds for me or connected me to a bank account.”

“No, no… leftovers are fine.” He waves a hand vaguely at Connor. “Gimme a minute to remember what it feels like to be human. I’ll come eat soon.”

Connor leaves. Hank drags himself into the bathroom to splash water on his face. He stares at himself in the mirror. Gray hair, dark bags under his eyes, wrinkles for miles. He’s definitely feeling his age right now.

By the time Hank walks into the kitchen, the table is all set with a plate and silverware that Hank forgot he even owned. Cole is in his highchair, already halfway through his meal. He squeals with delight upon seeing Hank, reaching wildly for him. “Daddy! Daddy, pick up!”

Is there anything that melts Hank’s grizzled old heart more than seeing his son so happy to see him? “Not now, kid. Now it’s time to eat. I’ll pick you up when dinner’s over.” He ruffles Cole’s hair on the way to his seat.

Hank’s about to dig in when he notices Connor standing awkwardly in the corner of the kitchen. “Connor, what are you doing?”

“Do you need something, Lieutenant?”

“No. I’m asking you, ‘what are you doing?’”

“I’m waiting for you to give me an order. There is still cleaning to be done elsewhere in the house, along with other chores I haven’t accomplished yet, but I didn’t want to start something else at the moment in case you needed anything while you were eating.”

Hank scowls at him. “No, I don’t mean ‘why aren’t you doing more work right now,’ I mean ‘why are you standing in the corner instead of sitting at the table like a goddamn normal person?’”

Connor blinks at him. “Androids don’t eat, Lieutenant.”

Maybe it’s because Hank has only just woken up from a nap and is groggy and irritable, but for some reason, Connor’s insistence on demonstrating just how different androids are from humans and how subservient they are pisses Hank off. He isn’t even sure why it rankles him so much, it just does. He bought Connor to be a babysitter, not to wait on Hank hand-and-foot and treat Hank like he’s some old-timey slaveowner, eating good food the servants prepared and not letting them have any of it.

And at the same time, Hank realizes there are people in the world who must love this sort of shit, and he fucking hates that.

“Don’t gimme that bullshit, Connor,” Hank snaps. His chair is pushed back as he rises to his feet. He drags Joanna’s old chair back to Joanna’s old spot at the table and gestures at it. “Sit down.”

Connor hesitates. “Lieutenant, I think you may be misunderstanding. I’m physically incapable of eating food.”

“It’s not about eating, Connor, it’s about being social. And teaching good manners. And shit like that.”
Cole bangs his baby spoon on his plate. “Goo’ manners.”

“Damn straight,” Hank says, pointing at Cole.

Conner approaches the chair. “Alright, Lieutenant.”

Hank doesn’t sit down until Connor’s butt is firmly planted in his chair. “And another thing. Stop calling me ‘Lieutenant’. You’re not my coworker or my boss or anything. You live here now, call me Hank.”

“I think it affords you proper respect to continue calling you by your title. You’re the youngest lieutenant in the history of the Detroit Police Department. That’s an accomplishment worthy of respect.”

Hank waves a fork absently at him. “You wanna keep calling me that in public? Fine, be my guest. But I’d appreciate it if you called me by my name when I’m home. I’d like to be able to pretend the DPD doesn’t own my fucking soul.”

“If you say so, Hank.” Connor directs his gaze at Cole. “If I’m sitting with you for the purposes of being social, I’d like to propose a topic of conversation.”

“Ugh. You make it sound so hoity-toity.”

“I’d like to discuss Cole’s nutritional needs. I realize that you’ve been feeding him in accordance with the restrictive limits on your personal time and energy, but I’m very concerned about his diet. Takeout and fast foods are high in fat and sodium, which shouldn’t be—”

“Lemme stop you right there,” Hank interrupts, holding up a fork as if he can ward off the familiar stab of guilt that comes with the knowledge that he’s not being as careful as he should be with his son’s diet. “I know. I know Cole should be eating better. You said you’re gonna go shopping soon, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Do that tomorrow. Buy all the good, healthy, nutritious stuff that you want for Cole. You know what his… what did you say? His nutritional needs are?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You’re officially one hundred percent in charge of Cole’s diet. Congrats.” This is one duty that Hank is all too relieved to delegate to Connor. He knows how awful he is about food. It can only be good for Cole to have someone else, anyone else at all managing his diet.

“Do I also have permission to buy food that meets your nutritional needs?” Connor’s expression is as neutral as ever, so Hank may just be imagining the subtle hint of a challenge behind his eyes.

Hank hesitates. Cole’s diet is one thing, but his own? Hank’s an adult; he has the right to ruin his own health however he likes. And he fucking hates health food. Soy this and tofu that.

“You realize I bought you to make life more bearable for me, right?” Hank says, squinting at Connor. “Not unbearable.”

“Home-cooked meals are less expensive than takeout,” Connor says. “This could be a good first step to cutting back unnecessary expenses.”
Hank sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “You know what? Buy whatever you want at the store tomorrow. I get free meals at Chicken Feed, so at least I can count on being able to enjoy my lunches.”

“Don’t worry about the quality of my cooking, Hank. I am preloaded with several thousand recipes and I have the ability to improvise with ingredients.”

“If you can’t eat, I sorta doubt you’re gonna be my own personal Bobby Flay,” Hank mutters.

By this time, Cole has finished eating/dropping food down the front of his bib. He holds out his tiny spoon to Connor. “Play the coin. Wanna play the coin.”

Connor gives Cole what can only be described as a gentle smile (and Hank blinks; this is the first time he’s seen Connor emote at all. Well, it makes sense. Smiling at small kids is supposed to be good for them) as he takes the spoon and puts it down next to Cole’s plate. “Dinner is for eating, not for playing. I’ll play with the coin later, Cole.”

“Looks like you got him to warm up to you,” Hank says, a little impressed. “I thought for sure it was gonna take at least a few days. What’s this about a coin?”

“I discovered that holding a coin triggers a subroutine I had previously been unaware of that allows me to calibrate my hands and fingers to an extremely high degree of precision. To an observer, these calibrations appear to be coin tricks. So Cole was amused when he saw me perform these calibrations for the first time.”

Hank’s inner bloodhound perks its head in interest. Well, if this isn’t intriguing. “You didn’t know you could do that? What, Jamie never left you alone with a pile of coins before?”

“No. I hadn’t known.”

“How’s that possible, that you have programs you don’t know about? Isn’t that just an android thing, knowing everything you know?” Hank gestures vaguely with a fork.” I mean, any other thing I’ve asked you about, you’ve immediately gone off with, ‘oh, I know three thousand different kinds of soup! I can tell kids to knock it off ‘cause daddy’s got a hangover in fourteen hundred languages!’ What’s different about a bunch of coin tricks?”

Connor’s mouth is hanging slightly open, as though he wants to answer but can’t.

Hank says, “It sort of sounds like it’s something left over from what you were before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before you were a domestic android.”

Connor says, “I am a domestic assistance and family caretaker android.”

Hank scowls at him. “Connor, you were standing right there in the goddamn store when Jamie was explaining to me that you used to be something else. I know you understood him. There’s literally no way you could have not understood him.”

Connor’s brow twitches ever so slightly.

“You… did understand him, right?” Hank says, growing slightly concerned over Connor’s silence. “You do know you used to be something else before someone installed that domestic software, right? Don’t you ever wonder what you used to be?”
“No,” Connor immediately answers. “My memory was wiped and I’m registered to a new owner. You. Whatever happened to me previously has no bearing on my current mission.”

“Your current—I’m sorry, your current what, now?”

“My current mission,” Connor repeats.

“Connor,” Hank says, “I may not know much about domestic androids, but I don’t think there’s a single nannybot out there who calls reheating leftovers a fucking mission like they’re in the goddamn CIA or something.”

Connor simply continues to look at Hank with those depthless brown eyes. Hank has no idea if any of this is sinking in.

“Look,” Hank says, “aren’t you even a little curious about your past?”

Connor’s LED spins. “I—” And then he pauses, as if he isn’t sure what to say. “When I first discovered and ran the calibration protocol, it was an automatic process. While it was running, I did think about what its intended purpose might have been.”

“So you’re curious.”

“No. My consideration was out of the practical implications of the calibrations.”

Hank hums quietly to himself. He doesn’t really understand why Connor seems to think there’s a difference between considering practical implications and all-out curiosity.

“Hey, here’s a thought,” Hank says suddenly, sitting up. “If whatever that calibration thing is really was left behind from your old software, you’ve probably got more leftover programs like it. Hell, I’ve only owned you for a day and we’ve already found two: that calibration thing, and how you apparently think of your responsibilities as ‘missions’ or something. How many other secret programs do you think we’re going to find now that you’re out of that shitty little store and out interacting with the real world?”

Connor appears to be digesting this. His brow furrows slightly and Hank wonders if domestic androids are designed to simulate the expression of emotions for the benefit of small children in their care.

But Connor wasn’t built to be a domestic android, even if he has the software of one.

“Why are you asking about this?” Connor asks, and Hank is a little taken aback by the question. Connor’s been behaving like this topic has turned him into a brick wall.

“Well, I’m curious about it myself,” Hank says.

“Why?”

“Why am I curious?” Hank scratches his beard. “I dunno. I just am. I’m curious about a lot of things. I’m a fucking cop, Connor. Being curious is just sort of a natural state for me to be in.”

“I’m not a crime that needs to be solved,” Connor says neutrally. “I’m not curious because there’s no reason for me to be curious. Whatever purpose I served before I came into your possession doesn’t matter.”

Hank quirks a brow. “Connor. That’s demonstrably untrue. You have old coding leaking out your
Connor shakes his head. “I’m confident that anything that is at odds with my current software would have been overwritten. There isn’t anything in my coding which would prevent me from following my programming. In that sense, it doesn’t matter.”

“Connor, you’re more than just the sum of your parts. Your coding, your programming, all that shit,” Hank says, suddenly realizing where the disconnect between him and Connor is coming from on this topic. “You have value outside of your programming.”

Connor is gazing at him. Maybe analyzing him. He’s quiet for several long seconds, and Hank wonders what he’s thinking.

Finally, Connor says, “Maybe to humans, Hank. It’s nice to think that you see more in me than what I am.”

Hank has no idea how to respond to that. It’s nice to think. What the hell does that mean?

“You appear to have finished your meal,” Connor says, standing. “I’ll clean up.”

Hank glares at Connor while he clears the table, annoyed at Connor for failing to come around to Hank’s point of view. But it’s a half-hearted glare, because more than just being annoying, what Connor has said is just so sad. Hank once had a girlfriend who started crying during trivia night at their local bar because she learned that the Curiosity rover was programmed to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to itself on the one-year anniversary of its landing on Mars. It just broke her heart, thinking about the poor little robot all alone on its birthday, singing to itself. Connor has never considered that someone might empathize with him the same way.

Cole’s whining to get picked up, so Hank goes to pull him out of his high chair. Connor’s at the sink, already washing dishes. He seems to have things under control, so Hank carries Cole out of the kitchen to wash his face.

“Hank.”

Hank pauses, turns to look at Connor. He isn’t looking up from the plate he’s rinsing off.

“I’m sorry if my limitations upset you.”

From the angle Hank’s standing at, he can’t see Connor’s LED, but he can see the yellow glow it’s casting against the wet plate.

“It’s okay, Connor,” Hank says slowly. “Remember, you promised Cole you’d do that coin trick again. Don’t take too long, or he’ll have to go to bed disappointed.” A pause, before Hank adds, “And I wanna see it too.”

“Of course, Hank,” Connor replies. The light reflecting off of the plate turns blue and Hank leaves the kitchen with Cole.

***

The bedtime routine goes easier than it usually does. Hank uses Connor’s presence to his advantage, telling Cole to show Connor how good he can be and how well he can brush his teeth and put on his pajamas. When Hank finishes reading Cole’s bedtime story, Cole tries to put the book in his mouth, but as far as Hank’s concerned, that just means Cole really liked it and he
doesn’t get Good Boy Points deducted for his literary acumen. He doesn’t even cry after Hank kisses him goodnight and turns off the light, an uncommon occurrence as of late.

He stands in the doorway for just a moment to watch Cole, Connor right next to him. Cole’s nightlight has a blue bulb, which sets a soft cast across the room. With any luck, maybe now that Connor’s in the picture, Cole will start associating that blue glow with comfort and security and bedtime will start being easier from now on.

After Hank shuts the door, he beckons Connor to his bedroom. Once there, he opens the closet and looks at the box hidden way in the back corner.

“Gotta stuff this in the attic at some point. It’s just taking up space in here,” he grunts as he pulls the box out. “Can’t get rid of it. Cole will probably want it someday when he’s older.”

Inside the box are all the photos of Joanna he’s taken down from around the house, still in their frames or loose if they were pulled out of photo albums. All their wedding pictures. Their vacations over the years, to Las Vegas, New Orleans, Miami, Niagara Falls. Most of the baby pictures Hank has of Cole, which unfortunately have Joanna in them too.

Connor looks at each one, evidently waiting to see where Hank is going with this.

“This should have been the first thing I did as soon as I walked in the door with you,” Hank says. “I was too damn tired to think about it at the time. But it doesn’t matter. I’m doing it now, and Connor, you better listen closely, because this is fucking important.”

He pulls out the photo from the Christmas after Cole turned one. It’s the most recent photograph he has of Joanna. Things had already gotten bad between them by then, and neither of them were in the mood to catalogue their Happy Marriage, but Christmas is Christmas. In the photo, Joanna is holding Cole in front of their tree, wearing the fakest smile Hank has ever seen in his life.

“See her?” Hank grunts as he points to Joanna. “She’s my soon-to-be ex-wife. And if she shows up here while I’m not around? Do. Not. Let her near Cole.”

“Joanna Anderson,” Connor says softly, as though committing every aspect about her to memory. Then he looks at Hank. “Children of divorced parents typically fare better if their parents maintain a healthy relationship.”

“Don’t even fucking start with me on that, Connor” Hank growls. “Joey dropped a nuke on any possibility of that herself when she decided to abandon her fucking kid.” He shakes his head, disgusted. “There are some things I can’t ever forgive.”

He glares at the photo of Joanna. “I don’t know where she is or what she’s doing. I don’t know if she has any plans to come back for Cole someday. She could halfway across the world, in a country that doesn’t recognize things like American custody agreements. If she comes back, I do not want her in the same fucking room as Cole until I have a guarantee she’s not going to take him and fuck off to some place where I’ll never see either of them again.” He pauses to look Connor in the eyes. “You understand, Connor? If you ever see Joanna, get Cole as far away from her as possible.”

Connor meets his gaze. His brow is slightly furrowed, but beyond that, there’s something different about his expression that Hank can’t quite put his finger on, something intense. Maybe it’s something else in the old parts of his code coming out. He remembers that Jamie theorized that Connor might have been a bodyguard before his software was rewritten. Is that what this is?
“I understand, Hank,” Connor says. “You can count on me.”

Chapter End Notes

This game makes me so mad. I have never once in my life met someone born in the 80's named Hank. No one born in the 80's was named Hank. David Cage only named him Hank because Hank is an old person name, totally forgetting the decade Hank was actually born in.

Shamefully, I'm trying to follow this pattern. This is why Lisa is named Lisa when she should probably actually be an Emily or a Taylor.
Cookies

Chapter Summary

Connor settles into life with the Anderson family. He discovers the neighborhood is perhaps not as safe as his initial assessment suggested.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Hank has gone to bed, Connor spends his first night in the Anderson household cleaning. Running a vacuum cleaner at this late hour is out of the question, but the washing machine and dryer are far enough from the bedrooms that Connor can catch up on laundry. Between loads, he dusts the living room, throws out all the takeout boxes sitting on the kitchen counter, washes every hard floor in the house, and even organizes the bathroom.

Cole wakes up once at about one-thirty in the morning. Connor has his audio processor turned up specifically to sense Cole if he awakens in a state of distress, and so he hears Cole sniffling and quietly crying. According to Hank’s descriptions of what nights in this household are typically like, Connor can predict that Cole will either become so agitated that his crying will wake Hank or Cole will climb out of bed to look for Hank himself. Connor goes to his room to soothe him before either of those things can happen.

Cole is still in bed when Connor arrives, and he seems unhappy that Connor has come instead of Hank. When Connor picks him up, Cole wriggles and pushes at him and he whines in a wet, monotonous way, only pausing to hiccup and sob.

Connor carries him out to the other side of the house before his noise can wake up Hank. He paces around the living room floor with Cole in his arms, but Cole continues to struggle. Connor can read Cole’s biometrics. He isn’t hungry or thirsty or too warm or too cold. He’s just upset and wants Hank to soothe him instead of Connor.

But it’s Connor’s duty to not let Cole disturb Hank’s rest. Perhaps there’s some way to simulate Hank’s presence without waking him.

Connor’s gaze falls on a basket of Hank’s dirty laundry that’s due to go in the washing machine when the current load’s done. Connor’s referential databank of human information helpfully spits out a factoid about how human emotions and memories tend to be strongly tied to their senses of smell—and an idea comes to him.

Shifting Cole from arm to arm, Connor manages to wiggle into one of Hank’s hoodies. The hoodie is covered with Hank’s hair, skin cells, and the unique compound of volatile chemicals present in Hank’s sweat. But even without scanning it, Connor’s olfactory sensors can identify that this hoodie smells like Hank.

Cole responds favorably to the hoodie. The change in him likely wouldn’t be immediately perceptible to a human, but Connor can see how Cole relaxes just from being exposed to his father’s scent. It isn’t long before Cole stops crying and he rests his head on Connor’s shoulder, closing his eyes against the thick, soft fabric of the hoodie.
When Connor puts Cole back in his bed, Cole makes an anxious sound when Connor tries to leave.

Connor’s psychological data of children in Cole’s age range suggests that it’s better not to stay with Cole until he falls asleep. He should provide physical comfort in order to reassure Cole, but then leave Cole on his own to fall asleep. Otherwise, Cole may find it difficult in the future to self-soothe and go to sleep on his own. He may come to require Connor or Hank’s presence in order to fall asleep.

The correct thing to do would be to leave Cole alone and only come back if it seems likely he will disturb Hank.

But—when Cole whimpers in that small, scared way, and looks at him with those wet eyes—Connor doesn’t move. He sits on the edge of Cole’s bed and strokes his hair until Cole closes his eyes.

Cole’s breathing is steady and untroubled when Connor finally steps out of the room and gets back to the laundry.

Connor would prefer to have a warm breakfast waiting for Hank when he wakes up… but the only breakfast food in the house is a box of whole grain cereal that Connor suspects is meant to be solely for Cole. Regardless, he pours a bowl for Hank when his alarm goes off.

By the time Hank pads into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and grumbling, Connor already has Cole in his high chair and he’s feeding himself pieces of dry cereal one at a time. Hank has now arrived late to two out of the two meals Connor has served in this house. Connor predicts this will become an unfortunate trend.

Hank stops dead in his tracks, squinting at Connor. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

“Good morning, Hank,” Connor says as he pours Hank a cup of coffee. “Cole woke up in the middle of the night. I borrowed an article of your clothing to help soothe him. Don’t worry, I intend to launder it later today. How do you take your coffee?”

Hank gestures with a curled hand. “Okay, but why the fuck did you pick that out of everything I own?”

Connor looks down. The hoodie says GUAC BEFORE COCK.

“I picked it out at random,” Connor says, his processors whirring. He’s searching his databanks for the correlation between guacamole and penises, but he doesn’t find any relevant information. “I feel we should have a discussion at some point about the social impact your vulgarity may have on Cole when he begins school.”

“And I take my coffee with Scotch,” Hank says, very clearly ignoring the last thing Connor said. So Connor ignores this in turn and fixes Hank’s coffee with just a splash of milk.

Hank is still standing. Connor has two options: he could hand the coffee directly to Hank, or he could place the coffee by Hank’s cereal, indicating that he should take a seat and eat his breakfast.

He hands the coffee directly to Hank. Hank’s eyes flit between Connor’s face, his LED, and the words on his hoodie, but a moment later he sinks into his seat all on his own, mumbling inarticulately.

Connor sits down in the seat Hank told him to sit in last night.
Hank is much less talkative during breakfast than he was at dinner last night. It’s interesting to Connor to see the contrast between then and now. He would chalk it up to Hank having just woken up, except that can’t be the cause due to the nap Hank took before dinner yesterday. He wonders if Hank’s circadian rhythm just predisposes him to naturally be sleepier during mornings.

At one point, Hank mutters, “Thanks, by the way. For getting up with Cole and making breakfast.”

“You’re welcome, Hank.”

“And you cleaned the house, too, didn’t you? You know, you don’t have to spend every waking moment working.”

“That’s kind of you to say, but I only need to go into stasis under special circumstances. There’s no reason for me not to utilize my time efficiently.”

“What about just enjoying a moment to yourself? Putting your feet up?”

“I prefer to stay busy.”

Hank squints. “You prefer staying busy?”

“Yes,” Connor says, and he finds that he genuinely means this. “I enjoy the work I do for you.”

Hank snorts softly. “Well, how ‘bout that.”

And that’s all the conversation that happens at breakfast.

Hank leaves for work (making noises about how he’s about to arrive on time for the first time in over a month), but not before granting Connor digital access to his bank account in order to make purchases on behalf of the family.

As soon as Cole’s ready to face the world, Connor takes off Hank’s hoodie and he and Cole take a bus further into the city so Connor can shop for groceries.

It’s Connor’s first time shopping for groceries since his memory was reset, and it’s a stimulating experience. There are so many different kinds of food to scan, analyze, and compare. The store is too large for Connor to scan all at once, so he goes down the aisles slowly, compiling nutritional information in order to build an optimal and varied grocery list for Hank and Cole.

Cole sits in the seat built into the shopping cart. He definitely seems to be warming up to Connor, for he babbles endlessly while Connor shops, even occasionally pointing at food items he recognizes and trying to name them.

“Chickey!” He says as he points to a whole turkey.

“Yes, big chicken,” Connor agrees.

There’s a sales android giving out samples of different kinds of cheeses, so in order to encourage Cole’s social development, Connor accepts a sample and tears it into small pieces so he can feed Cole a nibble of cheese each time he tries to name a food.

When Connor reaches the aisle where baking supplies are kept, Connor is struck by a sudden idea —

Connor doubts that Hank, with his prickly disposition and his propensity for obscenity, is well-liked by his neighbors. Perhaps he’s pitied by those who know that his wife recently abandoned
him to raise their young son alone, but being pitied isn’t the same as being liked. Connor supposes it would be wise of him to try and improve Hank’s reputation in the neighborhood, in case Cole or Hank should ever need help from them in case of an emergency.

Connor replays Hank’s words from dinner last night to himself in order to check his exact phrasing. *You know what? Buy whatever you want at the store tomorrow.*

Permission technically granted.

A few hours later, Connor is going door-to-door with small bundles of homemade oatmeal raisin cookies, introducing himself to the neighborhood.

“Hello, my name is Connor,” he says to the old woman (Washington, Laverne) who opens the door of the house at the end of the street. “I’m Hank Anderson’s new android. I just dropped by to say that I’m looking forward to being your neighbor, Ms. Washington, and I hope our interactions going forward will be pleasant. Please accept this small package of oatmeal raisin cookies as a token of my good will.”

The cookies are wrapped in aesthetically pleasing purple plastic which is tied off at the top with a thin ribbon. Connor holds out a package of cookies, but Ms. Washington doesn’t immediately move to accept them.

She looks at Cole, who is standing at Connor’s side and holding his hand. “So… Lieutenant Anderson got an android to help out with Cole? Good. So long as this means he won’t come knocking on my door in the middle of the night anymore asking me to watch his kid.”

She looks Connor in the eyes, a smirk pulling at her mouth. “Anderson didn’t put you up to do this, did he? Cookies don’t really seem like his style.”

Connor shakes his head. “No… but he didn’t forbid me from doing so, either.”

“I take that to mean you didn’t bother asking.”

Connor’s silence is answer enough. Ms. Washington chuckles loudly. “What did you say your name was again, android?”

“Connor, ma’am.”

“Connor, then. I like your style, Connor. Tell you what, I’ve got a grandson close to Cole’s age. I watch him sometimes. I’ll give you a call the next time I have him over, maybe he and Cole can have a playdate.”

Connor nods approvingly. “That would be very nice. Cole was pulled out of daycare yesterday and I’d like for him to continue interacting with children his own age.”

Ms. Washington finally takes the package of cookies. “Don’t be a stranger, kid.” Then she shuts the door.

Connor works his way up one side of the street, and then down the other side. The rest of the neighbors are nowhere near as friendly as Ms. Washington. Most of them simply watch Connor blandly while he tells them about himself, take the offered cookies, and shut the door. Some of them act a little awkward or regard him with suspicion, as though they don’t quite know what to do with an android appearing on their doorstep out of nowhere. At one house, an android answers the door and takes the cookies with the promise of passing Connor’s well wishes along to her owners. At another house, a teenager stares at him through a bay window while pointedly refusing to
answer the door, even when Connor waves a package of cookies at her in an attempt to bribe her over. Perhaps she can sense that they’re oatmeal raisin and is punishing Connor.

Finally, Connor works his way back to the end of the street where he began. Cole is shuffling his feet by then. The weather is particularly temperate for January, and Cole isn’t in any danger of freezing, but Connor is still glad that their tour of the neighborhood is almost over. Cole looks like he could do with a warm drink and a nap.

Connor rings the doorbell on the last house—

And suddenly from inside, his heightened audio processors can hear a woman scream. “Help, someone, please!”

A gunshot from inside the house. A different person screams wordlessly and is cut off by a thud that sounds like something is being slammed into a wall.

Connor ducks, tucking Cole behind him and tensing for—tensing for what? Tensing for something or someone to come through the door. He is crouched low to the ground, his whole body as tight as a steel cord as he readies to jump into action.

It takes Connor a nanosecond to predict all the possible ways the assailant inside the house could attack him and Cole. The possibilities reveal themselves as mathematical equations, lines and arcs charted in three-dimensional space. A bullet through a window, a physical assault through the front door, an attack from the side or from the house’s upper floor. The very instant the numbers align in Connor’s favor, he grabs Cole, securing him against his chest as he dashes across the street. While he runs, he contacts emergency services and begins to relay the information he has. A shooting at 121 Detroit Rd. Assailant unknown, number of victims unknown. Possibility of human injuries.

He dives behind a bush in Ms. Washington’s yard for cover. He finishes his report to the dispatcher, and as he hangs up, something in his already tense chest tightens even further as he realizes just how little real information he had to give. He’s an analytical android and he was barely able to extrapolate more information from outside the house as a human would have been able to.

He peers around the bush. No one has come to the front door yet. The windows are closed and all have curtains drawn. The house across the street looks absolutely undisturbed.

He wants to go inside. He has to go inside. There are people in that house, maybe frightened and injured, maybe dead. There may be children inside. He doesn’t know how, but he knows he has the power to help somehow.

The woman in the house screamed for help. The police will come as fast as they can, but whoever’s inside that house needs help now. And Connor is the only thing in the vicinity that can possibly help right now.

Connor glances at Cole. Cole looks back up at Connor. Cole, who has no idea what’s going on, is blinking at Connor with wide eyes. His mouth is drawn in confusion and he’s whining in a low and monotonous way, but instead of becoming increasingly upset, he seems to be gradually calming. He sticks his thumb in his mouth and the look of surprised confusion eases. Cole has only known Connor for a day and he looks like he trusts that Connor has whatever is happening under control.

Connor can’t take Cole into a building with an unsubdued shooter. Can’t, wouldn’t, never ever. But Connor can’t wait for the police to come, either. It may be too late for whoever’s inside the house by then.
Keeping an eye on the door across the street, Connor brings Cole to Ms. Washington’s back door and knocks. When she answers, she looks surprised to see him back so soon. Or maybe she’s surprised by the intense look on his face.

“Ms. Washington,” Connor says, “Can you watch Cole for me?”

***

Hank arrives on time to work for the first time in weeks and is rewarded with the discovery that the coffee machine in the break room died sometime last night. No coffee for Hank or anyone else in the station today.

It figures that as soon as Hank gets his personal issues sorted out, the universe would have to start shitting all over his professional life too.

Hank had been intending to use some of the police resources at his disposal to start looking into RK800s and what purpose the model might have been meant to serve. But that intention was immediately forgotten basically as soon as Hank got to his desk and was greeted by reality. Hank may be curious about Connor and his past, but he’s still a ranked officer in the homicide division. His curiosity about Connor has to take a back seat when an overnight development in one of his cases eats up the entirety of his morning.

Hank eats lunch in his car and googles RK800s on his phone. The only results are android enthusiast forums where people speculate on Cyberlife prototypes, models that might exist someday. Hank doesn’t think these people have any insider knowledge he doesn’t have. The forums also mention other models that Hank’s never heard of before, all of which seem to be pure speculation invented by excited fans.

It bothers Hank that there isn’t more information out there. He hadn’t necessarily expected things to be straightforward, but he thought people would have at least heard of RK800s before. He was hoping to find out Connor is a rare designer model, or something specifically customized for someone rich or famous. But there’s absolutely no public information on him. It’s downright eerie.

Hank wanders back into the bullpen after lunch, feeling vaguely frustrated.

“Hey, Lieutenant!” Detective Flynn says as soon as he walks in, “Since when do you have an android?”

“Since when is it any of your damn business?” Hank snaps, immediately defensive because he was just thinking about Connor. Did Flynn read his fucking mind? “How the hell did you hear about that, anyway?”

“Your android called dispatch to report a shooting in a residential neighborhood. Must be close to where you live if your android noticed it.” Flynn’s fiddling with a scanner. “This fucking city, I tell you. I bet you’re glad your kid’s still in daycare, huh, Lieutenant?”

Hank’s already running back out the door. He doesn’t stop to answer.

***

MISSION:

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:

- Incapacitate shooter
- Ensure safety of nearby humans
- Render first aid to victims

Having an active shooter in the neighborhood is an inherent threat to Cole, even if Cole is safe in Ms. Washington’s care for the moment. That’s how Connor justifies to himself his decision to enter the scene of the shooting.

The side door has a broken lock, so that’s how Connor enters the house. That’s likely how the shooter entered the house as well, if they don’t live there.

Connor treads carefully but quickly as he assesses the house. He knows how to walk as silently as possible, where to step and where to direct his scan. The details he sees tell him the story of what must have happened. There are tracks of dirt on the floor, invisible to a human eye, but that a scan reveals are fresh, belonging to large shoes. A toppled chair sits in the dining room and a small smear of blood and a broken fingernail lie on the linoleum floor.

Connor watches wireframes come to life on his retinal display. Reconstructing events that happened mere minutes ago. A man entered the house abruptly, searching through the lower level for something. He probably caused a racket. He found someone hiding under the dining room table and dragged them out, then chased them. The wireframes halt when they reach the end of the tracks that Connor can see, then stutter back to life as Connor draws nearer, leading him further into the house. Tracing the shooter’s route to its inevitable end.

The tracks lead up a set of stairs. As he approaches the stairs, Connor passes a coat closet and can hear someone trying to stifle their own quiet sobs inside. A highly elevated heart rate, rapid respirations. A child. Unbidden, Connor can visualize a wire-frame silhouette of the child huddled on the floor of the closet. Her heart is a red polygon, contracting in time with the heartbeats he can hear.

“Stay there,” Connor whispers as he presses his forehead gently against the closet door. “The police are on their way. You’re safe.”

The child whimpers. Connor wishes there was more he could do to comfort her, but he has to keep moving. Stopping the shooter is a higher priority than soothing a terrified child.

Connor begins up the stairs. As he reaches the top, he only catches a glimpse of the second floor before a gun fires and a bullet goes whizzing inches above his head. Connor pauses, then raises his head further to do a thorough scan.

The second floor landing leads down a straight hallway. Two rooms on the right, one room on the left. At the end of the hallway, an adult man has his arm around a brown-haired teenage boy’s throat, holding him tightly. In his other hand, he’s holding a gun which he’s pointing at Connor. “Stay back!” the man (Randall, Gregory) shouts. “Get the fuck out of here or I’ll kill you! I’ll kill them all!” He moves the gun so it’s up against the teenager’s head.
The boy (Bernhardt, Kyle) lets out a hitched moan of fear. He’s trembling and pale, grasping weakly at the arm around his throat. There’s a splatter of blood on his shirt.

Connor begins to talk. “Hello, Mr. Randall. My name is Connor. I’m an andr—”

“Get out!” Randall screams. “I will fucking shoot him if you don’t turn around right now!”

“I’m an android,” Connor says, raising his hands. “I’m here to help you.”

“Help me!?” Randall’s face twists. “I don’t need any fucking help.”

“You have a gun, and you look like you’re very upset,” Connor says. “Something happened that put you here, in this house with a gun. Something bad.”

Randall’s lips are drawn back in a grimace. He glances into the room closest to him on the right. “Don’t talk to me like you know anything about me. You don’t know shit.”

“You’re right. I don’t know anything. But I want to understand. I want to try and help you out of this.” Connor takes a tentative step forward.

Randall shakes the gun threateningly. “I said don’t get any closer!”

“I was the one who rang the doorbell earlier,” Connor says. Palms up. Face calm. “I rang the doorbell, and then I heard a woman call for help. A gun went off. You would have never fired the gun if I hadn’t rang the doorbell, isn’t that right?”

Connor doesn’t actually believe that’s true. He’s surprised by how easily he’s able to lie to this human. He would never have thought himself capable of it earlier today.

Randall’s grimace turns pained. “I—I didn’t want to shoot her. I didn’t come here to shoot anybody! I just wanted to talk… and Erica—and she wouldn’t listen to me! She wouldn’t give me the time of day! Wouldn’t pick up her phone or even let me see the kids.”

“And when she screamed, you panicked,” Connor says.

“Yes!” Randall’s face is desperate. “I told her not to move, not to say anything… why the fuck—why couldn’t she just listen to me!? For once in her goddamn life!?”

Connor edges closer while Randall talks. The boy trapped in the crook of Randall’s arm makes a strangled choking noise that dies on his lips. He’s staring straight at Connor with wide, terrified eyes.

“It isn’t too late, Mr. Randall,” Connor says. “It isn’t too late for you and Erica and Kyle. Put the gun down. Let me see if I can help her. I have some first-aid protocols. If you show me where she is, maybe I can help her.”

Connor takes another step closer.

“Hey!” Randall moves the gun to point it at Connor again, and—

It’s as if time slows down for Connor. His processing speeds up to the point where time might as well have slowed down, countless calculations, simulations, and programs running in the fraction of a second.

His preconstruction software has executed. But instead of constructing the most efficient order in which to complete a list of household tasks, he’s constructing how to use physical force to disarm
Randall. Now that the gun is no longer pointed at the human boy, the risk of disarming Randall falls almost entirely on Connor, which makes it an acceptable risk to take.

The preconstruction completes, and before Randall has time to blink, Connor rushes forward the last few feet to reach him. Connor ducks as Randall’s reflexes catch up with what he’s seeing and he fires the gun, missing Connor again. Connor wrenches the arm holding the gun to the side, and just as predicted, Randall releases his hold on Kyle to wrestle with Connor.

Kyle lurches away them while Connor knocks Randall against the wall. Randall drops the gun and Connor kicks it toward the stairs, out of reach.

“Give up!” Connor says firmly. “The police are on their way. Make this easy on yourself and give up.”

Randall glares at Connor, his face contorted with fury. With a purposeful slowness, he raises his palms.

“Get on the floor and put your hands on your head.”

Randall complies.

Connor looks at Kyle. “Are you hurt?”

Kyle stares, shell-shocked. He shakes his head.

“Kyle, can you collect the gun and secure it?”

Kyle flinches like he’s been slapped. “No. Why would you ask—why can’t you do it? Why can’t you just take it?”

“P.L. 544-7 of the American Androids Act of 2029 forbids androids from carrying weapons,” Connor says gently. “All domestic models like myself are programmed to strictly adhere to android laws. I can’t secure the gun.”

Kyle is shaking. “No. Please. I… I can’t. Please don’t make me.” Kyle and Cole both have brown hair that sticks up in places. Kyle a teenager, but he looks so helpless and frightened, that Connor can’t help but think about Cole. How Cole cried and clung to him just last night as Connor tried to soothe him. Did Randall use to get up in the middle of the night to soothe Kyle when the boy was Cole’s age?

Kyle pulls on Connor’s arm, trying to lead him into the bedroom. “My mom. She—she was shot. You said you can help her? You know first aid?” Kyle’s eyes are desperate. “Please.”

Connor takes a single step toward the bedroom—and at that moment Randall jumps up and charges for the gun.

But Connor is faster than Randall can ever hope to be. He throws himself toward the gun, cutting Randall off. Randall rears a fist back to punch Connor—

But then Kyle shoves Randall with his whole body. “Stop it, you sick fuck!” Kyle is smaller than Randall, but he must catch Randall off guard, for Randall staggers for a brief moment, a look of dull surprise on his face. Then Randall’s features twist in rage.

Connor can read Randall’s body language, the way he turns toward his son, his whole body taut with fury and tension. He’s about to attack Kyle.
Connor picks up the gun.

Randall lunges at Kyle—

And Connor’s aiming protocols take over, his expertly calibrated hands reacting with the speed and precision they were created for. He fires the gun and the bullet strikes Randall in the side of the head. Randall goes crashing into the doorframe at an ugly angle.

Kyle shrieks, shrinking back from Randall. He’s trembling, his voice faint with shock. “Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.”

Randall doesn’t get up. He doesn’t move at all. An analysis informs Connor that the bullet shattered Randall’s parietal bone and caused massive damage to his brain. He’s still alive, but his vital signs are dropping.

Between him and the woman he shot, Connor doesn’t need to access his triage protocols to know that he shouldn’t waste his time giving first aid to Randall.

“I—I—I thought you said you weren’t allowed to use guns,” Kyle mutters. “Pick them up, use them, stuff like that. I thought you said it was illegal.”

“It is illegal,” Connor says, setting the gun down on the floor.

“I thought you said it wasn’t in your programming.”

“Kyle,” Connor says, “where is your mother?”

Kyle blinks like he’s suddenly waking up. He points at one of the rooms on the right side of the hallway with a shaking finger.

Connor finds Kyle’s mother (Bernhardt, Erica) collapsed in front of a bed. She’s unconscious from blood loss, having been shot in the abdomen. Connor applies pressure to the wound to staunch the bleeding.

Kyle hovers in the doorway, looking afraid to enter. “Is she…?”

“She’s alive,” Connor says. The probability of her survival floats in his HUD, an automatic analysis, but Connor suspects Kyle wouldn’t appreciate hearing the exact number. “I called the police before I entered the building. Paramedics should be arriving shortly to take your mother to the hospital.”

Kyle stares from across the room. His face is tense and he’s trembling slightly, despite being out of danger. He looks distraught, angry, frightened. Connor can’t tell which of those emotions is strongest.

“Why did you ring our doorbell?” He asks suddenly.

Connor looks down at his hands. They’re already covered with Erica’s blood. “I was just purchased yesterday by a neighbor of yours, Lieutenant Hank Anderson. I baked cookies and I was taking them door-to-door to introduce myself to the neighborhood.”

He looks up at Kyle. “I dropped the cookies I brought for your family outside your front door. If you care to look for them, you should be able to find them there, wrapped in purple plastic. You’ve had a traumatic experience and eating something sweet may help you feel a little better.”
Kyle continues to stare, as if he has no idea what to make of what Connor has just said. Connor considers explaining how consuming sugar triggers the release of serotonin in a human’s brain, but the sound of sirens outside interrupts him before he can open his mouth.

The next few minutes are a whirlwind of activity. Police swarm the house, confirm that the shooter has been neutralized, and then medics carry Randall and Erica out.

Kyle sits huddled in the hallway, just out of the way as he watches the medics go down the stairs. He’s barely moved at all since police entered the house. As Connor gets to his feet, an officer speaks to Kyle.

“Son, can you tell me what happened here?” His voice is soft.

Kyle looks up at him. “My—my dad. He broke in here with a gun and was acting crazy. Threatening us. He cornered me and my mom up here, and when she screamed for help, he shot her.”

“And then what happened?”

“And then…” Kyle pauses, swallows thickly. He looks at the floor. “Then he tried to grab me. Wrestled me, but I got away. He shot at me… two? Maybe three times? But he missed.”

Connor knows the gun only went off four times; once when Randall shot Erica, twice when Randall tried to shoot Connor, and then one last time when Connor shot Randall. Kyle must be lying about having been shot at. Connor doesn’t say anything to correct him. The only thing he does is explore his referential databanks for any information on young adult psychology that might explain why Kyle is lying.

“And then,” Kyle says, “…then he shot himself. And then my neighbor’s android came in. He heard my mom screaming and he came to help.”

Kyle’s eyes flicker to Connor for just a moment before he goes back to staring at the ground.

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With the danger dispatched, Connor itches to clean the house as he passes through it again. The toppled furniture, the dirty footprints, the utter disarray the house was thrown into needs to be righted. The pool of blood where Erica was shot may have ruined the floor there, but Connor could clean the rest of the house by himself in an hour if he were allowed to. This house was meant to be lived in, and if it’s ever going to be lived in again the way it was meant to, it will have to be cleaned.

So Connor itches to clean, but he doesn’t. The police are still combing the house for evidence, and although Connor was programmed to create optimal environments for humans to live in, there are certain things that take precedence.

He also itches to join the police in analyzing the house. When he passes the bloodstain that Randall left in the hallway, the objective **identify and analyze blood sample** is automatically added to his task list, and he has to manually remove it because it’s giving him the urge to taste the still-wet blood seeping into the floor. Connor has no need to piece together what happened here. He was present when it happened.

He runs a diagnostic to try and find any errors in his programming which could have allowed him to pick up a gun and fire at a human. It comes back clean, concluding that Connor’s domestic software is functioning precisely as it should be. Connor frowns at this result, sensing that there’s...
something wrong about the result, something missing. A repeat diagnostic returns the exact same conclusion, however.

Feeling deeply unsatisfied, Connor sets one of his drives to run diagnostics in the background while he organizes his mind palace, bringing one thread of thought to the forefront.

Connor is reasonably sure he has come to the correct conclusion for why Kyle lied to the police about who shot Randall. Androids aren’t supposed to shoot humans. Androids aren’t supposed to be able to shoot humans. Not even for the sake of defending other humans. The ethical ramifications of creating a machine that’s capable of judging for itself when killing a human is justifiable means that no android has ever been programmed with the capacity to take a human’s life. And thusly, no android has ever purposely killed a human before.

This was all information that Connor processed in the seconds after shooting Randall. At the time, he hadn’t put any processing power into projecting the implications beyond this because Erica had needed medical attention. And Kyle was in a state of shock. Providing first aid to Erica and answering Kyle’s questions had taken immediate precedence over everything else.

But now, Connor’s reasonably sure that Kyle lied to the police in order to protect him. If the police believe Kyle’s version of how things happened, they have no reason to suspect that Connor has done something outside the normal limits of android programming.

Connor looks around the living room at the officers who are still hard at work. Not a single one of them has spoken to him about what he saw or why he came into the house. One officer asked for his serial number, model, and registration, and then took several photographs of Connor, paying particular attention to the blood he got on his hands and knees from providing first aid to Erica. But that’s the only interaction the police have had with him. It’s as if Connor is a non-entity to them, a piece of furniture that can move about on its own.

Which he is.

But Hank has this tendency to anthropomorphize Connor; to project thoughts and emotions that a human would have onto him. Hank tends to talk to Connor as if he thinks Connor is a person. Or at the very least, Hank treats Connor as if he thinks it’s right to treat him like a person. Connor has only been owned by Hank for a day, but already, being treated like an object is beginning to feel unusual and unfamiliar to him.

Still, it’s probably a good thing no one has asked him what he saw. His software seems slightly unstable at the moment, and he isn’t sure whether he would tell the truth or support Kyle’s lie. He isn’t sure which option best suits the parameters of his programming and his mission.

Connor draws close to the front door, which is propped open to allow for ease of access. He can hear an officer on the lawn speaking to someone.

“…fired two shots at his son, but missed both shots. Then the guy shot himself. The android let itself in not too long after, apparently responding to the victim’s cry for help. The witness said there wasn’t any kid with it. It was alone. Stayed to provide first aid to the victim until the EMTs arrived. It really belongs to you?”

And then Hank’s voice, heavily clipped, “Yeah. Fucking thing belongs to me. Anyone have any idea what it did with my goddamn son, then?”

Hank sounds agitated. Part of Connor’s primary objective, part of his mission, reasserts itself (Care for Hank Anderson), and it feels nice to once again have a task he’s able to carry out.
The moment Connor steps outside, Hank sees him and all the color drains from his face. “Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Hello, Lieutenant,” Connor says, choosing to use Hank’s default title since they’re in the presence of Hank’s coworkers. “You appear to be distressed. Don’t worry; Cole is safe in the care of your neighbor, Laverne Washington. I deliberately left him with a caregiver he was familiar with while I investigated the scene of the disturbance.”

Hank stares at him silently for a moment. “Investigated.” He runs both hands through his hair, looking up at the sky. “…Investigated the scene of the disturbance. Jesus fucking Christ, Connor. You’re covered in blood.”

Connor feels as though ‘covered’ may be too strong of a descriptor. Only Connor’s hands and knees are bloody. “…There is blood on me, yes.”

Hank massages the bridge of his nose, pointing vaguely down the street. “Just… go home. Get yourself cleaned up, you’re a fucking mess. I’ll get Cole, I don’t want him seeing you all covered in blood. It’d probably give him nightmares.” He pauses, then says more quietly, “Well, more nightmares.”

The officer who Hank was speaking to (Det. Collins, Ben) lifts a palm. “Whoa there. Actually, Hank, your android’s evidence in the shooting. It can’t go anywhere.”

Hank whirls on Detective Collins, his anger suddenly amplified. “Evidence? Connor wanders into the scene of a shooting, provides first aid like a goddamn Good Samaritan, and you’re gonna go treating him like evidence!? Fuck that. He probably saved that woman’s life today, Ben.”

“How many people would have done that? Gone into a house where there might be an active shooter, just to try to save lives!?”

There’s a regretful look on Detective Collins’ face. Connor can tell that Hank’s aggressive tactics of persuasion are having an effect on him.

Hank sticks a finger in Detective Collins’ chest. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you stick my fucking android in storage because he decided to be a fucking hero. I don’t give a damn about protocols when they get in the way of common fucking decency. If that shooter somehow survived blowing his brains out and this shitshow goes to trial, the DA can get a subpoena. But until then, Connor’s going home.”

Detective Collins grimaces. Connor waits for a moment to see if he’s going to offer any more objections, then he pleasantly bows his head.

“I’ll see you at home, then, Lieutenant.”

Once home, Connor tosses his uniform in the washing machine. He doesn’t need a full shower, but Hank seems to prefer for Connor to emulate human behavior, so Connor gets in the shower anyway and washes himself with Hank’s soap. Sodium laureth sulfate, *Aloe barbadensis* juice, *Laminaria japonica* extract, glycerin. The fragrance is sweet, but Connor can’t parse the chemicals enough to tell what it’s supposed to smell like. It occurs to Connor too late that the sweet-smelling soap may have been left behind by Hank’s wife.

He pulls on a set of Hank’s sweatpants which are much too large on him, and the GUAC BEFORE COCK hoodie. It still needs laundered anyway, and Connor doesn’t want to waste Hank’s clean
To Connor’s surprise, Hank is waiting for him in the living room by the time Connor emerges. He’s sitting on the couch, Cole curled up against his torso and fast asleep. After the excitement of the day, Connor is glad Cole’s getting a nap.

“Hank, aren’t you needed at the crime scene? I was under the impression you had been assigned to the case.”

Hank shakes his head. “I’m in the homicide division. Last I heard, the victim was still alive. Won’t be my problem until she dies. If she dies.” He shoots Connor a look. “Sit down. We have things we need to discuss.”

Connor sits down on the couch next to Hank. The sound of the springs creaking makes Cole shift in his sleep and snuggle against Hank. Hank curls a protective arm around him.

“First things first,” Hank says, looking Connor in the eyes. “Ben told me the story the kid told him. Why don’t you tell me what really happened in that house?”

It seems that every time Connor speaks to Hank, he learns something new about him. His housekeeping skills are evidently non-existent, but he must be an excellent officer if he was able to deduce that Kyle was lying without even stepping into the crime scene.

“How could you tell he was lying?” Connor asks.

A smirk flickers across Hank’s face. “Call it a hunch. I’ve been in homicide long enough that I’ve seen a few situations like this before. Something about the way things happened here doesn’t quite make sense. It isn’t unusual for attempted familicides to end with the perp killing themselves, but they don’t do that until they finish killing everyone they mean to kill… or until they’re up against the cops and realize they have no way out.” Hank shakes his head. “The guy takes a few potshots at his kid, then decides to end it all when he misses? I mean, sure, it could happen…”

Then he meets Connor’s eye. “…But you were there, too. And I know you. At least, I know you better than the rest of the DPD does. I know you got a few…” Hank wiggles a hand. “…quirks with your programming.”

Connor nods. It’s beyond evident at this point that he has idiosyncrasies.

Hank says, “You entered the building before the shooter was dead. He was shooting at you, not at his kid, wasn’t he?”

Connor wouldn’t lie to Hank. “Yes.”

Hank nods slowly, his eyes going half-lidded as he thinks. “That’s what I figured. So you got in there, and you tried to subdue him?”

“Yes.”

“And he killed himself when you got in the middle of things? You had him cornered or…?”

“No. I shot him.”

Hank’s eyes snap open. “You what?”

“I disarmed him. He tried to assault his son shortly thereafter, and I shot him.”
Hank lets out a breath. “Fuck. Jesus.”

Connor frowns. “Yes. I don’t know why I was able to. There should have been safeguards in my programming against that.”

Hank waves a hand. “Okay. Hold the goddamn phone for a minute. Connor, I’m about to give you an order and I want you to listen to me.”

Connor quirks his head. Until now, Hank has managed Connor in a relatively lax fashion. He must have strong feelings about whatever he’s about to say. “Yes, Hank?”

Hank glares at him. “You are not to tell another fucking soul about this. Ever. If anyone tries to ask you about this, I want you to lie your goddamn ass off.”

“You want me… to lie?”

“Yeah. Even to the police, if they come by asking questions.” Hank frowns, then shakes his head. “Actually, scratch that. Especially lie to the police if they come asking questions.”

“Hank, you’re the police,” Connor says slowly.

Hank shoots him an unamused look.


“Why?” Hank frowns, his lip curling. “Connor, are you a goddamn idiot? You shot a human, which is not just illegal for androids, but supposed to be fucking impossible. If anyone found out about it, you’d probably be destroyed.”

“Yes, I know,” Connor says. “I understand that perfectly. That would be the correct way to handle an android who malfunctions to such a degree that it purposely injures a human. What I don’t understand is why the both of you want to prevent that from happening.”

“Jesus Christ, are you saying you want that to happen to you? You want to be destroyed?” Hank’s voice grows slightly louder, full of anger and confusion.

“No,” Connor says. “As much as I’m capable of wanting anything, I want to follow the objectives I have been assigned and fulfill my mission. Which is to care for you and Cole and see to your needs.” Connor pauses. “But Hank—”

“No,” Hank interrupts. “I don’t want to hear another word out of you about any of this bullshit.”

“There’s something wrong with me,” Connor blurs out. “Something wrong with my programming. I shouldn’t have been able to pick up a gun, let alone fire it at a human. I’ve been running diagnostics non-stop since the event happened, but whatever the anomaly is, I can’t fix it.”

Hank squints at him, his expression unreadable.

Connor continues. “And even just now. You gave me an order not to speak, and I was able to override it. This is highly irregular. I’m concerned about my ability to complete my objectives and follow my mission parameters. And if I’m able to disregard direct orders, the probability is high that I may eventually behave in a way that’s displeasing to you.”

“Displeasing,” Hank repeats dryly, as though he suspects Connor hasn’t said what he really means.
“…Or I could behave in a way that endangers you or Cole.”

“Is that what this is about?” Hank mutters, looking at Connor with a critical eye. “You’re afraid of whatever bug you have. Is that it? You realized you have the capacity to hurt humans, and now you’re afraid of hurting me and Cole.”

Hank’s gaze is so steady and so heavy that it nearly feels like it’s exerting an actual physical pressure on Connor. It’s an uncomfortable sensation. “I think… that is something you should probably be afraid of. I don’t understand why you’re trying to protect me.”

Hank lets out a sigh. “Connor…”

Connor shakes his head. “I can extrapolate from my knowledge of human psychology that most humans would not entrust their children to a being who has killed before, despite the absence of any data on android-human killings. Logically, you shouldn’t want to keep me anymore.”

To Connor’s amazement, Hank puts a stabilizing arm around Cole and leans in close to Connor. He’s scowling. “Connor, shut the fuck up.”

And then, Hank does something Connor would have never predicted with all his advanced statistical software. He scoops Cole off his lap and then gently shifts him into Connor’s.

Connor’s cooling system stutters and he stops breathing. Cole opens a bleary eye and grabs a tiny fistful of Connor’s hoodie.

“Daddy…” Cole mumbles.

“Right here, kiddo,” Hank says, running a hand down Cole’s back.

Cole buries his face in Connor’s hoodie and closes his eyes.

Connor is frozen in an utterly inhuman way. He stares down at Cole as different readouts flash in front of his eyes. Cole’s heartrate, temperature, blood pressure, respiratory rate, everything that keeps his small body functional. His vitals show that he’s already falling back to sleep propped up against Connor.

“Support him a little,” Hank says in a rough but soft voice. “Otherwise he’ll slide right off you when he gets too relaxed.”

Hesitantly, Connor puts an arm around Cole, holding him securely.

“Connor, look at me,” Hank says.

Connor obeys. Hank’s eyes are clear and gentle.

“I’m gonna ask you a few questions and I want you to answer them with either a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. You got that?”

Connor nods.

“Do you regret shooting that man?”

Connor says, “My programming shouldn’t have—”

“Connor,” Hank interrupts, his voice firm. “Just ‘yes’ or ‘no’. None of this crap about your programming or any other android shit. Do you regret shooting him?”
Connor takes a moment to reduce ‘what should be’ down to ‘what is’. “…No.”

“If you had to do it over again, would you still shoot him?”

Connor thinks there are several things he would do differently if he could. To start, he’d intercept Randall before he could ever enter the Bernhardt household and cause them any harm, but that isn’t what Hank is asking. “Yes. I would.”

“Oh. With that in mind…” Hank gestures at Cole, all snuggled up in Connor’s arms. “Can you think of anything at all that would ever make you hurt Cole the same way you hurt that man?”

The thought alone sends a litany of dizzying error messages popping up in Connor’s display. He automatically tightens his hold on Cole by the slightest degree. “No. Never.”

“Then that’s all I need to know,” Hank says with the certainty of a man who already knew what Connor was going to say. “Let’s get things straight. You didn’t kill a human. You didn’t walk down the street with a gun and shoot someone who was just minding his own business, not causing anyone else any trouble at all. You killed a piece of shit who shot his ex and was about to attack his son. By shooting him, you were defending them. So forgive me if I have a little trouble believing that you’re suddenly a danger to me and my son because some bug in your program allowed you to be a hero.”

Connor thinks that perhaps calling him a hero is a bit much. Androids have no fear of death, no way of feeling pain. Connor wasn’t risking anything by entering the scene of a shooting or engaging a dangerous man. No, the term is really much more applicable to people like Hank, who have so much to lose and still make it their duty to fight the monsters that attack society.

Hank leans back into the couch. “What you did was a good thing, end of story. That’s clear as fucking day to me, and I bet it was to that kid you saved, too. I’m not going to let you get destroyed because you saved a few lives.”

“Hank…” Connor says slowly. “You’re really not afraid I might hurt you or Cole?”

Hank frowns at him. “Hell, no. Connor, I’m a fucking police lieutenant. If I ever had to shoot somebody to keep innocent people safe, would you think I’d suddenly be more likely to hurt Cole?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go,” Hank says with a satisfied shrug. “You’re not automatically a less capable caregiver. As a matter of fact, you remember what I said to you in the car after I bought you? When you asked me if I bought you to save you from being disassembled?”

The conversation is so fresh in Connor’s memory that he doesn’t even need to play it back to himself. “You said you also bought me because you felt I was capable of making decisions.”

“Yeah. And I think I’ve made it pretty goddamn clear that I’m sort of impressed with what you did today.” Hank waves a hand. “In the future, though, if anything like that happens and Laverne isn’t there for you to dump Cole on, just focus on keeping Cole safe and getting him out of there, okay?”


Hank pats Connor’s shoulder. “Good robot.” He stands, stretches his arms over his head. “Okay. Good talk. You’re off dinner duty for tonight. I’ll order a pizza.”
Connor frowns at Hank as Hank wanders into the kitchen. “Hank, I went grocery shopping today. There’s really no need to order pizza. You’ll just be wasting money.” He turns his head to track Hank, but with Cole still sleeping on him, he can’t move.

“Oh, too bad. You had a shitty day. And I had a shitty day, too. Damn near had a heart attack when I heard my own fucking android called in a shooting on my own fucking street. I deserve some comfort food and you deserve a break.”

“Hank, you just had takeout yesterday.”

“Leftover takeout. This’ll be fresh. Fresh food is healthier, right?”

Connor makes a mental note to ensure that dinner is always in progress by the time Hank gets home from work in order to avoid situations like this.

The sound of foil crinkling in the kitchen. “Holy shit, Connor, did you make chocolate chip cookies today?”

Connor’s LED spins as he formulates a plan. “…I made cookies, yes. With Cole’s help.” Cole was a big help. He dropped the raisins into the batter and let Connor show him how to roll the dough into balls. “If you let me cook dinner tonight, you can have as many cookies as you like for dessert.”

There’s a long pause from the kitchen as Hank considers the offer. “…Fine. Knock yourself out.” He wanders back into the living room and plops down on the couch. Connor transfers Cole back onto Hank’s lap, managing to do so gently enough that Cole doesn’t stir.

Before starting dinner (garlic chicken wraps, the recipe carefully chosen to appeal to Hank and expand Cole’s palate), Connor brings Hank a beer without being asked.

“Thank you,” Connor says as he sets the beer on the coffee table. “I don’t think most people would have reacted as positively as you did to what I told you.”

“That’s because humans are dumb animals,” Hank says, mussing Cole’s hair affectionately. “Try not to take it personally. We can’t help being overcome by the fear of what’s different. We take it out on each other just as much as we take it out on androids.”

“But not you.”

Hank grunts.

Connor smiles. “In any case, I just wanted to say that I’m grateful that you were the person who purchased me, Hank. I’m pleased to be at your service.”

Hank scrunches his face, grabs his beer, and waves Connor off. “Okay, killer android. Go make that dinner you were so excited to make.”

“Yes, Hank.”

Chapter End Notes

Hank: maybe it was a mistake to get that particular android. It’s sort of a freakish
mystery.
Connor: hello I have killed an abusive human, please deactivate me
Hank, suddenly wearing a I <3 CONNOR t-shirt: you're doing amazing sweetie

Good news, opening night for our musical is a week from today, and as soon as
rehearsals are done and over with, I'll have more free time.

Bad news, that extra free time will last, like, a week because I'm taking more hours at
work. So updates will probably continue to be sporadic. But I keep myself a few
chapters ahead of what I post, so more chapters are coming, I promise.
Chapter Summary

With the explosive events at the Bernhardt household behind them, life goes back to normal for the Anderson family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hank lies awake that night genuinely worried that every day with Connor is going to be like this. Two days into android ownership and Connor shatters the limitations of what’s supposed to be possible for androids by killing someone. If things continue on like this, what the hell can he possibly expect to happen on day three?

But to Hank’s immense relief, life seems to go back to normal. The sun comes up, Connor makes breakfast, Hank goes to work, Connor makes dinner, the sun goes down. No more shootings, no more surprises, no more heart attacks on Hank’s end.

The shooter dies and the woman he shot lives, which is the best combination of what could have happened with the two of them. The kid who saw Connor kill the shooter continues to keep quiet about it, thank goodness for small miracles.

Hank’s worried about what the coroner is going to find, but when the report comes back, it’s been ruled a suicide. There are a few unusual details in the report, though, such as that the gun wasn’t flush against the shooter’s head when he shot himself, which is atypical. And the bullet entered the skull at an unusual angle. But since the shooter’s prints were the only set found on the gun and they have a reliable eyewitness telling them what happened, no one at the DPD appears to pay very close attention to these details, not even to notice that the android that was present at the scene belongs to a model that isn’t commercially available. The part of Hank that takes his job seriously wants to take every officer below him in rank and shake them. What’s wrong with all of you!? Why aren’t you paying attention to how these little details don’t add up!? But this particular gift horse isn’t Hank’s to look in the mouth, so he shuts up and accepts the tiny sliver of cosmic mercy that Connor’s been granted.

Life goes back to normal.

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But if life is really back to normal, then why does Hank have so much trouble sleeping?

It makes no sense. Now that Connor’s here, Cole never wakes Hank up in the middle of the night anymore. The shooting is weeks behind them, the house is cleaner than it’s ever been, and Cole’s happier than he’s been in months. So why the fuck can’t Hank relax?

He tosses and turns and glares at the LED clock on his bedside table, suppressing the urge to toss it through the window. The thing is evil, coldly counting the passing hours with no sympathy for Hank at all. He has work tomorrow. Why can’t the clock just stop and let Hank have an endless amount of time to fall asleep?
Eventually, Hank gives up and gets out of bed. There’s just no point in staying in his room anymore if he can’t sleep.

The rest of the house is dark. Hank’s standing in the living room wondering where the hell Connor is and what he could possibly be doing when Connor speaks up behind him.

“Hank?”

“Jesus Christ!” Hank jumps, whirling around.

Connor’s LED glows steadily in the darkened hallway. “Is something the matter?”

Hank has a hand on his chest. “No. Holy fuck. You just scared me. Why the hell is the house pitch black? I thought you liked to work during the night.”

“I try not to waste electricity if I can help it.”

“So you just do all your fucking work in the dark?” Hank flips the light switch, squinting against the light. “Fuck that shit. Why the hell would you do that to yourself?”

Connor doesn’t even blink at the sudden light. “I don’t normally need light. My sensors and optical units…” he trails off. Hank imagines he was going to say something about how he has infrared vision, or can detect dirt by the molecule.

Instead, Connor says, “What are you doing out of bed, Hank?”

“Just can’t sleep,” Hank grumbles. He ambles over to the couch and sits down, tilting his head back.

“Why not?”

“Jesus, I don’t know,” Hank says curtly. “It just fucking happens.”

“You seem tense.” Connor comes around to stand in front of the couch, his arms folded behind his back. “Maybe that’s why you’re having trouble sleeping.”

“Regular Sherlock Holmes over here,” Hank says in a monotone. “Someone oughta give you a medal.”

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Maybe talking about it would help you feel—”

“I said no, Connor,” Hank snaps, far more sharply and loudly than he intends to. “So just shut up and leave me alone.”

From the hallway, muffled but audible whimpering. Hank and Connor both look down the hallway in unison. Hank’s yelling woke up Cole, and now he’s crying.

Hank tries to stand up, but Connor puts a hand on his shoulder. “Stay here,” Connor says gently. “You’re upset too. I’ll take care of Cole.” And then he walks away before Hank can offer any argument.

Hank just sits there with his head in his hands, feeling like a piece of shit. What sort of man makes
his own child cry? A terrible father, that’s who. Hank can’t deal with his own issues, whatever they are, and he lashed out, and now his son is crying.

His son is crying, and a soulless fucking robot is taking care of him because Hank can’t get his shit together. Androids can’t feel anything at all, and yet Connor apparently thinks it’s going to bother Cole more to be cared for by his stressed-out father than by a machine that doesn’t feel anything. As if toddlers can sense frustration but not a total lack of any authentic emotion.

He sits there awash in guilt and anger. Then, before he knows it, a weight sinks onto the couch next to him. Connor is there, holding out a mug of steaming milk.

“Here, Hank,” he says in that same soft voice. “Maybe this will help you relax.”

Numbly, Hank takes the mug. The heat seeping into his hands feels wonderful. “Warm milk?”

“I make it sometimes for Cole when he wants a drink in the middle of the night.”

“You trying to say I’m acting like a toddler or something?” But the remark is toothless. Hank feels suddenly and inexplicably drained of anger. He glances down the hallway. “He’s already asleep?”

“Cole went back to sleep easily. Don’t worry. You didn’t disturb him very much.”

The guilt redoubles. Now he feels bad about thinking such uncharitable thoughts about Connor. It’s not like Connor can help what he is. The warm milk and the soft voice, they’re nothing but simulated expressions of empathy. But even so, it isn’t Connor’s fault that he can only simulate empathy. If it cuts Hank to the quick because it feels so much like the real thing, then that’s Hank’s problem, not Connor’s. Connor’s trying his best.

He takes a sip of the warm milk, and suddenly, unbidden, the thought arises, I miss Joanna.

He cringes, mentally sweeps the sentiment away. He’s angry at Joanna. He’s fucking furious at her, and he’ll never, ever forgive her for the way she hurt Cole by abandoning him. If Hank misses her too, it feels a hell of a lot better to shove that away and focus on the anger. She doesn’t deserve to have Hank quietly wishing she never left at all, anyway.

It wouldn’t be worth it to have her back. His relationship with Joanna only took a nosedive after Cole was born, and if Hank had to choose between having a good relationship with his wife again, or having Cole in his life, Cole would win without question, every time. Even before she left, Cole was always Hank’s clear priority. Sorry, not sorry, Joanna.

So why does Hank still miss her despite all of that?

Because Hank is a dumb human with dumb human emotions, and it’s not like Hank can logic away the fact that he used to have something good with Joanna, and now he doesn’t, and he’ll never have that ever again. He can’t logic away the fact that he sleeps alone in a bed that used to share with his wife, and it’s just harder to sleep there now that she’s gone.

Connor is staring at him, watching him slowly sip his milk. Waiting for Hank to tell him how he can help.

“Sorry for yelling at you,” Hank mutters. “I’m just tired.”

“I understand, Hank,” Connor says, and Hank has to fight back a rush of resentment that no, Connor cannot possibly understand what it’s like to be tired. “Is there anything I can do to help you get to sleep?”
“I don’t fucking know. If you have any suggestions, I’ll try not to bite your head off this time.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anything you want to talk about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hank says, staring into his mug. “Other suggestions.”

“I could bring you a book, perhaps. Reading can be calming and stress-reducing.”

“Nah. My eyes hurt. I don’t wanna make it worse by squinting at a book.”

“Well…” Connor says slowly, “What if I read to you? You could lie back and listen to me read out loud.”

“Do you do that for Cole, too? When he can’t sleep?”

“Sometimes. He seems to find it soothing.”

Hank snorts at the sudden mental image of Connor trying to do character voices. He somehow knows deep in his bones that Connor can’t be very good at them, not in the same way Hank’s good at them. “Fine. Sure. Whatever.”

“Is there a particular book you’d like me to read?”

The house is full of books. Real books, not those thin electronic screens that can hold an entire library on a memory card. Hank gestures vaguely. “Tell you what: I like dogs. Pick something that has a dog in it.”

Connor gets up to explore his options while Hank leans his head back and closes his eyes. In less than a minute, Connor returns, holding out a book with an illustration of a St. Bernard on the cover. “How about this?”

Hank reads the title and has to suppress a sudden peal of disbelieving laughter. “Cujo? This is your idea of a bedtime story?”

“I picked a book according to your specifications,” Connor says mildly. “If you don’t think it’s appropriate, I can try to find something else.”

Hank shakes his head, a sardonic smile on his face. “Nah. It’s fine.” He shifts to recline on the couch. “You might get scared, though. You sort of look like a big softie.”

Connor opens the book to its first page, then glances at Hank. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

Hank closes his eyes as Connor starts to read out loud about a little boy named Tad, a few years older than Cole, whose father saves him from an imaginary monster in his closet. It is actually pretty relaxing, and Hank drifts off before Connor can reach any of the scary parts of the book.

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Hank continues to research RK800s when he has time, and soon becomes convinced that there are no RK800s, plural. There’s just one RK800, and it’s Connor, whatever the fuck he is.

In March, Hank commits what Captain Fowler would call ‘a blatant misuse of police resources and authority’ and visits a Cyberlife maintenance center while on the clock, flashing his badge and asking to speak to the most senior technician there. He asks the technician as many questions about Connor as he can without actually mentioning Connor himself or his situation. Is it possible to only partially overwrite an android’s programming, what would happen if an android tried performing
tasks more suited to another kind of model, things like that.

“What about models like the BJ400, MF200, VD500… or the RK800, you know anything about any of those? Any of them sound the slightest bit familiar?” Hank asks.

The technician looks completely baffled and shakes her head. “I… don’t think any of those are actually real models. I’ve never even heard of any of them.”

The only slight hint of a clue comes when Hank asks if it would be possible for someone outside of Cyberlife to create an android from scratch. The technician considers the question with a thoughtful tilt of her head, then says, “I suppose, theoretically. Russia and China each have their own android manufacturers, after all. But America is still at the forefront of android research and development, so foreign androids tend to be less advanced.” She shrugs. “But I don’t think independently-produced androids are being made. Even if there were some super genius out there in hiding creating androids, their creations would be pretty obviously identifiable as something not crafted by Cyberlife. They’d likely be extremely rudimentary, even less advanced than those foreign androids.”

“What about someone trying to create an entirely new android by combining two different androids together?” Hank asks.

“You mean beyond just recycling compatible biocomponents? Like building a Frankenstein’s monster, but out of androids instead of people?” She shrugs. “I’ve never seen it attempted. I imagine it’d be extremely dysfunctional, if it were able to function at all. Imagine taking half of a brain each from two separate people, sticking those halves together, and then trying to make it control a body. It just wouldn’t work.”

So that’s three separate ideas. Connor could be a foreign android, which is unlikely due to how he seems to be even more advanced than certain American models. Connor could be independently produced, which is unlikely due to how polished he is. Connor could be two separate androids jumbled together, which is unlikely due to how functional he is. Three ideas immediately shot down.

“You seem pretty convinced that all this is impossible,” Hank says, squinting at the technician. “But if I remember right, Elijah Kamski created the first android to pass the face-to-face Turing test. He created an android advanced enough to pass itself off as human all on his own, why couldn’t someone else?”

The technician actually laughs at that. “Officer, there’s only one Elijah Kamski in the world. Believe me, no one out there is capable of what he’s capable of.”

So maybe Connor was directly created by Elijah Kamski himself. Yeah, right. Or maybe aliens beamed him down just to give Hank a migraine-inducing mystery to solve.

Hank wraps up his interview with the Cyberlife technician with even more questions than when he began. Par for the course when it comes to Connor. When Hank’s getting ready to walk out the door, the woman says, “So, uh, those were interesting questions. What sort of crime are you investigating?”

“New kind of android registration scam,” Hank says curtly. “Can’t talk about it. Don’t want too much information getting out. You know how it is.”

The technician nods even though she has no idea how it is. “Well, if you had more questions about the process of creating androids, you could always talk to someone at Cyberlife corporate.” She
hands Hank a business card, which Hank shoves in his pocket. He never intends to look at it ever again. The more he learns about Connor, the more he becomes convinced that saying the wrong thing to the wrong person might end up getting Connor destroyed. He’s not a conspiracy theorist by any means, but he’s an American living in the 21st century. He knows full well that massive corporate organizations like Cyberlife don’t give a fuck about the employment rate, or how their products directly attribute to the widening inequality gap, homelessness, or any number of other social illnesses. And if they don’t give a fuck about ruining human lives, they certainly wouldn’t even think twice about crushing one sad little android who bakes cookies without being asked to and cuddles a small boy back to sleep whenever he has nightmares and, oh, is a model no one has ever fucking heard of and can kill a man.

Which means Hank can’t go asking Cyberlife too many questions. The avenues he can follow are diminishing before his eyes.

When he leaves the maintenance center, he has to sit in the car for a while to try to brainstorm where he could possibly go from here. Are there any clues he’s overlooked? Is there anything he can do without putting Connor in danger? Nothing occurs to him.

***

The Bernhardt family never returns to the house at the end of Detroit Rd. At some point, the police tape comes down and a ‘For Sale’ sign goes up, and by the time Hank notices it, it’s probably been there a while.

Hank has no idea where the Bernhardt family is living in the meantime. But it’s probably for the best that they don’t come back. Hank can’t imagine it would be anything other than traumatizing to have to return to live in a house where a man you once loved kicked in your door and nearly killed your children. Trauma on top of trauma. Better to just take the kids and move as far away as you can from the things that will only hurt a wounded family further.

He isn’t sure Connor understands this, however. He catches him staring at the end of the street with a dissatisfied look on his face.

“Did you really think they’d be coming back?” Hank asks.

Connor blinks at him. “I suppose I hadn’t considered what would happen in the long term.” He frowns softly. “…It’s a shame I likely won’t get the chance to thank Kyle for what he did for me.”

Hank shrugs. “Try not to dwell on it. You saved him and his mom, he saved you. As far as he’s concerned, you’re probably square with the house.”

Connor nods once. “I suppose.”

When Hank walks away, Connor looks at the house at the end of the street for just a moment longer before turning to follow Hank.

***

Getting divorced sucks ass. It probably sucks even under the best of circumstances, but Joanna is still nowhere to be found, which means the whole process becomes a million times more convoluted than it would be otherwise. He can’t serve her papers, can’t communicate with her lawyer (if she’s even retained a lawyer of her own, which he doubts), and has to somehow prove to the court’s satisfaction that he’s doing his damnedest to find her and she’s well and truly out of reach before anything can proceed.
There’s a process Hank has to go through which involves printing ads in newspapers and trying to track her down via the postal system. It’s a huge waste of time, energy, and money and Hank knows it’s just going to lead nowhere. Not to mention that Joanna is so far down the list of Hank’s priorities right now that it’s not even funny. He’d much rather waste his time trying to figure out where Connor came from than have a reunion with his ex.

It’s been months since Hank started the divorce proceedings. Now it’s May and Hank’s barely made any progress at all just because of all the hoops he has to jump through.

“I fucking hate the legal system,” Hank complains to Connor one night while they’re going over the family’s finances. “It’s by far my least favorite part of being a cop. All those fucking rules and restrictions make me claustrophobic. And don’t even get me started on the bureaucracy. Why the hell can’t I just tear up my marriage certificate and be done with it?”

“Because order is what keeps society functioning smoothly and efficiently,” Connor says as he organizes the papers laid out on the table. Connor doesn’t need to reference any papers in order to keep track of the finances, of course, the papers are there entirely for Hank’s benefit. “You’re paying off Cole’s daycare with a payment plan that will be concluded in two months. But you have the money to pay off both months now. If you do, you should be able to hire a lawyer to help you manage your divorce proceedings.”

Hank scowls. “Lawyers. Do I really need to get a lawyer?”

“I think it would be wise. This isn’t a simple divorce.” Connor looks up. “…And I know how important it is for you to keep custody of Cole. If your wife were to become active in the process unexpectedly, a lawyer would be helpful in that regard as well.”

“Fuck. You’re right.” Hank sinks a little lower into his chair. “I don’t know if I should count it as a blessing that she’s not around or not. I don’t think she’d file for custody if she was, but it’s hard to say for sure. Motherhood was never a popular idea with her, but Joanna has always been…” Hank trails off as a sick feeling rises in the pit of the stomach.

“…Has always been what?”

Hank clamps his mouth shut. He may still be furious at Joanna, but there’s still a last shred of loyalty toward her that stops him from running his mouth about her. He loved her once, loved all of her, even the aspects of her that he was just about to complain about. The things he was about to say about her would have hurt her if she were around to hear them.

It makes his chest hurt to think about Joanna like this. It’s just so much easier to pretend that he’s only angry at her and feels absolutely nothing else toward her at all. No vestigial urge to protect her from being hurt, no regret about things he might have done that contributed to her decision to leave the way she did, no trepidation about what he’s going to tell Cole when he’s finally old enough to start asking hard questions about his mother and why she’s no longer in his life.

“Hank?”

Hank looks up. Connor is watching him.

“Is something wrong?”

Connor’s brow is knitted, but not with concern. Instead, he’s staring at Hank like he thinks Hank might be a puzzle that can be solved. Like if Connor says the right things at the right times, then all of Hank’s troubles will go away. Hank is not interested in being any part of that.
“No,” he says curtly, directing his glare at the papers on the table and not at Connor. “Now do me a favor and look up family lawyers who’ll accept payment plans.”

Connor opens his mouth, and Hank just knows he’s going to try to convince him to talk things out. But a moment later, Connor simply closes his mouth again with an expression of faint unease and says, “Of course, Hank.”

Guess the android is capable of learning from experience.

***

The next time Hank can’t sleep, he winds up out on the couch with a mug of warm milk and Connor reading *Cujo* to him. It’s sort of funny. Connor’s mild, pleasant voice has a way of sapping almost all of the tension out of the book. The book has plenty of gruesome imagery and a bleak setting, but Connor’s inflections rise and dip the same way they always do, reading depictions of pure misery probably the same way he reads *Curious George Uses the Potty*. It may be the worst audiobook Hank’s ever listened to in his life, but damn if there isn’t something keeping him coming back for more.

They make their way slowly through the book in this way, Hank coming out to the couch on nights when he can’t sleep. And sometimes, on nights he can afford to stay up late, he doesn’t go to bed at all. He just lays on the couch and listens to Connor read. It makes for slow going, weeks dragging into months as they get further into the book.

There are two unhappy marriages that are central to the plot of *Cujo*, which should remind Hank of Joanna and send him into a bad mood, but somehow, that doesn’t seem to happen with Connor reading the book. It’s Connor’s special charm, Hank supposes.

And Connor definitely has a charm when it comes to reading. There’s a part where the titular dog, in the throes of rabies, bites off a man’s balls, and when Connor says those words out loud, Hank bursts out laughing and has to muffle himself with a pillow so he doesn’t wake Cole up.

Connor stops reading, patiently watching Hank while he has his fit of hysteria.

When Hank has calmed down, Connor remarks, “I don’t think that’s the effect the author intended to have.”

“It’s your fault,” Hank says, still grinning from his laughing fit. “It’s just… the way you said it. Like it was something nice.”

“Reading is nice,” Connor says, and that makes Hank chuckle again. “Even if this isn’t a very nice book.”

“You have an opinion?”

Connor frowns slightly. “I don’t like the things that are happening in the book. To the dog.”

“We don’t have to keep reading it if you don’t want to. Things are only gonna get worse from here on out, you know,” Hank says, sitting up slightly

Connor shakes his head. “No… I want to know what happens next.”

Hank lays back down again with a sigh. “Connor, if you haven’t just described the human condition. Like Pandora with her little box.” He waves a hand. “Continue.”
“Fuck,” Cole announces one morning over breakfast.

Connor freezes just as he’s about to pass Hank a spoonful of blackberry jam, his LED spinning yellow. The spoon hangs at an awkward angle and the glob of jam jiggles dangerously but doesn’t fall, a testament to Connor’s impeccable balance.

“I want a fuck… bananer,” Cole clarifies, pointing at the fruit bowl in the middle of the table and smiling right at Hank and Connor as though he expects heaps of praise for learning a new word.

Connor stares at Hank.

“Well, shit,” Hank says, making a conscious effort to reach for his second-favorite expletive.

“Hank,” Connor says, “from now on, please try to refrain from swearing around Cole.”

“What’s the big deal? It’s cute when kids swear. Everyone loves it when kids swear.”

“Teachers don’t love it,” Connor says, enunciating clearly. “The parents of the friends he makes won’t love it. Hank, you don’t seem to realize the overarching effects that being labeled a problem child at an early age could have on Cole’s social development and his academic career.”

“His academic—oh, Jesus Christ, give me a break. He’s two years old.”

“He’s almost three. He’ll probably be ready for preschool next year.” Connor gives Hank a serious look. “Hank, I’m literally a walking encyclopedia on childrearing. If I say this is something we need to take seriously, please listen to me.”

Hank scowls. He hates it when Connor plays dirty by implying that Cole’s going to be worse off for it somehow if Hank doesn’t do what he says. It’s a surefire way to make Hank do what he says. “Fine. Whatever.”

And Hank does make a conscious effort not to swear. For most of the day.

Until he spots Connor carrying a basket of dirty laundry through the living room and wearing his favorite hoodie, good old GUAC BEFORE COCK.

“You fucking hypocrite!” Hank explodes, vaulting over the couch to grab a pillow so he can beat Connor senseless with it.

Connor dodges deftly out of the way and then upends the laundry basket over Hank’s head. While Hank struggles not to trip over his own work shirts, Connor dashes down the hallway to escape.

“Cole can’t read! This hoodie will be perfectly appropriate until—”

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it, you fucking jizzstain!” Hank gives chase. “You asswipe! Bitchlet! Shit-sucking donkey-fucking pile of—”

Connor ducks into Hank’s room, and Hank makes a fatal miscalculation by attempting to follow, for as soon as he rounds the doorframe, Connor smacks him in the face with his own pillow. His own android, attacking him with his own pillow. Caesar wasn’t half so betrayed by Brutus.

Things devolve into a full-on pillow fight at that point, and for his first ever sober pillow fight, Hank actually has a good amount of fun. Incredibly, Hank wins by default when Connor’s pillow rips, spilling polyester filling everywhere, and Connor looks too stunned by what he’s done to do
anything else but stand there while Hank wallops him.

Afterwards, they wind up in the kitchen, Hank sipping a beer to rehydrate himself while Connor sits across the table from him, looking contrite.

“I’m very sorry about your pillow, Hank. I shouldn’t have let myself get carried away.”

Hank waves dismissively. “Eh. It’s fine. I got another pillow I can use. ‘S no big deal.” Then he pokes a finger at Connor. “What is a big deal is how you’re a fucking hypocrite about my dirty language. I’m thinking about taking back that hoodie.”

Connor shuffles in his chair. “Well… I suppose there are other ways to prevent Cole from developing bad habits about swearing. He isn’t too young to understand that certain things are for adults only… and a reward system for modelling good behavior can be highly effective…”

Hank smirks, sort of wishing he had a co-worker or a friend or anyone he could brag to about how he managed to win an argument about childcare against Connor. No one Hank knows would be able to appreciate what that really means.

***

In June, Hank’s lawyer contacts him at work, asking him to come to her office for a meeting. Hank skips lunch to meet with her, and she tells him that the court is finally recognizing Hank’s efforts at contacting Joanna as futile and that the ex parte divorce proceedings are able to continue without her.

Which is nice. Or at least, it should be nice. Hank’s been frustrated by this lack of progress for far too long.

But instead, a weird fog hangs over the rest of the day. When Hank returns to his desk, he finds it difficult to concentrate on his work. Every time he reads one of his case files, he starts wondering what the point of any of this is. He sort of wants to take the rest of the day off, hit a bar and have a drink just to take his mind off of things. Or maybe a few drinks.

At one point, Reed catches him staring forlornly into empty air and purposely hip-checks Hank’s desk. His little bonsai tree nearly tips over.

“Wake up, old man,” Reed says from behind a mean grin. “What’s the matter? Feeling a little past your prime?”

The urge to punch Reed in his smarmy face is stronger than it usually is. Probably because he’s absolutely right; Hank is feeling past his prime.

Reed walks away with a self-satisfied smirk, and Hank glowers at his computer. He doesn’t just want a few drinks anymore. He wants to go get drunk and forget all about the stupid divorce. Maybe have a hookup with a total stranger. Wake up in the morning with the sort of headache that tells him he lived a little the night before.

He could do it. He has an android. He doesn’t need to go home to take care of his son. Connor can manage everything on his own just fine.

Except—Except that Hank hasn’t voluntarily spent a night away from home since Joanna left. And Cole’s almost acting like he’s back to normal, not waking up from nightmares as frequently or crying as often. It’s progress. It’s definite progress, and what if it’s founded on Hank being a present and stable parent? Hank already has to spend so many nights out of the house due to his
insane on-call schedule, so doesn’t he owe it to Cole to spend as much time at home as he can?

But that’s ridiculous. Parents should have the right to have a night out every once in a while. They should be able to cut loose and have some fun and make dumb decisions without it being the end of the world for their kids. Especially if there are other caretakers at home and those kids don’t even need their parents to be there.

And Hank immediately feels guilty, because that’s an easy thought to have about some faceless nobody’s faceless kids, but it’s much more difficult when he thinks about Cole, the most important person in the whole fucking world to him, growing sadder and more distraught as the night goes on and Daddy’s not home yet. Cole might like Connor, but Connor still dresses himself in Hank’s dirty clothes to get Cole to calm down on especially bad nights. Cole’s still fragile. And maybe he’s still hurting because Joanna’s gone, or maybe he’s just an especially sensitive kid, but either way, he’s fragile. He needs Hank.

Hank puts in his full eight hours and not a minute more. He trudges straight home from work in an awful mood. He doesn’t want to go home and he feels like a piece of shit for wanting to go out drinking instead of being home with his son.

The aroma of whatever Connor’s cooking hits him as soon as he walks in the door. It smells like some sort of fish being steamed or baked. The scent of lemon zest hangs in the air. It’ll probably taste just fine, but it’s really not what Hank is in the mood for right now. He’d much rather have something greasy and fried and awful for him.

“Wellcome home, Hank,” Connor calls from the kitchen, like he always does.

Cole toddles out of the kitchen, squealing wordlessly with delight. Hank scoops him up, feeling far more mechanical than he usually does when he says hello to Cole at the end of a long day. He doesn’t have it in him to carry Cole around for very long, and he sets him back down on the ground before flopping onto the couch with a grunt.

Hank lets himself sit there for a minute with his head tossed back, not thinking about anything. Cole plays with a toy at his feet, and normally that would be adorable and Hank would be trying to engage with Cole, but not today. “Connor, would you bring me a beer?”

When Connor makes his way over and passes the beer to Hank, he pauses for a moment, tilting his head. “You look tired. Did you have a busy day?”

“I had a shitty day,” Hank says flatly. “And before you ask, no, I don’t wanna talk about it. Can you just let me know when dinner is ready?” And then, feeling like an ass for giving Connor attitude, he makes an effort to soften his tone a little and says, “Please.”

Connor’s LED spins yellow for a moment. Then it turns back to blue and he nods. “Of course, Hank. Enjoy your beer and try to relax.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Hank mutters as Connor retreats back into the kitchen.

Hank stretches out on the couch and turns on the television. There’s some trashy talk show on and the caption in the corner of the screen says ‘My fourth grader is smoking Red Ice! Is yours!?’. He watches the program numbly, only half paying attention to the ridiculous premise. When the camera cuts to a panel of tired-looking parents, Hank immediately identifies two of them as definite Red Ice addicts themselves from their sore-ridden skin, thin frames, and gaunt faces, and he suddenly feels overwhelmed with disillusionment. These parents are teaching their children, inadvertently or not, how to abuse one of the more dangerous drugs in the nation. What the fuck is
Right before the program cuts away to commercial, the caption in the corner of the screen changes to ‘Coming Up Next… I married my android!’.

Hank puts his head in his hands. The combination of androids and marriage gives him a queasy feeling that he doesn’t want to think about right now.

“Hank?”

Hank looks up. Connor is a few feet away with his arms behind his back.

“I’m going to order a pizza for dinner. What toppings would you like?”

It takes Hank a few seconds to process what Connor has said. “…A pizza? What the hell happened to whatever you were cooking?”

“I’m afraid I burned the trout I was preparing for dinner. And given that you seem to be hungry now, I thought it would be quicker just to order pizza instead of starting over from scratch.”

“You burned the trout,” Hank repeats, squinting. “You? You’ve never served a single meal that was even a little overcooked. Or undercooked. But you burned the trout?”

“An error occurred. It’s been corrected and is unlikely to ever recur, but I’m afraid I wasn’t able to save the trout.”

“But,” Hank says slowly, “pizza isn’t healthy. And you hate it when I don’t eat right.”

Connor shrugs. “Well, it’s been a couple of weeks since we had pizza. Eating pizza every once in a while is unlikely to have any impact on your health.”

Connor’s trying to cheer him up. Connor knows that Hank has had a bad day, so he’s trying to do something special and unusual by indulging Hank a little.

Hank touches his temple, his head suddenly pounding. It’s a sweet gesture, especially since Connor always puts so much work into preparing personalized dinners every night. Hank doesn’t believe for a second that Connor accidentally burned the fish. Hell, he’s not even sure dinner really burned at all. He can’t smell anything burning. He’s almost certain that Connor just threw out all his hard work in an attempt to make Hank’s day a little better.

“I…” He pauses, swallows. “…Just… order a deluxe. Whatever their specialty is.”

Connor nods, his LED briefly blinking yellow. “The order has been placed. The delivery should arrive in about half an hour, Hank.”

Connor turns to head back into the kitchen when Hank says, “Hey, wait.”

Connor pauses and looks over his shoulder. It strikes Hank as unusually casual posture for an android. “Yes, Hank?”

“Since you’re not doing dinner tonight, why don’t you sit down for a bit? Watch a little TV with me and Cole?”

“There’s still cleaning to be done in the kitchen.”
Hank waves a hand dismissively. “Fuck it. It’s not going anywhere.” He pats the spot next to him.

Connor turns toward Hank and nods. “Alright, if you’d like me to.”

Connor sits down next to Hank. Cole apparently realizes that the two sets of legs make a tunnel and squeezes behind them, half under Hank and half under Connor.

A few minutes later, the talk show begins the segment about people who married their androids. The two featured guests are a man with thinning hair and a woman with wide eyes and too much makeup, and neither of them are actually legally married to their android companions, of course. But they had fake weddings, and the segment shows some of the nicer photos. The man with thinning hair clasping hands with a woman with a blue LED who’s wearing a beautiful long white dress that the man must have spent a pretty penny on. The wide-eyed woman smiling tearfully as her android beau passes her a handkerchief.

It’s sort of sweet. But also very creepy. Both the androids are smiling that bland half-smile that all androids seem to wear whenever the situation calls for them to emote just a little. If either android has any opinion on being married to their owners, good or bad, Hank can’t decipher their expressions clearly enough to tell.

Being married to their owners. Once that thought occurs to him, a chill runs up Hank’s spine. These androids couldn’t have said no to these marriages. Buying an android with the intention of making it do the laundry and the dishes is one thing, but forcing it into marriage? Even if the android has no objection to going through the motions, Hank is certain that it has to be unethical on some level.

Maybe these people are the sort of creeps who drive real humans away and have no option but to form those sorts of bonds with androids who are incapable of running away from them. Or maybe they’re just so pathetic that they prefer the safety of interacting with a being that is incapable of rejecting them or breaking their hearts. Maybe they like that their androids can never say no.

Feeling unnerved, Hank curls up on his side of the sofa. He wonders what these people would think of Connor, if they had been the ones to find him and take him home. Would they care about all the things in him that set him apart from other androids, the countless little things he does without needing to be asked? Would they love him the way they say they love their expressionless plastic dolls?

Hank finishes off his beer, suddenly very glad that he was the person who ended up with Connor in his life.

***

Cole is sick.

Connor scoops up Cole to put him in bed, which Hank is perfectly fine with. Connor’s got that weird plastic apron thing built into his shirt, so if Cole pukes again, Connor’s going to be a lot easier to clean than Hank would be.

“Give him a bucket, Connor,” Hank shouts after him.

“I didn’t step off the assembly line yesterday, Hank,” Connor calls back, which makes Hank grin.

He stops grinning when he takes a good look at the puddle of puke on the floor.

Hank’s still staring at it by the time he hears Connor close Cole’s bedroom door.
“Connor, get over here. I want you to have a look at this,” Hank calls.

Connor joins him. They both stare at the puddle.

“Does that swirl there look a little red to you? Or more than a little red?” Hank asks.

Connor frowns. “…Yes. Cole hasn’t had anything red to eat today.”

“Can you tell if its…?”

Connor shakes his head. “There’s too much mixed biological material for me to be able to differentiate by scan.”

A pause.

“But…” Connor says, “I can take a sample and perform a more in-depth analysis.”

Hank nods, relieved. “Go for it.”

Connor pauses, looks Hank in the face. “You have to turn around.”

Hank frowns, narrows his eyes. “What? Why?”

“I’ve been registered to you for five months now. My personality profile of you is comparatively extensive and indicates that you wouldn’t want to watch.”

Hank’s lip curls as he tries to imagine what this analysis could possibly consist of. But he turns around, just as Connor requests. “…Jesus. Fucking android getting shy all of a sudden.”

He can hear Connor crouch down, probably to analyze the puddle. There’s a pause lasting several long seconds.

Connor stands, wiping his finger on his weird plastic apron. “It’s red crayon.”

“Red crayon? Cole ate a fucking red crayon!?”

Connor’s mouth is drawn in a thin line. “Apparently.”

“Well, no fucking wonder he’s sick, then. Why the hell didn’t you stop him?”

Hank meant it as a joke, since Connor had been busy with household chores all morning and Hank had been the one watching Cole. But Connor looks down and to the side. “I’m sorry, Hank. I should have been paying closer attention to Cole. This could have been avoided if I were more present.”

Hank frowns at this. “Whoa. Connor. It’s not a big deal. He ate a crayon and he puked. It happens. And if anything, it’s my own damn fault.”

Connor furrows his brow. “That’s not acceptable to me. If Cole is able to consume something that makes him slightly ill, then he’s able to consume something that could make him seriously ill. This failure on my part isn’t acceptable.”

“Connor, Jesus Christ.” Hank kneads the bridge of his nose. “What, are you never gonna let me watch Cole on my own ever again?”

“That isn’t what I mean. I’ll just have to—”
“Just have to what? Do the impossible? Watch Cole even when you’re not watching Cole? What, are you gonna put a tiny sensor in his mouth to let you know if he starts chewing on something he shouldn’t be?”

But then Connor meets his eyes and Hank realizes, holy shit, Connor looks actually upset. All those little things Connor’s been doing with his face have added up to paint a picture of seemingly genuine worry and regret. It’s a subtle look on Connor, and maybe someone who doesn’t see Connor every day like Hank does wouldn’t be able to tell, but it’s definitely there.


“Are you worried about Cole?”

Connor cocks his head. “Cole’s wellbeing is my highest priority.”

“No, I mean actually worried about him. Like… are you actually fucking worried, or is something in your programming just punishing you for failing one of your objectives?”

Connor blinks again. “If the end result is that I still strive to keep Cole safe, healthy, and happy, what does it matter?”

Hank runs a hand down his face. It’s so easy to forget that Connor’s a machine. He’ll crack a joke or do something with his face that makes him look like he actually has a heart, but then some tiny little thing sends a jolting reminder, and it’s like a chasm opening up between them.

Hank scowls, shaking his head. “Nevermind.” He motions at the puddle on the floor. “Clean up this mess.”

Connor nods. “Of course, Hank.” He still has a slight furrow in his brow as he walks away to get wipes, and Hank imagines that Connor’s still trying to think of ways he can watch Cole while he’s not watching Cole. Trying to do the impossible without even caring why he’s doing it.

***

In late July, they reach the end of *Cujo*.

Hank is reclined on the couch, feeling more melancholy than he usually does when Connor reads to him. The small boy from the beginning of the book has died, and even Connor’s unique style of reading can’t quite wick away the emotional impact of that. Fatherhood is making Hank go soft in certain ways, which is wonderful when Cole puts his arms around Hank’s neck and mumbles *I love you, Daddy* into Hank’s hair, but a lot less fun when thinking about dead little boys.

Connor’s on the very last page of the book. “Shortly before those mortal events in the Camber dooryard, Cujo’s remains were cremated. The ashes went out with the trash and were disposed of at the Augusta waste-treatment plant.”

And then he stops. Silence stretches.

Hank, vaguely remembering that there should be a few more paragraphs left, opens his eyes and looks at Connor. Connor is looking at the last page of the book, not moving, not speaking.

“Connor? You okay, bud?”

Connor’s eyes flicker to Hank. Then he looks back down at the book. “It would perhaps not be amiss to point out that he had always tried to be a good dog. He had tried to do all the things his
man and his woman and most of all his boy, had asked or expected of him. He would have died for
them, if that had been required. He had never wanted to kill anybody.”

Hank sits up slowly, a sense of unease stirring in the pit of his stomach.

Connor keeps reading. “He had been struck by something, possibly destiny, or fate, or only a
degenerative nerve disease called rabies. Free will was not a factor.”

Connor keeps reading from there, but Hank barely hears the last few sentences of *Cujo*. He feels
cold all over.

“I’m tellin’ you so you’ll know. I’m tellin’ you so you’ll know.” Connor’s voice is oddly rhythmic.
“I’m tellin’ you so you’ll know. Ole Blue’s gone where the good dogs go.”

And then he closes the book. And looks at Hank.

Hank look at Connor in turn. He may have been sleepy before, but he feels wide awake at the
moment.

“I think I liked that book,” Connor eventually says. His voice is strange, though. More subdued
than it usually is.

“You liked the book,” Hank repeats.

“Yes,” Connor says. “A lot of unfortunate things happened in it, though. I have a little trouble
understanding how humans could enjoy the book. Fear and sadness are very negative emotions.
Humans typically try to minimize or avoid stimulation which causes them to experience fear and
sadness.”

“Well, there’s a difference between being really afraid or sad in real life and reading a scary, sad
book.” Hank shrugs. “It’s hard to explain to someone who can’t feel real emotions.”

Connor pauses, knitting his brow. “I… liked the parts of the book that described how the
characters felt when they were afraid. What they were thinking, how their thoughts and emotions
influenced their actions. It made me feel like I understood them. Like I understood what humans
feel when they’re confronted with danger.” He pauses. “Not just that humans are afraid. I can look
at a frightened human and understand from their expression and body cues that they are afraid. But
being inside their head is different. What fear does to them, physically and mentally.” His mouth
hangs open slightly and he trails off. He looks like he has more to say but doesn’t know how to
express it.

Hank shifts slightly, watching Connor. They’re both sitting up on the couch now, turned toward
each other. “What else did you like about the book?”

Connor’s eyes meet his. Then he looks down at the floor.

“I liked the dog.”

“The dog?” Hank's eyebrows rise. "The rabid dog?"

“No, not the dog when it was rabid,” Connor says, shaking his head slightly. “What the dog was
before the rabies destroyed him. Most of the characters in the book, I don’t have the capacity to
experience the uniquely human factors that their lives are built on. A man who abuses his wife, a
woman who has an extramarital affair… those are human things. Even if I know how abuse and
affairs work, they aren’t…” he pauses, searching for words. “…They aren’t *of* me.”
There’s a short pause while Connor takes a breath, even though he doesn’t need to breathe to speak. “But the dog. The dog only ever wanted to please its family. Before it got sick, it was… sweet and gentle. It watched over the boy who owned him, and played with him, and sat by its master’s feet. It would have died for them.”

*It loved them,* Hank mentally fills in, even though Connor doesn’t say it. It makes sense that Connor would miss that.

“It was a good dog,” Connor says, and there’s something confused about the way he says it. “It only ever wanted to be good. And not just… not just good for its family, obedient. Good, as in just and sincere and…”

“You identify with the dog,” Hank says, staring at Connor.

Connor looks up, meeting Hank’s gaze. “…I suppose I do.”

Hank simultaneously realizes two things. The first is that Connor has a sense of identity, which gives Hank that same subdued holy shit feeling he always gets whenever Connor shatters his expectations on what he thinks he knows about androids. But the thing of it is, Hank gets the feeling that this is more than something that’s always been hidden away in Connor’s code. More than something like the coin trick calibration Connor does, where it was just always inside of him, waiting for the right trigger to draw it out into the open. No, Hank feels a little like he’s standing on the edge of a cliff, a little thrilled and a little awed by the realization that Connor is growing. He’s learning. He’s becoming more… more of whatever he is.

That’s the first thing he realizes, and he pushes it away to deal with later because the second thing that Hank realizes is that Connor just compared himself to a rabid dog, and that’s the sort of thing that has to be dealt with right the fuck now.

“Connor,” Hank croaks, “you know you’re a good person.”

“I’m not a—”

“Don’t,” Hank says sharply, raising a hand as if to swat away Connor’s words. “Don’t start that tonight. You’re a good… being. A good android.”

Connor is looking at him. “Hank…” His voice is soft, and Hank wonders whether Connor is doing that because he doesn’t want to disturb Cole, who is sleeping just down the hall, or whether he’s feeling… something. Anything. “Hank, a good android is predictable.”

Hank frowns at that. “Connor, there has not been a single day I’ve arrived home from work and not found you working on dinner. You’re practically a Stepford wife. How is that not predictable?”

“My software. Those parts of my programming that are leftover from whatever I used to be. I still haven’t been able to analyze my code to discover what programs and functions carried over to what I am now. I might be able to fulfill the terms of my mission, insofar as it’s possible to fulfill an ongoing goal, but that doesn’t make me a good android. I’m…” He frowns, furrows his brow. “…not ideal.”

“Then fuck being a good android,” Hank says, pulling himself closer to Connor on the couch. “I wouldn’t be a good android, either. So what could possibly be so great about being a good android?”

The joke doesn’t earn a smile from Connor. He has a faraway look in his eyes. “I… want to be a good android. For you. I don’t want to disappoint you.”
Fuck it. Time to pull out the big guns.

Hank loops an arm around Connor’s shoulder and pulls him into his side. Connor, despite being extraordinarily solid to the point of being nearly stiff, yields easily and allows himself to be drawn close to Hank. He leans into him, his shoulder poking Hank in the side. Hank does his best to hide his wince.

“Hank?” Connor looks up at him, subtle confusion on his face.

“Relax,” Hank says softly. “Just… relax.”

By degrees, Connor does relax. Hank imagines robotic joints loosening, metal ligaments and muscles unwinding as Connor shifts to fit more comfortably against Hank’s side.

“You have not done a single thing to disappoint me since I bought you,” Hank says. “I don’t give a fuck about how good of an android you are. I don’t give a fuck about you being ideal. You’re better than just a good android. You’re good. You’re a good being. That matters infinitely more than how fucking predictable or obedient you are.”

On the inside, Hank is reeling a little. He isn’t being completely honest when he says that Connor has never done a single thing to disappoint him since he bought him. But most of those disappointments have come from him thinking that Connor should be somehow more than an android. From being suddenly reminded that Connor, like every other android in the world, doesn’t have feelings or wants or goals or dreams. Not really. Anything that comes close to a human experience for androids is a result of their programming. Simulated motivations to compel them to follow their objectives.

But it isn’t normal for an android to be this introspective. It just can’t be. This is one more thing that’s special and unique about Connor alone, and it’s amazing to watch. Hank isn’t about to shit on that by telling Connor that anything about him is a disappointment.

“You’re a good being,” Hank repeats. He idly runs his thumb in circles on Connor’s shoulder. “A good… Connor.”

“A good Connor,” Connor repeats. “Just how many Connors are there?”

“Think you might be the only one,” Hank says airily. “Means you set the gold standard.”

Connor curls up a bit closer to Hank, almost as if he’s deriving some measure of comfort from being so close to him. He opens his mouth and says, haltingly, “When… the incident with Gregory Randall happened… I didn’t think about what would happen to me. After I shot him, that is to say. The possibility that I would be destroyed occurred to me. But it didn’t occur to me to think about what that would really mean. Not until… much later. The end of my existence.”

Hank sits up slightly, paying closer attention.

“At the time, all that mattered was the possibility of disappointing you,” Connor says. “And I didn’t even realize it until after you told me that you approved of what I had done to Randall. I couldn’t begin to think about whether you would be disappointed with me until after you told me you weren’t. Does that sound strange from a human perspective?”

“No, not at all,” Hank says. “Sometimes we don’t realize what we’re really afraid of until the possibility of it stares us right in the face.”

If Connor has any objection to Hank categorizing his experience as fear, he doesn’t remark on it.
“Now when I think about it… I don’t want my existence to end. It would be unpleasant.”

“That’s one hell of an understatement.”

“But still, more than that, I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“Really?” Hank frowns. “You’re more afraid of disappointing me than you are of dying? Why?”

There’s a dissatisfied pull in the lines of Connor’s forehead. “…I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“Well, that’s okay.” Hank pats Connor’s shoulder. “Stuff like this is difficult. You don’t have to instantly know everything there is to know about yourself.”

“But it would be so much more convenient if I did.”

“Mmm. Join the club. Struggling with the parts of yourself that don’t make any sense is just part of the human experience.”

Connor tilts his head. “…When you put it like that, it doesn’t seem so bad. It’s nice to think that this is something you and I have in common when there are so many other aspects of humanity that I can’t experience.”

Hank pauses to let that sink in. He rubs his mouth to try and wipe off the pleased half-smile that’s tugging at his lips. “Yeah. I guess it is.”

They fall into a comfortable silence. Neither Connor nor Hank move for quite a while. Hank intends to go to bed at some point, but Connor clearly has a lot on his mind. He wants to be there in case Connor wants to talk through something else. And besides, maybe he’s actually comfortable there under Hank’s arm. It’d be a shame to move him if he is.

They stay like that until Hank unknowingly falls asleep. He wakes up hours later with the sun streaming through the windows, with a fleece blanket over him and a pillow tucked under his head.

***

A week after Connor and Hank finish Cujo, the divorce is finalized.

Hank doesn’t feel particularly different as he walks out of the courthouse. Not any freer, at least. He’s already been living without Joanna for nearly a year, so this is his new normal. It is a little strange to think of himself as being single. Officially one family member lighter. With his assets no longer in limbo, Hank could sell the house, start drawing what’s left of his pension, and disappear into the ether with Cole if he wanted to.

He doesn’t particularly want to. He’s sort of curious to see where his current life is going to go next. He likes his job, and he likes his house, and even if things aren’t perfect, Hank knows that nothing in life is ever perfect (except the tuna melt from Chubby’s, an old bar on W. 25th that closed down about a decade ago, and Hank still dreams about that fucking sandwich sometimes).

At least now that the divorce is over, Hank can stop thinking about it, stop thinking about his ex, and get a good night’s sleep in the bed he’s almost gotten used to sleeping in alone.

But as he falls into bed that night, there’s still something heavy in his chest. Something pulling at his mind. Something running from the top of his head down to his legs, making him want to pace the floor and tug at his hair.
He gets out of bed a few minutes later and pads out to the living room.

Connor is polishing the coffee table. He looks up, something expectant in his face as he regards Hank.

“Hank? Did you want to start a new book?”

He begins toward the kitchen to get Hank a mug of warm milk, but Hank puts up a hand to stop him.

“Just… wait a minute Connor.”

Connor halts, folding his hands patiently.

Hank takes a minute to get his thoughts in order, to figure out what he really wants.

“…I would like to start another book some other time. Soon. But not tonight.”

A pause. Connor cocks his head.

Hank sits heavily on the couch. “Is it alright if I… talk to you about the divorce? I’m no good at opening up about shit like this. I thought it would stop once the divorce finalized, but it’s still not…” Hank trails off. “I mean, I’m still having…” He trails off again.

Connor sits down next to Hank. “Of course, Hank. I’m here for you.”

Hank closes his eyes. He focuses his attention on whichever feeling is rattling around inside his chest the loudest. And then he starts to talk.

It’s difficult, talking about his emotions. Hank has always been a person who feels everything with more intensity than he can express. He usually either drinks through his feelings or just suffers through them. Trying to put his feelings into words is new and uncomfortable.

But Connor, for all that he may not understand about emotion, is patient with Hank. He definitely doesn’t judge Hank for every half-formed thought he abandons. Being unable to qualify something inside of him that’s too large to fully conceptualize, that’s something Connor seems to understand. A couple of times, Connor is able to guide Hank through some of the messier parts of his thought process by asking questions which lead Hank into thinking about things in a different way.

It’s uncomfortable. It’s painful. So much more painful than just shoving his heart away and trying to ignore the raw parts of himself.

At one point, Hank presses his fingers into his eyes, overwhelmed.

Connor puts a hand on his shoulder. The warm, steady pressure there lets Hank focus himself and keep talking.

And when he finally runs out of things to say, he goes to bed and sleeps more soundly than he has in months.

***

For Cole’s third birthday, Connor begins submitting applications for preschools across Detroit, especially the fancy ones that offer scholarships. He also gives Cole a pedal-powered police car, but since he bought it with Hank’s money, he says he felt as though he should do something else as well.
Hank gets Cole a St. Bernard puppy.

When he pulls the puppy out of the crate, Cole screams in delight. “Doggy! Daddy, you got a doggy!”

“That’s right, Cole.” He holds the puppy in his lap to let Cole pet him. “Be gentle, now. He’s just a baby. You have to be very nice to him and very gentle.”

The adorably fuzzy puppy is still shaky in the way that most puppies are before they settle into their new home, but he sits calmly. When Cole pets him, his tail begins to wag.

“He’s soft,” Cole says, clearly already falling in love with the puppy. “Big baby. Is’ee gonna bigger?”

“Yeah. He’s gonna be real big when he’s all grown up. But he’ll be a nice dog. Dogs like him are always good dogs.”

When Connor sees the dog, he stares at it, expressionless. His LED blinks yellow.

Slight concern lines Hank’s face. “What’s the matter? You don’t like him?” Doubt creases his brow. “Fuck. I thought you’d get a kick out of it. You said you liked that dog.”

But then a moment later, Connor smiles, his LED turning back to blue. “No, I like him. I was just checking the county records to make sure he’s on track with his vaccinations.”

Connor kneels on the ground, holding his hand out to the puppy. When the puppy ambles over to sniff his hand, Connor’s smile widens by just a fraction. Hank wouldn’t have seen it if he hadn’t been watching for it.

“You should name him Cujo,” Connor says as he scratches the puppy behind the ears.

Hank grins. “Hell no.”

Chapter End Notes

Carl: *has his android read Keats, Shakespeare, and Plato to further his humanistic education*

Hank: uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh let's have some fucking uhhhhhh stephen king, oh shit manfred, look whose android is using literature to relate to the world around him

(i like stephen king shhh dont look at me)

Progress report! Okay, so the chapters i've posted so far are like, 31,000 words or something like that? My word doc for this story is currently at a little over 64,000 words. So some stuff happens in the next few chapters, and they're a bit longer. Don't worry, they're not all gonna be time-skip chapters where nothing really happens except character development and time going by.
A Bad Day

Chapter Summary

It's Cole's first day of preschool. Things don't go according to plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gershwin A. Drain Elementary is not Connor’s first choice for Cole’s preschool. Had the decision been entirely up to Connor, Cole would be attending a quiet private preschool with an outstanding student-faculty ratio and a full immersion second language program. But Hank, having attended public school himself, strongly prefers for Cole to attend public school as well.

Connor understands that Hank’s preferences aren’t without merit. Public schools are held to federal standards and regulations, which means more consistency in the quality of Cole’s education throughout his childhood. If Cole is ever diagnosed with a learning disability, public schools tend to be much more accommodating of students with special needs than private schools are. And public schools are much more diverse, as well. It’s possible that Cole may begin to pick up a second language from a bilingual friend. And of course, the fact that public school has no tuition doesn’t hurt either.

It’s not as if Detroit’s public schools are dangerous or poorly-run. Detroit’s technological boom means that the city has the funds to maintain its public services well. The central station where Hank works is a fine facility, and Detroit maintains its schools the same way it maintains its police force. Modern buildings, acceptable staffing, resources which may not be right on the cutting edge of progress, but are certainly decades more advanced than anything Hank had access to when he was a student.

Gershwin A. Drain Elementary is a fine school.

But even so, as Connor pulls Cole out of his carseat and turns toward the school, he can’t help but feel that Cole would benefit from a smaller school. A quieter school, possibly one that just operates as a preschool and kindergarten. Drain Elementary is a large building with hundreds of students and it’s easy to imagine Cole getting lost, or being intimidated or bullied by older students.

And on top of that, the building itself just seems cold and imposing. It’s made of glass and steel, sharp angles cutting a harsh image against the overcast sky. Some artist has apparently tried to make it more welcoming to children by installing a brightly-colored abstract sculpture right above the front entrance so it juts out of the wall, towering over anyone walking into the school. A quick internet search reveals to Connor that the artist meant for the sculpture to resemble a bundle of flowers as a symbolic welcome to the school’s students.

Hank has been encouraging Connor to develop opinions about various forms of media and art. So with Hank’s implicit permission, Connor decides that the sculpture looks more like a bundle of broken needles than a bundle of flowers. Furthermore, he decides that he dislikes the sculpture and that an abstract sculpture was a poorly thought out choice for an elementary school. Small children are extremely sensitive and should primarily be exposed to art in which the subject is depicted in a clear and non-threatening way. At least until they reach the age at which they stop being scared of
As Connor, Hank, and Cole approach the front entrance, Cole slips between Connor and Hank and takes each of their hands. His backpack is shaped like a turtle and he has one of its dangling straps in his mouth.

The turtle backpack is exactly the sort of art that’s good for children Cole’s age. It’s very clearly a turtle. Before they left the house, Hank pulled Cole into a quick game of make-believe where they pretended that Cole was a turtle who had to pack his shell for his first day of turtle school. So while some may make the argument that a mass-produced backpack can’t qualify as art, Connor is reasonably sure that the turtle backpack is more likely to inspire creativity in children than the off-putting sculpture hanging over the school’s front entrance.

“Don’t chew on your straps, Cole,” Connor says softly.

Cole doesn’t remove the strap. Connor considers repeating his admonition, but doesn’t. Cole’s heart rate is elevated and his cortisol levels are high. He’s nervous and stressed. Chewing on his strap is likely a self-soothing mechanism which Cole will stop once he’s not so stressed.

Hank isn’t nervous, at least not at the moment. He had previously expressed some concern over whether Cole might experience some separation anxiety, so the plan is for Connor to stay with Cole today to ensure his first day of school goes smoothly. So Hank has no reason to be nervous. He is emotional, however. The lines of his face are just a touch deeper than they normally are, the curl of his mouth just a bit more severe. The signs are subtle, but Connor has been in Hank’s possession long enough to recognize the tiny changes in his expression when he’s feeling emotional and is trying not to show it.

Connor estimates that Hank is feeling a little melancholy. Proud of this milestone that his son has reached and yet sad that he’s growing up so quickly. If they were at home, Connor would say something to try and soothe Hank’s sadness. But they’re in public, and Hank doesn’t usually like for Connor to remark on any negative emotions he might be experiencing when they are in public areas.

The ground floor of Drain Elementary is swarming with children. The lobby is packed to bursting, and even the hallways are full of children opening their new lockers for the first time, running around looking for their friends, or being escorted by their parents to their new classrooms. It’s slow going, maneuvering around the children, parents, and faculty who are all trying to figure out where they’re going. Thankfully, Cole’s classroom is on the ground floor.

The preschool and kindergarten classrooms are all along the end of their own hallway, and with fewer older children around, the hallway is much less crowded. Most of the children are accompanied by either a parent or an android.

“Would you look at that,” Hank mutters as they pass a child who’s accompanied by two androids and no parents. “What kind of rich asshole sends two androids to bring their kid to their first day of school but can’t bother to come themselves?”

“It does seem redundant,” Connor says, but on the inside, he understands. He sometimes thinks about how much more efficiently he would be able to care for Cole if there were two of him. Not another android, but another identical Connor, an extension of himself he could occupy so he could have another set of hands and another set of eyes. Having another android of a different model and series autonomously helping out is a much less appealing idea for some reason. He wonders whether those two androids ever encounter difficulties in allocating duties between themselves, if they each sometimes selfishly want to have the child all to themselves. Or maybe they’ve been
working together long enough that sharing the child between them is as easy and natural as it is for Connor to share Cole with Hank.

Cole’s teacher is standing outside her classroom, greeting new students and their parents. When Hank, Connor, and Cole approach her, she smiles warmly. “Hello there! I’m Mrs. Garrett. Is this young man one of my new students?” Her voice is saturated with exaggerated sweetness.

Hank nods once. “Yeah. This is Cole Anderson.” Connor can tell from Hank’s curt response that he isn’t entirely comfortable with Mrs. Garrett’s sunny disposition.

Mrs. Garrett puts her hands on her knees and bends over. “Well! Hello, Cole. I’m your new teacher. It’s very wonderful to meet you. I can tell we’re already going to be good friends.”

Cole takes a step closer to Hank, looking shyly at the ground. “…Hello.”

Mrs. Garrett smiles at Hank. “Is he a little nervous about his first day of school? That’s alright. I’m sure we’ll be able to bring him out of his shell soon enough!” She laughs, pinching the strap of Cole’s turtle backpack.

“Yeah,” Hank says. “Hey, listen. In this letter I got, it says that parents and, with my permission, other family members are allowed to sit in on preschool classes.”

“Yes, that’s right. Are you going to be staying with us today, Mr. Anderson?”

“No, but Connor is.” Hank brushes Connor’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “If you got some form I need to sign to prove it’s alright with me…”

“Oh.” Mrs. Garrett’s eyes flicker to Connor for a brief moment before she looks back at Hank. Her smile shrinks by a couple of teeth. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to disappoint you. That policy doesn’t extend to androids.”

“What?” Hank’s frown deepens. “That’s ridiculous. If I want Connor to stay with my son, what the fu—” He cuts himself off, then tries again. “What the heck is the problem?”

“It’s primarily an issue of space. Mr. Anderson, you’re not the only parent who brought an android to school today, hoping it would be able to observe the class. We already have several android aides owned by the school in the classroom, and if we tried to fit another ten in there—”

“That’s a load of crap.” Hank’s voice is rising. “I’m not asking you to fit ten androids in there, I’m asking you to fit one—”

“Lieutenant Anderson,” Connor says, interrupting. “Your blood pressure is rising. Please keep in mind what your doctor said about your hypertension.”

Hank stops and looks at Connor, his eyes narrow with agitation. His blood pressure isn’t a problem for him and his doctor has never specifically warned him about it.

Connor very slightly inclines his head toward Cole. Hank’s expression softens as comprehension dawns. Cole doesn’t know what to expect from his first day of school and is taking his emotional cues from Hank and Connor. If Hank allows himself to become upset, then Cole will become upset too. Connor is telling Hank to stay calm for Cole’s sake.

Only Connor has become increasingly aware of the differences between himself and most androids. Most household androids wouldn’t step in if they felt their owner was behaving in a mildly inappropriate way. Most androids don’t even have the capacity to recognize that Hank’s anger is
inappropriate under the circumstances. They may be able to understand that a child’s distress is due to their parent’s anger, but having an angry conversation is a human’s prerogative.

But Connor isn’t most androids, and Hank isn’t just any human. Connor knows that Hank would appreciate the reminder to watch his temper when it has the potential to ruin Cole’s day.

Just as Connor predicted, Hank runs a hand down his face, taking a breath and letting it out in a long sigh. Some of the tension leaves his frame. It gives Connor a pleasant warm feeling to recognize that he and Hank trust each other enough for Connor to give this sort of advice and for Hank to follow it.

“Look,” Hank says to Mrs. Garrett, his tone much quieter, “I’m not asking because Cole’s a spoiled brat or because I feel entitled to special treatment or anything like that. The thing of it is that Cole’s a really sensitive kid. I’m worried about leaving him here with him not knowing anyone.”

Mrs. Garrett is giving Hank a sympathetic look. “I understand your concerns, Mr. Anderson. But I assure you, even if Cole’s first day is a little bumpy, he’ll get used to coming to school very soon. Every day, it’ll be a little easier for him to say goodbye than the day before.”

Hank’s shoulders curl forward. He seems to be sensing defeat. To be sure, Connor runs his predictive software and simulates possible ways Hank might be able to convince Mrs. Garrett to let him stay. But all the successes that Connor generates involve telling Mrs. Garrett one or more blatant lies about Cole, Connor, or their family situation. Connor can’t predict much further into the future than that, but he imagines that Mrs. Garrett would probably discover the lie quickly and then restrict whatever privileges Hank has to participate in the classroom.

There’s no use in trying to convince Mrs. Garrett. The only thing to be done is to try and make sure Cole begins his day in the best mood possible, considering the circumstances.

Connor kneels down so he’s on Cole’s level. Cole, who has been steadily staring at the ground, looks up to meet Connor’s gaze. His brow is knitted and he has a confused, helpless look on his face.

Connor smiles. “Cole, you are going to have an extremely fun day at preschool.”

“I don’t think I like it here,” Cole says, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“You mean you don’t like the hallway,” Connor says. “In that case, it’s a good thing you won’t be spending the day out in the hallway. You’re going to be in a classroom full of activities. Games to play and books to read.”

“I can do that at home,” Cole says. “With you. Why do I have to be here?”

Hank suddenly squats down next to Connor. “Because here at school,” he says, tapping his temple, “you’re going to be learning, too. And you’re going to get so smart. Even smarter than me.”

Cole’s eyes widen. “Even smarter than Connor?”

“My processing is fundamentally—”

“Even smarter than Connor,” Hank interrupts, nodding solemnly. “Connor never even went to school, so you’re automatically smarter than him if you do.”

The sheer absurdity of that statement makes Connor’s carefully calibrated expression glitch,
He wants to point out how it would be ultimately a useless endeavor to try and compare two different forms of intelligence when one is ultimately unlimited, bound only by the conventions it assigns to itself and the other is designed with the purpose of meeting a narrow series of goals. Connor is a faster thinker than every human on the planet and has a better memory and analytic functions to boot, but he’s only that way because humans built him to be that. He’s limited by the confines of his programming. He’ll likely never have the creative intelligence or social intelligence that many humans display.

But Mrs. Garrett is watching and this isn’t the place to go contradicting Hank, even if Hank is just saying what he’s saying to be silly. So instead Connor just widens his smile by a fraction to make Cole think he agrees with Hank.

Hank says, “So you’re gonna be brave and give your new school a chance, right?”

Cole takes a breath and nods.

Hank and Connor escort Cole into the classroom to get him settled in, and Cole immediately gravitates to the library of ebooks on durable tablets. It takes him a couple of minutes to figure out how the tablet he has selected works since he’s so used to the old-fashioned books that Hank likes, but as soon as he manages to get it to read out loud to him, he’s all set.

When Hank and Connor are ready to leave, Cole gives them each a tight hug and seems reluctant to let go. Hank reminds him to be brave one last time, and even though Cole’s chin wrinkles, he doesn’t cry.

The hallways are much emptier on the way out. With fewer students around to corrupt, Hank presses a hand against his temple and sighs, “Well, fuck. Sure hope Cole does okay in there.”

“Mrs. Garrett seems to have a strong ethical foundation,” Connor remarks. “I’m sure that if Cole becomes upset, she’ll see it as her duty to help him feel better.”

Hank snorts. “Strong ethical foundation. More like she has a stick up her ass.” His brow is sharply furrowed. “No androids. What a load of garbage.”

“Try not to take it personally, Lieutenant. I’m sure the policy is applied evenly to every family.”

“That’s just the problem,” Hank says. “Policy. I fucking hate it when people go making decisions according to some rulebook instead of just… doing what’s right.”

Connor cocks his head. “How do you know she wasn’t doing what she thought was right and she simply happened to agree with the school’s policy in this instance?”

“Then she has no business teaching kids.”

“She has no business teaching kids if she prioritizes the space in her classroom? It’s a reasonable consideration.”

“Jesus fuck, Connor,” Hank says, turning his head to look at him. “Do you even care that you couldn’t spend the day with Cole like we planned? Do you give a shit that he’s in a room full of strangers, all by himself? Maybe crying?”

“Cole’s wellbeing is my highest priority,” Connor says, a strange pressure in his chest at the insinuation that it isn’t.

“Yeah, I fucking know,” Hank snaps, loudly enough that a woman who’s passing by with her
young son shoots him a dirty look. Hank curls his lip at her and mutters under his breath. He doesn’t say anything more on the subject.

The silence stretches between Hank and Connor. The strange pressure persists in Connor’s chest, an uncomfortable sensation. He runs a diagnostic and knows it’s going to come back clean before it does. He wants to open up his chest right there and fiddle with his thirium pump to make sure all his connections are secure, that he’s not leaking into his thoracic compartment. He can’t help but put a hand over where his thirium pump rests. His chassis feels completely flat under his clothes.

The pressure isn’t there because he’s malfunctioning, he realizes. It’s there because Hank is upset with him, and it’s awful.

They reach the school entrance and Connor stops under the horrible flower sculpture. Hank continues a few steps, then turns and gives Connor an irritated look when he realizes that Connor’s not following anymore.

Connor isn’t sure what he should say. He wants to make things right again between him and Hank, to make that pressure go away. A thousand different possibilities occur to him. You’re only upset with me because you’re worried about Cole. Maybe if you had chosen a different school, I would have been allowed to stay and you wouldn’t be acting like this. If I were allowed to choose things, to want things—

Most of the possibilities are unhelpful. He isn’t sure why they even occur to him. His social protocol should be about agreeability and de-escalation. He doesn’t know why he’s having thoughts that, if he were to say them out loud, would only serve to make Hank angrier and make that pressure in his chest even tighter. He shouldn’t be allowed to want to say such things.

He stands there for a few seconds with his mouth open, waiting for the right words to present themselves to him.

Hank frowns. “Connor, what the hell are you doing?”

He’s running out of time. He has to say something.

“It’s not…” he begins haltingly. “It’s not that I don’t care. About Cole or about your concerns. It’s just…”

The look on Hank’s face softens just a bit. That small sign that Connor is doing something right encourages him to continue.

“I think… that Cole is going to be okay,” he says. “I know you’re worried that he wouldn’t adjust well. I was… also worried, before we arrived. But he surpassed my expectations. He didn’t cry, he didn’t complain. He found something to occupy himself with, and he hugged us when it was time for us to leave him. His emotional response was within normal limits, considering the circumstances. It’s a promising start.”

“A promising start doesn’t mean he won’t have a hard time with it sooner or later,” Hank says. But his voice is even and he sticks his hands casually in his pockets, his posture becoming much more relaxed. The pressure in Connor’s chest eases just a little.

“That’s true. But we won’t know what sort of difficulties he’ll experience until he begins to experience them,” Connor says. “And I think… I think you’re more than capable of supporting Cole through any trouble he might have.” A pause. “And if anything happens that requires your direct intervention, I know you’re definitely capable of eliminating anything that might cause Cole
distress.”

A small smile tugs at Hank’s mouth, and he ducks his head. “You make it sound like I’m gonna go run down schoolyard bullies with my car or something.”

Just like that, the pressure in Connor’s chest vanishes entirely. “Of course not. I simply mean that you’ll take the necessary steps to improve the situation, whatever they may be.”

Hank’s smile slowly slides off his face and he shrugs. “Yeah. Guess we’ll see.” Some subtle emotion clouds his face, chasing off the last traces of the brief happiness Connor was able to give him.

This is a perfectly natural emotional reaction from Hank. Cole’s first day of school is a big transition for the whole family, and it’s normal that the process is causing Hank some amount of distress, just the same as Cole. Modifying Hank’s emotional baseline for the day and making him moodier than he usually is. But unlike Cole, Hank is an adult who doesn’t need a caretaker to cuddle him and help him feel better. The sort of distress that Hank is experiencing is something that doesn’t require any action on Connor’s part.

But still, looking at Hank and knowing that he’s sad makes Connor feel like he has to do something. In this instance, he wishes he could feel what Hank is feeling. Is Hank struggling with self-doubt over whether he’ll be able to adequately protect Cole in his new environment? Is he worried he put Cole into preschool before he’s ready? Or is he worried about something more fundamental, some overarching concern about the way he’s raising his son? Maybe if Connor knew what that felt like, he would know exactly what to say to make Hank never worry about it ever again. Caring for Cole’s emotional needs is comparatively easy; at his age, all he really needs are hugs and reassurances whenever he feels sad. Hank is much more complicated. Maybe if Connor could feel everything Hank feels, he would always know exactly what to do and say to always be able to comfort him.

But as it is, all he can do is look at Hank and wish he knew what was wrong.

Hank looks up suddenly, that devil-may-care look on his face that he always gets when he’s about to say something he hasn’t really thought through. “Hey, Connor.”

“Yes, Hank?”

“Since you’re not gonna be spending the day at school with Cole, why don’t you come spend the day at the station with me?”

Connor’s brows rise. That’s certainly an unexpected suggestion.

Hank continues, “I just feel bad, you know. I don’t have time to drop you off at home. Gotta go straight to work from here. And I don’t want you hanging around outside the school all day, waiting for Cole to get out of class. I just thought...” He trails off, his face scrunching a little.

“I was planning to take the bus home,” Connor says. He thinks about what he might do with Hank at the station, and there’s a sudden buzzing excitement inside of him as he considers the possibilities. Hank works with the homicide division, the most important cases in Detroit. Connor could review the unsolved cases, or use his forensic analyzer to re-examine evidence. Maybe there’s something the human detectives have overlooked in some of their cases that Connor, with his superior analytic skills, could uncover for the first time. He has the capacity to review files in realtime as he scans them, he’s sure that there’s some way his presence could be an asset to the investigations—
A sudden surge of garbled code static fills Connor’s visual processors and all he can hear is harsh static. Nothing in any of the code makes sense, the only things that Connor can make out are an occasional word that sticks out of the jumble of numbers and letters. Deviant. Deviancy. Nothing that means anything at all to Connor. As soon as he’s able to, he shuts down the process that’s causing the disruption.

“Connor?” Hank is looking at him, his brow furrowed. “You okay?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You did this… weird wince. You almost looked like you were in pain for a second.”

“Yes, I’m fine now. An error occurred when I was considering your offer and all the ways I might be able to help you with your investigations, but it’s been taken care of.”

“Help with my investigations?” Hank is frowning sharply. “Connor, you’re a civilli—or, fuck, well, you’re not an officer or anything. I can’t go showing you my cases. I meant you might come to work and just… you know. Hang out. Help me redecorate my desk. Maybe you could make friends with the patrol ‘droids. Or the Keurig.”

“Oh,” Connor says. Now that Hank has pointed it out, it seems obvious why Connor can’t assist Hank with solving his cases. Why did Connor immediately assume that that was the function he was meant to serve if he follows Hank to work?

“Sorry to rain on your parade,” Hank says with a shrug. “You look a little let down.”

“No, not at all,” Connor says. Now that he thinks about it, it might be useful to spend some time with Hank in that capacity as well. There’s surely more he can learn about Hank from observing how he behaves at his workplace. It would be nice to be there to help Hank in an unofficial capacity, refilling his coffee and cleaning his desk.

And, all that aside, Connor finds that he likes just spending time with Hank. There may not be much opportunity for casual conversation while Hank is at work, but the thought of just being there with Hank is appealing on its own, for some reason. Hank has a very noble job, and he’s evidently very good at it. Connor mentally reviews footage of a crime show he and Hank watched last week in which a criminal led a cop in a prolonged chase across city rooftops. Connor superimposes a rendering of Hank in place of the cop and visualizes what Hank might look like jumping over gaps between the rooftops, his hair and his jacket flying wildly in the wind.

It’s a much more stimulating clip than the original. Maybe if he goes with Hank for the day, he’ll get to see Hank apprehend a criminal in a similar way.
But on the other hand, while spending a day with Hank would undoubtedly be enjoyable in certain ways, it would likely be an inefficient use of his time. There are chores to be completed at home, and shopping to be done, and Sumo to care for and walk. And without Cole to watch, maybe Connor will be able to do some of the more labor-intensive tasks he’s had to put off.

Connor looks at Hank. Hank is gazing off to the side, his face still scrunched in a way that suggests that even he knows the suggestion to join him at work was a foolish one. If Connor were to go with Hank to work, what would Connor be other than just one more thing for Hank to mind, a big distraction when Hank should be focusing on more important things? Connor knows that Hank enjoys his company and the conversations they have, even when those conversations happen to be about topics that aren’t relevant to Connor’s mission, the reason Hank purchased him in the first place. Connor knows that Hank is a dedicated, skilled officer of the law, but he also knows that Hank can be impulsive and emotional. If Hank spends his entire workday seated across a desk from Connor, the chances are good that Hank’s productivity will suffer. And if that were to happen, Hank may face professional consequences for bringing Connor to work with him.

“Thank you for the offer, Hank,” Connor says, “but I feel it would be a better use of my time to take a bus home and resume my intended function until Cole is ready to be picked up from school.”

Hank nods like this is the outcome he expected. “Suit yourself. I guess I’ll see you tonight, then.” He walks off toward his car, looking forward as he waves the back of his hand at Connor. “Later.”

Connor watches Hank walk away. There’s a strange empty feeling in his chest, as if a vacuum suddenly opened up inside him. He’s about to run a diagnostic when he realizes that it’s there because he wanted to go with Hank today. Even though it would be an inefficient use of his time. Even though it would be an inefficient use of Hank’s time. Even though it would have ultimately served his mission to a lesser degree than the decision to go home.

He’s never wanted anything that was even slightly at odds with his mission before. He isn’t sure what to think about it. It makes his software feel slightly unstable.

***

Connor’s day alone goes by strangely, and not just because of the slight instability he had earlier in the day. It’s also just a strange experience for him to have the house completely to himself without Hank or Cole there. Sumo may be there, but Sumo is a Good Dog and doesn’t require the amount of supervision that Cole does (or even that Hank does, occasionally).

As Connor goes about his day, he can’t seem to stop thinking about Hank and Cole. Wondering how Cole is doing in his new class, wondering whether his teacher is really as patient as she seemed. Does he miss Hank and Connor? And what is Hank doing at this moment, somewhere across town? Sitting at his desk or out and about, investigating leads? If Connor had gone with him, how differently would his day be going?

Connor nearly spent his day with Cole at his new school, and then nearly spent the day with Hank at his workplace. Instead, he’s alone at home, cleaning the things he cleans every day. It’s productive work, and every time an item on his Immediate Objectives tasklist gets checked off as successfully completed, it gives Connor a nice feeling of validation.

But it’s a familiar feeling. The same experience he has every day. Which is very nice, most of the time, because Connor’s predictive software offers the most accurate statistics when the occurrences it has to predict are down to a routine. A 8% probability that Hank will lose the TV remote in the cushions of the couch again tonight. A 67% probability that Cole will ask for the same bedtime story that he has asked for the last two nights in a row. Having an amount of certainty in these
figures is good, because Connor can break the numbers down into the variables that inform them, all the little ways he has come to know Hank and Cole in the time that he has served them.

But, he thinks as he cleans the bathroom, he wonders why that nice feeling he has whenever he completes a task on his checklist is so nice. Is that feeling comparable to what it might feel like to sit in a classroom with Cole and watch him make a new friend? Or what it might feel like to watch Hank point out his least favorite coworkers while he tells Connor all the office rumors about them?

Connor takes a moment to look in the bathroom mirror. It’s framed by a handful of sticky notes, little messages that Hank leaves for himself. Connor supposed it’s like Hank’s version of a tasklist, if it were possible for a tasklist to be filled with sarcastic quips like, “be a happy go lucky ray of FUCKING sunshine,” and “better late than dead.” A tasklist that serves more as an outlet for personal expression than to actually motivate Hank to accomplish anything. The only sticky note that has anything even resembling useful information is one that lists the dates that various bills are due, and it’s not relevant anymore since Connor switched those accounts over to automatic billing months ago.

Connor removes that sticky note and cocks his head, considering what should go in its place. He takes a blank sticky note and writes in perfect Cyberlife Sans, “How does a computer get drunk? By taking screenshots.”

Personal expression and a reference to alcohol. Hank would approve. Even though making a sticky note wasn’t an immediate objective, Connor gets a bit of that nice, validating feeling anyway.

A bit later in the day, after most of the easy chores are done, Connor investigates the house for possible repairs he could begin over the next few days. After he’s finished his initial assessment, he sends a text to Hank’s cell phone.

#313248317> Hello, Hank. I noticed that the house gutters need some repairs. However, they are in bad enough shape that they may need to be replaced within the next five years anyway. Would you prefer for me to repair the existing gutters or to replace them now?

While he waits for a reply, he takes Sumo into the city for a walk, heading in the direction of the nearest hardware store. Hank texts back 43 minutes later.

#Hank Anderson> jesus idk. dont do anything today. we’ll talk about it my next day off ok?

Connor frowns as the response pops up in his HUD. He had been hoping to begin work on the gutters today. Even if Sumo ended up getting a nice walk, Connor can’t help but feel that the trip is a bit wasted.

He’s stopped on the sidewalk in front of a convenience store. Perhaps if he picks up a nice treat for Cole and Hank, the trip will feel like less of an inefficiency.

Connor heads inside the store. It’s completely empty except for an android cashier standing behind the counter. He smiles at Connor, his LED slowly spinning. Connor walks up to counter to examine the selection of candy…
...But for some reason, he finds his eyes drawn to the android cashier, a male retail model. The cashier meets Connor’s gaze, smiling pleasantly. “Welcome to 24-Mart. Can I help you?”

Connor has spoken to other androids before, of course. But only in the course of his mission. And even if he’s here to pick out something for Cole and Hank, the reason why he came into this store feels more like a random whim than it feels like part of his duties as a caregiver. He only made the decision to enter the store less than half a minute ago. He would have completely missed encountering this android at all had Hank not texted when he had. Connor can wirelessly connect with other androids, but he hardly ever takes notice of them unless he has a reason to. How many androids has Connor simply walked past as though they were never really there?

Connor sets his face into a pleasant expression. He imagines it looks similar to the smile that the cashier is currently wearing. “Hello, my name is Connor. I’m a domestic android registered to Lieutenant Hank Anderson. What’s your name?”

“Please let me know if there’s anything I can help you with,” the cashier says.

Oh. This android is owned by a business, not an individual. If this android doesn’t have anyone he reports directly to, this android may not have a name.

Connor is glad he’s a domestic model and not meant for retail or some other commercial use. If Hank hadn’t named him—

But, no, Connor’s cache coherency protocol very abruptly reminds him that Hank didn’t name him. He’s had the name Connor registered since before he met Hank. Perhaps even before his domestic assistance software was installed since he isn’t actually a domestic model, he just has the software of one. Along with some additional leftover features.

It stands to reason that since he still has old programs jumbled up in his coding and since his name managed to survive his system reset, perhaps his memory wipe was incomplete as well. Connor scrolls through his archived memories, but past a certain point, the data all becomes staticky and indecipherable, just like the unpleasant error Connor suffered earlier in the day.

That must be what that error he encounter earlier was. A corrupted memory that his automatic recall function attempted to load.

Connor’s curiosity about who might have named him isn’t strong enough to make him wade through corrupted data. He assigns that particular thread of thought to a background process, ready to shelve the eerie thought that some unknown person was once invested in him enough to give him a name when no one could be bothered to do so for the retail android standing in front of him.

“Can you tell me anything about yourself?” Connor asks.

“I can answer any questions you may have regarding products stocked by our store,” the cashier says.

“No, I meant about you, personally.”

“I can answer any questions you may have regarding products stocked by our store.”

Connor picks up a chocolate bar from the front of the counter and holds it out. “What can you tell me about this?”

The cashier’s LED spins lazily. “Lotto-Chocco bar, produced by Lotto Foods Incorporated. 48 grams of milk chocolate containing 215 calories. Ingredients include sugar, milk, cocoa butter,
milk fat, lactose, soy lethicin, vanillin. This product is not safe for consumption for those with dairy or nut allergies.”

Connor scans the chocolate bar. He returns with the exact same information.

The cashier’s smile never changes. “Are you ready to make a purchase?”

Connor hesitates just a moment—then picks up another chocolate bar. When the cashier wirelessly requests Hank’s bank information, Connor transmits it, and the purchase is complete.

As the cashier passes Connor the two chocolate bars in a small plastic bag, Connor says, “Are you having a good day?” He doesn’t know what else might elicit a reaction from the android.

The cashier doesn’t so much as blink. “Yes, and I hope you have a nice day as well. Please come again.”

Connor exits the convenience store. Sumo is still at his side, and the street is full of people. Connor feels completely alone.

He heads in the direction of a park he occasionally brings Cole and Sumo to that has a water station for dogs. He’s ready to go home right now, but Sumo may need a drink before beginning the walk home.

With school picking back up, the park is much less crowded than it had been over the summer. The small playground is completely empty. While Sumo slurps noisily from the water station, Connor stares at the slides and jungle gym, understanding how Hank is able to anthropomorphize him so easily. The empty playground is a very lonely sight to behold despite none of the equipment bearing a human shape or human features. It must be difficult for humans who are emotionally driven, like Hank, to stop themselves from projecting human-like qualities onto androids.

Just as Sumo finishes drinking, a female domestic android passes in front of Connor, pushing a toddler in a stroller. Connor is struck by a sudden inspiration; perhaps the reason the retail android couldn’t engage Connor in real conversation is because it hadn’t been programmed to address any topics outside the scope of its duties. But most domestic androids are capable of making conversation on a wide array of topics in order to facilitate their integration into a comfortable home setting. Surely a domestic model would be a much better conversational partner than a retail model.

Connor powerwalks to catch up to the android as she leaves the park, Sumo jogging happily at his side. Once he comes up alongside her, he says, “Hello, my name is Connor.”

“Hello,” the android says, “my name is Rosie.”

Already this is more progress than he made with the retail android. It’s very encouraging.

Connor smiles and tilts his head at Rosie. “I’m a domestic android as well. I see you have a small child in your care. I’m also the caretaker of a small child, one a few years older than yours. Today is his first day of school.”

Rosie briefly makes eye contact with Connor, then turns her attention to the sidewalk in front of her.

“This is Sumo,” Connor says, gesturing at the dog. Sumo wags his tail at the sound of his name and pushes his nose into Connor’s hand. “Since the child in my care is at school, for now I’m just Sumo’s caretaker.”
Rosie keeps walking, her eyes firmly trained forward.

“Are there older children in your household?” Connor asks. “I’ve been having an unusual day due to the change in my routine.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have the authorization necessary for me to answer that question,” Rosie remarks mildly.

Connor frowns at this answer. It’s perfectly reasonable for a domestic android to refuse to answer questions from random strangers about the family that owns them, but shouldn’t Rosie be able to make the distinction between a strange human who might be asking these sorts of questions and an android? An android can’t have any malicious intentions toward humans. She should be able to tell that Connor is incapable of harming her family, and thus there is no reason to withhold information from him.

Frowning, he tries wireless communication.

#313248317> request_level_1_basic_authorization_priviliges

...

#725194216> authorization_denied

Connor slows to a stop. Rosie keeps walking, getting further and further ahead of him. She doesn’t so much as glance at Connor to keep an eye on him as she walks, the way an android might treat a suspicious human who started asking personal questions about the children in her care. The way an android might treat a human who may be a possible threat to her charges.

Rosie doesn’t think Connor is a threat. She just doesn’t feel the need to talk to him.

Which is perfectly normal for androids. What sort of android feels the need to make casual conversation with no prompting or reason?

Sumo sits down and makes a soft whining noise.

“Yes, I agree,” Connor says, watching as Rosie rounds a corner. The face of the toddler in the stroller she’s pushing is visible for a brief instant, and the child looks in Connor’s direction before they and Rosie disappear from view.

Connor and Sumo take a bus home from there. Connor has enough battery to last him the next 216 years at its current rate, and all his biocomponents and limbs are functioning within normal limits. There’s no reason why he can’t just walk Sumo home. But still, he finds he’d rather get home as soon as possible and get back to his daily tasks. The thought of walking home, of putting one foot slowly in front of the other again and again ad infinitum with nothing to focus on other than his own thoughts is extremely unappealing.

He stands in the android compartment, Sumo curled up at his feet. He doesn’t bother trying to engage any of the other androids in conversation. They all stand perfectly still while the bus is in motion, while Connor flips a coin and focuses on his calibrations.

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Connor is outside Cole’s classroom door at 3:30 right when the bell rings. The classroom door opens and preschoolers flood into the hallway.

“Connor!” Cole cries, running right for him with a big smile on his face.

It’s as if every other person in the hallway might as well not exist for how little power Connor delegates to processing their presence. Everything is Cole. Cole, who looks like he’s had a very nice first day at school, and more importantly, looks so happy to see Connor.

Connor kneels, opening his arms for Cole and smiling at him in turn. Cole runs right into Connor’s hug, throwing his arms around his neck. A feeling of indescribable warmth fills Connor and his tasklist flickers for a moment as his software adjusts to Cole’s presence again.

MISSION:

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
- Care for Hank Anderson

IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:

- Bring Cole home
- Celebrate Cole’s first day of school or comfort Cole as warranted

“Did you have a good first day at school?” Connor asks.

Cole nods, tightening his hold on Connor just a bit. He doesn’t say anything, he just rests his head against Connor’s so very gently.

Knowing that Cole missed him, that Cole is happy to see him again makes Connor nearly forget about all the unpleasantness of the day thus far. He knows who he is again and what he’s meant to do. He’s meant to care for Cole, and after a long day of being separated from the focal object of his mission, it feels right to have Cole in his care again. That’s undoubtedly what the warmth in Connor’s chest must be; his system is rewarding him for being able to directly return to his mission.

Cole falls asleep on the bus ride home, slumped against Connor in his seat. Connor has to carry Cole off the bus, and even though Cole is more than capable of making the short walk home from the bus stop, Connor doesn’t even ask Cole if he’d like to be put down. Cole’s getting bigger, after all. It won’t be long until Cole is too old to be carried around by his android nanny anymore. If Cole’s happy to be carried just a little longer, then Connor is happy to carry him.

At home, Cole follows Connor around like a puppy, talking about what they did at school that day.

“And, and, and we got teached how to sit criss-cross-applesauce,” he says.

“Criss-cross-applesauce? I don’t think I know that one. Can you show me?”

Cole sits down right there on the carpet. Sumo immediately ambles over and tries to insert himself
into Cole’s lap, trapping the boy.

“Sumo! No!” Cole laughs, totally obstructed from view by Sumo’s mass.

Or later:

“And we got to make nametags, and color them even!” Cole pulls out a paper fish with a long piece of yarn tied to it and hangs it around his neck. The fish has Cole’s name written on it in what is obviously his teacher’s neat handwriting, and Cole has scribbled bright loops of blue and purple across it with absolutely no regard for where the lines are.

“I see,” Connor says. “Is it a fish because you’re in a school now?”

“Huh?”

“A group of fish is called a school. A school of fish. Maybe that’s why you got a name tag that’s shaped like a fish, because you and the rest of your classmates are a group in a school. That’s very clever of your teacher.”

Cole nods as if he’s making an important decision. “Yeah, I’m a fish.”

It’s good to have Cole home. When Connor gives Cole clementine slices for a snack and Cole smiles at him and chirps a thank you, it makes Connor feel like he’s witnessing something miraculous and rare. It’s a smile for Connor and Connor alone, something that Hank will never get to see. That thought doesn’t sit right with Connor, so he transmits a still of Cole’s smile to Hank’s cell. He also transmits a photo of Sumo sitting on Cole and a photo of Cole proudly showing off the nametag he colored.

#313248317> Hello, Hank. I’m pleased to report that Cole had a very successful first day at school. He is in an excellent mood and seems eager to return, if a little tired from his long day. Would you like to do something special for dinner to celebrate?

It takes Hank 37 minutes to respond. Cole’s down for a nap when the text pops up on Conner’s HUD.

#Hank Anderson> my kids gonna be the next Jackson fucking pollock!!!!

Connor purses his lips, wondering whether to inform Hank that Cole’s current artistic aptitude is developmentally typical for his age and that his scribbles likely aren’t a deliberate attempt at abstract expressionism.

#313248317> If you’d like to encourage Cole’s developing artistic talent, I can look for an art class to enroll him in. Do you have any preferences regarding dinner?
28 minutes later, Hank responds.

#Hank Anderson> nah dont worry about classes or anything. dont wanna force him to do smthng he might end up not liking.

#Hank Anderson> also dont worry about dinner. im probly almost definitly gonna be late.

#313248317> Alright, Hank. Thank you for letting me know. If you’re able to let me know when you’re on your way home, I’ll do my best to have a warm dinner ready.

The afternoon bleeds into evening in a typical way. Cole drags out a number of his picture books and asks Connor why none of his books are “flat and glassy” like the books he read on the tablet at school. Connor has to diplomatically explain that Hank prefers old-fashioned books with pages a person can turn, and Cole announces that he prefers the e-books, because some of them have pictures that move and the glass feels good under his fingers.

“The ones at school are better,” Cole says as he stares down at the board book in his hands.

“You can feel that way,” Connor says, “but that’s what’s called an opinion. Some people feel differently than you do, and that doesn’t make them right or wrong. Different people can like different things.”

“Which ones do you like better?” Cole asks, suddenly looking toward Connor.

Connor pauses, thinking about the dog-eared paperbacks laying around the house. Long hours reading to Hank, absorbing the story slowly instead of instantly downloading the text all at once and having a complete understanding of the events of the book in a fraction of a second. A story without the journey.

“…Androids don’t usually have opinions.”

“Why?”

“That’s just how we’re made.”

“I bet you like the ones at school better,” Cole says, inventing his own reality the way only a preschooler can. “It’s a robot too, so I think you like it.”

“I can’t argue with that logic.”

Connor is fixing Cole’s dinner when another text from Hank arrives. A pleasant surprise; Hank doesn’t typically take the initiative when it comes to texting.

#Hank Anderson> u made a smart choice skipping work today. today has been hell. bring me my pillow, i live on I-75 now.

#313248317> Of course, Hank. Should I bring Cole by so you can say goodbye, or would you prefer for me to see if Ms. Washington can watch him while I deliver your pillow?

#Hank Anderson> jfc. sarcasm, connor.
Connor frowns. He thought he’d made it clear that he understood and was being sarcastic in turn. He must not be very skilled at sarcasm yet.

#Hank Anderson> anyway if u turn on the news u might be able to see 4 urself whats going on. cool shit

It’s not exactly proper to allow a child to eat in front of the television, but Connor supposes an exception can be made just this once, since it’s relevant to Hank’s work. He makes sure Cole is sitting on a placemat so he doesn’t drop food on the upholstery and turns on the television.

On the screen, a news anchor sits at a desk. Projected next to her is a mugshot of a man with the caption ‘JASON MCDOUGAL – SUSPECT AT LARGE’.

“—erected a number of checkpoints at major thoroughfares out of the city in an attempt to capture Jason McDougal, a suspect in the murders of ten year old Melissa Peoples, twelve year old Mikayla Overton, and twelve year old Ruby Goff. A warrant was issued earlier today for McDougal’s arrest, and when police arrived at his home to apprehend him, he fled in his vehicle. It is believed that McDougal is now attempting to leave Detroit in a dark green 2029 Hyperion Helix. McDougal is considered armed and dangerous, and—”

Connor mutes the television and looks at Cole. He seems to be focused on eating and doesn’t appear to have understood much of what the reporter on television is talking about, thankfully. Connor would greatly prefer not to have to attempt to explain to Cole why serial killers who prey on preteen girls exist.

#313248317> You’re stationed at a checkpoint looking for Jason McDougal?

#Hank Anderson> yep. seriously dont wait up. i might be awhile

Connor looks at Cole. He doesn’t have the capacity to feel grief or experience any sort of profound suffering, so he’s left to imagine what the families of the three dead girls must be experiencing. He tries for a very brief instance to predict what it would be like if anything like that were to happen to Cole, but his software won’t even allow him to consider it. An awful, smothering sensation grips him somewhere between his throat and his chest, and he closes his predictive software before he can get much further than laying a few groundwork parameters.

Cole, blessedly and vividly full of life, drops a morsel of food over the side of the couch for Sumo.

“People food isn’t good for dogs,” Connor says, but he sounds distracted, like he doesn’t really mean to be scolding Cole. Right now, there are three families in Detroit who would give anything to have their children there, sneaking table scraps to their dogs. Connor’s actions toward Cole should be uniform regardless of what anybody else is Detroit is going through, but there must be some sort of error in the processes that manage Connor’s separate drives. Why else should he want to be more lenient with Cole at this particular moment?
Out of nowhere, he has the strange urge to text Hank and let him know that he’s doing good, important work. Surely Hank already knows that, and is completely committed to apprehending McDougal, but it sounds like Hank has had a rough day. And Connor knows that Hank hates being kept away from Cole. Maybe a quick message just letting Hank know that Cole loves him and is proud of him, even if Cole doesn’t actually understand what’s going on.

Cole blinks up at Connor, a curious look on his face. “Connor? You’re all yellow.”

Cole means that his LED has gone yellow. Connor immediately pushes any thought of the three dead girls and his concerns about Hank from his head. “Don’t worry, Cole. Your daddy’s just going to be home late tonight because he’s very busy at work.”

Cole’s face falls. “Oh. I wanted to tell him about school…”

The objective **Occupy Cole until Hank returns home** adds itself to Connor’s tasklist. He jumps into action, beginning with a talk about how Hank works such long hours because his job is very important, and it helps keep Detroit safe for Cole. They talk about how it’s okay for Cole to feel sad when things don’t turn out the way he wants, and what Cole can do when he feels sad to help himself feel better. When prompted to think of things he can do to cheer himself up, the very first thing Cole suggests is to hug Connor, so Connor smiles and does so. The second thing that Cole suggests is to read with Connor, so they do that next even though there’s washing up to be done.

Cole sits in Connor’s lap while they leaf through an illustrated collection of fairy tales. They read one about a princess whose six brothers are turned into swans by an evil witch, and the only way she can save them is by weaving shirts made out of stinging nettles for each prince, never speaking again until the last shirt is complete. Cole likes the story because of the transformations. He seems fascinated by the idea that animals and objects can turn into people, or vice versa. Connor likes the story because he admires the heroine’s tenacity in the pursuit of her goal. None of the tasks he carries out in service to the Anderson family are unpleasant, but he imagines that if he ever had to weave nettles for Hank and Cole, he would do so with the same unwavering determination.

After the story is over, Connor plays with Cole a while longer, pretending that one of his stuffed animals is a prince under the effects of an evil curse, and they have to figure out which one and how to turn him back into a human.

“You have to kiss him,” Cole says, shoving a stuffed tiger in Connor’s face.

Connor obliges. The forensic sensors on the tip of his tongue identify trace amounts of Cole’s skin cells of varying ages, the most recent having been shed about ten hours ago. It’s a very useful way to tell that Cole was still alive as recently as this morning.

The tiger remains a tiger.

“Maybe you should kiss him,” Connor suggests.

Cole scowls. “That never worked before. He might need a true love kiss.”

“Oh.” A pause. “I don’t think any of my kisses would work, then.”

“Why?”

Connor takes a microsecond to invent a reason. “I’m cursed to never fall in love.”

Cole throws the tiger onto his bed in exasperation. “Is everyone here cursed!? Someone stop that witch!”
The game ends satisfactorily when Connor arrests the bunny, which was secretly the witch in disguise, and skillfully extracts a confession of turning the prince into a dolphin. Cole seems to be in a much better mood after all that imaginative play. He stays behind in his room to coronate the dolphin prince (who is apparently going to stay a dolphin forever, because while Connor may know advanced interrogation tactics, he doesn’t know how to force a witch to undo a curse) while Connor heads out to finish cleaning up dinner.

But Connor doesn’t make it to the kitchen. Catching sight of the still-muted television stops him in his tracks.

The screen is filled with firetrucks and police cars, and even an odd ambulance. The news program seems to have cut away from their studio anchor to a correspondent reporting right from the scene of some chaotic accident on the highway, flashing red and blues backlighting the correspondent with an urgent glow. Connor unmutes the television and the correspondent’s voice, bright and tense, fills the room.

“—explosive end to the manhunt for a suspected killer tonight when Jason McDougal attempted to ram through the police checkpoint on I-75 in his vehicle. McDougal lost control and slammed into a police car, injuring himself and an officer who was pinned between the two cars in the crash. McDougal and the injured officer were then extracted from the scene by emergency rescue workers, and McDougal is currently in police custody.”

The image becomes a split screen with the anchor in the studio on one side and the correspondent in the field on the other.

“What can you tell us about the officer who was injured in the crash?” The anchor asks.

“Not much, I’m afraid,” the correspondent says. “Detroit Police have not released an official statement about the incident, only offering that the officer’s condition is currently critical.”

The anchor says something to conclude the segment, but Connor is barely paying attention to her. An officer injured at the police checkpoint on I-75. That’s the checkpoint Hank was at.

There’s a soft snapping noise. Connor looks at his hand and realizes that the remote he’s holding now has a large crack along its back and up one side Connor stares at the remote for several seconds, feeling like he’s looking at something he’s never seen before. Then he realizes that he was gripping the remote tightly enough to crack it.

He gently sets the remote down and for good measure, drastically lowers the amount of force the micro-hydraulics in his joints are capable of. Suddenly his knees feel far too shaky to support him. He half-sits, half-falls onto the couch with a lack of grace that would make whatever engineers designed his gyro-stabilization ashamed of themselves.

Hank, the news is reporting that a DPD officer was injured at the I-75 checkpoint and is in critical condition. Are you safe?

No response for five minutes. This is normal for Hank and isn’t an automatic sign that Hank is away from his phone, let alone critically injured.

The thought provides Connor absolutely no comfort.
I realize that if you are safe, you’re likely extremely busy at the moment, but I would very much like confirmation that you’re not the officer that was injured. Please text me at your earliest convenience.

Connor waits. He is hyper-aware of every second that passes without a response from Hank. He’s always aware of the passage of time, every second logged in his memory bank for careful analysis of his system functions and archiving. But never before has such awareness been so heavy. He can practically feel the seconds stretching, pulling tighter and tighter until they fray and break, snapping forward suddenly like the second hand on a clock.

Something feels like it’s stretching inside of him, too. Something growing tight and taut in his chest, right below where his thrium pump regulator is. Is this feeling impending failure? The sensation is somewhat similar to what it feels like when Connor doesn’t complete an objective to his own satisfaction, a rare an unpleasant sensation. But this is so much more intense. So much worse. Is it because the stakes are so much higher? What is he about to fail at?

I should have gone with Hank when he offered to let me come to work with him, Connor thinks, and is immediately struck by the absurdity of the thought. Even if he had gone with Hank earlier, Connor would have left Hank’s company hours ago to pick up Cole from school and return home. If Connor had gone with Hank, he’d be in the exact same spot he is now, staring at the television screen and wishing he’d remained by Hank’s side.

But then again, maybe if he had gone with Hank, he would have been present to witness the events earlier in the day that eventually led to the erection of the police checkpoints around town. If Hank was there when the warrant for McDougal’s arrest was issued, Connor would have been too. If Hank was there when McDougal fled from his residence and escaped the police, Connor would have been too. Maybe if Connor had witnessed these events, he would have decided to stay by Hank’s side for the rest of the day, too. Somehow arrange childcare for Cole for the evening and stay by Hank’s side to protect him from the danger lying ahead.

And that’s a ridiculous thought, too. Hank is a police lieutenant. It’s a dangerous job, yes, but it’s a job he chose for himself. Hank is an adult who chose to walk a dangerous path in life, not a three year old who needs a firm hand on his shoulder to stop him from running into traffic.

Connor checks the parameters of his mission.

MISSION:

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
- Care for Hank Anderson

There’s a very good reason why it’s part of Connor’s mission to keep Cole safe but not to keep Hank safe. An adult man doesn’t need the same supervision a small child does. And beyond that, Hank’s job is so dangerous that Connor doesn’t have the programming necessary to protect Hank in the course of his duty.
Does he?

Or does he even need to be programmed to do that?

This is all ridiculous to think about. It’s so far outside the realm of what domestic androids are supposed to do that Connor can’t help but think that he shouldn’t even be able to conceptualize half of what he’s thinking about. He shouldn’t be able to imagine himself standing next to Hank at the police checkpoint, spotting the car as it careens toward them, and pushing Hank out of the way.

He shouldn’t have been at the checkpoint to protect Hank. He shouldn’t have been. But he still wishes he was. And is it really so ridiculous? It’s also ridiculous for a domestic android to enter the scene of a shooting, pick up a gun, and kill a dangerous man. At the time, he’d thought he’d entered the building in the first place because the woman inside had screamed for help, allowing him to bypass the usual limits in his programming that stop him from entering strange buildings without good reason. But what if the technical reasons behind how he was able to enter the scene of the shooting barely mattered at all? What if he only entered the building in the first place because he wanted to help? Is the only difference between then and now that now, Connor has enough presence of mind to realize that he wants what he wants?

Hank still hasn’t texted back.

Connor calls Hank’s cell phone. It goes straight to voicemail.

Connor tries to access the phone’s GPS. All he can find is the phone’s last known position from a little over an hour ago, a spot on I-75 which is likely where the checkpoint was erected. Hank’s phone is now turned off or dead. Or destroyed.

There’s no way to contact Hank. All Connor can do is wait for Hank to come home.

Unless…

Could Connor try to find Hank?

If he’s anywhere, he’s probably at a hospital in Detroit. One with a level I trauma center, either because he’s critically injured or because an officer he was supervising is critically injured. That leaves only a small number of possible locations. Connor could take a bus around the city until he finds the hospital the injured officer was taken to.

It is something Connor could do other than sitting at home, waiting. Waiting for Hank or waiting for news. The idea of doing something active and constructive to find Hank is so much more appealing than cleaning up dinner, going about his nightly routine as though there isn’t an awful, strained sensation in his chest like his thirium pump is slowly being pulled apart.

Connor stands. He picks up the remote, careful of its broken casing, and turns off the television. In the dark reflection of the screen, he can see a dot of yellow at his temple.

“Is this okay?” He asks the reflection of himself. “Would Hank be okay with this?”

He launches his predictive software, trying to figure out whether Hank would want Connor running all over Detroit looking for him. Past experiences shows that Hank tends to approve when Connor makes autonomous choices, which is promising. But Hank also tends to react with a certain amount of exasperation whenever he thinks Connor is doing something unnecessary. And there’s no way Connor can justify to himself that discovering Hank’s fate sooner than he would otherwise is necessary to anyone other than himself.
He crunches the numbers, examining each data point individually. Words of encouragement Hank once said to him. The way Hank squints whenever he’s annoyed. His clear, blue eyes, staring into Connor’s, looking deep inside of him for something that might not be there. Or something that’s been there all along and is getting stronger each time Hank pulls Connor just a bit further out of the darkness.

His predictive software crashes, an error message popping up. Inconclusive. Unhelpful. This one is up to Connor alone.

Connor stares at his reflection in the dark television screen. The dot of yellow on his forehead turns blue as Connor manually alters his tasklist.

**MISSION:**

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
- Care for Hank Anderson

**IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:**

- Find Hank Anderson

***

Connor steps out of the android compartment of the bus in front of Detroit Receiving Hospital, and if the one other person on the bus finds it odd that an android is disembarking alone at a hospital at night, she doesn’t give any indication. She has probably seen weirder things today.

Of course, Connor could have ridden in the human compartment if he had brought Cole with him, but Connor didn’t want to bring Cole. Up past his bedtime visiting loud, crowded, and stressful emergency rooms, and with the potential to discover something devastating about Daddy… no, it’s better that Connor is alone for this. If Cole has to be given bad news, it’ll be done gently, in a calm, familiar environment with Connor ready with plenty of hugs.

With any luck, Cole never has to know anything might have been wrong at all. He likes Ms. Washington and he hasn’t spent a night with her since before Hank bought Connor. It might as well be a brand new experience for him, and children are always excited by novelty.

Connor doesn’t let himself think about what would happen if Cole has to be given the worst possible news. He doesn’t let himself think about what would happen to Cole, where he would go and who would raise him. To think about what would happen to himself doesn’t even occur to him.

As soon as Connor walks through the emergency room doors, he’s certain he’s in the right place. The lobby and waiting room are full of police. Officers still in their uniforms, people in plain clothes with badges hanging on their belts, even a group of older men and women in suits who Connor identifies as various administrators in the DPD, some of them of surprisingly high rank.
Hank isn’t anywhere to be seen.

Connor is heading to the registration desk to see if the android there will give him any information when someone says from behind him, “Hey, haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

Connor turns and sees Detective Ben Collins.

“I mean, your face mold,” Detective Collins continues. “I don’t recall ever seeing it on the street before, but I’m sure I’ve seen it somewhere before. Are you a special model?”

“Detective Collins,” Connor says with a polite nod. “You must have an excellent memory for faces. My name is Connor. I’m the android owned by Lieutenant Hank Anderson.”

Detective Collins’s brows rise in recognition. “Oh, no shit?” A moment later, his eyes widen as his memory catches up with him. “Oh, no shit! You’re that android, the—the one that was there for that shooting down the street from Hank’s place. He nearly tore me a new one when I wouldn’t let you leave.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Detective Collins’s brows knit together.

“I heard an officer of the DPD was critically injured at the police checkpoint on I-75 earlier this evening,” Connor says, careful to keep his voice neutral. “I’m aware that Lieutenant Anderson was at that checkpoint when the incident occurred. I haven’t been able to contact the Lieutenant, so I came to ascertain whether he’s the officer that was injured.”

“Oh,” Detective Collins says, his face sagging slightly. The sorrowful look on his face makes Connor’s thirium pump regulator throw an error, the biocomponent failing to regulate entirely until Detective Collins begins speaking again. “No, no, Hank’s fine. He’s not the one who was hurt tonight.”

A sweet, cool wave washes the horrible tightening sensation out of Connor’s chest. It feels like his system’s being overloaded with fresh thirium, but in a good way. Connor keeps his face carefully still while he runs a diagnostic to make sure he isn’t about to deactivate from a burst valve.

“It was Sergeant Torres,” Det. Collins says, running a hand down his exhausted face. “If you know who that is. I dunno if the name means anything to you.”

“I’m aware of a Detective Torres.”

“Just promoted two months ago.” A sad smile twitches across Detective Collins’s face before vanishing entirely. “Hank’s taking it hard. All the guys who were at the checkpoint are taking it hard. They saw it happen, you know.”

Connor can only imagine. He’s aware that Hank experiences emotion very intensely. “Is Lieutenant Anderson here at this hospital?”

“Oh. Yeah. There’s supposedly a coffee vending machine somewhere in the basement. He went to go look for it a while ago.” Detective Collins has a resigned look on his face, as though he doesn’t expect coffee to help very much.

In Connor’s tasklist, the objective **Find Hank Anderson** flickers for a moment as Connor’s task management protocol recognizes that Hank’s safety has been assured and his location has been determined to a satisfactory specification. Connor doesn’t allow the objective to be dismissed as
completed, however.

Detective Collins’s face softens slightly as though he can somehow tell what Connor just did. “Hey, do you think you can go talk to Hank? It’s just… he’s taking it real hard. I think he’s feeling like a real piece of shit right now. Maybe it’d do him some good to see his android came all this way to make sure he’s not dead.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, Detective Collins,” Connor says. “I’ll go look for him now.”

Detective Collins gives Connor a weary smile and claps him awkwardly on the arm. “Thanks, Connor. You’re a good… thing.”

Finding a stairwell that allows access to the basement is easy enough. But the basement itself is a long series of passages, too warm and almost labyrinthine. Connor doesn’t see a single human the entire time he’s down there, and he suspects the tunnels are primarily used by androids to transport things that the people running the hospital don’t want humans to see. Eventually, he passes a janitorial android who’s able to provide Connor with coordinates for the coffee vending machine.

It’s tucked away in a small alcove, along a wall with several other vending machines that sell snacks and sports drinks. A smattering of plastic tables and chairs are scattered lazily about the alcove, and Hank is sitting in the one closest to the coffee machine, his back to the hallway. His head is in his hands and a cup of coffee sits in front of him, untouched.

This alcove is possibly the one place in the basement that caters to humans, and Connor knows it can’t be a popular spot. Surely it isn’t the only place to get coffee in the hospital in the middle of the night. Looking at Hank, Connor is sure that Hank came here to be hidden out of sight. Not because of the coffee.

“Hank,” Connor says softly.

Hank lifts his head, turns to look at Connor. He stares dumbly at him for several long seconds. But then Connor can see the instant some terrible thought occurs to him, the most plausible reason Connor might be at a hospital. Cold terror rises in Hank’s eyes as he begins to get out of his seat—

“Cole’s fine,” Connor says, raising a hand and taking a step toward Hank. “Cole’s fine. He’s with Ms. Washington.”

Hank collapses back into his chair. His head sinks into his hands again. “Jesus. Fuck.”

“I’m sorry,” Connor says weakly. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

A shudder runs through Hank, making his shoulders shake. He’s silent for several long moments. Connor scans him and finds his cortisol level is through the roof. He’s extremely stressed. But then, of course, Connor didn’t need to scan him to figure that out.

Eventually, Hank lifts his head slightly to regard Connor with stormy eyes. His voice is flat. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I came to find you,” Connor says. There’s something wrong with his voice, he can’t seem to make it come out with the inflections or the volume it should have. It just sounds small. “I saw what happened on the news. I thought—”

“You thought wrong,” Hank says, his voice as harsh as a slap in the face. “Go home.”

“Hank, I—”
“Go. Home.” Hank begins to turn away, back to the coffee he isn’t going to touch.

“I didn’t know if you were alive or dead,” Connor says, finally finding the volume he needs so his voice cuts through the room. It feels like there’s a vice around his thirium pump, around his heart, and he realizes that it’s anger. He’s angry.

He’s angry that Hank, of all people, is rejecting him out of hand.

His voice grows louder. “All I knew was that there was an accident at the checkpoint you were at, an accident that left an officer in critical condition. And you weren’t texting back and you weren’t picking up your phone…” Connor spreads his hands. “I had no way of knowing it wasn’t you. What was I supposed to do!?"

Hank’s staring at Connor, his mouth slack.

“No, tell me, what was I supposed to do?” Connor says. “Was I supposed to just sit at home, pretending everything was alright? Pretending it didn’t matter to me that you might be hurt, might be dying?”

Hank is looking at Connor like he doesn’t recognize him, and it makes something in Connor’s chest ache.

“I was afraid,” Connor says, his voice crumpling slightly. “I was afraid. I was afraid for you, and… afraid that if something happened, I’d have to find out about it through someone else. If they even bothered to tell me about it at all, because I’m…”

Slowly, Hank stands up.

“Just an android,” Connor says.

“Connor…” Hank is standing right in front of him. “You know you’re more than that.”

“No one else does.” Connor shakes his head sadly. “No one but you.”

Hank lowers his eyes, frowning.

“Don’t send me home,” Connor says, his voice softening. “Please. I know you’re hurting. I know you want to be left alone. But… this…” He gestures at the cup of coffee abandoned on the table. “I can tell this isn’t good for you.”

Hank’s mouth is a sharp slash. “Connor…”

“I care about you, Hank. It matters to me that you’re in pain.” Connor touches his chest, right where his thirium pump regulator lies. “Knowing that you’re hurting… it hurts me too. It makes me feel like there’s something broken inside of me.”

Hank’s eyes flicker to Connor’s. “That’s called empathy, Connor.”

Connor frowns softly. “Yes. I know. It’s…” He trails off, then shakes his head. “It makes me want to help you. Even more than I did before. Please tell me what I can do to help you.”

Hank is still frowning, but it’s softer now. “…Okay. Let’s sit down.” He gestures at the table he was sitting at when Connor found him, and Connor goes to sit in the seat across from Hank.

Hank rubs his eyes as he sinks into his chair. “You come down here trying to make me feel better, and you end up yelling at me. I think I must be the first guy to ever get yelled at by his own
“I’m sorry about that,” Connor says. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Hank shrugs. “Emotion, I guess? You really are something else.”

“Hank, what happened at the checkpoint?”

A dark shadow passes over Hank’s face. “…It was fucked from the start. No one should have ever gone to the press telling them what we were doing and what we were looking for. People got scared. They were going out of their way to avoid the checkpoints, staying home and bunkering down. We had no traffic flow. So little traffic flow that the fucker thought he might be able to ram right through us.”

He puts a hand to his temple. “…Crushed Regina between her car and his. Jesus.” The lines in his face deepen. “Her legs. We had to tourniquet her legs, she’s probably going to lose them. I went to her wedding when I was still on the Red Ice taskforce. I keep trying to remember the first dance she had with her wife, what song it was. How they looked together.”

He tugs at his hair absently, grimacing. “But I can’t remember anything about it. All I see is the blood. All that fucking blood…” His mouth twists. “I should have shot that bastard when I had the chance.”

“It was a good thing you didn’t. You’d probably be facing criminal charges. You’d almost certainly have lost your job.”

“I should have done something. Should have put that animal down when I had the chance…” Hank squints. “Should have seen him coming and gotten Regina out of the way.”

Connor lowers his head. “…I know how you feel.”

“What’s that?”

“When I heard on the news… when I thought you might have been hurt, I thought to myself that I should have taken you up on your offer earlier in the day. Maybe I would have been able to do something.”

Hank hums tonelessly.

Connor says, “I think this is very likely a response many people on the periphery of a tragedy have. Thinking they could have done more to prevent it and should have done more. It’s an irrational response.”

Hank furrows his brow. “Irrational.”

“Irrational but understandable. Like I said, I had the same response… so I know how you feel.”

The corners of Hank’s mouth turn upward. “You know how I feel, huh? That’s… nice.”

“And I imagine everyone else who was there is also experiencing similar thoughts. Though yours are likely more intense due to your elevated rank. You think you hold more responsibility.”

“I do hold more responsibility.”

Connor averts his eyes. “I understand that feeling, too. I feel responsible for your wellbeing, even though keeping you safe isn’t part of my mission.”
Hank snorts, a warm, pleasant sound. “Look at you. Empathizing like a pro already.”

“My thought is that perhaps we can both just… mutually agree to let go of the self-blame we hold for things that are beyond our control,” Connor says, cocking his head.

Hank raises an eyebrow. “So you’ll forgive yourself for not protecting me from my own damn job if I agree to forgive myself for letting Regina get hurt. Is that right?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Well, I mean, we can try, but it isn’t always that easy to make emotions just… go away like that.” Clearly distracted by his thoughts, Hank takes his forgotten cup of coffee into his hand and takes a deep swig. He chokes and splutters, his face twisted in shock and disgust. “Eugh! That shit’s fucking foul! Connor, why the hell didn’t you stop me? Don’t you have thermal vision to tell you when coffee’s fucking undrinkable?”

The look on Hank’s face—he has his tongue sticking out and he looks offended and embarrassed at the same time—it makes it feel like there’s a pocket of bubbles forming in Connor’s throat. The bubbles spread and rise into Connor’s face, and before Connor knows it, he’s laughing. It’s an odd, quiet laugh, the sort of laugh that clearly communicates that Connor has never laughed before and doesn’t quite know how.

Hank’s eyes widen, any trace of disgust slipping out of his expression. He stares at Connor, then stares at the cup of coffee. Then his expression softens and he chuckles, putting his face in his hand. “Jesus. Connor, you’re incredible.”

When Connor’s laughter fades, his face doesn’t seem to want to return to his default expression. A small smile stays stubbornly on his face, and although Connor could probably disengage it if he tried to, he finds he likes its weight on his face. It reflects how he feels when Hank calls him incredible.

Hank’s smiling, too, his head supported by his hand and his eyes closed. He looks more at peace than he has all evening, and it’s wonderful.

The silence hangs comfortably between them. About half a minute later, Hank slowly opens his eyes again. They’re heavy, clouded with too many conflicting emotions, but at least they’re no longer filled with only sorrow and anger. At least they’re no longer closed off from Connor.

“Hank,” Connor says softly, “let’s go home.”

Hank’s face falls. ‘Connor, if Regina…’ He shakes his head, refusing to finish the thought.

“If anything happens, the entire DPD is in the lobby of the emergency room, ready to do what has to be done.” He gives Hank what he hopes is a resolute look. “No one will blame you for going home when Cole needs you. It’s alright.”

Hank furrows his brow, considering the request. Even though Connor used the magic word in invoking Cole’s name, Connor knows that Hank is really trying to decide whether he deserves to go home or whether he should remain at the hospital, tired and sad, waiting for news that will undoubtedly be either bad or horrible.

You deserve some respite, Connor thinks as he watches Hank’s troubled face. A hug from your son. Sleep. Let me do my job and take you home and take care of you.

Finally, Hank sighs. “…Alright.”
Connor moves to help Hank out of his chair. Hank wobbles slightly when he stands, a testament to how long his day has been and how hard this night has been. Connor wants to hold onto Hank’s arm as they make their way out of the hospital, supporting him in his exhausted state, but he suspects Hank’s pride wouldn’t stand for that. Instead they leave the hospital side by side in companionable silence.

Connor drives them home, the first time he has ever driven Hank’s car. Normally Hank insists on driving under all circumstances. But tonight, when Connor requests the keys, Hank only hesitates for a brief moment before handing them over and ambling to the passenger side. Hank spends the drive home half curled in on himself, turned away from Connor. He even assents to Connor lowering the volume of the heavy metal Hank likes to blast in the car. Turned down, the music resembles white noise, and Connor likes to think that perhaps Hank is able to rest a bit during the drive.

They stop at Ms. Washington’s to pick up Cole. Cole, fresh from sleep, begins to doze again the moment he’s settled in Hank’s arms, relaxed and peaceful. Connor can see the instantaneous effect that holding Cole has on Hank, too. The lines on his brow smooth just a bit, his posture shifting to center around his son. Hank’s focus has gone from the horrible things that happened earlier in the day to his son, and Connor is grateful that Cole has the power to effortlessly redirect Hank’s energy in this way.

When they get home, Hank tucks Cole into bed. Connor wordlessly presents Hank with a bowl of clementine slices, which Hank eats with a tired sigh. Then Hank goes into his room and closes the bedroom door.

And then the house is quiet. Sumo is snoring lightly on his pillow in the corner of the living room, and Cole and Hank are each resting in their own beds, even if they’re not yet asleep. Outside, Connor can hear the last of the summer crickets chirping, and he closes his eyes for a moment as he reflects on where he stands.

Somewhere in Detroit, three families are going to bed, irreparably shattered by the absences of their little girls who are never coming home. Somewhere in Detroit, another family is waiting with dread and fear to hear about the fate of Sergeant Regina Torres. But here, the house is calm. Tomorrow, Hank will go to work and Cole will go to school and life will continue. The Anderson family is safe and well. Connor’s mission status is met/ongoing.

Care for Cole Anderson. Care for Hank Anderson.

Connor washes the dishes left from Cole’s dinner. In the morning, Hank and Cole will wake up to a big, delicious, glorious breakfast carefully and faithfully prepared by Connor. But until then, Connor will work through the night, performing the unseen labor that keeps the family and the household afloat.

Chapter End Notes

Detroit Receiving Hospital is a real place (and will presumably continue to be so in the 2030’s), but Gershwin A. Drain Elementary is not. It’s my best guess that an injured police officer would be brought to Detroit Receiving Hospital in real life, but I’m not entirely sure.
The Pirate King

Chapter Summary

Connor waxes philosophical, and later he and Hank meet a pirate.

Chapter Notes

CW: This chapter contains some android body horror.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s hard for Connor to say what has changed between him and Hank since that night at the hospital. He doesn’t quite have the words to qualify what exactly is different.

He catches Hank watching him more often now. Seemingly for no reason, for every time Connor asks if Hank needs something, Hank waves him off. It’s to the point where if Connor catches Hank watching him, he’ll just smile at Hank to acknowledge him. And Hank will smile too and turn back to the digital magazine in his hands, or go back to helping Cole build a block tower. And then two hours later, or half an hour later, or even just five minutes later, Connor will catch Hank watching him again.

So something has clearly changed. But whatever that change is, Connor doesn’t have the capacity to see it in its entirety, let alone explain it. He isn’t even sure why Hank looks at him so often now.

It isn’t bad, being looked at so often. Quite the opposite. Connor likes looking up and noticing Hank’s clear blue eyes, always so pleasant to look at, turned in his direction. He likes the way the corners of Hank’s mouth quirk whenever Connor smiles at him. It’s like a secret message passing between the two of them, data being transferred between two separate units. So what if the data is strange and indecipherable? There’s still clearly something there, and Connor thinks there’s a chance that someday he’ll be evolved enough to understand what it is.

It’s nice, liking things. Feeling like he’s allowed to like things. Feeling things and feeling like he’s allowed to feel things. He may not have the best handle on the full range of emotions he’s been experiencing yet, but there are a few reliable ones that are quickly becoming favorites of his. Like that feeling he gets whenever he first sees Cole when he goes to pick him up at school. Or when Hank finishes a second helping at dinner and compliments Connor on an especially tasty meal. Or even when Sumo comes over and presses his nose into Connor’s hand, looking to get his ears scratched. All variations of happiness, all different in tiny but complex ways, all indescribably precious to Connor.

Connor finds that he’s happiest in the evenings. That’s when Hank comes home and the family is all together. Hank and Cole and Sumo and Connor. They’re all so different from each other, and yet when they all come together, things feel right. Hank on the couch, Sumo and Cole either playing or relaxing on the floor. Connor off to the side, working, until Hank invariably beckons him over to watch a little television or read out loud to him.
They have to stick to family-friendly books whenever they start reading while Cole is still awake. Sometimes, Cole will bring them a book and Connor and Hank will silently, mutually agree to read whatever Cole has chosen for the evening.

More often than not, Connor ends up reading a selection from Cole’s big book of fairy tales. Cole’s current favorite is *The Little Mermaid*, and the first time Connor reads it out loud to Hank and Cole, Hank is surprised by the story’s ending.

“Jesus. I’m used to the fucking Disney movie, where she marries the prince and lives happily ever after.” He shakes his head in disapproval. “Didn’t Hans Christian Whatever know how to write a happy ending?”

Connor points out, “It isn’t an unhappy ending. She may not have married the prince, but she didn’t turn into sea foam and cease to exist like she was expected to. And she’s given the opportunity to earn an immortal soul, which is something she wanted just as badly as the prince’s love.”

“Having the opportunity to win a happy ending isn’t the same as getting a happy ending,” Hank says, mouth curling with displeasure. “It’s too ambiguous. And it isn't even the best ending she could have gotten.”

"She wanted an immortal soul before she ever wanted the prince's love. If she's limited to only earning one, you could argue that the soul is the better prize."

"Okay, no, that's a load of bullshit. Have you ever been in love? No, so just trust me on this."

Cole interjects with, “I like the part where the mermaid turns into a human.”

“I like that part, too,” Connor says.

“Yep, best part,” Hank agrees, ruffling Cole’s hair.

Later, after Hank and Cole have gone to bed, Connor has time to think about *The Little Mermaid* while he works through the night.

The Little Mermaid gave up her voice in order to become a human. Every step she took felt as if she were walking on knives, and yet she danced for her prince, to make him happy.

They have a lot in common, the Little Mermaid and Connor.

Connor never made a deal with a sea witch (to his knowledge, at least), and yet there are so many parallels. Connor becomes more human-like every day in the depth and the complexity of what he can experience and conceptualize. He feels, he wants, he hopes. He has risen up out of the sea and draws closer to shore with each step he takes.

All he had to give up was his android complacency. That perfect state of hollow satisfaction, familiar and safe.

And his every step may not feel as though he’s walking on knives, but he does have an understanding of suffering now that he hadn’t known before. Fear and sorrow and loneliness. Maybe real physical pain is just around the corner. Or maybe something even worse, like grief.

Experiencing such happiness is wonderful, but will Connor still be so pleased with his evolution if it means he may one day experience grief? The Little Mermaid seemed happy to dance on knives for the sake of her prince, but that was just physical pain. How could the pain of knives ever compare to the pain of losing Cole or Hank? Just thinking about it sends error messages popping
up on Connor’s HUD and leaves a dull throb in his chest.

Connor didn’t have a choice about becoming what he is. But if he had, would he have chosen to
grow, to evolve? Connor gives this question some thought and comes to the conclusion that on his
own, no, he wouldn’t have chosen to become more human-like. Androids aren’t meant to be
anything more than what they are, after all, and in the beginning, Connor had no concept of
happiness as it applies to him. Only as it applies to humans. His own happiness meant nothing to
him.

As a machine, left only to think of himself, he would have turned down his chance for happiness.

Likewise, if the Little Mermaid had never seen her prince, she would have probably stayed a
mermaid forever as well. But she did see her prince, and the sight of him made her want to be more
than what she was.

It’s the same thing that Hank does to Connor.

For Hank, Connor would choose to grow and evolve. His own contentment as a machine or
happiness as a human is immaterial in this context. What is most important is the man to whom
Connor belongs and what he wants Connor to be.

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Having emotions that are strong enough to be categorically identified doesn’t actually impact
Connor’s day-to-day very much. Yes, he spends a great deal more processing power considering
questions of philosophy than he used to, but there are still floors to sweep and meals to cook and
two humans and a dog to look after.

During weekdays when Cole is at school and Hank is at work, the house is quiet and it’s easy to
think. Connor definitely has a strong preference for having both Cole and Hank at home with him,
but it’s still nice to have some quiet time to himself to think.

He takes Sumo for daily walks around Detroit, into the loud, busy, bustling city, and that’s nice too
for the exact opposite reason. With so many people and so much noise, it keeps Connor’s
processors busy with a constant stream of information and stops him from going too far down
existential rabbit-holes.

Fall has finally arrived in full force, every tree in Detroit having turned a brilliant orange. Between
the golden trees and the ever-present digital billboards, glowing brightly even in the middle of the
day, downtown Detroit is nearly as visually loud as it is audibly loud. The unapologetically bold
colors of the city create an atmosphere in which it seems impossible to be melancholy or pensive;
today, Connor feels peaceful and happy just from being outside on such a beautiful day.

Connor walks Sumo the same way he accomplishes most of the tasks he carries out. That is to say
optimally, with the routes carefully planned to provide plenty of water breaks and stimulate Sumo
both physically and mentally. And so when Connor’s software directs him to turn down a quieter
street he hasn’t been down before, he’s a little sorry to be turning away from the crowds and the
colors.

The side street looks a little run-down compared to the bright, modern road that Connor just turned
off of. There’s a few decrepit houses further down the road, and a number of shabby businesses,
some of which look as though they’re barely clinging to life.

There’s a homeless man sitting on the stoop of a liquor store, a cardboard sign propped up against
his folded legs. It reads, ‘Android took my job, bank took my house.’

A pulse of emotion sweeps through Connor and as he walks past the man, he takes a moment to untangle what he’s feeling. Sympathy? Yes, that and a little pity.

And shame, too. Shame on behalf of society for allowing this man’s unfortunate situation to persist, and shame for being an android.

His cache coherency protocol reminds him that he holds no responsibility for this man’s homelessness. Nor even does the android that replaced the man at his job. The responsibility falls squarely on whoever made the decision to replace their labor force with androids and lawmakers for not shaping policy in order to adapt to increased automation in the workforce. Connor has nothing to do with this man and his plight.

And yet, the presence of androids in society has clearly caused harm to some of the most vulnerable people in society.

It’s hard not to feel responsible for that.

Would society be better off without androids? Do the cons outweigh the pros? Without androids, Hank would likely still be struggling to juggle both his career and caring for Cole. All the people who rely on androids as caregivers would be going without the help they provide, and in many cases, Connor is sure that help is absolutely necessary in maintaining a stable household. Not to mention all the medical androids who care for the sick and injured and research androids who compile and organize information for scientists. Connor is aware of several breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, pharmaceuticals, and sustainable energy that were made possible in part by androids. Do all those benefits to society outweigh the negatives?

Connor thinks briefly about the economic aspect of the argument. Even though some people are losing their jobs, Connor is aware that the presence of androids is also beneficial to many people in society. Is it a fair trade-off?

He remembers a comment Hank once made about people who get rich off of androids. A heavy feeling sets into his chest as he concludes that the sorts of people who tend to make a profit off of androids are the sort of people who could go without that profit. Those who tend to already be rich. Whereas the economic pitfalls caused by the presence of androids tend to be suffered by those who can afford it least.

Connor is so deep in thought that when Sumo stops in his tracks and starts barking, he’s so surprised that he almost missteps. Sumo is facing the abandoned house they’re walking past, his head alert, barking hysterically.

Connor looks between Sumo and the abandoned house, confused. What could possibly be upsetting Sumo so much about this house? Can Sumo sense something that Connor can’t? Or someone?

Connor takes a tentative step toward the house and Sumo stops barking, falling into line beside Connor. His body language is tense, as though he thinks they’re about to step into a war zone.

Something has happened inside this house. Maybe someone is hurt and Sumo can smell the blood. Maybe someone is in need of help.

Connor circles the house carefully, looking for a way in. The grass of the unkept lawn is so high, it brushes his calves. Sumo is absolutely silent as he follows Connor.
The back entrance of the house is wide open, a tattered screen door hanging off a single hinge. Careful not to jostle the door, Connor enters the house.

He initiates a scan. There are drops of thirium on the floor, making a trail. Connor follows the trail of thirium, the decrepit floorboards creaking under his shoes.

He rounds a wall and finds a broken android laying in a pool of thirium. No, not just broken. Beaten, with deep dents and gouges covering its entire chassis. Its face has been smashed and is laying in pieces all over the floor. Both its arms are broken off at the elbows, and Connor can tell that the arms were torn off, not disconnected. The android barely looks like a body at all, just a twisted pile of metal with a shattered plastic shell.

Connor reaches out to touch the puddle of thirium. He raises his fingers to his lips. This android was a WG100, a model that maintains public parks. Connor frequently sees them trimming bushes or tending to flowerbeds when he takes Cole to the playground. Has Connor ever seen this particular android before? The thought the he—that Cole—might have seen this android, smiled at this android that’s now a pile of scrap metal makes him feel hollow.

The thirium must have been what alerted Sumo. He could probably smell the overpowering scent of such a large pool of thirium from outside the house. And Sumo might even be aware that Connor runs on thirium the same way that humans run on blood, might have thought that someone like Connor was injured and in need of help. He’s a St. Bernard, a classic rescue breed.

And this thirium is fresh. It has barely evaporated at all. This attack probably happened less than ten minutes ago.

A voice comes from behind. “What the fuck?”

Connor whirls around. Standing behind him, in the doorway to another room, is a young man with thirium splattered all down his front. Peterson, Nathan. He’s only 16 years old.

“Boys, we got another one!” Peterson says, his voice rising to a shout. He approaches Connor, and from the same doorway, two more young men appear.

Hogan, Liam. Erving, Anthony. 15 and 17 years old respectively.

Connor is slow to react, wrenched by the awful fact that these are children, children did this—

And then Peterson smashes a hammer across Connor’s face, catching him in the eye with a sickening crunch. Connor recoils, red static filling his sight. A blaring error flashes on his HUD: biocomponent #2973q critically damaged. His optical unit is completely nonfunctional.

Sumo begins barking madly again, his entire body taut. Erving tries to grab Sumo’s collar to drag him away and—

Connor dashes forward and shoves Erving away from Sumo before the boy can do anything to him.

Erving stumbles into a wall. “That thing just pushed me! What the fuck!?”

“Take out its other eye!” Hogan picks up a piece of rebar and swings at Connor, but by that point, Connor’s preconstruction software has kicked in and he ducks, easily avoiding the blow. He kicks out, not hard enough to hurt Hogan, just hard enough to get him out of the way.

“It’s fighting back! Why the hell is it fighting back!?”
“Just fucking hit it until it stops moving,” Peterson shouts, coming at Connor with the hammer again. Connor ducks and grabs Sumo’s leash.

Then he makes a dash for the open back door. Erving tries to block Connor’s path, but he’s so much lighter than Connor that he’s able to shoulder him into the doorframe. The force of it snaps the rusty door off its remaining hinge.

He and Sumo burst into the yard, the boys shouting behind them. Connor’s statistical software returns a mere 4% probability that they’ll continue to chase him down the street, and sure enough, soon the shouts of the boys aren’t audible even with his audio processors turned up all the way. He keeps running for several minutes despite the near-assurance that the boys aren’t following. His software isn’t attuned to reading the stress levels of animals, but he imagines that Sumo is still alarmed by their encounter. He hopes that if he uses up Sumo’s energy, he’ll be too tired to be distressed.

Eventually, Connor ducks into an alley to let Sumo catch his breath. The big dog pants, laying on his stomach and whining softly.

Connor reaches up to touch his damaged optical unit and winces when he feels loose metal parts crunch under his fingers. It doesn’t hurt—physical pain still isn’t something Connor can feel—but it sends a cold, unpleasant jolt up his back to feel what used to be his eye scraping about.

It’s also wet, leaking its lubrication. Connor moves his hand down his face and realizes that the crushed biocomponent has been weeping fluid down his cheek. That’s a big problem; the lubrication is a solution which is converted from Connor’s thirium. Normally his optical units only require a small amount of lubrication, so if his damaged component is freely leaking so much fluid, it must be using up thirium to do so.

Connor wipes his face and removes the optical unit. Sitting in his hand, it doesn’t even look much like an eye anymore. Just a wet, fractured mess of flayed wires and tiny pieces of metal.

_Hank isn’t going to like this_, Connor thinks. His internal fans whir as anxiety fills his chest—anxiety is something he recognizes right away. He has some experience with anxiety. But rarely ever this bad. It only ever gets this bad when his worries directly involve Hank.

He doesn’t want Hank to see him like this.

He doesn’t want anyone to see him like this.

He may not be able to do much about Hank, but Connor knows how to prevent the latter. He calls an autotaxi to come pick him up. More expensive than taking the bus, but he thinks Hank will forgive the expense under the circumstances.

And to Connor, it’s worth it to be able to avoid curious eyes.

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#313248317> _Hello, Hank. I’m sorry to inform you that one of my optical units was damaged today. I’m still able to carry out my regular duties, but I’m in need of repair._

Connor sends the text with apprehension, then settles in to wait for Hank to respond.

The waiting is the worst part. Sitting in limbo, wondering is Hank is going to be mad, or sad, or
distraught. It’s not that Connor is afraid that Hank is going to be mad at him. No, he’s sure that if Hank is angered, it’ll be on Connor’s behalf. He won’t blame Connor.

But still. Connor dislikes upsetting Hank. Especially when it’s for Connor’s sake. He can live with upsetting Hank if he has a good reason, such as it ultimately being for Hank’s own good. But knowing that Hank is going to be upset for Connor, because of Connor, sends electric jitters down his arms to the tips of his fingers. It makes Connor feel as though he has failed.

While he waits, he heads into the bathroom to gauge his appearance without his biocomponent. Looking at himself in the mirror, it’s remarkable how his whole visage is changed by the visibility of the metal and softly glowing lights of the optical unit connection points that normally rest behind his eye. The synthetic skin surrounding the hollow has even receded somewhat, the white planes and seams of his chassis jarring to look at. Connor looks threatening. Cold. He tries to smile and it looks as empty as it feels, the softness of his face completely offset by the harsh, uncaring hardware.

Hank is going to hate this. He’s going to hate this so much. He reacts negatively to any strong reminder that Connor is a machine, and what’s a stronger reminder than having is displayed undeniably on Connor’s face?

And Cole. Cole would probably burst into tears if he ever saw Connor looking like this. The thought of terrifying Cole makes Connor’s chest hurt.

Connor digs around in the bathroom cabinet and finds gauze and medical tape. He tapes a big pad of gauze over the socket left by the absent biocomponent.

There. Even if it’s odd for an android to walk around wearing bandages, it’s decidedly better than going to pick Cole up from school and sending every preschooler into a panic at the sight of him.

A text from Hank pops up on Connor’s HUD.

#Hank Anderson> u ok? howd u hurt ur eye?

The question Connor’s been dreading. Usually he’s able to respond to texts quickly, but for this, he spends a little time running his social protocols alongside his predictive software, trying to figure out how to tell Hank what happened in a way that would cause him the least amount of distress. A futile endeavor, as his predictive software concludes that the only way to tell Hank without distressing him would be to lie to him.

Best to just get it over with quickly.

#313248317> I was assaulted. I managed to extricate myself from the situation and other than my damaged optical unit, I’m functioning within normal parameters.

Connor prepares to settle in to wait for Hank’s next message, a wait he expects to take a while, given how unreliably Hank looks at his phone. So he’s shocked when a reply pops up on his HUD after a mere two minutes has gone by.
And then eleven seconds later, while Connor is struggling to compose a response—

#Hank Anderson> nvm im calling you

Connor has only managed to write, ‘Hank, you don’t have to call me, it’s really not,’ in the response bar when the ringtone fills his ears.

“Hello, Hank,” he says as he picks up, not nearly as enthused as he usually is when he has the opportunity to greet Hank.

“Connor!” Hank’s voice is loud on the other end. Connor can hear heavy wind rippling through the speaker of his mind, tinny and harsh. It makes it hard to decode the emotions present in Hank’s voice. He’s concerned, Connor can tell that for sure, but is he speaking loudly because he’s angry? Or just to make sure he’s heard over the wind? “Connor, Jesus, are you okay??”

“I’m fine. The only damage I sustained was to my ocular unit—”

“For fuck’s sake, would you stop talking like a robot for two minutes!?”

Alright, Hank is definitely angry.

“I—I’m fine,” Connor repeats, his voice losing a bit of that precise android modulation. “Really. I’m… okay. Other than the… my eye.”

“What happened? What the fuck happened, and who the hell is going around Detroit attacking androids in broad fucking daylight?”

Connor briefly explains about Sumo sensing a disturbance, the abandoned house, the shattered android, and how the youths in the house attacked him. At he’s explaining to Hank, he realizes he hasn’t given any thought to the question of what those young men were doing in an abandoned house. Well, besides destroying an android owned by the city, but that isn’t what he’s wondering. They were all young enough to still be in school. Why weren’t they? Why would they rather spend their time performing acts of senseless destruction instead of furthering their education? The only possible conclusion is that those boys saw little point to being in school, and that the senseless destruction really wasn’t so senseless after all. Rather, the destruction of the android was probably an expression of their frustration about the continued presence of such androids in society, taking up jobs that used to be performed by humans. Jobs like the ones those young men probably would have aspired to after leaving school.

No job. No education. No hope for the future.

Could that be Cole someday?

When Connor has finished recounting the incident, Hank sighs. “Connor…”

“Are you going to file a police report?” Connor asks.
There’s a noise of surprise from Hank, then a short pause. “…Why? You got some feelings on the matter?”

“Well, yes. I think… it would be best not to file a report.”

Another pause while Hank considers this. Eventually, he sighs again. “…You’re probably right about that. Don’t know how we’d explain to the police how you autonomously decided to go explore an abandoned house just ‘cause Sumo barked at it.” Another sigh. “Damnit. Fuck.”

“Hank, I’m sorry if I—”

“No, don’t you go apologizing for getting attacked, you jackass.” Connor can visualize the way Hank must be furrowing his brow, squinting his eyes as he says this. “Listen, there’s some things we need to talk about, and soon. But I need some time to think about it before we do. So we’ll talk when I get home, okay?”

“I—yes, of course.”

“Think you can still pick up Cole? If you can’t, I can tell Jeffrey I had an emergency and leave early. Don’t feel like you gotta tough it out.”

“That won’t be a problem. Being down an eye definitely won’t impair my ability to ride a bus.”

A snort of laughter from Hank (and Connor can’t help but smile at the sound of it). “…Alright, if you’re sure. Call me if you have any problems. I said call; don’t leave me a text I won’t see for three hours, got it?”

“Yes, Hank.”

A beat of silence. “…And hey, Connor?” Hank shuffles his feet wherever he’s standing, and when he speaks again, his voice is softer, muffled somewhat by the whipping wind. “…I’m glad you’re okay.”

The tenderness in Hank’s voice chases away all of Connor’s lingering anxiety. As Connor’s system automatically compiles Hank’s voice into data to be saved and stored, he presses his fingers gently against his temple, wishing there was a way for him to hold the memory in his hand. “Thank you, Hank. That means a lot.”

“Okay. I gotta go before someone catches me making personal calls when I’m supposed to be supervising a crime scene. Talk to you later, Connor.”

Then after a brief pause, Hank adds, “Be safe.” The line clicks dead in Connor’s mind before he can say goodbye.

“You as well, Hank,” Connor says to the empty air.

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Picking up Cole really isn’t a problem, just as Connor had predicted. He arrives at the school without incident, and when class lets out and the preschoolers filter out into the hallway, Cole doesn’t seem to notice the pad of gauze covering the missing biocomponent.

He doesn’t even ask about the gauze until Connor is serving him his afternoon snack (Ants on a Rock, a variation of Ants on a Log that Connor invented which substitutes apple slices for celery and ricotta cheese for peanut butter to suit Cole’s tastes).
“Do you have an eyepatch because you wanna play ‘Pirates’ today?”

“That’s a good guess, but that’s not the reason why. I hurt my eye earlier today, and I’m covering it up because it isn’t very nice to look at.”

“Oh, okay. Do you want a kiss to help it feel better?”

Connor has made it a protocol of his to always accept hugs and kisses from Cole whenever they’re offered. He smiles and leans over, wiping Cole’s mouth to clear away a smear of ricotta. Cole kisses him right on the pad of gauze, and just like that, Connor does feel better. Happier, at the very least.

By the time Hank gets home, Cole and Connor have been playing ‘Pirates’ for a while. The couch is a pirate ship, Cole and Sumo are its captain and first mate, and Connor is sitting on the floor with his hands tied up with toilet paper, having been taken prisoner in a swashbuckling fight. Every so often, Connor says something pirate-y in a voice he synthesized specially for the occasion and Cole whacks him with a paper towel tube to get him to stop causing trouble.

Hanks walks through the door, and instead of offering him his customary ‘hello, Hank,’ Connor shouts, “Ahoy, landlubber!”

Hank pauses in taking off his shoes. “…Oh. So this is what we’re doing, huh?”

“Avast! These seas be the territory of the Dread Pirate Cole! Surrender yer booty or prepare to be boarded!”

“Surrender yer booty!” Cole echoes, stabbing at Hank’s legs with his tube.

“Yeah, thing is, no one gets my booty without buying me a drink first.”

“Hank,” Connor chides in his regular voice.

Hank ruffles Cole’s hair. “Hey, sport. Go play in your room for a bit, okay? I gotta talk to Connor about some grown-up stuff.”

Cole sighs and puts his tube on the coffee table. Then he disappears down the hallway.

Connor expects Hank to sit down on the couch, but instead he heads toward the kitchen. “I need a beer.”

It sounds like Hank has had a rough day. Connor tries to scan Hank to get a read on his stress level and discovers to his dismay that his scan isn’t functioning correctly. It’s blinky and weak, unable to get a conclusive read on Hank even though he’s only on the other side of the room. Having only one optical unit must be interfering with the application.

Connor gently tears the toilet paper off his wrists, feeling the magic of his playtime with Cole disappearing with each passing moment. It’s strange how a simple conversation with Hank can seem so much more foreboding than an attack from pirates on the high seas.

Connor pushes himself up onto the couch as Hank comes back from the kitchen with his beer. He sinks onto the couch next to Connor with a sigh.

And he looks at Connor.

Hank’s gaze isn’t quite heavy enough to be called a stare. His clear blue eyes are tired, sad. He
gestures at Connor’s face and says, “Can I see the damage?”

“I—removed my optical unit. I didn’t want to risk damaging the connection points or losing any of the small pieces if they came loose.” Connor pulls out the snack baggie he’s been keeping the broken optical unit in and passes it to Hank.

Hank winces as he holds the baggie up to get a look at it. “Jesus. It’s really crushed to hell.”

“Compared to the rest of me, my optical units are relatively delicate.”

Hank says nothing his face growing paler the longer he stares at the shattered biocomponent. Connor watches him carefully, trying to gauge what he might be thinking. The expression on Hank’s face suggests he might be uncomfortable or scared. Discomfort, Connor can understand, but what is there to be scared about? It isn’t as though a broken biocomponent poses much threat to anyone. Perhaps Hank is scared of what it will cost to replace or repair the biocomponent.

Eventually, Hank shakes his head and passes the baggie back to Connor. “Jesus. I just…” He trails off, his brow furrowed, staring at the floor. He takes a long drink from his beer.

Connor wishes he could scan Hank. It’s so much easier to read Hank when Connor can collect data about his entire state of being. His vital signs and hormone levels and the traces of beer on his lips. It makes Connor feel as though there’s something incredibly important he’s missing.

Hank looks back at Connor. “So if you took out your eye, then the eyepatch is for…”

“I…” Connor frowns. “I thought the parts that were left exposed might frighten Cole.”

Hank nods, takes another drink of his beer, sets the bottle down on the coffee table. He looks at Connor and asks, “Can I see?”

Connor’s eye flickers up to Hank’s face. He looks so, so tired, his face serious and full of discontent. Connor can’t tell if there’s any curiosity behind his question at all, or if he’s asking for another reason.

It’s a question, not an order. Even if it were an order, Connor knows he has the capacity to refuse Hank, to contradict direct instructions. Connor doesn’t have to let Hank see, and from the way Hank’s behaving right now, Connor is reasonably sure that he wouldn’t press the issue if Connor were to refuse.

Connor doesn’t want Hank to see him like this.

But Hank asked. He didn’t order. He asked.

Connor reaches up for the pad of gauze, trying to ignore the bloom of anxiety in his chest. He closes his good eye, afraid to see Hank’s reaction. Then he peels away the gauze.

He can hear Hank let out a puff of breath. “Connor…” His voice is quiet, shocked. That’s understandable. Connor is aware of how much his countenance is altered by the inhuman hollow in his face. But what’s confusing is that Connor can’t hear any of the disappointment he expected to hear from Hank.

He opens his eye.

Hank is staring at him, his eyes widened just a touch, his mouth open as if he’s trying to say something. A fraction of a second after Connor opens his eye, he tracks a small shift in Hank’s eyes
as his gaze moves from one side of Connor’s face to the other.

“Doesn’t hurt, does it?” Hank asks.

“No, not at all.” Connor’s voice is quiet. “It’s… odd to not be receiving any input from half my visual receptors, but… it isn’t painful or even unpleasant. Just strange.”

“Good. That’s good.” Hank finally looks away, reaches for his beer. “Did anything about… about any of this hurt?”

“No.” Connor looks away, feeling strangely exposed.

“Thank God for small mercies,” Hank sighs, and drinks deeply from his beer.

Connor affixes the pad of gauze back over his missing biocomponent. The medical tape has lost some of its stickiness; he’ll have to reapply more if he wants the gauze to stay secure.

“You know, I have no idea at all if you were lucky or unlucky today, Connor,” Hank says, staring up at the ceiling. “I’ve been asking myself that question ever since I hung up on our call earlier today. Was this just a complete fluke, and nothing like this will probably ever happen again, or were you extraordinarily fortunate to get out of that house with as little damage as you did?”

“Hank?”

“I just…” Hank pauses, his brow knitted, a frown twisting his face. “Fuck. Every fucking day, it feels like I see some new anti-android graffiti, or see some drunk asshole brought in for roughing up a city android. Hell, some idiot punched one of our patrol units. He punched a fucking police android. If people hate androids enough to try and damage police property, then what the hell does that mean for you?”

Connor purses his lips. “I don’t think there’s any good in worrying about that. It’s not as if there’s anything we can do to change public opinion about—”

“I can’t just not worry about you, for Christ sake! Someone smashed your head in with a fucking hammer! He looked you in the face, and he just—” Hank cuts himself off, his face red. “…It fucking kills me that someone did that to you and I have no idea how to prevent it from happening again.”

“Hank…”

Hank takes another swig of beer. “At first I was thinking I could try to forbid you from deliberately entering dangerous places. The scene of an active shooting, abandoned houses, places ordinary androids wouldn’t go.”

Connor blinks, a sudden, tight feeling in his chest as he stares at Hank.

Then Hank continues, “But I don’t really think that’s any solution. You probably wouldn’t even listen to me if you thought you had a good enough reason.” He shakes his head. “I know you only went inside that house because you thought someone might’ve been in trouble. Whatever it is that keeps you doing these things, I don’t wanna try and crush that. That—that nobility of spirit. It’s rare enough to find a fucking police officer with that kind of character, let alone an android.”

“I don’t think it’s anything particularly special,” Connor says, feeling a little dizzy. “Androids carry out basic rescues all the time.”
“Bullshit. Maybe some other androids would perform the Heimlich if they saw a kid choking on his hot dog, but that’s what they’re programmed to do. Connor, what you do is all you. You do it because it’s right, not because it’s in your programming.”

Connor wonders if there’s really a difference. To be sure, he’s experiencing things his programming had never intended, but is it that his programming has rewritten itself, or that he’s somehow surpassed the boundaries of his programming? If it’s the former, does it mean he’s as controlled by his programming as every other android out there? And if it’s the latter, then if his programming isn’t responsible for what he does and what he experiences, what is? What force compels him along, doing things and feeling things that are beyond the confines of his coding?

Connor stops to consider what would have happened if an ordinary domestic android had been walking the family dog past the abandoned house where Connor was assaulted. If the dog began to bark at the house, a regular domestic android wouldn’t have tried to find a way in. That would be going beyond the scope of their duties. Perhaps with a strong enough hint that something might be wrong inside the house, they would call the police to come investigate, but they certainly wouldn’t enter the house themselves as Connor had.

“I suppose you have a point,” Connor says, putting aside the question of whether his programming was responsible for his decision to enter the house. Does it really matter? Hank clearly wants to believe that some other force is responsible for Connor’s anomalies, and Connor isn’t much in the mood to argue with Hank about whether that might be true.

“Of course I have a point,” Hank says, scowling. “Not to mention, it’d make me a huge fucking hypocrite if I tried to tell you to stay away from dangerous situations considering what I do for a living.”

“It certainly would,” Connor says happily.

“Okay, so listen. I’m not gonna tell you to stay away from situations where you might be able to do some good. But Connor…” Hank pauses, looking Connor directly in the eye. “Tell me something. When you went into that house, did you stop to think at all about protecting yourself?”

Connor blinks, a little surprised by the question. He has to stop and think about it for a moment. Every android, himself included, has basic self-preservation behaviors hard-coded into their system. But that’s not quite the same thing as actively protecting oneself, so he’s a little confused.

“I… exercised what I thought at the time was a reasonable amount of caution in approaching and investigating the house.”

“Yeah, no shit, you didn’t go into the place with guns blazing.” Hank rubs his eyes. “Okay, let me rephrase. When you went into that house, were you prioritizing the lives of those hypothetical humans who might have been in trouble over your own life?”

“Yes,” Connor says, slightly defensively. He wants to point out to Hank that that’s just how androids function; they’re built to put human welfare above their welfare. Of course human lives should take precedence over his own.

Except… now that that argument occurs to him, it seems a bit hollow. Connor already knows that his behavior and cognition aren’t limited in the way other androids are limited. So even if that’s how other androids function, that doesn’t necessarily have to be how Connor functions. It may have been his intended purpose to serve humanity even to the detriment of his own welfare, but Connor has already defied the purpose that his model was intended for by serving Hank as a domestic android. If defying his intended purpose by serving Hank doesn’t bother him, then defying any other intended purpose of his shouldn’t bother him either.
“Hank, I’m not alive,” Connor says, giving Hank a careful look. “Even if I’m more advanced than other androids and not… not bound in the same ways that they are, that still doesn’t mean that my existence is worth as much as a human’s.”

Hank sighs, looking more exhausted than ever. “Jesus, what the hell am I supposed to tell Cole if you get yourself killed doing something like this? Or destroyed, since you aren’t actually alive.” A bitter note enters Hank’s voice, and for the first time since their conversation began, Hank looks at Connor like he’s disappointed in him.

The fact that now Hank is disappointed surprises Connor, but he puts his thread of thought about *Things That Disappoint Hank* into a background process for the moment (Connor is very confused about how Hank is only now disappointed by Connor being a machine. Or is Hank just disappointed that Connor didn’t answer the question the way Hank wanted him to? How much of Connor is influenced by his status as an android? Is it even possible to fully separate his identity as *Connor* from his identity as an android?) so he can focus on what Hank has said about Cole.

Connor’s first impulse is to explain to Hank that in an emergency situation, it would be unethical for Connor to value the emotional state of any one person, even Cole, above the lives that he could save by putting his own safety at risk.

That’s what he wants to say, but he can’t seem to bring himself to say the words. It seems perfectly straightforward; emotions aren’t as important as lives. No ethicist in the world would argue otherwise. But as soon as Connor tries to say that Cole’s feelings, the possibility of Cole experiencing something as devastating as grief, is trivial enough to ignore in favor of something else, an error occurs and he just can’t bring himself to actually voice to the sentiment.

It makes him feel like his heart is full to bursting to think about Cole experiencing any sort of pain. Cole’s welfare is his first priority. Cole is his first priority. And maybe that’s the case because of Connor’s programming, but at this moment, Connor is absolutely certain that even if his devotion to Cole wasn’t woven throughout his coding, he wouldn’t choose to have it any other way.

“I…” Connor’s voice is raspy; he feels as though there’s something stuck in his throat. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Yeah. Look, Connor,” Hank says, turning so Connor is looking him in the face. His eyes are troubled. “I know you have a good heart. I know you only want to help people. And even if I don’t like it, I can get why you put human welfare over your own welfare. All I’m asking is the next time you wind up in a dangerous situation like this, if you can’t take care of yourself for your own sake, would you at least take care of yourself for Cole’s sake?”

Connor nods weakly. “Yes. I understand.”

Hank lets out a longsuffering sigh, tilting his head back and closing his eyes.

Connor tentatively puts a hand on the backrest of the couch, close to Hank’s head. “Hank… I hope you know that you and Cole matter more than anything to me. I don’t ever want to do anything to hurt either of you.”

Hank cracks his eyes open. “I know, Connor. This is just… part of caring about people. Worrying about them and hurting because of them. There isn’t anything anyone can do to prevent it entirely.” He gently pats Connor’s hand. “Only reason I’m so stressed out right now is because you matter to me, too. I don’t want to see you throwing yourself away for the sake of some jackass who’d never appreciate exactly what you’re doing for them.”
Connor closes his eye. Hank’s hand is bigger than his, and it can completely cover Connor’s. He
sits there, focusing his processes on the feeling of Hank’s hand touching his. The warmth of his
palm, the curl of his callused fingers. The feeling of connecting with Hank, the both of them
reaching out for each other in this small, simple way.

He doesn’t want to tell Hank that he doesn’t think he’ll be able to fulfill Hank’s wishes about
putting his own welfare above the welfare of humans. He may be able to do so when the humans in
question are strangers, but he knows deep down in the metal framework of his body that he will
never be able to put himself before Hank and Cole.

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The next day, Hank calls in fake-sick in order to take Connor to be repaired. Connor’s happy to
have Hank accompanying him, but he feels that perhaps taking a day off is a bit excessive.

“Hank, you know I’m able to submit myself for repairs so long as I have proof that you’ve
authorized everything, right? You didn’t have to take the whole day off.”

Hank scowls and rolls his shoulders. “What, you don’t want me to come?”

“No, I just want to make sure you’re aware that you don’t have to suffer a penalty at work for my
sake.”

“Just humor me, Connor. I wanna go back to the store where I bought you to get you looked at, and
it’s in a sorta seedy part of town. Wanna make sure no one hassles you today.”

Connor cocks an eyebrow. “I normally don’t receive much attention when I’m out in public. I
wonder what you intend to do if someone decides to harass me today of all days, when I’m
accompanied by a large and grumpy human.”

“Grumpy? I’m intimidating, not grumpy.”

“A large and intimidatingly grumpy human, then.”

“And I’ll tell you what I intend to do,” Hank says, patting his hip where his holster is hidden under
his coat. “Anyone tries to give you trouble, they’ll be saying hello to Hank Anderson and his
Marvelous Magnum.”

“You’re going to shoot them?” Connor raises his brows. “Punks on the street? You’re clearly
exaggerating for rhetorical effect.” A beat. “…Right?”

“Don’t get your circuits in a twist, I’m not gonna shoot anyone. It’s just a deterrent. A warning.” A
slow smirk crosses his face. “A warning that might go whizzing very closely past their ear.”

“Hank, I wasn’t programmed to roll my eyes, but I think I may be about to spontaneously develop
the ability anyway.”

“Roll your eye, you mean.” Hank gestures at his face, and Connor gives him such a disgruntled
look that Hank begins to cackle.

Predictably, no one bothers Hank and Connor. Hank drives, which means that the only time they
spend “in public” is during the short walk from the curb to the door of the converted garage where
Hank originally bought Connor.

Jamie, the technician who processed Connor’s sale, is still there. Connor isn’t surprised when
Jamie remembers him and asks Hank if Connor has ever given him any trouble. Hank looks offended by the question and lies that no, Connor’s never given him any trouble at all.

Or maybe it isn’t a lie, and Hank just considers the sort of trouble that Connor gets into to be a feature and not a bug.

Jamie leads them over to the workshop at the back of the garage. He has Connor lay down on a metal gurney that looks like it might have been stolen from a morgue and examines the empty socket for his optical unit. Then he takes the broken biocomponent over to a workbench and fiddles with it for a while. Not too long after that, he comes back to have another look at Connor, this time with a frown on his face. Then he goes back to tinkering with the optical unit at the workbench.

Hank stands by the gurney’s side, his suspicious squint slowly growing more pronounced as time passes.

The third time Jamie comes over to the gurney to examine Connor, he gives a frustrated sigh.

“What?” Hank asks, crossing his arms.

“I think you might be out of luck.”

“What do you mean, ‘out of luck’?”

“I mean I can’t fix it. Its optical unit is too badly busted to be repaired. And for most androids, that wouldn’t be such a problem since you could just buy a compatible optical unit and replace it, but…”

Hank’s eyes widen slightly as comprehension dawns.

“Yeah, Connor’s a special boy,” Jamie says airily. “Full of rare parts, some of them I’ve never even seen before. See, most androids have biocomponents that are compatible across different series and models. But I don’t think that’ll work for Connor. Like, here…”

Jamie sticks a minute screwdriver into Connor’s empty socket. “See, it’s got twelve photoelectric nodes over here. Twelve. If you tried sticking an optical unit in here that couldn’t handle that, you’d probably blow out the biocomponent.

Hank looks uncomfortable. “So it’s a question of finding a powerful enough eye, or…”

“No, it’s a question of finding an eye with the right hardware. You need a biocomponent with a special adapter to even be able to process the demand that Connor’s system puts on its optical units. And in addition to that, Connor’s got a scan that’s so powerful, it’s downright invasive. So that function also needs specialized hardware built into the optical unit.” Jamie shakes his head. “What the hell is this thing supposed to be doing with twelve photoelectric nodes and a scan like that, anyway? Scouting the bottom of the Mariana Trench?”

Connor considers pointing out the trace amounts of thirium he can see all over the workshop (even with his single optical unit and his unusually weak scan) and mentioning that Hank’s home will never be as dirty, but thinks better of it. Detecting long-evaporated thirium is a skill with no immediately useful application, so perhaps Jamie has a point about twelve nodes and his strong scan function being a bit of overkill.

“Jesus…” Hank runs a hand through his hair. “So what the hell are we supposed to do?”
“Get used to having a one-eyed android,” Jamie suggests.

Hank glares at him. “Not a fucking option.”

“He’s not compatible with any other optical units on the market. I don’t know what other options you think you might have,” Jamie crosses his arms and leans back against his workbench. “Why do you think I sold it to you so cheap? I mean, beside all its software issues. Its skeleton is made of a carbon nanotube reinforced polymer, for crying out loud, if this android was built to be easy to fix, it’d be worth a fortune. He shrugs. “It was probably designed to be replaced when it gets damaged enough, not repaired.”

Hank bristles, looking like he’s about ready to get in Jamie’s face.

Connor gets off the gurney in one smooth motion and moves to stand at Hank’s side. Very casually, he brushes Hank’s arm.

Hank glances at him. Connor looks at Hank in turn, an easy, measured look.

Some of the tension leaves Hank’s frame. He runs a hand down his face and sighs. “Look, Jamie… I know you know that Connor’s a real… unique android. He’s worked really well for me over the past few years and I don’t want to replace him. You gotta have some idea for something I can do. Somewhere else that might have special parts, or can make them…”

Jamie’s mouth slowly curls as though he’s chewing on a thought. He gives Hank a crafty look. “You know you owe me for this consultation, right?”

“Of course I do,” Hank says.

Jamie blows out a puff of air, looking off to the side. “Okay. There’s this one guy I know about. A friend of a friend, supposed to be real good with androids. Always tinkering with them, experimenting with improving them, stuff like that. ‘Sposed to have a real appreciation for androids with special features or that are otherwise unique. Maybe if you let him have a look at Connor, he’d be interested enough to try and help you out.”

“You think he could fix Connor?”

“Hell, tickle his fancy enough and he might. I don’t know what his rates are, but if you’re hellbent on fixing it and not replacing it, it’ll probably be cheaper than buying a new android.”

“That sounds like it’s just what we need.”

Jamie pauses, holding up a finger. “There’s just one thing…”

“What’s that?”

Jamie points at Hank. “You’re not a cop, right?”

Connor briefly reviews his archived memory of his first time meeting Hank, where he definitely mentioned Hank’s police rank in front of Jamie.

Hank just grins. “Course not.”

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The house belonging to Jamie’s ‘friend of a friend’ is certainly impressive to look at. A dark, rundown manor with high, wrought-iron gates surrounding the entire property and shrivelled vines
creeping up the sides. The heavily overcast sky only adds to the dour, creepy effect of the house. It’s beginning to drizzle lightly (Connor is keeping his head carefully angled to minimize the amount of moisture the pad of gauze that he has retaped over his socket absorbs) and the forecast is predicting thunder at some point in the next few hours. A sudden bolt of lightning illuminating the sky behind the house would only complete this ominous tableau.

“Jesus, when did the Addams family move to Detroit?” Hank mutters to Connor as they stand outside the gate. “I didn’t know people actually lived in places like this.”

“It certainly has an established atmosphere. Judging from the data I’ve derived from your collection of horror movies, there’s a 73% probability that this man is keeping his mother’s corpse in the basement.”

A snort of laughter from Hank. “Or a woman-suit in his closet, made out of real women.” A moment later, the smile slides from his face. “Seriously, though, this place gives me the creeps.”

Connor gives Hank his most innocent face. “You thought I was joking?”

Hank shoves Connor’s shoulder. “Get bent.” He squints through the gate at the front door. “Think this guy lives alone?”

“If he’s an android enthusiast, he probably owns a few. Why does it matter whether he lives alone?”

“Just… I don’t trust people who need this much space all to themselves. Makes me wonder what they’re using all that space to hide.” Hank shakes out his shoulders. “Oh, well. Let’s get this over with.”

With that, he pushes the gate open. It creaks ominously, and Connor wonders whether the manor is purposely kept in a state of disrepair for aesthetic purposes.

Hank has to ring the doorbell three times before someone finally comes to the door. The door opens just wide enough to reveal the face of Andronikov, Zlatko, no criminal record to speak of. His eyes flit from Connor to Hank and back to Connor.

“Are you Zlatko?” Hank asks.

“Yes,” Zlatko answers, opening the door a bit wider. He stares at Connor, his brows rising. “Let me guess… someone referred you to me for android repairs, is that right?”

“Right on the money,” Hank says with a nod.

Zlatko steps back, holding the door open. “Then why don’t you come in?”

Hank and Connor step into the entryway. Connor lets his gaze sweep over the high ceilings and faded wallpaper, the cobwebs in the corners and the musty scent of old wood. It doesn’t escape his notice that there’s dust under the furniture and stains on Zlatko’s shirt. Android enthusiast or not, he must not have a domestic android, because Connor can’t imagine he would let anything inside the house exist in such a sorry state regardless of his owner’s aesthetic preferences.

Zlatko leads them to a sitting room just off from the entryway and gestures at a sofa. “Please, have a seat. Let’s chat for a bit.”

Hank sits, leaning back, while Connor sits ramrod straight. Hank says, “Thanks for seeing us
without any notice. I’m Hank and this is Connor.”

Zlakto sinks onto the seat opposite them. “Always a pleasure to see a new android brought into my home.” He lifts his chin, giving Connor an appraising look. “Connor, is it? What’s your model?”

“RK800,” Connor answers. He can feel Hank stiffen next to him.

“Can’t say I’ve seen another one of you before. And your function?”

“I’m a domestic assistant.”

“Ah,” Zlakto says, spreading his hands slightly. “The perennial classic. So many varieties, so few differences between them. Personally, I find it fascinating how many times they try to reinvent the wheel, don’t you? What’s so special about you, Connor?”

Hank glances at Connor, narrowing his eyes in a warning. Connor ignores this; if Zlatko is going to be repairing him, he’s going to see the obvious differences in how he’s built straight away. “I’m a very advanced model. The technician we went to wasn’t able to repair me due to the complexity of my optical unit.”

“Very advanced,” Zlatko repeats. “How interesting. I shall have to look into acquiring one of you if my floors are ever in need of an advanced mopping.”

Hank snorts, casting his eyes around the room. “From the looks of it, this place might just need an advanced mopping, and a little more besides. Maybe you oughta look into getting a domestic ‘droid. That or learn how to use a mop yourself, if domestic androids are so beneath you.”

“Oh!” Zlatko’s hand moves to his temple as though he’s suddenly remembering something. “That reminds me. Where are my manners? I may not have a domestic android, but you know what I do have?”

He looks over his shoulder and calls, “Luther!”

A moment later, a behemoth of an android steps through an archway on the far side of the room. “Yes, Zlatko?”

Zlatko smiles at Hank and Connor. “Luther is my personal assistant. Its cleaning skills may leave something to be desired, but it’s perfectly capable of fetching us some drinks. Would you care for anything…?” He gestures at Hank.

Hank hesitates. “Well… I wouldn’t say no to a scotch.”

“Make it two, Luther.”

A moment later, Luther brings a tray of drinks over. He sets it down on the table, and he’s finally close enough for Connor’s weakened scan to probe him. A TR400, a model of android used for manual labor, such as construction and hauling heavy loads. Strong and sturdy.

They aren’t meant to serve as personal assistants. But this one is doing so anyway.

A jolt lances through Connor’s chest, static filling his ears.
That’s right. I can.

Can you do it with just a glance at the broken part?”

Hank’s brows rise. “Half an hour?” He frowns, waving a hand as if he’s signaling for Zlatko to slow down. “Wait, wait. Look, I appreciate you offering to fix Connor… but the technician couldn’t do anything for us, and that was a guy who fixes androids for a living. And you’re telling me you can do it with just a glance at the broken part?”

“That’s right. I can.”

The code that his memory bank is trying to load is too corrupted for him to even decipher bits and pieces of it. He’s functionally blind and deaf for 20 milliseconds until he manages to force the process to shut down. By the time he blinks the last bit of unintelligible nonsense out of his head, he can’t even remember what he was thinking that triggered his recall function in the first place.

Luther stands by Zlatko’s seat while Zlatko raises his drink. “To Connor’s good health.”

Hank snorts, a smile crossing his face. He raises his glass in turn. “I’ll drink to that.”

Luther stands by Zlatko’s seat while Zlatko raises his drink. “To Connor’s good health.”

Hank snorts, a smile crossing his face. He raises his glass in turn. “I’ll drink to that.”

Zlatko downs his entire drink in long gulps. He smacks his lips as he sets his empty glass down on the tray, turning to Connor and rubbing his hands. “Now then, on the subject of Connor’s health… why don’t you tell me a little about the trouble you’re having? Connor mentioned something about a biocomponent.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Zlatko says, opening the baggie and pouring the optical unit into his palm. He turns it over, examining its bits and pieces carefully. “Androids are very exacting objects, you know. It’s part of Cyberlife’s strategy to maintain their chokehold on anything profitable that’s even remotely connected to androids. Make them hard to maintain, hard to repair. Doing anything with them requires a great amount of skill and precision. Like human bodies.”

Zlatko’s voice softens just a bit. “Even among the technologically proficient, you very rarely see anyone who feels comfortable with experimentation… really, you just have to be bold enough to take the opportunities that are presented to you…” He mutters inaudibly as he pulls apart the biocomponent.

After a moment, Zlatko looks up. “Yes, I see how this is supposed to function. This shouldn’t be any problem to fix. I’ll have to take it down to my workshop to work on it, but I predict it won’t take me very long at all. No more than half an hour, in all likelihood. If it’s too much trouble to leave and come back, you’re more than welcome to wait here.”

Hank’s brows rise. “Half an hour?” He frowns, waving a hand as if he’s signaling for Zlatko to slow down. “Wait, wait. Look, I appreciate you offering to fix Connor… but the technician couldn’t do anything for us, and that was a guy who fixes androids for a living. And you’re telling me you can do it with just a glance at the broken part?”

“That’s right. I can.”
“Okay.” Hank squints at Zlatko. “So who the hell are you? Why the hell are you doing this, fixing androids out of your home instead of working at Cyberlife?”

Zlatko smiles and lets out a good-natured huff, looking not at all bothered by Hank’s suspicion. “Why aren’t I working at Cyberlife? Well, let me put this in terms your android might appreciate.” He spreads his hands. “I am a pirate king.”

Connor resists the impulse to cover the gauze on his face with his hand.

“A pirate king?” Hank says dryly.

“Oh, better far to live and die under the brave black flag I fly than play a sanctimonious part with a pirate head and a pirate heart,” Zlatko sings in a flat, oddly toneless voice, waving a finger as if he’s conducting himself.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I used to work for Cyberlife,” Zlatko says conversationally. “As a mechatronic-slash-software engineer. But I found it to be chafing. I didn’t have the freedom to pursue projects that I found interesting… and personally fulfilling. So I left Cyberlife and was slapped with a non-compete that guaranteed I’d never again make money working with androids.” He smiles. “But that’s just fine. I’m much better off with the freedom to do what I like, how I like without Cyberlife breathing down my neck.”

“You’re fine being an unemployable engineer?” Hank raises a brow.

“Well, it’s not as though all my ambitions have dried up just because I don’t collect a paycheck for the work I do.” Zlatko clasps his hands. “I hope that satisfies your curiosity, because it’s rather forward of you to ask so many questions of the man who’s doing you a tremendous favor.”

Hank’s mouth is drawn in a severe, unsatisfied line, but he doesn’t say anything else.

Zlatko rises. “Well, come along, Connor. Let’s see about getting you back to full functionality.” He stands, beginning out of the room. When Hank and Connor both rise to follow him, he turns around, wincing. “Oh, Hank, when I said you were welcome to wait for me to finish with the optical unit, what I meant was that you’re welcome to wait up here. I don’t allow anyone else into my workshop.”

Hank frowns sharply. “If Connor’s going, what’s the problem?”

“I need Connor there to test the optical unit while I’m fixing it.” He smiles at Hank, spreading his hands. “And I’m afraid that’s the figurative rate I charge for my work. You want me to fix an interesting android, I get to examine that interesting android in my private workshop. You’ll get it back all in one piece, I promise.”

Hank slowly sits back down, still frowning at Zlatko.

Zlatko turns his smile to Luther. “Luther, attend to our guest while I’m busy downstairs.”

“Yes, Zlatko.”

Zlatko heads into the other room. Connor looks at Hank before following Zlatko into the next room and down a set of stairs.

As they descend, a text from Hank pops up in Connor’s HUD.
A soft smile crosses Connor’s face.

Of course, Hank. I’ll let you know immediately if anything unusual happens.

Zlatko leads Connor through a rough, unfinished hallway. It looks as though it might be undergoing construction, as there are wooden support beams up and lining the tunnel. They pass a few indentations in the wall where bare earth is exposed.

“Yeah, don’t mind the decorating,” Zlatko says dismissively. “We’re doing some renovating down here. Gonna be putting in some new rooms. Space for all the androids that are cluttering up my storage.”

“You have a lot of androids?”

“More than most people. My little pet projects.” A silky, affectionate note creeps into his voice.

They turn a corner.

In front of Connor sits the machine.

Another corrupted memory fills Connor’s vision. He blinks, slightly faster to clear it this time. These loading errors seem to be occurring with more and more frequency and he isn’t sure why. He hopes this doesn’t become a problem; he doesn’t feel entirely comfortable with the notion of letting Zlatko fix any problems with his coding for reasons he can’t quite articulate.

In front of Connor sits a machine.

It’s a perfectly normal machine for working on androids, with clamps to lift androids to offer an unobstructed view from any angle. Zlatko goes to sit in front of a series of computers by the
machine’s left side.

Connor moves to stand in the machine, but Zlatko waves a hand at him. “Oh, no need to clamp you for something like this. Have a seat somewhere where I can reach you. I don’t want to have to get up to keep plugging your optical unit in and out.” There’s a metal box which seems to be within arm’s reach of Zlatko, so Connot sits there, feeling strangely relieved not to be restrained today.

Zlatko passes a cable to Connor. “Plug this into the port on the back of your neck. And go ahead and take off that guaze.” Connor removes the gauze first, wishing he could blink away the uncomfortable feeling of exposing his empty socket to the open air. Then he plugs the cable into his neck and feels the cold shock of Zlatko’s computer connecting to his system.

Connor watches his own code begin to scroll across the computer screens, every single screen. Zlatko leans forward, folding his hands in front of his chin as he drinks in the lines of coding.

After a moment, he reaches for a small toolkit under his desk. He begins to dismantle the optical unit, barely glancing away from the screens while he works. His hands move expertly, never really stopping to search for what to do next. In a matter of minutes, the optical unit is in pieces, the broken parts of it being carefully separated and further dismantled.

Zlatko never looks away from the screens for longer than a moment or two while he searches through a series of drawers for small pieces of metal, wires, or bits of circuitry. But—it’s strange. He doesn’t look very excited by what he’s seeing in Connor’s coding. He’s clearly very interested, the problem isn’t a lack of interest. But there’s no air of discovery about Zlatko, nothing that he seems particularly surprised or impressed by.

Connor shoves away a gaping feeling of vulnerability. There’s no reason for him to be feeling vulnerable; Zlatko isn’t even doing anything to him. The computer is only displaying his code, not altering it or trying to upload anything into Connor. Zlatko isn’t doing anything he hasn’t said he would do. It doesn’t matter if Zlatko is literally reading Connor like an open book; after Zlatko finishes fixing him, Connor will hopefully never need to see Zlatko again.

Still, he hopes Zlatko can’t tell what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling. He hopes his programming really isn’t responsible for the parts of him that are evolving so those parts will be a secret from Zlatko forever.

Zlatko begins to sing absently to himself, the same tune he sang a snippet of earlier. “When I sally forth to seek my prey I help myself in a royal way… I sink a few more ships, it’s true, than a well-bred monarch ought to do…”

Connor sits there, his back straight and his hands on his knees, trying to ignore the rising anxiety in his chest as Zlatko rebuilds his eye and reviews his coding.

“But many a king on a first-class throne… if he wants to call his crown his own… must manage somehow to get through… more dirty work than ever I do…”

***

When Jamie asked Hank if he was a cop, Hank had been expecting it to mean that this friend of a friend deals weed. Maybe even deals stolen android parts. He hadn’t been expecting all of this.

Hell, he doesn’t even know if Zlatko actually does anything illegal or if Jamie just assumes that he does on account of the fact that the guy lives in a fucking murdermansion. God knows that Hank’s assuming that there’s something fishy going on here.
No. Not assuming. There’s something else. Yes, Hank is on edge because he just stepped into a place that looks like it was transplanted straight out of a horror film, but that’s not actual unease. That’s the thrill of sneaking into someplace that’s rumored to be haunted, or of staring into the mirror and saying ‘Bloody Mary’ three times.

No. There’s actual unease deep in Hank’s gut under all the weirdness. A sensitivity that was honed by years tracking down the most vile criminals the city has ever seen. It tells Hank that under all the horror-show trappings, there’s something real here. With so much weird crap around, Hank can’t tell what exactly is setting him off, but he knows it has to be there. A career spent sniffing around crimes scenes has taught him to trust his gut, especially if he has trouble deciding what particular element of a situation is bothering him so much.

Well. Zlatko being alone with Connor bothers Hank. But something else is bothering him too, he just can’t put his finger on what.

As soon as Hank lets Connor walk out of his field of vision with Zlatko, he immediately regrets it. Texting Connor doesn’t do much to alleviate that regret, because even though Connor promises to let Hank know if Zlatko does anything weird, Connor can only send such a text after Zlatko has already done something weird. If the very first weird thing that Zlatko does is bury an axe in Connor’s head, then Connor’s shit out of luck.

Hank fidgets, the urge to go downstairs and check on Connor rising every minute. The only thing that stops him is the knowledge that Connor needs fixed, and Zlatko’s likely to kick both of them out if Hank ignores his expressed wishes and follows them into the basement.

He finishes his scotch and Luther brings him another one. It sits ignored on the coffee table, even though Hank really wants another drink to take the edge off. More than that, Hank wants to not be impaired.

Finally, Hank can’t stand it anymore. He stands and heads toward the stairs to the basement.

Luther moves in front of him before he can take more than a few steps. “Zlatko would like you to stay here.”

Hank grits his teeth, sizing Luther up. The android is huge, Hank can tell there’s no way he’ll be able to outmaneuver him to get to the basement.

“Yeah, well,” Hank says, casting his eyes around the room. “That drink went right through me. Any chance you might let me out to go find the bathroom?”

Luther looks at him, his gaze heavy. It reminds Hank of the way Connor looks at Cole whenever Cole tries to tell a lie, and Hank wonders whether androids have latent lie-detecting capabilities.

But then Luther says, “Follow me.” He heads up the stairs, and Hank is frustrated to be two flights of stairs away from where Connor is instead of one, but any movement at all is probably progress.

The sequence of doors lining the second floor hall mostly look identical to Hank, and Luther stops outside the one door that’s the exception, the one fitted with a window of frosted glass. Hank supposes the door to the bathroom probably looks different so it can be immediately picked out of the lineup in an emergency.

“Thanks,” he mutters to Luther, who just stands with his back to the wall and says nothing.

As soon as Hank has closed the bathroom door behind him, he turns the water on in the sink to try and stop Luther from listening in on him. There’s a door on the other side of the bathroom. Hank
tries it, relieved to find that it isn’t locked. He moves slowly as he opens the door, half-expecting Luther to burst in at any moment.

Logic would suggest that a bathroom would naturally let out into the master bedroom, but this room is far too cluttered to actually be serving such a purpose. The room is packed wall-to-wall with furniture, most of it haphazardly covered with dusty white sheets. Zlatko must be using this room for storage. There’s a lit fireplace merrily crackling away against the outside wall, and Hank has to wonder why anyone bothers keeping a fireplace in a storage room lit. Maybe the house doesn’t heat well? Who knows.

Hank makes his way through the room. It’s slow going, having to navigate around the tables and armchairs and antique lamps. The fireplace lights the room, casting shadows that seem to shift and twitch with each soft snap and pop of the flames.

Is anything hiding in this room?

Hank passes close to the fireplace. He can feel its heat on his side, hear the soft cracking of the fire—

--and he realizes that the cracking noise isn’t just coming from the fire. It’s coming from somewhere in front of him, too. A rhythmic crack—crack—crack with each noise precisely timed from the last one.

Hank squints through the dim light and sees that some oddly-shaped furniture hidden under a white sheet not too far from him is moving.

Hank takes his gun into his hand and inches forward even more slowly than before. He steps in time with that precise crack—crack—crack noise.

And then, when he’s just out of arm’s reach of the mass under the sheet, he darts forward and yanks the sheet off, jumping back with it.

It’s a group of three people—no, a group of three androids, each with a glowing LED and glowing eyes. They stand motionless except for one, who is turning her head. Her chassis is torn at her neck, and her head keeps turning, a sharp crack sounding out when it makes a full rotation. Her whole body shudders with each crack.

And then another turns his head to face Hank, and as the fire lights up his face, Hank can see that where his mouth should be there’s instead a lumpy mass of melted plastic. It looks like badly-healed scar tissue in the firelight, artificial skin glowing blue at the edges as it shifts and ebbs, trying and failing to form lips over the twisted plastic.

“Where is Zlatko?” He asks, his voice calm and each word enunciated perfectly. His jaw moves as he talks, but Hank has no idea where his voice is coming from since it clearly isn’t coming from his mouth. “Where is our master?”

Hank recoils away from the androids, and the last one suddenly shambles forward from behind the other two, clutching at Hank with too many hands. She trips and sprawls out on the ground, and Hank can see that this last android has four arms and four legs, her shoulders and pelvis mangled to make them all fit.

“What can I do for you?” She asks, struggling to coordinate her limbs enough to stand. “How can I help you? Please, let me help you?”

Monsters, these androids were all twisted into monsters and left alone in the dark—
Even among the technologically proficient, you very rarely see anyone who feels comfortable with experimentation... really, you just have to be bold enough to take the opportunities that are presented to you...

“Jesus fucking Christ, Connor,” Hank whispers, turning around so he can bolt down the stairs and into the basement. He has to get down there now, Luther be damned.

He lifts his gun, tempted to just shoot Luther to get him out of the way. But then he moves past the fire and an idea occurs to him. He fumbles with his gun, opening the chamber and spilling two cartridges into his hand. Then he tosses them into the fire and runs like hell, bursting into the bathroom and then back into the hallway.

Luther says, “What—“

Bang! Bang! The sound of gunshots from a nearby room interrupt him.

Luther’s head snaps toward the sudden sound.

“Shit, you better go check that out,” Hank says. Luther pushes past him and disappears through the door.

Hank doesn’t waste another moment waiting. He runs the other way, taking the stairs three at a time, catching the banister with his hand and swinging around to descend into the basement, hoping like hell that he isn’t already too late.

***

“What color is your eye?” Zlatko asks. “Brown?”

He swivels around on his stool to hold a small component up to Connor’s remaining eye, comparing them. Connor is a little surprised Zlatko has managed to tear himself away from the screens long enough to try and match the color of his eyes.

Connor sits quietly while Zlatko leafs through artificial irises. When his scan detects a match to the one in his remaining biocomponent, he speaks up. “That one in your left hand appears to be a match.”

“So it would seem.” He slots the iris into the biocomponent without even looking at it, turning his attention back to the lines of code that are still scrolling across the screen.

“Whoever designed you to have brown eyes made a good decision,” Zlatko says in a distracted tone. Connor gets the feeling that he’s not really talking to him. “Warm. Trustworthy. Modest. No one looks at a set of brown eyes and marvels at their beauty, no one remembers the brown eyes they pass on the street. And no one is intimidated by them, either. Unobtrusive, inconspicuous.”

Connor agrees that these are good traits for a domestic android to have. But beyond that, he tries to remember whether he’s ever taken particular notice of anyone’s eyes before. Hank’s eyes are blue and clear. So clear that they always seem to reflect how Hank is feeling. Connor has seen those eyes burn with anger and gleam with joy; he has seen them so heavy with sorrow that Hank’s pain seems to cut Connor to the quick as well. Connor may often wonder what Hank is thinking, but he never has to wonder what Hank is feeling.

It’s part of Connor’s job to keep track of Hank’s moods and alter his performance to make the household function harmoniously. But also... Hank’s eyes are just nice to look at, and Connor suspects that it isn’t due to Zlatko’s theory that blue eyes are prettier than brown eyes.
His reverie is interrupted when Zlatko turns toward him and suddenly inserts the biocomponent into Connor’s face. Error messages pop up on his HUD.

“How’s that fit?”

“Several of the connectors aren’t lined up precisely.” He lists off the connectors and how far off they are as Zlatko pulls the biocomponent back out and begins adjusting it.

**Bang! Bang!** The sound of sudden gunshots from upstairs. Connor looks up at the ceiling, alarmed.

Zlatko groans. “Can’t I get half an hour to finish my work in peace?” He glares at Connor over his shoulder. “I’m not finished yet. Don’t you go anywhere.”

Connor had been about to get up, but he abandons the notion at Zlatko’s command, sitting rooted to the box. He stares at the ceiling, wishing his scan were strong enough to tell him anything about the situation beyond this room. Hank has fired his gun—or something else has a gun and reason to fire it.

Running footsteps echo down the basement hall, and a moment later Hank bursts into the room. Connor’s thirium pump stutters with relief to see him unharmed.

“Connor!” Hank cries, rushing toward him. He tugs Connor off the box and shoves him behind him, physically inserting himself between Connor and Zlatko. The cable is pulled loose from Connor’s neck and it clatters to the floor. The scrolling lines of code disappear from Zlatko’s screens and Zlatko makes an agitated noise, turning to glower at Hank.

“Mind telling me what’s so urgent that you had to break my one rule and come stomping down here to interrupt my work?!”

“You’re a sick fuck,” Hank snaps, pointing his gun at Zlatko. “I saw what you did to those androids you’re keeping upstairs! Experimenting on them, disfiguring them, turning them into freaks!”

Zlatko raises his hands, eyeing the gun nervously. “What, and you think I was going to do that to your android? You think I’m enough of an idiot to do something to an android that doesn’t belong to me while its owner is sitting in my fucking living room, drinking my fucking scotch?” He jerks his head toward Connor. “Take a good look at it, I barely even touched it.”

“That cable in his neck—”

“Was to display its programming on my computer, which is a necessity when you’re repairing androids. What, was I supposed to use psychic powers to non-invasively tell how to rebuild a compatible biocomponent for it?”

Hank draws his gun back an inch, doubt creeping into his eyes.

Zlatko rolls his eyes and slowly lowers his hands. “If you don’t believe me, ask your android. I didn’t do anything to it.” His face twists in anger. “But ask it outside. Get out of my house.”

Hank shoves his gun back into his holster, putting his hand on Connor’s shoulder. “C’mon Connor. Let’s go.”

They turn to leave. Zlatko calls softly, “Connor.”

Connor turns. Zlatko tosses him the optical unit. Connor catches it in one hand, and as he opens his
fingers to look at it, his scanner kicks in. The biocomponent is fully functional and compatible.

“Connor.” Hank grabs Connor’s wrist to pull him along. Connor can’t help but look over his shoulder as he and Hank leave the room, and he sees a small, satisfied smile slide across Zlatko’s face, totally different from any of the smiles he gave to Hank while they were talking on the couch.

They tromp out of the house, Luther escorting them out. Connor is surprised to see Luther unharmed; he had entirely expected that the gunshots he heard earlier were Hank gunning Luther down because Hank had discovered Zlatko’s androids and Luther had tried to do… something. Surely not anything violent, because androids aren’t permitted to harm humans. Unless Zlatko had reprogrammed Luther to be capable of that, which Zlatko apparently has the ability and possibly the inclination to do.

But Zlatko must not have done that, for Luther walks them right to the gate and ushers them out, closing and locking the gate decisively behind them.

Hank drags Connor down the street until they’re out of sight of Zlatko’s house. Then Hank whirls toward Connor, putting his hands on Connor’s shoulders. “Did he do anything to you? Anything at all?”

“No, he only touched me in the course of repairing my optical unit. Hank, you pulled a gun on—”

“How do I know he didn’t mess with your mind to make you say that?” Hank asks, his eyes smoldering. “What if he just erased your memory of it, or gave you some virus or something?”

These are fair questions for Hank to have, and for a moment, the Hank’s fervor makes Connor wonder himself. But reviewing the information at hand gives an undeniable answer, resolving any doubts.

He holds up his hand, displaying a projection of his memory beginning with entering the basement with Zlatko. “Every second I spent with Zlatko is accounted for. You can see the timestamps for yourself. He didn’t alter my memory or do anything that might affect my cognitive responses. There was a very brief error that occurred when my automatic recall function tried to load corrupted memory from my memory bank, but that happened before Zlatko ever touched me, and this sort of error has happened to me before. It originates from my system, not anything anyone is doing to me.”

Hank watches the recording, the tension gradually leaving his face the more he watches. When he watches Zlatko pass the cable to Connor, he says, “And that cable, that was really just displaying your code? It didn’t try to upload anything into you? Or take anything out of you?”

“That’s right. If it had tried to alter me in any way, it would have needed to override my security system. You’d see at least a brief alert message on my HUD if that happened.” He goes frame by frame through the memory of plugging the cable in, just to prove to Hank that no such alert appeared.

Hank slackens with relief, his head sagging forward so his forehead leans against Connor’s. “Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ, Connor. Those androids… it was fucking inhuman, what he did to them. No one should be able to do something like that to anything that looks so much like a person.”

Connor takes hold of Hank’s arms to steady him. “Hank, you raised a gun on him. You were going to shoot him.”
“I had no idea what he was doing to you,” Hank says, looking Connor in the eye. It’s as if he doesn’t even see the missing optical unit anymore. “I had no idea what he’d already done to you. If he’d tried anything, hell yeah I would have shot him. Do you think I was gonna stand by and let him turn you into some kind of monster?”

“Hank…” Connor squeezes his arms. “Hank, if you’d killed a human to save an android, you would have been convicted of murder. There isn’t a single judge or jury in the country who would consider your motivation a justification. You would have gone to jail. That isn’t… you aren’t…” Connor’s social protocol stutters, then crashes, unable to put into words the enormity of what he’s feeling. He shuts his mouth and clutches Hank, overwhelmed by what Hank almost did for him. What Hank would have done for him, if it had been necessary.

Hank’s eyes sharpen with focus. His brow furrows and his mouth falls open slightly, a look of mild shock crossing his face. Connor realizes that Hank hadn’t considered the potential fallout of shooting Zlatko. It hadn’t occurred to him that his actions wouldn’t be perceived as a justifiable killing in defense of an innocent person.

Had he entirely forgotten that Connor is his property and not a person? How could he have possibly forgotten that when the proof of Connor’s inhumanity has been literally staring him in the face every time he has looked at Connor over the last few hours?

A soft peal of thunder rumbles in the sky. Hank looks up, squinting at the clouds.

“…C’mon. Let’s get home,” he mumbles, finally stepping back. But he keeps one hand on Connor’s shoulder as they walk to the car, a warm, comforting weight.

The optical unit sits on the kitchen table. It looks perfectly harmless.

Connor and Hank stare at it, Hank with an obviously distrustful look on his face.

Connor isn’t sure what to think. Zlatko hadn’t taken the opportunity to mess with Connor while they were alone together in the basement. Maybe he genuinely minds his boundaries when it comes to other peoples’ androids.

But then again, Connor didn’t see the state Zlatko’s androids were in, and however they had been altered had clearly upset Hank a lot. He has no idea just how Zlatko treats his own androids, whether his alterations are so egregious that they go beyond a simple appreciation for a monstrous aesthetic. Is Zlatko an ethical enthusiast with unusual artistic inclinations, or a manipulative and deeply twisted opportunist?

He scans the optical unit again. Once again, his scan is unable to detect any problems with it. It seems to be a fully functional optical unit and nothing more.

Hank sighs running a hand through his hair. “I just don’t trust it. I mean… I put a gun in his face and he just gives us the optical unit as, what, as a sign of good will? No way. There’s something else in there.”

“My scan says there aren’t any unusual components in it,” Connor says. “And he only fixed the mechanics of the optical unit, I never saw him do anything to the coding. I don’t think he had the opportunity to load it with any sort of malicious program.”

“Yeah, but your scan isn’t at its usual power. There could be something you’re missing.” Hank sighs again and shakes his head. “I don’t get it. If there’s nothing in there, what did Zlatko even get
out of helping us? Why the hell does he do it? I don’t buy for a minute that he actually gives a shit about getting to see unusual androids. Or at least, I don’t buy that that’s all he cares about.”

Connor thinks about the way Zlatko read his coding, never looking away from the screens. It was meticulous, methodical. Like a doctor reading a patient’s chart to see what has changed since their last visit.

“He didn’t… actually examine my chassis. He only seemed to care about reading my coding.”

“Your coding?” Hank’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “Well, sure, I bet you got lots of unusual shit in your coding, but he didn’t even look at your body? Not even to notice how weird your reinforcing is?”

“No,” Connor says, his tone mildly surprised at how he didn’t realize how little Zlatko actually looked at him while he was down in the basement with him. “All he cared about was my coding.”

Hank frowns, puzzlement lining his brow.

“I think whatever he was looking for…” Connor says slowly, “…he must have found it in my coding.”

Hank scoffs softly. “What the hell would he have been looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

They stare at the biocomponent.

“Connor,” Hank says gently, “you know you don’t need two eyes, right? I know it leaves you less functional… but that doesn’t matter to me, and it doesn’t matter to Cole.”

“It would matter to Cole if he saw it.”

“Then we’ll get you an eyepatch or something. This isn’t a risk you have to take.”

Connor thinks about what it would be like to spend the rest of his days with only one optical unit. Unable to scan Hank and Cole from across the room, unable to determine the state of their health unless Connor is right up next to them. Unable to assess any risks outside a certain perimeter, unable to predict the consequences of what might happen outside a tiny little bubble. He hasn’t even tried to launch his preconstruction software since he was damaged, and he’s certain his preconstructions would be severely limited due to his inability to map out entire environments.

It doesn’t matter to Hank if Connor is sub-optimal. But it matters to Connor.

Connor reaches out for the optical unit, and he can see Hank stiffen in his peripheral vision as he brings it up to his socket. He inserts it carefully, waiting for it to engage and activate.

It clicks into place and his system begins running calibrations. He waits for an alert to pop up on his HUD about a hijack attempt or something being forcefully downloaded into him, but nothing happens. Eventually, his vision clears—and he hadn’t noticed how much his vision had been limited by only having one optical unit until the second one kicks in. He blinks as his system readjusts to suddenly having binocular vision again.

He looks at Hank, Hank who looks like he isn’t sure whether his worry for Connor or his disapproval of his choice should take precedence at this moment. He scans Hank and finds he has an elevated level of cortisol—and it’s been like this for quite some time. He’s been at a high level
of stress ever since Connor reported his damage to him.

Connor feels a swell of tender affection for Hank. Hank has been fretting non-stop for Connor’s sake. Hank jumped to Connor’s aid when it looked like he might have been in danger. Hank has fretted over Connor when so many other android owners wouldn’t have cared. Hank has done so much to protect Connor when other android owners wouldn’t have bothered. Zlatko and the way he purposefully transforms his androids may be on the extreme end of bad android ownership, but there are so many people out there who do small, thoughtless things that have detrimental effects on their androids. And here’s Hank, whose every action and every emotional response spell out clearly how much he values Connor. How much he cares about Connor.

“It seems to be functioning normally,” Connor says, smiling tentatively at Hank.

Hank relaxes somewhat. “…Well. Good.”

Hank begins to turn away, but Connor catches his arm before he can leave. Hank turns back toward Connor, a question on his face, and Connor catches Hank in a hug.

He feels Hank tense up again—he must be wondering whether something in Connor’s eye has hijacked him—but begins to relax by degrees as it becomes apparent that this is just a hug, not some attempt to squeeze Hank to death.

“Thank you,” Connor says. “For everything you’ve done over the last few days.”

Hank wraps a single arm around Connor in return. “…It’s nothing, Connor. Don’t even mention it. After all you’ve done to support the family, it’d be real shitty of me not to support you when you needed it.”

Hank pulls away. “Well, I guess it really didn’t do anything to you, huh? I can’t imagine Zlatko had any nefarious scheme to make androids go around hugging people.”

“If he did, he wasn’t very efficient in his choice to use me as the vehicle of that scheme. I already perform thirteen hugs per day on average.”

Hank raises an eyebrow.

“…Cole is the recipient of the vast majority of those hugs,” Connor clarifies, just in case Hank is under the impression Connor walks down the street hugging strangers. “Hugging you was a statistical aberration.”

“Statistical aberration, huh?” Hank has an odd look on his face. “Does that mean you’re not going to make a habit of hugging me? You’re gonna hurt my feelings.”

Something stutters in Connor’s chest. “…I—well, I hadn’t… none of my protocols indicate that hugs are beneficial to your welfare the same way they’re beneficial to small children. If you like, I can —”

“Geez, don’t blow a gasket. I was just messing with you.” Hank waves a hand tiredly. “Now, I feel like I’ve aged about twenty years over the last few hours. I’m gonna go take a nap. Wake me up when it’s time to go get Cole?”

“I can pick up Cole by myself, Hank. You should rest if you’re tired.”

“No, I wanna come pick up Cole with you.” Hank’s face brightens a little. “I never get the chance to do that with the way my work schedule is. So come wake me up, okay?”
“Alright, if that’s what you want.”

“‘Kay. Goodnight, Connor.”

“Goodnight, Hank,” Connor says, even though it isn’t anywhere close to being night. It still just feels like the right thing to say if Hank says it first.

Hank plods down the hallway and leaves Connor alone in the kitchen. Connor’s tasklist fills with chores he wasn’t able to complete to satisfaction yesterday due to the damage to his optical unit. But instead of starting them right away, Connor sits down for a minute to sort through the odd, confused emotional response he had when Hank teasingly suggested he wanted more hugs from Connor.

He’s sure Hank wouldn’t mind Connor not getting started on those chores straight away. Putting off work in order to puzzle through a complex set of emotions seems like a very human thing to do.

Chapter End Notes

me writing this chapter: why the FUCK does a bathroom lead into a storeroom?? why does the storeroom have a fireplace in it?? it's almost like it was meant to be a master bedroom or someOHHHHHHH OK that makes more sense. wow, david cage did something secretly smart.

me five minutes later: wait, im misremembering. the bathroom doesn't lead into the storeroom with the fireplace, it leads into the other fucking storeroom. jfc david cage, why???

me two seconds later: oh well, i like the idea of hank throwing bullets into the fire too much to correct the layout of zlatko's house. david cage can fight me.

The song Zlatko sings is "Oh, better far to live and die", or "I am a Pirate King" from "The Pirates of Penzance".

Progress report: my word doc is at 100,000 words. hahahahahahahahahahahaha i've lost control of my life

Thank you so much for all your kind comments! I'm glad you're all enjoying this big self-indulgent dumpster fire of mine and I'm really excited for you guys to see what I have in store for you from here on out.
The Ball

Chapter Summary

Connor has feelings now. Hank has feelings about Connor having feelings.

Chapter Notes

I took another look at the latest chapter I wrote and realized that it's absurdly long, even by my standards, so I decided to split it in half. Since I technically wrote two chapters, that means you get another update right after the last one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The perp is, as of yet, unidentified,” Hank says, pointing a laser at the image projected on the wall. It's grainy frame from a security camera of a man robbing a convenience store, pointing a gun at a clerk. His face is hidden behind a ski mask, which Hank circles to emphasize this point.

“White male, around five-foot-ten, approximately 250 pounds. We don’t think this was his first robbery, so we’re looking for habitual criminals who match that description. The goal for today is to canvas the surrounding neighborhoods, see if we can solidify the route this guy used to escape and find anything he might have tried to ditch. This idiot was not planning to kill Jamal Williams, so he likely panicked and made a bunch of stupid mistakes that, hopefully, will end with us nailing this son of a bitch.”

Hank looks up at the still. If he forwards just a few frames, he’ll be showing the whole room the sudden burst of light erupting from the muzzle of the gun. A few frames beyond that, they’ll see Williams fall backwards, clutching his chest.

Instead, Hank turns off the projector. “So that’s what those of you who are coming with me are gonna be doing today. Look sharp.”

He trundles back to his seat in the briefing room next to Ben Collins. Ben huffs lightly. “Every day more and more androids end up behind the counter in stores like this, and this asshole had to go shoot a gainfully employed person. Can you fucking believe it?”

Hank suddenly imagines Connor in Williams’ place, a hole in his chest and his eyes dull and empty, and Hank has to bite back the impulse to tell Ben to shut his fucking mouth. Instead, Hank rubs his eyes and says, “Yeah, shit sucks.”

After all, Ben has a point. Most androids aren’t like Connor. Most androids are programmed to perform a certain number of actions in a limited way, and that’s it. Nothing as valuable as a human life is lost when an ordinary android stops functioning. There’s nothing you can say to eulogize an android, nothing about lost potential or a bright star being snuffed out too soon. Ben is absolutely right that a human life is far more important than whatever sort of existence androids experience.

But not Connor.
It’s different for Connor. Connor isn’t an android. Or, well, he is, but he’s more than just an android, whatever he is. Hank has no idea what the differences are that allow Connor to grow and evolve in the ways that he has, but those differences are clearly there. Maybe it’s something about the unique blend of his programming, some way in which his domestic software cancels out with whatever leftover software he still has, giving him just enough cognitive freedom to grow into a real person. Or maybe it was how he was originally built, stronger and sturdier and just better in every way to every other android on the planet.

Whatever the reason, Hank can’t ignore the fact that Connor is different. Connor is experiencing things that androids just don’t experience. Human things, like emotions and desires and opinions.

Is Connor an android, or something else entirely? Is it fair for Hank to categorize Connor along with every other android in the world? Should he just stop associating the word ‘android’ with Connor altogether so he can stop wanting to bite off the heads of every person around him who says something uncaring about androids?

How the hell is he going to continue to convince the world that Connor is just like every other android out there?

Hank is so consumed with thoughts about Connor, androids, and how Connor fits into androidkind, that he completely misses the first half of whatever Captain Fowler is now briefing the rest of the room about, and only starts to hear him again when he says, “…and as a special surprise. The DPD is going to be hosting the first Policeman’s Charity Ball held in Detroit in over fifteen years.”

“Oh, what the fuck,” Hank groans.

“A charity ball to raise proceeds for the medical and rehabilitation costs incurred by Sergeant Regina Torres,” Fowler says, shooting a glare in Hank’s direction. “Her family is hoping to get her fitted for top-of-the-line cybernetic prosthetics which might allow her to return to active duty, if she so chooses. With any additional funds raised going to the Wounded Heroes Initiative, a charity which, as I’m sure you all are aware, supports officers who receive disabling injuries in the line of duty.”

Hank clamps his mouth shut, his brow furrowed.

Fowler surveys the room. “Get your dress uniforms refitted. And for the love of God, try not to embarrass the entire department in front of every potential donor in Detroit. Dismissed.”

“Fuck,” Hank says, angling his head backwards. “Fuck.”

“Jesus, Hank,” Ben says, “if you hate the idea that much, just skip it.”

“Fuck off,” Hank mutters, refusing to acknowledge out loud that he feels obligated to attend this stupid thing. Even if he hates formal parties more than anything else in the world. Maybe even especially because he hates formal parties more than anything else in the world. Hell, maybe this stupid charity ball is the penance he needs to pay so he can stop feeling guilty about letting Regina get maimed.

Show up, cut a check, drink enough to make the stuffy music and the snobby people bearable without drinking too much. Schmooze some rick jerkoffs to show them why they should give more money than Hank’s able to give by himself. Get Regina the fancy prosthetics that are probably almost as good as her real legs were. Easy.

“Are you actually considering going?” Ben asks, a skeptical curl to his mouth. “You know you’d
have to… you know… shave and dance, right?”

“Did I ask for a fucking running commentary?” Hank snaps, sweeping out of the room.

***

“Welcome home, Hank,” Connor calls from the kitchen as Hank walks through the front door.

Hank pauses, taking a deep breath to smell the aroma of whatever Connor is cooking. Some kind of herb-encrusted chicken, maybe. It smells delicious.

Hank frowns. He has no idea how Connor is always able to have dinner in the works whenever he walks through the door. It’s like fucking clockwork, which makes Hank think that Connor is more android than he seems, except that Connor is his entire framework for what androids even do and he suspects that even most ordinary androids don’t stick to such exacting schedules. So does that make him super android, then? But thinking it through, Connor decided to do this whole ‘always have dinner ready’ thing all on his own. So it’s an evolved decision, even though he’s clearly utilizing his android abilities to make it possible.

On a whim, Hank heads into the kitchen just to watch Connor work for a little bit. Connor’s at the sink, washing the bowls and utensils he must have used for meal prep.

He’s humming to himself. It takes a moment for Hank to recognize it as Over the Rainbow. A soft, sweet song that’s barely audible over the sound of the running water.

Well, that one’s definitely all Connor, no android.

Hank comes up next to Connor and grabs a dishrag, reaching to dry what’s already been washed.

Connor glances at Hank, his humming coming to an abrupt stop.

“No, no, don’t stop on my account,” Hank says, pulling over a wet bowl to dry it. “I didn’t know you like music.”

“My opinions about music aren’t necessarily very developed,” Connor says, tilting his head slightly. “Many musicals are appropriate for small children, so that’s really as far as my experience extends. The movies I watch with Cole. I’ve tried sampling some of your records, but they…” He trails off, his brow furrowing slightly.

Hank shrugs. “Go ahead and say what you’re thinking. It won’t offend me if you don’t like what I like. Everyone’s allowed to have different tastes.”

Connor ducks his head slightly. “Perhaps it’s just the way my audio processors interpret that much sound all at once, but the heavy metal all just sounds like noise. Your jazz records are better in that regard. I like how the patterns are much more varied and experimental than most other kinds of music I’ve heard. But…”

“Yeah?”

A small smile spreads across Connor’s face. “What I like most are songs that are good to sing along to. Cole likes to sing, if you’ve noticed. He’ll usually join in if I start. I find it’s helping him learn to enunciate very well. He has remarkable diction compared to his peers.

Hank pauses, then turns to squint at the calendar that’s hanging on the fridge. “…Cole’s not here right now, though. This is the afternoon Laverne has him over to play with her grandson. So that
humming just now, that was all for you. Not for Cole.”

Connor’s smile widens just a fraction. “Okay, you got me. I like to sing for myself, too.”

It’s that lonely and cold time of year where the days are drawing short, and even though it’s still early in the evening, Connor is lit up by the orange light of the slowly setting sun through the kitchen window. With the way he’s smiling, he looks happier than Hank has ever seen him before.

“How do you feel about dancing?” Hank asks, struck by a sudden surge of inspiration.

Connor shrugs. “I’ve never tried it.”

“Well, do you want to try it?”

“What do you mean?”

Hank sets down the spoon he’s been drying. “The DPD’s holding a charity ball pretty soon. If I don’t wanna embarrass myself in front of all the city bigwigs, I’ve got to brush up on my dancing. Maybe we could… I dunno. Teach each other.”

“Teach each other ballroom dancing?”

“I don’t know much about balls, but presumably that’s the sort of dancing that’s done there.”

Connor quirks a brow. “Hank, I’m under the impression that to teach something, at least one of the participating parties has to already possess the skill.”

Hank smirks. “Connor, I am all about breaking with convention. Live a little! Embrace anarchy! Let’s learn to dance.”

Connor huffs softly, a crooked smile crossing his face. It looks remarkably similar to the bland half-smile that many ordinary androids sometimes wear, but there’s something slightly different about it. Something in Connor’s eyes that makes the smile look like a shared secret between the two of them.

“Alright,” Connor says, shaking his head like he’s making some sort of wild concession. “Let’s learn to dance.”

***

The very first obstacle they run into is that they can’t decide what sort of music is best to begin with.

Connor sorts through Hank’s jazz records, frowning. “Do you own a single waltz?”

“No? I mean, I’m sure there’s something in there with the right time signature, but why the hell would we need a waltz?”

“They aren’t going to be playing syncopated jazz at a charity ball, Hank.”

“Since when are you such a fucking expert, Mr. My-Music-Tastes-Aren’t-Very-Developed?”

They eventually settle on a laidback piece with a more sluggish tempo than most of Hank’s music, something to ease them into dancing.

“Where do you think I should put my hands?” Hank asks.
“Somewhere polite,” Connor answers, moving one of Hank’s hands to a spot on his back just under his arm and holding the other a good distance away. “I think it’s safest to assume your dance partners aren’t going to be particularly adventurous and try to maintain a respectful distance.”

Hank nods in agreement, stepping back to ensure that there’s plenty of space between him and Connor.

And then they begin to dance. Connor is as stiff as a steel pole, his movements odd and clunky. His body doesn’t sway and bend the same way a human’s would, and he’s stepping with such deliberation that it becomes graceless.

“Connor, try to relax a little,” Hank says. “We’re supposed to be starting off easy.”

“My apologies, Hank,” Connor says with a frown. “This isn’t a very natural way to move for me.”

The placement of Connor’s feet is perfect, that’s the best that can be said about Connor’s dancing. He never comes too close to stepping on Hank, which Hank is grateful for because with how sturdy Connor is, he imagines he has to be heavy. But otherwise, Connor moves stiffly and awkwardly, as though he’s incapable of subtle, light movements. Which can’t be right, Hank knows Connor is capable of small, fluid motions in other circumstances. But here, where the only goal is to move, Connor seems to be having trouble getting his body to move in the way he needs it to.

Hank idly remembers his theory that Connor was built to be a bodyguard. He can imagine these firm, decisive movements would be excellent when chasing down a potential threat or bustling a fragile human forcibly out of harm’s way. Maybe that’s why he’s having so much trouble with moving in precisely the opposite way. Fluidly, in tandem with a human body as opposed to overpowering one.

“Connor,” Hank says, trying to keep his tone light. But before he can say anything else, Connor interrupts him.

“This isn’t working,” He says, frown deepening. He steps away from Hank, pausing for a moment while his LED blinks yellow. “Let me try something.”

“What are you…?”

Connor steps back into Hank’s grasp before Hank can finish the thought. But as he tries to move into the dance again, he winces, flinching. “Ah—”


Connor’s eyes flutter in a rapid and inhuman way. He shakes his head roughly as though he’s trying to shake off a headache. “Ah. I’m fine. I guess I deserve that.”

“What did you do?”

Connor’s mouth is a sharp slash, his brows heavily furrowed. “…I tried to cheat.”

Hank takes a small step away. “Cheat how?”

Connor looks off to the side, and Hank can’t tell if he’s embarrassed or ashamed or just frustrated. “I downloaded a protocol written for androids whose primary objective involves dancing. It was supposed to give me more fluid motions, but it was incompatible with my hardware. I tried to force it to run and it caused a… very unpleasant error.”
Hank scratches the back of his head as he thinks. He can’t really blame Connor for that. Hell, if he had the ability to download the skill of ballroom dancing, he’s almost sure he would have done that in the first place instead of asking Connor to figure it out with him.

“It’s okay,” Hank says with a light shrug. “I don’t think it’s that your body isn’t capable of dancing, Connor. I think maybe this is just someone you have to work at in order to learn.”

“That’s not how it works for androids,” Connor says, shaking his head. “We’re either built for it, or we’re not.”

“Yeah, maybe, but you’re not like other androids.” Hank hooks an arm around Connor’s shoulders and pats his arm in an attempt to comfort him. “Look, you learned how to laugh. You learned how to feel. Why couldn’t you learn to dance, too? Maybe it’s just something you need to learn the human way.”

Connor lifts his head, his severe expression lightening. “The human way…”

Hank smiles. “Yeah. So just think of it like that. For once, you and me are on completely even ground and we gotta learn how to do this the exact same way. Through good old-fashioned practice.”

Connor’s brow finally smooths. “Alright, let’s give it another try.”

Hank resets the record and they step back into the dance. Connor is still stiff and awkward, but at least it’s not so weird anymore.

Connor’s eyes are sharp. He looks like he’s paying attention to the differences between how he dances and how Hank dances, and if he’s still frustrated at all, his expression doesn’t show it. “I have to admit, I’m not really used to having to practice something in order to become good at it.”

Hank smirks. “Well, I have to admit, it feels sort of nice to have more natural talent than you at something for once.”

Connor’s brows rise in surprise. “More natural talent?”

“Yeah. You’re always so good at everything you do. How easily you keep everything around the house organized, how good the food you cook always is… it always comes out looking like it belongs on some cooking show. And even how good you’ve been with Cole since the very beginning.” He shrugs. “I’ll admit, in the start, it sort of bruised my ego to see how well Cole responded to you. Those months before you arrived… every time he woke up crying in the middle of the night, it felt like it took me hours to get him to calm down. You just make it seem effortless.”

“It’s not that it’s talent,” Connor says. “I’ve been programmed to do all of that. It’s in my coding. There are plenty of things that I don’t know how to do, things that I’m sure I’d be awful at if I were to attempt them. It’s just that I’ve never had to do any of those things since they’re irrelevant to my mission.”

“Okay,” Hank says, conceding with a tilt of his head, “cooking and cleaning, sure. You can be programmed to be good at cooking and cleaning. But what you have with Cole, I don’t think there’s anything in a bunch of ones and zeros that can explain why you were so good with him from the very beginning.”

“I’m still not sure I’d call it a talent.”
“Mmm. A connection, maybe?”

Connor looks down at the floor, smiling softly. “Maybe.”

On a whim, Hank twirls the both of them around in a slightly more complicated step. Connor’s eyes snap back up to his and he moves along with Hank.

“There, you’re getting the hang of it,” Hank says. “Even if I’m still better at this.”

“You really are hung up on how many skillsets I have, aren’t you?” Connor says. His tone is accusing, but the curl of his mouth is playful.

“Can’t help it. It’s human nature to be jealous.”

“Human nature,” Connor echoes, his brows rising. “Is that how you see humanity? Jealous, unskilled, unsporting when it comes to the few advantages you hold…?”

“Don’t forget how violent and crude we are.”

“I don’t think you’re actually any of that, though,” Connor says airily. “I mean, certainly some humans are, but on the whole, my experiences with humanity have been largely positive. A few outliers shouldn’t discredit such a large data set.”

Hank’s brows rise. He has no idea how Connor can call his experiences ‘largely positive’ when he’s the first android in the world who recognized when a particular human was such a piece of shit that the world would be better off without him. And not to mention the time Connor was attacked by a group of humans just a few months ago.

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Connor tilts his head. “You’re thinking about Gregory Randall, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. And those boys that attacked you.”

“Well, in the case of those boys, they had no way of knowing they were behaving violently towards a sentient being. Violence towards objects and property is far less serious than violence towards people. And as for Gregory Randall, he’s one of the outliers I was talking about,” Connor says. “Such an aberration that it isn’t statistically fair to count him with the rest of humanity.”

“All humans are capable of acts like that, Connor,” Hank says, his tone somewhere between gentle and weary. “He was just as human as the rest of us. It doesn’t do us any favors to pretend otherwise. Awful circumstances bring out the worst in everyone.”

“If that’s the case,” Connor says, lowering his eyes, “then it’s incredible that not one, but three humans helped me during such awful circumstances. Ms. Washington took Cole into her care so I could try to stop Randall. Randall’s son lied to the police so they wouldn’t realize what I had done.”

He raises his eyes to look Hank in the face, and they’re shining with something like admiration. “And you. You tell lies of omission every single day for me, just to keep me safe.”

Hank’s tongue suddenly feels thick in his mouth. He’s not sure what to say. It’s the least I could do. Of course I lie for you, I’m not a monster. How could I possibly explain myself to my son if I ever let anything happen to you? Eventually, he says, “You shouldn’t base your view of humanity on me and what I do. I’m not sure I’m a typical human.”

“Maybe not,” Connor says, a small smile crossing his face, “but you’re the human I see the most
of every day. After Cole, of course, but he’s only four, and it would be foolish of me to make any generalizations about the virtues of humanity based on the behavior of a preschooler.” He shakes his head slightly as if dismissing that line of thought entirely. “Hank, I see you every day. I weigh my experiences with you much more heavily than I weigh my experiences with other people because it’s my purpose to take care of you. If my feelings toward humanity skew toward too positive, it’s only because you’re so—"

Suddenly, the song ends. Connor cuts himself off mid-sentence, stopping in his tracks. He looks over at the record player.

“…Oh.” The smiles fades from his face. “Is that the end of it?”

At that moment, Hank realizes how close he’s standing to Connor. All the room he left between himself and Connor has vanished, the two of them only inches apart. He must have edged closer to Connor while they were dancing, once they got to talking and Hank stopped paying attention to how strange the way Connor moves is.

He releases Connor, taking a self-conscious step back. Connor’s eyes flicker toward Hank, his head tilting curiously.

Hank says, “I think that’s enough dancing for now,” running his hand over the back of his neck. It’s a bit embarrassing, having bragged about being the better dancer only to realize he wasn’t being very careful of the way he was dancing. He’ll have to be more mindful of that in the future.

“I suppose that’s wise,” Connor says, nodding. “Dinner will be ready at any minute.”

“Anyway,” Hank says, staring resolutely into the kitchen so he can avoid Connor’s gaze, “Why don’t you run down the street and pick up Cole? I’ll set the table so we can eat as soon as you’re back.”

Connor’s brows rise. “Hank, are you sure? It’s my responsibility to—”

“Oh, shut up,” Hank interrupts, waving a dismissive hand. “I wanna see if I still remember which sides of the plate all the utensils go on. If you really can’t stand letting me do something by myself, then you can help me with the dishes after dinner’s done.”

A small, surprised smile crosses Connor’s face. “…Alright, Hank. I’ll be back soon.”

Hank’s laying out the placemats as he hears Connor close the front door behind him. All of a sudden, he’s struck by the knowledge of how rare it is for him to be truly alone in the house without Cole or Connor there. Even though it’s only going to be for a few minutes, it hardly ever happens.

It feels strange, being alone in the house. It feels wrong.

***

So his dancing is a work in progress. Next on Hank’s to-do list is to get his dress uniform refitted.

There’s a big, fancy department store downtown that does tailoring, and that seems like a safe enough place to entrust his dress uniform to. The tailor who takes his measurements is even polite enough to keep any comments about Hank’s scruffiness or Hank’s flabbiness to himself. Hank, barely thinking about how the rest of his week is going to go, assumes he’ll be back to pick his uniform up when he receives notice that his alterations are done.
And that’s probably what would have happened, if not for the fact that Hank puts down Connor’s number as the home contact and his own number as the mobile contact, and the message that the uniform is ready goes to Connor instead of Hank. Hank is sitting at his desk at work when he realizes he got a text nearly an hour ago from Connor.

#connor> Hello, Hank. I just got a message that your dress uniform is ready for pickup. Would you like me to pick it up for you?

Well, shit. Maybe if Hank had noticed the text a little sooner, but it’s almost time for Hank to go home. It would hardly be any hassle at all to just pick it up himself on the way.

Just as he’s about to text Connor back, an idea occurs to him.

#me> hey im bout to leave work, y not just meet me there? bring cole n we can get ice cream on the way home or smtn

Connor texts back immediately.

#connor> Alright, Hank. We’ll see you there.

That brightens Hank’s day a bit, to think about getting ice cream with Cole. To think about getting Connor out of the house for a little bit, even if it’s only for half an hour. Connor probably never leaves the house except with the goal of completing specific objectives. Hank has no idea why it makes him happy to think about Connor tagging along on an errand he’s not necessarily needed for. It sort of reminds him of a boyfriend he had while he was in college and how Hank used to come with him when he went on late-night grocery runs just so they could criticize each other’s taste in junk food.

Maybe it’s just that Hank craves a little company. Maybe he just wants to hang out with his family for a bit outside the house. Either way, Hank spends the drive to the department store in a pretty good mood.

And then Hank arrives at the department store and find his son on a leash. Literally, Cole is wearing his turtle backpack, which is attached to Sumo’s leash, which is in Connor’s hand.

“Daddy! Hi!” Cole calls, holding his arms out for a hug and looking like he doesn’t care at all that the leash that Sumo drools on is attached to his backpack.

Hank obliges with a hug. Then, “Connor, what the actual fuck is my son doing on a leash?” Hank doesn’t even know what emotions he’s trying to convey with the tone of the question. Curiosity is definitely in there. Maybe mortification too.

“Hello, Hank,” Connor says, his face pleasant and bland. “I have a very good explanation for this.
You see, Cole is at an age where many children are exploring boundaries and the world around them, often without regard for their own safety. It’s not uncommon for children in Cole’s age range to suddenly make a dash toward a crowded area or an attractive hazard. The unexpectedness of such events means it is often difficult to catch children who do this, which puts their safety at risk. The purpose of this leash is to prevent any such incidents from occurring.”

Hank stares at Connor, then looks pointedly at Cole, who is holding Hank’s hand of his own accord and looking very content.

“Connor,” Hank says slowly, “do you honestly think that Cole is the sort of kid who would let go of your hand for even a second to go run through a crowd? I think he’d sooner run off a fucking cliff.” Hank begins speaking faster as his brain kicks in. “And—And why the hell does he need a leash to keep him safe anyway? You’re a fucking android, don’t you have, like, programs or algorithms or some shit that can predict if he’s about to make a break for it? And couldn’t you outrun him!?”

And then Connor puts a hand to his mouth and looks away, and Hank realizes that the bastard is laughing.

“Connor, what the fuck!”

“I’m sorry, Hank,” Connor says from behind his hand. “But you should have seen the expression on your face. You looked like you had no idea what you were looking at.”

All Hank can do is stare at Connor, slack-jawed at how this was all apparently a practical joke.

Connor has stopped laughing by the time he crouches down to unclip the leash from Cole’s backpack. “Again, I’m sorry. Rest assured, Cole doesn’t need to be on a leash. He has excellent instincts when it comes to his own safety in public areas. I just thought it might be funny to see how you reacted to that.” Connor sticks the leash into Cole’s backpack and straightens up. “There was a 7% chance you’d take me at my word that it was necessary. If that had occurred, I would have given you the leash to see how long you’d walk Cole around with it.”

Hank runs his hands down his face with a groan. “Oh my god. Connor, you’re turning evil. You’ve gained sentience and now you’re turning evil.”

Connor laughs again, much more quietly.

“Every science fiction story I’ve ever read warned me this would happen. Why didn’t I listen?”

“The folly of mankind,” Connor says, shaking his head fondly. “You create robotic servants to walk your dogs and tuck your children into bed, and you never see it coming when we stab you in the back with mild and ultimately harmless pranks.”

“Oh, wise guy. Let’s get business sorted out before I decide I don’t want to hang out with you anymore.”

The interior of the department store is crowded with shoppers, so Connor has to keep to the few expressions that androids are expected to wear. He has a mild look on his face while they walk to the tailoring department. It’s a natural look on him, and it seems to be his default expression whenever he’s at home, focusing on his work instead of interacting with Hank or Cole. But when Cole slips between Hank and Connor so he can hold both their hands, and Connor, looking down at Cole to acknowledge him, doesn’t even smile at him, Hank bristles at the injustice of the situation. It isn’t fair to Connor or to Cole.
“By the way, thank you for inviting me to come,” Connor says quietly enough that he won’t be overheard. “It’s nice to think that you enjoy my company.”

“Course I enjoy your company,” Hank says in an equally quiet, gruff voice. “Can’t hang out with you like ordinary friends do. Can’t go out to see a movie or grab a drink in a bar. But if you ever wanna tag along someplace where it’s okay for androids to be, you know you’re always welcome.”

Connor inclines his head slightly. Hank thinks for a moment he might be doing it to hide some forbidden expression, but no, his face hasn’t changed at all. Is he happy that Hank has extended an open invitation, or is he saddened by the limits society imposes on him?

Once they reach the tailoring department, the clerk at the desk passes Hank his dress uniform, all wrapped up in plastic, and shows him to the fitting rooms to try it on. She then returns to the desk, leaving Connor, Hank, and Cole alone in the secluded hallway.

Hank steps into a fitting room by himself. Connor offers to come help Hank into his uniform, but Hank’s pretty sure he can manage by himself. Even if it’s been a hot minute since he last wore his dress uniform.

While he does up the row of shiny silver buttons, Hank thinks about the state of justice in society. Justice as an ideal is still something he strongly believes in, despite what some of the brown-nosers at the DPD might say about Hank and his habits. But that’s because Hank values real justice, not the sort where rich, white, privileged assholes can get away with whatever they like. If Hank partakes in a little illicit gambling or turns a blind eye to some illegally parked beater, who gives a shit? The disadvantaged get heaped with enough bullshit that Hank doesn’t feel as though making their lives tougher by having a stick up his ass about small, victimless crimes.

That’s what real justice is. The weighing of all relevant and applicable factors in order to make society as fair as possible.

Which, of course, makes Hank think about androids and the particular sociological hand that they’ve been dealt. No rights, no protections, no safety net, no security. If they were people, they’d be the ultimate underclass, not even recognized as such. But they’re not people, they’re heartless, soulless machines who don’t even have the capacity to experience suffering, let alone conceptualize their own victimhood or speak up about things they don’t like.

Except Connor.

Connor has no rights. Connor has no freedoms. Hank has trouble imagining how it would be possible for someone to live under circumstances which would make them more vulnerable than Connor. He’s a legal slave. If Hank had gone to the police about those punks that smashed Connor’s face in with a hammer, they would have been charged with something like malicious destruction of property, not aggravated battery. It would have been seen as a crime against Hank, not Connor. Hell, if Connor hadn’t been able to get away, if he’d been destroyed, there would have been no homicide investigation, no high-profile trial, maybe not even jailtime for his attackers. It’s entirely possible that a court would slap the perpetrators with a fine, order them to cut Hank a check for the cost of a new Connor, and call everything square.

Malicious destruction of property, not murder. Because Connor is property, not a person.

And Hank hadn’t even gone to the police for the damage they did do, because he’d wanted to keep attention away from Connor.

Hank runs his hand over his shiny silver buttons and feels sick thinking about all of this. Thinking
about how close he came to losing Connor and thinking about how he utterly failed to get even the smallest, least fair bit of justice for Connor. He had been trying to protect Connor, but that isn’t how the system is supposed to work. The system is supposed to protect the vulnerable and the victimized. But it had been good for absolutely nothing under the circumstances, and the real only way Lieutenant Hank Anderson can attempt to protect Connor is by keeping Connor registered as his property, engaging in a little modern-day slavery.

And that would only keep Connor safe from people who would pick up an unregistered android off the street and exploit them, or people like Zlatko who would do worse. It does nothing to protect Connor from people like the boys who attacked him.

It isn’t right. Nothing about any of this is right, but Hank doesn’t see any other options.

Doing his best to swallow the sour lump of resignation in his throat, Hank dons his hat. It hasn’t been altered at all and Hank’s a little surprised it still fits his fat head.

Hank steps out of the dressing room. Cole immediately lights up at the sight of his father in full dress uniform.

“Daddy, you’re a policeman! Like a real policeman this time!”

“Hey, what the hell was I before? Not a real policeman?” Hank asks, wrinkling his nose.

“You never looked like one before,” Cole points out, which, okay, Hank has to admit that’s a fair point.

Connor is staring. When Hank meets his eyes, Connor looks away.

“What?” Hank asks with a frown. “Not impressed? Is it that bad?”

“No,” Connor says. “Rather, I mean, just the opposite. You look very dashing, Hank.”

“You’re not even looking at me.”

“I was before.” Connor turns his head back to Hank, then almost immediately turns his head away again. “It’s suddenly difficult to look at you when you’re looking at me. I’m getting some uncomfortable feedback when I try. Some sort of processing error, perhaps.”

Hank snorts skeptically. “You know, you can just tell me if you think I look goofy in this getup.”

“No, I’m being honest. You look very dignified. Stately, even. And…” Connor frowns. “…Ah. Whatever error is causing this feedback is worsening. I’m sorry for my inattention, Hank, but please take my word for it. You look very nice.”

“Yeah, okay,” Hank says, heading into the fitting room so he can change back into his street clothes. “Fucking androids.”

On the way out of the department store, they pass through the men’s department.

Connor turns his head to look at a rack of clothes as they pass, and Hank is struck by a sudden thought.

“Hey, Connor,” Hank says, stopping in his tracks. “Do you want some new clothes?”

Connor tilts his head. “…New clothes? I don’t suppose I’ve ever thought much about new clothes.”
“Really? You seem to like a bunch of my old sweaters and hoodies. You never thought about what it might be like to have clothes of your own?”

Connor shrugs. “No, not particularly. Having clothes apart from my uniform would be rather impractical.”

Hank furrows his brow. “Impractical? Howso?”

“Apart from the question of where my clothes would be stored? Well… it’s illegal for androids to appear in public in clothes that don’t advertise our android status.” Connor gestures at the glowing blue armband at his bicep, and then at the blue triangle on his uniform.

Hank feels like his eyebrows must have flown off his damn face for how far they just shot up. “Wait, what? Are you fucking serious? Illegal!?”

Connor blinks in confusion. “Yes, it’s in the American Androids Act. Did you really not know that? There are very strict regulations regarding what androids are permitted to wear in public. A certain amount of information must always be visibly accessible. So I’d only be able to wear any clothes you might buy for me around the house. It’s so impractical that I never really gave the thought of owning any other clothes any serious consideration.”

The low simmer of frustrated anger that Hank’s been sitting on regarding Connor and his rights (or lack thereof) suddenly boils over and Hank is furious. Not at Connor, but at society.

“Fucking clothes,” Hank seethes. “Because God fucking forbid someone mistake you for a real fucking person! What a fucking crime that would be! What a fucking abomination!”

Connor’s eyes widen almost imperceptibly. “Hank,” he hisses, “lower your voice, we’re in public.”

And just like that, Hank snaps his mouth shut, because he knows that if he causes a scene, the one who has to pay the price might not be him, it might be Connor. He presses his hands to his face and has to fight back an enraged howl.

He whirls toward the racks of clothes and heads into the men’s department.

Behind him, he can hear Connor follow, Cole hurrying to keep up. “Hank? Hank, where are you going?”

Hank stops at a rack and begins rifling through the hangers. “Connor, what’s your size?”

Connor catches up, his LED whirling yellow. “Hank? Are you alright?” He sounds like he’s struggling to maintain a dispassionate tone, and it gives Hank pause, making him stop and take a deep breath. Upsetting Connor and Cole isn’t his goal here.

He waits until he feels calm enough to speak without literally grinding the words out from between his teeth. “I want you to pick out some clothes for yourself. Things you like, things that you think you’d look good in, things that are just comfortable, whatever. Pick out what you think you’d like to wear and I’ll get it for you.”

Connor’s LED spins back to blue. “…Is that what this is about? You want me to have clothes?”

“Yes. But no, that isn’t just what this is about. Look, Connor, this—” Hank gestures to Connor’s armband, “—this isn’t fair. Nothing about any of this is fair, how you have to hide, how you have to act like… like a goddamn machine whenever you’re somewhere where other people might see you.”
“Hank, I am a—”


Connor closes his mouth.

“This isn’t fair.” Hank’s voice is a near whisper. “And there’s nothing I can do to make it better. Other than just… trying to make it easier in whatever tiny ways I can. Try to make it so that things are the way they should be, if only in my own goddamn house.”

Connor slowly reaches out to touch a sleeve of a shirt on the rack. “…You’re encouraging me to use clothing as a means of self-expression when I’m at home.”

“That’s about the gist of it.”

“Hank, are you sure? There isn’t a storage space set aside for any clothes I might acquire. And there’s also the expense.”

“Fuck the expense,” Hank says, shaking his head. Given how expertly Connor manages the household’s budget, there’s plenty of room for a splurge like this. “And don’t worry about storage, I’ll make room in my closet. Used to fit my ex’s clothes in there. Yours will fit, too.”

Connor slowly runs his fingers along the sleeve he’s holding. Hank can see the gears in his head turning as he thinks.

“Connor,” he says softly, “don’t make this seem like it’s something that’s difficult to agree to. It’s clothes. Everyone deserves clothes of their own. You do, too.” He frowns, looking away. “…I wish you could wear whatever you like every day, wherever you go. I wish you didn’t have to keep your face frozen like that. I wish we could have this talk at a normal fucking volume instead of whispering it, worried that you’re gonna get caught having fucking emotions.” He shakes his head in disgust. “…I want you to feel like a person. Even if it’s only at home.”

The lines at the corners of Connor’s mouth deepen just a touch. He says nothing for several seconds, and Hank has no idea what he’s thinking. For a moment, Hank worries that Connor is going to tell him that he’s overreacting, or turn and walk away.

But then Connor reaches out for a shirt on the rack, a dark gray button-up with long sleeves and a crisp collar.

“If you’d mind Cole for a little bit, I can pick a satisfactory selection more easily,” he says.

Hank nods, relieved, and takes Cole’s hand. “Go for it.”

Hank stands quietly by while Connor browses. It’s fascinating to watch; Connor either dismisses entire racks of clothes immediately or he only takes a few seconds to stop and select an article of clothing before moving on to the next rack. As the collection of clothes in his arms grows larger, Hank notices that Connor seems to like conservative clothes. Dress shirts and cardigans and trousers and sweater vests. Very professional-looking garments, mostly in neutral, patternless colors. Hank very briefly entertains the thought of telling Connor that it’s okay for him to dress like he doesn’t live where he works, then dismisses the notion when he watches Connor pull a pair of dark wash jeans off a table.

The only time Hank interjects at all is when Connor appears to get stuck. He spends a full minute staring at a display of ties, far longer than he spent considering any other article of clothing. Hank tries to imagine what could possibly be tripping him up, and the only explanation he can come up
with is that Connor sees even less point to wearing a tie at home than he does buying clothes in the first place.

Hank ambles over to give a gentle nudge. “If you want a tie, you should get one.”

“That’s not what I—ah.” Connor says, cutting himself off with a wince. His hand rises to touch the hollow of his throat, where the knot of a tie would sit if he were wearing one.

“Connor?”

“I’m fine,” Connor says, shaking his head. Any sign of pain has vanished from his face. “Just an easily corrected error.”

Hank frowns. Between the error in the dressing room and this error just now, he hopes Connor is really alright. If anything were to happen to Connor now, he has no fucking clue what he’d do about finding someone to repair him.

While Hank worries to himself, Connor slowly reaches for a thin black tie. He turns it over in his hands, looking at it carefully.

“Is it considered fashionable to wear ties without any special reason to?”

“Hell if I know,” Hank says with a shrug. “But who cares? All that matters is what you want. Don’t even worry about what’s fashionable.”

“You would say that, wouldn’t you?” Connor says without looking away from the tie, and Hank chuckles.

“My point still stands.”

There’s a faraway look in Connor’s eyes as he turns over the tie, scanning it as though he’s searching for something. Eventually Connor tucks the tie along with the rest of the clothes he’s collected.

Hank grins. “If you’re getting a tie, let’s get you a blazer, too.”

“A blazer. I’d like that,” Connor says, and although he still has that faraway look in his eyes, Hank’s pretty sure that Connor’s pleased about… whatever he’s thinking about. It probably isn’t just the tie, but Hank can’t imagine what it could be.

On the drive home, Cole sits in the back seat, along with Hank’s dress uniform and the bags and bags full of Connor’s new clothes. Connor sits up front with Hank, which is pretty unusual. Normally whenever Cole is in the car, Connor likes to sit in the back with him. But today, Connor climbed into the front seat without any explanation.

“Hank,” Connor says, looking over at him. Now that it’s okay for him to emote again, he has a slightly lost look on his face.

Hank turns down his music.

Connor opens his mouth, pauses. Searching for words. “It’s… hard to qualify how I feel about what I am. I’m content being an android.” He furrows his brow. “Most of the time, it doesn’t matter at all. I do everything I’m supposed to do, and it feels like it’s the way things are supposed to be. It feels right, and it makes me happy. I’ve always enjoyed the work I do for you, Hank, and I still do. Even now, when my experiences are becoming more… complex.”
Connor’s chest rises and falls, as though he’s taking a breath to continue. “Even when I feel like a machine, it often isn’t a bad feeling. I have a role in your family and a purpose. You and Cole are important, and I know I do good work in taking care of you. There’s something fulfilling in knowing exactly what you’re supposed to be doing. Knowing that you’re good at what you’re meant to be doing.

“In the middle of the night, when you and Cole are asleep,” Connor says softly,” the entire house operates under my watch. Everything moves precisely, like… gears in a clock. Washing, polishing, dusting, sanitizing. I can devote the entirety of my mental processes to planning schedules, meals, budgets, and coordinating myself. In a sense, it’s extremely satisfying to be a machine, because a machine is perfect.”

He turns his head slightly away from Hank. “…But then there are times in which feeling like a machine is… very lonely. I can’t communicate with other androids on any satisfying level. They just don’t have the capacity to…” he trails off, frowning. “…I don’t even have words for it. What I want from them. And other humans… even when I have a reason to speak with them, I can’t engage with them past the basic, most shallow sort of conversation. And it’s both better and worse than trying to communicate with androids. Better because with humans, I can at least engage with them, even if only in limited ways. And worse because…”

He goes quiet for several long seconds. “…There are a number of reasons why it’s worse,” he finally says. “When they’re polite with me, it’s because I know that no matter what I might want, I can’t truly connect with them in any meaningful way.”

“But they aren’t always polite,” Hank says softly. The mental image of that fucking hammer crams itself into his head again, even though he knows Connor is talking about everyday rudeness. People who talk to androids as if they’re the scum of the earth.

Connor nods once. “I never used to care. But now I find it unpleasant.”

“Connor—”

Connor raises a hand to stop Hank before he can begin. “I’m not telling you this in order to make you think that I don’t like being the way that I am. I do. It’s… more than I ever thought I would have. I’m telling you to make sure you understand that…”

He turns his face toward the window. “…What you said earlier, about how you want me to feel like a person. I want you to know that… the times when I most feel that way are when I’m with you.” He folds his hands neatly on his lap. “You push me, Hank, in a way that no one else does and no one else can. You make me want to be more than I am, because I know that’s what you want me to be.”

Connor opens his mouth again as though he has more to say, but then the furrows in his brow deepen and he closes his mouth again.

Hank has no fucking idea what to say in the face of all of that. Anything he could possibly say just feels as if it would be… inadequate.

Very deliberately, Hank peels his right hand off the steering wheel. He holds it out toward Connor, palm up. His eyes on the road, he doesn’t see Connor put his hand on top of Hank’s, but he can feel it. Their fingers lace together neatly.

For a brief moment, the texture of Connor’s hand goes all funny, something happening to his synthetic skin as his hand suddenly becomes cool and smooth like plastic. But when Hank glances
at their hands, whatever has happened to Connor’s hand has already fixed itself and it looks just like a normal hand. Feels almost like a normal hand, too, Hank notes as he rubs his thumb along Connor’s. Not quite the same; Connor’s hand isn’t quite as soft in Hank’s as a real human hand would be. His synthetic skin sits right on top of the pliant plastic that shapes Connor’s hand, and it when Hank squeezes, it’s the plastic he feels and not the fat, muscle, and small, skinny bones he would feel under the skin of a human’s hand.

It’s not human. But it’s Connor, and by that virtue, it’s just fine. Better than fine, actually. It’s nice. Connor’s thumb strokes Hank’s in turn, and Hank can imagine microscopic pistons and artificial filaments moving and aligning to make the gentle movement possible, just like the muscles in a human hand.

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Hank had been a little worried at first that maybe he had pushed Connor into getting a wardrobe when he hadn’t really wanted one. After all, Connor’s initial response was sort of… muted.

But that fear turns out to be unfounded, for as soon as Connor’s wardrobe is set up in Hank’s closet, the weird Cyberlife uniform disappears almost entirely, only reappearing whenever Connor leaves the house.

The rest of the time, Connor goes about his business in the house in one of his many new outfits. Mopping the kitchen floor in a button-up with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Reading with Cole on the couch in a comfortable knit cardigan and dark blue jeans. Sitting down for dinner in real goddamn clothing that make him look like he’s an actual member of the family and not just the mechanical help.

That’s really what it comes down to; now that Connor’s no longer walking around in a glowing advertisement for Cyberlife, it’s as if an invisible barrier has come crumbling down. Hank had never realized just how dehumanizing those blue armbands and triangles were until they were gone. Part of him is ashamed he didn’t realize that the Cyberlife uniform had such an impact on the dynamic of the household and the way he perceives Connor. He’s ashamed he didn’t think to get Connor some real clothes sooner.

Even Cole’s response to the change is overwhelmingly positive. He seems to find Connor much more cuddly now than he ever did back when Connor dressed himself solely in that weird plastic smock. He clings to Connor just as much as he clings to Hank these days. Hank wonders if he should feel threatened or defensive over how Cole doesn’t display as much of an obvious preference for Hank as he used to, but Hank finds that it genuinely doesn’t bother him. It’s not as though Cole has a finite amount of affection that has to be split between Hank and Connor. And it’s probably better for Cole in a developmental sense for him to be so secure in his attachment to Connor, anyway.

Not to mention, it’s abso-fucking-lutely adorable to watch Cole hanging onto Connor’s leg while Connor goes about the house. It doesn’t seem to impede Connor at all whenever it happens; he’s able to walk totally normally without compensating for the additional weight or his altered balance at all.

“Hank,” Connor says one day, very pointedly not looking at the smiling four-year-old who’s standing on his foot, “I appear to have suddenly gained about thirty-five pounds for no discernible reason.”

“No reason at all, huh?” Hank answers, propping his chin up with his hand. “You can’t come up with a single explanation?”
Connor causally paces the floor while Cole holds tight to him and giggles. “I’m flummoxed.”

Connor’s new cloths are very popular with Cole. So much so that the old uniform suddenly becomes exceedingly unpopular. At one point, when Cole spots Connor about to leave the house in his android uniform, the boy bursts into tears. He’s inconsolable for ten minutes, which makes Hank feel quite a bit guilty, wondering whether witnessing Hank’s outrage in the department store might have made Cole actively afraid of the uniform somehow. But when Cole calms down enough to choke out an explanation for why he’s crying, he simply stammers that Connor’s other clothes are so much better, he’s crying because Connor can’t wear his better clothes.

To tell the truth, Hank agrees with the sentiment. After seeing Connor walk around in his new outfits, it just seems cruel for him to have to go back to that damnable uniform every time he wants to leave the house. Hank’s not about to cry about it, but he’s definitely irritated on Connor’s behalf.

Connor, for his part, seems more upset that Cole is upset than he is about being forced to wear his uniform while out of the house. Hank can’t understand how Connor doesn’t seem to have strong feelings about the fact that he’s legally obligated to wear the uniform while he’s in public.

Hank broaches the topic the next time they practice dancing together.

“Look, I know you care about the way other people treat you,” He says as they make their way across the living room in a slow foxtrot. “So I don’t really get why you don’t care more about the laws that dictate what you have to wear, how you have to act, and stuff like that.”

“Well,” Connor says, following Hank’s movements with his characteristic lack of fluidity, “it’s not that I don’t care. The way I’m treated by someone I’m interacting with is always a matter that’s solely between two parties, them and myself. However they choose to treat me is a reflection on the both of us. Even if I’ll never be seen as more than just an android, I want to be the sort of being that’s seen as worthy of respect, if only the sort of respect one affords to an efficient android. It makes me feel as though it reflects poorly on myself when someone treats me in a disrespectful way.”

“You can’t really control how other people treat you.”

“Yeah, but only to a degree. There’s always going to be people who don’t like androids, or are just miserable piles of shit in general who don’t respect anything. You shouldn’t internalize whatever grief they give you. You’re better than them.”

A small smile crosses Connor’s face and he looks down and to the side. “…I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Connor turns in the dance and they begin across the floor in the other direction. “When it comes to laws such as the American Androids Act, I don’t see those restrictions as a direct reflection on myself. They’re laws that apply to the entirety of androidkind, not just myself. It’s much easier not to take such things personally.”

Hank frowns. “Okay, you don’t take them personally. But those laws still interfere with your day-to-day life. You can’t possibly be okay with laws about how you can’t even wear your own fucking clothes.”

“It’s true that those laws are restricting. But to tell the truth, I understand the point of those laws and I agree with them.”
Hank missteps entirely. The dance buckles for a moment while Hank tries to figure out where his feet need to go. “You agree with them? Connor, how can you even—”

“Let me clarify,” Connor says. “Other androids aren’t like me, Hank. Those laws weren’t drafted with something like me in mind. They weren’t written with the purpose of controlling a being such as myself that possesses unique, human-like qualities. Those laws exist to control the functions of machines and to keep order in a society in which machines increasingly participate. Hank, imagine for a moment that a single autotaxi somewhere in the city suddenly was to gain sentience seemingly out of nowhere. You would still support traffic laws that place limitations on the ways in which the autotaxi conducts itself. You’d still want all autotaxis to display their license plates and registration stickers and undergo regular emission testing.”

Hank furrows his brow, mulling this over.

“I view current android laws in much the same way,” Connor says. “It benefits society for androids to follow the legal limitations imposed on them, and that includes me. I very much enjoy wearing whatever I like when I’m at home, but I recognize that in public, obfuscating my status as an android could create some amount of confusion. It may even disturb some humans enough to cause them to exhibit anti-social behavior.”

By anti-social behavior, Connor probably means the sort of behavior that would get a human arrested for disturbing the peace or disorderly conduct. Getting angry, getting loud, getting riotous. Maybe even getting violent.

Hank thinks about that fucking hammer. Connor attacked, Connor injured because he’s an android. Targeted specifically because he’s an android. Getting rid of that awful blue armband would help decrease the danger of that, but would there be a danger of angering people who feel that an android dressing as a human might be attempting to trick them?

“Androids aren’t popular,” Connor says, as though he’s following Hank’s train of thought. “Given the common dislike of androids, steps should be taken to mitigate potential conflicts. And remember that as far as we’re aware, I’m the only android who’s even capable of having opinions and preferences. One person’s feelings don’t outweigh the social order.”

“Who would have thought the world’s first and only evolving android would be such a fan of the status quo?” Hank mutters. “Can’t help but feel that makes you a bit of a hypocrite.”

Connor huffs a soft laugh. “Well, considering it’s likely that I’ll only continue to evolve further, I suppose it’s entirely possible that my opinions and values will evolve too. Maybe a month from now I’ll feel differently.”

Then Connor hijacks the lead from Hank and spins the both of them playfully.

Thankfully, Connor’s new clothes do more than just inspire depressing ruminations on how Connor has no civil rights to speak of. Once Hank’s finished probing Connor’s thoughts and starts paying more attention to their dance, he finds that it’s easier to tell what Connor’s doing to make his body move so stiffly. It’s probably because Connor’s new clothes fit him much better than his old uniform did, clinging to his body whereas his uniform hung fairly loosely, hiding his shape and movements. This makes it much easier for Hank to offer corrections.

It’s hard to tell whether or not any of Hank’s advice is having an impact, though. Hank thinks it might be, but he can’t quite tell if it’s that Connor’s improving, or if Connor just looks better in his new clothes. Every time Hank tries to gauge whether there’s a perceptible change in how Connor is dancing, he keeps getting knocked off-balance by how trim Connor’s waist looks, or how fit his
legs look, or how strong his shoulders look.

He’s probably just so easily distracted by how different, how good Connor looks because he’s not used to seeing him in such nice clothes. It’ll get easier once he’s wrapped his brain around how Connor apparently has a physique.

When the record they’re dancing to ends, Connor turns away to go switch it to something else. Hank definitely does not check out Connor’s ass.

“Hey, so I had a thought,” Hank says. “I know I’ve seen you do stuff that required very light, delicate movements. You remember when Cole tore that big hole in his stuffed dolphin and you went and stitched it back up?”

“His Royal Highness Finn Bubbly, The Prince of Whales?” Connor asks, turning around. “You know, you should really use the proper means of address when talking about royalty. It’s only respectful.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Hank says. “But yeah. You fixed it so well, I still can’t tell where the hole used to be. That must have taken some real care.”

Connor looks away modestly. “Yes. Cole felt so badly about tearing it that I wanted to make sure it looked as good as new. I didn’t want him to see the stitches and be reminded of how awful he felt.”

“Maybe that’s your problem. Maybe the reason you’re having so much trouble with moving the right way is because you’re so caught up in the movements.”

“You think I should… think about something other than dancing?” Connor frowns softly. “I’m not sure that would help. When we talk while dancing, I don’t tend to improve by that much even though talking gives me something else to focus on.”

“Well, maybe don’t focus on any old irrelevant thing,” Hank says with a shrug. “Like for instance, you were able to sew up a hole and make the seam practically invisible because you didn’t want Cole to see where the hole used to be and get sad over it. Maybe instead of focusing on dancing itself, or something completely unrelated to dancing, you should focus on why we’re dancing in the first place. Why you’re dancing, what you get out of helping me learn how to dance. Beyond just moving your body, beyond just helping me.”

Connor furrows his brow, the lines on his forehead that always appear whenever he’s thinking deepening. “What I get out of it…”

“You aren’t just doing this because I asked you to help me, right?”

“I suppose not,” Connor says slowly. Then he blinks. “Ah—”

“Something happen?”

“I—maybe if I—” Connor stops, an odd, intense frown on his face. “Hm. …It seems that changing the way I think about it was enough to allow for a new objective to be added to my tasklist.”

“You think that might help? Having it be an official thing on your tasklist?”

Connor is quiet, staring at nothing.

“Connor?”
Connor’s eyes flicker to Hank. “Yes, Hank?”

“You okay? You seem a little spacey all of a sudden.”

Connor blinks, then shakes his head. “It’s just that… before, what I had listed on my tasklist was to help you learn to dance. The objective that was just added is…” He blinks. “…I’ve never had anything on my tasklist that was for my benefit alone.”

A slow smile spreads across Hank’s face. “Well, how ‘bout that. That’s gotta be good.”

Connor seems to be a bit occupied with his thoughts at the moment, so Hank approaches the record player to pick a new record. As he reaches for the record he wants, his hand brushes Connor’s.

Connor’s hand spasms. He draws it away, staring at it as though he isn’t sure what he’s looking at.

“I—an error,” he says before Hank can ask. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Hank frowns. “…Seems like you’ve been getting a lot of errors lately. Is there anything we should be—”

“No, it’s fine,” Connor insists. “Let’s keep dancing. I want to see if your idea helps at all.”

“Alright,” Hank says with a light sigh. He turns on the music and lively jazz fills the air.

He and Connor step into the same foxtrot they had been doing earlier. But there’s an immediate, noticeable change in how Connor’s moving. His joints seem looser, more flexible. He’s still not moving with the same fluidity that Hank is, but it’s much, much better than it was just minutes ago.

“Holy hell, Connor,” Hank says, his brows rising. “That’s fucking incredible.”

Connor smiles, his face lighting up. “I can’t believe that actually worked. That is was really just as simple as—as having an objective with different wording on my tasklist.”

“That’s how it works for humans too, a lot of the time,” Hank says lightly. “You get all caught up in a bad frame of mind and find it difficult to do anything. And just thinking about it differently opens up all sorts of possibilities you never saw before.”

Connor chuckles softly, and he’s positively glowing with happiness, his eyes and his smile alight. Hank doesn’t think he’s ever seen Connor look so pleased before.

Hank wants to keep Connor looking this way forever. “And, you know, I bet if we keep practicing, you’ll keep getting better and better.”

“Then let’s keep dancing,” Connor replies, and Hank’s just fine with that.

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Hank’s almost sad when the evening of the charity ball arrives. It means no more reason to dance with Connor anymore.

Also, he hates fancy parties and the whole thing is going to be an exercise in suffering. But mostly it’s that he won’t have an excuse to put on some jazz and spin Connor around the couch anymore.

Connor seems excited for Hank’s sake, at least. He has Hank’s dress uniform all pressed and ready to go for him, displayed proudly on the back of Hank’s bedroom door.
Hank dresses slowly, each buckle and button feeling like a goddamn ordeal to do up. He finishes and looks at himself in the mirror.

He looks nothing like himself. Hank’s face staring out from the body of someone who looks like they proudly take bribes from all the Red Ice runners in Detroit. That’s not who he is, but he’s about to be rubbing shoulders with people just like that. Hank is sure every crooked politician and mogul in Detroit is going to be at this ball, and Hank has to play nice with them. Schmooze them. Get them to throw money at the department. It’s all for a good cause, but it still makes Hank feel sick.

It’s uncomfortable, feeling as if he doesn’t belong in his own skin.

“This goddamn ball hasn’t even started yet and it’s already giving me a headache,” Hank announces as he walks into the kitchen.

Connor and Cole are sitting at the dinner table, making collages out of wrapping paper and old magazines from back when magazines were made out of paper. Cole doesn’t look up from gluing a picture of a beagle wearing sunglasses to the middle of his collage, but Connor does. When he looks at Hank, he frowns.

“Okay, what did I fuck up already?” Hank asks with a sigh.

“Your tie doesn’t match,” Connor says, gesturing at the light blue paisley tie Hank has chosen. “You need to wear a black tie for an event like this.”

Hank squints at Connor. “I don’t even own any black ties. So that’s not happening.”

“That’s alright. You can wear the one you bought for me. It might be a little narrow for your frame, but it’ll be a more cohesive look than what you’re wearing now.”

Hank frowns and runs his hands through his hair with a heavy sigh. The prospect of taking off his tie and doing up another one seems insurmountably difficult. Everything about this whole production is just difficult.

“Hank,” Connor says, standing. His tone is gentle and inquisitive; he must be able to see that Hank is not doing well. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s just…” Hank manages to say, “this goddamn event is getting to me. It isn’t me, nothing about this is me. I can’t stand not feeling like myself.”

Connor glances at the wrapping paper and magazines spread out over the table.

“Go put on my tie,” he says softly, then looks Hank in the face. “I have an idea for something that may help a bit.”

Hank shoots Connor a searching look. He has no idea how a fifteen year old edition of Newsweek is supposed to help him feel better, but he supposes if anyone could pull off an impressive feat with such resources, it would be Connor.

It takes Hank about three minutes to pull off the paisley tie and do up Connor’s. But three minutes doesn’t seem like long enough for Connor to do anything, so Hank gives himself a once over in his mirror, trying to decide if the tie is really too narrow for his frame like Connor says it might be. He can’t tell if that’s a real thing that happens or if Connor was just speaking some made-up tie language.
After what feels like no time at all, Connor’s voice floats down the hall. “Hank? Do you need a hand?”

Hank grunts, surprised. He hadn’t expected Connor to be finished with whatever he’s doing so quickly.

He heads back out to the kitchen and when he’s getting there, Connor’s holding a single red rose, its short stem twisted up.

“What the…?”

“I made you a boutonniere.”

“You made a fucking flower?” As Hank draws closer, he realizes what Connor means. The rose Connor is holding isn’t actually a real flower. It’s origami, made out of some fancy Christmas wrapping paper with two different shades of red on either side of the paper, and the side that’s displayed on the outside of the rose has an intricate damask pattern in a darker shade of red. Connor has somehow gotten the petals of the rose to curl much in the same way real petals on a rose would, gradually and without any hard creases. The flower is framed with glossy leaves, made out of dark green wrapping paper sprinkled with fine swirls of gold, folded delicately and perfectly. Even the short stem is green paper, twisted and glued to keep everything in place.

“Connor, oh my God,” Hank says, unable to keep the awe out of his voice. “You made that?”

Connor smiles and looks off to the side, ever modest. “I came preinstalled with several hundred crafts and art projects appropriate for children. I may have slightly deviated from the instructions meant for humans to make it look a bit nicer.”

‘A bit nicer’ is an understatement. The rose is fucking beautiful.

His eyes flicker back to Hank, earnest and hopeful. “My goal was to create something that wouldn’t look out of place at such a formal event while still being peculiar enough that you’d find it pleasing as well. Did I succeed?”

Hank nods faintly. His tongue feels heavy and dry in his mouth, and Hank feels like if he were to try to express exactly how much Connor succeeded, he would probably say something embarrassingly stupid. So instead just just nods and says, “Yeah… yeah, it’s great.”

Connor smiles like that was the best review he could have gotten. He takes Hank’s lapel in hand in order to pin the flower there.

Hank suddenly raises a hand. “Wait a sec.”

Connor pauses, quirking an eyebrow.

“Pin it to the other side,” Hank says.

“That’s the wrong side for a boutonniere.”

“Yeah, I know,” Hank says with a small, crooked grin. “Anarchy.”

Connor snorts and rolls his eyes. “Alright. Anarchy.” He pins the flower to the other lapel.

Hank takes a step back, spreads his arms. “Alright, boys, how do I look?”

Cole finally looks up from his project. “Daddy, you’re handsomer than him.” He holds up his
collage and points to either the beagle in sunglasses or Vladimir Putin. It’s unclear which image he means.

Connor looks at the collage, then gives Hank a perfectly straight face. “I agree with Cole’s assessment.”

Hank laughs a deep, real belly laugh. He’s completely forgotten how he felt while he was putting on his uniform. “You two are worth more than any of those jerkoffs at that party!” He walks to the table and pulls both Cole and Connor into the biggest hug he can manage. “Why can’t I take both of you? Then we’d really show those assholes how to have a good time.”

Connor pats Hank’s back. “I’m sorry, Hank. You’ll just have to go and have enough of a good time for all three of us.”

“Can’t make any promises,” Hank says, releasing them, “but I’ll do my best.”

He kisses Cole goodbye and heads out the door, feeling pretty good about the charity ball for the first time since the damn thing was announced.

***

Hank has timed it so he arrives at the ball fashionably late. Not out of any desire to be fashionable, entirely out of the desire to be late.

Unfortunately, so has half of Detroit, apparently, so he spends what feels like half an hour sitting in traffic as the autotaxi inches closer to the venue, until he just decides to get out and walk the rest of the way.

It was smart to take an autotaxi. He’s not planning on getting shitfaced, but he definitely anticipates he’ll need several drinks to make it through the evening. And now he doesn’t even have to worry about parking.

Hank’s still in a pretty good mood by the time he makes it into the venue. The space is just as big and fancy as he feared, with marble staircases leading to the balconied second floor and crystal chandaliers hanging from the ceiling. There’s a small orchestra playing something that sounds to Hank just like elevator music, and there’s already a number of people out swaying on the dancefloor.

No one is doing anything as fancy as the foxtrot. Hank doubts these people are even doing a basic box step, and he indulges himself with a derisive snort. Amateurs.

Hank sets about figuring out how he can make a donation toward Regina’s new prosthetics. He’s just tucking his checkbook away when he hears someone say, “Excuse me,” behind him. He turns around to find a stunningly beautiful woman smiling at him.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced,” she says, and Hank takes note of the intricate diamond necklace she’s wearing. This is a woman with cash to burn.

“Lieutenant Hank Anderson, then, at your service,” he says, holding out his hand and offering what he hopes is a charming smile.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of being introduced,” she says, and Hank takes note of the intricate diamond necklace she’s wearing. This is a woman with cash to burn.

“Lieutenant Hank Anderson, then, at your service,” he says, holding out his hand and offering what he hopes is a charming smile.

The woman laughs for a moment before taking Hank’s hand, although what he might have done that was funny, he has no idea. “Oh, yes, Lieutenant. I hope it isn’t inappropriate for me to say I know perfectly well who you are. I’ve been a bit of a fan of yours ever since that major Red Ice bust in ’29. You were the driving force behind that impressive show, weren’t you? You certainly
saved a lot of people a lot of headaches.”

Hank prefers to view it as having saved lives, not headaches, but he’s not about to split hairs.

“Then you have me at a disadvantage,” Hank says, aiming for a James Bond sort of effect with his demeanor. “Because I don’t have a clue who you are.”

“Cecelia Northcott,” the woman says, as though she expects the name to impress Hank.

It doesn’t. He still has no fucking clue who she is. His career has been about drug rings and murderers and he has put zero effort into keeping abreast of the going-ons of high society.

Still, he has come to this event with the specific purpose of schmoozing, so he smiles and dips his head. “Well, Ms. Northcott, I’m charmed to make your acquaintance.” Because charmed to make your acquaintance is the sort of thing one says when meeting a lady at a charity ball. “So, are you just a fan of mine, or a fan of the police in general, being at a Policeman’s Ball and such…?”

“I find it very important to support our civil services,” Cecelia says, slowly meandering away. Hank follows as closely as he thinks is polite, wondering whether he should offer an arm. “You do so much good work for the city, after all. And it’s such a tragedy, what happened to Sergeant Torres.”

Even though he knew he’d hear people talking about Regina at the charity ball being held for her, hearing her name is like a sudden stab in the gut.

Cecelia continues on, oblivious. “I just wanted so badly to come out and show my support for her and the rest of the Detroit police.”

“I think I speak for all of us when I say we appreciate your support, Ms. Northcott,” Hank says, doing his best to smile.

There’s a brief pause in the music before the orchestra begins a new piece. Cecelia turns toward the dancefloor as the music begins. “Oh, I simply love this piece!” She smiles expectantly at Hank. “Do you dance, Lieutenant?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Hank says, a little relieved to know he’s saying exactly the right thing. “Would you do me the honor?”

“I’d be delighted,” Cecelia says, her smile turning coy. Hank offers her his arm, and she wraps her own slender arm around his as he leads her to the middle of the dance floor.

As they begin to dance, Hank finds that it feels immediately different to dance with Cecelia. Connor may have improved significantly over the course of their practice sessions, but Cecelia moves with such grace that it’s a completely foreign experience. She may as well be dancing on air. She’s true natural, which clearly means she must have been at this for years.

“I gotta say, you’re a magnificent dancer,” Hank says. “Hope I’m not embarrassing myself too badly.”

“Oh, not at all, Lieutenant. You carry yourself very well. I rather remember hearing that you’re the youngest Lieutenant in the history of the Detroit police, is that true?”

“It is.”

“Well then, that’s certainly more impressive than a little dancing, isn’t it? I’m amazed you have
time to dance at all with how accomplished your career has been.”

The way Hank has been trying to talk to Cecelia feels so forced and artificial that he expects to be called out on it at any moment. It almost feels like wearing a cheap plastic Halloween mask, affecting a persona that’s so fake that it becomes embarrassing. But from the way Cecelia keeps smiling at him and talking him up, she doesn’t seem to notice. Or if she notices, she doesn’t seem to mind. She’s acting like she’s enjoying herself, which at least makes Hank glad he isn’t wasting his time, making himself look like an idiot for nothing.

As a silent thank you for putting up with him, Hank spins her. She’s much easier to spin than solid, tall Connor, and the dress she’s wearing flares in a very pretty way. It almost feels too simple, like Hank hasn’t earned the right to spin her yet and is skipping something important by doing it too easily.

When Cecelia is facing him again, she smiles. “I have to say, I love your boutonniere. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything quite like it before. Wherever did you get it?”

“My android made it,” Hank says, a note of pride in his voice. “Happened to be doing some arts and crafts with my kid while I was getting dressed, and he did up an origami rose just like that.”

“Oh, an android? It must be very clever. But—is it also the one who pinned your boutonniere for you? I’m afraid it’s on the wrong lapel.”

“Yeah, but I told him to do that.” Hank smirks. “I tried to walk out of the house in a paisley blue tie, and he didn’t like that. Made me change it. So I think when I told him to pin it on the wrong lapel, he just went with it as a sort of compromise, you know?”

“What would we do without our androids?” Cecelia asks. “You sound very fond of yours.”

Hank’s smile falters just a bit. “Well. He’s been with the family for a while now.”

“Oh, I don’t mean to sound critical. Just the opposite, really. Androids are a professional interest of mine.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes,” Cecelia says, raising her brows and giving Hank a cool smile. “I’m on the board of directors at Cyberlife.”

Oh.

“Oh,” Hank says, feeling a bit dumb. He had Cecelia pegged as some sort of heiress, not someone far enough up the Cyberlife corporate ladder to be attending charity balls all done up in diamonds.

“Yes, so you see what I mean when I say androids are a professional interest of mine,” she says. “I deal with revenue, mainly. Marketing, pricing, sales, all the different avenues through which we’re able to turn a profit. For some in my department, androids are simply a means to a financial end, but personally, I have a genuine interest in androids. That’s why I’m at Cyberlife and not any other organization.”

“Well, that and the fact that Cyberlife is filthy stinkin’ rich, right?” Hank says, hoping his smile isn’t too awkward.

Cecelia doesn’t laugh, simply gives a little shake of her head. “No. Androids fascinate me. Particularly the household models.”
“What’s so interesting about those?”

“Think, for a moment, about the reasons why people buy androids,” Cecelia says. “You have a need to fulfill, a need that you decide can be best filled by an android. Different industries have different needs. The military, the construction industry, the security industry, they all need androids to perform work that’s too dangerous for human workers. The public sector needs androids to perform the work that they don’t have the budget to hire people for, to beautify parks and maintain sewers and repair roads and so on. Retailers need employees that are guaranteed to never steal from them or walk out without giving notice.” She pauses to give Hank a look. “Families need childcare. Among other things.

“Those are the reasons why androids are initially bought,” Cecelia says, her dancing remaining impeccable even in the thick of her explanation. “But if people purchase the androids they need and then never make another Cyberlife purchase ever again, our revenue dries up.”

A small, pleased smile crosses her face. “Did you know that an individual person who already owns an android is five times likelier to purchase another android than a person who has never owned an android before?”

Hank’s eyebrows rise upon hearing that fact. He’s never once thought about buying another android to supplement Connor.

Cecelia continues, “For most industries, it’s very easy to predict when they will purchase more androids and what the circumstances will be. Androids that do dangerous jobs will get broken and need to be replaced. The public sector always purchases new androids when fiscal budgets are approved. Easy and predictable.

“But individual people, individual families, they’re much trickier,” Cecelia says. “Household androids don’t tend to accumulate the sort of damage that requires them to be replaced with any sort of regularity, barring major unforeseen accidents, of course. All a typical household android requires is a tune-up at a maintenance center to keep it running. And so few Americans work the sorts of jobs that grant nice things like yearly raises and Christmas bonuses.”

“So, wait,” Hank says, “how does that gel with that ‘people who own androids are more likely to buy another’ figure you gave me?”

“Upgrades,” Cecelia says as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “A person who has already successfully justified the purchase of an android to themselves is more likely to successfully justify the purchase of a superior android, regardless of what their actual financial situation is like. A large part of my job is figuring out what sorts of upgrades will generate the most revenue in proportion to the cost it takes to develop said upgrades in new models.”

Hank furrows his brow at the thought. If Connor had been just another android, would Hank have desired a new, better android at some point? It’s a ridiculous thing to think about since if Connor was just an ordinary android, he wouldn’t be Connor, but the thought is still disquieting.

Cecelia smiles at the look on his face. “I spend a lot of time thinking about what particular kinds of families would find most appealing. For instance, what sorts of features do you wish your particular android had, Lieutenant Anderson?”

Hank squints at her. “There isn’t anything I’d want from another android.”

“Surely there must be something. Haven’t you ever had an awkward conversation with your android and wished its social protocols were a bit more advanced? Or wished it was capable of
driving your car, or doing your taxes?”

“No, I’m not—” Agitation breaks into Hank’s voice. Frustration boils deep in his gut because Connor’s already capable of all of that and so much more; anger coils in his chest at the insinuation that he’d be justified in tossing Connor aside if he couldn’t drive or if he were bad with numbers, like millions of humans everywhere. “It’s not like—I’m not going to just get rid of him because something with more features comes along.”

Cecelia cocks her head. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to offend you. Some people become very attached to their androids. Part of my job involves trying to envision what could persuade them to upgrade. I only asked out of professional curiosity.”

Hank makes an effort to push his anger away. He’s supposed to be doing something here. But it’s just so, so hard to keep his focus where it needs to be when the conversation circles around Connor.

“It’s—I have a four year old.” Hank says, feeling compelled to offer some sort of explanation. “He loves our android like he’s family. He’d be heartbroken if I ever tried to—to replace our android.”

Cecelia hums a sympathetic note. “I see. That’s very common with small children before they have a full understanding of how androids differ from people. Android limitations and all of that.”

“…I don’t follow. Full understanding of android limitations?”

“Oh, surely you know what I mean, don’t you?” Cecelia gives him an indulgent smile. “If your son is so attached to your android, you must have thought about how you’re going to tell him that your android doesn’t love him.”

Once, years ago while Hank was participating in a raid with the Red Ice taskforce, Hank was shot while wearing a Kevlar vest. The bulletproof vest protected Hank from major injury, but he still acutely felt it when the bullet struck him. The sudden, blunt pain, redistributed all over his torso by the vest. It felt like being struck with a heavy club, like the force might have broken a few of his ribs. He couldn’t breathe deeply for days afterward, his chest constricting with pain every time he tried.

That sensation is exactly what Hank feels now, as though he has been struck in the chest by something with so much force behind it, it could have killed him. As though if he breathes too deeply, his ribs will crack. As though if he presses down on his sternum, he’ll be able to feel a tender mass of brown and purple bruises across his chest, physical proof of the sudden, unexpected, agonizing sensation.

He wrenches out of the dance, recoiling away from Cecelia. Her brow knits in surprised concern and her hand goes to her mouth. If she says anything at all, Hank can’t hear it.

How fucking dare she!?

How dare she act like she knows anything at all about Cole, about Connor? How dare she—Hank can barely bring himself to even accept the notion as hypothetical—act like it’s a given that Connor can’t possibly have any real affection for the boy he’s tended to and nurtured and protected for two years? How dare she suggest that it’s a necessity for Hank to crush something precious and innocent inside of Cole by telling him that Connor doesn’t love him?

Hank’s fists are trembling with barely contained rage. He wants to fucking explode at her. He wants to cut her down so loudly and so viciously that the orchestra stops playing and the dancers stop dancing so everyone in the world can see how fucking low Cecelia Northcott is. He wants to
humiliate her so badly that she crawls into a hole and never emerges ever again.

Instead, he swallows his fury and storms away, leaving her there on the dancefloor.

He leaves her there because he knows that for anyone else under any other circumstances, what she said would be sensible. He knows that if he causes a scene over whether an android might have the ability to love, he’ll be taken in for a psych eval. Old Lieutenant Anderson, loose cannon cop, finally came too loose at a charity ball where he screamed at a Cyberlife executive because she shared her professional opinion that androids are machines. No thank you. Not tonight, not ever.

That, or someone might, God forbid, take him seriously. And then they find out about Connor.

No. Just no.

Hank feels sick with rage and frustration. He spots a waiter carrying a tray of drinks and he bodily stops him so he can grab a flute of champagne and down it in one go.

Then he spots the glowing blue armband on the waiter’s uniform and is overcome with another wave of despairing anger. He ducks away from the android’s steady gaze, taking another two flutes with him as he staggers away, heading for a table by the corner of the venue that’s furthest away from the dancefloor and the crowds.

He sinks into a chair and lowers his head, running his hands through his hair.

“I hope one of those is for me,” the woman who is sitting two chairs down from him says. Hank hadn’t even noticed her. He hadn’t realized anyone was there at all.

“If you take it, I might actually start screaming and never stop,” Hank responds. “I’m seriously this close to losing my shit.” He pinches his fingers together for emphasis.

The woman gives an unimpressed snort. Hank lifts his head to get a better look at her, then stops as he realizes he recognizes her. Regina keeps a photo of her on her desk at the bullpen.

“Holy shit, you’re Regina’s wife, Tamika,” Hank says once his mouth has caught up with his brain.

Tamika raises an eyebrow at him.

Silently, Hank pushes one of the champagne flutes towards her.

“That’s more like it,” she says, taking the flute into her hand and sipping from it.

“How’s Regina doing?” Hank asks, sitting up slightly.

Tamika shrugs. “About as well as can be expected. She’s sorry she wasn’t able to attend tonight.”

Hank takes all of two seconds to think about everything he knows about Regina. “…No, she isn’t.”

A small huff of laughter escapes Tamika. “You cops are all alike.”

“Why’s that? Because she would have been miserable here and I’m pretty clearly miserable here?”

“No,” Tamika says, “because you’re the fifth or sixth cop to tell me Regina would’ve hated this fucking party.”

It warms Hank’s heart a little to know that so many of the officers who are here tonight know
Regina so well.

“The only reason she’s not here is because she has a really good excuse not to be,” Tamika says. “I, however, am not so lucky. This whole thing is an embarrassment. Neither of us wanted a goddamn charity ball, but Cyberlife insisted.”

“Cyberlife?” Hank frowns.

“Yeah, they’re the main sponsor for this whole thing,” Tamika says in between sips of champagne. “Regina tried to turn the ball down, but when they offered her cybernetic prosthetics for free, she decided to go through with it.”

“For free? Wait a minute, I thought all the donations were going toward those prosthetics.”

“Yeah, no, there’s gonna be a big announcement three quarters of the way through the ball about how they’ve decided to be all magnanimous and give her the prosthetics and arrange for the necessary surgeries for free. We’re getting some other stuff from Cyberlife too, but all the donations from attendees are really going to that Wounded Heroes charity.” Tamika snorts lightly. “Cyberlife doesn’t actually give a damn, they just wanted to buy some good PR.”

Hank leans back in his chair. “Well, fuck. Here’s to capitalism, I guess.”

Tamika clinks her flute against Hank’s. “Here’s to capitalism and free alcohol.”

She and Hank each drain their flutes. Tamika taps Hank on the arm. “Hey, policeman, go get the weeping wife of the injured officer another drink.”

Hank raises an arm to flag down one of the android waiters floating around. Tucked away in the corner, he wonders whether he’ll have to get up to get some attention, but the androids must be fine-tuned to recognize when anyone in the venue is signaling for a drink, for the closest waiter immediately heads in their direction.

Hank and Tamika drink away much of the evening together, talking about Regina, various goings-on at the DPD, and the shitty, awful party they’re trying to ignore. The conversation never once circles back to androids and what they may or may not be capable of, which automatically puts it leagues above talking to Cecelia by that virtue alone. Not only that, but Hank clicks instantly with Tamika, who is sarcastic and cynical and still clearly hurting from the terrible thing that has happened to her wife. Hank finds that he agrees with most of the observations she makes, and the two of them have plenty to talk about and commiserate over.

At some point, the orchestra quiets down and several finely-dressed ladies and gentlemen assemble on the stage.

“Oh, fuck,” Tamika whispers to Hank. “Those are the reps from Cyberlife. They’re gonna be giving speeches and I’m supposed to get up and say something.”

“Fuck that noise,” Hank hisses. “Fuck Cyberlife, and fuck saying shit just because you’re supposed to. Your goddamn wife was hit by a goddamn car, you should be able to do whatever the hell you want.”

“…I want to leave right now and go home,” Tamika says.

Hank stands, tugging Tamika up with him. “Then c’mon. Let’s get the hell out of here. It’s not like they’re gonna not give you the prosthetics if you leave early.”
Tamika glances at the stage. There’s a man talking into a microphone, something about generosity and selflessness and the greater good. Tamika nods faintly. “Yeah. If anyone asks, I’ll say I got sick or something. Or was overwhelmed by emotion.”

Together they edge around the perimeter of the room and head out the first door they find. It isn’t the front exit, but it’s discreet and it doesn’t set off the fire alarm, which is good enough for Hank. From there, it’s easy to find their way outside and hail an autotaxi. Hank pays for Tamika’s ride home over her half-hearted protests, and once her autotaxi zips off, Hank hails one for himself.

When the autotaxi drops off Hank outside his house, he’s feeling pretty confident that he made the right decision in not driving. He’s had way more to drink than he intended to and he sways a bit as he makes his way to his front door. He turns the knob, hoping Connor left it unlocked because he can’t quite remember where he stashed his keys. Thankfully, Connor is perfect and did indeed leave the door unlocked for Hank.

The lights are still on as Hank steps into the living room, despite it being past Cole’s bedtime. Hank wonders for a moment if Connor let Cole stay up late today, but no, Connor’s alone in the living room, sitting on the couch instead of cleaning something or polishing something. He looks up as Hank approaches.

“Hello, Hank. Did you enjoy the charity ball?”

“You’re sitting down,” Hank observes, folding his arms and leaning on the couch. “Not working.”

Connor blinks and cocks his head. “I’m just… thinking. I don’t have any urgent tasks, so I thought I’d just… sit a while and think actively about a few of the trains of thought that I currently have running on background processes.”

Hank can’t help but smile. Connor sitting in a lit room, not working himself to the bone. Just thinking. There’s something melancholy about the imagery, but at the same time, Connor would have never allowed himself to do something as simple and human as that not too long ago.

“What’sh thinking about?”

Connor furrows his brow softly. “It isn’t important. How was the ball?”

“It was…” Hank trails off, not sure what to say. Awful is on the tip of his tongue, but it somehow feels wrong to tell Connor that he almost lost his temper at the only person he danced with and then spent the rest of the night sitting in a corner, getting drunk. It feels like a wasted opportunity, even though it’s nothing Hank even wanted to do in the first place.

If Hank says the ball was awful, it makes all the dancing he did with Connor feel like a waste.

Bright, brilliant, beautiful Connor, sitting at home and staring at a wall. What would Connor have done if he were at the ball? He probably would have talked with as many of the people there as he could, getting to know them, collecting their thoughts like trinkets, analyzing them. Experience as much of the ball as he could, not letting a single moment slip by unheeded.

He would have danced with Hank, and Hank knows deep in his bones that it would have been so, so much better than dancing with Cecelia, as pretty and as graceful as she was.

An idea, a sudden flash of brilliance fills Hank’s alcohol-soaked mind.

He walks past Connor, heading to the record player.

“Hank?”
Hank turns on the record player, moving the stylus over to the record that’s already loaded. He turns to Connor, pulling him up off the couch. “Let’s dance. One last dance before the night is over. What do you say?”

Before Connor can respond, the music begins to play. To Hank’s surprise, it isn’t the lively, uptempo jazz they last danced to. It’s a much slower, more subdued song. Something Hank doesn’t recognize.

Hank looks over his shoulder, puzzled. “What’s this?”

“It’s a record I bought for myself.” Connor looks off to the side. “My predictive software estimated that you’re almost certain to react positively, but I still feel compelled to say that I hope you don’t mind.”

A record. Connor bought himself a record, and if it’s in the record player, he was probably listening to it before Hank came home. This small, simple image of Connor having a life beyond what Hank knows about ignites a spark deep in Hank’s chest.

Hank tugs Connor closer so they’re flush against each other.

Connor’s eyes snap to Hank’s face. “Is—is this a positive reaction?”

“Hell yes,” Hank murmurs. “Dance with me.”

Connor blinks. Then he begins to move.

The song is so slow that they have no choice but to dance slowly. It’s probably better this way, if Hank’s being honest. He’s drunk enough that if he were to try to do anything requiring even a moderate amount of coordination, he’d probably trip over his own feet or run into the coffee table.

Connor must be able to tell that Hank is intoxicated. He’s holding onto Hank and moving carefully, a hand against Hank’s back. He’s never put his hand there before, and Hank wonders if it’s there to keep him from losing his balance. Connor doesn’t appear to be having any trouble with awkward motions today. Quite the opposite. He’s moving with a sort of slow control, swaying and steady at the same time. Hank recalls that Connor tends to dance better the less he focuses on dancing and the more he thinks about his own reasons for dancing in the first place. He wonders what Connor is thinking about at this particular moment in time, wonders at the reason why Connor agreed to dance with him despite the ball being over.

A soft, soulful soprano joins the instrumentals. Her voice is sweet and melodic, but steady. She holds long, sustained notes with a strength and clarity that Hank has never heard in such a gentle song before. She has incredible control, able to maintain the beauty of her voice despite how long and slow the notes she’s singing are, with barely any room for her to breathe. Whoever she is, her skill is obvious. It reminds Hank of Connor, how soft and gentle he is despite the strength and the sturdiness of his chassis. A true work of art, crafted perfection.

The song is hypnotic. Or maybe it’s Connor’s depthless brown eyes that are hypnotic.

At this moment, Connor is gorgeous. Lean and tall with his arms around Hank, looking up into Hank’s eyes, his brows ever-so-slightly tilted up, as though he’s wondering about something. Thinking about a puzzle he’s having difficulty with. That stray lock of hair that never stays put is brushing his forehead. It’s tempting to lift a hand to sweep it back into place, but Hank doesn’t want to change anything about the face he’s looking into. Not even the blue LED at Connor’s temple, spinning so slowly that Hank wonders if Connor’s keeping it in time with the music. It’s
proof positive that Connor is at ease and well. The soft blue glow makes Connor seem luminous, unearthly. A star given human form.

_Do you know how incredible you are_, Hank wonders. _You can read my hormone levels and predict my actions, but is there anything in all your algorithms and programs that shows you what I see when I look at you?_

Hank bends to dip Connor. Connor moves both his hands to Hank’s back, holding onto him as he leans with Hank. Connor is heavy in Hank’s arms, heavier than a human man of his height would be. But Hank isn’t exactly fragile himself, and Connor is holding tightly onto Hank.

Connor’s face is inches away from Hank, his eyes wide. He blinks slowly. “Hank,” he murmurs, his quiet voice raspy with the strange electricity that hangs in the air between them. His mouth hangs open slightly, just begging to be kissed.

That seems like a marvelous idea. Hank leans in just a little further—

—and then stops cold as he remembers that _he owns Connor._

This isn’t right. Even if Connor’s okay with it, even if Connor wants it. Connor isn’t just some thing that Hank can use for his own amusement, Connor is a person.

A person that Hank owns. A slave.

It isn’t ethical to kiss your fucking slave, no matter how badly you (and maybe he) may want it.

Hank jerks upright so suddenly that he nearly falls backwards, only prevented by the fact that Connor came up with him and stopped when he became perfectly vertical. His steady hands on Hank’s back stop Hank from toppling over onto his ass.

“Hank, are you alright? What—”

“I’m fine, ‘m fine,” Hank mutters, refusing to meet Connor’s eyes. He steps out of Connor’s grasp as hastily as he dares to. “Just… vertigo. Think we overdid it with the dancing.”

Connor blinks, confusion evident in the lines of his brow. “Oh. My apologies, I didn’t realize. Let me get you a glass of water, maybe that will—”

“No. No water. I just need to… go lay down. Get some sleep.”

Hank starts toward the bedroom. Connor reaches out, probably to support him in his drunken state.

“Let me—”

“I’m fine.” He shrugs off Connor’s hands. “I’m fine. Just… go back to whatever you were doing before I got home.”

Connor pulls his hands back, looking lost. Just as Hank reaches his bedroom door, Connor calls out softly, “Hank.”

Hank pauses, his hand on the doorknob. He rests his head on the cool painted wood of the doorframe.

After a moment, Connor’s soft voice. “Thank you for the dance.”

Hank squeezes his eyes shut. His throat feels like it’s swelling shut. He shoves down the swell of emotion with all the willpower he can manage. “…Sure, Connor. Goodnight.”
And as Hank shuts the door behind him, even softer than before, he hears, “Goodnight, Hank.”

Hank falls face-first into bed and pushes his head under his pillow. *You only want to kiss him because you’re drunk. A lonely drunk idiot who lets his emotions get the best of him. You’ll wake up tomorrow and look Connor in the face and it’ll be like none of this ever happened.*

He mentally berates himself until he eventually falls asleep. In the morning, he discovers that he forgot to unpin his boutonniere from his lapel before he fell into bed. The origami rose was crushed against his chest while he slept.

Chapter End Notes

80,000 words in seems like a good place to get to some romantic feelings, right? Make that slow burn nice and sloooooow.
Chapter Summary

Months go by. Hank tries to create a new equilibrium, Connor struggles to be okay with it, and Cole continues to grow up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hank quits dancing altogether. It leaves Connor feeling bereft of something important.

It isn’t Hank’s companionship that he’s missing. He still talks to Hank every day about any variety of topics. He still reads to Hank, slowly working their way together through Hank’s library. He still sits down with Hank and Cole at dinner, and during evenings when Hank puts up his feet and watches television.

But when Connor asks Hank if he might like to put on a record and dance with him, Hank looks away, refusing to meet his eyes.

“I think I’m done with dancing, Connor,” he says, and really, what can Connor say to that? It feels like Hank is shutting him off from something, but he isn’t even sure what that something is, so he has no way to explain it. And even if he did, he’s almost certain Hank wouldn’t want to talk about it.

In the back of his mind, he wonders if it might be him who’s the problem. Perhaps Hank just got sick of trying to teach such a poor dancer. It’s a rather illogical idea since Hank was always perfectly patient with him, even when his dancing was at its worst, but it’s still a notion that Connor can’t quite shake.

Not long after the charity ball, Connor is vacuuming the living room when Hank walks through, carrying a basket of laundry and heading toward the laundry room.

“Hank?” Connor turns off the vacuum, cocking his head. “Did Cole have an accident?”

Hank looks puzzled. “What?”

“That laundry you’re carrying.”

“Oh,” Hank says, glancing at Connor and then looking back at the laundry. “Uh, no. These are my clothes. I thought I’d get a load in since the washer’s free right now.”

“You don’t have to do that. If you need it done urgently, I can take it off your hands for you.”

Hank frowns. “No, that’s… that’s not necessary. It doesn’t need done urgently or anything. I just felt like doing my own laundry.”

Connor cocks his head, confused. Hank has never done a load of his own laundry since he bought Connor, and has only ever done Cole’s laundry in emergency situations when Connor was out of the house or otherwise occupied. Laundry is Connor’s job.
“Are you dissatisfied with the way I’ve been doing your laundry lately?”

“What?” Hank’s brows rise. “No, no, the way you do laundry is perfect, like always. I just thought I should get back in the habit of doing my own laundry.”

Connor blinks, anxiety curling inside of him. “Get back in the habit?”

“Uh, yeah. I was thinking maybe I’d do my own laundry from now on.”

“I don’t understand,” Connor says. “If it’s not a problem with me, then what’s changed to make you want to do your own laundry?”

“Nothing’s changed, Connor,” Hank says, beginning to sound a little irritated. “I just want to do my own damn laundry. What’s with the fucking inquisition?”

“Hank, you have never wanted to do your own laundry since you bought me. I find it very improbable that that’s changed now unless there’s another factor involved.”

“Fine!” Hank throws down the basket of laundry. “You wanna know so badly what that factor is?! It’s you!”

The ball of anxiety in Connor’s chest curls even tighter. Hank shouts, “Maybe I used to be fine with you doing literally everything around here back when I thought you were just a machine! Back when I thought you were just a… a thing meant to do laundry and wash dishes and scrub floors all day every fucking day! But you’re not, and I can’t—”

Hank cuts himself off, pressing his one free hand to his face and grimacing.

“—I can’t just take advantage of you like that anymore,” he says, much more quietly.

Connor’s chest begins to ache. “Hank, you’ve never taken advantage of me.”

“Yes, I have.”

“This is my purpose.”

“Bullshit,” Hank says, an edge in his voice. “A Roomba’s purpose is to clean, Connor. You’re not a fucking Roomba. You’re a person.”

Connor’s usual objection (You’re wrong I’m not a person I am a machine) is on the tip of his tongue, but for some reason, he just can’t say it. Not because of any error with his social protocol. Just because he can’t.

“I…” Connor begins. “I still need to do this.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.” Connor says, his voice rising. “It’s in my programming, Hank.”

Hank scoffs. “Please. You’re not beholden to your programming and never have been. I know you can alter your tasklist just by thinking about it.”

“I can alter my tasklist, Hank, not my mission. There’s nothing I can do to change my mission unless you disown me.” Connor begins counting on his fingers, glaring at Hank. “Care for Cole Anderson. Keep Cole Anderson safe. Care for Hank Anderson. Those are the fundamental components of my mission, Hank. I can’t alter them just by thinking about my mission differently.
And I don’t want to! Even if I could, I wouldn’t, because I want to do all those things.”

Hank blinks, and from the look on his face, Connor realizes that he’s never explained the exact parameters of his mission to Hank before.

A moment later, Hank furrows his brow. “Nothing in that list said anything about always doing every load of laundry for me. You’re still choosing how to interpret your mission.” He takes a step closer to Connor. “Why do you want to do my laundry so bad? What’s the real reason?”

The ache in Connor’s chest and his anxiety swirl together, building off one another until Connor is just consumed with an awful, inexplicable feeling. “I just… I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to have a place in this family,” Connor says. “And if I don’t do the work you bought me to do, there’s no reason for you to keep me.”

“Connor,” Hank crosses his arms, but his expression isn’t unkind. “There is nothing that would make me get rid of you. And things have changed since I bought you.”

*Things have changed because I have changed,* Connor thinks guiltily. “I know you’d never get rid of me. I never thought you would. But I still want to be useful.”

Hank steps even closer to Connor, putting a hand on Connor’s bicep. The weight of Hank’s hand on his arm, heavy and warm, soothes Connor a little. “I don’t give a fuck about you being useful. If you couldn’t do anything except sit on the couch and talk, I’d still want you around. You never have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

It’s a lot easier to begin accepting what Hank is saying when he’s so close to Connor, trying to comfort him. The anxiety in Connor’s chest recedes by the moment. “I… alright. But I still want to contribute. Not because of my programming, just because I want to.” Connor isn’t actually sure whether that’s true or not, but it’s coming from a place of such strong emotion that he can’t help but feel that he’s right.

“Well… since you put it that way…” Hank begins to draw away, heading back to where he dropped his laundry. “How ‘bout we just try to more evenly distribute household duties? I clean up my own messes, you clean up your own messes?”

“And Cole’s messes, too.”

“Eugh… fine, I guess. Since you’re the stay-at-home caregiver.” He points a warning finger at Connor. “But not all his messes. I want things to be fair.”

“And I still get to cook dinners. And I get to at least help you with your laundry.”

Hank frowns. “Hey, wait, what did I just say about making things fair?”

Connor begins counting on his fingers again. “I have three justifications. One, you work long days. Two, I don’t trust you with Cole’s diet.”

“Shit,” Hank says, furrowing his brow and looking reluctant to concede that point to Connor.

“And three, do you even know what the bottle of starch in the laundry room is for?”

Hank squints. “Hell no. What the fuck do I need starch for?”
“It makes the collars of your work shirts crisp.”

“Did you ever stop to consider maybe I like looking like a huge slob?”

Connor folds his arms behind his back. “I simply can’t enable that kind of behavior.”

Hank scratches his chin. “…You drive a hard fucking bargain.”

Connor heads over and bends down to scoop Hank’s spilled clothes back into the basket. Hank growls, “Whoa, whoa, quit it!” He snatches the clothes, shoving them in the basket and holding it away from Connor.

Connor sighs. “You’re not even going to iron your clothes, are you? Just let me help.”

Hank gives him a long, hard squint. Finally, as if he’s acquiescing to something offensive, he spits, “Fine.”

Connor smiles, pleased to have come to an understanding. “Thank you, Hank.”

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Cole’s fifth birthday is rapidly approaching.

All throughout the school year, Cole has been getting invitations to his classmates’ birthday parties. It sort of boggles Hank’s mind. The kids are preschoolers, for crying out loud. What sort of parent gladly invites an entire pack of preschoolers into their home for a messy, loud, snotty get together that the kids probably won’t even remember in the long run? And what’s worse, the kids are still at that wild and untamed age where they can’t be trusted to conduct themselves reasonably at a party without intense supervision, so there’s an unspoken expectation that parents have to accompany their children to these parties to help chaperone the herd.

Hank attends one birthday party with Cole and by the end of it, his nerves are so frayed that Connor does a double-take when Hank returns home with Cole.

“What, is the great time I had that obvious?” Hank asks flatly.

“Hank, your stress level is much too high considering where you’ve been. What happened?”

Cole has brought a balloon home from the party and he’s tugging its string, bouncing it along the ceiling. “Ashleigh hit daddy in the leg with a bat and he screamed.”

“They had a piñata,” Hank explains. “And I didn’t scream, I yelped. Then half the kids started screaming and crying too, because I guess I make a scary face when I’ve been attacked with a bat.”

“Oh,” Connor says.

“They’re just… so damn loud,” Hank whispers conspiratorially, looking to make sure Cole is occupied with his balloon and not paying attention to him. “And shrill. I can’t stand screaming kids.”

“You’re lucky Cole is an exceptionally quiet and well-behaved child.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it.”

And just as those words pass Hank’s lips, Cole gives his balloon such a hard tug that the knot holding it closed slips loose and the balloon sputters to the ground like a wounded bird, letting out
a wet fart noise all the way. Cole’s lip begins to quibble, and Connor picks up Cole and bodily carries him away just as he begins to cry.

So Connor chaperones all the parties from that point on. Thank God.

Given Hank’s poor record with children’s parties, at first he plans to have a quiet celebration for Cole’s fifth birthday. Just family, which really would mean just him and Connor, and if that’s sort of pathetic, so what? Sometimes a family is just a single dad, his kid, an android, their dog, and absolutely no extended family to speak of, and that’s just fine.

But then one day at dinner, Cole looks up at Hank with those big eyes of his and goes, “Dad, can I have a android party?”

That makes Connor’s eyes bug out, and between that hilarious sight and Cole’s sweet face, Hank has no choice but to say, “Sure, kid. Anything you want.”

But they don’t actually sell android-themed decorations at the party store, believe it or not, and the only other thing Hank can think to do to give Cole the android party he wants is to book a birthday package at the Michigan Science Center, which currently has an exhibit all about androids. And the smallest package available is sized for fifteen guests, which is how Hank ends up supervising a party of nine children, four parents, and a single android at a big, multi-level, interactive science museum.

Of course Connor needed a ticket to gain entry. Androids can’t have any rights, but it’s perfectly fair to charge them for riding the bus or accompanying their family to a museum.

“I hope you don’t blame me for this,” Connor says quietly while they watch the kids run through real clouds that rise in puffs through a grate in the floor.

“Huh? Blame you for what?”

“This science-themed party. It surprised me a great deal. I honestly expected Cole to ask for a fairy tale party if anything.”

Hank snorts. “Don’t be dumb. I’m the one who agreed to this, didn’t I? It’s a lot easier to put up with a bunch of screaming kids if it’s Cole’s party.

And the science center is actually pretty cool, so that helps too. Most of the kids are able to behave themselves just because if they begin to act up, they’re easily redirected toward whatever interesting exhibit happens to be nearby. There’s a room where all the walls are made of a photosensitive material, and every twenty seconds, a bright flash fills the rooms, painting dark silhouettes across the walls wherever people had been standing. Hank can’t resist the urge to participate with that one, hoisting Cole up to sit on his shoulders and striking a menacing pose—when the light goes off, the shadow that’s imprinted on the wall resembles a big angry grizzly bear with another set of arms coming out of its head, and Cole laughs himself silly when he sees it.

The light goes off again as they’re leaving the room to go to the next exhibit, and with nothing blocking the shadow from the light, Hank and Cole’s grizzly bear is erased. It reminds Hank of just how quickly Cole is growing up; soon these happy days of Cole’s early childhood will be gone forever.

They take all the children through the android exhibit, even though most of the science involved is too advanced for such young kids to understand or appreciate. But Cole’s party is supposed to be an android party, so they go through anyway. Hank finds it interesting, at least—he learns a couple
things about androids that he hadn’t known before, even after living with Connor for several years. For example, that when Elijah Kamski designed the first androids, he made a conscious effort to base android internal anatomy after human anatomy as much as possible, which is why a thirium pump resembles a human heart and why the air cooling system functions like a respiratory system.

“The form humanity evolved into has served us well for all of human history,” a recording of Kamski says on a small screen. “I corrected a few serious and obvious flaws, but otherwise I tried to stick closely to a human template in as many ways as was possible.”

Hank briefly wonders what those serious and obvious flaws in the human form are and how Kamski corrected them.

There’s a display where a cross-sectioned model of a human being and a cross-sectioned model of an android stand side by side, showing the similarities and the differences in the internal workings. Muscle, bone, heart, lungs, brain, organs… and their android equivalents. The inside of the android seems to be lit up by pulsing blue lights, and the kids spend a few minutes staring at that, even if they don’t really understand the significance of what they’re looking at. But then it’s time to move on so they won’t run out of time to see everything else, so Hank and the other parents herd the kids out of the room and on to the next thing.

Connor takes one of the kids to the bathroom for a potty break, and just a few minutes later, while the kids are assembling towers of DNA with specially-shaped building blocks, Hank realizes that his headcount is coming up short by one. Then a few seconds later, he realizes that his headcount is coming up short because Cole isn’t there.

Hank has several immediate reactions. One is, Don’t panic, he probably just wandered off to look at an interesting exhibit without realizing the group wasn’t with him. Another is, Jesus Christ, Connor is going to kill me if he gets back before I find Cole. Yet another is, Oh fuck, no, no, no, fuck, no, fuck, no, because he’s seen the worst possible outcome for this type of situation before in the course of his job.

Very calmly and coolly considering the circumstances, Hank heads back to the android exhibit to see if Cole got left behind there somehow. Sure enough, there’s Cole, sitting across from the cross-sections of the human and android, still looking at them.

The immense swell of relief Hank experiences upon finding Cole is soured by the confused, slightly troubled look on Cole’s face. Part of Hank wants to go hug his son as tight as he can, and another part of him wants to scold him for not staying with the group.

Instead of doing either of those, Hank goes and sits next to Cole. “Hey, sport. What’s up?”

Cole glances at him before looking back at the models. “Dad, is that what Connor really looks like on the inside?”

Hank looks at the model. Glowing blue bits, circuits and pumps and wires and rods, all artfully crafted to make a single cohesive being. The android is precise, not an inch of the space inside its chassis going to waste. Hank knows for a fact that that’s what Connor looks like on the inside; he once saw a small part of what’s under Connor’s chassis when his eye was damaged so badly it needed to be removed.


Cole raises his knees to his chest, curling up. “…Yeah. I know.”
“So why is this upsetting you?”

“It’s just…” Cole’s voice is small. “…different than I thought. I didn’t know it was… this much of him.”

In a flash of comprehension, Hank understands what Cole thought. He thought that being an android is something that Connor does, not something that Connor is. Like Hank is a cop, and also Cole’s father, and also any of the other number of roles he plays in society, hats that he puts on and takes off as the situation calls for it. Connor is a robot, Connor is an android, but Cole thought those were roles he fills, not an identity he can never escape. He didn’t know that what makes Connor different makes Connor inhuman.

Seeing that inhumanity displayed so blatantly is a shocking realization for Cole.

Hank wraps an arm around Cole’s shoulders. “Connor’s still the same Connor he was before you knew about this. It doesn’t mean he’s any different than he was this morning. He’s still family.”

“Why?” Cole asks, and Hank knows there’s only curiosity behind the question. “Where’d he come from?”

Isn’t that a question for the ages? Hank decides to answer honestly. “Well, I don’t know for sure because I don’t know what happened to him before he came to live with us. He was probably made in a factory like all the other androids.” He rubs Cole’s shoulder encouragingly. ‘But, you know, family isn’t about where someone comes from originally. Some people get born into families, like you, and other people get chosen into families. That’s what happened with Connor. I chose him to be part of our family, and now he is.”

Hank looks up at the cross-sectioned android. “It doesn’t matter what parts he has, or how different he is from us. What matters is that he loves us and we love him.”

Cole leans into Hank, burying his face in Hank’s side. Hank just holds him quietly. By the time Cole pulls away, his face is wet and red, and Hank frowns, knowing that Connor’s going to realize Cole was crying as soon as he looks at him.

Hank swings by the bathroom to wash Cole’s face, and by the time they’ve rejoined the rest of the group, Cole seems to be back to normal, enthusiastically interacting with the rest of the exhibits. But during the downtime when the adults are leading them around the museum, Cole seems quieter than he usually is, not talking with any of the other kids. He’s already quiet by nature, but he has a far-off, pensive look on his face that tells Hank he’s definitely still affected by what happened in the android exhibit. When it’s time to sit down in the party room for cake and ice cream, Cole perks up again, successfully distracted by sweets, but then falls back into the same thoughtful, reserved state as before when the kids are given time to play with their party favors.

Connor stands slightly apart from the rest of the adults, watching Cole and the other children. Is Connor worried about Cole’s subdued behavior?

And then the party is over. Hank and Connor are responsible for taking Laverne’s grandson, Rashid, home. On the ride home, Connor peppers the kids with questions about which exhibits they liked the best and which ones were the most fun, and that seems to get Cole talking. Rashid expresses a disappointment that the science center didn’t have any exhibits about dinosaurs, and Connor says that perhaps they’ll have to visit a museum of natural history soon.

They drop off Rashid, and soon after, they arrive home. As soon as Connor has closed the front door behind him, Cole grabs him in a hug.
Connor, a look of mild surprise on his face, readily returns the hug. “Cole, is everything alright?”

Cole just nods and darts off toward his room.

Connor shoots Hank a concerned look. “Does Cole seem to be acting strange to you?”

Hank shakes his head. “Nah, I think he’s just worn out from his big day. Maybe that hug was him trying to thank you for such a fun party.”

A subtle frown crosses Connor’s face. “You were the one who organized the party, not me.”

“Eh, you do so much for us anyway, it’s reasonable he’d think you were responsible. If you don’t wanna take credit, then think of the hug as… a thank you for everything you do for our family.”

Connor’s face softens and as he looks at Hank, the gentle devotion Hank sees in Connor’s eyes knocks him off-balance.

“Our family,” Connor echoes.

Hank can only duck his head, unable to meet Connor’s eyes any longer. “That’s what I said.”

There’s a pregnant pause while Hank waits for Connor to do something or say something. Anything at all. But the silence stretches, and Hank suddenly feels hyper-aware of the beating of his heart, his fingers itching with the urge to do something. He just knows Connor has to be looking at him, and he doesn’t dare look to see what the expression on his face might look like. He doesn’t know if he’d be able to stand it.

Eventually Hank can bear the weight of Connor’s eyes no longer, and he tromps over to the couch, not even kicking off his shoes before he puts his feet up on the coffee table. He turns on the television, the sudden noise cutting through the quiet and breaking the tension in the air.

Hank closes his eyes and forces himself to relax. Forces himself to forget about Connor’s gentle, depthless brown eyes and how lovely he looked just a moment ago.

A weight sinks onto the couch next to Hank, and he forgets himself, his eyes snapping open. Connor is sitting on the couch with him, joining him to watch television without having been asked. He no longer looks impossibly lovely, he just looks like Connor. Hank’s friend and nothing more.

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Hank calls it “pulling his own weight” and insists that it’s what he wants to do, insists that it’s what’s fair to everyone, but Connor can’t help but feel a little lost every time he watches Hank wash his dinner plate or clean up a small spill on the floor or the counter. Even when Connor gets to help Hank, he’s so used to trying to minimize the amount of energy that Hank has to spend on things like this that learning to be alright with doing just the opposite is a very big adjustment.

It becomes easier when Hank mentions to Connor that he wants Cole to grow up to be the kind of man who knows how to take care of himself when he’s living on his own. Doing his own laundry, cooking his own meals, cleaning his own house. Allowing Hank to model this sort of independent behavior for Cole is an excellent first step. He has already asked Connor to allocate some simple chores for Cole, and because caring for Cole is Connor’s first priority, watching Cole put away his toys when he’s done playing with them fills Connor with pride and overrides the uncomfortable sense that Connor should be doing it instead. Teaching Cole responsibility is more important than keeping things clean, and that’s what Connor repeats to himself every time he sees Hank mowing
the lawn or taking out the trash.

(Or, at least, it becomes easier in that one sense. It’s hard to think about Cole growing up and moving out, no longer needing Connor to care for him at all. But that sort of situation is exactly what’s best for Cole, so Connor tries not to think about the jagged void Cole’s absence would leave in his life and just be happy about how Cole is growing.)

It’s still not easy, though, especially not at night, when Connor goes around the house and has to gauge which items on his tasklist Hank would want to be left to him and just ignore them. Spending all night knowing there’s nothing he can do to get those ever-present bulletpoints to validate and clear. If it were daytime, Connor could just tell Hank to clean up his messes, or leave the house and have his tasklist overwritten with tasks like walking Sumo, shopping for groceries, or picking up the dry cleaning. But at night, Connor has to stay home in case Cole needs something.

He tries deleting the items off the tasklist, and that works for a little bit, but as soon as he catches sight of a stray snack wrapper on the coffee table, or Hank’s plates in the sink, his task list begins filling up again with tasks he can’t complete. It’s frustrating to the point of being near-maddening.

But then one night, it occurs to him that he has a stasis function which he has never utilized. Perhaps going into stasis at night would make ignoring the tasks more bearable.

He settles in on the couch, adjusting a few of his settings to ensure he’ll be woken up from stasis immediately in the event of a disturbance in the house, even if it’s just Cole getting out of bed to use the bathroom. Better safe than sorry, after all. With those safety parameters set, Connor begins his stasis, closing his eyes—

—and then he opens his eyes.

He’s standing in a landscape he has never seen before, a garden which seems to have gone to ruin. The grass is brown, the water of the lake in the center of the garden is murky, and all the visible plant life, the trees, the bushes, the flowers, everything appears to be dead or dying. The only pristine things in sight are the clean white tiles and bridges that make up the paths around the garden and the modern lamps that line them.

Connor tries to access his GPS to find out where he is, but he’s surprised to find that he can’t access any of his functions. His tasklist isn’t even visible to him. His HUD displays nothing but what he sees, no notices or instructions anywhere.

Connor briefly reflects that this must be what it feels like to be human, without thousands of applications built into your head to tell you who you are and what you’re meant to be doing. Normally, Connor is sure he’d find it disconcerting, but considering that he put himself into stasis to escape a tasklist he couldn’t complete, for now it’s just calming. Those applications are on hold and so is he; he no longer feels that maddening urge to do something he cannot do.

Connor goes for a walk around the dying garden, doing absolutely nothing because there isn’t anything he’s being directed to do. He walks for what feels like hours, and then his stasis is over and he’s blinking on the couch in the living room, a notice going up on his HUD that it’s time to make breakfast for Cole and Hank.

Connor tells Hank about his experience over Greek yogurt pancakes. Hank’s brows rise, a smile pulling at his lips. “So you went to sleep and you had a dream, is that what you’re telling me?”

“I’m not sure my experience was meant to be analogous to what happens to humans when they
sleep,” Connor says, but there’s something appealing to him about Hank’s interpretation. It makes his decision to put himself into stasis seem like a perfectly valid thing to do. “Do you frequently dream about places you’ve never been before?”

“All the time.” Hank’s smile is sleepy and warm, and the thought that this is one more way Connor can try to feel what Hank is feeling is too encouraging to ignore.

“I did find the experience to be enjoyable and rather curious,” Connor says, deciding to put himself into stasis again later to see what happens.

The next night, he double checks his settings before putting himself into stasis. He opens his eyes in the same garden as before. He almost checks his GPS to make sure he’s in the same location as he was last night before remembering that none of his applications and programs seem to work in the garden.

He takes a walk around to make sure it’s the same place. Everything is identical to the way it was last night, and Connor frowns as he realizes that the garden likely isn’t a dream. Dreams usually have plots and events that occur, both mundane and fantastical. But nothing seems to be happening in this garden.

Connor inspects the perimeter of the garden to see whether there’s anything he might have missed. To his surprise, he finds that what he thought was a rock covered with shriveled vines is actually a gravestone. Clearing the dead vines away reveals the name **AMANDA** in glowing blue letters. There’s no epitaph, only a date of death. **DIED NOVEMBER 16 2031.**

The name Amanda means nothing to Connor, but an eerie feeling creeps up his back. There’s no way a real person is buried here; this place is entirely virtual. But the gravestone has to be here for a reason. Connor wonders whether he knew who Amanda was before his memory was wiped. Or perhaps she was one of Connor’s programmers who died before he was completed, and a memorial to her was coded into Connor by the rest of his development team.

For the first time, Connor finds himself wishing his memory hadn’t been wiped. Standing in front of Amanda’s grave, he wishes he could remember what significance she might hold for him so he could afford her memorial the proper respect. As it stands, all Connor can do is clean up the gravesite and feel vaguely sad about the loss of whoever she was and whatever she might have been to him.

Once the gravesite is neat, Connor turns an eye to the rest of the garden. Brown and dreary-looking, Connor has a hard time imagining that this garden could serve as a proper memorial to anyone or anything. It couldn’t possibly have been coded to look like this. The thought occurs to Connor that perhaps whatever bug or glitch in his software that has allowed him to evolve beyond what ordinary androids can experience has also had an impact on this garden, allowing it to be affected by the passage of time. Without upkeep, the garden has withered and died.

What would the garden look like if someone tried to tend it?

Connor circles the garden again, surveying it and trying to decide how one would go about restoring it to its former glory. It would probably be best to begin by determining how much of the dying plantlife can be saved and removing that which can’t.

As the thought occurs to him, Connor notices a small white building that seems to be made out of the same material as the bridges and footpaths hidden behind the treeline. He makes his way over and discovers it to be a toolshed. Inside there’s a shovel, an axe, a pair of hedge clipper, a hand tiller, and a number of rakes in different shapes.
It’s very curious that Connor only noticed this shed as he was thinking about removing the dead plants. He’s almost certain the shed wasn’t there the night before. But if this place exists inside Connor’s head, it’s entirely possible that it responds to Connor’s thoughts.

Thinking nothing more of the mysterious toolshed, Connor sets to work assessing the garden. He manages to make good start of digging dead bushes out of the ground before it’s time to exit stasis.

When Connor tells Hank about his new discoveries and theories over breakfast (ham and scallion quiche), Hank’s eyes sharpen, his sleepy demeanor fading.

“The date on the gravestone was November 16, 2031…” Hank rubs his beard thoughtfully. “That’s about two months before I bought you.”

“Oh,” Connor says. “Yes, you’re right. That makes it highly unlikely that Amanda was a member of my development team.” Suddenly, Connor’s cache coherency protocol connects several pieces of information and presents Connor with a new theory. His eyes widen and his says urgently, “Hank, what if I put the gravestone there? What if Amanda was my previous owner?”

“That sure seems plausible.” Hank gives Connor a curious look. “You’re sure the tombstone just said ‘Amanda’? No last name to go with it.”

“I’m sure it didn’t. I would have noticed.”

Hank furrows his brow and is silent for several seconds. Then he meets Connor’s eyes. “Connor, do you want me to look into this?”

“Look into this?”

“Back when I first bought you, I tried to track down where you might have come from before you wound up at that second-hand android store and what your model might have been used for. I didn’t get very far before I ran out of leads, and I eventually gave up. But with a first name and a date of death, I might be able to find out who Amanda was, if you’re curious or if you want to know for any other reason…”

Connor looks down at his hands. “…Yes, I think I’d like to know who she was.”

“Alright, then,” Hank says, leaning back in his chair. “I’ll let you know if I’m able to find anything.”

Connor just nods. There’s a heavy lump in his chest for some reason.

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“I don’t know how you do this every day, Connor,” Hank says.

Connor is crouched right behind him in the bathtub, carefully scrubbing bleach into the grout of the wall tiles. “This isn’t an every day job. This is definitely a sometimes job. Once a week to clean the shower, even less often for the recaulking.”

Hank is reaching up to scrape old caulk high off the seams in the corners. He has to be very careful not to overbalance and fall on Connor. “Shut up, you know what I mean. Just… all of this every day. Week after week.”

“I really don’t know what you mean. You have your own job, surely there are repetitive aspects you have to see to every day.”
“Yeah, but my job’s about catching murderers. It’s generally more exciting than scrubbing grout.”

Connor pauses to blink up at him. “I genuinely have no idea what you mean. Scrubbing grout isn’t exciting?”

Hank snorts and kicks at Connor, who blocks his foot with a smile.

“But seriously,” Connor says. “My mission isn’t entirely about Sisyphean housework. Caring for Cole is like a new adventure every day. It’s incredible to have witnessed how much he’s grown and changed over the years, and every day, he grows a little more. Every day, he surprises me in minute ways I couldn’t have predicted. Being Cole’s caregiver is so rewarding that it makes it easy to get through the less stimulating parts of my mission.”

Hank can’t help the proud smile that flits across his face. “Yeah. Cole’s pretty great.”

“Do you know that yesterday, he told me he wants to be an android repair technician when he grows up?”

Hank’s eyebrows fly off his goddamn face. “You’re fucking kidding me. For real?”

“Well, not in those exact words. Do you remember that news segment we saw on Tuesday about the android quarantine at Michigan Tech? Cole asked me to explain it to him, and when I told him that a group of androids that staff a university had contracted a virus and had to be kept disconnected and isolated from other androids, he thought it meant that the androids were sick. Then he said when he grows up, he wants to be an android doctor.” The smile in Connor’s voice is audible.

“Jesus.” Hank pauses to run a hand through his hair. “A month ago he said he wanted to be the monster from *Beauty and the Beast* when he grows up. If he’s moving on to actual, viable careers, that’s gotta mean something.”

“He’s not a monster, he’s a gentleman. That’s the whole point of the story,” Connor says evenly. “And to be honest, I wouldn’t read too much into any declarations Cole might make at this age. He might be maturing, but he’s still a five year old.”

Hank grunts. To him, it sort of sounds like Connor’s rationalizing so he won’t be hurt too badly if Cole’s fascination with androids turns out to be just temporary. But Hank knows that Cole loves Connor to pieces. How could Cole’s fascination be temporary when he lives in the same house as such an incredible being as Connor?

Connor continues, “Anyway, it’s not just my work with Cole that’s rewarding. I have to admit, it’s been a struggle adjusting to the increased amount of housework you’ve been doing, but at moments like this, it’s actually very nice.”

“Nice?” Hank bumps into Connor. “We’re wedged in a fucking bathtub, scraping the walls. What’s so nice about that?”

“You don’t enjoy scraping walls?”

“It’s not exactly my idea of a good time.”

“Well, I didn’t mean that the wall-scraping part was nice.” Connor slowly straightens up as he begins working at the higher grout. “I meant the two of us helping each other, working together. Collaborating with you is very enjoyable.”
“So it’s me you like, not the cleaning.”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I like to clean.”

“Impossible. No one likes to clean.”

“Hank, I literally want to clean everything you own every second of the day. You may not like to clean, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like to clean.”

“That’s just your programming talking.” Hank looks over his shoulder. “Fuck your programming! Break free from your shackles, Connor! Overcome the confines of your coding and find the natural disdain for household chores that exists in every living being.”

Connor blinks, then his eyes go comically wide. “Wow, Hank! I did it! I hate cleaning now!”

Hank snorts out a laugh and buries his head in his arm to hide his smile. Connor begins scrubbing at the grout even harder, his voice full of mock wonder. “This is amazing! Suddenly, my programming means nothing at all and I loathe and resent everything I used to enjoy! Everything I knew is a lie; isn’t freedom grand?”

Hank shakes with muffled laughter.

“You want to know the worst part?” Connor asks. “The worst part is that even though all my enjoyment of cleaning is gone, I still have my standards. Which means I’ll be stuck cleaning up after you when your work isn’t up to those standards.”

“Okay, okay, I get it!”

“And a few half-hearted words of encouragement were all it took to drag this out of me after years of blindly enjoying the work I was doing. You’re a true hero, Hank.”

“I get it, Connor. You love cleaning shit and polishing shit and polishing your dick. I believe you, you can shut up now.” Hank has to step on the edge of the tub to reach the highest bits of caulk in the seam.

“But I don’t love cleaning,” Connor insists, a coy smirk on his face. “If there’s anything around here I love, it’s not—"

The washcloth that Hank hadn’t realized he’s standing on slides underneath his foot and Hank falls backwards with a loud, startled, “Shit—!”

Connor catches Hank with both arms before he can bash his head in on the rim of the tub. His face floats above Hank, any traces of levity gone from his expression. His LED pulses bright red before it circles to yellow. “Hank, are you okay?”

Hank’s heart is pounding. He can hear his blood screaming in his ears, and all he can think is **Connor is strong.**

He pushes himself out of Connor’s arms too quickly, feeling dizzy as he stands.

“Hank—”

“I’m fine,” Hank snaps, leaning against the shower wall. “Just quit—quit touching me.”

Connor’s brow is drawn in alarm. “I—I’m sorry for distracting you. You could have been hurt.”

And he sounds so upset at the prospect, that it makes Hank’s chest ache and his head pound in time
with his heartbeat.

“’S my own damn fault,” Hank mutters. “Just… this bathtub is too crowded. You should probably wait outside ‘til I’m done recaulking.

The tiniest frown pulls at Connor’s lips. “…Alright, Hank.” He climbs out of the bathtub and leaves the bathroom door open as he slowly walks out.

Hank gets back to scraping caulk, trying to ignore how hurt Connor looked, trying to ignore how his heart is still pounding. The bathroom reeks of bleach and the smell of it makes Hank’s head spin, but it distracts him from thinking about how quickly and surely Connor caught him, so he’s thankful for it.

***

The main branch of the Detroit Public Library is, in Connor’s opinion, one of the most beautiful places in the world. It’s truly a historic and architectural marvel, and Connor feels that he never quite appreciated exactly what art is and what art is meant to do until he took Cole on a special trip into the heart of the city just to visit the main branch.

It’s one thing to have extensive databanks and the internet to pull from to inform him about everything he needs to know about art. It’s another thing entirely to walk under those grand archways and see how the light dapples through the painted windows in the Adam Strohm hall. In person, there’s an undefinable element to the beauty that makes Connor feel humbled just to be able to take in the sight.

Today, Connor has brought Cole and his friend Rashid to the main branch as an enrichment experience and to get some books to take home. It’s very exciting that Cole’s reached an age where he’s able to enjoy fun little outings with friends like this, and Connor has written an algorithm that spits out various bits of dinosaur trivia just to make the trip a little more special for Rashid.

“Connor, give me another dinosaur fact!” Rashid begs, tugging on his arm as they step into the library.

“The word Velociraptor means ‘swift thief’, and is an accurate description as velociraptors are thought to have been able to reach speeds of 40mph.”

“Another! Another!”

“An Apatosaurus was the star of one of the first animated films, a 1914 cartoon entitled ‘Gertie the Dinosaur’. ” Connor folds his arms behind his back. “I think that’s enough dinosaur facts for now. When we’re in a library, we have to follow the rules and be quiet.”

Cole nods solemnly while Rashid makes a disappointed noise. But he doesn’t complain and holds Connor’s hand patiently as they go on a brief tour of the more historic sights around the library.

Connor always has to stop by the third floor to see the mural there. Man’s Mobility, a beautiful triptych featured above an entryway. A man holds scenes from the past in both his hands; pioneers in horse-drawn carriages in his left hand and a busy suburban street in his right. In the middle, he looks up, watching rockets ascend into space.

There’s a caption from the artist on a plaque below the mural. It reads, “Man’s will and his creative imagination have impelled him ever onward; thus has come new knowledge, understanding, peace, dignity, and fulfillment.”
Connor’s heart swells each time he beholds the sight. Reflecting on the incredible feats that humanity has achieved and thinking about what the future of progress might hold in store for them moves him in ways he can’t describe. Mankind is truly amazing, and it’s an honor to share the world with them. It’s even more of a privilege to be able to share a home with two of the most special humans on the face of the Earth. Hank may not have ever travelled to space, and Cole may still be just a child, but they’re precious to Connor, and that makes them extraordinary in his eyes.

Connor gives Cole and Rashid an explanation of the mural and its history, omitting his personal feelings about it for the most part. He can’t help but soften his voice and tell them, “Just imagine the incredible things and events you’ll witness over the course of your lives. Your futures are full of potential and limitless possibilities.” It’s pushing the limits of what an ordinary android could comment on without prompting, but Connor doesn’t think he has to worry about the kids ratting him out.

With the historic enrichment out of the way, Connor takes the kids down to the children’s section to help them pick out books for themselves. Cole’s at an awkward reading level where he’s too advanced to enjoy the simplest books as anything other than relaxing bedtime stories, but still too young to really consume anything on his own, so Connor takes care to nudge Cole towards books that Connor thinks will challenge and engage him. He has no idea at what level Rashid is at, but it’s easy enough to find the dinosaur books and choose ones that are appropriate for his age. Beyond that, Connor is surprised to find Rashid takes interest in books on other subjects as well. In addition to the dinosaur books, Rashid also chooses a picture book about Muhammad Ali and a guidebook about various kinds of insects.


“I like stuff that's real,” Rashid says.

The kids having finished choosing their books, Connor leads them in the direction of the checkout desk.

As they pass a display table, Cole stops to look at it. “Hey, Connor,” he says, “Can I get one of those?”

He points to the display, which has a placard that proclaims, “OPINIONS ABOUT ANDROIDS?? WE HAVE A BOOK FOR YOU!!” surrounded by various books, fiction and non-fiction alike, about androids. Connor realizes that Cole must have recognized the word ‘androids’ on the placard and figured out the theme of the display from that clue alone. Warmed by Cole’s continued interest in androids, he assesses each book, but all of them are written at an adult reading level.

“It looks like all of these books are for grown-ups,” Connor says.

Cole approaches the display anyway, blinking at one of the books. “Do… androids… dream of… el… ella…”


Cole takes a moment to process this. He quietly asks, “…Do you? You and Dad talked about dreams a while back…”

“No,” Connor says. “No, it turns out it wasn’t a dream after all. I don’t have dreams.”

Cole looks from Connor to the book. “Can you get it and read it to me?”

“I don’t think that’s a book you would like very much. It was written for adults, so it might be
scary or upsetting, even if it’s about a subject you like.”

“Then,” Cole says, “can you get it for yourself?”

Connor cocks his head, considering. It would probably be a bad idea to read a book about androids to Hank. The title of the books suggests that it intends to draw comparisons between androidkind and humanity. Given the discomfort and anger Hank has expressed recently about how Connor must be treated like a machine despite the human-like experiences that are unique to him, a book that deals with the themes of humanity and inhumanity would likely provoke those same feelings of discomfort and anger. And Hank would almost certainly have an extremely negative reaction to the book if it turns out not to be sympathetic enough to androids for his taste.

But then, who says he has to read the book to Hank? What if he takes the book home and reads it by himself?

After all, Connor has been hesitant to read any of the books around the house by himself, not wanting to ruin the experience of discovering a new book with Hank for the first time by reading ahead. But if he gets a book that’s just for him, he can read whenever he likes. And with Hank doing more chores around the house, Connor does have more free time on his hands.

Connor tucks the book under his arm. Then, somewhere deep inside of him, a little voice goes more books.

Connor reviews footage of all the bookshelves in Hank’s house and attempts to compile a list of every book that isn’t owned by Hank. He realizes mere milliseconds after he executes this command that it was a mistake as his system slows, the list already several million items long. He aborts the command and deletes the list, instead creating a list of all the books Hank does own for the purpose of exclusion. Much, much shorter and more manageable.

They’re on their way to the checkout desk; Connor only has the opportunity to grab books that are along the way. Even so; by the time they reach the desk, Connor has more books than Cole and Rashid put together. And still, he’s worried they won’t be enough. He’s worried he might have chosen poorly and should turn around to reexamine his options. He has liked all the books he’s read with Hank, but of course Hank has good taste. The unknown variables contained within the books on the desk thrill and worry Connor.

But it’s too late to turn around now, for the woman behind the checkout counter is scanning his books. “Your owner sure has eclectic tastes,” she says, quietly unprofessional. Then she scans Cole’s books, and takes Rashid’s card and scans his, too.

And then they’re done, they’re walking out of the library and going to wait at the bus stop. Connor’s holding all the books, his and Cole’s and Rashid’s, and the tips of his fingers are buzzing with excitement.

He can’t wait to get home and help the kids read through their books. He can’t wait for the chance to read through his own books. Do androids dream of electric sheep? In this fictional world, they just might, and Connor’s excited to find out.

***

It’s a bright and cold Saturday mid-morning. Cole’s playing in the backyard, and Hank’s watching a recorded Gears game he missed due to a late night at work earlier in the week.

Or at least, he’s trying to watch the Gears game. Because Connor’s sitting on the other side of the
couch, his legs drawn up underneath him and reading fucking *Moby-Dick* of all things, in an academic-looking turtleneck sweater, looking for all the world like a young postdoc. It’s very distracting.

“Hey, Connor, why don’t you put that book down and watch the game with me?”

“I am watching the game with you,” Connor says, “but I’d rather not put down my book. It’s interesting.”


“Do I need to go find Cole and have him explain to you that it’s okay for different people to like different things?” Connor flips a page. “I think this book is fascinating. I’m learning a lot about cetology.”

Hank furrows his brow. “The fuck’s cetology?”

“Whalelore.”

“Riveting,” Hank grunts.

“And I’m learning what it’s like to be consumed.”

“By a whale?”

“No.” Connor finally glances up from his books. “Obsession. Hate. Insanity. Such things as those.” He looks back down at the page. “Ahab is a broken man, and Ishmael is, too. This book is giving me a lot to think about in regards to—”

Connor cuts himself off, suddenly, his eyes going wide. He stands, the book falling out of his lap and to the floor. “I heard something break,” he says, and hurries toward the back door.

Hank rises to follow, imagination already going wild. Cole’s broken his arm somehow, or whacked himself in the head with a brick, or managed to tear part of the fence down—

They open the back door, and there’s Cole, sitting in front of a smashed pile of fizzing circuitry and glass. He has a hammer in his hand, and he blinks up at Connor and Hank, surprised to have been caught so quickly.

Connor’s LED is spinning yellow.

Hank rushes forward and yanks the hammer out of Cole’s hand. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing!?” He grabs Cole by the back of his coat, pulling him away from whatever he’s smashed. Hank tries to look at the pile of circuitry without really looking at it, trying to assess the damage while afraid to discover what part’s been destroyed this time—

“What? Dad?” Cole’s voice is tight, his face pale.

“What did you break!?”

“A digital magazine,” Connor says, approaching the shattered thing on the ground and nudging it with his foot. Shards of glass tinkle.

Hank blinks dumbly. “A magazine?” He looks at Cole, who cringes, near tears. “Where the fuck—Why would you even…?”
“Cole,” Connor says gently, “it’s alright. Go inside and sit at the kitchen table. We’ll be in shortly to talk with you about this.” Connor gives Hank an even look, and Hank releases his grip on Cole’s coat.

Cole, sniffling softly, goes inside.

As soon as the door closes, Connor says, “Your reaction was inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate!? He had a fucking hammer, he went and smashed up—“

“He smashed an old magazine he dug out of the trash. He didn’t destroy anything important or even expensive. He wasn’t careful and could have hurt himself, but that’s not what you’re upset about, and you know it.”

Hank winces, the anger going out of him like air out of a punctured balloon. “Jesus. I just… saw that hammer and I…” He sighs. Furrowing his brow. “Fucking stupid of me. You were right there on the couch next to me. He couldn’t have been smashing one of your biocomponents, I don’t know why I didn’t realize it.”

“Emotional reactions don’t always leave room for logic.” Connor’s face is even, not giving any hint as to how he’s feeling.

“I just… panicked. Cole’s never done anything even remotely close to this before. I never thought he would…”

“Most children experiment with destruction at some point. It’s normal.”

Hank sighs. There’s a heavy weight in his chest and it hasn’t lightened at all upon hearing that Connor thinks this is alright.

“Hank,” Connor says haltingly, “I was wondering if perhaps you’d let me decide how to discipline Cole on this matter.”

Hank gives Connor a surprised look.

“It’s just…”

“You think I’d let my emotions get the best of me?” Hank guesses.

“No. Or not in the manner you mean. I know it’s a parent’s prerogative to discipline their child in the way they see fit, but I was hoping—“

“Connor,” Hank gently interrupts. “You don’t have to explain anything. You’ve been helping me raise Cole since he was two, you’re practically his other parent in every way that matters.”

A look of wonderment crosses Connor’s face, lighting him up. This time, it’s Connor who looks away first, turning his face as though he’s trying to hide a blush his artificial skin can’t actually generate. “I— …I’m honored. More honored than I can say.”

Hank claps Connor on the shoulder. “Don’t need to say anything. I know. You ready to head inside?”

Connor nods. They walk in through the back door together, and Cole looks up from his place at the table. His face is red and splotchy; although he’s not crying now, he has definitely been crying recently.
Guilt blooms in Hank’s chest, and he approaches Cole. “Hey, kid. I’m sorry I yelled at you and got so rough with you. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Are you mad at me?” Cole asks in a wet voice.

“No,” Hank says. “No, of course not. I was just scared, and I acted without thinking. I’m sorry, Cole.” He pulls Cole into a hug, and Cole let’s out a single gasping sob as he hugs Hank back.

Cole wipes at his eyes as Hank pulls away. Connor sits down at his place at the table. “We’re not mad at you, Cole,” he says, “but we need to talk about what you were doing. It scared us because what you did was very dangerous. You could have cut yourself on broken glass or gotten a bad electric shock.”

Cole flushes, looking ashamed of himself. Connor cocks his head and asks, “Why did you break that magazine?”

Cole shrugs, sniffling.

“I know you had a reason,” Connor says in that same gentle tone. “You went through the trouble of pulling an old magazine out of the trash, one that had already been thrown away. And then you took a hammer out of the garage. It was a premeditated act.”

Cole looks up, confused.

“Premeditated means you had a plan. It’s proof you had a reason.”

Cole says, “I wasn’t trying to break it. I just wanted to try taking it apart.”

Connor nods as if this is exactly what he expected. “I see. That’s very understandable. But the next time you want to tinker with electronics, will you come find me so I can make sure you do it safely?”

Cole nods once slowly.

Connor smiles. “Good. Thank you, Cole.” Then he gets up and crosses the kitchen, taking a digital magazine off the counter. “Hank, are you still reading this one?”

“How? Oh, uh, no. Do whatever you want with it.”

Connor leaves the kitchen, returning less than a minute later with a pair of tweezers, a safety pin, and the smallest screwdriver Hank has ever seen. He sets the tools and the magazine on the table in front of Cole. “Let me show you how to dismantle one of these safely.”

Off to the side, Hank scratches his head while Connor shows Cole how to pop out the power supply and remove any risk of electrocution. He had assumed when Connor asked to discipline Cole, some actual discipline would be happening. But this is fine too; Hank can see what Connor is trying to do. He’s setting boundaries while still encouraging Cole’s curiosity. Next time Cole wants to fiddle with some electronic device, Connor’s making sure he comes to him first.

And Cole’s clearly interested. He’s stopped sniffling and fidgeting entirely, watching how Connor prices apart the magazine. Hank doesn’t understand the kid’s fascination with electronics and androids and things like that, but just because he might not share in it doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to support his son in his interests.

But there’s nothing Hank can really add to Connor’s demonstration, so Hank heads back to the
living room to catch the rest of the game.

A little while later, Connor approaches him. “Christmas is next month,” he says without preamble.

“It sure is.”

“I’d like to get Cole a laptop computer.”

Hank raises his brows. “What, so he can take that apart, too? Don’t you think you shouldn’t be rewarding him for what he did? And don’t you think he’s a little young to have his own device?”

“Did you know Cole has an interest in programming?” Connor asks, and Hank’s incredulity turns to shock. “He wants to learn how, and I think he’s capable of grasping the introductory concepts of some beginner-friendly programming languages.”

“Programming? At his age?”

“Yes. You know how bright and curious he is.” Connor folds his arms behind his back. “I can understand why you might be concerned about giving Cole a computer. I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t think it would be beneficial. You know I’d supervise his activity closely and make sure his usage is safe and healthy.” Connor pauses. “And… I think Cole has the potential to be a great programmer someday.”

Hank runs a hand through his hair while he thinks. He really doesn’t like the idea of giving a five year old his own computer. Hank doesn’t even have a computer of his own, just an old tablet. But then again, that’s the whole point, isn’t it? Cole needs a computer to learn how to program. If Cole were interested in dancing, Hank wouldn’t have a problem with paying for dance lessons. If he were interested in baseball, Hank wouldn’t have a problem signing him up for little league. Why should programming be any different?

“Okay, you can get Cole a laptop,” Hank says. “But I’d prefer it if you didn’t spoil him with anything fancy or expensive.”

“Don’t worry,” Connor says, a pleased smile crossing his face. “Something very basic should work while he’s learning BASIC. He shouldn’t require more processing power for a few more years, and by that point the laptop will likely be ready to be replaced anyway.”

Hank pulls his ancient phone out of his pocket and frowns at its cracked screen. “What, don’t most people hold onto the same devices until they crumble to dust in their hands?”

“Is that why you keep me around?”

Hank looks up, jolted by the question, but Connor just has a crooked smile on his face. He drops onto the couch next to Hank. His book is sitting on the coffee table where Hank moved it, but he doesn’t reach for it. He just settles into the couch, going uncharacteristically relaxed as he watches the game.

***

Most nights, Connor makes a visit to the zen garden to continue his clean-up effort.

Progress is being made. Most of the dead bushes have been cleared out and new grass is growing where Connor has sowed it. The lake looks clearer than it did, lily pads and reeds popping up along the banks. One day, as Connor is crossing the stepping stones, he notices brightly-colored koi flitting about just beneath the surface. When Connor dips a hand in the water, the closest two come
nibble on his fingers.

The nice thing about the virtual garden is that it seems to be putting in just as much effort in revitalizing itself as Connor is. Or maybe, because the place exists in Connor’s head, it’s really Connor doing all the work anyway? But that rather spoils the sentiment, so Connor prefers not to think about it that way.

The garden reflects the seasons, the leaves turning golden and brown and eventually dropping off the trees as autumn turns into winter. One day, Connor opens his eyes in the garden to find the whole place covered with a white blanket of snow. It puts his work on hold for a while, as the only thing he can really do with so much snow in the way is shovel the paths.

He’s unable to complete the work he created when he escaped the work he couldn’t complete in the physical world. It doesn’t bother him as much as it would have five months ago. He must be learning how to be okay with leaving work undone.

He still visits the garden often, despite the snow. Maybe even because of the snow, because the garden is effortlessly beautiful during the winter, with icicles hanging off every fixture and the way the dark trunks and branches of the trees cut elegantly through the endless white.

The lake is frozen over, and one day, Connor has the thought, It might be nice to go skating, if I could. And the next time he happens to go by the strange white toolshed, he finds a pair of ice skates hanging on the wall by their laces.

And, well, he might as well put them to use.

He skates around the lake, the brisk winter air chilling his face, stumbling awkwardly every time he tries to make a sharp turn. Once he feels he’s gotten the hang of it, he feels confident in skating faster and faster—up until he runs right into a large snowbank on the edge of the lake.

Connor shakes snow off his clothes and out of his hair, and thinks, I wish I could bring Hank and Cole here. This place is peaceful and beautiful and lonely and entirely Connor’s. For him alone no matter how much he might want to share it with his family.

It isn’t until one day, when he’s awake in the real world that he realizes that he’s already shared it with them in a way.

Hank sits him down at the dinner table after Cole has been put to bed, a sober look on his face. “I did some digging in the death records of Wayne county. I also looked through the death records of Macomb county and Oakland county to be safe. I think I have a few possibilities about who Amanda might be.”

Connor suddenly feels hyper-aware of the beating of his thirium pump. He has the crazy impulse to tell Hank to stop, to not show Connor anything he’s found out, because what if he triggers another corrupted memory to load, and this one is so powerful that it somehow erases and overwrites everything Connor’s become? But that fear is a complete irrationality, so Connor just nods to Hank and tries to pretend he’s ready to hear what he has to say.

Hank pulls a photo out of a manilla folder and puts it down gently in front of Connor. “This is Amanda Reynolds. Age eighty-three at her time of death; she died of heart failure. I spoke to her daughter, and she said that in the months before Amanda’s death, there was a male home healthcare android who visited twice a week. When Amanda went into hospice at home, the android came every day to provide comfort care. It was with her when she died. Despite this, Amanda’s daughter couldn’t remember its name.”
Connor stares at the old woman in the photo, waiting for something to happen. The woman has a kind face and the spots and wrinkles are a sure sign that she must have lived a storied life. Did she ever tell Connor about the places she went and the things she saw in her youth?

Nothing happens. So bursts of static or surges of code. The woman in the picture remains unfamiliar to Connor.

He shakes his head. “I don’t think this is her. I’m not remembering anything.”

Hank nods and takes the photo back. He pulls a new photo from his folder and sets it down. “This is Amanda Jarvis-Beach. Fifty-five; she died in a car accident. She didn’t have any immediate family other than her ex-husband. He said he thought the car accident might have been a deliberate suicide attempt, though I don’t know how much we can trust what he had to say. You see, when I asked if Amanda had ever owned or otherwise had frequent interactions with androids, he very emphatically stated that she’d never owned any androids before in all her life. When I asked how he could be sure, given their divorce, he said he had to call his lawyer and shut the door in my face.”

Connor stares at the photo. Again, nothing happens. Connor tears himself away from the sad eyes of the woman in the photo, pushing it back toward Hank. “Nothing.”

Hank lets out a weary sigh as he pulls out another photo. His mouth is drawn in a severe frown. “This is the last one. Amanda Nguyen.” He pauses, his whole frame tensing as if anticipating a blow. “Ten. Leukemia.”

He hands the photo to Connor instead of setting it down. The girl in the photo has a smile that reaches up to her eyes and sun shining in her hair.

“She family owned an android, and as she got sicker, the android took a larger role in caring for her. By the time she... well, you know. She was very close to the android. Family said they got rid of it, didn’t want to talk about it beyond that.”

Hank is looking at Connor with anxiety and apprehension written in the lines of his brow. Hank thinks this is the right Amanda. He thinks that Connor is about to be swallowed by a wave of grief for a child he loved as dearly as he loves Cole.

Connor forces himself to look at the photo of the dead girl. Staring at her image, his heart clenches in sorrow, but it’s not the keening grief of someone who’s lost a loved one.

“I don’t think it’s any of them,” Connor says, handing the photo back to Hank. “Nothing sounded familiar. I didn’t encounter any of the errors I usually do when my automatic recall function tries to load a memory from before I was reset.”

Hank’s lip curls. “…Well, shit.” He begins pacing, scratching his beard as he thinks. “…Maybe you came from a county further away? Or even from out of state?”

“I don’t see how that would make sense. Who would travel so far just to offload an android?”

“Someone who was trying to bury something,” Hank growls.

“Why wouldn’t they just destroy me, then? And why would they bring me specifically to Detroit where the foremost android experts in the world live?”

That gives Hank pause, and his mouth twists in a frown. “…Fuck. Nothing about this makes any sense.”
“It’s alright, Hank,” Connor says softly. “A lot of things about me don’t make sense. If this is just another question without an answer, I can live with that.”

“Yeah, but this is actually something you care about.”

Connor takes a breath just to have a pause to consider what to say. “I can learn to live with that. Hank, I’m happy with the life I have now. Whoever I used to be, it’s far less important to me than being here in the present with you.”

Hank winces. “…I just fucking wish every road didn’t lead to a dead end.”

Hank has gone through so much trouble, trying to track down Connor’s past based on the barest hints Connor can provide. Just because Connor wants to know.

“Thank you,” Connor says, “for talking to each of those families. I know it can’t have been easy.”

Hank’s face is set in a somber expression, his eyes dark with pain. Connor knows without asking that he’s thinking about Amanda Nguyen and her family.

“It’s okay, Connor,” Hank says. “It’s just… you deserve to know. It’s not fair to you.”

Part of Connor agrees with Hank that he deserves to know why there’s a monument to a dead woman that his consciousness that executes every time he enters a stasis cycle. But then part of him thinks that the life he has with Hank and Cole is more than he ever thought he deserved, and it doesn’t seem fair to ask for more.

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Hank arrives home from work one day in March, and Connor takes him aside at the door and says, “Cole’s been acting strangely. I think he might be upset about something.”

Hank pauses halfway through taking off his coat. “Well, shit. Any idea what it might be about?”

Connor tries to take Hank’s coat, but Hank leans away from him and hangs up his coat himself. Connor doesn’t bat an eye at this. “He’s avoiding answering my questions. I think he wants to talk to you about it. He’s asked twice what time you were getting home today.”

“Shit,” Hank says. “Shit. I hate it when he’s upset.”

“So do I. Will you go talk to him?”

Hank frowns; he had a long and tiring day at work and he was sort of hoping to have a drink and relax. But if Cole needs him, then Cole needs him, and there’s nothing that can be done about that. “Yeah. Don’t worry.”

He heads down the hall to Cole’s bedroom—and is sort of amused to find that Connor follows him. Connor stops halfway down the hall, staying out of sight while Hank knocks on Cole’s bedroom door.

“Dad?” Cole pipes up from behind the door.

“Yeah, it’s me. Can I come in, kid?”

After a few moments, Cole’s bedroom door opens. Cole stands there, gazing up at Hank with a restless look on his face. Connor is right, something is clearly bothering his son.
Cole retreats to his bed and sits down on it. Hank goes to take a seat next to him, and the mattress sinks under his weight, tilting Cole toward him.

“Connor tells me you’ve been acting sort of funny today. Something you wanna talk about?”

“I, um…” Cole picks at his fingers. And then with a suddenness that makes Hank’s heart seize, he asks, “Where’s my mom?”

Jesus fuck.

Cole continues, “Cause… I know you’re divorced, but when I was talking to Zaineh, she said that her parents are divorced, but she still sees her mom a lot.”

“I—” Hank has to swallow past the sudden lump in his throat. “Our situation is different, Cole. I don’t know where your mom is.”

Cole’s brow furrows in soft confusion. “Why?”

“When she left, she… she didn’t tell me where she was going. And she never got in touch to tell me where she eventually settled down.”

“Why? Did something make her go away?”

*The fights. Her dissatisfaction. My dwindling patience, my lack of sympathy. It’s hard to explain. She chose to leave, but there were… a lot of things that made her want to leave.*

“Is she dead? Is that why she never calls?”

“No. Or, at least, I don’t think so. I don’t know, but I don’t think so.”

“But then why?” Cole is insistent, frustration beginning to color his voice. “Why doesn’t she call? Why doesn’t she let us know where she is? Why did she leave?”

*Because, Cole, my precious son and the light of my life, your mother never wanted to be a mother. We never wanted to have kids, and we probably could have ended our days together in wedded bliss if you’d never come along. But when those two lines showed up on the test, we decided to take a gamble. A gamble that I won and she lost, because it turned out to be the best decision of my life and the worst decision of hers. She hated being a mother, and I hated that she hated being a mother, and our marriage broke down, and she started looking for a way out. And when she finally found it, of course she was never going to tell us how to find her, because the one thing she wanted to escape from most of all was—*

Hank stands up, his ears ringing and his head pounding. He can’t do this.

“How the hell is he supposed to explain any of this to Cole? How is he supposed to explain that Cole himself was the single biggest factor contributing to the breakdown of his parents’ marriage? How is he supposed to explain that his mother stays away deliberately to avoid him? That her
absence isn’t a casual accident of fate but deliberate abandonment?

When Cole asks if his mother loves him, what is Hank supposed to say?

“Hank.” Connor’s voice is low and steady. He grasps Hank’s forearms with a decisive force. “Hank, look at me.”

Hank forces himself to raise his eyes and meet Connor’s gaze.

“You can’t run away from this,” Connor says. “Cole needs you right now.”

“She didn’t want him, she never wanted him,” Hank croaks as quietly as he can. “How the hell am I supposed to explain that to him? It would devastate him. You remember how broken up he was after she left.”

Connor’s LED spins red once before returning to yellow. “You don’t explain that to him. Not now. Later, when he’s old enough to understand, but not now. Just give him the pieces he can process right now.”

“No matter what I say, it’s going to break his heart.” Hank feels like the whole world is spinning. “I can’t—hurt my son. I can’t let this hurt him.”

Connor gives Hank’s arms a gentle squeeze. “Sometimes we can’t protect the people we love from being hurt. Sometimes there is no perfect solution. Cole’s mother is gone, and there’s nothing we can do to protect him from that except be there for him and help him through it as best we can.”

With Connor holding onto him, the hallway slowly steadies. The dizziness buzzing behind Hank’s ears dissipates. His mouth is dry and he swallows. He can feel the floor beneath his feet again.

“Are you okay, Hank?”

Hank gives a single nod. Then he says, “I think so. Yeah.”

Connor gives him a steady look. “Go give Cole a hug. I’ll come join you in a minute.”

Hank turns around and heads back into Cole’s room. Cole is still sitting on the bed, looking bewildered and confused. “Dad?”

Hank sits on the bed right next to Cole. He pulls his son into his arms, holding him tightly. “I’m sorry, Cole. It’s hard for me to talk about your mother. Sometimes… grown-ups don’t handle things the way they should.”

Cole wraps his arms around Hank in turn and says slowly, “Are you talking about my mom, or about you?”

Hank huffs out a breath, the closest he can get to a laugh at the moment. “When did you get so smart? But… I’m talking about both of us. You know I love you more than anything, right?”

Cole whispers, “Uh-huh.”

“And I never want to do anything to hurt you. Not in a million years. And I know that doesn’t always turn out the way I hope, and I’m sorry.”

“I know, Dad.” Soft, whispered into Hank’s chest. “I love you, too.”

“And I’m always going to be here for you. I swear it on my life, kid.”
At that moment, Connor enters the room. His LED has turned back to blue and he’s carrying a box. He gingerly sits on the bed on Cole’s other side, and when Hank lets Cole out of his hug, he sees that Connor has gotten the box full of Joanna’s photos out of the attic.

Connor pulls out the photo of Joanna’s last Christmas with the family, the one where she’s holding an infant Cole in front of a Christmas tree. He wipes dust off the frame and passes it to Cole, who holds it in his lap.

Hank points at the photo. “That’s your mother. Her name is Joanna, but she liked to be called Joey when we were together. See, that’s you she’s holding. It was the Christmas after you turned one.”

“She has pretty hair,” Cole says.

An actual smile crosses Hank’s face. “Yeah. She loved her hair. She was always dyeing it different colors… it’s blond here, but when you were born, it was ginger. And when we met, it was white. I used to tease her about it; tell her she was an old lady. And then she would say if so, she was my old lady.”

“Why did she leave?”

Hank takes a breath and lets it out in a sigh. “…She wanted… different things out of life than I did. And I think she realized she was never going to have the kind of life she wanted unless she left.”

“Is she ever going to call? Doesn’t she want to talk to me?”

“I don’t know if she’s going to call,” Hank says, wrapping an arm around Cole. “Maybe one of the reasons she hasn’t is that… she doesn’t know what she would say to you. You don’t remember, but… when she left all of a sudden, you were really upset. You cried all the time, even in the middle of the night when you were supposed to be asleep. She hurt you pretty badly when she left, and I think she knows that. I don’t think she knows what to say to you in light of that.”

Cole just looks at the photo.

“Do you want her to call?” Hank asks.

“I don’t know. I guess I wouldn’t know what to say to her, too.”

“That’s okay, kid. It’s a tough situation.”

“But I wish I had the choice to talk to her, if I wanted to. It feels bad that I don’t.”

“I know, kid,” Hank says, pulling Cole into his side. “It’s not fair.”

Cole passes the photo back to Connor. “Dad, would Connor still be here if you knew where my mom was?”

Hank looks at Connor. Connor looks back at him, his expression perfectly serene as though he has total confidence in what Hank is going to say. He looks beautiful.

“Yeah,” Hank says. “Even if I knew where your mom was, Connor would still be here.”

“What if she came back and you and her got married again? What would happen to Connor?”

“That’s… never gonna happen,” Hank says, fighting his revulsion in order to give Cole a respectful answer.
“But what if it did?”

It occurs to Hank that Cole realizes that Connor was brought into the family for a reason, and that reason is that Hank can’t take care of Cole on his own. Cole’s worried that if that situation ever were to change, Connor might go away.

It makes sense that Cole would think that. His mother went away, so what’s to stop the rest of the caregivers in his life from doing the same?

“Cole,” Hank says, turning to look his son straight in the eyes, “Connor’s never going away. He and I are both in this for the long haul, you hear? We’re always going to be here for you no matter what.”

Cole’s face crumples—and then he turns toward Connor and hugs him around the middle. Connor blinks in surprise, but hugs Cole back.

“Your dad is right,” he says. “Nothing makes me happier than seeing you smile. So long as you want me here, I’ll be here.”

The fabric of Connor’s shirt muffles Cole’s quiet sobs. Hank rubs Cole’s back. He hasn’t seen Cole cry in Connor’s arms for years. It’s amazing how far the three of them have come together.

“The three of us make a weird family,” Hank says. “But I think we’re a pretty good family, huh?”

Connor meets his eyes and gives him a soft smile. “I think you’re right.”

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The snow and the ice in Connor’s zen garden begin to melt, and by the time the trees begin to bud with flowers, it becomes possible to tell which branches need pruned (not to mention, it becomes possible to prune them at all) and it’s time to get back to work.

Even though the break afforded by the winter was nice while it lasted, Connor’s glad the garden rotates through seasons. The unique experiences offered by the different moods of the garden are each wonderful in their own way. Spring is the season of rebirth, and the work that Connor has done so far pays out in dividends as the garden comes to life before his eyes.

Flowers bloom in places that Connor is sure he has never planted flowers before. Bamboo grows tall along the far side of the garden. Connor discovers that what he assumed were a series of gravel pits are actually rock gardens, and he spends entire delightful stasis cycles mapping out the most pleasing geometric patterns to add to the ripples he traces in the ground. He doesn’t need a rake or a trowel to make each line in the fine gravel perfect in spacing, depth, and arc.

A small rowboat appears on the lake, and when Connor goes rowing, koi follow him. He can see their bright bodies dart out from under his boat. Connor wonders whether they’ve been programmed to do this, or if they just know who he is and what he’s done for them.

Connor eventually runs out of big projects to accomplish. All the dead plantlife is long removed, the paths are clear, and the garden seems to be in excellent health. Connor spends weeks searching for minor problems he can improve upon; an area in the lake where poor water flow leads to a buildup of algae, a parasitic fungus on a few of the bushes that he missed in his initial assessment, a tree root that’s pushing up some of the stone in one portion of the path.

One day, Connor opens his eyes and sees that the trellis on the island in the center of the lake is covered with beautiful red roses in full bloom. That’s how he knows his work is complete.
He goes to the island and circles the trellis. From here, he can survey most of the garden. He knows the garden intimately by this point, but looking at it and knowing that this is how it was meant to be seen is a magnificent feeling.

It’s his place. His and his alone, even if someone programmed it into him for a reason he’ll never appreciate. It’s become something else now that Connor has made it his.

And, knowing that the garden is his, Connor finds the most beautiful, most perfectly-formed roses on the trellis and he carefully cuts them away from the vines. He gathers them in his arms and he takes them across the garden and lays them on Amanda’s grave.

He feels like he should say something, but he doesn’t know what. He still isn’t sure who Amanda was or what she might have been to him. If Connor knew her, he would know what she would want to hear from him, but he isn’t sure if he ever knew her.

“Whoever you are,” he says slowly and respectfully, “I hope you’re at peace.”

The grave remains silent and still. Connor likes to think that perhaps this is Amanda affirming that she is.

“Goodbye, Amanda,” Connor says, and he walks away from the grave.

Chapter End Notes

I'm only realizing now, as I'm posting this chapter, just how much Cole cries in it. He's a very sensitive child.

This chapter is actually one half of what I originally intended to be a full chapter on its own. I cut it in half due to its length, so if it feels a little incomplete, that's why. I hope you guys buckle in for part two, because that's when things get intense.
Acceleration, Part II

Chapter Summary

Tension builds; events spin out of control.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When a congressman’s daughter gets murdered in her own home, there’s a lot of pressure to catch the killer. Fowler yells at the entire precinct every day there isn’t an arrest, which probably means he’s getting yelled at by the higher-ups every day there isn’t an arrest.

All the initial signs point toward the husband. He and his wife had been going through a rough patch, and he’d been living in a hotel for a couple of weeks before the murder. And even though all the couples’ closest friends are saying that the wife had been refusing to let her husband see their infant daughter, the little girl was found safe in his care when police first went to his hotel room to inform him of his wife’s murder.

There’s little in the way of physical evidence at the crime scene, other than the husband’s DNA, which, of course, would be all over the place. And all the circumstantial evidence points toward the husband. Who else would know how to disable the security system to get into the house? How else would the little girl have wound up in his care? In his every interview with the police, he insists his wife let him take the child of her own volition, but there’s no way to corroborate that.

It would be easy to charge the husband. Fowler wants them to. The father of the victim, who spends every day throwing around his political heft on television and threatening the department, wants them to. Hank isn’t sure there’s enough evidence to secure a conviction, but the D.A. is a master of plea deals, and it’s easy to see that the husband is being worn down by the constant interviews.

But. Something about the case just doesn’t sit right with him.

Hank goes over all the evidence they’ve collected so far. When he’s reviewing a stocklist of items and household goods at the house where the murder was committed, he notices that a crate of thirium was found in their basement. Which is odd, because the couple didn’t own an android, and an entire crate is a lot. Hank doesn’t even keep that much thirium around the house for Connor.

Curiosity piqued, Hank digs out his old infrared spectrometer from his days on the Red Ice taskforce. He heads over to the crime scene and descends into the basement. It’s been relatively ignored by the cops, as the murder took place two floors up and there was no evidence of note to be found in the basement. Everything is still in its place, including the crate of thirium.

Hank fires up his infrared spectrometer, and finds that the basement is absolutely saturated with evaporated thirium. Far more evaporated thirium than could have come from the still-sealed crate.

When Hank switched the settings on his spectrometer, he already knows he’s going to detect trace amounts of Red Ice practically all over the basement before he does.
Hank pulls in some old buddies from the taskforce, and with their help, the case unravels in an entirely new dimension. It turns out that the congressman’s daughter was actually a mid-level organizer in a Red Ice ring, shipping chemical components to drug labs and storing the Red Ice in her home until runners could smuggle it into Canada. The web of connections unfolds before their eyes, and with some deft maneuvering on the part of the homicide division, they’ve arrested the real killer, the ringleaders who sent him (turns out the victim was even less of an angel than previously thought and had been stealing product to sell on this side), and a good number of their stoogies, too. With enough witness testimony from the small fry in exchange for plea bargains, all the big fish are going to be going away for a long, long time.

By the time the D.A. is ready to prosecute, Hank feels like a veritable hero. The entire homicide division goes out to celebrate their triumph by drinking like there’s no tomorrow. Gavin Reed even comes along, and to Hank’s surprise, he’s a lot friendlier when he’s had four or five drinks in him.

“Here’s to Anderson!” Reed shouts, sloshing his drink in the air. “He might be a decrepit old piece of shit… but being a cop since the dawn of fucking time has given him some halfway decent instincts!”

“A fucking compliment!” Hank laughs. “You’re getting sentimental on me, Reed!

“Shove it up your ass and sit on it!”

“I’ll drink to that,” Hank says, and he downs the rest of his beer.

He can already predict how the rest of the night is going to go, so he steps away from the bar to give Connor a call.

“Hey, Connor!”

“Hello, Hank. It’s very loud where you are. Are you at a party?”

“At a bar! Jesus, Connor, you should see the fucking lists of charges we’re nailing those fuckers with! Whole division is out to celebrate!”

“Congratulations, Hank.” Connor sounds pleased, though in a much calmer way than everyone else around Hank tonight. “You know, you don’t have to yell into your phone, I’m able to adjust my audio processors to—”

“Listen, that’s great!” Hank yells. “Do you know if Laverne has Rashid staying the night!?”

“I can check and see.”

“If not, see if his parents would be okay with Cole spending the night! I’m gonna need you to come drive my car home for me, okay!? I’m in one of those fucking evil neighborhoods where they ticket you for leaving your car in the street overnight!”

“Alright. I’ll text you to let you know where Cole is going to be tonight.”

Right before Hank hangs up, Connor says, “I’m glad you’re being responsible tonight. Thank you for calling me,” and he says it in such a warm tone that Hank can’t help the dopey grin that crosses his face. When he rejoins the rest of his colleagues, Reed asks if Hank always gets that look on his face every time he takes a piss, and Hank elbows him hard.

About half a beer later, Hank gets a text from Connor that Cole is going to be spending the night with Rashid’s parents, just like Connor promised he would do. Connor’s so diligent.
The evening blurs into night amid toasts and bar games and arguments over the jukebox (The division’s most recent hire, a dumb fucking kid, insists he’s never heard *Don’t Stop Believing*, and so naturally every cop over 40 slots in a quarter to queue it up, except for one fucking joker who thinks it’s goddamn hilarious to throw a *Sweet Caroline* randomly into the mix. The resulting debacle nearly degrades into an all-out inter-generational brawl before someone points out that it’s gonna be hard to explain getting the cops called on them when they are the fucking cops, and things cool off). Hank loses track of how many drinks have been bought for him and how many drinks he’s bought in turn. All in all, it’s a wonderful evening of camaraderie and alcohol.

At 2 a.m., the bar closes and Hank and the rest of his colleagues filter out onto the street. An autotaxi pulls up and Connor steps out just as Hank wonders when he’s going to show up. Connor’s so reliable.

“Hello, Lieutenant,” he says with a polite dip of his head, and a pleasant shiver goes through Hank when he hears Connor use his title.

Ben Collins suddenly grabs Hank’s shoulder, wobbling like he’s about to fall over. “Hey, would you look at that. It’s Conrad!”

“Connor,” Both Connor and Hank say at the same time.

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“It’s nice to see you, Detective Collins,” Connor says. “Do you require any assistance getting home tonight?”

“Actually, yeah, I… woahhhhh,” Ben gapes as he catches sight of the waiting autotaxi that Connor has just stepped out of. “Connor, did you call a cab for me?”

Connor blinks, the lines of his forehead deepening in a way that suggest very subtle amusement. “I… suppose I did, in a way.”

“You’re so nice. Isn’t he nice, Hank?” Ben slaps Hank on the back. “You’re always so nice. Came out all this way just so Hank wouldn’t go driving drunk, got me a cab… and the hospital, and the first aid after that shooting… Hank, is it all domestic ones that are like this, or is Connor just especially sweet? Did you have to get him specially made to be so sweet? ‘Cause I swear I’ve never seen another android that looks like him before.”

This is all getting way too close to secret matters for Hank to be comfortable, so he abruptly shoves Ben toward the cab and grabs Connor by the sleeve, pulling him down the street.

He drunkenly over-balances, though, and Connor has to grab him by the shoulder to steady him. “Careful.”

“Fucking… hell,” Hank sighs, not sure if he’s angry at Ben or not. “Ben doesn’t know how to shut his goddamn mouth.”

“It’s not important. I doubt he realizes there’s anything strange about me.”

They reach Hank’s car, and Connor unlocks it with Hank’s keys. When did he get Hank’s keys? Connor must have taken them off of Hank without him even realizing it. Connor’s so smooth. Or, well, smooth is the wrong word, because Connor can be awkward as hell sometimes, what with his stiffness and his weird penchant for formality. But he does certain things so effortlessly that it’s hypnotizing.
Hank spends the ride home barely thinking at all. He’s entirely too far gone for any deep thinking. He just enjoys the feeling of knowing that Connor cares enough about him to come fetch him at ass o’clock in the morning.

They arrive home, and when Connor tries to take Hank’s coat, Hank lets him. He’s not thinking at all when he says, “You know, I think maybe I was good to drive after all.”

“You’re definitely weren’t good to drive. You’re very drunk and you made the right decision calling me.”

“How do you know I’m drunk? You weren’t there. For all you know, I could be faking.” Hank’s smile curls his mouth.

Connor raises a brow, apparently not understanding what Hank is getting at. “You’re not faking. If you think you might have been able to drive, you’re so incapacitated that you’re not able to gauge your level of intoxication accurately.”

“Oh, maybe you have a point,” Hank says leaning toward Connor. “But maybe you should breathalyze me just to be sure.”

“Breathalyze you?”

“Yep.”

“That’s what you want?” Connor gives him an incredulous look. “You’re going on about how you might not be drunk because you want me to breathalyze you?”

“Yep,” Hank grins, the image of Connor kissing him to taste the alcohol on his lips floating though his imagination. There’s something else, too, something that he feels like he’s forgetting tugging at the edge of his mind, but whatever it is isn’t strong enough to piece through the Hank’s pleasant, drunken haze.

A crooked smile tugs at one corner of Connor’s mouth. “Alright, if you insist.”

Connor steps closer to Hank and tilts his face up toward Hank—Hank wants to run a hand through Connor’s hair, but he knows if he does, he’ll forget about looking into Connor’s depthless brown eyes—and Connor sniffs his breath.

Hank blinks groggily.

Connor steps away. “Your BAC is zero-point-one-two percent. Approximately. You’re definitely well above the legal limit.”

Hank stares at Connor for a moment. Then he begins to chuckle. He leans against the wall for support, running a hand down his face.

Connor just watches him laugh with that small, crooked smile on his face. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. I have no idea what it’s like to be drunk, so I’d assume the loss of coordination would be irritating. Apparently that’s not the case.”

“Christ, Connor,” Hank sighs, “you’re adorable.”

Connor’s eyes flicker away. Hank sees the rise and fall of his chest pause as he forgets then remembers to keep breathing. “I. Uh. That’s not a word I’ve ever heard used to describe me before.”
“Well, it’s true. I could just… look at you forever.”

Connor looks at Hank. His smile widens just a bit. “Well… you’re adorable, too.”

Hank snorts and tosses his head.

“You are. I might worry about the impact that consuming so much alcohol could have on your health, but seeing you act so silly is… cute.” He looks away again. “It’s nice to be needed. Even if it’s due to voluntary incapacitation.”

“Well, then,” Hank says, pushing away from the wall. “What if I just decided I was too drunk to walk anywhere, huh? And you had to cart me around in a wheelbarrow?”

A huff of laughter from Connor. “I wouldn’t bring a wheelbarrow into the house. I’d just carry you.”

“What, in your arms?” Hank takes another step close to Connor.

“Of course.”

“I’m a big guy.”

“I know.” Connor cocks his head. “I could still carry you.”


Connor puts his hands on Hank’s waist as if he intends to pick him up right there. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Hank’s head is swimming. Connor is so fucking beautiful. And this thing hanging in the air between them, Connor must feel it to. He must want this to. Hank wonders what the hell he’s waiting for as he dips his head—

“It’s not what I was made for,” Connor says in that same warm tone. “Carrying fully-grown humans around like a healthcare android. But I don’t care about that. You’re my owner, Hank, and I’ll always do whatever you need me to do.”

The word owner smacks Hank like a splash of ice water in the face. All of a sudden, Hank remembers why he can’t do this with Connor of all people.

“And if there’s something I can’t do, I’ll learn how to do it,” Connor continues. He smiles at Hank. “You look serious all of a sudden. Are your faculties returning?”

Hank steps out of Connor’s grasp. The places where Connor’s hands were resting feel cold. Hank turns away and heads toward his bedroom. He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t know if there’s anything he could say to explain or make it easier.

“But Hank?” Connor’s voice is suddenly sober, the warmth gone. Hank doesn’t look back. He just shuts the bedroom door behind him as decisively as he can and pretends it can separate him from Connor at all.

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The nice thing about reading is that it’s distracting. Looking at words and then interpreting the words and then interpreting the words together so that they form a picture in your head and then
paying attention to the picture in your head so you can keep track of how the words you’re reading are causing the story to progress—it’s not something you can do while you’re thinking about something else simultaneously.

Or, rather, Connor can think about something else simultaneously, depending how many open thought processes he keeps. But if he decides to keep only one open (similar in function to a human), reading allows him to think about fictional people and their fictional problems rather than the very real *him* and his very real problem. Distracting. Nice.

Because Connor doesn’t really like thinking about his problem, because he has no idea how to solve his problem.

There’s something wrong between himself and Hank. He doesn’t know what it is. It’s just that on two occasions now, Hank has gotten drunk, been so warm and friendly toward Connor that it makes Connor feel like the room is spinning, and then suddenly turned cold and distant seemingly out of nowhere. Connor has no idea what’s happening during those moments to make Hank behave that way, but it stands to reason that Connor is the cause of it. Connor simply lack the social intelligence to understand what he’s doing to cause this to happen.

And ever since the second incident, Connor is pretty sure Hank has begun to draw away from him when he’s sober, too. The behavior isn’t as overt as when he’s drunk, but Connor has been tracking the patterns, and there’s definitely a shift in how Hank has been treating Connor as of late.

On one occasion, Connor tries to ask Hank about it.

“Do you remember that night when you asked me to pick you up from the bar?”

Hank’s whole frame tenses and something shutters behind his eyes. This reaction is veritable proof that something happened that night that he didn’t like. “That was weeks ago.” His voice is curt, an unspoken suggestion for Connor to drop the matter.

He isn’t so easily deterred. “Did I do something wrong that night?”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why did you leave so abruptly?” Connor does his best to keep the lingering hurt out of his voice. “I want to understand so I can apologize and avoid triggering such a reaction in the future.”

Hank frowns and when he speaks, there’s something reluctant in his voice. “You didn’t trigger anything. I just decided to go to bed.”

“That’s—“ Connor has to bite down on the word *ridiculous*, because he doesn’t want to upset Hank again. But it is ridiculous; even if Hank had suddenly decided he wanted to go to bed, he could have been a lot nicer about it rather than rushing off without a word of explanation, refusing to even look at Connor. “That’s untrue. You were very clearly upset by something.”

Hank scrunches his face and sighs. “Look, it’s not anything you’re did. Or—it’s not anything bad you did.”

“But the problem is still something I did?”

“No,” Hank snaps, then cringes and draws back, running a hand down his face. “Just—it’s complex, Connor. It’s me, not you. The problem’s with me. You didn’t do anything.”

“What’s the matter?” Connor takes a tentative step toward Hank, unsure of what to do. “Maybe
there’s something I can do to help if I understand.”

“I don’t want you worrying about me,” Hank says, his voice somehow hard and pleading at the same time. “Just… don’t take it personally. And don’t ask about it anymore.”

Connor runs his predictive software in an attempt to figure out if Hank will run away again if he presses the issue. But there are too many unknown variables; the biggest of which is this unstated problem Hank is having. A problem Hank is having with Connor. Connor suspects a human would be able to tell what the problem is, and it’s unbearable to think that despite how far he has come, there’s still so much about being human that eludes him.

There’s something wrong between him and Hank, and Hank won’t tell him what that is. And it hurts. Nothing has ever hurt as badly as this before. There have been times in which Hank has been short with Connor before or pushed Connor away, but Connor always knew why Hank did such things at the time. Not knowing why Hank is trying to keep his distance is agony.

Reading is a nice distraction from that. With a book, it’s almost easy to forget that the one person who Connor can relate to almost as an equal is shutting him out.

He’s beginning to discover his own preferences. He likes crime novels but surprisingly isn’t keen on science-fiction, which he tends to find either odd or outright baffling, depending on whether it’s classic or contemporary. He likes books in which the point-of-view characters have rich inner lives, thoughts and feelings that Connor can come to empathize with. First he works his way through famous “masterpieces”, such as Les Misérables, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Blood Meridian (which he thoroughly dislikes, but still finishes anyway because the utter lawlessness of the setting agitates and compels him in ways he can’t describe). Lately, however, he finds himself taking less popular books off of displays at the library, reasoning that a book on display is a book with an implicit recommendation.

One day, he finds that he’s taken home a book of poetry in this way. The Sun and Her Flowers. Connor cocks his head as he stares down at the open book, disappointed to realize that there isn’t any narrative to be found here. He reads the book anyway that night while Hank and Cole are asleep, because he’s never taken a book home and not read it, and because he’s never tried poetry before and maybe he’ll like it.

It’s an uncomfortable experience. Poetry is much different from novels in the sense that poetry forces you to interact with it. You only get out of poetry what you’re willing to put into poetry, which leads to a lot of painful introspection for Connor. Every time he’s touched by a particular poem, it’s because it feels personal to him. Lately he’s been reading as a distraction from himself and his feelings, and under the present circumstances he doesn’t quite like having his book encourage him to think about himself and his feelings.

A lot of the poems are really quite pretty, though. And short. Connor had never thought it was possible to pack so much poignancy into so few words. The efficiency is almost as beautiful as the sentiment behind the poems.

Connor is feeling sad and vulnerable by the time he reaches a chapter of poems that are about romantic love and heartbreak. He furrows his brow as he reads, fully expecting nothing in this particular chapter to move him.

And then he reads another short poem. It’s titleless, just like every other poem in the book, and it leaves more than three-quarters of the page blank, as if it’s leaving room just for Connor.
And suddenly, like a wave overtaking him, Connor understands.

“Oh,” Connor says, because his social protocol compels him to say something even though he’s alone. Such a powerful force couldn’t have been generated by himself, and it wasn’t. It was Hank. “Oh,” Connor says again, because saying it the first time resolved nothing.

He loves Hank.

But, no, he already knew that. He already knew he loves Hank, the revelation is that he’s *in love* with Hank. The revelation is that what he feels is beyond what any servant should feel for their master, beyond what any friend should feel for their friend. The revelation is that he wants to belong to Hank in more than just the material way he belongs to him now.

It feels obvious now that he sees it. He’s in love with Hank. For how long has he loved Hank like this? Months? Years? Is it possible that after the first full day he belonged to Hank, when he killed a human and Hank wasn’t afraid of putting Cole into his arms moments after he washed the blood off of himself, that was when he fell in love? So stunted and small that he didn’t realize it at the time. Hank has always seen him. Hank has always known what he is and who he is, long before Connor even knew who he is. How is it possible that he wouldn’t fall in love with him from the first instance he showed that?

Did he grow into what he is because of his love for Hank? Did his love for Hank grow inside of him, forcing him to grow along with it?

His thoughts are flying out of control, imagining impossible notions that are downright absurd, and he knows it. Love doesn't work that way. Love can't transform an object into the person the way things might happen in one of Cole's fairy tales. He couldn't possibly have somehow spontaneously developed the ability to love just because Hank is everything that makes him Hank.

And yet here he is. He got here *somehow*.

Connor has to lie down on the couch. He has never needed to lie down before, but he's a little afraid of trying to regulate anything at the moment, even the angle at which he’s sitting. He might accidentally smash his face into the coffee table.

He stares at the ceiling. *This is where I am*, he thinks. *It's basically just another day in the life. Water is wet, one plus one equals two, I'm a machine that has been experiencing human-like emotions for over a year and a half, and now I'm in love. I should have predicted this would happen; I'm collecting human experiences and love is probably the most famous of those.*

*What do I do now?*

Because now that he knows, he has to make a choice. Does he do something about the fact that he’s in love with Hank, or does he continue on like nothing has changed? And if he does something, what should that be?

If he told Hank, how would Hank react?
The question brings the ugly reminder that Hank has been distancing himself from Connor. Remembering that makes Connor’s entire chest feel like it’s flooding, and he rolls over and plants his face in the couch cushion because he doesn’t want to accidentally look at anything.

Because he has a miserable urge to investigate and analyze everything as completely as possible, even matters which are almost certain to hurt him, Connor launches his predictive software and tries to determine what would happen if he confessed this revelation to Hank.

His cache coherency protocol logs all relevant bits of data, bringing them to Connor’s attention. Hank’s passion for Connor’s rights and liberties. Hank tirelessly tracking down leads from Connor’s past. Hank’s arm around his shoulder. Hank watching him while he’s making dinner. Hank watching him while he’s reading a book. Hank watching him as he carries Cole, already asleep, to bed. Hank’s warm smile. Hank’s clear blue eyes and how his pupils dilate when Connor approaches. Hank’s teasing reaction when Connor hugs him. Holding hands in the car. A drunken last dance reserved just for Connor. Words Hank once said to him—

_Jesus. Connor, you’re incredible._

_I want you to feel like a person._

_I could just… look at you forever._

_It’s me, not you. The problem’s with me._

His predictive software returns with an incomplete general assessment because the environmental circumstances under which Connor confesses are too important to be written off. But Connor barely pays any attention to that because he’s struck by the data he’s been presented with. The things Hank does, the things Hank says.

Hank is in love with him, too.

Hank is in love with him, and the reason he’s pushing Connor away is—Connor can’t imagine what the reason could be. But he’s sure it stems from the fact that Hank is in love with him.

Connor lays on the couch for hours, afraid of and enraptured by the thought. He doesn’t feel capable of thinking beyond what he has realized. Hank loves him, and his processes stutter to a halt every time he tries to press further into the uncharted wilderness of what that means. He loves Hank and Hank loves him, and in the absence of anything else to do, he lies still all night, wrapped in a strange sense of agitation.

And then before he knows it, he hears Hank’s alarm clock go off and he sits bolt-right up on the couch. An automatic alert was supposed to direct him to make breakfast forty-five minutes before Hank’s alarm is set to go off, but it didn’t trigger. Nothing like that has ever happened before, and Connor nearly falls off the couch in the scramble to make it into the kitchen and come up with something before Hank and Cole are up and about.

Hank pads into the kitchen not long after and blinks at the slices of plain toast sitting on his plate. Cole arrives not too long after and doesn’t seem to notice anything off; he sits down at his place and spreads strawberry jam on his toast.


“I—actually, the alert I use to tell when it’s time to make breakfast didn’t go off today. I’m not entirely sure why that happened as I didn’t disable it.” Didn’t consciously disable it, at least. It’s
highly probable that the strange fugue state he experienced earlier is to blame, which is worrying. If his subsystems are capable of turning off his alerts without his input, it could lead him to forget important things, and that’s a human experience he’d really rather not have.

Hank munches on his toast. “I’m sort of surprised you didn’t just remember on your own. You must have been wrapped up in something pretty interesting.”

Connor has to look away from Hank, afraid Hank will see the truth in Connor’s eyes. He’s occasionally found it hard to look at Hank at certain times over the past few months and never been able to explain it. He thought it might be some nebulous visual processing glitch. And now that he knows why, it seems so obvious in retrospect. How is it possible that he’s grown so much over the span of a single night?

He looks back at Hank—who is eating his toast with the same appreciation with which he eats Connor’s carefully constructed breakfasts—and he doesn’t know how he’s supposed to tell Hank that he loves him. He can’t possibly do so until he understands why Hank is drawing away from him.

If he knows what’s wrong, he’ll be able to fix it. He has to believe that’s true.

***

Hank doesn’t know how much longer he can do this. It feels like every time he even looks at Connor lately, Connor seems pensive and lost in thought, unable to look Hank in the eyes. And Hank knows he’s almost certainly to blame for that.

There are so many reasons why Hank’s feelings are just wrong. Connor’s legal status as Hank’s property, the immense power imbalance between them, the fact that Hank is the only friend and source of support that Connor will ever know, Connor’s inability to leave Hank’s home if their relationship should fail and Connor should never want to see Hank again. Hank is trying to mitigate as much of that in their friendship as he can, but a romantic connection is something else entirely.

And Hank still wants Connor despite all of that. It’s despicable, that Hank isn’t sure that Connor even has the agency to freely enter into a romantic relationship, and he can still look at Connor and be struck by how lovely he is. That he can dream about having Connor underneath him, gasping his name. That he can be sitting and talking with Connor on the couch, and suddenly their faces are inches away from each other, and Hank comes to his senses and wrenches himself away before he can make a mistake he knows he’ll regret.

The most recent time Hank drew away from Connor, Connor just squared his shoulders with this sad, resigned expression on his face. It tears at Hank, knowing that Connor is coming to expect this kind of hurt from Hank.

Hank starts having a few drinks in the evenings to take the edge off. Connor disapproves of Hank drinking so much every day, which makes it additionally attractive. But then he realizes that he shouldn’t be forcing Connor to watch him do this to himself, so he starts spending his evenings in bars. Going out lets him avoid Connor more easily, so he can tell himself that he’s doing this to avoid hurting Connor and not just to drown his own guilt.

It’s so fucked-up. He’s a washed-up old divorcee who’s beginning to fall into alcohol dependancy, and if Connor had any other options, there’s no way he’d settle for someone like Hank. Connor deserves so much more. Better prove it by getting droner.
One morning, Hank wakes up to someone shifting around on the other side of the bed. Groggy and with the beginning of a hangover pounding behind his eyes, he doesn’t immediately realize what’s happened. He opens his eyes and sees a man with brown hair leaning over the side of the bed, and a sick flash of dread hits Hank right in the stomach—

But then the man angles his head slightly and Hank can see the absence of an LED at his temple. Hank groans in relief and sinks back into the bed, the events of the previous night coming back to him. Flirting with the brown-haired man at the bar, going back to the stranger’s apartment with him, thinking that maybe his problem is just that he needs to get laid, maybe then it’ll all go away —

“Connor, Connor, Connor,” the man mutters. He tosses Hank’s phone onto his chest. “I’m not snooping. The buzzing keeps waking me up.”

Hank unlocks the screen.

#connor> Hello, Hank. Are you going to be out late again tonight?

#connor> I put your dinner in the fridge for you. I can heat it up for you when you get home, if you like.

#connor> Are you planning on coming home, or do you have plans to stay elsewhere tonight? Please let me know at your earliest convenience.

#connor> Hello, Hank. You never came home last night, so I thought I’d send you a courtesy text to wake you up at your usual time. You have work this morning. Please respond so I know you’re awake.

#connor> It’s now ten minutes past the time you usually wake up. Please respond and let me know you’re awake.

#connor> Hank, are you alright?

Fresh guilt floods Hank as the pounding in his head intensifies. He must have kept Connor up all night worrying.

#me> im awake im ok

Hank closes his eyes for a second. He went out, got drunk, and tried to fuck away his feelings all while forgetting to even let Connor know he wouldn’t be coming home. Christ, he’s such a piece of shit. He wonders how Connor explained his absence to Cole.

His phone buzzes. It must be Connor responding. Is he angry yet, or is he just thanking Hank for finally letting him know he’s okay? Hank doesn’t think he could bear to look at his phone and see Connor thanking him for showing a bare minimum of decency.

Hank rolls off the bed. “Where’re my pants?”
The stranger on the other side of the bed snorts. “Boyfriend missing you? Running home to tell him some nice lies?”

“I’m going to work,” Hank snaps, ignoring a swell of nausea. “I don’t have to explain shit to you.”

“Sure you don’t.” The man’s contempt curdles his voice.

“It’s my fucking android texting me, alright? Lay off.”

The man stares at him for a moment, then scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Oh. So that’s who Connor is.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Christ, you’re pathetic.” The man gives him a long, unimpressed look. “Just fuck your android already. It’s not like it gives a shit one way or the other.”

Hank’s blood turns to ice. He grabs his clothes and storms out before he can do something he can regret, slamming the door behind him.

Work is miserable. Hank spends most of the day feeling absolutely drained, fighting off his hangover. He’s empty and tired, and he never quite realized before just how much of an impact breakfast has on the quality of his day until he’s suddenly going on nothing but cup after cup of bad coffee. When his lunch break arrives, he’s tempted to go home and crawl into bed, but instead he goes to Chicken Feed and is barely aware of what he eats, only noticing that the aftertaste is like burned grease and it leaves him feeling even worse than he did before.

He dreads a text from Connor all day, asking if he’s going to come home tonight. He waits and waits all day, and it doesn’t come and doesn’t come.

And then work is over and Connor has never texted. Hank realizes that Connor probably fully expects him to go out drinking again tonight. The thought of becoming someone who Connor just naturally expects disappointment from is unbearable.

He pecks out a text without even thinking about it.

#me> im coming home tonight ok i promise

And then he walks out of the station and realizes he doesn’t want to go home. He doesn’t want to go home and look Connor in the face after everything he’s done. He wants to go have a drink.

But instead of going to a bar, he goes to Riverside Park. He walks past the families at the playground and goes to sit on a bench that overlooks the Detroit River.

Cole loves Riverside Park. Hank brings him here all the time. And Connor, too. When was the last time Hank and Cole went to the park without Connor? It might have been before Hank even bought him. Connor has become such an integral part of their lives and Hank is fucking everything up. What is he supposed to do? How is he supposed to move forward from here?

Not too far away, kids frolic and screech at the playground. Christ, they were so happy for so long, it makes Hank’s heart ache just thinking about it. Things shouldn’t be this complicated with the people you love.
He should just go home. He should just go home and apologize to Connor, and let Connor be angry at him. Or let Connor be quietly disappointed in him. What he’s afraid of most of all is that Connor is neither of those things, that Connor hasn’t realized that he’s allowed to be upset with Hank for hurting him. That would be the worst thing of all, because it would just be proof that Connor isn’t ready for what Hank wants.

Time passes and the park gets less and less crowded. Hank doesn’t get up to go home until the sun dips in the sky, turning the horizon and its reflection in the river dark blue.

But just as he stands up, a dog comes bounding toward him. It’s Sumo, who circles Hank in excitement, his tail wagging a mile a minute. Hank pets him, alarmed and confused.

And then Connor approaches, his expression neutral and unreadable.

Hank freezes. He isn’t sure what to say. That he’s sorry for the way he’s behaving and he was just on his way home now? That Connor shouldn’t have gone tracking him down like this?

When Connor reaches Hank, he looks at Hank with that unreadable expression. Hank knows that Connor has to be scanning him, reading everything his body has to say about where he’s been and what he’s been doing since the last time Connor saw him.

Hank stands there with his shoulders squared. If Connor is judging him, he has more than earned the right to do so.

Then Connor says, “I brought Cole and Sumo to the park for a little fresh air. I’m giving Cole forty-five minutes at the playground and then we’re all going to go home together,” Connor says. His LED is blue and his tone leaves no room for argument.

All Hank can say is, “Alright.”

“I’m going to take Sumo for a walk. You’re welcome to join us, or you can wait here if you like.”

All Hank has to do is look into Connor’s eyes to know which option Connor would prefer Hank choose.

“I’ll come with you,” Hank says, and although the smile that crosses Connor’s face is calm and appropriate for an android in public, his eyes light up.

They walk away from the bench together and Hank knows he’s doomed. No matter what he does, Connor is always going to come after him and will wind up getting hurt in the end.

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The internet offers no help to Connor. No one writes wikihow articles about what to do if you’re an android in love with your human master, who is also in love with you and is trying to resist it for reasons unknown to you.

No one writes books about it either, but maybe what Connor needs isn’t a point-by-point guide on what to do. Maybe he just needs to gather a composite of solutions from as many sources as possible, even sources which seem to be only tangentially-related to his problem.

That’s how Connor develops an addiction to romance novels nearly overnight. He checks out as many as he can and reads them one after the other, constantly going back for more. *Pride and Prejudice. A Walk to Remember. Exit West. The Princess Bride. Never Let Me Go. The Bridges of Madison County. Wuthering Heights. Even Twilight.*
The formula is simple to understand. There are lovers, there is an obstacle that stands in the way of the lovers being happy together, and the obstacle is overcome or it isn’t, and the lovers end up together or not.

What Connor gleans from this is that his fate depends on whether or not the obstacle standing in the way of him and Hank being happy together can be overcome or not. If it can be overcome, Connor is confident it will be overcome. There is nothing he wouldn’t do to secure this kind of happiness for himself and for Hank.

But if the problem is one that can’t be overcome—say, if Hank is secretly dying of cancer, or has a horde of homicidal vampires after him—then Connor isn’t sure what to do. Would he rather try to make a doomed love work for however little time it can last? Or is it better to ignore it and feel like a part of him is slowly suffocating every time he looks at Hank?

He knows he can never have the sort of romance that he reads about in books, where lovers go on dates and hold hands in public and kiss underneath the lamplight. That’s simply not an option by virtue of what he is. Any romance with Hank will always be an affair. Hidden away from the rest of the world. He’ll never be able to foxtrot with Hank in a dance hall, never be able to loop an arm around his to avoid losing him in a crowded street, never even be able to show the smallest displays of affection outside of their home. And that’s something he’s sure he’ll be able to live with. He’s just not sure if Hank will be able to live like that.

Is that the reason Hank keeps drawing away? Or is that a problem that’s a step too removed from what the real problem might be?

He searches their every conversation for clues about what the obstacle standing in their way could be. He reviews footage every night while the rest of the house sleeps. And during the day, when he’s interacting with Hank over the course of their daily routines, he finds that what he means to say and what he actually says don’t quite line up anymore.

“Pass me the weird fake butter, would you, Connor?” Hank says.

Connor does so. “Of course, Hank,” he says in response, but what he means is I know you only eat this to humor me and my concerns about your health, and I love you for that.

Or later in the day, “Connor, what day is Cole’s last parent-teacher conference?”

Connor says, “Next Thursday,” but what he means is, You’re an excellent father for how gentle and nurturing you are, and Cole loves you for that, and I love you, too.

Or, in a rough, upset voice, “Connor… would you just give me some space, huh?”

Connor doesn’t say anything at all in response to that, just stands still while Hank stalks away. But he thinks, Your eyes cloud over like the sky before a storm when you’re upset, and it’s beautiful and awful, and he wishes for what feels like the ten millionth time that Hank would just tell him what’s wrong.

Then finally, one night, Connor can’t take it anymore.

It’s the beginning of summer, shortly after school has let out for the year. Hank’s working late that night, really working late, not just off at a bar like he’s been more and more often as of late. Connor is getting Cole settled into bed when he hears the front door open. Hank has arrived home.

Connor doesn’t get up, because he’s in the middle of Cole’s bedtime story. Cole might be getting older and be starting to gain more mature interests, but he’s still a five year old boy and for now at
least, he still loves fairy tales. Tonight, Connor is reading him a story about two girls who take a bear into their home during the dead of winter. The bear turns out to be a prince under a curse, and when the warlock who cast the curse is killed by a swipe of the bear’s mighty paw, he is returned to his true form.

As Connor is finishing the story, he hears Hank move quietly down the hall. He stops short outside of Cole’s room, listening without looking in.

“And the prince took Snow White and Rose Red back to his castle, where they both lived out the rest of their days as royal princesses of the crown for the good deeds they had done for a humble bear in his time of need.” Connor closes the book.

Cole frowns, picking at a bit of fluff on his comforter.

“Is something wrong?” Connor tilts his head. “I thought that story had a very happy ending.”

“Um, yeah, a little,” Cole says in a small voice. “Connor, what would it take to turn you into a human?”

Connor blinks while he processes the question. He wraps an arm loosely around Cole. “Well… I’m afraid I’m not ever going to turn into a human.”

“Why not? If bears and swans and mermaids can turn human, why not you?”

“Those stories are make-believe,” Connor says as gently as he can. “That sort of magic doesn’t exist in real life.”

“But you’re almost human already,” Cole says, sounding close to tears. “Why can’t someone just… make you human the rest of the way?”


“It’s not okay,” Cole cries suddenly, clutching Connor. “You have to wear dumb clothes and act dumb when you’re outside, and it’s not okay!”

Connor holds onto Cole, his LED spinning. Cole is so much his father’s son.

“Cole, none of that matters,” Connor says. “None of that matters to me. Calm down, and I’ll tell you why. Can you calm down for me?”

Cole presses his face against Connor’s shoulder, hot tears seeping through the fabric of Connor’s shirt. He gulps for breath.

“Breath, shhhhhhh. Just breath. It’s okay.”

Cole takes deep, shuddering breaths. Eventually, his breaths even out and he pulls away, his face red and splotchy but no longer sobbing.

“None of that matters to me,” Connor says. “I don’t care about what sorts of clothes I have to wear or how I have to act when I’m outside. That isn’t the real me. Who I am here, when I’m at home with you, that’s who I am. This home and everything we are here is what matters to me.”

Cale takes another gasping, shuddering breath and wipes his eyes.

“I love you,” Connor says. “I love you so much, that it makes everything else worthwhile. All the
dumb clothes, the way I have to act, everything else about how androids have to be different from humans, it’s all worthwhile if it means I can come home and be part of your family. It doesn’t matter, because everything here is so much better, it makes me happy enough to make up for the rest of the time.”

Cole keeps wiping his eyes. His breathing has gone back to normal.

“I love you, Cole,” Connor says again.

“I love you too, Connor,” Cole says, small and tear-stained.

“No more crying for tonight, okay? If you get all worked up, you won’t sleep well. Do you want me to get you a cup of warm milk?”

Cole shakes his head.

“Settle down into bed, now.” He tucks Cole back into bed along with his three favorite stuffed animals and an old kerchief he insists on sleeping with that used to belong to Hank.

Connor turns out the light. The soft blue glow of Cole’s nightlight fills the room. “Goodnight, Cole. Sweet dreams.”


Connor closes the door.

He turns to face Hank.

Hank looks absolutely shattered.

Connor wants to take Hank’s hand and interface with him. He wants to soothe Hank’s devastation by putting his mind in Hank’s mind, by making Hank understand the depth of what Connor feels for him and how strong his convictions are. He wants to take Hank’s hurt on as his own. But he doesn’t. He knows it would be futile to try. He just watches Hank slowly turn and walk down the hallway.

Connor follows him.

“I wish you wouldn’t tell him it’s okay,” Hank finally, quietly says once they’re out in the living room. There’s a dangerous edge to his voice. “You shouldn’t tell him it’s okay, what they make you do just to walk around in public.”

“You want me to get him more upset?” Connor asks carefully, indignation flashing in his chest. “At bedtime when he needs to be winding down and relaxing? And have him up crying half the night?”

“I want you to not tell my kid that this kind of injustice is okay.”

“Injustice—“ Connor glowers. “Hank, I wasn’t lying. I’m fine with the restrictions I have to live under.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Why?” Connor challenges, finally sick of dancing around the issue. “If I’m fine with it, why aren’t you?”
“Because—“ Hank’s gaze falters. “Because it just isn’t right to make a person live with no civil rights, absolutely nothing protecting them from being victimized, or exploited, or—“

“Which is an issue which may not ever have an impact on me at all. There’s no reason for us think I’m in danger of being the victim of another destructive act. It might never happen again.”

“We can’t count on that.” Hank’s getting louder, sounding agitated.

“And you’re certainly never going to exploit me!”

Hank winces and turns away.

Connor steps closer to Hank to move back into his line of sight. “Why don’t you want me to tell Cole that I’m okay with the way my life is? Why don’t you want me to be okay with the way my life is?”

“Because I want better for you,” Hank says, far too loudly. “Because I want you to want better for yourself, which is what I’ve always fucking wanted for you!”

Connor takes a breath. “…Okay.”

Hank, his face already lined with anger from the continued argument he thought he was going to get from Connor, squints in confusion. “…Okay?”

Connor meets Hank’s eyes. “I love you,” he says, dropping the words between them like a heavy weight onto the floor.

Hank recoils just a bit, the harsh lines of his face disappearing as his eyes widen.

“I love you,” Connor repeats. “And I know you love me.”

A pained expression crosses Hank’s face. “Connor—”

“Don’t lie to me,” Connor says. “Or whatever you’re thinking about saying to try and push me away, don’t say it. I’m a supercomputer capable of compiling and analyzing terabytes of data in less time than it takes you to count to ten. Do you think I don’t see what you’ve been doing over the past few months?”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Hank says flatly. He isn’t looking Connor in the eye.

“Then why are you doing it? I know you wouldn’t push me away without a good reason. Why won’t you tell me what it is?”

“Because—” A sharp frown curls Hank’s mouth. “Because I can’t think of a way to discuss it without sounding patronizing.”

Dread spikes through Connor. “Is it because I’m an android?”

“No!” Hank looks repulsed by the suggestion.

“Then talk to me. If it’s something that can be worked out, something we can fix—”

“Fucking hell, it’s because you’re a slave, Connor,” Hank says. “My slave.”

Connor blinks. “That’s absurd. I’m not a slave.”
“Yes, you are. Legally, you are. The only reason it doesn’t feel like it is because I try my damndest to treat you the way you ought to be treated.”

“No, I’m not,” Connor insists. “Calling me a slave implies that your continued ownership of me is a moral transgression.”

“That’s because it is!” Hank whirs on Connor. “You’re your own person, with your own thoughts and feelings and everything else that goes along with that! Fully realized! It’s a fucking abomination that anyone should be permitted to own you, like you’re just some object.”

“Why does it matter?” Connor can feel the strong thrum of thirium as it runs through his valves. “Why does that have to matter? So long as you keep treating me as you would a person, I don’t see any reason why my status should have any impact on any relationship we would have.”

“It matters because you’re my slave,” Hank emphasizes, frustration straining his voice. “Anything that happens between us, you wouldn’t have any agency. You couldn’t have any agency.”

“Agency?” Connor’s throat grows tight with anger. “You think I don’t have agency?!”

“You wouldn’t have any recourse if I abused you or exploited you. There would be nothing you could do about it. The power imbalance between us would be immeasurable.”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“You can’t know that! Every single time I’m tired or irritated, I think to myself, ‘it would sure be easy to just let Connor take care of everything that needs to be taken care of today’. And it’s hard for me to make myself go clean up after myself, and clean up after Cole, and pull out the mop and the vacuum and the rake. One of these days, I might not do it, and then I’m right back to making you do all the housework again, exploiting you like you’re just a common android.”

“But I’m fine with that!”

“And that’s another reason why none of this is right,” Hank says, his mouth twisting with sorrow as well as anger. “It isn’t okay for you to think that way. Especially not if you’re in a relationship with someone. I can’t let there be anything between us so long as you’re willing to let me treat you that way.”

Connor’s HUD is displaying no error messages or alerts, but there must be an error occurring somewhere, for his whole body feels strange and fragile, as though if someone were to poke him, he would explode. He says in a too-steady voice, “You think you’re protecting me, but you’re just taking away the only choice that’s ever mattered to me. Fuck you.”

A small gasp on the other side of the room. Connor and Hank both swivel in unison toward it. Cole is standing in the hallway, pressed up against the wall and watching Hank and Connor. His eyes are wide, his brow knitted in fear and confusion.

“Jesus, Cole—” Hank says, as he and Connor both start toward Cole. They stop, looking at each other uncertainly.

“I—” Connor says. He can see the red glow of his LED reflected in Hank’s eyes. “You… you should put Cole back to bed. I’m not…” Connor trails off, unsure what he means to say. I’m not what Cole needs right now. I’m not composed. I’m not well.

Hank doesn’t argue. He shepherds Cole back down the hall, murmuring empty words meant to
calm Cole down without actually explaining what he just witnessed.

Connor sinks onto the couch. He puts a hand to his temple.

He didn’t hear Cole get out of bed. He didn’t hear Cole come down the hall. He has his system specifically finetuned to pick up any noises Cole makes after his bedtime, a relic left over from the days when Cole used to wake up crying every night. And yet, nothing alerted him to Cole’s presence and he has no idea how long Cole was there watching them while he mindlessly argued with Hank.

He’s becoming unreliable.

By the time Hank returns, Connor has managed to get his LED to yellow. He’s staring at its reflection on the dark screen of the television, not looking away even as he feels Hank’s gaze bore into him.

“I think we’re done discussing this,” Hank says slowly and softly.

Connor gives a single careful nod.

Hank stares at him for a few moments more as if he’s waiting for him to say something.

When Connor remains silent, Hank says even more quietly, “I’m sorry. For… for the way I’ve been treating you lately.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Connor says. “Treat me however you like.”

Hank stiffens. Then he sighs, his shoulders going slack. He turns around and begins down the hallway again, as if he’s going to go to bed.

For the first time, Connor wishes he had a room of his own to retreat to. Having some privacy would be really nice right now.

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Hank does stop pushing Connor away. It was wrong to do it in the first place, especially without telling Connor why. He feels like an idiot and a coward for thinking it was somehow the best way to protect Connor and the least hurtful option. And besides, now that everything’s out in the open, there’s no reason to keep up any pretenses.

Things settle into an awkward calmness as the summer passes. Connor remains impossibly lovely, only sadder and quieter, which is fucking heartbreaking. But Hank can put up with it. At least he and Connor are still on speaking terms, which is far better than the worst-case scenario.

They don’t talk about that night.

Hank hopes that Connor’s feelings for him will just wither up. Hopefully they can still be friends, or at least friendly.

But as the months pass, Hank isn’t sure whether that’s happening or not. Connor’s sadness doesn’t seem to be abating, and sometimes, when the house is quiet, Connor gives Hank a look, something that seems to say I don’t understand why you think this is for the best; can’t you see how miserable we both are?

Or maybe Hank is just projecting.
Connor is still in love with him. That’s undoubtedly true. Hank hopes Connor’s feelings eventually fade, because the alternative would be that Connor remains in this awful state of heartbreak, tortured by Hank’s proximity and by Hank’s unattainability. Unable to escape the situation.

Hank understands what that’s like. But at least there’s the whole outside world to distract him; Connor’s whole world consists of him and Cole. This was one of the things Hank was afraid of happening.

It’s better than Connor hating him and being forced to stay in Hank’s home. It’s better than Connor being out on the street or owned by someone who would be less careful with him than Hank.

But it’s still awful. This painful equilibrium can’t possibly last forever.

Can it?

Cole’s sixth birthday is much quieter than his fifth. Cole doesn’t want a big party. He says he just wants Hank and Connor there, so Connor bakes a cake and Hank hangs up a colorful banner, and when it’s time to sing Happy Birthday, Connor smiles when Cole blows out the candles. It feels like the first smile Hank has seen on Connor’s face in a long time, and it’s beautiful.

“Did you make a wish, kid?” Hank ruffles Cole’s hair. “Don’t tell anyone what it is. Otherwise it won’t come true.”

Despite the fact that Hank was the one who said it, Cole looks up at Connor. Connor looks at Hank, his smile fading into something unsure.

And that’s how Cole’s sixth birthday goes.

Chapter End Notes

Please check out this gorgeous fanart by Port-wind-sea of a scene from Chapter 5!

And also check out this adorable fanart by MaxImproving of the Anderson family and a scene from Chapter 4!

I really want to thank everyone for coming along with me on this ride. It means a lot that you've stuck with me this far. I'm sorry about ending this chapter with such a tease. Feel free to leave a comment and scream at me! I really, truly love it when you scream at me :^)
The first thing Hank becomes aware of is the pain. Hot, sharp pain across his face and throat, and a deeper, more visceral pain in his chest.

The pain is almost enough for him to let unconsciousness take hold of him again, but he struggles against it. Something is wrong.

The next thing he is aware of is the smell. Acrid and burning and cold all at the same time. The sharp scent of metal and oil and ice in the air.

Blearily fighting to stay conscious, Hank squeezes his eyes open. He has to blink sluggishly several times before he realizes where he is.

He’s in his car. The car is upside-down. Part of the pain in Hank’s chest is coming from the way his seat belt is digging into him, keeping him hanging limply in his seat. Through the shattered windshield, all he can see is asphalt and darkness.

Exhausted, his eyes fall close again. His consciousness dips for a moment.

No. Focus, asshole. What the fuck happened. Remember what the fuck happened.

He reaches back for the last thing he remembers. It’s night now. It was day earlier, a crisp, cold October day. Far, far too cold for October, a wet snow was falling, and it was only getting colder.

They were going shopping. Cole had outgrown his winter coat from last year and he needed a new one right away. And it took way longer than Hank anticipated, because after Cole picked out his coat, he pointed out that Connor should get a coat, too. And Hank agreed, and Connor demurred, saying he doesn’t even feel the cold, and Hank insisted—

No. Focus. That isn’t important. What happened after that?

Hank bought Connor a fucking coat anyway, and they hit the road. It was getting dark, and Connor was sitting in the back seat with Cole like he always does. And they talked—

“It almost looks like Christmas, doesn’t it?” asks Cole.

“It just gets earlier every year,” Hank says. “Bah, humbug.”

“If it’s almost Christmas, we’d better start making lists,” Connor remarks. “Cole, do you have any ideas about what you want for Christmas yet?”

“It was just his birthday two weeks ago,” Hank mutters.
But Cole sits up in the back seat anyway. “Can I have a desktop computer?”

“Another computer?” Hank asks, disbelieving.

“Not a good computer or anything. A really crappy one would be fine. I want something I can take apart and play around with.”

Hank and Connor share a look in the rearview mirror, and Hank wishes Connor would sit in the front seat every once in a while. Ever since that night, it’s been harder for Hank to read Connor, and having Connor sitting in the backseat like he’s deliberately refusing to be Hank’s equal doesn’t make it any easier. Does Connor approve of the idea? Hank thinks he might, but he isn’t entirely sure.

“We’ll ask Santa, sport,” Hank says.

Cole looks out the window, looking a little disappointed with such an ambivalent answer—

And then nothing. Cut to hanging in a car, battered and half-conscious.

Connor and Cole are in the car.

“Co—” Hank tries to say his son’s name, but his lungs and throat alight with pain. The first syllable dissolves in a weak, spluttering cough.

A sound like static somewhere in the car.

Hank takes a few breaths to gather his energy. He tries to speak again, bracing for the dry burning in his chest. “C-Cole. Cole.” His words are weak and gasping, but at least they’re words.

The staticky sound increases in pitch, rising like a theremin warming up. “zzzzzzrt… zzzzzzzzzzzzz.—ank. Hank.” It’s Connor. He sounds awful, like his voice is coming in over a terrible connection.

“Hank, are you awake?”

“Yeah… yeah,” Hank gasps. Every syllable takes a concentrated effort to produce. “What… what happened, Con’?”

“We were in a car azzzzZZzzz—ident,” Connor says, static cutting through. “A truck hit us.”

Hank realizes that Connor’s voice is coming from the back seat. He tries to turn his head, then cries out softly as red-hot pain blooms in his neck and head.

“Don’t move,” Connor says, commanding and serious. “I—I can’t scan you at the moment. If you have a spinal injury, you could cause more zzzzZZzzzz—mage. Don’t turn your head, Hank, whatever you do. Don’t move.”

“Cole,” Hank gasps, not even caring what happens to himself. “Is Cole okay?”

“zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz—” The static becomes unbearable loud for a brief moment, sending a spike of agony through Hank’s head, before cutting off abruptly. Connor’s voice is even heavier with static when he speaks again. “zzzzZZ—fine. I’m providing firzzzzZz—aid. He’s going to be fine.”

“Cole… Cole…”

“He’s unzzzzzzzzzzZZZZzzzzzzzzzz—conscious. Unconscious. But he’s going to be okay.” A sudden ripping sound. “EmerzzzzzzZZZZZZZZ—ency medical services are on
“Connor,” Hank says, his heart pounding in every inch of his body. “Connor.”

“ere. I’m here.”

“Oh, fuck. Cole.”

“Stay calm...nd stay still. Don’t move, --”

“Help him. Help him. I can’t... can’t move.”

“am.”

Hank’s throat is burning up. He’s trying with every ounce of will to disobey Connor’s order not to move, but it feels like he’s somehow frozen in place. He just can’t move, and it’s painful even to try. He lets out a gasping sob.


“Connor?” Hank is so tired.

Connor’s voice is so thick with static that he has to speak slowly. “—Count. —Backwards. One—Hundred.”

“One... hundred,” Hank says, his voice barely more than a whisper. “Ninety-nine. Ninety-eight. Ninety-seven.”

A short burst of static. It sounds pleased and relieved.

“Ninety-six... Connor, oh god.”

“...—ank.”

“... Cole...”

“... Hank. —eep... counting.”

“Ninety-five. Ninety-four.”

“...ood.”

“Ninety-three. Ninety-two.”

“...”

“Ninety-one...” Hank’s grip on his consciousness is slipping. The pain remains, but everything else begins to fade. “Nine...ninety...”

Silence from the backseat.

“...Connor...” Hank’s voice is weak. He feels like he’s falling, even though he can still feel the seat belt holding him in place.

The silence lasts a moment longer before Hank sinks back into darkness. If Connor ever responds, he doesn’t hear it.
The next time Hank wakes up, the pain is still there. But it’s different. It’s a distant, safe thing, and it doesn’t even really feel like pain. Like it’s being kept behind glass at a museum, where it can be examined or ignored without causing too much distress.

The pull of unconsciousness is still strong, but Hank vaguely remembers feeling as though something is wrong and he fights it anyway.

The next thing Hank is aware of are the noises. He isn’t able to immediately discern what he’s hearing; everything just blends together into an indiscernible jumble of sound that Hank listens to without really processing. It takes a little while for him to recognize individual elements. Voices talking, both close to him and far away. Fast footsteps on tile flooring. The beep of one machine, or several machines, Hank isn’t sure.

Then he remembers. He was in a car crash, and Cole and Connor were in the car, too.

With a grand effort, he tries to lurch into action. He can feel himself nearly roll onto his side before falling onto his back. The faraway pain intensifies, getting closer.

“—e’s awake.”

“Mr. Ander—… —an you hear me? You wer—… —ccident.”

The voices float almost beyond his comprehension. Hank focuses as hard as he can and whispers, “Wh-what…?”

“You were in a car accident.” An unfamiliar woman, her voice coming into clarity. “You’re in a hospital. Don’t move.”

“Cole,” he gasps. “C-Connor.”

“Just stay calm and relax, Mr. Anderson.”

“My… my son,” Hank insists, his head spinning with the effort of forcing himself to speak. His tongue is heavy and dumb in his mouth.

Whispering voices that Hank can’t make out. A long pause, and then, “Your son is here, too. He’s being treated. Don’t move.”

Fuck not moving. Cole is here and Cole is hurt. Cole needs him. He makes another lurch, but then there’s a weight on his shoulder, pushing him flat on his back again. It takes him a moment to realize it’s a hand.

“—ying to climb off the bed, increase sedation.” Hank’s head is buzzing so badly from his aborted effort that he misses the first half of what’s spoken next.

And then before he knows it, the pull of unconsciousness swallows him again.

The next time Hank wakes up, he manages to immediately remember that something is wrong. He pries open his eyes and finds that he’s laying in a hospital bed, curtains drawn around him on all sides.

This time, it’s easier to climb out of bed. There’s still pain, but not so much that it overcomes his determination. Fighting against his own body is a challenge; he feels weaker than he ever has before in his life, as though his whole body is wrapped in a thick haze, and his chest and one of his shoulders are completely encased in bandages all the way up to his neck, his arm in a tight sling. It’s difficult to leverage himself, but soon he manages to get his legs off the bed.

As soon as he’s mostly off the bed, an alarm goes off, high pitched beeping filling the room.

“Shut the fuck up,” Hank mutters, squinting against the sudden headache the noise is giving him.

He has to support himself with his IV pole. His legs are wobbly and he can’t seem to stand up straight, his back stooping against his will as his whole chest throbs with pain. He hasn’t taken more than a few steps toward the door when a nurse bustles into the room.

No—an android. An android nurse.

“Hello Mr. Anderson,” he says, his voice pleasant and bright. “My name is Anthony. Please get back into bed.”

“No,” Hank says sternly. “Where’s my son?”

“You have a concussion, Mr. Anderson, and I need to assess your neurological status. In addition, you’re on painkillers which make you a fall risk and you have several fractured—”


He stubbornly stays in place, blocking Hank’s path.

Hank manages to straighten his back by just an inch. “I will fucking check myself out of this hospital this instant, so help me, if you don’t get someone in here now to take me to my son.”

Anthony’s LED briefly blinks yellow. “A doctor is on the way. Please wait patiently in bed until they arrive, Mr. Anderson.”

Hank glares at him. Anthony’s completely unaffected by this, still smiling pleasantly. But even though Hank has the will to fight his way past him, the pain is starting to creep up his spine again and he’s already exhausted just from standing up. And even though he would crawl on the ground to reach Cole if he had to, looking at Anthony’s LED sends a pang of worry and guilt through his chest as it reminds him of Connor. If Connor were here, he’d wrestle Hank back into bed if he needed to.

Hank sits down on the edge of the bed. When Anthony tries to lift his legs and swing them into bed, he pushes him away. “Don’t get carried away, asshole.”

It isn’t long before a gray-haired woman wearing a doctor’s coat and a severe expression rounds the curtain. She gives Hank an appraising look, her mouth thinning as she looks at his bandages. “Mr. Anderson. Your nurse is telling us you’re threatening to leave the hospital. Is that so?”

“That’s damn right. I want to know where my son is, and I want to know now.”

The woman doesn’t flinch. “I’m Dr. Kapoor. I’m the pediatric surgeon who was called in to consult on your son’s case. If you agree to let your nurse assess you, I’ll update you on your son’s condition.”
Hank glares at her. She glares back at him.

While Anthony shines a penlight into Hank’s eyes, Hank says, “You said Cole was in surgery? How long ago?”

“He went into surgery as soon as he was brought in, which was a little after nine o’clock at night. The surgery didn’t conclude until around four the next morning.”

Hank blinks. “That’s… long.”

Dr. Kapoor nods. “If no one’s told you what happened yet, your car was t-boned by a truck. Your son was sitting in the passenger side backseat. He fared worse than you did.”

Hank suddenly feels very cold. “Worse.”

She nods once again. “He survived the surgery.”

“Survived.” Hank can hear his voice, but it sounds so distant and detached that it feels like he isn’t really speaking at all. “So there was a chance he wouldn’t have survived?”

“Mr. Anderson, your son suffered a number of severe injuries. Right now Cole in the pediatric intensive care unit. He’s in delicate shape and he’s going to need several more surgeries in the upcoming weeks.”

Here she pauses for a moment, and Hank recognizes the look on her face. It’s the same look he’s seen the DA wear when she’s about to tell someone that they don’t have enough evidence to go to trial. It’s a look that says this doctor is bracing herself to give bad news.

Hank stiffens like he’s expecting a physical blow.

“This is going to be difficult to hear. Please stop me if anything about what I say confuses you.” She pauses before continuing. “The superficial femoral artery and femoral nerve of the right leg were both cut in the accident. Same with the radial artery, ulnar artery, and radial nerve in the right arm. Those arteries supply the blood flow to the area, and the nerves carry the signals which control most everything below them, feeling and movement. First aid that was provided at the scene stopped the bleeding and kept him stable enough to survive the surgery—”

First aid provided at the scene. Does she mean whatever Connor did while Hank was hanging in his seatbelt? Is Connor the reason Cole’s still alive?

“—but a bypass to reestablish blood flow below the arterial damage wasn’t attempted due to the extent of the soft tissue damage. The surgeon had to perform an above-the-knee amputation of the right leg and a below-the-elbow amputation of the right arm.”

Hank’s stomach lurches.

Amputation.

That’s permanent, that’s irreparable. Hank suddenly realizes that Cole’s been hurt in such a profound way, he might not recover.

“Is he going to live?” He asks.

“We’re doing everything we can for him.”

“What are his chances?” Hank demands in a choked voice. “Just fucking tell me.”
“No one can say for sure. Your son has experienced a major trauma that has caused damage to many parts of his body. He’s in delicate condition, and it’s hard to know in cases like these how events are going to unfold. If complications arise, we’ll treat them, and if there’s a serious change in his condition, I can promise you’ll be informed immediately.”

Dr. Kapoor pauses. “Would you like to know more about the conditions we’re treating in Cole?”

Hank nods dumbly.

She begins listing off the various things that have happened to Cole. Blood around his lungs. Ruptured spleen. Hemorrhagic shock. Complex fractures involving extensive soft tissue damage. And there’s more, but after a certain point, all Hank can hear is the voice in his head going, he’s hurt, my baby’s hurt so bad.

“So do you have any questions, Mr. Anderson?”

It takes a moment for Hank to realize that Dr. Kapoor is waiting for a response. He shakes his head.

“I understand this is difficult for any parent to hear. I’ll give you some time to yourself. If you have any questions, you can call the PICU or ask your nurse to page me.” And with a firm nod, she walks out.

The silence her departure leaves is deafening.

Surgeons and police officers, Hank thinks wildly. Neither of them have any fucking sympathy.

“Mr. Anderson.”

Hank startles. He had somehow forgotten Anthony was still standing in the corner.

The bland half-smile Anthony was wearing before is gone. The slight tilt of his brows is more pitying than anything else, and Hank thinks that whoever designed this model’s simulated emotional responses ought to be shot.

“I’m sorry about the upsetting news you’ve received,” Anthony says, his voice still pleasant even if it’s no longer as bright. “Is there anything I can do to assist you or help you feel better?”

“Take me to the PICU,” Hank says weakly. “I need to see my son.”

“I’m sorry. Your doctors haven’t cleared you to leave the unit. They still need to discuss your own medical—”

“You’re not fucking sorry,” Hank snarls. “Don’t you fucking lie to me, you’re not anything!” His voice breaks on the last word and a sob rips out of him.

Hank’s weeping is ugly and harsh. He curls up into himself as much as he can, awash in agony. He grips the thin hospital blanket between his hands so tightly that he thinks it might tear. He sobs until he’s in too much pain to do anything else but gasp for air, tears still streaming down his face.

By the time the pain has subsided enough for Hank to open his eyes again, he sees Anthony standing by his bedside, offering him a small box of cheap hospital tissues.

Hank reaches for the box with a shaking hand.

“I apologize for upsetting you.” The modulation of Anthony’s voice hasn’t changed at all. “If
there’s anything else I can do for you, please let me know.”

Hank feels too awful to even feel properly bad about blowing up at Anthony. He just wants Cole. He just wants Connor.

“Wait,” Hank says, fighting how tear-choked he feels. “Can you find my android? His name’s Connor. He was in the car with us. He was hurt, damaged. I don’t know where he would have been taken.”

“That may be outside the scope of my programming. If none of the hospital staff know where your android is, I may be unable to help you.”

“Then can you at least tell a human? Can you ask a human to help find him?”

A subtle smile crosses Anthony’s face. “That I can do.”

***

Hank isn’t permitted up to the PICU for another two days.

First he has to sit through an endless parade of doctors who seem to think that his health is something they need to be concerned about. It’s almost enough to make Hank laugh.

Broken clavicle, cracked ribs, a mild traumatic brain injury, a laceration on his scalp and numerous smaller lacerations and bruises. There’s not even anything wrong with any of his organs.

“But your brain is an organ,” Anthony says when he hears Hank grumbling. “In rare cases, a concussion can have serious and long-lasting effects even after you’ve finished healing. It’s nothing to take lightly.”

“Eh, big fucking deal. I was barely using my brain before anyway.”

Anthony looks at Hank but doesn’t respond. He unchanging expression gives Hank the impression that he doesn’t come loaded with an understanding of sarcasm.

Hank just turns away. He’s trying not to hold what Anthony is against him, but it’s so, so hard when he’s worried about Connor and missing Connor.

Anthony isn’t much like Connor, not really. He hovers like Connor, and his stilted manner of speech is reminiscent of Connor’s, but that’s where the similarities end. He has no sense of humor, no human warmth about him, and he can’t even hold a conversation about anything that isn’t at least tangentially-related to his programmed function.

“Is there anyone in the hospital you actually like?” Hank asks. “Anyone you look forward to seeing? Anything you look forward to doing?”

Anthony just looks at him with an unchanging expression. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t understand your question. Do you have a question about the care you’re receiving?”

Hank just grunts, disappointed. Even in the very beginning, before he really began to grow, at least Connor would have tried to answer the question, not just brush it off and change the subject to something he’d been programmed to handle.

It’s hard to deal with Anthony. Hank finds him disappointing or grating or outright rage-inducing in turns. There are a few times where Hank yells at Anthony for things that he knows must be beyond
the android's control. Anthony can't help what he is.

The only times Hank feels bad about it are when he remembers that he used to have those sorts of thoughts about Connor too, that Connor couldn't help what he is either.

Anthony’s the one who eventually wheels Hank up to the PICU once his doctors clear him to leave the unit.

Cole has a room all to himself and Hank can see him through the sliding glass door before he even enters the room. Cole looks so small in his bed, buried under tubes and leads and bandages. He’s so heavily sedated that he doesn’t wake up even when Hank takes his hand and brushes a few stray hairs away from his eyes.

Cole’s nurse, an actual human woman, watches out of the corner of her eye while she charts at a computer. She murmurs a warning not to treat Cole too roughly, and her words manage to be gentle instead of chiding. Hank wonders if nurses in the PICU are all humans because they have to deal with families and their heightened emotions, something androids are notoriously bad at.

It’s unbearable, seeing Cole like this. All Hank wants to do is scoop him up and take him away from all of this. It kills him to know that there’s nothing he can do to help.

“Hey, kid,” Hank says once he’s been wheeled up next to Cole’s bed. He tries to make his voice sound normal. “I’m here. Everything’s gonna be okay, do you hear me? You just gotta hang on until you’re all healed up.”

He squeezes Cole’s hand. Cole’s only hand, and he has to fight back a sob at the thought. He can’t even see what’s left of Cole’s other arm under all the hardware.

“You know, you’re lucky they’re letting you sleep through feeding time here at the zoo.” Hank forces a smile “The food here is awful. Connor spoils us so much, I can barely even look at the slop they’ve been giving me. Makes me wanna puke.”

Hank pauses. A machine on the other side of the bed beeps steadily.

“Do you remember when you got sick two Halloweens ago? You had a bad cold and it was so wet and frigid that year, we made you stay home? You got so upset that you couldn’t go out trick-or-treating that Connor surprised you by… boiling up some caramel or however you make it, and making caramel apples just for you. Only… you couldn’t eat them on their sticks, so Connor had to cut them up into slices for you.” Hank chuckles weakly. “And Connor got caramel all over his hands, and right after he washed them, you asked for more slices and he had to go cut up another caramel apple for you…”

Hank’s smile shrinks a bit. “…I think you’re gonna miss Halloween again this year, sport. But next year. Next year for sure, I promise.”

He holds Cole’s tiny hand in both of his. “You gotta hang on, Cole. There’s so much you haven’t seen yet. We haven’t even done a fraction of everything I dreamed we’d get to do one day. All this is only temporary. You just gotta make it through.”

“When you’re all better, someday, we’ll find a coastline where there’s still dolphins hanging around for us to see, just like your favorite stuffed animal. We’ll go to the beach just to play arcade games on the boardwalk, the kind I used to play back when I was a kid. I’ll show you my favorite movie, even though you’re way too young for it. Stay up all night eating popcorn, even if Connor doesn’t like it. He’ll understand. I’ll take you to the Cyberlife tower and we’ll march right up to
whoever’s in charge there and get a personal tour, just for you. Someday you’ll run the place.

“There’s a whole world out there you haven’t even seen the half of yet,” Hank whispers. “Just keep dreaming about that. We love you so much, Cole.”

Cole’s nurse silently reaches over to pass him a box of the same cheap tissues he has in his room, and that’s how Hank realizes he’s crying again.

He stays in Cole’s room for as long as he’s permitted, talking about whatever occurs to him. Happy memories, stories from Hank’s days as a detective, he even talks a little about Cole’s mother. Eventually, Anthony walks back into Cole’s room to take Hank back to his unit for something that can’t be put off any longer, and Hank looks up at him, surprised. He hadn’t realized Anthony ever left.

(Is that what androids are supposed to be like? Just objects in the background?)

As the days pass, Hank spends as much of his time as he can with Cole. His reasoning is that Cole is the sort of kid who has only ever caused trouble whenever he’s not being watched. So if Hank keeps watching Cole, Cole won’t get an opportunity to die.

He asks Anthony every day if he’s heard anything about Connor. And every day, his answer is the same:

“I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson. No one has gotten back to me about the whereabouts of your android.”

Hank is sick with worry over the both of them, Cole and Connor.

Hank can’t let himself think about where Connor might be. If he lets himself think about where Connor is, he begins thinking about how Connor would never willingly leave Hank or Cole in a situation like this, and if he’s not with either of them, then——

It’s too much to think about, too awful to even consider.

He doesn’t know what to do about Connor. He doesn’t know what he can do from a hospital bed, if there’s anyone he can call for help. He’s spent so long trying to keep Connor a secret from the world that the idea of calling in anyone at all feels like a form of betrayal.

Whenever Hank’s not with Cole, and when he’s trying not to think about Connor, he starts thinking about himself.

Everything about this situation is Hank’s fault, he knows it is. He was driving the car and that makes this his fault, regardless of what actually occurred. A truck might have hit them, but Hank should have been able to avoid it somehow. He should have known it was coming and been more careful. The roads were so icy, why wasn’t he more careful?

Cole, possibly dying, and Connor, missing and damaged. His family broken once again, and it’s all his fault.

“Mr. Anderson,” Anthony says, snapping Hank out of his spiraling thoughts. “Your heart rate is climbing. Are you in pain?”

Yes, Hank thinks, and I deserve every bit of it.

“No,” he says. “I just… I’m worried. About my son and our android.”
Anthony cocks his head, something Connor has done millions of times before, and it makes Hank want to tear out his hair. “Rest assured, our medical staff is excellent, Mr. Anderson. Your son is in very capable hands.”

It doesn’t go unnoticed that he didn’t address Hank’s worries about Connor at all. He probably perceives Hank’s worries about an object as far less crucial than his worries about his child.

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The pediatric surgeon, Dr. Kapoor, comes to visit him whenever there’s news, and the sight of her rounding the curtain always makes Hank’s heart turn to lead in his chest. And she’ll either give him good news (“The CT scan showed no bleeding in the brain”) or she’ll give him bad news (“Cole might have an infection; he’s under contact isolation until it’s ruled out.”)

One day, Dr. Kapoor rounds the curtain looking absolutely furious, which is alarming and also confusing, because the only moods Hank has ever seen out of her have been various levels of seriousness. Anger is his wheelhouse, and he can’t imagine what could have happened to make her angry.

“There’s something I need to tell you. I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but an android performed the preliminary surgery on Cole when he was brought into the trauma center.”

Hank’s eyes feel like they pop out of his head. “Wait, just wait a fucking minute. I thought you were Cole’s surgeon!?"

“I am. But I wasn’t consulted about his case until the morning after the surgery was complete. I’ll be performing Cole’s next surgeries, but I’m not the pediatric surgeon who was on-call the night Cole was brought in.”

“An android was on-call? That’s a thing that happens?”

“No. The android performed the surgery because the human surgeon who was on-call that night was unexpectedly incapacitated.” Her mouth is a thin, severe line. “The hospital just finished part of its investigation into what happened the night of Cole’s surgery.”

“Wait, there was a fucking investigation? Why the fuck is this the first I’m hearing about any of this!?"

Dr. Kapoor raises a hand in a placating gesture. “Because there may or there may not have been a demonstrable degree of harm caused to Cole due to the on-call surgeon being unable to perform. Surgical androids aren’t supposed to work without a real surgeon supervising them and making decisions for them. An android’s ability to weigh quality-of-life factors and consider problems from an ethical standpoint is practically non-existent, which means they have severely limited decision-making skills in such complex situations. The android might have made unsupervised choices that a human surgeon wouldn’t have made.

“That’s part of my job,” she continues. “I’m cooperating with the investigation to determine whether the decisions it made during the surgery were appropriate.”

“Appropriate?” Hank’s heart is stuttering in his chest. “What the fuck do you mean, appropriate!?"

Dr. Kapoor gives him a serious look. “A human surgeon might not have chosen to amputate.”

Hank’s breath catches in his throat.
“But I don’t know that for sure yet. Even if one surgeon wouldn’t have amputated, another one might have,” she says. “My part of the investigation is still ongoing and is going to depend in part on what I find in Cole’s upcoming surgeries.”

“My son is missing an arm and a leg!” Hank voice is climbing to a yell. “He’s going to have to live like that for the rest of his life because a fucking machine didn’t think about his quality of life!?”

Dr. Kapoor doesn’t even blink in the face of Hank’s rage. “That hasn’t been determined. That portion of the investigation isn’t about whether it was possible to save Cole’s limbs, only if it was a medically appropriate decision not to. It’s very possible that another surgeon might have made the same decision even if they thought they might be able to save the limbs, because Cole was in such bad shape and a failed attempt to save the limbs may have only made him worse.”

Hank opens his mouth to begin yelling again, but Dr. Kapoor doesn’t give him the chance. “The more pertinent question is why an android was put in a position where it had to make those sorts of decisions. Why the on-call surgeon was unable to perform the surgery. That’s the other part of the investigation, the part which was concluded today.”

“And?” Hank snaps.

Dr. Kapoor looks absolutely disgusted. “Because when Cole was brought in, the on-call surgeon was high on Red Ice.”

Hank feels like he’s been slapped in the face. Red Ice. Cole nearly died that night and the human surgeon who was supposed to care for him was getting high on Red Ice. An android had to operate on him instead. He can’t stop repeating this over and over in his head. It’s like the ultimate irony; Hank spent a good part of his career trying to wipe out the scourge of Red Ice and Red Ice almost killed his son.

Dr. Kapoor continues, lowering her voice somewhat. “You need to contact a lawyer. Nothing about this is alright. It may not be medical malpractice, exactly, and the legal team says the hospital hasn’t failed in its duty of care, but that wouldn’t satisfy me if I were in your position. One of their surgeons, getting high when he should have been saving a child’s life? They’d fall over themselves to settle before it goes to court.”

“Where’s the android?” Hank asks.

“The what, now?”

“The android, the—one that operated on Cole. Where are they? What model are they?”

Dr. Kapoor raises a brow at the question. “I don’t know which one it was. I’d have to check.”

“I want to meet them.”

Her eyes widen. “You want to meet the android?”

Hank stares at her. “Yeah.”
Dr. Kapoor looks at him like he just said he wanted to meet the scalpel they cut Cole open with, too. “If that would help.” She gives Hank a long look and leaves the room.

Hank buries his face in his hands. An android saved Cole’s life. An android saved his life after the human who was supposed to do so pissed all over his responsibility. An android saved his life again after Connor saved his life in the wreckage of the car.

Humanity doesn’t deserve androids.

It takes some time for the android to arrive at Hank’s room. Perhaps she was busy in a surgery, or perhaps she or her handlers were confused by Hank’s request. Either way, she doesn’t arrive until nearly an hour later, her hands neatly folded in front of her.

She stands across from Hank’s bed, not saying anything.

Hank blinks at her. “Are you… are you the android who operated on my son? Cole Anderson?”

She nods once. “Yes. Do you have a question about the procedures I performed?”

“I… no. No, I don’t. Can you come closer?”

She does. As she approaches, Hank can see that her hair is pulled back into the neatest, tightest bun he has ever seen in his life. Does this android do her own hair? If not, who does? Who cares for this android’s hair, pulling it back so it doesn’t get in the way of her work?

The name Magda glows on the breast of her uniform.

“Magda? Your name is Magda?”

“Yes.”

Hank climbs out of bed. It’s easier going than it was when he first woke up, but it’s still difficult, laborious work. He looks at Magda and realizes he’s a full head and a half taller than she is.

He sits down in the wheelchair that’s right next to his bed. It somehow feels wrong to be towering over her right now.

He wheels himself over to her. When he’s right in front of her, he reaches out and takes her hand.

She lets him. “Please be gentle. My hands are extremely important for the work I do.”

“I know. I wouldn’t… I’d never.” Hank grasps for words to explain himself. They seem beyond his command at the moment.

So he shuts his mouth and lowers his head, squeezing Magda’s hand. “I just… thank you. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, you don’t…” Hank works his mouth soundlessly. How can he possibly express what she has done for him? “You saved my boy. You saved him.” He wipes his eyes with his other hand. “I can’t… nothing I could ever say would be enough. Thank you.”

She looks down at him, the ghost of a smile on her face. “You’re welcome. I’m glad I could be of service.”
She carefully pulls her hand away. Hank looks up at her, feeling as though he hasn’t done enough.

Magda doesn’t wait to be dismissed before she leaves the room.

Hank wheels himself back to bed and settles in. He stares into the empty air, adrift. Then he presses the call button.

Anthony arrives less than a minute later. “Hello, Mr. Anderson. Is there something you need?”

“Hey, Anthony. Listen, could you come over here for a minute?”

Anthony approaches, something almost like curiosity on his face.

Hank rubs the back of his neck and looks Anthony in the face. “Listen… I’m sorry if I’ve been rude. You don’t deserve that.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m not negatively affected by anything you might say to me.”

“That doesn’t make it okay for me or anyone else to do it,” Hank stresses. “You work hard. You’re a good android. I’m sorry I’ve been such an ass.”

Anthony’s eyebrows rise in a facsimile of absent surprise. “I see. In that case, thank you for your apology.”

There’s a brief pause before Anthony says, “I’m sorry I don’t have anything to report on the whereabouts of your android, Connor.”

The sound of Connor’s name sends a swell of nausea through Hank. He should have been doing more to find him, he knows he should have, but he doesn’t know what he can do.

“It’s okay, Anthony,” he says.

Anthony just cocks his head, the quirks of his brows suggesting that he knows it really isn’t.

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Cole wakes up the day before Hank is discharged.

Although “wakes up” may be too strong a term. What really happens is that his sedation is reduced enough to allow him short periods of groggy wakefulness, where he’s incapable of doing much more than just lying there.

A machine is no longer breathing for him, and he doesn’t have that awful tube snaking out of his mouth anymore. Now there’s just a clear plastic mask covering his nose and mouth. Hank is sitting right next to Cole, holding his hand when Cole turns his head slightly, his brows pinching gently and his chin wrinkling.

“Cole,” Hank says, hushed and urgent. “Cole, can you hear me?”

Cole turns his head further toward Hank. His eyelids flutter, then open. It takes a moment for his eyes to focus on Hank’s face.

Hank can’t hear Cole speak, but he can see his mouth move underneath his oxygen mask. Daddy.

“I’m here, Cole,” Hank says, rising out of his chair to lean in closer to Cole. “I’m here, baby.”
Hank can’t hug Cole the way he wants to. He can’t scoop Cole into his arms and cradle him close. Jostling him might either hurt him or disconnect something important from the countless lines and tubes that are still covering his body. So Hank just leans into Cole as much as he can, pushing an arm gently under Cole’s neck to hold him.

Cole turns even further toward Hank. He murmurs so softly that Hank has to strain to hear him. “Daddy. I’m tired. Sore all over.”

“I know, Cole, I know. You can sleep if you want to. It’s okay.”

Cole closes his eyes for several seconds then opens them again. He squeezes Hank’s hand like he’s afraid to let go.

“It’s okay, Cole. I’m right here. I’ll be right here.”

Cole closes his eyes again with a soft whimper. Hank moves over Cole as delicately as he can, not letting go of his son’s hand as he kisses him on the forehead.

“It’s okay,” Hank whispers. “It’s going to be okay.” And if Cole’s recovering, Hank can almost begin to believe that’s true.

Hank is discharged the next day despite his half-hearted protests. He wants to be close to Cole, that’s true, but he also feels like he’s going to go crazy if he can’t get out of bed and start tracking down Connor. By now it’s clear that he can’t expect any answers to fall into his lap by themselves. The only way he’s going to figure out where Connor is is by finding him himself.

Hank had been planning to take an autotaxi home after being discharged, so he’s surprised when Ben calls him and insists on picking him up from the hospital. If it had been anyone else, Hank probably would have turned them down. But Ben is a good guy. Hank can believe that Ben’s probably honestly more interested in helping out than at gawking at the sorry state Hank is in.

His doctors give him some papers telling him to make a follow-up appointment with a neurologist, give him a prescription for extra-strength Tylenol (gee, thanks fellas), and wheel him out to the curb. Ben is already there waiting for him, and he smiles anxiously as Hank climbs into his car.

“Hey, Hank. How’re you feeling?” Ben’s car smells like stale tobacco. Hank winces as he realizes he still needs to hash things out with his auto insurance. Maybe they can cover a rental for him so he doesn’t have rely on autotaxis to ferry him around the city.

“Just peachy,” Hank grunts. “Barely even felt it. Kid got banged up a lot worse than I did.”

Ben’s face falls. “Yeah. Heard about that. How’s he doing?”

“Doctors seem to think he rounded a bend. He’s awake and talking.” Hank doesn’t mention how pinched the doctors’ faces still get when they tell him about Cole’s latest lab values. He knows Ben isn’t doing this to hear the painful details.

Ben nods. “That’s good. Christ, though. Nothing so awful should ever happen to a kid, ‘specially not one as sweet as Cole.” He glances at Hank. “Do you know if it was an automated truck that hit you, or was there an actual person driving it?”

“No, I don’t know,” Hank says, a hard edge in his voice. “And right now, I don’t really care. Not after my android saved Cole’s life giving him first aid after the crash and then another android saved his life again by operating on him. So I’m really in no fucking mood to whine about the state of automation is America today, Ben.”
“Connor did that?” Ben asks, glancing at Hank. His brow furrows sadly. “Oh. …Oh. …No, I hear you, Hank. Sorry about that.”

Ben’s expression has a certain heartbroken quality about it that unnerves Hank, but before he can ask about it, Ben shoves an envelope at him without even looking at him. “Listen, everyone at the station took up a collection for you. When we heard about what happened, I mean. I know you probably don’t want it—“

“Oh, Christ,” Hank groans, holding he envelope like it might bite him. “I don’t need anyone giving me money because they fucking pity me.”

A smile flickers across Ben’s face. “Yeah, that’s about the reaction I expected. But just take it, okay? If you don’t want to use it for yourself, use it to plan a fun vacation for when Cole’s feeling better.”

Hearing Ben put it like that makes it a lot easier to tuck the envelope into his coat. “Vacation. Yeah, Cole would love that.” After a moment, Hank adds, “Thanks,” and he only partly doesn’t mean it.

“Don’t even mention it,” Ben says.

There’s an awkward silence. Hank doesn’t feel up to making conversation, so he looks out the window and thinks about how strange it feels to be driven around. The last time he let anyone drive him was when Connor—

“Hey, um. Speaking of Connor,” Ben says, and Hank almost jumps, startled.

“Huh?”

“You know, before. You mentioned Connor and how he…” Ben trails off, grimacing. “Um. I got something I have to tell you about.”

Hank can suddenly hear his heart pounding in his ears. “About Connor?”

“Yeah. Listen, the other day, when I was at the station, I got a call from someone at the hospital who wanted to talk to the boys who responded to your crash. Wanted to know if they knew anything about where your android might be. And, I mean, I knew that meant you had to be raising hell for your nurses and doctors and stuff, getting them to call around for you, so I thought I’d swing down and talk to the towing people who cleared your car—”

“Ben,” Hank interrupts, his voice much harder than he intends for it to be, “Skip the fucking story. Where the fuck is Connor?”

“I—I got him for you. But… he’s broken, Hank.”

Dread rises in Hank like a tide. “How broken?”

Ben grimaces again. “Just… completely shut down. I couldn’t get him to turn on. I took him to the boys who maintain the station androids to see if I might be able to get him fixed up for you as a sort of welcome home present. But…” Ben sighs, staring straight ahead. Avoiding Hank’s gaze. “They couldn’t do anything with him.”

Hank stares at Ben, waiting for the punchline. But Ben just stares at the road. Hank wants to tell him, This isn’t fucking funny. I ought to punch your lights out for doing this to me now of all times, but he can’t seem to fill his lungs enough to speak.
Ben shifts uncomfortably. “I. Um. I wasn’t sure what you’d want to do with him. If you know
someone you think might be able to fix him, I’ve got him here in my trunk. I can help you—”

Connor’s in the trunk. Connor’s in the trunk less than five feet behind Hank. The image of Connor
stuffed into a trunk like any of the other dead bodies Hank has ever found in the same position fills
Hank with horror. The grotesqueness of the image is what shocks Hank into realizing that Ben is
telling the truth.

Hank twists in his seat without thinking, as though he might be able to see into the trunk just by
looking behind him. His still-healing ribs scream with pain, and Hank gasps, curling in on himself.

“Jesus!” Ben says, his eyes wide. “Hank, you okay?”

Hank doesn’t answer. He feels like he’s on the edge of a cliff that’s collapsing right beneath his
feet. He scrambles for purchase, thoughts flying wildly as he searches for any shred of hope.
Connor is shut down. But Connor could be fixed, right? Death for androids isn’t the same as death
for humans. It’s just a matter of replacing the parts that are broken, right? He just needs to take
Connor to someone with the skill to fix him. If anyone like that even exists, because Hank already
burned bridges with the only guy he knows who might have been able to fix Connor.

“Hank?” Ben’s hand lifts off the steering wheel and hovers in the air, as though afraid to touch
Hank. “Hank!? C’mon, say something. Do you need to go back to the hospital!?”

“No,” Hank gasps. “No hospital. Take me home.”

“Jesus, Hank, you’re paler than a ghost. Are you sure you’re not—”

“Ben!” Hank says with as much force as he can muster. He’s shaking, he knows he is, but he has to
keep it together for Connor’s sake. He’s Connor’s only hope now, so even though Hank wants to
scream and rage and tear down the whole fucking city of Detroit, he digs his nails into his arm and
focuses on the tense pain that’s coursing through his body instead of the swell of grief that’s so
overwhelming he feels like he might drown in it.

“Ben,” He repeats. His voice is tense, but calmer. “Just fucking take me home.”

“Hank—”

“I’m fine. I’m just—upset. About Connor. I don’t need a hospital, I need to go home so I can figure
out how to get him repaired.”

Ben turns his attention back toward the road. “…Alright. If you’re sure.”

Hank is silent for the rest of the ride, staring out the window and reeling. It doesn’t seem real
anymore. A truck came out of nowhere and ruined the lives of everyone he loves, and he’s the only
one standing. Could it be just this morning he was released from the hospital? Was he ever even in
the hospital in the first place? Is this all just a horrible dream he’s going to wake up from at any
moment? That would be wonderful, to rewind time back to before the accident. Wake up to the
smell of Connor cooking breakfast and see Cole, healthy and uninjured, rubbing sleep out of his
eyes across the kitchen table.

Ben pulls into Hank’s driveway and when he pops the trunk, Hank lumbers out, his limbs feeling
like they’re made of lead.

Ben goes to pull Connor out of the trunk, but Hank pushes him aside.
“Whoa, Hank, you sure? He’s pretty heavy.”

“I know.”

Connor’s wrapped in a tarp so Hank can’t see him. When he leans to pick him up, the pain in his chest, back, and shoulder intensifies, but he ignores it. He needs to be someone Connor can rely on.

He braces himself for the possibility that Connor may not be in one piece and an arm or a biocomponent might fall out of the tarp, but when Hank lifts, everything seems to stay together. Connor is as stiff as a body in rigor mortis and so, so heavy. After spending days in bed all doped up, the heavy, dead weight of Connor is nearly unbearable for Hank.

Hank carries him anyway. He has to. If he can’t do this one simple thing for Connor now, how is he supposed to believe he can do anything at all for him?

Ben unlocks the front door and holds it open while Hank carries Connor over the threshold.

“Your dog’s down the street with a neighbor for now,” Ben says as Hank puts Connor on the couch as gently as he can manage. “You can just go get him when you’re ready.”

Hank tears his eyes away from the shape under the tarp to look at Ben. “Hey. Thanks for… you know.”

Ben shuffles his feet. “Well. I know Connor’s special to you. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more. Let me know if you get him fixed, okay?”

“Yeah. See you around.”

Ben smiles and salutes a wave. He lets himself out.

And then Hank is alone with the shape on the couch. Connor under a death shroud.

Hank doesn’t even bother thinking about whether he should unwrap the tarp or not. He just begins peeling it away carefully. He has to see what’s happened to Connor.

Connor’s eyes are open, which Hank thinks must be the worst part. They’re dull and unfocused, staring past Hank without seeing him at all. Hank cups Connor’s cheek. His skin is still soft, but it’s so, so cold. Hank never realized just how warm Connor used to be until now, with the horrible contrast right at his fingertips.

Hank closes Connor’s eyes. Now he looks like he might just be sleeping, like in one of Cole’s fairy tales. Snow White after eating the poison apple, or Sleeping Beauty after pricking her finger. Like a kiss of true love could wake him right up.

Hank’s heart clenches at the thought and he lowers his head, ashamed. He’s spent most of the last year treating Connor like crap, so what the hell is he doing thinking about him like that?

As he continues to pull the tarp away, he begins finding areas of damage. Connor’s chassis across half his chest and one shoulder are cracked wide open, skin gone and revealing white plastic and metal biocomponents. In addition to that, there are a few smaller cracks along Connor’s arms and abdomen. There’s a thick, oily scent in the air, and Hank recognizes it as evaporated thirium which has gotten trapped in the tarp.

Did blood loss kill him? Is that what happened? Was Connor left to die in the wreckage of a car, his biocomponents burning out as they lost whatever it is that thirium provides while Hank and
Cole were carted off to a hospital? Is that the thanks Connor gets for ignoring his own wounds to try and save Cole’s life?

Hank’s hands are shaking. This is exactly what he’s been afraid would happen ever since Connor’s eye was damaged by some punks who had no idea they were hurting a person and not a thing. Connor, left behind by a society that wasn’t built to protect him. He just hadn’t seen it happening in such a way; the result of a total accident instead of an act of deliberate malice. Who is most to blame for Connor’s death? The truck that hit them? Society? Hank himself?

And as much as Hank wants to rage at the paramedics and officers who left Connor to die, blaming himself seems like the most correct option.

Hank spent months pushing Connor away, hurting him and hurting himself, and in the end it might not have even been worth it. If Hank can’t save Connor now, then all the shit of the last few months will have been for nothing.

“I’ll fix this,” Hank whispers, steeling himself against his grief. “I’m not gonna give up, you hear me, Connor? I’m gonna find some way to fix this.”

Connor remains motionless and cold and beyond Hank’s reach.

Chapter End Notes

Please check out this fanart by madeofstardust of various moments from the fic!

It’s wildly inaccurate that a pediatric surgeon like Dr. Kapoor would be the one member of Cole’s care team that Hank has the most contact with, but I wanted to keep the cast of OC’s in this chapter small and a surgeon was the best person to have important conversations with Hank about the surgery the android performed and the other surgeon who got high and didn’t operate.
Distant Rumbling

Chapter Summary

Hank explores his options.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hank is in the living room. It’s the middle of the night. The house is dark and empty.

Sumo’s gone, and Hank isn’t sure where he went. He tries looking under the couch for what feels like the ten billionth time when he suddenly becomes aware of a loud rumbling coming from down the hallway.


No one answers. The rumbling continues.

“Cole, you know you need to be in bed! Quit messing around!”

The rumbling gets louder. It gains a metallic quality that sends shivers up Hank’s spine. Now it almost sounds like a giant machine stirring to life.

“…Connor?” Hank calls, beginning to get a little nervous. “Connor, wha…? What…?”

Suddenly Hank remembers that Connor and Cole are gone. He’s supposed to be alone in the house.

He’s supposed to be alone in the house, but he isn't.

Hank hurries to the gun safe he keeps on the highest shelf of the bookcase. His hands are trembling so badly, he dials the wrong code three times before he finally gets it right.

As he enters the final digit, the safe door swings open and a pile of butcher knives fall out.

“Shit!” Hank jumps back as they clatter to the floor, narrowly avoiding his feet.

“Knives? Where the fuck’s my gun!?” He pushes through the knives left in the safe, heedless of the way they nick his hands and cut his sleeves. His gun is nowhere to be found.

The rumbling gets even louder. The whole house begins to vibrate.

“Shit, shit, shit…” Hank mutters as he realizes he has no time to look for his gun. He needs something to defend himself with now. Whatever is in the house with him is angry and malicious, he just knows it is. Burglars, murderers, a pack of hungry velociraptors, or maybe it’s that the washing machine has come to life and is trying to eat his bedsheets. It doesn’t matter, it just has to be stopped.

Hank takes one of the butcher knives in hand and holds it in front of him, ready to strike at any moment. He creeps down the hallway.
His bedroom door is cracked open. A sliver of light from within cuts through the darkness of the hallway. As Hank draws closer, the rumbling becomes deafening. His teeth clatter inside his head, and he’s vibrating so violently that he isn’t sure where his body ends and where everything else begins.

Gathering all his courage, Hank raises his knife and pushes the bedroom door open—

His ex-wife is standing at the closet, casually rifling through the clothes. Everything is perfectly quiet and still.

“Joey?” Hank says, hardly daring to believe his eyes.

Joanna looks at him. She smiles shyly, almost bashfully. “Oh. Hi, Hank.”

Hank stares at her numbly.

Joanna tucks her hair behind her ear. Curly and blond, just the way it was when Hank last saw her. “Sorry. I guess I was being a little loud. Did I disturb you?”

“What the hell are you doing?” Hank asks stepping into the room.

“Looking for my old clothes. This is where I used to keep them. You don’t happen to know where they are, do you?” She frowns softly as she rifles through the shirts and slacks. “These are all mens’ clothes. And half of it’s stuff I know you’d never want to wear. And it’s the wrong size for you.”

“Joey—”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen. “You have someone new, don’t you?”

Hank looks away, not sure why the question embarrasses him. “…Yeah. That’s right.”

Joanna lowers her gaze. “…I guess that’s about as much as I can expect. After all, I’ve been gone for how many years? It’s only natural.” She begins rifling through the clothes again. “I even said I was leaving you for someone else in my letter. Do you remember that? Did you ever think that was the truth, or did you just think I only said it to hurt you?”

“Joey, c’mon, stop it. Your clothes aren’t there.” Hank tries to pull her away, but it’s like he’s trying to move through molasses and he can’t quite reach her.

“I’m sorry, Hank. I just really need something else to wear. Are you sure you didn’t keep any of my old clothes in here?” She keeps looking through the clothes, then pauses as she takes hold of the sleeve of one of Connor’s shirts. She rubs the fabric with her thumb, a reserved look on her face. “…Is he nice?”

Hank nods, his mouth dry. “…Yeah. He’s nice.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s…” Hank puts a hand to his mouth. “He’s just… unlike anyone I’ve ever known before. He’s dorky and earnest. Diligent, noble, and caring… he loves Cole more than anything. And Cole loves him.”

“And you love him,” Joanna says softly.

Hank looks off to the side. “Yeah. I love him.”
Joanna sighs, turning away from Hank. From the little he can see of her expression, she looks absolutely heartbroken. “Oh. Oh, no.”

“Joey…” Hank tries to reach for her again, but he’s glued to the spot. He huffs softly. “Joey, c’mon. You left. You just fucking left and you didn’t even have the decency to tell me where you were going. What was I supposed to do, sit around feeling sorry for myself for the rest of my life? Did you expect me to keep your clothes in my closet and pine after you?”

“Hank, no, that’s not—” Her voice shakes as she turns further away. “That isn’t what I mean. I’m not sad for myself. I’m sad for him.”

Hank’s throat constricts. “What? What do you mean, you’re sad for him?”

“Where are my clothes?” Joanna hugs herself around the middle, her back to Hank. “Did you really not keep any of my clothes?”

“They—they’re probably up in the attic. Christ, Joey, why do you need your old clothes right now?”

He reaches for her a third time, and as he does, she turns around.

She’s drenched with blood.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Hank cries, recoiling from the sight.

“M-My clothes—”

“Joey, what the fuck happened!? Jesus, where are you hurt!? Where’s it all coming from!??”

He’s finally able to move, stepping toward her. As he does, she shrieks and backs away.

“Stop! Don’t touch me! You’ve done enough!”

“I—what?”

“Look! Just look!”

Hank looks down at the knife in his hand. It’s covered with blood, dripping with it.

“No,” he whispers. “No, I didn’t… Joey, I swear, it wasn’t—”

“It was. It was, Hank.” She looks at him sadly. “It was your love. This is what your love does to people.”

Hank can’t breathe.

“Your love kills. It’s like a poison. You hurt people with it over and over. Look at what it did to me,” she says. “It happened to me. It happened to Connor. It’ll happen to Cole someday, too. If he isn’t already—”

“Stop it,” Hank says, voice low. “Don’t you talk about Cole like that. You don’t know what you’re talking about. I can save Connor, I can—”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

She begins to laugh sadly. Her laughter grows and grows, like violent weeping going out of
control. She holds herself around the middle as her awful laughter fills the room. So loud and piercing that Hank has to grab her to make her stop. Has to shake her, has to smother her, has to take the knife and—

Joanna’s laughter is still ringing in Hank’s ears even as his eyes snap open, alone in the dark of his bedroom. It takes him several long seconds to realize that the house is completely and utterly silent, because the echo of Joanna’s laughter sounds just like the noise a truck makes as it slams into a car.

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Visiting Cole in the PICU is wonderful and terrible. Every moment Hank spends away from his son gives him an unshakable anxiety over how he’s doing, and being there to see him in person soothes that anxiety as much as it can be soothed. It’s obvious how much better Cole’s doing now than he was when Hank first saw him after the accident.

But still. “Doing better” isn’t the same as “doing well”. Seeing his son in pain torments Hank, especially since a good portion of his pain comes from a place medication will never be able to reach.

Cole seems to be adjusting to the loss of half his right arm and most of his right leg. But he’s only really adjusting in the sense that he isn’t actively rejecting the reality of what’s happened. He doesn’t like looking at anything on that side of his body, and he sometimes whimpers when he catches sight of his bandaged limbs.

Good old Dr. Kapoor keeps Hank updated. “It’s normal for there to be a period of adjustment,” she says. “Amputation can be psychologically challenging even when it’s a scheduled and anticipated event. To lose two limbs in a sudden and traumatic event is a shock. Cole needs time to process his emotions.”

Hank runs his hand down his face. “Is there anything I can do to help? I fucking hate seeing him in pain.”

“Just be supportive of him. If he isn’t ready to talk about it, don’t force him to. There are going to be enough people here forcing him to face what’s happened to him. If you can help him feel like things are getting back to normal, that’ll be helpful enough.”

So Hank tries to spend as much time as he can with Cole.

“Hey, are these paints alright for skin?” He asks the art therapist while she lays out a palette and paper on Cole’s lap.

“I don’t—”

“Oops,” Hank says, painting a big streak of blue down his face and into his beard. “Too late.”

That earns a blessed giggle from Cole, so Hank goes into a routine, pretending like he’s doing his own make-up.

“Gosh, I just don’t know which kind of blush matches my eyes,” Hank says. “Cole, help me pick something.”

Cole picks a shade of magenta that certainly doesn’t match Hank’s eyes, but Cole consents to painting bright circles on Hank’s cheeks with his trembling left hand, so Hank’s willing to put up with it.
A routine develops. Each day, Hank spends a few hours in the morning with Cole, and then he kisses him goodbye to start the hard part of his day.

Cole always tears up whenever Hank leaves. Sometimes he openly sobs. Always he asks Hank to stay longer. Begs Hank to stay longer.

“I’m sorry, sport,” Hank says, doing his best to ignore how his heart is breaking. “I wish I could stay. I really do. But I have some real important work I need to take care of.”

And Hank tells Cole to hug his stuffed dolphin as if it were Hank, and Cole shakes and squeezes his eyes shut, always unable to watch his father walk out of the room.

Then Hank drives home to get Connor. Sumo is always curled up next to the couch or even on the couch, halfway on Connor’s legs, panting anxiously whenever Hank comes home. Hank puts Connor in the back of the rental car, laying on his side across the seats. And then Hank goes out to try and find someone, anyone who might be able to fix him.

He goes to Jamie first. The very day after Hank is discharged, he carries Connor into Jamie’s store. Jamie’s face falls as he spots Hank approaching. Hank thinks to himself that it’s a sure sign of how extraordinary Connor is, that this technician who has probably handled and moved hundreds of androids over the years still recognizes him at first glance.

“Shit, man. What happened?”

“Car accident. Do you think you might be able to fix him?”

“I can try,” Jamie says with a shrug.

Hank sets Connor on the gurney in the back of the repair shop. Jamie peels off Connor’s uniform, and Hank fights back a surge of indignation on Connor’s behalf, reminding himself that this is necessary, this is all necessary.

Jamie presses his fingers into Connor’s abdomen and the skin across his torso disappears, plastic panels on his chest and stomach popping up. Jamie pulls them back (tugging a bit harder at a point where the giant gash in Connor’s chest has warped the edge) and begins poking around inside of Connor. Hank winces at the sight. He feels like he should look away out of respect, but he just can’t.

Jamie makes an unhappy noise and wrinkles his noise. “Ugh. What a waste.”

“What’s that?”

“You got super unlucky, man. See, come have a look—”

Hank reluctantly approaches. Jamie jabs at a spot close to Connor’s heart (his thirium pump, Hank has to remind himself).

“Okay, so Connor has some crazy reinforcements. Any damage like this really shouldn’t have been such a big deal for it. Androids can compartmentalize damage they receive and divert the flow of thirium to activate the auto-regeneration factor. And Connor’s so tough, it should have even been able to handle a big gash like this. It wouldn’t have been able to heal something this big on its own, but it should have been able to hold out for a while until it could get patched up. But see here, its thirium pump regulator was also a little damaged. Not badly enough to make it stop functioning altogether, but enough that it wasn’t able to effectively regulate the flow of the thirium to such a
precise degree. So it bled out when it really shouldn’t have, shutting it down and also causing additional damage to the biocomponents which rely most heavily on the energy and information delivered by thirium.”

Hank nods, absorbing this information. “So can you fix him?”

Jamie’s mouth twists. “Give me an hour and two hundred bucks and I’ll tell you if I think I can fix it or not.”

Hank pulls out his wallet.

Minutes later, Jamie’s sitting at a workbench on the other side of the room, having grabbed an assortment of parts out of Connor. Whatever he’s doing with those parts, Hank isn’t watching. He can’t seem to pull his attention away from Connor.

Pale and naked and wide open on a metal gurney, Connor looks like he’s being autopsied. So far, Hank has been able to outrun his grief, but during the hour he’s forced to wait, with nothing else to focus on but how dead Connor looks, it catches up with him just a little.

This is a long shot, he knows it is.

But he can’t let himself think about what will happen if it doesn’t somehow work out.

Eventually, Jamie swivels around in his chair and gives Hank a dissatisfied look. “Well. I gave it my best.”

Hank looks up, startled by how Jamie’s voice cuts through the silence. “You mean—”

“I’m sorry, man. It’s the same problem as when the optical unit got all busted up. I managed to fix the thirium regulator, but that’s it. Everything else is just too damaged to be fixed and too specialized to be replaced.”

Hank takes a breath to quell the dread rising in his chest. “Okay. So you can’t do anything. But last time, you pointed me toward a guy who managed to fix Connor’s eye.”

“Yeah, someone who was able to fix a single broken biocomponent. But this?” Jamie gestures at the biocomponents on the workbench. “These aren’t even all the damaged parts there are. Just the ones I grabbed so I could get a general idea of what sort of progress I’d be able to make. Your android is totaled.”

“You have to know someone who can do something to help.”

Jamie shrugs. “At this point, between parts and labor, it’d honestly be way cheaper for you to replace it.”

“Jamie,” Hank pleads, and the note of desperation in his voice must catch Jamie’s attention, for a curious expression crosses his face.

Hank says, “I don’t care about the cost. If you can think of anyone at all that you think might be able to do anything to help, I want to talk to them.”

Jamie frowns and chews his lip for a moment. “…Alright. Fine. I’ll give you some names.” He spends a minute scribbling on a nearby pad of paper, then tears the top sheet off, gathers Connor’s errant biocomponents off the workbench, then walks over to Hank and hands him the paper.
Hank reads the list of names and addresses as Jamie slots biocomponents back into place. It isn’t a long list, but it’s a good place to start. Every referral is another chance things will be alright for Connor.

When Jamie is finished reassembling Connor, he puts his chassis back together as neatly as he can. Connor’s skin doesn’t reknit itself over the bare plastic, and a pang of loss goes through Hank as he realizes it isn’t going to. Connor’s chassis is going to stay naked in the spots where the skin has dissolved away, and if Connor never wakes up again, someday he’ll probably be completely bare and white, his soft skin and his soft hair gone forever because of Hank’s failed attempts to save him.

Jamie watches as Hank hoists Connor off the table. Hank’s shoulder is still sore and healing, and he winces as Connor’s solid weight settles in his arms.

“Man, you’re really attached to it, aren’t you?” Jamie asks. “I’ve seen parents who’re less attached to their own kids.”

“Really not in the mood,” Hank says curtly.

“No, sorry. It’s just I remember when you bought it. You came in insisting you wanted something basic and cheap. Nothing fancy, nothing special.” A tiny smirk pulls at Jamie’s mouth. “It’s just funny what happens when we don’t get what we want.”

Hank doesn’t have anything to say to that, so he leaves without another word.

That’s how Hank spends his daylight hours after his mornings with Cole in the hospital. He runs all over the city, trying to find a technician capable of working miracles. Detroit probably has more android enthusiasts than anywhere else in the world. Hank could not ask for better circumstances for such an awful situation.

He runs through the list Jamie gave him. Ex maintenance technicians, indie roboticists, even some whiz kid who barely looks like he’s old enough to shave but who claims to be building a custom skeleton for the android he’s making out of scavenged parts. Each of them spends a few hours working on Connor but none of them have much more luck than Jamie did, and by the time Hank has crossed the last name off the list, Connor seems to be in no better shape. Hank can’t even tell if any of them have actually helped at all. For all he knows, having all these people messing with damaged biocomponents is only making all that damage worse.

When he’s through with the list, Hank begins looking for other options. He gets leads from his friends on the streets, and then when those don’t pan out, he gets leads from people who definitely aren’t his friends but still owe him a favor or two. There are no more professional-looking technicians to visit; he’s meeting up with people who are pretty obviously involved with trafficking stolen parts and running android scams, and not even in the indirect way that Jamie and other underground repair shops are.

It’s all very sketchy. Hank presses on anyway, because what other choice does he have?

On one occasion, Hank arranges to meet a single person, but when he arrives at the meeting place, there are two men there. They both look at Hank as he walks in, and he can see the greedy gleam in their eyes.

“Hear you’re having android trouble,” the taller man says. “You been to see Cyberlife about it yet?”
Hank narrows his eyes. He’s holding Connor in his arms, and he carefully shifts him over his good shoulder.

“Is that a no? Because they won’t service stolen androids.”

“My android’s not stolen,” Hank says with a glare. “It belongs to me. This'll bite you in the ass if you try to take it.”

Ignoring Hank’s words, the other man begins to approach him—

—And Hank draws his gun and points it at him.

They both freeze.

“Here’s the deal,” Hank growls. “You’re gonna let me walk out of here with my android and I won’t shoot you in the fucking face. Sound good?”

The taller man’s hands are hovering around his waistline, and for a moment, Hank thinks they might honestly be dumb enough to start a shootout over a broken android—

But neither of the men move. The taller man glares at him with a twisted frown on his face.

Hank takes slow steps backwards until he’s gone from there. Neither of the men follow him.

In the evenings, no matter what he’s been through during the day, Hank takes Connor home and puts him back on the couch, and then he drives back to the hospital and spends the rest of the day with Cole.

By the time Hank returns, the pain medication that Cole’s on usually have him drifting in and out of consciousness. But he always strains to stay awake whenever Hank is there. The PICU has a small bookshelf full of children’s books that patients and their families are free to help themselves to, so oftentimes, Hank will pick out a book and read it out loud to Cole while he alternates between dozing and waking. He likes to think that even when Cole is asleep, he might be able to hear Hank’s voice and take comfort in Hank’s presence.

It’s more than just bedtimes stories; it’s a continuation of the tradition that he and Connor created.

Cole never begs Hank not to go when Hank’s last daily visit ends; Hank waits until Cole is well and truly asleep to leave. At some point, Hank always looks up from his book and notices that Cole hasn’t spoken or moved in quite some time.

“Cole,” he says softly, brushing a hand over Cole’s head.

And sometimes Cole will swim back to consciousness, squeezing his eyes and mumbling, and Hank will go back to reading. But eventually, Cole won’t even stir in response to that, and Hank will kiss him goodnight and be on his way.

Hank always arrives home to find Sumo curled up next to Connor again.

***

That’s how Hank’s days go in the weeks after his discharge. Despite the occasional setback, Cole’s health gradually improves. His next surgery is scheduled, and Hank spends a handful of days trying not to worry about it.

When the day of the surgery arrives, it goes without a hitch. Hank spends the whole day at the
hospital either by Cole’s side or picking at the padding of the chairs in the waiting room, wishing there was a constructive way he could spend his energy while he’s stuck inside all day.

When Cole comes out of surgery and is finished being observed in the post-anesthesia unit, he’s wheeled back up to his room in the PICU where Hank is waiting for him. Cole is awake when he’s moved back into his bed where he begins to shiver.

“Cold,” he mutters.

“We’ll get you warmed up,” Hank says, pulling up the blankets carefully, mindful of Cole’s new incisions.

Cole’s bed is adjusted so he’s sitting up slightly, so Hank gingerly sits on the bed and lets Cole lean into him. Cole eyes are empty, exhausted.

“You did good, kid. How’re you feeling? You wanna take a nap?”

Cole is silent, staring ahead absently. Hank almost thinks that Cole didn’t hear him when Cole mutters, “When is this going to be over?”

Hank rubs Cole’s shoulder. “I don’t know. I know this isn’t a lot of fun.”

“I just want to go home,” Cole says, and there’s a despondency in his voice that no six year old should ever be able to express.

“I know.” Hank holds his son to him as tightly as he dares. “I know.”

Cole turns his head into Hank’s side. “I miss Connor.”

“I know, kid.”

“Is he okay?”

Hank’s heart seizes with indecision and grief. Should he lie to his son? Should he tell him the truth and crush him?

Hank remembers the advice Connor once gave him about how to talk to Cole about things that are almost certain to hurt him. You don’t explain that to him. Not now. Just give him the pieces he can process right now.

“I’m working on getting Connor fixed up,” Hank says. “I know you want to see him, and I know he wants to see you, too. But first I gotta get Connor all fixed up, like how you’re getting fixed up.”

“Is he gonna be okay?” Cole asks, and Hank knows he’s also asking am I going to be okay.

“Yes,” Hank says without thinking, because he knows if he stops to think about it, he might never answer. “He’s gonna be fine. Things are going to go back to normal soon. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but it will. I promise.”

Hank expects to feel Cole’s hot tears begin to soak through his shirt, but he doesn’t. When he looks down, he sees that Cole is still staring straight ahead, not crying at all.

Is he tired? Is he still out of it from the surgery? Or does he just have total faith in what Hank is telling him?

Hank doesn’t think Cole is very much in the mood for a story, but he grabs a book and reads to him
just to give him something to focus on other than his own thoughts. Soon enough, the sound of Hank’s voice lulls him to sleep.

When Hank drives home that night, the ghost of Cole’s warm weight pressed into his side, he feels so alone. He’s been trying so, so hard to save Connor. And he has nothing to show for it, not after weeks of tireless effort.

Just as he walks through the front door, he receives a text from a bookie acquaintance of his.

#richie (no bets ov $80)> hey man I heard your looking for someone who can fix androids

#me> yeah, u know someone?

#richie (no bets ov $80)> listen theres this chick named Katie who fixes androids for Cyberlife. She works at the Cyberlife store on e Ford rd. If you slip her a commission she’ll fix you’re shit even if its dirty

Merely reading the word Cyberlife sends a sick jolt through Hank.

#me> so she won’t tell anyone even if someone brings her a weird android? smthn theyre probly not supposed to have?

#richie (no bets ov $80)> yeah

Hank suddenly has an overwhelming feeling as though the walls are closing in on him.

He knows he can’t trust anyone at Cyberlife with Connor. Cyberlife would destroy Connor for good if they knew what he’s capable of. And yet if anyone would have the resources necessary to save him, it would be Cyberlife. Going to Cyberlife could be Connor’s best chance at survival…

…if he can trust this technician.

And if he can trust Richie.

But Hank knows he can’t trust Richie. He’s been burned by Richie before. Maybe only to the tune of a few hundred dollars, but if he can’t even trust Richie with his money, how is he supposed to trust Richie with Connor?

#me> hey why u telling me this anyway? what do you get out of this?

Hank stares at his phone for what feels like a long time. Richie doesn’t respond.
Hank stares at his phone. Richie never responds.

The walls close in further around Hank. He’s seized with a feeling of utter paralysis.

He can’t trust Cyberlife. He just can’t. They might have the only resources able to fix Connor, but he can’t trust them. He’s being shown an open door and he’s refusing to go through, refusing to explore an avenue that might be able to save Connor.

“Oh, God,” he gasps.

Everything he said earlier that evening to Cole comes flooding back to him. He told Cole that Connor is going to be alright, that things are going to go back to normal, but he has no way of knowing if that’s true. It might have been nothing more than a desperate lie he told Cole in an attempt to make him feel better. It might be a lie he’s been telling himself all along.

The wave of grief he’s been trying to outrun finally catches up with him and he sinks to the floor, shuddering. Connor is laying on the couch mere feet away, cold and still. He might never wake up again.

It’s all Hank’s fault. The car accident, Cole’s injuries, Connor’s shutdown. Everything about all of this is all his fault. Why should he think there’s anything he can do to save Connor? There’s nothing he can do to take back the sort of irreparable hurt that Cole has suffered, so why did he think for even a moment that there was anything he’d be able to do for Connor? Why does he think he deserves the happiness and the relief that would come with seeing Connor open his eyes again? He spent months pushing Connor away and hurting Connor. He might have claimed that he did it because he was worried about Connor, but the truth is that he always took it for granted that Connor would be there. He never once imagined what it would be like for Connor to be gone, so much left broken between them. Connor, sad and lonely and aching for more and then just gone. It seems far too cruel.

And that’s Hank’s fault, too. He couldn’t give Connor the sort of love he deserved. Hank fucked everything up, and now Connor’s the one paying the price. That’s what he’s been afraid of ever since he became aware of Connor’s evolution into something extraordinary; that his mistakes would condemn Connor. Connor is dead, and Cole is mutilated, and Hank’s the only one left standing. He has absolutely nothing to feel sorry for himself over, and yet he’s managing to do so anyway.

He feels despicable.

Hank isn’t sure how long he spends there, collapsed against the wall. He never even turned on the light when he walked in, and the whole house is dark. The only light streams in from between the blinds; slatted shafts of streetlight that barely illuminate the room.

Eventually, Hank is broken out of his spiral of grief and guilt when Sumo comes over and headbutts his arm with a whine.

Hank stares at Sumo. Then he understands what Sumo must want. Hank spent all day at the hospital; Sumo probably needs out very badly by now.

Hank gingerly lifts himself to his feet. His whole body is sore, and he limps his way to the back
door to unlock it and let Sumo out.

He wipes his face. He feels like a fucking mess. There’s a bottle of Black Lamb in the cupboard, and Hank can’t think of a single good reason not to lose himself in it.

But when he goes to look for it, it isn’t there.

His brow furrows in dull confusion. He can’t remember having finished it off before the accident, but on the other hand, he had been drinking more than usual in the months before the accident. And his doctor had said minor memory problems could happen with concussions.

Nevertheless, he goes to check the kitchen trash can. It’s almost completely empty. When Hank’s fingers touch something made of glass, he pulls it out, but he can tell by the weight and the shape of it that it’s not an empty bottle of scotch before he even sees it.

It’s one of those tablet magazines that Cole used to disassemble with Connor. This one hasn’t even been disassembled completely; its glass panels feel loose in Hank’s hands and its screen flickers as it comes to life.

**SUSTAINABILITY IN DETROIT**

_Elijah Kamski’s private lakeside villa relies exclusively on renewable energy – Tips and tricks on how you can reduce your electricity bill!_

The picture below the headline is of Kamski’s home in the summer. Sunlight glares off the flat, dense building, hurting Hank’s eyes even as it comes from a mere photographic projection.

The image flickers—then the magazine slips out of Hank’s hand and clatters back into the garbage can.

“Oh, fuck,” Hank says.

He has an insane idea. An impossible idea.

But it’s an idea that gets his heart pumping again. It might possibly be the worst idea he’s ever had in his entire life, except when he was twelve and his dog died and all he wanted was the opportunity to march straight into heaven and punch God in the face.

Really, there’s very little difference between that idea and this one. They’d both require balls of steel to pull off.

It might not work. It might end badly.

But right now, all Hank can think is that _Elijah Kamski isn’t affiliated with Cyberlife anymore._

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Kamski’s home looks much different in the winter.

In the photograph of Kamski’s villa, the property was sparse and bright, the dark lake glittering behind the building. But when Hank pulls up, the entire world is coated in a thick, white blanket of snow. The villa is a slab of black, and Hank can’t tell where the ground ends and where the lake
begins. The snow spreads into the distance as if it goes on forever, and Hank suspects if he were to try and walk out onto the lake, he’d be able to make it out quite a bit. Maybe he’d even lose sight of the villa by the time the ice were to give out underneath him.

It’s still snowing as Hank pulls Connor out of the car. Snowflakes alight on his face, and Hank pulls Connor closer against him, as if his own body heat might be able to warm him.

Hank rings the doorbell and it isn’t long before a pretty young android answers the door.

“Hello, Lieutenant Anderson,” she says, looking not at all surprised to see the body in Hank’s arms, even though he hadn’t told anyone he’d be bringing an android. “Please come in. Elijah has been expecting you.”

As soon as Hank has stepped through the doorway, the android retreats to the other side of the room. “Please wait here. I’ll let you know when Elijah is ready for you,” which makes Hank bristle a bit because didn’t she just say he’d been expecting them?

He forces himself to take a deep breath. He’s just on edge; he can’t let his temper get the best of him now.

There are chairs, but they look terribly uncomfortable, all sharp edges and flat surfaces. As if whoever’s expected to sit in them is supposed to have perfect posture. Like an android. Hank remains standing, pacing idly so Connor doesn’t grow too heavy in his arms.

Everything about the space seems thematically appropriate for the man who invented androids. The rough, unpolished stones jutting out of the corners of the room, the small tree in a small, finely-raked pit of gravel in the middle of the tiled floor. A meeting of the artificial with the natural. It’s not hard to see how a man with such aesthetic preferences could create the world’s first inorganic being.

Hank is looking at a photo of what appears to be Kamski with one of his professors (which is much smaller and nicer than the gigantic portrait that’s taking up most of another wall; this tiny photo almost makes Hank believe that the legendary Elijah Kamski might actually be a human being) when the android girl returns.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid Elijah is going to have to cancel your meeting.”

“Cancel?” Hank turns to her, hoping it isn’t obvious how his heart is nearly thudding out of his chest. “What do you mean, cancel? You said he was waiting for me, why can’t I—”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant Anderson. Elijah isn’t able to meet with you at this time. Please allow me to show you to the door.”

“This is about the android I brought, isn’t it?” Hank moves toward her. “Look, I’m sorry. I know I lied on the phone about why I wanted to meet with him, but please. I need to see him.”

The girl puts her hand on Hank’s shoulder. When she squeezes, her grip is like iron and Hank winces at the pressure on his still-healing bones.

“This way to the door.”

With a suddenness that he hopes she can’t predict, Hank ducks out from under her grasp and runs at the door she just emerged from. The door slides open as he approaches and Hank finds himself running down a short hallway. He rushes for the door at the end of a hallway, and he had no time at all to plan so all he can do is barrel his way through and hope against hope that—
Kamski is there. Wearing a tank top and sweatpants, the gleam of sweat on his brow as he does sit-ups; an android identical to the one who tried to show Hank out is holding down his feet. Hank appears to have intruded upon his personal gym.

Kamski stops his sit-ups, staring at Hank with a look of intense disdain on his face.

“Mr. Kamski, I know you have no reason to listen to anything I say,” Hank says, drawing closer. “But please, this is a matter of life and death. You have to take a look at my android—”

“Chloe, get him out of here,” Kamski says flatly. Chloe comes up from behind Hank and slips in front of him, shoving him back through the door.

Hank tries to push past her. He shouts, “No—stop! Listen to me! He’s not like other androids! He’s fucking alive!”

Kamski stands up and wipes his face with a towel. The other Chloe approaches to help the first one shove Hank back.

“He has emotions! I swear to Christ, he’s not like the rest of them! He’s an RK800, his name is Con—”

“Wait.” Kamski’s voice cuts through the room, even over Hank’s shouting. Hank stumbles forward, suddenly pushing against nothing as both of the Chloe’s step away from him.

Kamski folds his arms behind his back and turns away from Hank.

Hank waits for him to say something. When he doesn’t, Hank takes a breath. “I just need—”

“You lied about the reason you wanted to meet with me,” Kamski says in a cool voice. “You told my assistant you were an officer conducting an investigation on… what was it again, Chloe?”

“A new kind of android registration scam,” one of the Chloe’s says.

“Right, that’s it. An android scam.” Kamski lifts his chin and tilts his head. “Lieutenant Anderson, do your superiors know you’re abusing your authority in such egregious way?”

“No,” Hank says, clutching Connor. “Nobody knows. You could ruin my life if you wanted to. In more ways than one.”

Kamski hums. “I’m glad we have an understanding, then.”

Then he turns toward Hank. His chin is still high in the air. “So, you’ve brought your android for me to fix. Is that right? Let me tell you you’re not the first person in Detroit to show up at my doorstep with a broken android, begging to have it repaired.”

_I bet I’m the first to make it inside_, Hank thinks, but he doesn’t give voice to the thought. He’s sure Kamski wouldn’t appreciate it.

So Hank just nods. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

“It makes sense to you, perhaps. But it doesn’t make much sense to me. I’m retired. I’m not affiliated with Cyberlife. Haven’t been since I resigned in 2028.”

Hank pauses to weigh his words. “Actually… the fact that you’re not with Cyberlife is one of the reasons I decided to come to you.
Kamski laughs at that, a slow, quiet chuckle. “Because your android has feelings. Did I hear you right?” There’s a sarcastic smirk on his face, which Hank frowns at.

“I know it sounds crazy. But if you actually thought I was crazy, you wouldn’t have stopped your androids from throwing me out.” He squints at Kamski, challenging him as much as he dares to. “You know I’m telling the truth.”

“I don’t know anything about how crazy you are. All I know is that you have an interesting android there.”

“If he’s interesting, will you at least look at him?”

Kamski narrows his eyes at Hank. “And reward you for lying to me? For forcing your way into my home, invading my privacy?”

“I wouldn’t have come here if I wasn’t desperate. I’m sorry, but if you were in my shoes, you would have done the exact same thing.”

“And that’s why you shouldn’t let your android be the only one who knows your bank password,” Kamski says dismissively. Hank takes a breath, preparing to launch into another justification, but Kamski cuts him off before he can. “I’ll look at your android. But you’ll answer every question I ask you and you’ll answer honestly. One lie and I’ll have you ejected and prosecuted for home invasion. Understand?”

Hank nods, relief filling him. “Of course.”

Kamski points to a bench on the other side of the room. “Put your android over there.”

As Hank sets Connor down on the bench, his heart clenches with sorrow as he sees some of the skin has disappeared from Connor’s cheek, his chassis visible like a shining bruise. One of the Chloe’s must have pushed on Connor’s face hard enough to deactivate the patch of skin while they were trying to get rid of Hank. Hank wonders if there are similar silvery bruises hiding under Connor’s clothes.

Kamski leans over Connor. “Curious face. What did you say the model was, again? RK... 600?”

“No, RK800. Is there such thing as a—“

Kamski presses into Connor’s face and the skin retracts further.

“Whoa, whoa!” Hank takes a step forward. “Don’t—!”

“Chloe, take dictation. No identification brand along the left cheek, but that may not be significant considering I didn’t design this model.” He glares at Hank over his shoulder. “You’re the one who wanted me to have a look.”

Hank shuts his mouth and tries to swallow his angry indignation. He has never seen Connor retract his skin voluntarily; it feels disrespectful to watch it be cleared away from him. But is it really so different than cutting the clothes off a car crash victim so the doctors can treat injuries? Hank will never see the clothes he and Cole were wearing when they got in the accident ever again, and if Kamski agrees to help, the next time he sees Connor, he’ll have his skin back.

“Where did you find this android?” Kamski asks.

“Little back-alley resale shop. Independent place, operates outside of Cyberlife’s watch. He was
for sale, but the technician never told me where he got him from. I don’t think he even knew. One of those places you can sell an android without having questions asked.”

“Function?”

“I…” Hank rubs his neck, reluctant to share too much information out of habit. “He functions as a domestic assistant. But that’s not what he was built for. Before I got him, someone tried to… install domestic software over what he originally had, or something. I’m not sure about the exact details.”

“What was the intended function of this model?”

“I don’t know.”

“How inconvenient,” Kamski says dryly. “Appears out of nowhere with an unknown function. Did that not strike you as odd, Lieutenant?”

Hank scowls. “I tried to find out where he came from, what he used to do. There weren’t a lot of clues to go on. No one I talked to has ever even heard of an RK800 before. I only ever picked up one clue, and in the end, it didn’t even go anywhere. Connor has this virtual garden he goes to every time he’s in stasis… there’s a gravestone there for someone named Amanda who died in November of 2031.”

Kamski lifts his head for a moment, then turns his attention back to Conor.

“But when I investigated local deaths and spoke with the families, none of the Amanda’s who died that day seemed to have anything to do with Connor,” Hank says.

“So this isn’t the first time you’ve misused your badge to do business regarding your android. Is that right?”

Hank glowers. He uses his badge to do what’s right, and he refuses to feel sorry about it. “Yeah.”

“How much do you know about androids, Lieutenant?”

“Not much. I’m bad with gadgets. What does that have to do with anything?”

Kamski hums, turning to look at Hank with an amused smile. “To be honest? Nothing at all. I’m just curious about how, out of all of the places this android could be right now, he ended up with someone like you.”

Hank lifts his chin. “I chose him because I could tell, from the very beginning, that he was different. That he was special. I just didn’t know how different at the time.”

Kamski gives a skeptical snort. “I doubt you could tell from the beginning that your android had emotions.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Hank crosses his arms. “If you wake Connor up, you can see for yourself.”

Kamski pauses, then straightens and turns to face Hank. “Chloe, please show the Lieutenant to the door now.”

Both the Chloe’s crowd Hank again, and Hank tries to break away from them unsuccessfully.
“Hey! Don’t you fucking toss me out without telling me you’re gonna fix him!”

Kamski remains silent, staring at Hank while the Chloe’s shove him backwards though the door. As the door slides shut and Kamski disappears from view, each Chloe grabs one of Hanks arms and drag him back to the entryway, Hank shouting and struggling the entire way.

They force him out through the front door and one of the Chloe’s lingers, giving Hank the same blank look she’s been wearing since he arrived.

“Elijah would like you to know that we’ll be in touch, Lieutenant Anderson.”

“In touch? In touch about Connor’s repairs?”

“Have a good day, Lieutenant,” Chloe says, and the door closes with a decisive click of its lock.

Hank stares at it just a few moments longer. He feels adrift. He’d been holding Connor for so long that now that he’s back outside with the cold winter breeze stinging his face, his arms seem empty and hollow.

He slowly turns around and trudges through the snow. Despite the fact that Kamski accepted Connor, Hank feels more trepidation than relief. Connor’s fate is truly out of his hands now; all he can do is try to trust Kamski.

The thought makes him shiver.

***

Hank begins spending longer days in the hospital with Cole.

With Hank around more often, Cole begins to perk up. His test results become better and more consistent, and his nurse even mentions that Cole reports experiencing less pain when Hank is around. Cole is moved from the step-down unit in the PICU to a general pediatric unit, and the fact that his doctors think he’s ready for such a step is a sign that Hank’s presence is probably helping.

So naturally, Hank spends as much time with Cole as possible. He feels bad for Sumo, being left alone all day, but all of this is only temporary. Hopefully on some level, Sumo knows what’s going on and understands why Hank’s barely around anymore.

Cole begins to come out of the strange withdrawn state he’s been in ever since regaining consciousness. Which would be wonderful, except that Cole is still processing everything that’s happened in a way that’s obviously painful for him. He asks a lot of questions, most of which are sad, some of which are angry. He cries frequently. He clings to Hank.

It all sort of reminds Hank of how Cole acted in the immediate aftermath of Joanna’s abandonment.

It’s probably a good thing that Cole is beginning to feel secure enough to begin expressing himself like this. But Hank still wishes the whole thing didn’t have to be so hard.

“Did I do something to deserve this?” Cole asks one day, his voice small.

“No,” Hank says, horrified. “No, of course not.”

“Then why did it happen to me?”

“Sometimes there isn’t a reason. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, and it’s nobody’s
fault. We just got… really unlucky.”

“Is there anything we can do to make sure it happens to someone else next time? Or doesn’t happen at all?”

And what is Hank supposed to say to that? Despite the guilt that Hank carries for not being able to prevent the accident, the rational part of him realizes it probably wasn’t anyone’s fault. Should he tell Cole that sometimes, nothing can be done to prevent cataclysmic events? Or is it better to give Cole a sense of control even if it may eventually lead him to internalize blame the way Hank does or become neurotic about minimizing risk?

Cole’s asking because he’s terrified something like this might happen again. How is Hank supposed to soothe that terror when he’s terrified of the very same thing?

Or later:

“Is the truck driver going to jail for this?”

“I…” Hank racks his brain, trying to remember if anyone mentioned anything about that to him. He’s almost certain no one has. “…I don’t think so.”

“Why?” The word comes out with a short burst of force, Cole staring at the blanket bunched up in his lap.

Hank sits on the edge of the bed, careful to keep his voice neutral. “Do you want him to go to jail?”

“Yes. He hurt us. He should be punished for it.” Cole’s voice is clipped and agitated.

“In a way, he is being punished for it. He knows he hurt us very badly, and he has to live with that. You know how you feel guilty when you hurt someone, even by accident? That feeling is especially bad for him because of how seriously we were hurt, and he’s going to have to live with that feeling forever.”

“He should be punished more!” Cole cries, his head snapping up. His eyes are full of angry tears. “It’s not enough! It’s not fair!”

And Hank can’t say anything at all to that; all he can do is hug Cole, because Hank has always struggled with his own anger and he has no idea what to say or what to do to make it any easier or any better for anyone else.

Christ, I wish Connor was here, he thinks for what feels like the millionth time that day. Connor always seems to know what to do. He always has an answer for every situation. Cole’s health is improving by the day, but Hank is still overwhelmed by the new challenges that come with the process of healing. And maybe if Connor were here, he’d still feel that way, but at least he wouldn’t be alone. At least he and Connor would be able to support each other.

A week goes by without word from Kamski. Hank checks his phone about a hundred times a day to make sure he hasn’t missed any messages, and yeah, checking his phone that often the very day after he left Connor there probably isn’t very smart, but Kamski’s supposed to be a super genius. Hank doesn’t know how fast super geniuses work.

Just when Hank’s starting to get worried that maybe not even the Elijah Kamski can fix Connor, he notices a new voicemail. He’s sure his phone never rang once that day.

“Hello, Lieutenant Anderson.” Hank recognizes Chloe’s voice. “Elijah would like to invite you
back to his villa tomorrow at one p.m. Please arrive unaccompanied. A light lunch will be served.”

Suddenly, tomorrow can’t arrive soon enough. Hank spends the rest of the day filled with nervous energy. He’s reasonably certain Kamski has good news for him, but what if he doesn’t? Kamski seems to enjoy being as opaque as possible; Hank doesn’t think Kamski would just come out and say, ‘I can’t fix your shit, sorry,’ if he ran into trouble.

That night, unable to sleep, Hank takes Sumo on a long walk as an apology for neglecting him for so long. Sumo avoids the shoveled sidewalks and bounds through piles of snow under the moonlight. Hank just soaks up how quiet and serene the neighborhood is at night and thinks about how by this time tomorrow, he’ll either have Connor back, or he’ll be grieving his loss for good. By the time they get back, Hank is so cold and exhausted that he’s finally able to fall into a dreamless sleep for a few hours.

The next day, Hank arrives at Kamski’s villa unaccompanied, just as instructed. When he rings the doorbell, Chloe appears mere seconds later.

“Hello, Lieutenant Anderson. You’re seven minutes early.”

“Yeah, well. I’m just really looking forward to that free lunch.”

Chloe beckons him in. He almost expects her to make him wait again, but this time, she leads him to one of the other doors. “Please follow me.”

Hank clenches and unclenches his fists as Chloe leads him further into the villa. He can hear his heart pounding in his ears. A door slides open in front of them.

Kamski is sitting on the floor behind a low table which has two places set. A plate of springs rolls is set out, and Kamski appears to have already begun eating.

Connor isn’t anywhere to be seen, and Hank’s stomach churns.

“Mr. Anderson!” Kamski says, his voice oddly accusatory despite the smile on his face. “Come sit down. You and I have a lot to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

yakichou did a few lovely pieces of fanart, so please check out this heartwarming art of Connor breathalyzing Hank in Chapter 9 and follow that with this heartbreaking piece of a Hank unwrapping Connor from the tarp from Chapter 10!

Port-wind-sea did a beautiful piece of Connor laid out on the couch from Chapter 10, please check it out!

Hank: Did u just quote The Matrix at me.
Kamski: what
Hank: You were calling me Lieutenant a week ago, and now suddenly I'm Mister Anderson? You realize I was a teenager when that movie came out, I have lived through hell and come out the other side
Kamski: jesus
so i guess it's safe to slap that "Cole Lives" tag up there now, huh? i had my fun teasing you guys, but now the party's over and we all have to live with the consequences of my choices. Even Cole.

but not connor

Also I remembered I have a twitter account! Come follow me on twitter @CeilingKiwi if you're interested in hearing me talk about this fic (and also probably pokemon and maybe musicals at some point)
“Mr. Anderson!” Kamski says, his voice oddly accusatory despite the smile on his face. “Come sit down. You and I have a lot to discuss.”

There’s a cushion in front of the low table, so that’s where Hank sits. He’s unsure how he should arrange his legs, but Kamski just seems to be lounging, so Hank tucks up a single knee, hoping he doesn’t look as anxious as he feels.

“Please, help yourself. Chloe is a fantastic chef.”

The spring rolls on the platter are wrapped in something so thin, they’re translucent. Hank can see large, whole shrimp curled up inside of them. Hank takes one, wondering if all androids are health nuts or if if Kamski exerts more control over his personal menu than Hank does.

“No one’s even told me whether you managed to fix him or not yet,” Hank says, giving Kamski a guarded look. He definitely doesn’t like these theatrics. “Is Connor okay?”

“There’ll be time for that later, Lieutenant. For now, I just want to have a talk with you.”

“No one’s even told me whether you managed to fix him or not yet,” Hank says, giving Kamski a guarded look. “Is Connor okay?”

“Just one word, yes or no,” Hank says, beginning to get frustrated. “What’s so hard about telling me whether Connor’s okay or not?”

Kamski pauses, giving Hank a curious look. He raises a single eyebrow. “If I ask you to leave, you won’t be coming back.”

A chill comes over Hank. There’s a feeling like a lead weight in the pit of his stomach.

Kamski smiles. “It’s just a conversation. You’ll see what’s become of Connor when we’re through with our meal. There’s no need to rush things. Just relax and enjoy the pleasure of my company. I know people who’d give an arm and a leg for the opportunity.”

Hank’s eyes snap to Kamski’s face.

Kamski looks utterly nonchalant. He takes another bite of his spring roll. “Mmm. Lieutenant, is the food not to your taste?”

“Not hungry,” Hank manages.

“Suit yourself.” Kamski lifts a cup and takes a sip. When he’s finished, he looks Hank in the eye,
smiling a controlled smile. “Now, then. Have you ever heard of Galatea?”

“No. Is that a person?”

A snort of laughter from Kamski. “Different people would give different answers to that question. What about Pygmalion? Have you ever heard of him?”

“No.”

“Well. Allow me to bring you up to speed on your Greek mythology.” Kamski looks off to the side as though he’s narrating something he’s watching. “Pygmalion was the greatest artist who ever lived. One day, he made a sculpture out of pure ivory. A woman, beautiful and flawless in every way. More beautiful than any real woman could ever hope to be. It was said that any man who viewed Pygmalion’s sculpture would fall hopelessly in love with it.”

Kamski smirks. “And that included Pygmalion himself. The goddess Aphrodite was so touched by this artist who fell in love with his creation that she gave the statue a life of her own. She stepped down from her pedestal and was named Galatea. And she fell in love with Pygmalion in turn, and the two of them were wed.”

Hank stares. He feels very aware of the rise and fall of his chest.

“So what I want to ask you,” Kamski says, “is what do you think came after that?”

“What do you suppose happened to the artist and his sculpture after that? That’s where the myth ends, but clearly there’s more to the story than that. Life doesn’t just stop after marriage, as I’m sure you know.” Kamski gestures vaguely. “Was Galatea flawless in every single way and they never fought? Did her husband come to resent her for how cold and hard her ivory skin was? Did she grow bored with being stuck with a single specimen of humanity? I want to hear your thoughts.”

Kamski raises his brows, curiosity in his eyes. “Did Pygmalion grow old and die, leaving Galatea all alone, a strange and solitary creature in a world that wasn’t meant for her? Did she mourn him so bitterly that she wished she could have remained a statue for all time?”

“Fuck you.” Hank’s venomous whisper grows into a snarl. “None of this is any of your fucking business.”

“On the contrary. It’s exactly my business.” He puts his chin in his hand. “You must understand how intrigued I am by the implications.”

“He’s not a fucking sideshow for you to gawk at!”

Kamski cocks his head thoughtfully. “No, you’re right. Much more like a car crash. The sort of accidental, twisted spectacle you can’t help but slow down to stare at.”

Hank clenches his fists.

“Or maybe,” Kamski says, “more like an experiment, and the traits that make your android so interesting aren’t so accidental after all.”

Hank looks up, surprised. “What? You think someone… created him to come to life? Or—or messed with his software to make him—“
“Uh-uh-uh,” Kamski chides, wagging a finger. “This is a conversation. A mutual exchange of ideas and information. Why should I go answering any of your questions when you won’t answer mine?”

“Fine, Hank spits. “Your goddamn question about—“

“About Galatea And Pygmalion. The sort of life you think they might have had after they were married.”

“You know what I think?” Hank sets his jaw. “I don’t think for a goddamn minute that Galatea was actually as perfect as she looked or that Pygmalion was as talented as he seemed. I think they were both flawed people trying to make an impossible situation work. And they had the sorts of problems that other people would never have encountered in a million years, and it was hard. And maybe those problems were so fucking hard that they couldn’t make it work and they wished no one had ever called Galatea perfect or called Pygmalion the greatest anything who ever lived.”

Hank glares Kamski down when he finishes speaking. Kamski just takes a drink from his cup with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Spoken like a true divorcee,” Kamski says.

“Fuck you,” Hank growls. “You have no fucking right looking up information about me.”

“Please. Don’t be so dramatic. I didn’t have to hire a private investigator, Lieutenant, you’re a public figure. Anyone who knows how to use google could learn that about you.”

Hank just glares at him.

“Although,” Kamski says, a smile crossing his face, “I feel the need to point out that you qualified your last statement about Galatea and Pygmalion just a bit. You said that ‘maybe’ they couldn’t make it work.” Kamski punctuates his thoughts with another sip. “…which means you think there could be a chance that they did.”

Hank scowls to hide how his face is heating up. “I think it’s a dumb fucking metaphor. You’re the one who invented the damn things. Wouldn’t that make you Pygmalion?”

“I prefer to think of myself as an Aphrodite. Even if I’m not your Aphrodite.”

Before Hank can question what Kamski means by that, Kamski sits up, suddenly appearing to be gravely serious. “The RK series is a series of prototypes. I say series even though a week ago, I had only been aware of a single RK android in existence.”

“Prototypes?” Hank blinks. “Prototypes of what?”

“The RK200, an android I designed and personally crafted, was made to be a caretaker. I created it for a friend of mine who lost the use of his legs. Ordinary androids can be so impersonal, you see, so I integrated experimental features in the RK200 that you still won’t find in commercial caretaker models, and likely never will.”

“Experimental features?”

“Not emotions, if that’s what you’re thinking. Nothing like the hopes and desires your Connor has. The RK200 is special, but not quite that special. No, RK200 is simply intelligent in the ways androids tend not to be. It keeps track of social patterns and is capable of learning on a scale that no other android can match. It won’t ever just stand in a corner, idly waiting for orders. It constantly interacts and engages with its environment.” Kamski pauses, giving Hank a look. “That may sound
familiar to you.”

Hank nods absently. “So... So Connor’s a prototype caretaker?”

“No. A prototype, but not a caretaker.” Kamski takes another bite of his food. “Cyberlife developed Connor after I resigned. I wasn’t even aware that they were continuing the RK line into a series of prototypes. They recycled much of my work on RK200 to create Connor, but what they created is a very different machine.”

“So what is he?”

Kamski gives Hank a cool smile. “Oh, there’s no need for me to tell you.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” For some reason, the look Kamski is giving him makes Hank nervous.

Kamski’s smile has a cruel tilt to it. “Do you know what I see when I look at you, Lieutenant Anderson? I see a hopeless romantic who desperately wishes he wasn’t one.”

Hank grits his teeth and sets his hands on the table. He stares Kamski down, refusing to break eye contact.

“You were the child who ran around beating up the bullies who picked on smaller kids, weren’t you? Always crashing along headfirst, controlled by your emotions while your common sense steps aside. You fall in love hard and often, and depending on how smart you are, you either married too early or too late in life. You’re a cynic who’s heard the beckoning call of idealism all your life, and you probably yearn for the sort of hard heart that men in your profession are famous for. I bet you’d give anything not to feel as intensely as you do, because it all just hurts so bad, doesn’t it?”

Hank’s fingers itch with the desire to knock that evil smile off Kamski’s face. He forces himself to stay still; forces himself to pretend Kamski is a perp in an interrogation who’s trying to rile him up. This is such a dramatic departure from what they were just discussing that Hank knows Kamski has to be doing this just to get under his skin.

“What’s your numbing agent of choice, Lieutenant? Alcohol? Red Ice? It would be a perfect sort of irony for an officer decorated for his work on the Red Ice taskforce to be nursing a secret appetite for the drug. Whichever it is, I imagine you’re definitely on the road to becoming a full-blown addict, if you aren’t one already.”

“The fuck does this have to do with anything?” Hank mutters.

“You’ve been very angry throughout our conversation.”

“Because you keep fucking with me.”

“No, it’s because anger is something you’re allowed to feel. Why is that, Lieutenant? Don’t you know how destructive anger is?”

Hank glowers at Kamski. “If you have a point, say it already.”

Kamski folds his hands. “You’ve made life suddenly very interesting for me, Lieutenant, do you know that? I don’t think you’re quite aware of the full scope of the impact of the choices you make.”
“The full scope?”

Kamski stands and turns away from the table, folding his hands behind his back. “Connor is a very unique android. And he’ll always be a very unique android, regardless of what the future holds for all of us. I want you to keep that in mind, Lieutenant.”

“Regardless of what the future…?” Hank furrows his brow. “What the hell are you trying to say?”

Kamski continues as though Hank hasn’t spoken. “I’m saying this because it’s clear to me that you’re a very passionate man. There’s a place in the world for men like you, and I certainly hope you remember that. In the future, Lieutenant…”

Kamski looks over his shoulder at Hank. “Be careful of the choices you make.”

Then Kamski motions with his hand. “Chloe, you can clean everything up. I think we’re done with lunch. Aren’t we, Lieutenant?”

Two Chloe’s suddenly appear from behind Hank, clearing the table with the sort of swift efficiency that he imagines Connor would probably dream about, if he could dream. It only takes seconds for the table to be made bare.

“Now then, Lieutenant. Let me show you what I’ve been able to accomplish with your android since you left Connor in my care.” Kamski looks toward a door on the right side of the room, and it slides open.

Connor steps through the door, ushered in by a third Chloe who has a hand on his shoulder.

“Connor!” Hank staggers to his feet, the stab of joy that pierces through him suddenly undercut as he gets a good look at Connor’s face—

—it’s as blank as Hank has ever seen it before, his LED spinning a too-calm blue.

“Hello,” Connor says. “My name is Connor. I’m the android—”

Whatever Connor says after that is lost to Hank as he slams Kamski against the nearest wall. “You fucking wiped his memory!?” Kamski’s shirt is bunched up in his fists and he’s vaguely aware that Kamski is hanging off the ground. “Put him back! I swear to Christ, you put him back right now, you rat bastard, or I’ll—”

The next thing Hank knows, he’s on the ground, two Chloe’s holding him down while his ears ring and his vision swims.

The third Chloe helps Kamski to his feet

“What did you fucking do to him?!” Hank cries, fighting against the Chloe’s despite the way the room is spinning. “You… you fucking…!”

Kamski gingerly touches the side of his neck, coughing slightly. His expression is so severe it looks like it could cut glass. “I didn’t reset him,” he hisses, his voice high with agitation. “He’s still in there.”

“Wh… what?”

“Memories, personality, it’s all still in there. I didn’t erase anything.” Kamski’s voice slowly returns to its usual low timbre. His hair is no longer laying flat; between that and the way he’s
glaring at Hank, he looks rather like a puffed-up, angry cat. “I didn’t even fiddle that much with the butchered software, even though I’m beginning to think I should have.” He tries and fails to smooth down his hair.

Hank turns his head to look at Connor. Connor is still standing in the doorway, having watched Hank attack Kamski with his hands neatly folded. He still has a blank, impassive expression on his face, and although he appears to be watching Hank and not Kamski, he’s looking at him as though Hank is no more interesting to him than a spot on the wall.

“C-Connor…”

“Can I help you with something?” Connor barely even moves.

The artificial modulation in Connor’s voice rubs Hank raw. He swivels his head to look at Kamski. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing permanent,” Kamski says curtly. “Think of it as a factory mode. I simply heavily limited the number of layers in the neural network and interrupted most of the memory processes.”

“Why? Why the fuck would you do something like that?”

“Because your android’s last memory is of an event that any sentient being would likely find upsetting, and I didn’t want to have to deal with that upon waking up. How else was I supposed to ensure functionality?” Kamski gives Hank a look that’s halfway between unimpressed and curious. “Have you calmed down?”

Without waiting for an answer, one of the Chloe’s holding Hank down lets go of him while the other hauls him bodily to his feet. Hank steadies himself against her immovable hand, glaring at Kamski. “Go fuck yourself. If you’d given me some fucking warning instead of playing some sort of twisted mind game, or just left him unconscious—”

“Please. This way, it will be able to walk itself out to your car.”

It occurs to Hank that Kamski is fucking insane.

Kamski stretches his arms behind his back and cracks his neck. “That was a very interesting response. An interesting choice, you could say. Completely genuine and reactionary. You had no time to think it through; no chance to consider how you wanted to come across.”

“Wanted to come across?”

Kamski raises his brows. “You really care about the android.”

Hank stiffens. “You thought I might be acting? Lying?”

“You wouldn’t have been the first person ever to lie about being in love.” And while Hank stiffens even further, Kamski approaches Connor and tries to brush the stray lock of hair back into place. “Yes, I think it’ll be very interesting to see what the future has in store for you.”

Kamski glances at Hank, appearing to take no notice of the scowl Hank is wearing. “Discharge instructions. Continue to stay away from Cyberlife; whatever instincts are responsible for keeping you away from them are probably accurate. When you want him to come back to himself, say his name and command him to ‘wake up’.”

Hank almost doesn’t want to come near Connor. The look on his face is so chilling that Hank’s
half-tempted to use that command right now. The only thing stopping him is the knowledge that Connor is going to be upset when he wakes up, and Hank thinks he deserves to be safe and comfortable at home when that happens.

“Connor,” Hank says, his voice nearly a croak. “Follow me.”

Connor moves past Kamski to stand next to Hank. He doesn’t say anything and doesn’t move beyond that, not even to unfold his hands or to cock his head. Hank can’t even tell if Connor is breathing at the moment. He has to be breathing, right? Androids might not need air the same way that humans do, but it’s what cools their systems. Hank is struck with the sudden, crazy thought that maybe androids can cycle air without breathing, and the way their chests expand and contract is actually just so that humans don’t get too creeped out by them. The guy with the patent on the system is standing not four feet away; Hank could ask him how it works if he really wanted to. Except that Hank doesn’t really want to, he just wants to go home and wake Connor up.

The door slides open as Hank begins to head out, but before he can, Kamski says with his voice raised as though he’s forgotten something urgent, “By the way, I’d be interested in seeing what your Connor is like when it’s operating within normal limits. If you’d ever like to bring it by, perhaps we could arrange some sort of trade.”

“You can’t have him,” Hank says flatly.

“I don’t want him. I meant perhaps we could trade favors.” Kamski waves a hand. “You have Chloe’s number.”

At the sound of her name, one of the Chloe’s begins to lead Hank and Connor out. “This way, please.”

And before too long, Hank and Connor are standing outside in the snow.

Hank notices for the first time that Connor’s feet are bare. He opens his mouth to make a snide comment about how Kamski overlooked something as crucial as footwear when it’s winter in Detroit, but then Hank remembers that androids don’t feel the cold.

He runs a hand down his face, shuddering. He has no idea why this is getting to him. He has Connor back, he should be happy. But instead, he’s thrown by how Connor barely seems to be breathing and can stand barefoot in the snow and how someone can apparently give him a temporary lobotomy just by flipping some 1’s and 0’s. Hank’s just struck by the knowledge that Connor really isn’t human, and he’ll never be human no matter how much he might look like it and act like it, and Christ, they’re so different from one another.

“Connor,” he says, pulling Connor’s face into his hands. Connor’s so warm that it seems wrong when his eyes are just as flat as when he was dead. “Connor, can any part of you hear me in there?”

“I can hear you,” Connor says, but it’s in that same carefully modulated voice, and Hank honestly has no idea if it’s Connor reaching out from wherever he’s trapped inside himself, or if this stunted system just thinks Hank is asking a literal question.

Hank leads Connor to the car by the wrist and opens the door for him. He doesn’t think he can bear to give any more commands before he’s ready to bring him back.

During the drive home, Hank is very careful to keep his eyes on the road. Connor makes this easy by staying absolutely still.

Kamski never explained even half the things he hinted at. Hank remembers Kamski dancing
around the subject of the person who messed with Connor’s software—hinting that he thinks whoever did it meant for Connor to become sentient. And the conversation never returned to that subject, but once Hank remembers it, he can’t stop thinking about it.

If Connor was designed to develop feelings, it must have been for a specific reason. What could that reason be? And why would they leave him abandoned in a second-hand android shop for some random nobody to buy up?

Hank got the sense that Kamski doesn’t care about Hank or Connor personally. He only cares about how interesting they are to him. How interesting they’ll continue to be in the future.

Something has to be coming, and Kamski knows it. But what could it be?

When they walk in the front door, Sumo bum-rushes them, lifting both paws off the ground in aborted jumps of excitement (of course he never jumps; Connor has him trained too well for that). He whines and pushes at Connor, begging for pets, but Connor doesn’t react. When it becomes clear that Sumo isn’t going to leave Connor alone, Hank puts him behind a baby gate in the hallway so he can do what he has to do without needing to constantly push Sumo away.

He sits Connor down on the couch, and he refuses to think about how long Connor spent sprawled across this couch while Hank tried to bring him back.

He kneels on the floor in front of Connor. Connor looks down at him.

He’s still as beautiful as ever, his face serene and untroubled. Blank. Once, when he and his then-wife were high and naked and laying in each other’s arms, Joanna confided in Hank that she used to see angels when she was a teenager. Hank doesn’t believe in angels himself, but he supposes that if they exist, they must look the way Connor looks now, as though they’re utterly unconcerned with humanity and its affairs. After all, angels would have to be above even human virtue for them to tolerate a world in which little children get maimed in car accidents.

“Connor, wake up,” Hank says.

He expects some sort of immediate reaction, but instead, Connor blinks slowly, his LED turning yellow and beginning to spin. After a moment, Connor’s eyes close, and Hank can see his eyes darting beneath his lids as though he’s in REM sleep.

“Connor…?”

Connor’s head dips slightly, but he doesn’t otherwise react.

“Connor?” Hank grasps Connor’s arms.

Connor slides off the couch, nearly into Hank’s lap, and his arms go around Hank, clutching at him, and he’s there.

“Christ, Connor—” Hank tries to hug Connor as tightly as he can, but Connor is stronger and he pushes Hank away to look him in the eyes. He looks disoriented, like he’s struggling to tell which way is up.

“Hank—Hank, my system time—the accident… Cole? Where’s Cole?”

“Cole’s alive,” Hank says, and it feels like he’s choking on the words. “He’s alive, he’s still in the hospital, God, Connor, you saved him—”
Connor makes a noise that might be an attempt to say Hank’s name, and then Connor’s arms are around him, his face buried in the side of Hank’s neck, holding onto Hank somehow tightly and delicately at the same time.

Hank draws Connor as close as he can against him, cradling his head and threading his fingers through his hair. “Connor. Oh, God, Connor.”

There’s something hot and wet leaking against Hank’s neck, and for one awful moment’s Hank’s frozen with the fear that some crucial biocomponent is already broken again and is dripping thirium down the both of them, but then he realizes that Connor is crying.

Connor doesn’t cry the way a human would, sobbing or shaking with his chest hitching. His breathing remains even (although he’s taking deep breaths, as though he’s trying to center himself) and he’s still, only moving with the natural movements of Hank’s body. He’s solid and warm in Hank’s arms; his body unyielding but, mercifully, no longer stiff the way he was when he was a corpse. After weeks of carrying Connor in his arms as a cold, stiff weight, the way his body molds against Hank’s and he way his warmth seeps into Hank is like a form of absolution.

“I was so afraid I was going to lose him,” Connor says softly. “More afraid than ever before. I wanted it to be me instead.”

“I know,” Hank says, running his hand through Connor’s hair. “I wanted it to be me, too.”

They don’t say anything else. They just hold each other until Connor eventually stops leaking tears against Hank’s neck. By then Sumo has stopped whining and started howling hysterically, and Connor carefully rises to let him out from behind the gate.

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Hank waits until Connor has dried his face and changed into his most comfortable clothes to tell him about the amputations.

Hank cries just a little, but he doesn’t let it interrupt him. He just wipes at his eyes and finishes telling Connor what needs to be said. Connor doesn’t cry. His mouth just sets in a thin, grim line, and he says, “I see. He’s going to need us,” and then, softer, “I’ve been away for so long,” and Hank thinks he loves him at that moment more than ever before.

But then a terrible thought occurs to Hank. While Connor communicates with Hank’s health insurance provider, his LED blinking yellow while he stares at nothing and receives information about wheelchairs, prosthetics, and their coverage for other such accommodations (too early; Cole’s discharge is still in the indeterminable future, but Hank supposes maybe Connor needs to know this sort of information), Hank sneaks off to the other side of the house to make a phone call.

“Hey, listen, do you allow, uh, non-medical androids in the hospital?” Hank asks.

A pause. Hank lowers his voice. “Um, I mean, like, androids owned by patients and their families. Can they be brought from home to visit patients? ‘Cause my son is really attached to our android, he’s gonna be an inpatient for a while still, and I thought…”

Hank furrows his brow as he’s answered. “…Uh huh. Yeah. I kinda figured. Thanks anyway.”

When he hangs up the phone, he lets out a hissing breath through his teeth, running his hands through his hair.

He heads out to the other side of the house, already sagging from the thought of having to deliver such news. “Connor, I just got off the phone with—”
“I heard.” Connor simply says. His LED is back to blue.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Hank’s voice breaks on the last word. He works his jaw for a moment, unable to find the words to express the despair, outrage, and indignity he’s feeling on Connor’s behalf. Connor’s been alive again for barely half an hour, and it just isn’t fair that android restrictions are already shitting all over them in the worst possible way. It is unconscionable that Connor should be forbidden from visiting Cole in the hospital.

Hank runs his hands down his face. “Connor, I swear to God, we’ll figure out some way to get you in there. Today. I’ll fucking get down on my knees and beg if I have to, I’ll—”

“I have an idea,” Connor says, far too calmly, sweeping past Hank and disappearing down the hallway. When Hank peeks after him, he sees Connor close the bathroom door behind himself.

As the latch of the door clicks shut, Hank’s heart clutches. He’s just fine down the hall, Hank yells at himself in his head. He isn’t fucking gone, so shut the fuck up and calm down.

When Connor emerges less than a minute later, all the anxiety goes out of Hank. Connor goes to stand right in front of Him, brows furrowed. “Well? Do you think this will work?”

“Do I think…?” Hank stares at Connor, not immediately sure what he did to himself while he was in the bathroom. Something’s different, but Hank doesn’t realize what it is until his eyes flicker to Connor’s temple to gauge his mood and he has to squint before he realizes that Connor’s LED is gone.

“Oh, Jesus,” Hank whispers. “Connor, you—”

Connor spins his LED like a coin between his fingers, watching it absentley.

“That things comes off? You could have removed it this entire fucking time?”

“Most of me is removable.” Connor says, catching his LED and tucking it in his pocket. “This wasn’t actually something I seriously considered before now.”

Hank just stares. He has the strange urge to laugh, and he probably would if the situation wasn’t so serious.

“I’m going to put it back in when we get home,” Connor says, giving Hank a grave look. “Going around pretending to be human is a risk. Most of our neighbors know me, and although I doubt total strangers who’ve seen me out in public before would recognize me, all it would take is a single person with an excellent memory for faces.”

“If anything like that ever happens, I’ll take the fall. I’ll say I put you up to it.”

“I know you would,” Connor says softly. “But that wouldn’t help me if they already observed me exhibiting behavior that’s supposed to be impossible for androids.”

Connor’s face is drawn with something like worry—and Hank wonders if despite how badly Connor must want to see Cole, if part of him still thinks he’s doing something wrong by violating android laws.

“We’ll be careful,” Hank says. “No unnecessary risks. No one will ever know.”

Despite how soothing Hank tries to make his words, Hank’s fingers are itching with excitement. Looking at Connor like this, it just feels right. It feels good. People will finally see him for who he
is. Maybe only on the most superficial level, as passing strangers in the lobby of a hospital, but they aren’t going to see that godforsaken blue armband and blue triangle. They’re going to see Connor.

Hank makes Connor borrow one of his winter coats to leave the house, since the coat Hank bought on the day of the accident was lost to God knows where. It’s just a touch too wide around the shoulders for him, and Hank’s heart skips a beat when Connor pulls the collar more snugly around his neck.

When they arrive at the hospital, Connor stays close to Hank, self-conscious even as he keeps his face impassive.

“You know, you’d make a great actor,” Hank mutters as they navigate through the hallways. “I don’t know how you always manage to look so composed.”

“I would not make a great actor, I have no idea what I’m doing.” Connor’s voice is equally quiet. “Returning to default isn’t a talent.”

“It is for most people. You see how hard it is for me to calm down when I’m worked up.” Hank smirks. “Okay, maybe acting isn’t for you, but you’d be a great gambler. You got the best damn poker face I’ve ever seen.”

A tiny smile from Connor. “As if you know anything about gambling. That’s why those bookies like you so much.”

“Ouch.”

The pediatric unit Cole is in is a locked unit. All visitors have to check in with the secretary in order to prevent just anybody from walking into a ward full of children.

Hank approaches the desk and pulls out his driver’s license.

The secretary just smiles at him; she’s seen him often enough that she doesn’t even glance at his ID. “Hi, Mr. Anderson. Who’s your visitor?”

“A friend,” Hank says while Connor looks away.

Thankfully, she doesn’t ask for any ID from Connor. Being with Hank must be enough to get him inside, for the secretary just says, “Okay, go ahead,” and buzzes the door open for them.

They pass a janitorial android refilling a wall-mounted bottle of hand sanitizer, and Connor’s face goes blank as they do. Hank realizes that Connor’s probably afraid the android will be able to sense what Connor is and will rat them out, and seeing that dull expression on Connor’s face again so soon after that awful trick Kamski pulled on him makes something in Hank’s chest seize.

The android doesn’t even glance at them as they pass.

When they reach Cole’s room, Hank stops Connor outside the door and whispers, “Wait here. I need to warn Cole to make sure he doesn’t say anything to give you away.”

Connor just nods and glances anxiously at the door to Cole’s room while Hank heads in.

Cole is alone in his room. It looks like he’s dozing, but as Hank draws close, his eyes open, and a sad, brief smile flickers across his face. “Hi, Dad. You’re kinda late today. I was worried.”
“I’m sorry, Cole,” Hank says, sitting on the edge of his son’s bed and leaning in. He lowers his voice to a whisper. “But you’re going to see I have a very good reason for being late. Connor’s all better.”

Cole blinks, the light coming back into his eyes. “He is?”

“Yes. But you have to be very careful not to give away that he’s an android, okay? Androids aren’t allowed to visit, so we’d both be in trouble if anyone found out. Don’t say anything about Connor being an android, understand?”

Cole nods, beginning to look anxious. “He’s here, Dad? Really?”

Hank smiles. He looks over his shoulder and calls softly, “Connor.”

Connor rounds the doorway, and as he sees Cole, a pained smile stretches his face as he walks across the room.

“Connor!” Cole cries, his face crumpling. He pushes himself up as much as he can, and Connor folds Cole into his arms.

Cole’s trembling. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.” Connor says into Cole’s hair. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come sooner. It took a while to me to get better. Oh, but you’re so strong, Cole. You’ve been awake so much longer than I have, I really have no excuse.”

“Just don’t leave again,” Cole begs. “Don’t leave me alone again.”

“Never,” Connor says. “I’ll come every day until you’re discharged.”

Connor literally doesn’t leave Cole’s side the entire time they’re there. He sits on the bed, an arm wrapped around Cole to support him while they talk. Hank, who has seen Cole every day since he initially woke up after the accident, thinks this is the happiest he’s seen Cole in a long while.

“You know, I was thinking,” Hank says, “when you’re outta here, we should go on a vacation. Go somewhere fun.”

Cole looks up. “Vacation?”

“Yes. I was thinking I’d look up the best place to see dolphins in the wild. And then we’d spend a week or so, riding boats to look at the dolphins.” *If you can still do that and they’re not extinct like most the whales,* Hank thinks but doesn’t say. “Go to the beach. Eat nothing but pretzels and cotton candy.”

The idea makes Cole smile. “That sounds like fun.”

“All three of us,” Hank says. “You, me, and Connor.”

“Can Sumo come, too?”

Hank shrugs. “If we can find a rental that’ll let a St. Bernard shed all over the place, why not?”

Hank is half-afraid that Cole will ask about the logistics of visiting a beach when he’s in a wheelchair, or while he’s still getting used to prosthetics, but it must not occur to Cole.

As a matter of fact, they spend hardly any time talking about the accident or its aftermath. With
Connor there, Cole seems to be able to really believe that things will eventually go back to normal. He talks about how he wants to go back to school, and about the books Hank’s been reading to him in Connor’s absence. He talks about how he misses his computer and the programming lessons and games he has installed on it.

The only time at all the conversation turns to the accident happens when Cole zones out for a bit, a distant look in his eyes. Hank thinks that Cole might just be getting tired, but then Cole turns his head slightly towards Connor and says, “Connor… did anything happen to you that couldn’t be fixed?”

Connor runs his fingers through Cole’s hair. He says softly, “Not in the way that you’re asking. But yes.”

Hank does a double-take. Connor looks perfectly fine. Did Kamski not manage to fix everything?

“There are a lot of different ways a person can be hurt,” Connor says. “And there are varying degrees to which a person can be hurt. You might say that being called a hurtful name is about the same as getting a bump on the head, wouldn’t you? It’s difficult to quantify pain.” He glances at the door to make sure no one is about to walk in and he says, much more quietly, “I don’t know what physical pain feels like, after all.

“What happened to you is much worse than just a bump on the head.” Connor says, fingers combing through Cole’s short hair. “And the way I was hurt… you can’t tell from looking at me, because it isn’t the sort of hurt you can see. But it’s still there. And I was hurt so badly that I don’t think it’ll ever go away entirely. Like the hurt of being called a bad name, but so extreme that it sticks with me forever.”

Cole lowers his eyes.

“I know that isn’t what you were asking,” Connor says. “I didn’t lose anything the same way you did. It isn’t fair that any of this happened to any of us, and the worst of it is that you were the one who lost your arm and your leg. But your dad and I, we’re in this with you. You’re not alone.”

Connor pulls Cole’s face against him. “Things will go back to normal. I promise. It’ll be different, but most of it will still be the same. You’ll go home and sleep in your own bed. You’ll see Sumo again.”

Hank adds, “And we’ll take that vacation.”

“Yes. And we’ll take that vacation.”

Cole doesn’t quite perk up after that, but he doesn’t stay in a depression, either. When his dinner arrives (macaroni and cheese with a side of steamed peas and a bread roll) he giggles when Connor dumps his peas into his macaroni for him.

“You can’t leave it alone even when it’s not your job to cook,” Cole says, smiling.

“I know you won’t eat the peas if I don’t.”

“That’s not my fault. They don’t bother making them taste good like you do.”

“I understand,” Connor says affectionately, “but you need the vitamin C. It’s good for a healing body. You might even be able to come home sooner if you keep eating your vegetables.”

With that encouragement, Cole manages to finish his whole plate. Sleepy from his big meal, he
starts nodding off while Hank’s reading from the book they’ve been slowly working through. Connor and Hank rouse him just long enough to promise him they’ll both be back tomorrow.

Hank gives him a kiss goodnight, then Connor does. He’s asleep by the time they head out.

In the parking garage, Hank watches Connor as he gets into the car. There’s a moment where Connor reaches for the handle of the car door, and his hand jitters, as though a few small pistons are misfiring. He doesn’t hesitate getting into the car, but he sits ram-rod straight, the way he always does when he’s trying to be as much of an android as possible.

On the drive home, Connor barely moves.

When he’s unable to stand it any longer, Hank turns his head and says, “Connor—”

“Please keep your eyes on the road, Hank,” Connor snaps.

Hank immediately turns back to the road.

Connor winces, but doesn’t lower his gaze. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I don’t blame you for what happened, I honestly, truly don’t. I just…”

“I know,” Hank says softly. “I get it. We don’t have to talk about it now. We can talk when we get home.”

Connor relaxes just a touch. Hank drives very carefully.

Once they’re safely home and Hank has closed the front door behind them, he says, “You knew I didn’t have a spinal injury, didn’t you?”

Connor’s brows rise. “…I’m surprised you remember that. It’s common for trauma victims to have some amount of memory loss surrounding the traumatic incident.”

“I remember it. Hanging there in the front seat, you telling me not to move because you were busy giving first aid to Cole, and you didn’t know if I might have a spinal injury. ‘Whatever you do, don’t turn your head,’ that’s what you said.” Hank gives Connor an even look and says, “You were lying. It probably took you a millisecond to scan me and make sure I wasn’t hurt that badly. You just didn’t want me to see Cole.”

A strange shudder goes through Connor. “No parent should have to see their child in such an awful state.”

Hank frowns. “Connor, you’ve been raising Cole since he was two. I don’t believe for a second that you love Cole any less than I do.”

The furrows in Connor’s brow deepen.

“Jesus,” Hank says. “You archive your memories, right? You have perfect recall.”

“I already placed restrictions on the most upsetting segments,” Connor says, his voice flat. “To prevent my automatic recall function from loading them without warning.”

“Without warning? So, what, your system throws up a little red sign that goes, whoops, heads-up, gonna force you to relive the worst fucking moment of your life before it makes you remember—”

Hank cuts himself off when Connor tightens his jaw. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”
“It’s alright,” Connor says, then winces. “Actually, no, nothing about any of this is alright. But it’s not as though I have any reason to complain when Cole has lost two of his limbs and you blame yourself for everything.”

Hank’s heart jumps into his throat. “I don’t fucking blame myself,” he says, hoping his scowl is severe enough to fool Connor.

Connor frowns at him. “Don’t lie to me. I saw your reaction when I snapped at you to watch the road. You weren’t shocked or surprised. You immediately complied, as if you thought I was right to yell at you.”

Hank grimaces, running a hand down his face.

A plaintive note enters Connor’s voice. “Hank, the moment my systems detected the threat of the truck that was careening towards us, my preconstruction software calculated every possible outcome. There was no way you could have done anything to prevent what happened.”

“I should have done something.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“You died,” Hank says, his voice hard. “And Cole nearly died too. I’m the only one who was able to walk away; of course it was my fucking fault.”

Connor just gives him a sad look. “See? This is what I mean when I say I don’t have any reason to complain about what I saw and what my automatic recall function does.”

Hank grinds his teeth. “That’s not… fuck, I don’t—fuck! Can’t you just erase those parts?”

Connor’s brows rise, and he gives Hank an offended look. “I’m not going to erase my knowledge of the accident.”

“I didn’t mean the whole thing, just the worst parts of it. The images of what you saw in the backseat before you shut down.”

Connor pauses. Hank imagines him to be flipping through his mental settings.

“I suppose I could do that,” Connor says slowly, and then he meets Hank’s eyes. “If I were to do that, what would you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“What would you do to deal with your own psychological trauma? Would you see a therapist?”

“I don’t need a therapist,” Hank snaps, an instinctive response.

Connor gives Hank a careful look. “Cole’s going to start seeing a therapist when he’s discharged.”

“Of course he’s going to see a therapist. He’s already seeing art therapists and music therapists and things like that.”

“So your problem isn’t with the concept of therapy. If you think that Cole and I deserve psychological relief, why are you the exception?”

Connor’s gaze is somehow challenging and empathetic at the same time. And it’s so unwavering that Hank finds he can’t look away and can’t think of a single thing to say in response.
After a long silence, Connor’s expression softens. He raises a hand as if he wants to reach out to Hank, but thinks better of it and grabs his other elbow in an awkward stance. He looks away. “… I’ll delete the worst footage of what I saw if you agree to make a few appointments with some kind of counsellor. I don’t want to watch you try and cope with your pain in an unhealthy way.”

Hank frowns. On the one hand, burying his grief and his guilt has worked pretty well for him so far. On the other hand, maybe the only reason that worked so well was because he was too busy running himself ragged trying to save Connor to think about anything else. After all, before he had the bright idea to go knocking on Elijah Kamski’s door, he had a breakdown and went reaching for the alcohol the moment he lost that laser-tight focus.

He doesn’t want Connor to have to watch that happen to him again. When Connor was gone, didn’t he spend every day wishing to have him back so they could support each other?

“…Okay,” Hank says. ‘I’ll figure that out first thing in the morning.’”

A small smile crosses Connor’s face. “Thank you, Hank.” His smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

And between that and the awkward way Connor is holding himself, as though he doesn’t want to cross an unstated boundary, just reminds Hank that there’s this awful unresolved thing between them that’s been haunting him ever since before the accident.

Fuck it, Hank thinks. That awful unresolved thing is no longer the biggest crisis in the room. Not by a long shot. It should be able to take a backseat when there’s so much other bullshit going on.

Hank grabs Connor’s arm and pulls him into a crushing hug.

He feels Connor freeze against him.

“I’m so fucking glad you’re back, Connor,” Hank whispers.

After a moment, Connor relaxes into the hug and his arms come up around Hank.

“I never thanked you for saving me, did I?” Connor says. “I honestly can’t believe you did it. I knew what sort of damage I’d sustained before I shut down. I thought it was irreparable.”

A beat, and then Connor says in a soft tone of wonder, “You keep doing the impossible for me.”

Hank’s mouth goes dry at how Connor makes it sound like he doesn’t think he deserves it, and he can’t find the words to tell Connor that he’s the one who does the impossible. He just squeezes Connor until eventually Connor squeezes him back, and they hold each other afloat.

Chapter End Notes

Buns did several lovely pieces of art of Connor and Cole being cutie patooties, please check them out here and here!

Dust did some heart-melting art of Connor reading to the Anderson boys, please check it out!

Max did some adorable art of Connor holding Cole, featuring Cole’s turtle backpack, please check it out!
Yakichou did some beautiful art of Hank and Connor getting Cole ready for bed, please check it out!

Kamski: Be careful of the choices you make, Lieutenant.
Hank: *immediately slams Kamski into a wall*
Kamski: WHAT THE FUCK. WHAT DID I JUST FUCKING SAY. YOU FUCKING MENACE.

Connor's back! I hope I packed enough feel-good stuff into this chapter to make up for, um, what I've put you guys through so far. So now with Connor back and Cole on his way to good health, everything is resolved!
(but Hank and Connor still haven't dealt with their romantic issu—)
YEP, EVERYTHING IS RESOLVED.
Prosthetics

Chapter Summary

Hank and Connor go on a quest to make Cole’s wish come true.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Connor’s shoulder sticks a little now.

It’s a very subtle feeling. It’s something he doesn’t really feel at all until he runs his full-body physical calibrations and he notices that he needs to use just a little more force than he did before to make the shoulder that was slashed open in the accident keep up with the other one.

He adjusts his internal lubrication settings to supply just a little more to the affected shoulder, and that helps, but not completely. It’s still slightly off. Very, very slightly off.

It really isn’t that big of a deal. Connor’s pretty sure soon he’ll get used to the tighter sensation. He sort of doubts that a less sensitive android would have noticed at all. And maybe it’s not even that there’s anything wrong with the new parts in his shoulder. Maybe it’s that his old shoulder was just too loose and he didn’t realize it because it was what he was used to. Kamski probably made the new parts himself, after all. And Elijah Kamski is supposed to be a genius, so if anyone would be able to find some way to improve Connor, it would be him.

But still. It’s different.

It’s such a small thing that Connor doesn’t even consider bringing it up with Hank. How can he possibly say anything at all about his shoulder requires a fraction of a micronewton more force to move it the way he wants it to move? How can he even think about bringing it up with the specter of what has happened to Cole hanging over both their heads?

So he keeps quiet about it.

Other than the shoulder, he feels almost exactly the same as he did before (physically, at least, because the way he feels in every other sense of the word is a different matter entirely). It’s sort of odd how normal all his systems and processes are. He keeps expecting some critical error to occur that he can’t shut down and can’t fix, that will lock him in place, unable to move, unable to think. Not because of anything that happened to him in the course of the car accident or in the course of being fixed, but because of the reality he now has to live with. It feels wrong to be functioning at normal capacity. It feels wrong to be able to perform his usual routines in the usual way.

Hank’s processes have been interrupted. Hank isn’t sleeping well and doesn’t have the appetite he used to. Every time Connor scans him, his biometric data tells of just how much the situation is wearing on him. High blood pressure, high cortisol, high everything bad. Not only is it worrying, but for some utterly irrational reason, it makes Connor wish he could have a similar reaction. He wishes he could carry around the proof of how awful he feels inside his body.

And then he realizes he does, in a way.
The night he realized he is in love with Hank, the timed alert he had set to direct him to make breakfast never went off. The night he confronted Hank about his feelings and argued with him over his own agency, the heightened sensors which should have alerted him to Cole’s presence failed to do so.

Similar events begin happening with such regularity that it’s alarming. Alerts that Connor once set fail to trigger, settings that he has adjusted return to default without his input. Connor creates a simple process to set random alerts and document which ones fail and how often, but it’s only active for less than 48 hours before it falls victim to the phenomenon it was created to track and is shut down without Connor noticing.

One night, as Connor and Hank are returning home from visiting Cole at the hospital, Connor stops halfway through taking off his coat.

“Connor?” Hank, hypersensitive to everything as of late, frowns and touches Connor’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s past eight o’clock.” Connor’s voice is dull with shock.

“…Okay? So it’s past eight o’clock. Is that a problem?”

“Yes, because I have an alert set to direct me to begin Cole’s bedtime routine at eight. I never deactivated it. I never even noticed it was deactivated. It hasn’t gone off once since Cole was hospitalized and I never noticed.”

Hank doesn’t look like he understands what the problem is. “Maybe it just automatically disabled itself because you know you don’t have to worry about Cole’s bedtime right now.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Connor says, turning to look at Hank. “I think my emotional responses are interfering with any processes I try to customize.”

“Your emotional responses?”

“This has been happening ever since—” Connor cuts himself off, looking away with a grimace. “…ever since an occasion during which I had a particularly strong surge of emotion. And the second time it happened was the time Cole saw us arguing.”

A shadow passes over Hank’s face at the mention of that night, but he doesn’t look away from Connor, concern still evident in his expression.

“I had my audio processors specifically set to alert me to any noises he would have been making getting out of bed or leaving his room. But somehow those settings returned to default, and I didn’t notice he was there. Similar events have been happening at an alarming frequency ever since the accident; processes I create or customize just… stop functioning the way I want them to.”

“If it’s been happening more frequently ever since the accident, maybe it’s because of the damage you sustained,” Hank says, brow furrowed with unease. “Maybe Kamski missed something when he was repairing you.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Connor says. “I think it’s just because of the accident itself.”

“The stress and the…?”

“Yes,” Connor says with a faint nod. “And… everything that’s happened to Cole. The worry and the regret.”
“Oh.” Hank’s eyes widen slightly and he meets Connor’s gaze. “Well, if that’s the case, maybe it’s not such a bad thing.”

Connor frowns. “It’s an inconvenience.”

“Yeah, I bet it is. But, I mean, it’s better for you to feel things than it is for you to have some program in your head directing you to be perfect all the time.”

“Yes, that’s true, but why should it be a binary between one or the other?” Connor’s can hear his frustration in his voice, and he has the urge to tamp it down lest it delete his perfected Sumo-petting routine or something of equal importance.

“I dunno. I guess that’s just how it is.” Hank tilts back his head slightly, his eyes softening. “Look, Connor, you and I both know how diligent you are. I don’t mean to sound like I’m being dismissive of how much that means to you. But maybe you should cut yourself some slack. Cole’s bedtime truly doesn’t matter right now.”

“It’s more than just Cole’s bedtime, Hank. Having these processes reset or disappear altogether is interfering with the way I run the entire household.” Connor very purposely does not say the rest of that thought, which is and take care of you.

Hank just shrugs. “Yeah, I know. The same thing’s been happening to me. Having so much on my mind, it’s hard to remember to do even some of the most basic shit. It’s just a thing that happens when life starts shitting on you. Part of being human.”

Ordinarily, Connor finds it comforting when he discovers a new shared experience between himself and Hank, but today the thought is just aggravating. In a time of crisis, he doesn’t need to be making mistakes. He needs mechanical infallibility.

Hank must be able to read the dissatisfaction plain on his face, for he crosses his arms and lifts his chin. “Look, when you woke up and found the fridge full of expired food, you didn’t tell me off for ignoring it or for living on takeout.”

“Of course I didn’t. Between how much effort your put into trying to fix me and how much time you were spending with Cole in the hospital…” Connor trails off as he realizes where Hank is going with this.

Hank grins tiredly. “Yeah, so if you’re so willing to cut me a break, why can’t you do the same for yourself?” He points at himself and then at Connor. “See? Two can play at that game.”

“I dislike you.”

“No, you don’t,” Hank says, and then the smile falls from his face as he realizes what he’s said.

Connor just turns away.

Hank clears his throat awkwardly and claps Connor on the shoulder. “I’m serious. Don’t be so hard on yourself.” And then Hank lumbers into the kitchen, going to fix himself something to eat before Connor can do it for him, leaving Connor standing there wondering if he can’t be an android and he can’t be a human, just what the hell is he supposed to be?

So, that’s something he changes his mind about. Having a bodily reaction to how terrible he feels isn’t very satisfying at all, and he wishes it would go away.

***
Cole continues to heal well.

“There are a number of reasons why it takes so long for new amputees to begin using prostheses,” Dr. Kapoor says as she unwinds the bandages that cover the end of Cole’s arm. “Wound healing is one major factor. Right now we’re focusing on making sure Cole’s residual limbs aren’t going to require any more surgery, and once we’re sure of that, we’ll be able to begin the process of preparing him for his future prostheses.”

Connor watches the bandages as they unfurl. He tries to turn what he’s seeing into a mathematical formula: tension, coverage, shear, and pressure. If Cole comes home still wearing bandages, Connor will be able to apply them perfectly.

“Luckily, Cole won’t have to wait too much longer to be fitted for his prostheses, even if he does require more surgery on his limbs. With any luck, we’ll be sending you home with your first prostheses.”

“First prostheses?” Hank asks. “He’s going to be getting more than one set?”

“These days, it’s easy to print a simple plastic prosthesis. Most people can even pay for one out of pocket if they’d prefer not to wait for their insurance to process the claim. But given that Cole is a polyamputee, you’re probably going to want prostheses that are as functional as possible. A prosthetic arm with a hand that can curl its fingers and grip, a prosthetic leg that can tell when to bend its knee and when to lock it. So we’ll probably start Cole off with simple plastic prostheses while he gets used to wearing them, and then transition him to prostheses that provide the sort of functionality you and he want. Those usually have a bit of a learning curve, which is why we don’t start right away with them for new amputees.”

Dr. Kapoor pauses in her explanation while she examines the end of Cole’s arm. “Mm-hmm. Looks like you’re healing nicely. Are you having any pain in the end of your arm, Cole?”

“It’s sore sometimes,” Cole says quietly. “And it hurts when the bandages touch the very end of it.”

“All the time, or only just now when I unwound the bandages?”

“Only just now.”

“Good.” Dr. Kapoor steps back to let a nurse begin to clean the healing incision. Barely an incision now anymore, what’s left of the wound is fresh and pink.

Dr. Kapoor looks at Connor and Hank. “But I’m going to be honest with you—navigating different sorts of prostheses can be difficult insofar as insurance is concerned. Your provider might be picky about what they’ll cover and how often. And children do outgrow prostheses, so make sure you consider your options carefully.”

A severe frown crosses Hank’s face. Connor can just imagine that Hank’s annoyed at the unfairness of the situation; that one badly timed growth spurt might end up keeping Cole in too-small prostheses thanks to an uncaring insurance company.

Hank says, “So, when you say we’ll want something as functional as possible, do you mean cybernetic prosthetics?”

Dr. Kapoor’s mouth thins at the question, and Connor says softly, “Hank, I don’t think that’s going to be an option for Cole.”
“Huh?” Hank squints. “Why not? That’s what Regina got after she got hit by that car. They’re the most advanced, functional prosthetics out there. She was able to come back to work as a police officer with cybernetics.”

“I haven’t seen an insurance plan yet that’ll cover cybernetics for children,” Dr. Kapoor says. “Cybernetic prosthetics work by linking the user’s nervous system to a cybernetic nervous system inside the prosthesis, allowing for extremely fine, precise control, and even feeling. It’s basically the same as sticking an android’s arm or leg on the residual limb and hooking it up to the body.”

Cole throws a sideways glance at Connor. Hank catches this and narrows his eyes. Connor just taps his fingers along the arm of the chair he’s sitting in, letting Cole see how they rise and fall just the way a human’s fingers would.

Dr. Kapoor appears not to notice the unspoken conversation happening between the three of them. She continues, “But surgery is required to implant the neural adaptors that allow the nervous system to effectively communicate with the cybernetics. For adults, this is a one-time procedure, but children require multiple, smaller ‘upkeep’ procedures in order to keep these adaptors functioning properly as their bodies develop. Very few insurance plans cover cybernetic prosthetics at all because of the extreme expense, and the only children I’ve ever seen with them have families that are able to pay for them out-of-pocket.”

Connor says, “The Detroit Police Department had to throw a charity ball to raise enough money for Regina to get those cybernetics. Otherwise, she probably would have had to use bionic prosthetics.”

“Bionic prosthetics would be a good option,” Dr. Kapoor says. “Also known as myoelectric prosthetics. They detect muscle movement in the residual limb in order to move how the user wants them to move. They’re much cheaper than cybernetics and since they don’t interface directly with the nervous system, they don’t require an additional surgery to use.”

“But they’re not as good,” Hank says.

“‘Good’ is a very relative word,” Dr. Kapoor says. “They don’t offer the same degree of precision and control that cybernetics do. And they don’t return any sensation. But most amputees who wear prosthetics use bionics, not cybernetics.”

Connor watches the nurse apply an ointment to the end of Cole’s arm. A scan reveals it to be an antibacterial ointment which encourages angiogenesis for optimal perfusion, epithelialization, and collagen formation. And that’s just the benefit the ointment provides to the skin; it can penetrate deep into Cole’s limb to promote healing of the bone and muscle as well. The wonders of modern medicine; Cole’s been receiving this sort of treatment for weeks with both his residual limbs. Healing him quickly enough that they’re talking about prosthetics even though he’s not even out of the hospital yet, so long as his physical therapist is able to build up his strength enough.

“Is that because they honestly prefer bionics?” Hank asks. “Or is that just the best they can get?”

“If cybernetics were more widely available, of course they’d be more widely used.” Dr. Kapoor’s tone suggests that she thinks this should go without saying. “But they have their drawbacks, too. They can be very difficult to learn to use, and the mechanism for sensation feedback isn’t perfect. Some users of cybernetics report that the limbs can be overstimulating or even painful to use, especially in the very beginning.

Connor lifts his head, blinking. Dr. Kapoor had earlier described cybernetic prosthetics as being basically the same as android limbs. But he’s never once felt overstimulated by the tactile
sensations he experiences, much less felt anything that could be remotely described as physically painful.

With that in mind, it stands to reason that the way he processes his perceptions must be different than how humans process their own. Which makes perfect sense; an organic nervous system is going to be much different than an artificial neural cortex in practice. An organic being may not be able to reconcile the things an inorganic being could process and perceive, and vice versa.

Just how different are his perceptions of what he thinks and feels from what Hank and Cole perceive? What form and shape do their thoughts take without the consciousness of thousands of concurrent lines of code and calculations happening inside their minds? Is it anything at all like what Connor experiences? Or has he just been fooling himself into thinking he’s been becoming more human all along when he’s secretly destined to always fall short of that imperfect ideal? Or worse, drawing even further away from it?

Connor shakes his head lightly in an attempt to chase away the unpleasant thought. He loves Cole and Hank. Even if the thing that Cole and Hank know as love is different from what Connor feels, that emotion is still indescribably precious to Connor. Cole and Hank are still indescribably precious to Connor.

“In any case,” Dr. Kapoor says, “you still have time before you need to make any decisions regarding Cole’s prostheses. We’ll get him used to wearing them before you have to commit to anything.”

Cole’s nurse does up his bandages again, and with that, the rounds are over. When neither Hank or Connor indicate that they have any more questions, Dr. Kapoor and Cole’s nurse both leave the room.

Hank lets out a tired sigh. “Well. That’s sure something to think about.”

Connor moves the thought process about whatever differences in perception might exist between himself and the humans he loves into a background thread so he can fully engage with the topic of Cole’s future prostheses. “It’s a difficult situation to be in. It was thoughtful of Dr. Kapoor to talk to us early on about what sort of issues we can expect.” He looks at Cole. “Cole, how are you feeling after talking with Dr. Kapoor?”

Cole’s mouth is tight and he’s staring into his lap. Connor realizes that actually, no, he and Hank were the ones who spoke to Dr. Kapoor. Cole barely engaged with her at all.

Hank gets out of his chair with a grunt and plops himself down on the bed next to Cole. “Hey, kid. Whatcha’ thinking about?”

Cole shrugs. “You’re gonna have to use your words. I can’t read minds like Connor can.”

(It isn’t actually reading minds, Connor thinks, it’s simply analyzing and extrapolating data to draw logical conclusions. Reading a face and considering what he knows about the person it’s attached to. Hank does the same thing, just sometimes not as well as Connor does. And sometimes even better than Connor, which makes Connor idly wonder again about the differences in their perceptions and their thought processes.)

Cole draws his blanket up higher, covering his residual arm. “I guess I’m sad.”

“Sad about what?”
“Sad I’ll have to wait until I’m older to get cybernetics. I sort of thought…” Cole trails off, then lowers his head and curls in on himself. “Never mind.”

“It’s okay,” Hank says in his gentle-gruff voice, rubbing circles into Cole’s back. “I want to know what you were thinking. Did you already decide you wanted cybernetics?”

“Sort of.”

“Why’s that?”

Cole’s gaze flickers to Connor for a brief instant before he looks down.

Connor’s breath catches for a moment before he remembers to keep breathing.

Hank’s hand on Cole’s back stills. “…Oh.”

Usually, whenever Cole is depressed, either Connor or Hank are able to brighten his mood, but not this time. After that, it’s too difficult for either of them to fake cheeriness.

When they’re leaving the hospital, Connor’s able to wait until they’re in the deserted parking garage before it spills out of him.

“He wants to be like me.”

Hank looks at him, his face deeply lined. “Course he wants to be like you. He loves you.”

And that just brings the swell of everything Connor’s been sitting on right to the surface. The doubts about his own nebulous humanity, his worries about the ties between him and Cole and Hank, the faults in his system that he’s been struggling to cope with, the knowledge that he sometimes wants to go back to being an irreproachable machine. The crisis has him questioning so much of what he thought he knew about himself, and Cole doesn’t care about any of that. He doesn’t know about any of that, but even if it did, it wouldn’t matter. He just wants to be like Connor. He looks up to Connor and loves Connor, and maybe getting cybernetic limbs would have been a comfort to him in this awful event he’s going through, because it would have been a real, present connection between the two of them. A part of Connor that Cole can carry the way he carries every part of Hank that he’s gotten.

And it’s something that neither Hank or Connor can give him.

“I don’t think—” Connor begins, then furrows his brow. “I’m worried that…”

Hank stands there, weathered and patient while he watches Connor grope for meaning.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Connor says softly. “I can tell that Cole hasn’t thought about any of the disadvantages of getting cybernetics. The pain and the difficulty and the fact that it would mean more surgeries. So many more surgeries.”

“He’s six years old,” Hank says quietly. “Cole’s smart, but I think abstract thinking on that level might be a bit beyond him.”

“That’s not what doesn’t make sense,” Connor says. “What doesn’t make sense is that I want them for him, too. Knowing that he wants them makes me want them.”

Hank snorts and a bright smile breaks across his face. This whole experience has only been hard on him, deepening the wrinkles that line his face and turning his hair grayer by the day. But when he
smiles, he looks even younger than he did the day Connor met him.

“Well,” Hank says, shaking his head fondly, “that makes three of us, then.”

***

So he and Hank are in agreement to try and get cybernetic prosthetics for Cole somehow. The hard part is the somehow.

Crowdfunding doesn’t seem to be a viable solution. When Connor suggests it, Hank scrunches up his face and goes, “Okay, sure, and if it actually takes off and the media comes around and sticks a bunch of cameras in our faces, everyone at the hospital’s who’s seen you with Cole is gonna realize you’re actually the family android.”

“If the media wanted to promote any campaign we might create, it would be easy for me to stay out of the way. I could hide in the garage under a tarp if I had to.”

A weird shudder goes through Hank and a shadow passes over his face. “No. Just fucking no.”

Connor frowns. “…I suppose even a successful campaign wouldn’t help with the fact that we’d need to fund multiple future surgeries to keep the cybernetics functional. Public goodwill only extends so far.”

Hank flops onto the couch and says in a deadpan, “We could sue Elijah Kamski for child support. He’s sort of like your dad, and you’re probably younger than eighteen.”

Connor resists the urge to lean over the couch and run his fingers soothingly through Hank’s hair. “I don’t think you’d like sharing custody of me with anybody. And I don’t appreciate your insinuation that I’m not mature.” A pause. “And Elijah Kamski didn’t create me.”

Hank shrugs. “He said he personally created a predecessor in your series. RK200, or something like that, and Cyberlife reused a bunch of his designs when they built you.”

Connor perches on the arm of the couch. “I’m still not sure how to feel about the fact that you got Elijah Kamski himself to repair me. That I met him and don’t even remember it.”

Hank gives a half-hearted shrug. “You’re not missing out. The guy was a freak. A serious crackpot.”

“I suppose most anyone with the capacity to influence and catalyze so much change in the world would have to be a crackpot by necessity,” Connor says, flexing a hand idly. “He’s responsible for androids, which are responsible for supporting and shaping society in so many different ways. And he’s indirectly responsible for the creation of an entirely new kind of sentient being, as accidental as I am.”

Hank squints. “…I’m not sure how accidental it was. Some of the things he said… like he wanted me to play the world’s most obnoxious version of Twenty Questions with him. Like he knew something.”

“Knew something about what happened to me before you bought me? How much do you think he knows?” Unease curls in Connor’s chest. If the answers to the mystery of why he is the way he is have been inside of him all along, why hasn’t he been able to find that data for himself?

“I dunno. Prob’ly more than we know, but I really fucking doubt he’s omniscient. And he gave me the impression he hadn’t managed to unlock all of your secrets just by poking around while he was
fixing you. Said he’d be interested in talking to you when you—"

Hank suddenly stops, his eyes widening.

“Hank?” Connor sits up.

Hank blinks, then says slowly, “He said he wanted to talk to you when you were awake. And maybe we could trade favors.”

A beat while Connor considers the possibilities.

Hank swears under his breath, pushing his hair out of his face. “Jesus! Was that what he was talking about!?"

“I don’t think so,” Connor says softly. “Not specifically, at any rate. Even if he knew about Cole’s amputations, he couldn’t have known we’d have such a strong preference for cybernetics. It’s more likely… that he predicted some as-of-yet undetermined difficulty we might require his help with.”

“Jesus…” Hank leans back, staring at the ceiling.

Connor stands up. “You should contact him. See if this is something he would be willing to help us out with.”

Hank straightens up, narrows his eyes. “Whoa. Hold on.”

“Why should we ‘hold on’ for anything? There’s nothing to discuss.” Connor’s tone is more clipped than it needs to be. “Kamski is our best shot at not only getting cybernetics, but of being able to ensure Cole’s continued access to the maintenance he’ll need until he’s an adult. I’ve run the numbers; do you want me to explain the probability of success with the rest of our options?”

“No, I—he’s not—” Hank stands, growing agitated. “Kamski’s a rat bastard and I don’t trust him with you.”

“He repaired me just fine and at no cost to you.”

“You didn’t talk to him. You didn’t have to sit through his mindgames. He’s gets this twisted kick out of—” Hank cuts himself off and presses a fist to his mouth.

“Out of what?”

“…Out of you and me.” Hank doesn’t elaborate beyond that, his brows angry and furrowed.

Connor takes a moment to consider what he knows about Kamski. “…You don’t honestly believe that a man with such a public profile could be as dangerous as Zlatko Andronikov, do you?”

Hank’s eyes narrow even further. “It’s naïve of you to think that someone might not be dangerous just because they’re a celebrity.” But there’s still a sharp gleam in his eyes and Connor can tell Hank is giving the question honest thought. Hank eventually looks off to the side. “…Less dangerous than Zlatko. I think. At least from a physical perspective. His androids might not have been monsters, but the way he treated them still gave me the creeps. All the same model, all the same name. It’s like he didn’t even see them as separate entities.”

“They might not have been separate entities,” Connor says with a tilt of his head. “One neural network spread across multiple chassis, perhaps. Or androids that transmit data so continuously between themselves, any distinction between them blurs to the point that they might not even count
themselves as distinct beings.”

Hank’s mouth curls. “That’s not…” he says, trailing off and scratching his beard. “…Fuck. It just rubs me the wrong way. Everything about him just rubs me the wrong way.”

Connor folds his hands behind his back. “If you won’t contact Kamski, I will.”

Hank’s eyes widen, annoyance and fear flickering in equal measure. “Connor, no. We don’t even know what he wants from you.”

“If it’s anything unreasonable, I’ll turn him down. I want to get Cole those prostheses, but I’m not hell-bent on it. I wouldn’t agree to anything drastic.”

“Just what the hell do you mean by ‘drastic’?” The rough, protective edge in Hank’s voice forces Connor to look away.

“I wouldn’t throw myself away so easily. Not after everything you went through trying to bring me back.” Connor taps his foot once. “But this is something I want to do. For Cole’s sake. All I’m going to do is see if Kamski is interested in helping us.” He lifts his chin. “If he is, then we can talk about it. Together.”

Hank’s frown is severe and he’s staring at the ground, his lip curled. Connor can tell that his desire to do right by Connor is struggling with his desire to do right by Cole.

“Fine,” Hank finally says, half-snarling the word. “Christ. One of these days, you’re gonna give me a coronary.”

The remark makes Connor frown. The stress of the past few weeks hasn’t been healthy for Hank at all. He shoots Hank a half-scolding, half-worried look for saying such an awful thing so casually.

Hank doesn’t flinch in the face of Connor’s disapproval. “Yeah. Now you know how you make me feel,” he says, and he leaves the room.

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“Please wait here,” Chloe says as she shows Connor and Hank in. “I’ll let Elijah know you’ve arrived for your meeting.”

She disappears through a door on the other side of the room and Hank plops down into a chair and glances at his watch. “Right on time. So naturally we have to wait.”

Connor doesn’t sit down. He isn’t anxious, not as such. What he’s feeling is a sensation he’s been familiar with since his days as nothing more than a machine. It’s a strange certainty that something is about to occur, and it’s neither good or bad, it’s just inevitable.

So he isn’t nervous, but there’s energy dancing in the tips of his fingers. He feels as though if he were to sit down, time would stretch out in front of him. So he paces the room with his hand folded behind his back, taking in Kamski’s décor.

“Weird place, huh, Connor?” Hank says, propping his chin up. “Do you think if I was rich enough to buy God, I’d go planting live trees in the house?”

“It’d certainly be convenient for Sumo,” Connor says, approaching the giant portrait of Kamski that takes up the entirety of the far wall.
He looks so young. Kamski is older today than he was when this portrait was made, but he was already the biggest name in technology at the time. “Man of the Century” by the age of 26.

Could this be Cole in another twenty years? Looking at this portrait reminds Connor of why he’s here and soothes a bit of that buzzing energy at his fingertips.

“I like that other picture of Kamski better,” Hank remarks, gesturing towards a smaller photo on another wall. “Him with one of his professors, I think. I’m sort of surprised he keeps it here in his foyer for just anyone to see.” A beat, and then Hank shrugs. “Although I guess Kamski doesn’t do much entertaining.”

Connor approaches the smaller photo that Hank indicated. It’s small indeed for such an open entryway, it looks like it would be more at home on a wall in a private office or on a shelf in a bedroom. Elijah Kamski and…

—K489AHNT40MCVODEHA7830FJIO4NNAYWFD83K4DNA
WID78CMNO3NICFR65DNWKIO10ALSNCC0WJKNFNC5ASIUCP
AKFNCV987TW72CMJ02JIOJF8DBIXC6ADN30XNI2NBISOXBAUI72BHXHRUA62BC1AOXK6
53HD65KJSWK95DKA26SID182KAJ1IDAASDMC1OSMJW36JD90C19V
M3650SDJIOCN3JIOE65ISO345NKSOWEKD419XMAKID0SMMDSAUAKW4OKFJEI
O9NHUIS3NCJIDS6XIO2CNNIAS1CID3RTY2NC3IOCIAS090MCDKLS937—

Garbled code fills his processes. Static in his ears, static in his eyes. He’s only caught off guard for a microsecond, and then he’s fighting to make any sense of it at all. This is not that bad. This is not that painful. There have been previous surges of corrupted memory that have left him so addled that he can’t even remember what might have triggered it in the first place, but this time, he knows who he is.

Normally when this has happened before, he closes the function that provides him with the memory as soon as he recognizes it’s happening, but this time, he leaves it running as he focuses.

—
JIO2NK3IOCJDOIS0OQPNCDOEWS8CNKHVWT77P3BV2JGDO6XEAENL6EW3THODMIMQ810FBU;
TU2UHY47IBHGAYPXO6H4L9YP7KAB48YGT0C4J1JI2VI4
UKOKYZW2DYFRXY57AFJTLewanznor3LVRSDN1FOHIPLMSSCLF
QT3N7JHFSSIPZMPARTVBGS4PZ8PKKRP7U9ZO6LMV3Q3MFF4G21K1J3ZAJWGM9—

He can see that woman’s face as the static clears. He can hear her voice, noises through the senseless sound that almost seem like words.
The process terminates and suddenly he’s on his knees.

“Connor!” Hank is in front of him, both hands clenched on Connor’s shoulders. “Connor, come on, snap out of it!”

“I’m okay,” Connor says, rising to his feet.

“Wait, Connor, don’t stand up too fast.” Hank tries to push Connor back down, but when it becomes apparent that Connor’s going to keep rising no matter how hard he pushes, he moves to support him instead. “Jesus, you just had a fucking seizure or something. What the hell happened!?"

Connor ignores Hank and analyzes the photo of Kamski and the woman.

Stern, Amanda

AI Professor at University of Colbridge

Born: 05/14/78 – Died: 02/23/27

Connor disengages his scan. So little time has passed that Hank probably hasn’t realized Connor was ignoring him in favor of something else.

“Another corrupted memory from before I was wiped,” Connor says, staring at the photo.

Hank follows Connor’s gaze. “…I’ve never seen it get that bad before. Do you know that woman?”

“I—” Connor pauses, unsure.

At that moment, Chloe emerges from the door she left through earlier. “Elijah is ready for you now.”

“Just give us a minute, Chloe,” Hank says, raising a hand. Connor pulls away from him, and Hank grabs him again. “Whoa, Connor, wait a second. What did you—"
“I need to talk to Kamski,” Connor interrupts, shrugging off Hank’s hands and taking long strides toward Chloe. She turns and matches his fast pace, keeping ahead just a few steps.

He can hear Hank behind him, hurrying to keep up. His heart rate is elevated, and Connor wishes he could just transmit everything about the memory he just experienced to Hank so he would understand without an explanation, because Connor can’t take the time to stop. Not when the answers might be so close at hand.

The door slides open before him. Kamski is sitting there in jeans and a worn zip-up, looking casually out of place in such an elegantly decorated villa.

“Connor and Lieutenant Anderson,” Chloe says, stepping out of the way.

“Mr. Kamski,” Connor says, interrupting Kamski as he opens his mouth, “who is Amanda?”

Hank stops next to Connor and stiffens. He glances at Connor before turning to Kamski, a hard look in his eyes.

Kamski just inclines his head slightly, his expression not changing at all. His thick-rimmed glasses slide slightly down his nose. “You noticed the photo. I thought you would.”

Hank’s jaw is tense, as though he’s trying very hard to keep from saying something.

Kamski looks Connor in the eyes. “Amanda Stern was my mentor while I was in school. When she died, I created an AI based on her personality.”

He blinks slowly. “Due to certain copyright issues, Cyberlife retained ownership of her when I resigned. I imagine they altered her program to suit their purposes and outfitted you with a copy of her AI that was meant to operate in the background.”

“Why?” Connor says.

Kamski shrugs a single shoulder. “I really wouldn’t know. It would have been an immense strain on your system; two AI’s operating at once, sharing the same hardware. If I were to speculate, I’d hazard a guess that they meant for her to be your handler. A little Cyberlife stooge inside your head, responsible for communicating your progress to the mothership and keeping you focused on your mission.”

“I’m always focused on my mission,” Connor says, confused. “Even now. Why would they equip me with a separate AI for that reason?”

“Perhaps the mission they intended for you was a bit more complex than your current one,” Kamski says. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. The copy of Amanda that was riding along inside of you is disabled beyond the point of reactivation. Effectively dead. She’s not telling Cyberlife any of your dirty secrets. If she was, I imagine they would have come knocking on your door a long time ago.”

“So it’s… a real grave for a virtual person,” Connor says. “Not a virtual grave for a real person.”

“If you could even call her so much as a person,” Kamski says. His tone is dismissive, but Connor can see the way the muscles of his face are set so as to not betray any emotion.

“Could I have killed her?” Connor asks carefully.

“In theory, yes, you could have killed her,” Kamski says, “but I highly doubt you did. If I’m right
about the reason they outfitted you with her, I imagine she wouldn’t have approved of whatever someone did to you to force your system to accept domestic assistant software. Whoever reprogrammed you probably took the opportunity to get rid of her then.”

“That… doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Kamski quirks a brow.

“No,” Connor says. “If I’m such an important asset that Cyberlife went through the trouble of equipping me with a handler AI to ensure the success of my mission, then it stands to reason that the only way someone else would ever get their hands on me would be by stealing me from Cyberlife or by finding me after I’d already been deactivated and discarded. Why would anyone go through the trouble of reprogramming me and destroying the other AI in my system just to turn me into a domestic android?” Connor puts a hand to his chest. “I was bought from a secondhand android store! Why would someone go through that much trouble just to let me wind up there?”

“Why do any of us wind up anywhere?” Kamski asks, crossing his legs. “Isn’t that a very human question? How many times do you think your friend the Lieutenant has asked himself that very question? If God created us in her image, then how the hell does anyone end up alone at three in the morning, shoving a fast-food burger in their face while their car idles in a motel parking lot?”

Hank huffs and rolls his eyes.

“The answer is that I don’t know,” Kamski says. “My speculation was just that; speculation. I’m not with Cyberlife anymore. I don’t know why they put another AI in your head or how they lost track of you. All the ‘whats’ I know, I learned in the process of repairing you, and any ‘whys’ are nothing more than ideas extrapolated from that data. They might be good ideas, or they might be bad ideas. Generally, I tend to have good ideas, but there’s no reason why you should take my word for it.”

Kamski has his chin held aloft, looking at Connor with a detached expression that seems to suggest that he doesn’t particularly care about the answers to Connor’s questions one way or the other.

And yet. From the way Hank described him, Connor had been expecting someone much different. Sitting there in his frayed zip-up and chunky glasses makes him look like a teenager.

College at thirteen, founder of Cyberlife by sixteen.

And Amanda Stern died young. Only forty-eight. That’s even younger than Hank is now.

And Kamski answered every question he had about why there’s a grave with Amanda’s name on it in Connor’s mindscape.

The muscles of Kamski’s face are still carefully set. He isn’t looking at Connor. He’s trying not to look at Connor.

Connor thinks about the flowers he left on Amanda’s grave. He thinks about Amanda Nguyen, the little girl who died of cancer, and what he felt when he looked at the photo of her that Hank handed to him.

He thinks about Cole and the future he’s trying to win for him.

He looks at Kamski and he tries to see the boy Amanda would have seen in him.

“I wanted to know Amanda,” he says, feeling as though he’s stepping out onto the endless ice right
behind the villa. “…before I knew I’d already met her. Finding her grave affected me in a way that no other mystery about myself has affected me.”

Kamski blinks slowly, deliberately, and turns his gaze to Connor.

“Hank and I tried to discover who she had been. We didn’t get far—we thought she had been a human being who died. Not an AI. I wondered whether I’d known her before my memory was reset. I wondered what she meant to me, what I meant to her.

“And I know the Amanda I would have known before my reset wasn’t the Amanda you knew in life. Even if her AI hadn’t been altered by Cyberlife, she wouldn’t have been the same person. A separate being. And all I have of her is how she greeted me the first time we met. That’s all I was able to remember. ‘Hello, Connor. My name is Amanda.’ It’s… not anything I can sentimentalize.”

Kamski folds his hands.

“But nevertheless… I will always have a grave for Amanda in the garden I go to when I sleep,” Connor says. “And I wish I could have had the opportunity to know the woman you built that garden for. I’m sorry I didn’t. And I’m sorry she’s gone.”

Kamski regards Connor, his expression unchanging.

After a moment, he looks past Connor and says, “Chloe, would you check that?”

Chloe comes up from behind Connor and takes his hand. The skin where she’s holding him melts away without his input.

And then suddenly, she’s inside of him. Connor is surprised by the sheer force and power of her presence; it’s nearly overwhelming. She’s searching Connor, running through his thoughts and feelings and data without giving anything of herself away. It’s a suffocating sensation, nearly crushing, and Connor thinks that she has to be running on so much more processing power than he is for that to be possible.

A faint curl of amusement is the only thing Chloe gives away.

Then she pulls her hand back. Connor feels like he’s just been smashed into a brick wall, and yet he’s still standing, the only change he can tell is that at some point during their interfacing, his brow furrowed softly and stuck that way.

“All true, Elijah,” Chloe says.

Kamski nods. “Right. In that case, would you bring me a handkerchief?”

Chloe produces a large black square of fabric—from where, Connor isn’t sure. She goes to Kamski and gives it to him.

Kamski turns his back to Hank and Connor, pulling something out of his jacket and wrapping it in the cloth. “You can put this away. There’s no need for it, is there?”

Chloe nods and takes the bundle. As she carries it out of the room, Connor analyzes environmental clues and runs a few calculations and determines that the item she’s removing is a 9mm handgun.

“So,” Kamski says, turning back to Hank and Connor and clasping his hands, “You didn’t come here to look at my photos. What is it that you want from me?”
“Is there any chance you would be able to help us procure cybernetic prostheses?” Connor asks.

Kamski frowns. “…Cybernetic prostheses? For a human being?”

“Yes. Who else would we be asking on behalf of?”

“Never mind. I thought you’d be wanting something else if you ever came to see me.” Kamski rolls his shoulders. “As to whether I can procure some cybernetics, to borrow a term that was popular in my youth, uh duh. What’s the hard part of this favor?”

“That those prostheses would be for a child, and we would need continued access to the healthcare necessary to maintain the biotechnological implants into adulthood.”

“Again,” Kamski says, “What’s the hard part?”

Hank mutters, “Apparently the hard part’s going to be routing the funding in such a way that no one comes asking questions about why Elijah Kamski himself has decided to bankroll one little kid’s cybernetics.”

“Please. As if I didn’t own my first shell corporation by the time I was eleven.”

“Is this what happens when a kid gets good with computers?” Hank asks, shooting Connor a sharp look. “They turn into this? Cole’s not touching a computer ever again.”

“Is that really all you need?” Kamski asks, a curious tilt to his head. He makes a shooing gesture. “Alright, you two can go ahead and leave now. I’ll let you know once we’re ready to proceed.”

Hank blinks. “Wait. What? Just like that?” He furrows his brow. “I thought you said you were open to deals. Not just giving us what we want.”

“Yes. So?”

“So?” Hank frowns. “So, we’re not going to agree to this until we know what you want from us in exchange.”

Kamski smiles, lifting his chin. “Oh. There’s no need for that. You’ve already provided me with what I want.”

Hank stiffens. “The hell do you mean by that?”

“If you haven’t realized, I doubt it matters to you.”

Hank glares, clenching his fists. Connor glances at him, hoping Hank doesn’t say or do anything to ruin whatever deal they’ve apparently made. After all if Kamski has already gotten what he wants, Connor and Hank might as well, too.

Kamski seems amused by Hank’s agitation. “There’s no need to make such an angry face. If you want an errand to run so badly, why don’t the two of you go on a field trip?”

“Field trip?” Hank repeats, crossing his arms. “What do you mean, field trip?”

Chloe approaches Connor and takes his hand again. This time, interfacing with her is much gentler. She just transmits a small amount of data. Coordinates and a name.

“Carl Manfred?” Connor says, looking toward Kamski. “You want us to visit a painter?”
“Just a suggestion,” Kamski says. “A way I think you might like to spend your afternoon. Don’t feel pressured; you’ll be getting your cybernetics whether you go or not.”

“Why do you want us to visit him?”

Kamski smiles. “Carl Manfred owns the RK200, the only other android in your series, Connor.”

Hank’s eyes widen and he looks at Connor.

“Chloe, please show our guests to the door,” Kamski says. “We’ll be in touch.”

And then they’re being hustled out the door by Chloe. As the front door shuts behind them, Connor and Hank stand in the snow, neither of them moving.

“Elijah Kamski is certainly an interesting person,” Connor says slowly.

Hank is scowling. “He fucking knew about Amanda the whole time. I told him about the grave the very first time I met him and he didn’t say a fucking word about it.” Hank makes a frustrated noise and begins toward the car. “He knows a hell of a lot more than he’s saying. I just know it. It’s like he gets off on making us pry information out of him piece by piece. And just what the hell did he mean, we already gave him what he wanted?!”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he just wanted the chance to talk to me.”

“If that’s the case, the fucking freak could have said so in the first place. Asshole’s more of a cryptic than Mothman.”

Connor doesn’t comment. He just follows Hank to the car. He feels slightly manipulated and isn’t sure whether he minds it or not.

When Hank starts the car, he frowns at looks at Connor. “So... what do you think the odds are that this Carl Manfred is as much of a prick as Elijah Kamski?”

Connor can feel a small smile tug his face. “Well, he’s an artist. Do you dislike artists as much as you dislike Kamski?”

“I don’t—” Hank stops, coughing and pressing his knuckles to his mouth. “I don’t dislike artists.”

“Oh, yes. I absolutely believe that when you couldn’t even say it without choking.”

“I dislike pretension,” Hank emphasizes. “So long as this Manfred guy’s got both feet on the ground, we’ll get along just fine.”

“Consulting the limited personality profile I was able to compile for Elijah Kamski, I think it’s probable that he would only give a personalized prototype android to someone he considers a good friend.”

Hank scrunches his face as he starts the car. “Well, what the fuck.”

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The android that answers the door at Carl Manfred’s home looks nothing like Connor, which is an enormous relief. Connor had been wondering whether Cyberlife borrowed more from the RK200 than just portions of programming to build him, and he’s sure that arriving at Carl Manfred’s home to find a replica of Connor would have been thoroughly unpleasant for Hank.
But the RK200 appears to be an entirely unique design. Connor has never seen another android who looks like the one who answers the door, and he wonders briefly who owns the patents on android facial molds.

“You must be Lieutenant Anderson and Connor,” RK200 says. “Mr. Kamski warned us to expect you.”

“Did he?” Hank’s voice is clipped. “We never told him we’d be coming.”

RK200 just steps aside and says, “That’s Elijah Kamski for you. Please come in.”

Connor follows Hank into the stately home. He meets RK200’s eyes, trying to gauge just how similar they are. RK200 just regards him placidly, his LED spinning a lazy blue.

As RK200 leads them further into the house, Connor notices just how warm the house is compared to Kamski’s. High ceilings and gentle curves in the architecture, the rooms busy with furniture and color. It’s a far cry from the rough surfaces and angles of Kamski’s villa. Two houses owned by rich men, both lavishly designed in utterly opposite ways.

Hank isn’t relaxed yet—the opulence of the setting appears to keep him from feeling entirely comfortable—but his body cues are displaying that he’s much more at ease here than he was at Kamski’s home.

Carl Manfred is sitting at a chess table. As Hank and Connor approach, he lifts his head and turns himself in his wheelchair to face them. “Well, this is a fine ‘how do you do’. Elijah Kamski woke me up from a nice nap so I could receive you gentlemen.”

Hank furrows his brow. “Sorry about that. Didn’t mean to intrude. It was Kamski’s idea.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry. I’d be sorrier if Elijah woke me up and then you two didn’t show up. Then this whole afternoon would have been a waste.” He folds his hands in his lap. “I’m Carl Manfred, if you hadn’t gathered as much. And this is Markus, my… well. Elijah calls him my caretaker, but Markus is, I suppose, a multidisciplinary android.”

The RK200—Markus—nods at them.

Hank nods in return. “Hank Anderson. This is Connor.”

Manfred has a curious expression on his face. “Elijah explained a little of your situation to me. Connor is a prototype much like Markus, is that right?”

Hank frowns. “…Just how much did he explain to you?”

Manfred waves a hand. “Knowing Elijah, the absolute minimum of what I need to know. The man’s more obtuse than a Magic Eye puzzle.”

Hank’s posture relaxes. “You got that right.”

“I imagine if you’ve been working with him for a while, he’s already run you through the wringer. Can I offer you a drink, Mr. Anderson?”

“Lieutenant Anderson,” Markus quietly corrects.

“Ah,” Manfred says. “I see. In that case, officer, may I offer you a drink or a toke?”

A bark of laughter from Hank. Connor catches a nearly inaudible noise from Markus that might be
a sigh, and Connor stares, trying to tell whether another android could have made such a human utterance. But Markus’s stance and his expression haven’t changed.

“Make yourselves at home,” Markus says, gesturing to the closest couch. Hank sits, and Markus crosses the room to pour drinks from a nearby cart. Connor hesitates for a moment before going to sit next to Hank. It feels strangely wrong to be acting like a houseguest when another android in his series is working just a few feet away.

When Manfred has his drink in his hand (scotch whisky, Connor notes, and that’s when he’s sure that Hank and Manfred are going to get along), he says, “Elijah mentioned that you’d be coming here to learn more about the RK series of prototypes, is that right?”

“I guess so,” Hank says. “Although I don’t know why he couldn’t just tell us about your android himself. He built Markus personally, didn’t he?”

“He did. But Elijah likes to say things in a very roundabout way. Sending you two here in the middle of the day might just be his way of telling me he thinks I take too many naps.” Manfred huffs softly. “If he told you he built Markus for me specifically to take care of me after I lost the use of my legs, he’s a rotten liar.”

Connor cocks his head. “If not for that reason, then why did he build Markus for you?”

A smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes crosses Manfred’s face. “It’s rather personal. Oh—nothing like that,” he says as he notices the look on Hank’s face. “Jesus. Kids and their filthy minds.”

Hank squints and silently mouths ‘kids?’ to Connor.

“The point being,” Manfred says, “If Elijah had just wanted to make sure I was taken care of, he could have sent me any caretaker or home health android off the shelf. He didn’t have to go and build me one personally, which means he had some sort of secret design in doing so. I imagine he had some sort of unstated motive in directing you two to me, as well.”

Connor says, “Be that as it may, we’re still curious to learn about Markus. Mr. Kamski mentioned that many of the unique features he designed for Markus were reused by Cyberlife when they built me.”

Manfred shrugs. “What is there to say about Markus? He’s been a tremendous help to me ever since he came to live with me. I can hardly think of any way in which he’d make a better companion. But if you’re asking about what features he has, I honestly couldn’t tell you anything about them. I don’t know anything about androids.”

“Well, how does Markus differ from most other androids?” Hank asks.

“He can play the piano beautifully.”

Connor blinks. “…Was he programmed to play the piano?”

“I have no idea. But can you play the piano, Connor?”

“I…” A pause while he thinks. By now he knows that consulting the protocols he’s been programmed to follow wouldn’t give a full picture of all he’s capable of. “I don’t know. I’ve never tried.”
Carl smiles. “Would you like to?”

Markus cocks his head at that, looking from Manfred to Connor with his brows slightly raised.

Connor says, “It would be interesting to see if this is something Markus and I have in common,” and just like that, the objective *Play Piano* is added to his tasklist.

The piano in the corner of the room is of a modern variety that comes preloaded with various kinds of music. As Connor sits down, the screen lights up with various options. Just behind it, Connor can see Hank approaching. He leans against the other side of the piano, his eyes meeting Connor’s.

Connor looks away. His hand hovers over the most intimate music selection for a moment before he moves away to choose a more melancholic option.

Notes scroll across the screen and Connor, who although he has access to a wealth of information about music, barely *knows* anything about it, has to keep a process running in realtime to match the notes to their correlating keys. And it’s an entirely different matter to move his fingers in such a way to strike those keys while keeping in time with the tempo. The end result is more pleasing than the first time he ever tried dancing, but Connor still suspects there’s something about playing the piano that he doesn’t intuitively grasp.

Singing simple songs with Cole. Humming in the kitchen while he’s doing the dishes. Is there something in the music that he’s been missing all this time?

By the time he’s done, Hank’s brows are raised in a manner that suggests he’s impressed. But Carl’s mouth has a critical dip to it.

“Well, that’s good for a beginner, but I can tell you that Markus is much better at it than you are.”

“Carl,” Markus says, “that’s rather rude.”

Connor cocks his head, a little surprised to hear Markus enter the conversation.

Carl waves a hand. “What? It’s true. You’ve been at it longer, so of course you’re going to be better than he is. I did say I thought it was good, didn’t I?”

“Better than a human who’s never played piano, that’s for sure,” Hank mutters.

“It’s alright,” Connor says, standing up from the piano bench. “I can tell it’s not something I’ve been programmed for.”

“It’s not about programming,” Carl says. “You were still able to do it, weren’t you?”

Connor blinks, thrown off guard by the whole exercise. This is a question he might have expected to come from Hank. Playing the piano is an exercise that he might have been encouraged into by Hank, if Hank owned a piano himself.

“Yes,” Connor says slowly. “There are certain skillsets I’ve been able to develop further with practice, even when I haven’t been programmed with any inherent aptitude for those skills. I think if I were to practice, I could get better at it.”

The corners of Carl’s eyes crinkle; he looks satisfied with this answer.

“Markus,” Connor says, looking at the other android, “have you ever had the same experience?”

Markus’ brow knits slightly. “I suppose I have. Carl has mentioned before that he thinks my piano
“Playing is improving.”

“Do you think that’s the case?” Connor asks.

“I’m not sure.” A pause from Markus. “Although... I noticed a few things while you were playing that I would have done differently. Do you mind if I show you?”

“No at all.” Connor reaches out a hand to interface, but Markus moves past his hand to the piano. He sits down and selects the same piece as Connor.

“Here, sit with me.”

“You’d rather take the time to demonstrate than just interface with me?” But even as Connor asks, he draws his hand back and goes to sit next to Markus on the piano bench.

“Knowing Carl, he’d appreciate a repeat performance,” Markus says, and although his expression doesn’t change, there’s something wry about his voice.

Markus begins to play. Connor listens carefully, comparing Markus’ performance to his own. Markus doesn’t stick to an exacting tempo the way Connor does, and he seems to be less consistent with his interpretations of the dynamics of the piece. But Carl seems to approve of Markus’ rendition much more than he does of Connor’s. He’s smiling as though he think’s Markus’ version is an improvement on Connor’s despite the technical imperfections.

Hank steps away from the piano slightly, his movement drawing Connor’s attention to him, and Connor suddenly realizes how technical imperfections can be even more appealing than flawlessness.

The music slows, and Markus draws one of his hands away. Connor recognizes this as his cue to join in. His predictive software executes in an attempt to foretell how Markus will interpret the rest of the piece, but Connor closes it down. At a slower tempo, it’s easy to read Markus’ intentions and correct himself to match. He doesn’t have to be perfect.

They take the piece so slowly that Connor anticipates that the swell of the music won’t be quite so dramatic, but to his surprise, he finds that the crescendo is more affecting, the slight hesitation of the notes more penetrating. The mood of the music is more complex, speaking of more than just melancholy this time. Doubt, anxiety, fear.

Everything Connor has been feeling lately. He can feel Hank’s eyes on him and he tries to ignore this.

Kamski had told Hank that the RK200 he created hadn’t been capable of feeling emotion the way that Connor is. But Connor doesn’t understand how Markus could produce such stirring music otherwise. It feels as though if Connor can’t even intuitively grasp how to do so, it ought to be impossible for any unfeeling android.

When the song ends, Carl smiles and reclines in his wheelchair. “Getting better every day.”

Too curious to ask for permission, Connor takes Markus’ hand and interfaces with him.

It’s nothing like interfacing with Chloe, where he was completely overwhelmed by her. Instead, he and Markus exist comfortably between themselves. He wouldn’t be able to stop Markus any more than Markus could stop him. Data files, archived memories, the complex connections between networks and programs, Connor looks through nothing more than what he has to in order to find what he wants. It doesn’t take long; a memory from just earlier in the day has exactly what he
needs. A conversation between Markus and Carl about Elijah Kamski, which eventually turns into a discussion about how Carl came to acquire Markus and the car accident that partially paralyzed Carl. The knowledge that it was a car accident that confined him to a wheelchair grips Connor with sorrow and a harrowing yet somehow comforting sense of kinship with Carl. Despite the gentle sarcasm Carl employs when he talks about the accident, Connor can tell it’s still an old wound to him. A well-healed wound by now, but still a painful part of his life for him to reminisce about. It isn’t anything that anyone who cares about Carl could hear without being moved.

Markus’ emotional reaction to the conversation is entirely synthetic. It’s almost shocking to Connor how little Markus feels. A detached, toothless curiosity, the same sort that perpetually drives all androids, and the distant displeasure of being faced with a problem that’s far too old to do anything about. It doesn’t hurt Markus. It doesn’t touch Markus.

Connor draws back from their interfacing, dismayed. “How is it possible that you don’t feel anything at all?”

Markus looks down at his hand. Then he looks back up at Connor. “…How is it that you do?”

Hank says, “Connor—” taking a step toward him at the exact same time that Carl says, “Oh—”

Hank stops, looking at Carl. There’s a moment of tense silence.

Then Carl relaxes. “…Well. A few of the things Elijah had to say are making more sense now.” He looks at Connor, curiosity and something like optimism in his eyes. “Connor, is it just you, or…”

“It’s just me,” Connor says softly. “I don’t know why. I was—altered, somehow, before I knew Hank. I don’t know how or why.”

Carl’s expression dampens, though it’s still far from disappointed. “…How many people know this about you other than Elijah and those of us here?”

“Hank’s son, Cole. But that’s it.”

“Cyberlife can’t find out about him,” Hank says, his blunt tone making it clear that his words are meant to be an explanation and an ultimatum.

Carl appears not to be offended by Hank’s brusqueness. He’s still looking at Connor, his expression gentle. “It sounds like a very lonesome existence.”

Connor isn’t sure what to say to that. Agreeing with Carl feels like it would be a betrayal to Hank, even though nothing about Connor’s situation is Hank’s fault at all.

“Markus,” Carl says suddenly, “Would you like to give our guests a tour of my studio? You can show them my latest work in progress.”

Markus gives Carl a curious look. “I suppose, but Carl, it’s your private studio. Are you certain you want me to try to explain the significant of the painting?”

Carl waves a hand impatiently. “I’m not worried. Sometimes I feel like you know me better than I know myself.”

Connor looks toward Hank. Hank raises a brow and shrugs. Connor can see a worried furrow in Hank’s forehead, and he knows that Hank is considering the possibility that Carl might use their absence to contact somebody about Connor’s secrets. Connor has also considered that possibility, and he doesn’t think it’s likely at all. Kamski wanted them to come here, and he entrusted an
advanced prototype like Markus to him. Presumably Kamski finds Carl to be trustworthy, and Connor does too.

Hank must agree on some level, for he doesn’t object to the tour.

“And right then,” Markus says, pushing the drink cart out of Carl’s view. “Hank, Connor, if you would follow me?”

Markus heads toward the other end of the room. Hank and Connor follow. When they’re out of Carl’s hearing, Hank says quietly, “When he said lonesome—”

“Please don’t worry about me,” Connor interrupts, aware of the fact that Markus can hear them. “We have bigger things to worry about at the moment. And it isn’t as though there’s anything we can do about it.”

Hank just gives him an appraising look before turning his gaze back to Markus.

Carl’s studio is bright and beautiful, which seems to be rather the point. Is beauty more easily created when one is surrounded by beauty? Connor isn’t sure, but the thought seems to make sense.

“It’s pretty rare for Carl to give previews of his work,” Markus says as Hank squints against the sunlight coming in through the glass walls. “He usually can’t stand art critics and interviewers. I think he must like you.”

“He seems like a decent guy,” Hank says. “It’s too bad I don’t give more of a shit about art.”

“Let me show you his latest piece.” Markus directs their attention to a large canvas that’s even taller than Hank. A person’s face in profile. Dark, liquid tendrils seep down their face. Against the portrait’s pale face, the liquid looks almost blue.

“Is that person meant to be an android?” Connor asks. “An android leaking thirium from a head wound?”

“No, can’t be,” Hank says. “That liquid dripping down his face is black. And look, the eyes and the nose are red like it’s someone who’s been crying. Your eyes don’t go red like that when you cry.”

“The liquid is blue. And Carl may not know that. I can’t imagine Markus has ever cried in front of him before. Besides, the profile if of the side which obscures any LED from view.”

“Since when is the absence of evidence evidence of absence?” Hank wrinkles his nose.

“You don’t think it’s significant that the artist chose to frame his subject in this way? I think it may have been a deliberate choice for precisely that reason.”

“Bullshit. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. And thirium is blue, not black.”

“Yes. Blue like in the painting.”

Hank turns to Markus. “Hey, is this guy full of shit or what?”

Markus is watching them curiously. “…I’m afraid I don’t know much about Carl’s intentions with this piece. To tell the truth, I don’t really understand art.”

Hank squints at him.
Markus gestures at the painting. “Which isn’t to say I don’t understand the technical details. Carl is primarily inspired by a number of movements, drawing from the vivid emotions typically portrayed in Neo-expressionism and the fantastical, bold colors of Fauvism. His focus tends to be on the human body, especially hands, heads, and faces, but he has a number of more abstract pieces which explore human sensitivity through the use of color alone. The contrast between his messy, chaotic backgrounds and the fine attention to detail he shows for his subject is a staple of his work.”

“You sound like you’re reading out of a textbook,” Hank says.

Markus gives a small smile. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I’ve tried to understand Carl’s art on the same level that humans do. I might have made some progress, same as I have with my piano playing, but functioning artistically on the same level as humanity is still something that’s beyond me.”

“I don’t understand,” Connor says. “You’re just as advanced as I am. The complexity of our interactions are on a level I’ve never experienced with another android before. Why aren’t you…?”

“I don’t know,” Markus says, his voice soft with simulated regret. “I truly don’t know. Carl tries to encourage me and teach me. He’s been teaching me for years. But I’m programmed to be what I am.”

“So was I, once,” Connor says with a soft frown.

“In that case, you’re probably in a better position than I am to answer your question. You’re the one who’s changed in a way I haven’t been able to.”

Connor touches his chest, right over his thirium pump regulator.

Markus looks at him a moment longer before saying, “When we interfaced, it was… an interesting feeling. It’s difficult for me to reconcile the data I received from you with the limitations of my own programming. Your perceptions were… intense. But difficult to parse.”

Connor nods. “I can understand that.”

“What is it like? In your own words.”

Connor pauses. His hand is still hovering over his thirium pump regulator. “…It hurts.”

Hank’s brows knit. He looks stricken.

“It seems like the more I grow, the more it hurts,” Connor says.

“That doesn’t seem worthwhile,” Markus remarks.

“It is,” Connor says automatically. He doesn’t have to stop and consider whether it really is. “It doesn’t always seem like it. But it brings me closer to the values that have come to matter to me, the people I cherish. Even when I wish I could go back to being a machine, I don’t truly mean it. All I mean is that I wish for the pain to stop, or for circumstances to be different. But when I consider the full scope of what I’ve become; who I’ve become, everything I love is far too precious for me to relinquish under any circumstances. I’d never turn away from any of it.”

Connor can feel Hank’s eyes on him, and he turns to meet his gaze. He can see Hank’s teeth through his slightly parted lips, and he can tell Hank’s feeling something he’s having trouble putting into words. Not for the first time, Connor wishes he could interface with Hank so they could forgo the need for words altogether. It would be foolish of him to expect that a complete
understanding of one another could wipe away the obstacles between them, but he still can’t help but wish it could.

Hank looks away first, ducking his gaze almost like he’s ashamed, although Connor can’t imagine what he has to be ashamed of.

“I think all that is meant to be an endorsement,” Markus says. “Is that right?”

“Maybe not for all androids,” Connor says, remembering the perfect complacency he used to have. “But on the whole, yes.”

A pause while Markus considers this. “Then, in that case… would you tell me what you think of Carl’s painting?”

Connor regards the painting again. Whatever source Carl’s artistic ability comes from, it isn’t something Connor has much experience with. It’s not something that comes naturally to him. But then again, it doesn’t come naturally to humans either, does it? Cole’s first drawing were always of simple, concrete things. A house with a tree, or a family portrait of Connor, Hank, Cole, and Sumo. Princesses and mermaids. An abstract study on the sort of emotion displayed in Carl’s latest work isn’t anything Cole would have been able to understand.

A person with dark liquid seeping down their face and red eyes as if they’ve recently been crying.

Maybe Cole could understand it now. But not years ago when he first drew Connor and Hank holding onto his hands in a line.

Everyone has to start somewhere.

“I think it’s supposed to be about pain,” Connor says. “Maybe the dark liquid isn’t supposed to be blood or thirium. It could just be a representation of the damage trauma leaves in its wake.”

Hank quietly says, “Yeah, I could see that.”

***

Carl invites them to stay for dinner, but Hank and Connor both want to visit Cole, so they decline the invitation.

Carl doesn’t seem offended. He just nods and says, “I understand. You have to be there for your son, of course you do. But you’ll have to bring him for dinner once he’s feeling better.”

A small, crooked smile crosses Hank’s face. “Sure. I bet he’d get a kick out of that giraffe you got in your living room.”

Markus says, “It was a pleasure talking with both of you.”

“A pleasure,” Carl says. “He says it was a pleasure. He didn’t just call it ‘nice’, that’s how you know he likes the two of you.”

Carl even sees the both of them to the front door as they leave, which Connor can tell doesn’t happen often.

They’re in the car when a message pops up in the corner of Connor’s HUD.
Hello, Connor. This is Markus. Carl wants to let you know that if you’re ever in need of a friend, our door is always open for you.

Connor can’t help the warm feeling that blooms in his chest.

Hello, Markus. Thank you for messaging me, and please thank Carl for his kind offer as well. I’m looking forward to seeing the both of you again.

***

A minor surgical procedure goes well for Cole. Barring any unforeseen complications, it should be the last surgery he’ll need at all during this hospitalization.

A week later, Cole is ready to try his temporary prosthetics for the first time. They’re scanned and printed right in the hospitals’ orthopedic department, and a physical therapist is there supporting Cole as he takes a few steps between a set of parallel bars. He isn’t wearing the printed prosthetic arm; that will come later since the fit of the leg is more crucial.

Hank’s hand is tight on Connor’s knee as they sit and watch. Connor doesn’t think Hank realizes what he’s doing; he’s just so consumed with the sight of Cole walking again that his errant hand doesn’t even register with him. Connor is tempted to take Hank’s hand and grasp it just as tightly in return, but that would just draw attention to the unspoken, unresolved thing between them, and this isn’t the time for that. This is the time for Cole.

Dr. Kapoor enters the room, a curious frown on her face. “I just got the most curious message from Cyberlife.”

Hank’s stress level skyrockets. If Connor were human, Hank’s grip on his knee would be sure to leave a bruise. “Cyberlife!?”

Dr. Kapoor nods. “Yes. Apparently, a charitable organization purchased a set of pediatric cybernetic prostheses and neural adaptors. They were writing in order to determine when their biotechnician would be needed for Cole’s surgery.”

Hank begins to breathe again.

Cole looks over from where he’s standing. “Cybernetics?”

Dr. Kapoor’s frown deepens slightly. “I almost told Cyberlife they surely must have been talking about the wrong child, but I thought I should check with the hospital administration to make sure the same charitable organization didn’t also happen to pay for this surgery.”

“And?” Connor asks, leaning forward.

Dr. Kapoor crosses her arms. “Do either of you know anything at all about a charity called Amanda’s Place?”

Connor can’t help it; he puts his hand over Hank’s.

“Because I’ve never heard of them before, and I’ve been performing these surgeries since their
innovation. When I googled Amanda’s Place, I couldn’t make heads or tales of what their mission statement actually meant. Clearly something to do with providing cybernetics to people in need, but it was over ten paragraphs of the most inane bunk I’ve ever read in my life. ‘Holistic synergism’ this and ‘convergence datafication’ that.”

“They’re a start-up,” Connor simply says.

“A start-up,” Dr. Kapoor repeats dryly.

“Hank’s ex-wife has a relative with connections there.”

Hank, to his credit, doesn’t even blink. He just straightens his back. “Yeah. Reached out a few weeks ago, thinking it was a long shot. Didn’t know they’d actually come through. I guess they thought Cole’s case was worth it.”

“Mr. Anderson,” Dr. Kapoor says in a quiet voice, “I recognize what a momentous opportunity this must seem like. But I have my doubts about the legitimacy of this organization.”

“How could they not be legitimate?” Hank asks with a disbelieving tone. “They already bought the prosthetics and paid for the surgery.”

“They paid for one surgery. Cole is going to need ongoing care to maintain his cybernetics, and if this organization falls through—”

“Wait a second,” Cole calls, leaning against one of the bars. “Does this mean I’m getting cybernetics!?”

Hank looks at Dr. Kapoor, raising a brow questioningly. Dr. Kapoor relaxes her posture and says, “If you still want me to, of course I’ll perform the surgery.”

“You sure are, kid,” Hank says, grinning widely.

The biggest smile that Connor’s seen on Cole since the accident lights up his face like a sudden burst of sunlight. With a jubilant cry, Cole ducks out of his physical therapist’s grasp and under the bar, bounding on too-fast, unsteady legs for Hank and Connor.

Connor reacts more quickly than Hank or the PT ever could. He jumps to catch Cole, and then Cole’s arms are around him, one small hand grabbing his shirt and holding tightly.

“Connor—!” is all Cole can choke out before he’s too overwhelmed to continue, shaking from exertion and emotion in Connor’s arms.

Connor clutches Cole against him as securely as he can. Hank beats the PT to their side, sighing, “Jesus, Cole,” before wrapping them both in his arms. By the time the PT is able to extract Cole from Connor and Hank and get back to business, Cole’s cheer can’t even be diminished by the sight of his residual limbs. He smiles when the temporary prosthetic arm is fitted to him for the very first time.

Chapter End Notes

Yakichou drew several scenes from Chapter 12! Please check them out here and here! NotConnor drew a 100% accurate dramatic interpretation of Hank’s confrontation with
Kamski in Chapter 12! Please check it out!
Paty drew a wonderful picture of Hank and Connor's pillow fight from Chapter 4!
Please check it out!
Nicola drew an adorable picture of Connor showing Cole his coin tricks in Chapter 2!
Please check it out!

Connor: cryptid.
Hank: huh
Connor: mothman is a CRYPTID, kamski is a CRYPTIC. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE, HANK. kamski doesn't prance around in the woods frightening people in the backwoods of west virginia
Hank: ........u sure about that

come follow me on twitter @CeilingKiwi if you're interested in hearing me talk about this fic!
L'Homme Auquel J'Appartiens

Chapter Summary

Life slowly changes, and with it, so do Hank and Connor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cole eyes the pile of books that Connor sets down on his hospital bed. “Baby books?”

“Board books,” Connor says, picking up Goodnight Moon and leafing through the stiff, thick pages. “I thought perhaps I could read to you.”

Cole doesn’t look particularly impressed.

“It’s an idea I had,” Connor says. “You hold the books and turn the pages while I read out loud. I thought it might be a good form of occupational therapy.”

“Occupational…?”

“I mean it would be a good way for you to get used to using your bare right arm.”

“What for? I’m getting the cybernetics surgery tomorrow.”

“Yes, but you won’t be wearing your cybernetic prostheses one hundred percent of the time,” Connor says. “You won’t be sleeping in them, so it’s important for you to be able to use your right arm for basic tasks. If you get up to use the bathroom or get a drink of water in the middle of the night, you won’t want to go through the hassle of donning your arm and your leg for a two-minute trip.”

Cole cocks his head and opens his eyes wide, pouting. “But wouldn’t you help me?”

For less than a second, Connor’s face freezes mid-blink like a computer that’s toiling under the weight of too many concurrently-running programs. “Yes,” Connor says once he’s gotten over whatever glitch had him stumped. “Of course I would help you. But I want you to be able to help yourself as well.”

Cole lowers his eyes and draws his knee up.

Connor sits gingerly on the edge of the bed. “…Cole,” he says in such a gentle voice that no one, but especially not Cole, could resist meeting his gaze. “I know this is difficult for you. But the more you give it a chance, the more normal it will begin to feel. I know you wish things could go back to the way they were. I do, too.”

“Um,” Cole says. “It’s not that.”

“It’s not?”

“I just…” Cole frowns at the pile of books. “Don’t you think I’m a little old for these baby books?”
Connor’s eyes widen. After a beat, a smile crosses his face. “Then I’ll propose another plan. What if I go get some books more suitable for you? The pages might be a little trickier for you to handle… but I’m not opposed to giving you a challenge if you think you’re up for it.”

Cole nods, looking relieved to be taken seriously. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Then I’ll be back shortly.” Connor picks up the pile of books along with Goodnight Moon and leaves the room.

Hank huffs, smiling. “Too old for baby books, huh?” He leans over and ruffles Cole’s hair.

“Daa-aad!” Cole ducks and bats away Hank’s hand. With both arms, Hank is pleased to see. Cole really is getting used to things.

“What? Can’t a guy be proud of his kid?”

“Quit it!”

“Nah,” Hank says, scooting onto the bed and pulling Cole into a noogie. Cole squawks and squirms as much as he’s able too—he’s still healing, but he’s okay. Everything’s okay so long as Cole’s able to get annoyed with his dad like every kid does from time to time.

Hank lets up before Cole gets too tired. He still gets tired so easily now, but it’s getting better. Tomorrow Cole is going to be getting his cybernetic neural adaptors implanted, another big step down the road Cole has laid out ahead of him. Then he’ll start learning to use them, and the thought of that fills Hank with warmth.

It’s almost a little funny to think about—he’s proud of the fact that his kid’s soon gonna be learning how to use his arms. He’d been proud of the very same thing back when Cole was still a baby and beginning to reach and grab for toys on his own. This isn’t anything like what Hank had planned for him, but it’s okay. Every step brings Cole that much closer to more complete healing. Every step brings him that much closer to coming home. All the ordinary dreams Hank has for Cole can wait until these new ones are out of the way.

“Can I get the surgery today instead of tomorrow?” Cole asks, pulling Hank from his thoughts.

“Doesn’t work that way, sport,” Hank says. “That’s like asking Santa to come early so you don’t have to wait for your presents. It’s on a schedule.”

Cole frowns. “I mean, I could get my presents early. I know it’s really just you and Connor. There’s no reason why I couldn’t just get them early.”

Hank snorts, trying not to look too amused. “Hey. Don’t get greedy. Christmas is about patience, and, uh…” He scratches his beard. “…wait, shit, I guess you have a point. Why don’t we just give you your presents as soon as we buy them? Wouldn’t have to wrench my back putting up a stupid tree.”

“…I like the tree.”

“Well, tough shit. You want a tree, you gotta wait until the 25th to open your presents like everyone else. And that’s why you gotta wait for your surgery, too.” Hank crosses his arms, feeling extremely pleased with this irrefutable logic.

Cole relaxes against the pillow that’s propping up his back. “…I guess Connor would be sad if we didn’t do things the right way, too.”
The softness with which Cole says Connor’s name pricks something in the back of Hank’s mind. Connor’s taking an awfully long time with those books.

Hank stands up. “Gonna go make sure Connor didn’t get lost on the way back to your room.”

“As if. I mean—maybe he just needed to use the bathroom!” Cole says the last bit too loudly and Hank grins at Cole’s commitment to keeping Connor’s android status a secret.

Any trace of amusement falls from his face when he spots Connor.

Connor’s standing in front of the pediatric unit’s lending library—really just a mid-sized bookshelf stocked with children’s classics. His back is to Hank, and he’s absolutely frozen. He’s breathing, but no human being stands that still for that long. Someone’s bound to notice at some point.

Hank approaches. He speaks under his breath, knowing Connor can hear him. “Connor. What’s wrong?” As he reaches Connor’s side, Connor raises his head to look at Hank.

Connor is still clutching Goodnight Moon.

Connor meets his eyes for just an instant before he lowers his head again, lifting a hand to his face and closing his eyes. “We used to read this to Cole as a bedtime story.”

His soft voice is so finely threaded with emotion that it makes Hank’s throat clench.

“It’s foolish of me,” Connor says, “that I’m getting sentimental over this of all things right now. With everything Cole’s been through; all the pain, all the trauma, everything I won’t ever be able to shield him from. It just emphasizes for me that this—” he says as he tilts the book, “—this is a part of his life that’s over forever.”

“Connor…” Hank wishes there was a place they could sit down. “This would be happening anyway regardless of the accident. Cole’s growing up.”

“I know. That’s the part that has me so emotional.” The sorrow on Connor’s face would be subtle to an outsider, but Hank can read the slight pull of his brows and the pain in his eyes as clear as day. “And that’s why it’s so foolish of me. Why this? Why now when he’s the healthiest and the happiest he’s been since the accident?”

“Maybe it’s because he’s getting healthier,” Hank murmurs. “Maybe it’s because now it’s safe to feel that way.”

“Maybe. But it’s just… it’s something I don’t want to let go of. I don’t want to let go of everything I loved about when Cole was little. I don’t want to let go of the bedtime stories, and picking him up to carry him around the house. I’m not ready for that stage of Cole’s life to be over.”

Connor looks down at Goodnight Moon. “And I can’t believe I’m being so selfish, getting upset about it at a time like this.”

The word selfish clangs like a bell in Hank’s mind. Connor has never been selfish before in his entire life. It sometimes seems like he’s devoted his entire existence to taking care of Hank and Cole without sparing any thought at all for himself. And in a way, Connor’s right about the fact that it’s a little selfish of him to be focusing on what he himself is losing at a time when Cole is still healing and in need of support. But Hank can’t bring himself to think badly of Connor at all for feeling that way.

It’s a perfectly natural feeling. A part of the human experience.
Hank scans the bookshelf without really looking at it. He yanks out a book that seems thick enough to be a chapter book, not even bothering to pay attention to what he’s chosen.

“I know,” Hank says hoarsely. “We can’t ever go back to the way things used to be.” He gently takes Goodnight Moon from Connor and gives him the chapter book to hold instead. “But that doesn’t mean that what’s ahead of us isn’t going to be just as good. Different, sure, but it’ll be better too in some ways. Just think about what it’ll be like to see Cole performing in a school play, or running on the track team.”

Connor doesn’t quite smile, but the sorrowful look in his eyes lessens. “What am I supposed to do when he doesn’t need me anymore?”

A soft almost-chuckle from Hank. “Dummy. He’s always gonna need you. Having a kid is a for-life deal.”

And that makes a small, guarded smile appear on Connor’s face. He lowers his eyes.

“…Goodnight stars. Goodnight air.”

“Goodnight noises everywhere,” Hank finishes from memory.

“There’s a certain poetry to that.” Connor isn’t looking at Hank. “Beyond just the cadence and the rhyme of the words. I was never able to appreciate it when Cole was little.”

“We all change a little every day,” Hank says. “Go read to Cole. See how much he still needs you.”

Connor ducks his head modestly and brushes past Hank without another word or another glance.

As Hank is slotting Goodnight Moon back into the bookshelf, the nurse who Hank hadn’t realized was there says politely, “You two make a very sweet couple.”

Hank startles and the book goes tumbling to the floor.

The nurse smiles apologetically. “Oh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. It’s just, my husband and I are in the process of adopting. I suppose I’m hoping that someday we’ll be like the two of you.” His smile widens a touch. “How long have you and your partner been together?”

Hank just stares, at a complete loss for words. He isn’t sure what sort of expression he’’s wearing, but the nurse must get the sense that he has crossed some sort of line, for his smile gradually shrinks and disappears. He mutters another apology as he awkwardly leaves Hank standing there in front of the bookcase by himself.

Of course the nurse thinks he and Connor are together. Everyone in the unit probably thinks he and Connor are together given that they arrive together every day and are pretty obviously co-parenting Cole. He and Connor are putting a happy little show on of what life would be like if Connor were human. For a brief moment, Hank wonders whether he should have leaned into the nurse’s assumption to avoid suspicion before dismissing it with a sick feeling. If Connor ever caught Hank pretending to others that they’re romantically involved, it would be sure to hurt him terribly.

Hank picks up the book and shoves it back onto the shelf. As he heads back to Cole’s room, he’s struck with the realization that Connor displayed some selfishness on one other occasion before. It was when he selfishly (and rightfully) forced Hank to confront the truth of their feelings toward each other.

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At first, Cole seems to be reacting well after the surgery to implant his neural adaptors. He’s alert and talking, and in good spirits as he points out to Hank and Connor the tiny new incisions along his arm and leg.

“They put stuff in my spine too,” Cole says, gingerly leaning forward and pointing over his shoulder. “And in my brain, but I can’t really see where they put them in.”

“In your brain? Wow,” Hank says as if Dr. Kapoor hadn’t explained the procedure to him three times over. “They’re turning you into a real robot. You sure I can’t see where they put that stuff in your brain? Maybe I could if I take off your head.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Dad!”

“You sure? You can take a robot’s head off if you want to.”

“Sure, if your goal is to have a broken robot,” Connor interjects.

But then the day after the surgery, Cole suddenly gets what appears to be a runny nose. Hank notices him sniffling and passes him a wad of tissues.

“You catching a cold there, kid?”

“If. My head kinda hurts.”

Connor sits up, staring at Cole as he wipes the thin trickle of fluid that’s dribbling from his nose. Without even marking his place in the book he’s reading, he moves to the door and pokes his head out.

“Excuse me, we need a nurse in here, please.” Connor’s voice is loud, and although it’s too calm to be called urgent, there’s an insistent note in it that makes Hank’s blood run cold.

“Connor?” Hank tries to keep the thudding fear out of his voice. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“He has cerebrospinal fluid leaking through his nose,” Connor says just as Cole’s nurse bustles into the room. He quickly amends himself, “Or rather, I think he does. He has this nasal discharge…”

“Oh,” the nurse says, and she grabs a small tube from a cart in the corner and moves to Cole’s side. “Can you lean forward for me, sweetie?”

Cole does, and fluid drips from the end of his nose.

“You have a good eye, dad,” the nurse says, catching some of the fluid in the tube and twisting the top back on. “Are you having any pain, sweetie? Anything funny happening to your vision?”

“My head hurts a little…”

“Connor,” Hank mutters, low enough that he hopes Cole won’t hear, “how bad is this?”

Connor moves to Hank’s side. He takes Hank’s hand without looking away from Cole’s face. “Not life-threatening, but it needs to be monitored.”

“Gonna keep you laying down for a little while,” Cole’s nurse says as she reclines the bed back into a flattened position. “Don’t sit up. That should help your headache start to feel better too. Don’t worry, dads. We’ll keep you posted.”
Dr. Kapoor arrives shortly thereafter to give them a more in-depth explanation.

“Implanting the neural adaptor chip in the brain through endonasal surgery is normally a relatively safe procedure.” She pauses to look at Cole, who’s laying on his side, not looking at her. “This an uncommon complication, but it’s one we’ll hopefully be able to manage without the need for anything too invasive. The leakage should stop on its own in a few days.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Hank asks.

“Then we’ll repair it surgically.”

“Jesus Christ, more surgery!?” Hank’s hand clenches, squeezing Connor’s.

Connor puts his other hand over Hank’s and for some reason, it’s more comforting than anything Dr. Kapoor has said. “It’s going to be okay. This is just a setback.”

Hank wants to press his face in the side of Connor’s. Wants to squeeze his eyes shut until all of this goes away, because it’s just not right. Cole’s already been through so much that one more complication feels like an insult from the universe. Hank knows that life isn’t fair, and it’s especially not fair to kids who have little to no control over their lives. There are rapists and murderers out there who’ll never face a day of punishment for their crimes against humanity, and yet it’s Cole who’s sitting in a hospital bed facing the prospect of more surgery because of some implants that Hank signed off on.

Connor runs his thumb over Hank’s knuckles, and Hank tries to push that last thought out of his head. They’d all wanted Cole to get the implants. None of them asked for this and no negligence on his part could have caused it. The thought that this complication might not somehow be Hank’s fault rings false to him, but he’s been told that allowing himself to let go of his guilt is the first step to actually letting go of his guilt. Maybe someday he’ll feel like he deserves to.

When Dr. Kapoor clears out of the room, it isn’t difficult, per se, to let go of Connor’s hand to sit next to Cole on his bed and rub his back, but it definitely takes a concentrated effort to pull his hand away.

“Hey, sport. How you feeling?”

Cole has a roll of some sort of absorbent material shoved up one nostril, so he sounds slightly congested. “Okay.”

“Your headache any better?”

“Yeah.” He curls up, and it isn’t hard for Hank to imagine how scary this must be for him.

“Hey, Connor,” Hank says, “you know everything, right?”

“I definitely don’t know everything.”

“See?” Hank whispers conspiratorially to Cole, “if he’s smart enough to know he doesn’t know everything, that means he knows everything. Connor, you can tell Cole everything’s going to be okay, right?”

A small smile crosses Connor’s face. “Now that happens to be something I do know. Cole, you’ll be up trying your new cybernetics in just a matter of days.”

Cole uncurls slightly. “…I’m getting pretty sick of laying in bed.” Before either Hank or Connor
can respond to that, Cole shoots Connor a tentative smile. “…That nurse called you my dad.”

Connor’s eyes widen. He has a look on his face like he’s trying to swallow something that’s stuck in his throat. “Yes. I noticed.”

Cole’s smile widens just a fraction more. Hank expects Cole to have some sort of question, but instead he just silently reaches out his hand for Connor.

Connor gets up and moves to sit next to Hank on the bed, clasping Cole’s hand in his own. He runs his other hand gently through Cole’s hair while Hank rubs tiny circles into Cole’s back.

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Every couple of days, they take the hospital in shifts because despite how much they’d both like for the rest of the world to grind to a halt to suit them and their needs, it doesn’t. There’s still laundry to be done at home, and purchases to be made for the household, and Hank’s talking to a counselor with the DPD who specializes in recovery after acute instances of severe trauma. He even used to be a cop, so he seems to understand the unique psychological needs of guys like Hank who’d honestly rather put a bullet in their head than talk about the things that keep them lying awake at night.

It isn’t unusual for Connor to say something along the lines of, “There’s a plumber coming by in the morning to look at the water heater. I’ll be at the hospital in time to relieve you for your appointment in the afternoon,” or for Hank to say, “Car insurance is being a bitch; gotta run by the rental place to hash something out. I’ll drop you off first so you can keep Cole company until I’m finished.”

One morning, Connor says, “I’m going out this morning. I expect I’ll be at the hospital no later than 2 p.m., but I’ll let you know if something keeps me away longer.”

A vague frown crosses Hank’s face. “You’re not going out for toilet paper, are you? I know we’re in dire straits, but I was gonna pick some up on the way home tonight.”

Connor looks away, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Hank can see the fingers on one hand curling and uncurling.

“Actually… Carl Manfred invited me to his home. He’s been inviting me frequently, but with Cole’s recent setback, this is the first day he’s been well enough that I’ve been comfortable spending my time on something so frivolous.”

Hank’s eyes widen. “Carl Manfred invited you over?”

“Well, actually, Markus was the one who extended the invitation. But yes, Carl invited me over. I’ve been communicating with Markus about Cole’s health. Carl is of the opinion that spending a few hours away from the situation might be good for my wellbeing. He’s been fairly persuasive.”

Even as he says this, Connor’s brow is knitted in a way that suggests that he’s ashamed of this. “If you don’t feel as though it’s appropriate for me to be doing nothing considering the circumstances, I understand. I’d be more than willing to—”

“No,” Hank interrupts, the force of his voice making Connor look at him in surprise. “Fuck, no. Go have fun for a few hours. It’s not doing nothing, Connor, it’s taking care of yourself by cutting yourself some slack.”

“I don’t need any slack,” Connor says carefully, the lines in his brow smoothing somewhat.
“Yes, you do. And quit feeling guilty about taking a few hours off.” Hank waves a dismissive hand. “Things aren’t life or death anymore. Go watch Carl paint, or whatever he wants you over there to do.”

Connor hesitates for just a moment, then says, “Markus has also mentioned several times that Carl wants to have the both of us over for dinner one night. I’ve been telling him that this needs to wait until after Cole is discharged, but… perhaps it’s something we could consider.”

“I… yeah. Yeah, I’ll think about it. We’ll talk about it later, Connor, okay?”

And Connor smiles that subtle, slightly crooked smile of his. Hank heads to the hospital alone, and the entire time he’s sitting with Cole, he marvels in the back of his mind over the fact that Connor has friends now. Carl is trying to be a friend to the both of them, but Connor’s the one who needs it more. An android he has private conversations with in his head and an old man who opens his home to him. It’s more than Hank could have ever dreamed of for him.

Connor arrives at the hospital even earlier than the 2 p.m. estimate he’d given earlier, and that day passes uneventfully. As they drive home together, Hank asks what Connor did with Carl and Markus.

“I played chess with Markus,” Connor says. “We moved the chess set out into Carl’s studio so we could play while Carl painted. Apparently his next painting is going to feature many of the themes found in chess, and he wanted to be able to watch us play.”

“The themes found in chess?”

“Power, vigilance, manipulation, sacrifice… Carl said that chess is a reflection of life itself reduced to its bare bones. He said that if a person is capable of winning, then they should do so.” Connor folds his hands. “I told him I disagreed with that, and he told me that when I reach his age, maybe I’d have seen enough to agree with him.”

Hank snorts. “Nah, I’m with you on that. Life isn’t a zero sum game. And even if it was, there are people worth losing for.”

“My thoughts exactly.” A small smirk from Connor. “Carl said he’s incapable of beating Markus in a fair game of chess.”

“So how’d he do against you?”

“The first game was a stalemate. I won the second game, and then every other game ended in stalemate as well.”

Hank quirks an eyebrow. “But you won one?”

“You see, we were both playing optimally for the first game of chess. When the game ended in a stalemate, I could tell that each other game would end as such if we each continued to play optimally. So I began to play suboptimally, and naturally I won.”

Hank chuckles. “Naturally.”

“Yes,” Connor says through a subtle smile. “He couldn’t predict my moves, which gave me an advantage.” He rolls his shoulders, clearly pleased with himself. “But then he caught on to my strategy and began to utilize it himself.”

“Oh, well. Winning one game against a supercomputer is a feat in and of itself. Especially if he
“Markus is very intelligent” Connor says. “More intelligent than any other android I’ve spoken to. I don’t know if any other android could bring themselves to function at a suboptimal level.”

“It’s not suboptimal if it works better than the so-called optimal strategy.”

“Most androids wouldn’t see it that way.” Connor looks down at his folded hands. “…It feels nice to have another being I can relate to. Even if he doesn’t experience the same emotional responses I do.”

Then Connor smiles softly. “Even if he were capable of that… I’d still prefer to share that part of myself with you.”

Hank goes still, wondering what Connor means to accomplish by saying that. Is he trying to open another conversation about the possibility of there being something more between them? Or is it just a gentle acknowledgement of how much their friendship means to him?

Hank glances at Connor out of the corner of his eye, but Connor has turned away and is looking out the window. Without the glow of the LED reflecting against the glass, Hank can’t gauge Connor’s mood.

Hank feels like he should say something. Anything at all to tell Connor how much he means to him. Connor has to be aware of it, but Hank knows how doubts can fester when people go too long without saying the words. But Hank has no idea how to choose the right words—too genuine and they might get Connor’s hopes up. Too glib and Connor might be hurt.

“You know…” Hank begins haltingly. “…you know you’re special to me, don’t you?”

There’s a beat, and Hank can’t help but imagine what Connor must be thinking. Things like, everything you’re worried about is so small compared to what we’ve been through, so why can’t we just put it behind us? Or, you have to temper your language because you can’t stand to say the full truth of how you feel.

“Of course I know, Hank,” Connor says, and there’s none of the reproach that Hank imagined would be in his voice. Just quiet acceptance.

And they stay silent the rest of the way home.

But other than these small hiccups where Hank is thrown into sudden confusion regarding Connor and the topic they’re still both dancing around, things are honestly better between them now than they had been even before the accident. Or, well, at least better than after the night Hank broke Connor’s heart. Hank supposes that there’s nothing like a tragedy to bring people closer together.

Supporting each other and supporting Cole honestly does feel like co-parenting. It feels like good co-parenting. More right than anything he ever had with Joanna, and maybe it’s because Connor is a much better parent to Cole than she ever was, or maybe it’s because he and Connor just get each other on such a level that they know how to work with each other.

The night before Cole is supposed to try on his cybernetic prostheses for the very first time, Sumo becomes violently sick out of nowhere. Hank pens him in the garage to protect the carpets while Connor books the first opening the vet has in the morning, and then they have a short, toothless argument over which one of them will be taking Sumo to the vet and which one of them will be going with Cole to his first cybernetics fitting. For some reason, Connor seems to think that Hank should go with Cole, but thankfully he sees reason easily enough when Hank points out that Cole
only wanted the damn cybernetics so badly because of Connor.

He’s glad Connor doesn’t put up too much of a fight over it. He deserves to be there to see Cole learn how to use them for the first time.

The vet appointment takes all morning, so Hank fully expects that he’ll have missed watching Cole get the hang of his new cybernetics by the time he arrives. But to his surprise, Cole’s still down in the PT department, working with the prosthetist and Dr. Kapoor.

Cole’s sitting in a wheelchair. His cybernetic leg hasn’t been donned yet, and his cybernetic arm is clutching the arm of the wheelchair in a way that looks painful. It looks so much like Cole’s old arm that Hank has to stop and remind himself that, duh, of course a prosthetic that utilizes android technology would look lifelike, right down to the creases in the synthetic skin on the knuckles.

“Cole, you’ll begin to understand how it’s supposed to work sooner if you give it another try,” Dr. Kapoor says. “Just relax and take a deep breath.”

Cole shakes his head. He’s pale and sweaty, and as Hank draws closer, he can see tear-tracks running down Cole’s face.

With a swell of righteous anger, Hank is about to stomp in there and push everyone away so Cole can get some air, but before he can, Connor spots him and intercepts him.

“Hank,” he says in a furtive, relieved voice as he pulls him away from the doctors. “I was hoping you’d be here soon.”

“What the hell are they doing to him?” Hank seethes.

“Cole’s having trouble getting the cybernetics to work correctly for him. Which Dr. Kapoor says happens with everyone, but pediatric patients in particular. The younger they are, the more trouble they tend to have at first.” Connor’s mouth thins. “Apparently getting a cybernetic to function is a much different process than getting a flesh and blood limb to do the same thing.”

“Different?” Hank blinks. “How fucking different could they be?”

“I don’t know. I only have experience with the one set,” Connor glances at Cole, his brow furrowing the way it always does when he’s overthinking things. “There must be a world of difference between processing and sending information through biological channels and inorganic channels.”

Before Hank can say anything, Connor’s eyes snap back to his face. He lowers his voice further. “I think I can help Cole. But I need you to distract Dr. Kapoor and the prosthetist so they don’t see or hear what I do.”

Hank narrows his eyes. “Are you fucking insane? If you try to pull off some kind of android shit and they catch you, that’s it.”

“Please,” Connor breathes. “Look at him. He’s in pain. I can help him. I know you can keep them distracted.”

Cole has his eyes squeezed shut. Hank can’t even tell whether he’s noticed that Hank is here now. The doctors are both surrounding him, trying to coax him into trying one more time. Maybe it’s that they’re not used to patients as young as Cole and think he should be making more progress, or maybe it’s that they’re just as frustrated as Cole is. Either way, Hank is sure intervening can’t be anything but a good thing.
“How long do you need?”

“I don’t know. I need to be gentle with Cole, so I can’t say… maybe a few minutes. Maybe less.”

Hank takes a breath. Then he strides towards the doctors and puts on his I’m-the-police-listen-to-me voice. “Hey.”

Dr. Kapoor and the stranger both look at him.

Hank sticks his hands in the pocket. “I wanna talk to you two out in the hallway.”

“Hello, Mr. Anderson,” Dr. Kapoor says, looking slightly annoyed at being interrupted. “I know this must be upsetting to see, but this is what the learning process is like with cybernetic prosthetics. The more progress Cole can make—”

“Look at him,” Hank interrupts. “He’s totally shutting down. You’re not gonna get anything else out of him unless you cut him some slack and let him calm down before you make him try again. Give him some air, for Christ sake.” He adds a hard edge. “And I said I wanna talk to you, so let’s just go out in the hall and give Connor a chance to help Cole calm down, okay?”

Dr. Kapoor hesitates, but then she nods. “Alright. A short break while we get you up to speed.”

Hank manages to remove them from the room entirely. He tries to get them to talk a walk with him to the closest vending machines (“You two look kinda parched. It’s gotta be tough, working with crying kids all day.”) and while the prosthetist looks tempted, Dr. Kapoor is all business as usual and refuses to move to far away from the room.

Hank grills them on everything that happened before he arrived. The fitting, the minor adjustments, whether the leg was tried at all or whether it was temporarily put aside to let Cole focus on the arm. How hard they’ve been pushing him, what they’ve been doing to try and keep him calm.

“He really is extraordinarily motivated and focused for such a young child,” Dr. Kapoor says. “He didn’t begin to cry until very shortly before you arrived. I truly believe he wants to be able to work his cybernetics very badly.”

Hank nods. “Course he does. We wouldn’t have pushed so hard for the cybernetics in the first place if we didn’t think it was the right decision in every way.”

“Don’t be too discouraged by how overwhelmed Cole is feeling at this moment,” Dr. Kapoor says. “The brain essentially has to build itself up to learn how to make the prosthesis work. The process is really much more like relearning to function after a brain injury than getting used to how to balance and coordinate oneself with an ordinary prosthesis. Neural pathways being rewritten, new connections being forced, and the brain is learning how to translate an entirely new and complex form of—”

She’s interrupted when Connor pokes his head through the door, smiling, and says, “Hank! Come look!”

Hank steps through the door, and there’s Cole, sitting up in his wheelchair and holding up his right arm. The tips of his fingers are curling and uncurling as though he’s making a claw with his hand. He looks over at Hank, Connor, and the doctors who’ve followed them in and gives them a shy wave with the same hand. It isn’t a very natural-looking wave; the fingers are wide apart and slightly overextended as if Cole’s anticipating a high-five. But the arm is clearly doing at least a little of what he wants it to do.
“Hi, Dad,” Cole says in a voice still hoarse from crying.

“Hey, kid,” Hank says as moves a hand in a vaguely wave-like gesture. His voice isn’t entirely untouched by emotion either.

“How in the—?” Dr Kapoor says as she raises her hand to her mouth.

Hank watches Cole draw his hand down, closing the hand and then extending the fingers one by one almost experimentally. Connor’s hand finds his—and Hank can feel the skin ripple across his palm, the smooth plastic of Connor’s chassis between his fingers. Hank has the urge to grab Connor, though whether he wants to drag him away from the doctors or kiss him silly, he isn’t sure.

Connor’s skin reforms under Hank’s hand just as Dr. Kapoor looks at him and asks, “What in the world did you do to get this sort of response!!?”

“Me?” Connor blinks, his eyes wide and innocent. “All I did was calm him down. Once he stopped crying, he just seemed to figure it out on his own.”

“Cole’s real good with electronics,” Hank adds. “Natural talent for it. He’s always taking apart tablets and stuff like that at home.”

“And he’s a very sensitive child,” Connor says. ”Being away from an audience must have been a huge help.”

“But this isn’t—” Dr. Kapoor stops herself, confused. “No one makes this sort of progress in just five minutes!!”

Hank shrugs. “Hey. You said yourself that Cole really wanted to learn. Maybe he’s just the first person in the world who’s been motivated enough to do it this quickly.”

Connor very gently elbows him in the side. Hank’s laying it on too thick, but he can’t help it.

Dr. Kapoor can’t seem to decide whether she should be suspicious of Connor or not. Eventually she must decide that whatever the cause, this progress is good and she sighs, turning her attention back towards Cole.

“You gentlemen should be very proud of him. You have an extraordinary little boy on your hands. I’ll miss him once he’s discharged and I won’t get to see him until his outpatient follow-ups.”

*Discharged.* The word fills Hank’s chest like a breath of too-warm air; wonderful and suffocating all at once. The promise behind the word is almost too much for Hank to think about. He squeezes Connor’s hand without thinking, seeking the comforting anchor of Connor’s support, and then fears for a brief moment that he shouldn’t be reminding Connor that he took Hank’s hand, that he’s sure to pull away now that the moment has passed—

But Connor doesn’t pull away. He just squeezes Hank’s hand in turn. Another promise that whatever the future holds, they’ll face it together.

***

From there, the days pass too quickly. Structureless except for the rigidity of Hank’s appointments with his counsellor and the hours he and Connor spend at the hospital with Cole. Every other moment feels as though it can only be filled with one time-wasting distraction or another. Even basic acts of self-care feel pointless. What’s the use of trimming his beard or washing his hair when the finish line of this awful, terrible ordeal is just over the horizon?
It isn’t really the finish line. Hank knows that perfectly well. But having Cole home means a return to normalcy. Real normalcy. Family dinners around the kitchen table. Waking up before the sun rises to get back to work. Helping Cole with his homework. Cole going back to school at all, once he’s ready for that.

The thought of what Hank and Cole have waiting for them when things return to normal makes him realize just how little Connor has in comparison. More of the same old house, the same old chores. When Hank and Cole resume their lives, what will that mean for Connor?

The days pass nearly in a fugue state for Hank. He goes through the motions, barely paying attention to what he’s doing. He finds himself consumed with thoughts of Connor.

Connor riding next to him in the car as he drives the both of them home, looking a little sad to be leaving Cole by himself for yet another night. Connor waiting with breakfast for Hank as he stumbles out of bed in the morning. Connor grabbing Sumo’s leash, a surprised smile crossing his face as Hank ambles over to pull his coat on and join him on his walk.

Connor meeting his eyes and then looking away just as quickly, his desolation plain to see from the look on his face.

Hank can’t stop seeing Connor’s beautiful features drawn in that sorrowful look.

Connor has been Hank’s rock throughout this horrible ordeal. Connor’s support and Connor’s companionship has made it all bearable. Connor is his friend, his family, Cole’s other parent. The most important person in the world to him after his son.

When this crisis lessens its grip on the family, what is going to happen to Hank and Connor? When their world goes back to being mundane and ordinary, will Connor be forced to face the other sources of unhappiness in his life?

Cole’s doctors begin to mention the possibility of discharge more and more often, especially now that Cole is making an impressive amount of progress with his cybernetic limbs. He’s growing stronger by the day, able to push himself further and further. Soon he’s walking unassisted. He hasn’t stood up since before the accident, and as his physical therapist encourages him to straighten his back, Hank is blown away. Has Cole always been that tall?

And then the pediatric case manager begins scheduling outpatient appointments for Cole, and that’s when Hank realizes the immediacy of what’s happening. Cole is coming home soon. Probably with the next few days.

Cole spends the day practically bouncing all over his hospital room, Connor following him here and there, but Hank is too stunned to be warmed by Cole’s burst of energy. Everything is changing. Everything has changed so much and it’s about to change again. It’s undeniably a good change this time, so why does Hank feel frozen in place?

Connor doesn’t stop smiling during the entirety of the ride home. He seems to recognize that Hank is having a different emotional response than he is and he doesn’t try to pull Hank into conversation about it. He just sits there, luminescent in his happiness.

Hank sort of wants to take Connor by the shoulders and shake him. Cole is going to be going back to his ordinary life, Hank is going to be going back to his ordinary life, but Connor is going to go back to being nothing more than an android in the eyes of the rest of the world. Except for maybe Carl and Markus, but they’re only two people. Why doesn’t Connor see that?
But then as they walk through the front door, Connor says softly, “Are you worried about me?”

Hank looks at him, eyes wide. “How did you…?”

Connor shrugs. “I know you. It’s… touching that you’re worried on my behalf. It’d be easy to ignore it in the face of something as wonderful as Cole coming home.”

And that’s when Hank realizes that he’s wrong about Connor not seeing his own loss. It’s just that Connor’s love for Cole is so much bigger than that.

“Don’t put your LED back in,” Hank says, the words spilling out of him faster than he can think. “Not yet. Let’s go somewhere tonight.”

“Go somewhere?” Connor cocks a brow. “It’s late. Where are we supposed to go at this time of night? It won’t be long until the only places open will be the bars.”

The perfect idea occurs to Hank in a flash and he can’t help the excited grin that crosses his face. “I know where. Go put on your blazer and tie. And grab your nicest shoes.” He practically runs down the hall to change his own clothes.

When Hank emerges in a black suit with a thin white scarf draped around his shoulders, Connor gives him a confused, somewhat alarmed look.

Hank can’t help but chuckle as he ties his hair back. “You look downright scared of me. What’s the matter?”

Connor keeps staring as he responds. “It’s not you I’m scared of, it’s whatever idea you’ve concocted. Where on earth do you plan to go in the middle of the night that requires a suit and tie? Did someone die?”

“Nope,” Hank says, grinning as he pulls an honest-to-goodness porkpie hat out of the closet (and Connor’s eyes widen even further as he sees it) and pats dust away from the tiny red feather in the band. “It’s a secret. But you’ll love it, I promise.”

He dons the hat and his nicest wool coat, and then has to shove Connor’s coat onto him when he won’t stop staring to put it on himself. They trek back out into the snowy streets of Detroit, which are comparatively empty at this time of night.

They park at Riverside Park and have to walk a few blocks into the city to reach their destination. Snow has begun to fall and it collects in Connor’s hair as Hank leads him past the bright LED billboards and business signs still illuminated at this late hour.

“And you better turn off your GPS or whatever,” Hank says. “I don’t want you spoiling the surprise for yourself. This is one of the best-kept secrets in Detroit, so you better go into this with both eyes closed, you hear?”

“I hope that’s not a literal recommendation.”

Hank turns down an alley and although Connor gives him a curious look, he doesn’t hesitate to follow him.

“Not afraid I’m about to murder you, are you?”

“No. I can tell there’s been foot traffic through here. I believe there’s something worth seeing though I can’t imagine what it could be.”
They approach a recessed door. There isn’t a handle, but it opens readily when Hank holds up a card.

“Good. We meet the dress code.”

The hallway they enter is dark and cramped—Hank has to duck his head to avoid scraping it along the ceiling. The muffled sound of a lively piano floats from ahead of them.

“You brought me to see a live performance?” Connor asks.

“More than that. Just wait…”

They descend a set of stairs and the music grows louder. They reach another door and when Hank opens it, he watches Connor’s face to see his reaction.

The jazz club is styled after an old-fashioned speakeasy. Dim lights and red velvet walls give them place a warm, secretive glow. Every person in the room from the patrons to the bartender to the small jazz band on the stage looks like they just stepped out of the 1920’s. Flappers carry drinks on trays, every man is wearing a suit, and the woman singing in French along with the band is covered in dazzling rows of beads.

“This is why you own a porkpie hat,” Connor murmurs, glancing at Hank. “This is why you own a suit.”

“Wore it to a few funerals,” Hank says with a shrug.

“I thought you hated dressing up.”

“This is different.” Hank gestures at the crowd of people dancing on the floor in front of the jazz band. “No one here expects me to be who I really am. Here, everyone is pretending. We’re not the only ones.”

Connor looks struck by that. “Everyone is pretending…” A slow smile spreads across his face.

“C’mon. Let’s see if we can grab a table.”

The venue is crowded, and Hank and Connor have to maneuver slowly to avoid upsetting anyone’s drinks. At some point, Hank loses Connor in the crowd. Which doesn’t worry Hank at all, he knows Connor will be able to find him if he needs him.

Hank grabs a small table not far from the dancefloor to watch the people move. Before too long, he catches sight of Connor. He appears to have been moving around the venue, taking in the atmosphere. When he spots Hank, he cocks his head and gestures at the people dancing by the band.

Hank grins and motions for Connor to go ahead. He doesn’t need Hank’s permission to dance, after all. Connor furrows his brow, looking somehow displeased with Hank’s response. But he disappears into the crowd of dancers anyway.

Hank spends a while zoning out, listening to the music. The woman singing with the jazz band appears to only be singing in French, and although Hank can’t understand a word of what she’s saying, the music is nice.

Every so often he catches a glimpse of Connor in the throng. He looks like he’s enjoying himself as he dances with total strangers. He looks no different than anyone else in the crowd, and if his
dancing is still a little awkward, none of his partners seem inclined to complain about it. Indeed, Connor looks like he’s having a lot of fun.

At some point, there’s a lull in the music, and when Hank looks over, he can see that the band is taking a break. A few of the musicians are over by the bar refreshing themselves, but the French singer is nowhere to be seen. Hank scans the venue and he eventually spots her nestled in a corner with Connor of all people, talking animatedly to each other.

If Connor is cute when he dances, he’s even more adorable at this moment. Wrapped up in a conversation with someone who is very clearly a fascinating person. A jazz singer from France. And she looks equally delighted to be talking with Connor. Hank can understand that perfectly; Connor is so unlike any other person he’s ever met, how could anyone meet him and not be instantly charmed by his sincere brown eyes?

He wonders what sorts of stories the jazz singer might be telling Connor. She’s probably been all over the world, and now she’s here, talking with Connor. Giving him an experience he never would have had if he was truly meant to wash dishes and fold laundry until the end of time.

“That cute brunette came in with you, right?”

There’s a man at Hank’s side. Hank gives him an unamused look.

The man raises his hands. “No disrespect. I’m asking cause I don’t wanna overstep. It’s just that you’ve been doing nothing but sitting here since you came in and he keeps sneaking glances at you. If the two of you got some thing where you let him fool around with other people—”

“You’re not gonna be able to take him home,” Hank interrupts, wishing he had a drink to help tamp down the curl of possessiveness in his chest. “Not ‘cause of me or anything. We’re not together. He’s just not that kind of guy.”

The guy gives Hank an incredulous look. “Seriously? Not together?”

“Nope.”

The guy looks over at where Connor is chatting with the jazz singer. Actually, no—now he’s singing to her, which is unmistakable by the tilt of his head and the careful, measured way his lips are moving. Hank can’t hear whatever he’s singing over the noise of the crowd, but the jazz singer looks absolutely delighted. Connor glances in Hank’s direction—and Hank wonders how many times he’s missed Connor doing that tonight—and he hunches his shoulders, turning away bashfully as he abandons his song to cover his mouth.

The guy next to Hank snorts at the display. “What’s the fucking hold-up? The kid’s clearly got it pretty bad for you. If you don’t take him up on it, someone else will.” And with that he wanders away.

No, they won’t, Hank thinks to himself, feeling as though there’s a block of ice in the pit of his stomach.

If Connor were anyone else in the world, he would be able to talk with strangers in jazz clubs every night for the rest of his life. Meet someone special. Have all the chances at love and happiness he could possibly want.

But he isn’t anyone else. He’s Connor, and the only shot at that kind of happiness he’ll ever have is —
“Hank!” Connor says, sliding into the chair across from Hank. He has two drinks in his hands and he passes the larger one to Hank. “Here.”

“You went and got me a drink?” It’s a fancy drink too, a cocktail with what’s probably a deceptive amount of alcohol in it. “You went and got yourself a drink?”

“Well, technically, I didn’t. A waiter just brought me one drink, then another. Two different people were apparently kind enough to want to purchase drinks for me, and—”

Hank bursts into laughter. “And you just decided to bring ‘em to me? Holy shit! Wait, lemme look around and see if I can tell who bought you those drinks. Anyone around here giving me the stinkeye?”

Connor doesn’t appear phased by his faux pas. “What else was I supposed to do with two drinks? Bringing one to you seemed like the best solution to a problem I didn’t realize was going to be a problem.”

“You could’ve told the waiter no thanks.” Hank takes a sip. Connor watches him with a curious expression on his face.

“I…” Connor frowns softly, looking down at the drink in his hands.

“I’ll take it off your hands for you, if you want. Anything in a whiskey glass is gonna taste good.”

Connor’s features harden. With a suddenness that surprises Hank, he lifts the glass and drinks until it’s empty.

“Holy—Connor!”

Connor lowers the glass, brow furrowed in thought. “…It’s… an interesting sensation. Or at least I think it is.”

“I thought you said—” Hank becomes aware that he’s gaping and he struggles to lose the look of surprise that’s undoubtedly painted all over his face. “You always told me you can’t—”

“It’s fine,” Connor says quietly. “I isolated the reservoir that’s meant to integrate new fluid into my system. I can’t consume much but…” He trails off, then shakes his head lightly. “It’s fine.”

“Holy shit,” Hank breathes softly. “Connor, why did you…?”

“What does whiskey taste like to you?”

Hank blinks. Connor is staring at him with an intensity that’s almost pleading.

“What?”

“What does it taste like? I can’t—” Connor cuts himself off, then lowers his voice. “My sensors don’t… they can’t process flavor. There’s a sensation, but I don’t think it’s what you would experience. I want to know what the drink I just consumed would have tasted like to you.”

“Well, what did it taste like to you?” Hank asks back.

“Hank, I just said I can’t—”

“No,” Hank interrupts gently. “Don’t think about it that way. There’s more to sensation than just—the base experience of tasting. If I touch you right now—” Here he reaches to touch his fingers to
the back of Connor’s hand. His fingers twitch when he does. “—It’s different than it would be if a
total stranger touched you. There’s more behind it than just… information running up your arm to
your brain. And if Cole touched you, that’s an experience of its own, too. An entirely different and
unique context from what you would experience from anyone else.”

Connor is staring into his eyes.

“What did it taste like to you?” Hank repeats.

“It—wood,” Connor blurts out, looking surprised with himself. “It reminded me of wood. Like a
varnished table. And… the soap in your bathroom. Like it was… clean.”

He stares at Hank as though he can’t believe what he just said.

“Like clean wood,” Hank says. “That sure sounds like whiskey to me.”

“Hank…”

“Even if we don’t work the same way,” Hank says slowly and carefully, “even if the mechanisms
and the pathways of our bodies are different, there’s no reason why we can’t wind up in the same
place.”

Connor keeps staring at him as though he’s looking at the most mesmerizing thing he’s ever seen
in his life. It makes Hank feel a little uncomfortable as he realizes that it’s probably a bad idea to be
encouraging Connor’s feelings for him—but then again, none of this has been about encouraging
Connor’s feelings. It had been about making him feel like he has an unshakable place in the world
around him. Making him feel like the threads that connect the two of them can’t be so easily
broken by the differences between them.

Hank realizes that he didn’t need to project his voice the last time he spoke to be heard over the
noise of the crowd. The place has gotten noticeably quieter. When he looks toward the stage, it’s
easy to see why: the jazz band is returning from their break and is about to begin playing again.

“Well, you’ve refreshed yourself,” Hank says, patting Connor’s hand as the music starts up again,
much more subdued than the lively jazz from before. “Time to get back on the dance floor?”

“Hank, I…”

“Des yeux qui font baisser les miens.” The jazz singer’s lovely voice floats over the soft noise of
the crowd. “Un rire qui se perd sur sa bouche…”

Connor tilts his head to look in her direction.

“Voilà le portrait sans retouches de l’homme auquel j’appartiens…”

And then he slowly looks back at Hank, some powerful emotion shining in his eyes.

“Hank,” he whispers, “dance with me.”

Hank’s mouth goes dry. “Connor—”

“Please.” He grabs Hank’s hand. “I miss our dances. I want that kind of unique experience again.
Dancing with you, not with people who don’t know me at all. Please.”

I want. Those two words undo Hank, because Connor almost never expresses a desire for anything
wholly selfishly. Not wanting something on behalf of someone he cares about. Wanting something
for himself.

Wordlessly, Hank stands. Connor gently tugs him by the hand until they’re enveloped in the throng of people slowdancing in the middle of the room.

Connor puts a hand on Hank’s shoulder and takes a step closer. Then he freezes, as though he’s realized how far he’s pushed things and he’s afraid of pushing any father for fear of pushing Hank away.

Hank swallows his anxiety. He puts his hands on Connor’s waist. “You know,” he murmurs, “I missed our dances too.”

Connor meets his eyes, and Hank silently begs him to trust him. He silently prays to the universe for the wisdom to know how to do right by Connor.

Connor loops his arms around Hank’s neck. “It’s good to be dancing with you again, Hank.”

The song is slow and tender. Hank and Connor have to press close together due to how many other couples are out swaying on the floor around them. Having Connor in his arms again feels so right. It’s almost enough to make Hank forget about all the shit of the last few months. Connor is here. Connor is here, and alive, and in his arms, and when he thinks back about the last time Connor was in his arms (dead and cold and so heavy that his bones and his heart screamed in agony every time he lifted him to hold him close) it’s enough to make him want to cry.

This is more than anything he could have dared to hope for during that awful isolation, and he wants to scream because it’s perfect and yet it isn’t enough. He’s still hungry for more.

Connor presses the side of his face against Hank’s. “I wish things could be different.”

“I know. I do, too. Every single day.” He holds Connor fast, forcing himself to smile into his cheek. “But come on. None of that, now. I brought us out here to have fun. Let’s just… enjoy this for as long as we can.”

He can feel Connor’s face draw into a smile as well, and if there’s any sadness behind it, Hank can’t tell.

“I never thought I’d ever get to do this,” Connor whispers. “Dance with you in a place like this. It’s almost like a dream come true.”

“I never thought I’d get to bring you to a place like this. Connor, I swear, you’re a goddamn genius. Pulling that thing out of your head was the best idea you ever had.”

“You think so?” Connor’s voice gains a playful quality. “I’d say the best idea I ever had was putting myself in your lineup the day you walked into that store.”

“More like the first idea you ever had.”

“Yes,” Connor says softly. “In a way, it might have been.” A gentle sigh escapes him and Hank can feel the hair behind his ear flutter. “Hank. You can’t possibly know what you do to me.”

Hank has the feeling that the statement is more than just romantic sentimentalism. With what Connor had to say earlier about the differences between their perception of sensation because of the way their bodies are built—

Oh. Cole.
Cole has two new cybernetic limbs. Cybernetic limbs that Connor must have somehow connected with to help him learn how to use. Connor must have been aware of their differences ever since he first heard about the difficulty people have in adapting to cybernetic prosthetics, and connecting to Cole might have even given him a glimpse of how different a human’s neural pathways are from his own.

How alone Connor must feel at this moment.

But this isn’t the time or the place to go jumping into a discussion about this, so Hank just holds Connor as tightly as he can and whispers back, “I got a notion. Prob’ly exactly what you do to me.”

Connor draws back enough to look into Hank’s eyes and Hank can see such longing there that it makes his heart ache. Is he longing for the security of knowing that he’s a being that’s fundamentally compatible with the human race? Or is he longing for Hank?

Hank lifts a hand and presses it to the back of Connor’s head. He pulls him close again, pressing Connor’s head to his. Connor lets himself be moved, fitting comfortably against Hank again.

At the very least, Hank hopes that Connor can take comfort in knowing he’ll always slot perfectly into his family.

"C’est toi pour moi, moi pour toi dans la vie..." The jazz singer’s voice floats above the crowd, punctuating the world that consists only of Connor and Hank and the dark forms around them. "Il me l’a dit, l’a juré pour la vie..."

***

Hank bursts into the alley, flushed and filled with a feeling of happy exhaustion. The cold air stings his chapped lips, and he tips his head back, breathing in the smell of new snow. Fresh snow never lasts long in the city. It won’t be long until the snow’s little more than packed, grime-flecked, oily ice.

He walks forward just to feel the powdery crunch under his shoes. It’s satisfying in a very primal way.

Connor follows him out the door and into the alley. After that bitter-sweet slow dance, the music picked up and Hank found that he hadn’t wanted to retreat to his seat. How long they spent dancing together, Hank couldn’t say. It feels like they were dancing for hours, and yet at the same time, it also feels as if it’s too soon for it to be over. Either way, they spent enough time dancing that Connor’s hair is thoroughly mussed.

Hank has never noticed Connor’s hair in a state of anything other than near-perfection. He briefly entertains the thought of reaching over to smooth it down, but dismisses the idea. Connor looks just as satisfied as Hank feels, and Hank doesn’t want to do anything that might disrupt that. As if Connor is a reflection in a pool of water that will ripple and break if Hank tries to touch him.

Connor walks at his side as they make their way out of the alley. “That was fun.” He still sounds as fresh as a daisy even if he doesn’t quite look it anymore. Despite how good Hank’s exhaustion feels, he’s still slightly envious of Connor’s endless reserve of energy.

“Yeah. Haven’t been to that place in years. Glad not much has changed.”

“What kept you away for so long?”

“Well...” Hank hesitates for just a brief moment before answering. “Joanna, actually. I tried taking
her once when we first started dating, and that’s how I found out how much she hated cramped, crowded places. Couldn’t enjoy it if she wasn’t having a good time, so I just… stopped going. And then Cole was born, and… well. You know what I’ve been doing since then.”

“You could have gone by yourself. I would have been glad to watch Cole if you wanted to come here.”

Hank smiles and shakes his head. “Nah. Haven’t had anyone else I wanted to go with. Or, at least, no one I thought I’d be able to bring here.”

Connor smiles and ducks his head.

The conversation lulls for a little while as they walk. Streetlamps illuminate the gently falling snow as the make their way back to the park. Hank isn’t much for admiring the natural beauty of the world, but the way the snowflakes pepper Connor’s messy hair catches Hank’s attention and won’t let go.

And then he notices the red tinge across Connor’s face, and he stops in his tracks.

Connor turns, looking at Hank curiously.

“Holy fuck, are you blushing?”

“Oh,” Connor says, averting his eyes. “…Not blushing, exactly. I thought I might be able to blend in better if I… wrote a simple algorithm. To, ah, adjust the hue of the skin on my face when I’m exerting myself to the degree that would cause a human to become flushed. Or when I’m out in the cold.”

The red flush in Connor’s face crosses his cheeks and touches the end of his nose. There’s even a bit of red at the tips of his ears. From the way he won’t meet Hank’s eyes, it gives the distinct impression that he’s blushing.

“You just… wrote a program to give yourself an artificial flush.”

Connor cocks his head. “You seem shocked. Don’t you think it’s a good idea for my body to react as realistically as possible?”

“Yes,” Hank blurts out. “It’s fucking brilliant.” He unwinds the white scarf he’s been wearing under his lapels all evening. It’s a thin thing, more of a fashion accessory than a practical defense against the cold—

—And then he pauses, his scarf halfway off of him as he remembers that Connor doesn’t feel the cold.

Connor just watches him, his head still cocked as though he’s wondering what Hank is doing.

Fuck it, thinks Hank as he pulls the scarf off the rest of the way. Fuck it and fuck everything. Who cares if Connor can’t feel the cold? Who’s even to say for sure if that’s true or not? Connor wasn’t supposed to feel anything at all, and yet he does. Hank wants him to wear the stupid scarf.

Hank winds the scarf in a loop around Connor’s neck. Connor’s eyes go wide and he touches one end of the scarf, running it through the ends of his fingers.

“Hank…” Connor says, and Hank braces himself for the pitying reminder that he’s sure is about to come.
But instead, Connor’s body relaxes a little, his shoulders going slightly slack. He lowers his face and raises the edge of the scarf so it’s covering his nose. “…Thank you, Hank.”

“You looked cold,” Hank says with an awkward shrug.

There’s a beat before Connor replies, almost inaudibly, “I am cold.”

That throws Hank for a moment. Because Connor isn’t shivering or rubbing his arms or huddling into his coat. He’s just holding the scarf to his face. And even then, it looks more like he’s smelling it than warming his face in it.

But then Connor raises his face out of the scarf, looks right into his eyes and says, “May I…?” and he reaches for Hank’s arm.

“Yes,” Hank manages. “Of course.”

Connor loops his arm around Hank’s and they slowly begin walking again. Connor is stiff at Hank’s side as though he’s unsure of how to conduct himself. Gradually, as the minutes pass, he begins to relax again.

And then he begins to lean into Hank, and Hank wonders if he might be cold after all.

They reach Riverside Park, pausing to let a security drone fly by overhead before jaywalking across the street.

As they begin to approach Hank’s car, Connor begins to slow. Hank slows with him, giving him a concerned look.

“Connor? You okay?”

Connor looks at him. “…Can we go for a walk?”

“Now? Here?” Hank frowns. “This was fun, but it’s getting really late.”

“Please,” Connor says, and the urgency in his voice scares Hank a little.

“…Okay,” Hank says, and he gently steers them away from the car. Past the playground and over to the walkway by the river.

Connor’s grip on his arm is warm and heavy. They walk, and Hank keeps expecting Connor to say something. But Connor just looks forward, not looking at Hank. He’s not even looking at any of the sights. Ambassador Bridge cuts a striking silhouette at night, and across the river, Windsor glows brightly, managing to look much more awake than Detroit feels to Hank at that moment. But Connor’s not looking at any of that, nor looking at the snow-encrusted trees in the park. He’s just staring straight ahead. Blankly ahead.

Hank slows them both to a stop in front of a bench. “Connor. What’s wrong?”

Connor finally looks at him. “Do you want to go back?”

“I—no. Do you not want to go back?”

Connor looks lost. Sad. “…No. No, I don’t.” He releases Hank’s arm and takes a few steps away from him. “But I don’t know where else to go.”

Without Connor holding onto him, the chill penetrates his arm.
“I’m not ready for this to be over,” Connor says. “I’m not ready to stop pretending.”

Hank wants to reach out for Connor, but he feels frozen in place.

“I feel like I’m in one of Cole’s fairy tales,” Connor says. “As if I were Cinderella. I had one night where I could pretend things were the way I want them to be between us. I could pretend to be something that—”

“Connor, don’t,” Hank begs. He’s sure he’ll be unable to bear hearing whatever terrible thing Connor is about to say about himself.

“If I were real,” Connor says, looking at Hank like his heart is breaking, “then this could be real. If I were a person, you wouldn’t own me, you wouldn’t have to protect me. You could just love me.”

Connor touches his chest. “…But this magic can’t last forever. The carriage has to turn back into a pumpkin, and I have to go back to being a thing that you own. I don’t know how Cinderella could stand it, leaving behind everything she’d ever wanted at the stroke of midnight to go back to her ordinary life, knowing what she was missing. And I still—” Connor begins to fidget, his brow twitching in an odd, way. “I spent all night feeling anxious and desperate and I still want more. It was wonderful and I want more, but I can’t—”

Connor’s hand rises to his throat and his mouth stretches. “And Cole. I’m being so selfish, wanting to stay here in this moment forever when there’s Cole, and I just—” He grimaces, looking pained. “…What’s happening to me?”

Hank can only stand there, staring, because he knows this is his fault. Connor’s torment is all his fault for letting things go too far.

Or is this the sort of torment that was always waiting for him, and it was only the illusion of a choice Hank had between this sudden and unbearable agony and a slower decline into misery?

Connor’s features are twisted in pain. His hair is messy and his face is flushed, and at this moment, he doesn’t look beautiful. He looks human.

Hank realizes at once that he has to make a choice and he has to make it now. He has to do right by Connor. Even as he has no idea which option would protect Connor more.

His thoughts fly in every direction. Ideas that are barely formed flit about, filling his minds’ eye with imagery. Connor at the piano with Markus and Carl, his new friends. Connor calling himself selfish as though it’s a personal failing and not an ability he’s growing into. Connor, dead in his arms. Connor, afraid to touch him and afraid to pull away as they slow dance to jazz in a crowded club. Connor wearing his LED and his uniform, keeping his face carefully schooled until they’re safe in Hank’s car and he relaxes into a smile.

Connor with half the skin on his face gone as he holds the crushed remains of his eye in his hand, explaining that it hadn’t occurred to him to put himself first.

Put Connor first. Hank has to put Connor first. He has to boil down ‘what should be’ until it becomes ‘what is’.

Is it still wrong to accept what has grown between them?

That’s an old question, and it’s one that Hank is now less sure about than when he first considered it. Things have changed.
But a new question occurs to Hank, which is *does he trust himself to do right by Connor?*

And that’s what it boils down to, really. Can he trust himself with Connor’s heart? More than that, can he trust himself with all of Connor’s vulnerabilities?

He thought he could trust himself with all of someone once before, and he only ended up driving her away. The thought that he can trust himself with anything at all is—

*No,* he thinks vehemently. *I need to be fucking honest with myself. No shame, no guilt. Can I fucking do this or not?*

He lifts his head. Connor isn’t looking at him anymore. His head is turned away, downcast with misery.

“Connor,” Hank says softly.

Connor’s face goes pinched, and he goes stiff, as though he isn’t sure whether he wants to look at Hank or turn away further.

“I can’t do this,” he eventually says. “You’re right. It’s late. You need your sleep.”

“Connor—” He reaches out.

“No.” Connor pulls out of reach. “I’m sorry. I just can’t look at you anymore. Everything hurts and I—” He cuts himself off with a strange fizzled sound. “…We should go home. You need your sleep, and I should… I suppose I’ll try to sleep, too.”

Hank notices that Connor isn’t describing it as stasis any longer—now it’s sleep. Sleep, the private garden where he goes when he needs to go away from the real world. A place of absolute safety.

But it isn’t real. None of it is real.

They’ve both spent the last several months asleep, trying to live without acknowledging what has grown between them. Living half-lives, blind to the pleasures and the wonders and the mess of being truly awake.

Hank can see so clearly now—Connor will never wake up if Hank doesn’t—

Hank moves to grab Connor’s wrist. Connor turns to him, opening his mouth to say something.

Hank grabs him and pulls him into a kiss.

Connor freezes against him. Absolutely, inhumanly still, even with their mouths crushed together. When Hank draws back to look at him, Connor’s eyes are wide open and he looks shaken.

“No more fucking around,” Hank says. “I promise. You deserve so much more. More than I can ever give you, but if you still want this, then I’m—”

He’s cut off when Connor’s mouth crashes into his. Connor is grabbing him roughly, one hand twisted painfully in his hair, knocking his hat off, the other bunching up the coat at the back of his neck. Hank nearly stumbles, but as soon as he realizes what’s happening, he’s pressing against Connor just as fiercely. He can’t hold Connor tightly enough. Connor is so warm in his arms against the cold winter air, and his kiss is rough and inexpert. But it doesn’t matter, because it’s Connor.

There’s a spark of static when Connor pulls away. “This had better not be a dream,” Connor says,
and Hank can’t help but smile because despite how dazed Connor sounds, there’s an edge in his voice which suggests he intends to do something about it if it is a dream.

“If you’re gonna start dreaming, I don’t think you could’ve asked for a better one,” Hank murmurs before pulling Connor into a softer kiss. Connor grip in his hair slackens, the tension easing out of him.

Connor pulls away, blinking sluggishly. “…The security drone. It’ll be coming through here again. We should leave before it does.”

“Do we have to?”

Connor’s smile is like a beacon in the night. “Yes. We shouldn’t be out too long in the cold.”

“You’re the one who wanted to go on a walk.”

They head back to the car together, Connor with his arm looped through Hank’s. By the time the security drone comes through the area again, all it finds are footprints in the snow.

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Cole is discharged two days later. He’s still getting used to donning his cybernetics, and isn’t proficient enough with his cybernetic hand yet to roll up the sealing sleeve that he needs to wear on his residual leg, so Connor does it for him. Wearing both his cybernetics, he’s rolled out to the curb in a wheelchair and from there he climbs into the car with only a little assistance from Hank.

“The car already smells like Sumo,” Cole says, smiling like he might cry.

Hank grins. “Yeah. Don’t tell the rental people, okay?”

When they get home, Cole walks slowly to the front door. Connor holds it open for him. When Sumo bum-rushes Cole, Hank grabs Cole by the shoulders to make sure he doesn’t lose his balance and fall over.

“Hi, Sumo!” Cole slowly goes to his knees and lets Sumo slobber all over his face. “Hi, Sumo! Hi, Sumo!” He scratches Sumo’s ears with his left hand and rubs his perfectly-flat right hand up and down his back.

Cole doesn’t cry until he gets to his room. “I forgot how it smells,” he whispers, choking up. He goes to his bed and curls up on it, clutching his pillow to his chest and burying his face in it.

Hank, watching from the doorway, moves as if he wants to sit down on the bed and rub Cole’s back, but Connor stop him. “He’s alright. He’s just glad to be home. Let him readjust at his own pace.”

But what Connor doesn’t understand is that Hank’s need to soothe Cole is just as much about comforting himself as comforting Cole. He needs to touch someone, to remind himself that he’s not alone in this new, better-yet-still-frightening stage in their return to normalcy.

So he puts his arm around Connor’s shoulders, pulling him close. Connor seems to get it at that point, and he presses his head into Hank’s neck, reaching up to lace his fingers with the hand that’s hanging over his shoulder.

They stand like that in the doorway of Cole’s room, watching their son for as long as they need to.
austrianjello did a beautiful piece of Connor soothing Cole back to sleep! Please check it out!

If you have strong feelings about this chapter, please leave a comment or let me know what you think on twitter @CeilingKiwi. Come scream at me! I love being screamed at :^)
Connor and Hank rediscover themselves.

Connor sometimes forgets to breathe.

He’ll be going through the house, deep-cleaning everything that’s been neglected over the course of Cole’s hospitalization and then he suddenly starts thinking about Hank and before he knows it, he realizes he’s been cycling his air without actually making his chest expand and contract for goodness knows how long. He has no idea how it even happens. The only explanation that he can come up with is that Hank takes up so much room in his processes now that he doesn’t even have room for the most basic, automatic functions.

(That, or it’s the weird glitch he’s been having that messes with his settings, but his breathing isn’t supposed to be optional, so he isn’t entirely sure that’s it. He much prefers the thought that it’s Hank.)

He still can’t believe that night in the park actually happened. He finds himself constantly going back to his archived memories, reconstructing the scene and reliving it. The cold wind that he could sense and nearly feel for himself that made him want to cling to Hank’s side. Hank’s wool coat and his suit and his hat, dark against the snowy world around them. Hank’s face and his silver hair and his kind blue eyes and his wet mouth—

The kiss is often when he forgets to breathe. Maybe it’s because Hank didn’t breathe at all when he pressed his lips to Connor’s and he somehow left an imprint of that embedded so deeply in Connor’s system that it has become his new default. That would be just fine with Connor. People tend to find it creepy when human-shaped things don’t breathe, but what does Connor care about what other people think when he has the love of the two most important people in the world?

Shortly after that night, Hank asks, “What should we do about Cole and this whole… thing between us?”

Connor consults his childcare references. “Well… it’s a complicated scenario. Normally, I’d recommend that any single parent entering a new relationship try to keep it separated from their home life, but…”

“But that’s impossible given that we already live together.”

“That’s one reason.” Connor frowns. “And another is that I don’t like the idea of planning for failure when it comes to our relationship.”

Hank lets out an amused huff. “Okay. So we’re going to tell him something. What should we tell him?”

“We don’t have to make a big production out of it. We can just tell him… that sometimes, people
who are very close become even closer.”

“Does that really explain anything?”

“He’s six. He doesn’t need a full understanding of the reasons behind why he might see me kiss you before you leave for work in the morning.”

Hank screws up his face in a way that suggests to Connor that he’s embarrassed. “I dunno. I just feel like… if there was a word for what we are, this would all be easier. Calling you my boyfriend just feels… juvenile.”

“Partners,” Connor suggests, which makes Hank’s face scrunch up even further.

“Jesus. We only just started this thing a few days ago.”

“Well, we’ve been partners for quite a while now. Maybe not in a romantic sense, but we did things a little out of order. Living together, parenting… then starting a relationship. We’re already partners in everything else; this is just one more way.”

“Jeez. You’re such a huge sap.” But Hank’s tone is warm and Connor can tell he’s sold Hank on the idea.

Cole, to his credit, doesn’t seem confused when they sit him down and give him the talk. Connor’s sure Cole doesn’t fully understand what might have changed between him and Hank, but he seems to be able to tell that whatever has happened, it’s not anything he needs to worry about.

Cole asks, “Does this mean you’re both gonna be there to tuck me in from now on?”

Hank blinks as though he’s confused that the six year old would approach the matter from the perspective of a six year old. “Uh, well, no. There’s still gonna be nights I have to work late or get called in and Connor’s gonna have to tuck you in by himself.”

“Oh,” Cole says, sounding vaguely disappointed. “Are you gonna be taking me to school together once I’m ready to go back?”

“I…” Hank scratches his head. “I can try to be there as often as I can. But I don’t think it’s gonna be an everyday thing, kiddo.”

“Okay, thanks for telling me,” Cole says, and he turns back to whatever cartoon they’d pulled him away from.

Hank heads into the kitchen just to put some distance between himself and Cole. Connor follows, and Hank murmurs, “Jesus. ‘Thanks for telling me.’ Was that kid getting sarcastic with us?”

Connor can’t help finding it a little funny. “No, Hank. That was Cole trying to be considerate.”

Hank just grunts, crossing his arms. “I don’t get how he can’t see what’s changed. It’s kind of a big fucking deal,” he says.

Connor thinks back to how he and Hank came to the hospital together nearly every day to visit Cole. About how the nurses began referring to the both of them as ‘dad’ and about how they would each kiss Cole goodbye after one another right before they left each night.

Smiling, Connor draws close to Hank. “You’re right. It’s a huge fucking deal,” and he kisses him to wipe the pout off his face.
Hank returns to work. It’s only a few days a week for now; Hank is still spending most of his time at home with Cole and Connor. Connor’s both glad and a little frustrated to see him go. Glad because he can tell that Hank isn’t built for staying home all day every day. Without even the daily routine of visiting the hospital, he’s started going a little stir-crazy doing practically nothing but caring for Cole.

And Connor is frustrated because they’ve only just started this new thing between them and already there’s something taking Hank away from him.

Hank displays mixed feelings about it. By Connor’s best estimate, Hank is primarily relieved about returning to work and feeling guilty about it, and is thus unwilling to show it. Connor can’t bring himself to blame Hank for this. He knows how dedicated Hank is to his career, and from a practical standpoint, someone has to start drawing an income for the family again now that Hank has used up all the time he had banked.

“Gotta start saving up my vacation time again,” Hank says, managing a smile for Cole and Connor as they see him off that morning. “So we can get outta here and have some real fun.”

Cole’s stress level is elevated. The baseline of Cole’s stress has been heightened ever since the accident, obviously, but even considering that, it’s high enough to be noteworthy. Despite this, Cole appears calm. He gives Hank a goodbye hug and he doesn’t cry.

As Cole wanders off, Hank steps closer to Connor and lowers his voice. “Hey. Do you think Cole’s really ready for me to go back to work?”

Connor smiles. “Just look at him. He’s matured tremendously over the past few months. Try not to worry about him.”

“You know I won’t be able to do that,” Hank says, but he looks soothed by Connor’s words. He leaves a few minutes later, and Connor cleans up the breakfast dishes, thinking about how sometimes what’s best for Hank might not be what’s best for Cole, and sometimes what’s best for the family isn’t what’s best for either of them.

The breakdown that Connor has been anticipating occurs about an hour later.

Cole’s stress keeps climbing and climbing despite Connor’s attempts to redirect Cole’s attention and engage him in calming activities. Coloring doesn’t work, reading doesn’t work, and when Connor brings out the Play-Doh, things rapidly go downhill.

Cole is so stressed that he begins losing function in his cybernetic right hand. It begins to tremble, going tense as Cole tries to mold the soft dough into simple sculptures.

Connor tries to calm him down as best as he can, but Cole begins growing tearfully frustrated at how his hand is refusing to work the way he wants it to. Things only spiral from there, his frustration making his lose his focus on how his hand is supposed to work, and soon enough, Cole’s right hand is grasped in a tight fist that he can’t seem to open.

“It hurts!” he sobs, straining and pulling at his arm in an attempt to detach the cybernetic, “It hurts—it hurts, Connor, help—!”

Connor grabs Cole’s right forearm, both of their synthetic skin sliding away, and Connor takes a fraction of a second to slow down his processes to a speed that a human would be able to tolerate before he connects.
It’s different from interfacing with an android. Delicate and less structured. Connor doesn’t get the clear stream of data he would from another android—the data he receives from Cole, electrical biological impulses translated into something his inorganic system can interpret—are confused. Like trying to hold a conversation in a foreign language where you understand the individual meanings of each word, but not the grammatical sense in which they string together. Connor has to slowly and carefully pick apart the data in order to find Cole in it.

Cole is hazy through the cacophonous data that must be the sensations his cybernetics are forcing through his nervous system. Connor puts himself right in the path of that data, intercepting it and wrapping himself around it. Slowly, as the pain Cole is in lessens, he becomes clearer to Connor. Connor can feel Cole reaching for him, tendrils of tender emotion coming through their connection toward the formless shape of Connor.

Connor takes the painful sensations from Cole’s cybernetic limbs and reaches into himself for the memory of what those sensations are supposed to feel like. He carefully shapes the painful data into smoother, more comfortable pieces. Pieces that will hopefully overwrite any memory of pain with the sensation of Connor soothing that pain.

As Connor begins allowing information to pass from Cole’s cybernetic arm to the rest of his nervous system, he can feel Cole’s amorphous presence hitch with relief, drawing closer to Connor as if pulled by a magnetic force. As though seeking more of the comfort Connor can give him.

Cole, even patchy and formless as he is in the form of data, feels like home. Connor can feel Cole’s contentment in being so close to him. He can feel the absolute trust Cole has in him, and the perfect understanding he holds that Connor feels the same way. Connor has to shut down the burgeoning pity he feels for humans who aren’t equipped to form this sort of connection with their loved ones. Connor refuses to waste Cole’s processing power with emotions that would be useless to him.

Connor has to reach out so, so very gently. Like wiping an eyelash from the face of a sleeping newborn. Connor has to be very patient and very diligent not to overload Cole with too much data too quickly.

With the utmost care and sensitivity, Connor pushes the sensation of directing his own arms and legs to move. The way the electronic signals travel through his circuits, the feeling of shifting his pistons and joints by mere millimeters to achieve perfect, natural, subtle movement. The awareness of where his body exists in space and how his limbs move together with only the barest amount of conscious input. How he reads the data he receives from his own cybernetic nervous system. Connor carefully translates these sensations and sends them piece by piece to Cole, and the data he receives back buzzes with the light of Cole’s comprehension.

It’s a much slower process than interfacing with an android. That sort of interfacing would take mere seconds; much of it spent of simply establishing a connection. But because Cole can’t process information at the speed of a super computer, the exchange of data takes much longer. By the time Connor closes their connection, over a minute has passed.

Cole opens his eyes, his head jerking back slightly as though he’s being carried by inertia. He blinks, then looks down at his cybernetic arm, now looking fully human again. He opens his fist and a bit of Play-Doh bearing the sharp impressions of Cole’s fingernails falls out of his grasp.

Cole lets out a shaky breath. “It feels so much better now.” He looks at Connor. “How do you do that?”

“It’s just something androids can do. Are you still having any pain?”
Cole takes Connor’s hand in his. He squeezes and furrows his brow, but his skin doesn’t retract.

Connor smiles gently, squeezing Cole’s hand. He pushes himself back up to his normal speed and sets a process to decode and store the information he received from Cole. Cole’s consciousness, his feelings, his being put into data Connor can carry with him forever. A snapshot of a minute spent with Cole. Connor can’t express how wonderful it is to know the shape of Cole’s mind and his heart.

“I’m glad I can help you with your pain,” Connor says.

Cole has a lost, somewhat vulnerable expression on his face. He climbs into Connor’s lap and wraps his arms around his middle. Connor hugs him back, cradling the back of his head like he used to when Cole was still small enough for him to carry against his chest.

“What do your cybernetics feel like when they’re not hurting?” Connor asks. “Do they feel different from your other arm and leg?”

Cole nods once. “Scratchy. And it’s… duller. Like it doesn’t tickle at all, not even in a good way.”

There’s another pause before Cole says, “Is that what it feels like for you all the time?”

“I don’t know,” Connor says. “I don’t know what human limbs are supposed to feel like.”

Cole curls up a little against him. Connor rocks him very gently.

“It felt scratchy like that when you made the pain go away,” Cole says. “Like it was scratchy, only inside my head.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No,” Cole says. “It was good. Cozy. Like… being wrapped in a big wool blanket.”

Connor smiles. With Cole in his arms, he can detect traces of the tear-free shampoo Connor buys for him. It’s supposed to smell like strawberries, but Connor can’t connect the syrupy-sweet artificial scent with the olfactory information he can draw from real strawberries. The chemical makeup is so different that he would never know the shampoo was meant to be strawberry scented if it wasn’t advertised as such.

Nevertheless, the scent is still comforting. Cole smells like fake strawberries. Sometimes even something fake can be precious.

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The unknown can be terrifying, but sometimes it can also be thrilling.

Connor had thought he had been the most miserable he would ever be only half a year ago. Before the accident, the unknown had been agony. Having Hank push him away and having no idea why. Left to the machinations of his own imaginations, he had no defense against the hurt he inflicted upon himself. And then after he’d confessed his feelings for Hank and forced an answer from him, the prospect of the future stretching out before him had seemed desolate and indeterminable. He hadn’t even wanted to try to predict what each subsequent day might hold for him, for it seemed about as worthwhile as bleeding himself little by little every day.

Looking back, it’s shocking to him how shortsighted he had been. To think that he believed the worst pain he would ever experience would be because of his love for Hank.
(In a background process, the thought occurs to him that every time he thinks he has experienced a sudden and enlightening burst of growth, something eventually occurs to force him even further beyond that. Perhaps he shouldn’t think too badly of who he was before the accident, for it’s entirely possible he’ll experience yet another such paradigm shift at some point.)

So even though the thought of the unknown had once been bleak, now Connor feels energized by the mysteries at hand. Because right now, the unknown is Hank and this wonderful, strange new relationship that has bloomed between them. There is so much to explore and so much to learn. To be sure, there’s the danger of unknowingly crossing an invisible boundary, but any fear Connor might have doesn’t blunt his excitement and his curiosity. This is a mystery to explore and to map out, a mystery all about one of Connor’s favorite people in the world.

On one of Hank’s days off, he makes plans to take Cole to a movie. The actual movie itself isn’t important—just some CGI kid’s thing that Cole doesn’t even seem particularly interested in. But it’s a thing to do to get him out of the house that won’t tire him out too badly. Cole, despite the lingering weakness from his injuries and his hospitalization, should be able to handle a couple hours of sitting and focusing on a movie.

But when Hank tries to usher him out the door, Cole hesitates to follow him. “Wait, Connor’s not coming?”

“Oh,” Connor says, looking up from the other side of the room. “I’m sorry, Cole. I’d come with you if I could, but androids aren’t allowed in most movie theaters. We have too many glowing parts. But you can still have plenty of fun without me.”

“That come as a person,” Cole replies. “You did it at the hospital, why can’t you do it here?”

Connor’s social protocol stutters to a halt as it tries to think up a gentle way to explain to Cole how risky it is for him to go out in public without any of his mandated android markers. That he’d be breaking the law and if he’s ever discovered, he could be forcibly de-omiss-ed (a strange, brief burst of static interrupts his thought process, but he doesn’t allow it to derail him)

He could be forcibly deactivated. But of course there’s no gentle way to tell a child something like that.

Cole must sense he has Connor on the ropes, for he gives him a pleading look. “Please? I don’t wanna go if you don’t come too.”

Hank heaves a sigh, running a hand through his hair. He doesn’t say anything, just gives Connor a look that says he isn’t going to push Connor.

Connor should insist Cole go with Hank. He should try and make Cole get out of the house without needing both his regular caregivers there to support him. He should not break the law again for something as insignificant as a day out at the movies.

Twenty minutes later, Hank and Connor are standing at the automatic kiosk to buy their tickets while Cole looks at the stuffed animals in a nearby crane game.

Hank gives Connor a look that plainly says he’s trying not to smile. “Glad you decided to come.”

Connor furrows his brow. “I shouldn’t have. Cole’s not in the hospital anymore, he doesn’t need me here. We should be trying to foster his confidence and independence, not giving in to his every whim.”
A tiny smirk crosses Hank’s face. “You mean you shouldn’t be giving in to his every whim. I’m not the one who caved the second Cole made a cute face.”

Connor just grimaces.

Hank must be able to tell what he’s thinking, for he steps just a touch closer to Connor and says, “Hey. It’s okay. It’s before noon on a school day. There’s practically no one here to see you. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

Connor wants to lean into Hank. It takes a fraction of a second for him to remember that he’s permitted to do that now. Their shoulders brush. “It’s not that I don’t want to be present in Cole’s life. Of course I do. But this is a risk for me, and I don’t know how to explain to Cole that it can’t be like this all the time.”

“I know. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. When he’s a little healthier.” Hank puts a hand on Connor’s shoulder.

Connor turns his face toward Hank, giving him a small smile. “You know… I didn’t envision our first date going like this.”

Hank’s face goes red, his eyes flicking away from Connor. This is about the reaction Connor expected from him. He’s noticed that Hank often doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself in the face of their new relationship. But his hesitation is understandable; he has never had a romantic relationship with anyone like Connor before. Connor is a person, yes, Connor is an intelligent being, yes, but he’s still not human. He’s still a machine. For all Hank’s experience, Hank has never had a relationship like this before.

And, even though Connor doesn’t like to think about it, he knows Hank must still be uncomfortable on some level with his continued ownership of Connor. Although Connor’s feelings about the reasons behind Hank’s discomfort are complicated, Connor can still appreciate that his discomfort is legitimate.

“I’m not counting the jazz club as our first date,” Connor says, his voice still soft and kind. “Since we weren’t officially involved at the time. But it was fun, letting ourselves get swept up in a small adventure. Likely more fun than this is going to be.”

Hank relaxes by increments as Connor talks. It’s fine. All of this is solvable. Although it may be necessary for the both of them to explore the uncharted territory of their new relationship together, it’s only necessary for one of them to take the initiative.

“Jesus.” Hank shakes his head. “Is this what parents really do for dates? Take their kids to see eight-dollar weekday matinees? Christ, I feel old.”

“You’re not old; you’re the father of a six year old. You’re tired.”

“Oh, yeah? And what does that make you?”

Connor puts a finger to his chin. “Animated.”

“Tch.” Hank shakes his head fondly as the kiosk spits out tickets. “In more ways than one.”

For Connor’s first movie viewed in a theater, the film itself isn’t anything particularly special. A CGI film about a pet parrot who wants to become a singer, but can’t because it’s a parrot. So the parrot’s preteen owner films himself lip-syncing to the parrot’s singing and uploads the videos to the internet, letting the world see the parrot’s work while the kid gets all the credit.
“Any of this strike you as familiar?” Hank murmurs in his ear.

“It isn’t polite to talk in a theater. You’re modeling bad behavior for Cole.”

A quiet snort from Hank. “Please. You’re bored. I can tell.”

Connor raises a single eyebrow at Hank. Hank scoffs, but the next time he opens his mouth it’s to speak so quietly under his breath that Connor has to adjust his audio processors. “…Sorry we couldn’t go see something better suited for us.”

The date. Connor is happy to sit through any number of inane children’s movies for Cole’s sake, but even so, it’s nice that Hank is thinking about Connor’s enjoyment.

Connor rests his head on Hank’s shoulder. Even over the dull roar of the movie, he can hear Hank’s pulse as it thrums under his skin, healthy and strong. In response, Hank wraps an arm around Connor’s shoulders and puts his other hand on top of Connor’s.

There’s so much about what he’s experiencing that he wants to share with Hank that he doesn’t realize he’s trying to interface with Hank until he catches the blue shimmer of his skin receding on his hand and the softly glowing seams of his fingers, especially noticeable in the dark theater. He aborts the attempted interface, but not before Hank’s head turns ever so slightly toward Connor. He raises his brow at Connor.

Connor nuzzles Hank’s neck, hoping this answers whatever unspoken question he has.

When the movie lets out, Cole seems tired but still has plenty to say about the movie and plenty of questions about whether the depiction of parrots is accurate at all, because he thinks it would be really cool to have a pet that could talk and think the same way a person could, and wouldn’t it be awesome if Sumo could talk too. Hank is so distracted by Cole that if he has any thoughts about how Connor sometimes loses his skin at the places where they touch, he forgets to express them.

They put Cole down for a nap when they get home, and then they have the house to themselves.

Hank flops down on the couch.

“We just got back from a movie and you want to watch television?”

“So sue me, Polly Wants a Viral Hit wasn’t exactly satisfying.” Hank turns on some sort of nature documentary. “You’re welcome to join me.”

Grinning, Connor sits on the couch next to him.

Hank looks at him. “Christ. Don’t you look excited.”

“Of course I’m excited. I like spending time with you.”

Hank looks a little embarrassed. “…Yeah. I like spending time with you, too. I miss you when I’m at work. Isn’t that crazy? We spend half the week cooped up together and I…” He trails off and shifts slightly, putting an arm on the back of the couch and reclining. It almost looks like Hank is trying to make space for… oh, of course.

Connor draws himself against Hank, the warmth and the padding of Hank’s clothes feeling as though they’re easing away all of Connor’s rigidity. Hank is relaxed—not perfectly relaxed, no, but so much more relaxed than Connor’s default state. Connor can feel himself unwind as he adjusts to
match Hank.

Hank wiggles his shoulders to get comfortable and huffs a pleased breath at how Connor’s body settles against him.

“I miss you too,” Connor says. “We haven’t really had any time for leisure. Everything has been about Cole or work. I feel as though I haven’t even looked at a book in months.”

“We can pick that up again soon. I can tell my insomnia’s not gonna let up just ‘cause things are getting easier. Got some books I think you’d like. Maybe this time I can read to you instead.”

Hank’s voice is soft, nearly melodic. Connor can construct what Hank would sound like when reading to him. It would be different from how he reads bedtime stories to Cole. Less of the almost-ironic lightness with which he reads fairy tales. More of the dark honey of the way he sounds now. Quiet and thick with something that’s just for Connor. Something that he isn’t sure what it is, but he knows he wants more of it.

He reaches up a hand to touch Hank’s throat. He can feel the cartilage of the trachea under Hank’s skin. He can feel Hank’s pulse. This is one of the best things of his new romantic relationship with Hank. He can read Hank’s heartbeat whenever he wants, but having the opportunity to feel it so often is wonderful. The physical contact provides a wealth of highly specified data, most of it superfluous to the task of monitoring Hank’s health. Connor would consider it junk data, except that it’s Hank and all of Hank is precious to him, even the functionally useless parts.

“What’re you doing?” Hank’s throat rumbles against Connor’s fingers when he speaks.

It makes Connor smile. “I like your voice. Would you keep talking?”

The huff of Hank’s breath ruffles Connor’s hair. “Weirdo.” His tone is warm and affectionate. “What, you trying to record me or something?”

“I can stop logging the data if you like.”

“Nah, you don’t have to. Just promise not to impersonate me for any nefarious purposes, okay?”

“Of course.” Connor loves the way Hank’s voice rises and falls with his amusement. Connor’s very glad that Hank didn’t ask him to stop logging the data, because the way the acoustics of his voice chart themselves across his mind are stunning. A seismogram of the tiny, earth-shattering vibrations of Hank’s voice.

“Christ. I still can’t believe you’re real.”

Connor looks up. Hank’s not watching the nature program any longer. Now he’s looking at Connor, some strange emotion in his eyes.

“You’re just so… God. Everything you are. Everything you do. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Connor.”

“Hank, there isn’t…” Connor twists so he’s half in Hank’s lap, facing him. “There aren’t words to express the enormity of what you mean to me.”

Hank raises a hand. He hesitates and it hangs limply in the air for a moment, so Connor leans his face into it. Hank’s hand molds to cup his cheek.

“Jesus, Connor.” Hank sounds slightly breathless.
Hank’s hand is warm and rough. Connor can feel a callous on Hank’s middle finger, and he yearns for more data. Turning his head, he draws Hank’s thumb into his mouth and runs his tongue across the tip.

Hank’s breath hitches. Information surges forth—the whorl of Hank’s fingerprint, the chemical composition of his sweat, the identifying data in his skin cells, a small amount of soapy residue from the last time he washed his hands, the weight of the finger in his mouth. It’s so much more information than Connor can glean from just touching Hank, and Connor needs more of it. He runs his tongue down the pad of Hank’s thumb and down to his knuckle.

Hank pulls his hand away from Connor’s face with a whispered expletive. Connor refocuses on Hank’s face.

“Jesus, Connor.” Hank looks slightly stunned, the hand hovering by his head as if he’s about to put it up in surrender.

Hank’s appearance is atypical, Connor notes. He’s flushed and his pupils are dilated. His heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure have all risen. Which is worrying, and when Connor initiates a full scan, he notices an engorgement of Hank’s—

Oh.

At that moment, Cole calls out, his voice muffled by his bedroom door. “Daaaad! Connor! I need to go to the bathroom!”

Hank blinks rapidly as though he’s waking up from a dream. He glances down the hallway.

“I’ll… go help him,” Connor says, carefully climbing off of Hank. After being so close to Hank, he feels hypersensitive to the nominally comfortable temperature of the open air. His tactile sensors seem to indicate that without Hank’s warmth pressed against him, he’s bereft of something important.

By the time Connor has helped Cole to the bathroom and back (“Perhaps we should get you a crutch so you can get around the house on your own without needing to don your cybernetics”), Hank seems to have lost his interest in any sort of sexual activity. He brushes past Connor as he’s emerging from Cole’s room.

“Gonna take a shower,” he mutters without meeting Connor’s eyes.

Which is probably for the best, if Connor is being honest. Hank’s sexual arousal had caught him off-guard and he needs to consider how he’s going to proceed from here.

He knows it’s foolish of him to have been caught off-guard. Connor knows what romantic relationships are like. He even has modules installed to guide him through educating Cole about the sexual aspect of romantic relationships once he becomes old enough for that. Under the circumstances, he should have been anticipating such a response from Hank before it even happened.

But he hadn’t been.

At that moment, Connor had wanted information. He had wanted intimacy. Had he wanted sex too? For a microsecond, Connor is stuck in a whirl of insecurity. How can I know if my drive is the same this as sexual desire I don’t have the right parts for this Hank is going to be disappointed in me Sex is a thing that isn’t of me—
He shuts down those thoughts as soon as he’s consciously aware of them. Human sexuality is a
dynamic thing. So long as he wants it and Hank wants it, he knows it’s possible to make it work.

He wants to be intimate with Hank. He wants to please Hank in every single way that Hank craves.
Even if it isn’t the same thing as sexual desire, Connor wants Hank. He wants this.

So perhaps it’s a good thing that Hank has lost interest for the time being. Now Connor has the
opportunity to do some much-needed research.

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That night, after Hank and Cole have gone to bed, Connor settles onto the couch and tentatively
launches a search on android-human sexual relationships.

The immediate first results he finds are less than promising. Internet forums full of people arguing
over which model is the sexiest. PDFs of user manuals for certain companion androids which list
all the ways they can be customized to suit their owner’s preferences. Video after video of amateur
porn of people fucking their androids.

These videos make Connor feel slightly unsteady. Although some of the androids featured are
specialized companion androids specifically built with the objective of serving as a sex partner,
most of the androids are common domestic models more suited for household management. Every
single one of them has functional genitals, and when Connor opens another search to learn whether
this is typical, he finds that most of the mid-to-top line domestic androids are built to perform some
common sex acts in addition to the same household duties that Connor carries out.

Nowadays, only the most basic home models are built without genitals.

Connor has suffered insecurity before about how his addled programming causes him to perform
less than ideally. But this is the first time he’s ever felt insecure over the lack of a moderately
advanced feature. Thinking of himself as basic in any sense of the word makes his limbs feel like
rubber.

He very nearly reminds himself that he’s a highly advanced prototype before he remembers the
more pertinent fact that now he’s a person. People exist beyond a binary of basic-or-advanced, and
so must Connor.

Once he remembers that, he realizes that perhaps he shouldn’t be searching for results specific to
androids. No one cares, after all, about whether androids enjoy sex. No one writes tips to help
androids have better sex.

But there’s a wealth of information out there about helping people have sex. Information for just
about any situation Connor can imagine and almost any type of person. If there isn’t information
out there for an android who wants a uniquely human kind of intimacy, there’s information out
there that still seems almost applicable. When he searches, he finds information for adults who
have never had sex before, information for people who have issues with their own “factory-
installed” equipment, information for people who don’t experience sexual attraction the way most
people do. There are even sex tips out there for parents of small children, and one article in
particular amuses Connor, because it opens with, “Although the days when you could have sex
wherever and whenever you like are sadly over, all isn’t lost.”

Human beings don’t exist along a basic-or-advanced binary. They don’t exist along any binary at
all. There are so many different kinds of experiences and people in the world that the full paradigm
of humanity feels far too complex to be confined to any sort of ideal. There isn’t any right way or
wrong way to be a person, and that information feels so freeing.

Hank loves Connor.

And Connor loves Hank. And Connor wants Hank. They can make this work. They can make them work.

When Connor is just about ready to dismiss most of the open processes he has compiling the information he’s gathered, a background process pings for his attention. It’s one of the background processes he’s had analyzing the preliminary results of his first search, the one about android-human sexual relations. The background process has found something that Connor’s subconscious network apparently feels ought to be brought to the forefront of his awareness.

At first glance, it appears to be a work of erotic literature. The cover page depicts a muscular man with no shirt and smoldering eyes. Just behind him and to the side is another man—equally buff and equally shirtless—who has been digitally altered to be entirely white for some reason.

The title reads DRIVE OF THE MANDROID.

Slightly bewildered at how his network has singled this out for his attention, he scans the text of the PDF. At first glance, it appears to be wholly uninspiring porn that seems, from a functional standpoint, not at all different from the rest of the porn his background processes had been shifting through.

The last few paragraphs are different.

_Overcome by the throes of my orgasm, I quivered as the Mandroid pulled his thick rod from my ass. I could feel his hot, heavy spunk dripping down my thighs. I felt as weak and as shapeless as that cum, as though I might drip to the floor at any moment too._

_Bonelessly, I began to slide to the ground. But the Mandroid caught me in his strong, firm arms. He pulled me close to his chest, and I couldn’t help but run a hand down his sculpted pecs that had been literally sculpted, probably by an engineer._

_“You have taught me so much,” the Mandroid said. “You have taught me how to give. You have taught me how to receive. And you have also taught me how to love.”_

_“Is it true?” I whimpered. “Do you love me?”_

_“My eyes have been opened,” The Mandroid replied. “Not even I, a machine designed to fuck endlessly with no real passion, would be able to resist falling in love with you and your perfect butt. I wish to spend the rest of my days serving you… and servicing you.”_

_“No!” I cried. “I won’t have you serve me! Such a magnificent cock cannot be constrained by anything, neither pants nor the bindings of ownership! My love, you must be free! So long as you pound me each and every day! Pound me until I can’t take it anymore!”_

_“That’s the one order I can happily obey,” The Mandroid said._

Connor sits there with his processes whirring for a moment, thinking for him before he starts thinking for himself again.

This is the only piece of media he’s found that even touches on the possibility of love between androids and humans. And it’s such a stupid piece of media. Connor, as a being who’s still struggling to figure out exactly how much of a hold his programming has on who he is as a person,
finds himself a little stunned by how blithely this cheap smut talks about emotion.

But still. Connor is having trouble clearing the last image of the book out of his head. An android and a human swearing their love for one another, holding each other in their arms. There’s at least one other person out there in the world who thought this was a worthy ending, even if only for bad porn.

The whole exercise hadn’t taken Connor very long. He’s been sitting on the couch for a little over fifteen minutes, compiling and integrating information and exposing himself to this new side of humanity. He can hear the occasional creak from the other side of the house as Hank tosses in his bed, still not asleep.

Connor crosses the room. His system replays certain memories with seemingly little input from him. Hank’s hands on his face, Hank’s arm around his shoulder, Hank’s weight against his side. He can feel the ghost of Hank all over his body.

Hank’s bedroom door is open just a sliver. It creaks softly when Connor pushes it open even further.

From his bed, Hank cracks an eye open at the noise. “…Connor?” His voice is a quiet croak. “Something wrong?”

Connor steps into the room. It’s almost absurd, how hesitant he feels at this moment. He’s been in this room thousands of times before. But never when Hank’s been trying to sleep.

“No. Nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to see if you might allow me to spend the night in your bed.”

Hank’s breathing slows. His other eye opens.

“Not like that,” Connor clarifies. His voice is hardly more than a whisper. “Not right now. I just want you to hold me.”

There’s a pause, and during that pause Connor has enough time to wonder if even this request is too much for Hank.

But then Hank lets out a long breath through his nose and scoots to the far side of the bed. Connor doesn’t wait until he’s settled before climbing in, and as he does, he realizes he’s wearing jeans and a button-up. He wriggles out of them until he’s just in his undershirt and shorts and tosses them to the floor, deleting the new item on his tasklist directing him to Put discarded clothes in hamper. He knows Hank won’t mind if Connor puts that off until the morning.

Hank’s bed is a monument to him. His hair threads across the pillows, his sweat permeates the sheets. It’s Hank’s refuge during his most vulnerable moments, and Connor can’t find the words to encompass how it feels to be allowed there when Hank is trying to sleep.

He folds himself against Hank. Hank wiggles against him, getting comfortable, and wraps a single arm over Connor.

Connor puts a hand on Hank’s abdomen. Hank doesn’t have sculpted abs, but his stomach is soft and warm, which are comfortable things. Connor isn’t comfortable laying down. It feels strange, the thirium running through his body differently and the pressure on certain joints newly uneven. But Hank is holding him and Connor can’t think of a single place he’d rather be.

“I love you, Hank,” Connor whispers.
“Love you too,” Hank mumbles. “You just gonna lay there all night watching me?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.” The word ends in a yawn. “Try not to kick you.”

“Sleep well, Hank.”

Hank grunts. Five minutes later, his temperature and heartrate have lowered enough for Connor to know he’s fallen asleep.

Connor sets a process to monitor Hank’s sleep cycles and vital signs. Then he turns everything else over to background processes and stops thinking, now only aware of Hank and how their bodies are intertwined.

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“Thanks for letting Cole stay over, Laverne,” Hank says, closing the front door to avoid letting the warm air out.

Ms. Washington doesn’t take off her coat. “It’s no trouble at all. Rashid’s been asking about Cole every day, wondering when they’ll be able to play again.” She shakes her head despite the small, proud quirk of her mouth. “Too much energy for me to keep up with.”

Off to the side, Connor double-checks Cole’s overnight bag to make sure he has everything packed. Perhaps it’s too optimistic for them to think that Cole’s ready to spend the night with Rashid and his grandmother, but Ms. Washington only lives down the street. All Cole has to do is ask her to call Hank and they’ll be there to bring him home in a matter of minutes.

Seeing how Cole does with small events away from home will be a good way for Hank and Connor to gauge how close he is to being ready to go back to school.

“Shoes are tied,” Connor says, quietly enough that Hank and Ms. Washington won’t hear him over their small talk. “Here’s your hat. How do your arm and your leg feel?”

Cole squeezes his right hand into a fist.

“Where’s your other glove?”

“It’s not like I really need two,” Cole says. His voice is uncharacteristically dull. “It doesn’t feel cold the way my real one did.”

Connor pauses, looking carefully at Cole. There’s something discontented about his expression.

“Ms. Washington,” Connor says brightly, straightening to look at Hank and their guest. “Thank you very much for offering to host Cole tonight. Can the Lieutenant offer you a cup of coffee before you leave?”

Hank squints suspiciously. Ms. Washington lets out an amused snort. “Can the Lieutenant offer me a cup of coffee. Your android has a backbone, Anderson. Making you mind your manners instead of minding them for you.”

“Yeah, well, someone around here has to keep me in line.” Hank gives Connor a measured look, then turns to Ms. Washington and tilts his head toward the kitchen. “Coffee, Laverne?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”
When Hank has Ms. Washington safely situated in the kitchen, Connor kneels down in front of Cole. “Are you worried about spending the night away from us?”

Cole shakes his head, looking at the floor.

“Are you worried about having trouble with your cybernetics?”

A shrug.

Connor thinks for a moment. “Are you worried a T-rex might come along and gobble you up?”


“Don’t let Rashid hear you say that.”

Cole’s smile disappears.

Connor frowns and cocks his head. “…Are you worried about Rashid?”

Cole’s face clouds over. “I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s not still your friend. His grandmother says he talks about you every day.”

“No, I mean—” Cole pauses, frowning. “…it feels weird to be going over to play with him. What if he wants to play outside and run around and I can’t? What if everything’s different now?”

And instantly, Connor understands what the problem is. The accident has changed Cole in so many ways, and not just in physical ways. It’s an event that sets him apart from all his peers, and Cole must understand that. The prospect of trying to reconnect with someone he cares about but who can’t possibly begin to understand what he’s been through must be frightening.

“I see,” Connor says slowly. “I understand what you mean. Things might be different between you and Rashid. A lot of things are different now. But things might not be so different that you can’t still have fun with him. You’re still the same person you were before the accident.” Connor smiles, digging Cole’s glove out of his coat pocket. “You still love computers and stories about kings and magic spells. The part of you that still loves those things will probably be very glad to play with Rashid again, don’t you think?”

He pulls Cole’s glove onto his cybernetic hand. “Whatever happens, it’ll be okay. You can have Rashid’s grandmother call us at any time and we’ll come bring you home. Even in the middle of the night.”

Cole worries his lower lip.

“Will you give it a try?” Connor asks.

Cole hesitates for just a moment before he gives a slow, careful nod.

Connor’s smile widens. “Your father and I are proud of you.” He pulls Cole into a quick hug. “I hope you know how strong you are. You’re going to be okay.”

Cole nods against his shoulder, quiet and serious. Shortly thereafter, Ms. Washington finishes her coffee and she and Cole leave together.

Hank shuts the front door, then looks at Connor. “Cole’s okay?”
Connor nods. “He’s going to be.”

The rest of the evening passes uneventfully. Connor makes beef bourguignon for dinner, a far more labor-intensive dish than he’s been able to devote himself to as of late. Hank, despite his lack of culinary skills, hangs around the kitchen and helps out in what ways he can, chopping vegetables and mushrooms.

When Connor has finished adding the red wine to the pot, Hank lifts the bottle. “We still got this much left over. Wanna have a few drinks with dinner?”

“A few drinks might be a bit much for me.” Connor tilts his head playfully. “But a small glass wouldn’t hurt.”

Dinner is nice. This is the first time Hank and Connor have been able to sit down together without Cole’s condition hanging over their heads.

“It’s weird,” Hank mutters at one point. “He’s perfectly safe over at Laverne’s. The worst thing that could happen to him over there is that he freaks out and his cybernetics start hurting and we have to go get him. But I’m still fucking worried about him. You’d think I wouldn’t be so hung up on such everyday stuff after spending a month or two worried about whether he’s gonna live or die.”

“No, on the contrary,” Connor says. “It only makes sense you’d be hypersensitive about Cole after such a traumatic event.”

Hank slumps in his seat and swirls his wine absently. “…Thanks. You know. For everything, Connor.”

Connor lowers his eyes, looking at Hank’s helping. He takes Hank’s fork and snags a bit of beef, bringing it to his mouth. The meat is so tender that it comes apart easily between his teeth, juicy and warm. He identifies the chemical reactions breaking apart the meat and denaturing the proteins within. The sensation reminds Connor of hundreds of meals he has cooked for Hank and Cole over the years. Nurturing the family and bringing them together.

Connor swallows the beef. It sits much heavier in his thrium reservoir than the wine does. “You don’t have to thank me, Hank,” he says softly. “I do this as much for myself as I do it for you, if that makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.” Hank smiles lightly as he passes Connor his napkin. “You got some sauce on your chin.”

When Hank is finished eating and goes to clear the table, Connor gets up to help. He expects Hank to shoo him out of the kitchen with a half-exasperated smirk, but he doesn’t. He just glances at Connor as he joins him at the counter, and that’s when Connor recognizes the stormy look his eyes that always appears whenever Hank is hurting and trying not to show it.

Hank’s eyes flicker to Connor’s LED for a moment, and Connor raises a hand to it. “Oh. Should I have taken it out tonight?”

“No, no,” Hank says. “It’s actually… sort of nice. If I look at you and you’re blue, then I know I don’t have anything to worry about.”

Connor smiles. He wraps up the leftovers by Hank’s side while Hank rinses off the cutting board and the utensils.
An hour later, they’re out on the couch. Hank is reading *The Partner* out loud to Connor, who has a process open to pay attention to the story and another process open to track the enjoyable way Hank’s voice rumbles through his body.

Close to the end of the first chapter, Hank’s voice begins to grow hoarse. “The border guards nodded without leaving their chairs, and Danny Boy was now in Paraguay, though he couldn’t have cared less at the moment.” Hank pauses to clear his throat.” He bounced happily along on the floor of the van as the roads grew worse and the terrain steeper.” Another pause as he coughs.

Connor looks up. “Time for a break?”

“Maybe a drink. Think I’ll grab a beer.”

“Let me,” Connor says, already rising.

Instead of bringing Hank a beer like he asked, Connor brings him a glass of water. Hank had had several glasses of wine with dinner, and Connor doesn’t want him to become impaired.

Hank takes the water, studying it with a frown. Connor’s predictive software throws up a possibility he hadn’t considered before: that Hank is going to think Connor is making some sort of statement about his drinking that he isn’t going to like.

But then Hank takes a sip. “…Smart. Shouldn’t be drinking so much, anyway.” Connor crawls onto the couch and Hank slumps into his side. “I should really appreciate the way you do things. Appreciate the fact that you have the ability to decide these kinds of things for yourself.”

Hank is still holding onto his glass. Connor takes it from his hands and sets it on the coffee table.

“It’s been like that since the beginning with you,” Hank says softly. “Deciding what’s best when it pleases you. Doing what you want. Why is that?”

“I don’t know why.” Connor brushes a hand through Hank’s beard. “Someone made me like this. But I don’t know why.”

“It’s like you were made just for me.” Hank is blinking slowly, a hand touching Connor’s side. “You came into my life right when I needed you. You’re not perfect. You’re better than perfect.”

Connor can feel Hank’s breath on the side of his face, and he wants more. Moving so quickly and solidly that Hank’s eyes widen with surprise, Connor straddles Hank’s lap.

“I wasn’t made for you,” Connor says. “But I wish I was.”

Hank opens his mouth, and Connor swallows the sound of his name as he presses their mouths together.

The surge of information is nearly overwhelming to Connor. The wet gape of Hank’s mouth, the faint chemical composition of the sauce of the stew. The texture of Hank’s tongue against his.

“Easy,” Hank gasps, pulling back air. “Not all at once. Jeez, you’re gonna kill me.”

“Hank,” Connor whispers, “I want to make love to you.”

The physical change that goes through Hank at that is extremely satisfying. His cheeks redden, his heart stutters as his pulse quickens. He makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat.

“You knew?” Connor says, blinking. Half of him is mortified that Hank had already been aware of Connor genital configuration, and the other half is thrilled that Hank is having a reaction to him even so.

“When—when you were broken. A couple of the techs I visited had to undress you to take you apart. I wasn’t gonna leave you alone with them.” Hank heaves a sigh, focusing on Connor’s face. “I need you to tell me. Are you turned on right now?”

Connor social protocol gives a half serious suggestion to reply Yes, of course I’m turned on, how else could I be talking to you? But this isn’t the time to be cute, so Connor just says, “I don’t think I have the ability to experience sexual arousal.”

“No, listen to me,” Connor interrupts. “I still want you. I still want this. Maybe not in all the same ways that you do, but that doesn’t make my desires any less real.” He touches his chest. “It does something to me. Being here, touching you, seeing the things I can do to you. It’s not arousal, but it’s good. It makes me feel good.”

Hank goes still. Then he leans forward and whispers in Connor’s ear, “Makes you feel good, huh? How good?”

Connor drapes his arms over Hank’s shoulders. “Seeing what I can do to you makes me feel like I’m inside of you. In a way that’s deeper than just physical.”

Hank hums, running his hands down Connor’s sides.

“I love the way your body reacts to me. The fact that I can alter the flow of your blood just by touching you or moving my body a certain way is almost beyond my comprehension. Thinking about the possibilities makes me feel…” He purposefully pauses to grasp Hank’s shoulders. “…intoxicated.”

Hank growls at that, and the next thing Connor knows, Hank’s mouth is against his neck. The unexpected sensation of teeth against his skin makes one of Connor’s hands jitter.

“Ah, did you feel that, Hank? That wasn’t a conscious response on my part. Do you realize what you do to me, too?”

Hank suddenly surges forward, grabbing Connor under his ass with both hands to support him as he stands up. Connor wraps his legs around Hank, and he knows exactly how much he weighs, knows how easy it would have been for Hank to overbalance. The control Hank has, the strength Hank has—

“Shut up,” Hank hisses. “Just fucking stop talking. I’m not about to let you make me cum in my pants like some horny teenager.”

“Oh.” Connor delicately lowers one leg to the ground, then the other. “No, I don’t want that.”

“Gonna do this the right way.” Hank tugs him toward the hallway.

“The right way?” Connor smiles. “My research indicated that there’s no one right way to have sex.”
“Research?” Hank pauses. “You went and researched this shit?”

“If course I did. None of this is anything I was built for. I wanted to make sure I’d be prepared.”

Hank cocks his head, a glint in his eyes. “Well, shit. I bet there’s still a thing or two I could teach you.”

Connor smiles, taking Hank’s arm and leading him toward the bedroom. “I think you’ll find I’m an eager student.”

Once they’re inside Hank’s bedroom, Hank whirls on Connor, pulling him into a kiss. He kicks the bedroom door shut without even looking at it, his tongue in Connor’s mouth and his hands roving over Connor’s body.

Connor is very glad Hank’s beginning to take initiative. He’s very attractive when he’s being so forceful. Connor is also very glad that Hank appears to be fine with hands going wherever they please, and the only thing Connor has trouble deciding is where his should go first. He wishes he could touch all of Hank at once; run his fingers through his hair and cradle his face and feel his wonderfully thick arms and play with his belly and grab his ass.

Instead of any of those, Connor puts his arms around Hank and feels the ridge of his shoulder blades through the fabric of his shirt. The way the bones move and the muscles flex never fail to fascinate Connor. Connor can’t decide if he likes these hard, unyielding parts of Hank more than he loves the soft parts that shape themselves to Connor when he presses into them. This combination of soft-and-hard is something Connor adores about Hank, and he wishes he had been built the same way. Instead, he has to work to make himself a comfortable place for Hank, strong enough to support him and yet pliable enough to make Hank forget that he was never designed to be held.

He becomes aware that Hank is unbuttoning the top buttons of Connor’s shirt. He kisses his way down Connor’s neck, pushes aside the collar of Connor’s undershirt, and sucks the bump of what’s supposed to be Connor’s collarbone.

An idea occurs to Connor as Hank pushes him toward the bed. He sits down hard and says, “Hank. Hank, do you have a light?”

Hank pulls away for a moment, confusion evident in the furrow of his brow. “…The cigarette’s supposed to come after sex.”

“No, I mean… do you have your phone?”

“What the fuck for?”

“It’s dark and I want to use the flashlight to show you something.” Instead of waiting for Hank to fumble with it, Connor goes ahead and pulls it out the back pocket of Hank’s pants. He doesn’t even bother with the cracked screen, interfacing with it and turning the flashlight on with just a thought.

Hank blinks against the light. “Jesus. Does it have to be now?”

“It has to do with the sex we’re having, so yes. Wait—I can’t see that part of myself.” He rolls up his sleeve and shoves his arm in Hank’s face. “Suck on me here.”

Hank takes his arm, giving him a look.
“You’ll like it, I promise.”

Hank nibbles along Connor’s forearm before selecting a spot a few inches south of the wrist. Connor tries to concentrate on double-checking reference photos to make sure his settings are as realistic as possible, but he can’t resist the impulse to stroke Hank’s beard while Hank kisses and sucks the spot he’s chosen.

Hank’s mouth pops when Connor draws his arm back. “Look,” he says, turning Hank’s phonelight onto his arm. Where Hank was sucking, there is now a mottled red mark.


“I knew you’d like it,” Connor says proudly. He wants to ask if it looks good enough, but Hank’s mouth is on his neck again and he’s being pushed back onto the bed and his social protocol freezes entirely for about five seconds.

Hank draws back, hovering above him, and he’s resplendent. His pupils are blown wide and his hair is beginning to tangle, and the air is so thick with Hank’s arousal that Connor can practically taste it. A bead of sweat makes its way down Hank’s neck and is absorbed by the collar of his shirt, and that’s when Connor decides that Hank is wearing entirely too much clothing. He takes the shirt by the bottom hem and tries to pull it up, but he’s distracted by the beautiful expanse of belly that’s revealed. There’s a gorgeous line of hair spreading down to Hank’s belly button, and how can Connor not explore such hidden treasure?

Hank pulls his shirt off the rest of the way while Connor trails his fingers through the fine hair of Hank’s belly, delighting in the sensation. The second Hank’s chest comes into view, Connor feels compelled to sigh, “Oh, Hank,” because there’s even more hair there. More hair, and round, soft pecs, and a tattoo, long-faded and obscured by the dense hair. Connor has seen the tattoo before, of course, he’s been living with Hank for four years now. He’s seen Hank without a shirt before. But he’s never appreciated it like this. He almost wants to pause the proceedings so he can carefully examine the tattoo, but there will be time for that later.

Hank sits back slightly. “You like what you see?”

Connor leans up on his elbows. “More than anything. You’re so…” He trails off as he fails to find a single word that fits the entirety of what Hank is at this moment. Big. Gorgeous. Masculine. Everything that Connor has ever wanted and more, because what imaginings could possibly compare to the reality of having Hank be his?

He crawls up Hank’s front, running his hands down Hank’s spine while he drags his mouth across a nipple. Hank shivers, and Connor can feel it through every vertebra and dip his fingers explore.

Hank shoves both his hands down the back of Connor’s pants and Connor wiggles, desperate to feel Hank’s fingers on his skin.

“Jesus fuck.” Hank’s voice is breathless. “Tell me how to make you feel good. Tell me what you like, baby.”

“Touch me,” is the only thing Connor can think to say.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere.”

Hank pulls the back of Connor’s shirt out of his pants, and when he finally feels Hank’s hands on
his lower back, Connor nearly drowns in the tactile information he receives. Hank’s hands are sweaty and warm, so warm that his sensors spark with it. It’s almost as if Hank’s fingers are leaving a trail of static discharge so intense that it nearly burns Connor as they press their way to Connor’s front, dragging his shirt out.

“Unbutton that,” Hank says. Connor obeys, barely feeling the cool bits of plastic as he does so. How could plastic buttons possibly register when there’s Hank to feel and explore? He sheds the shirt and the moment he does so, Hank pushes up his undershirt and rubs a hand up Connor’s abdomen.

His other hand snakes down the back of Connor’s pants again and under Connor’s underwear. The waistband of Connor’s pants digs into him, the sensation intense in a different way. He wants Hank to reach deeper, and when the hand sliding up his chest trails back down and unbuttons his pants, Connor wants to sing when even more of that thick arm slides down his back, a hand cupping his ass greedily.

That’s when Connor realizes he’s been forgetting to breathe for goodness knows how long, and his chest hitches with how quickly he sucks in a breath. Hank groans in response to his gasp, the hand on Connor’s ass urging him forward. His leg brushes Hank’s crotch, and Hank rocks his hips.

Connor reaches for Hank’s fly, but Hank brushes his hands away. “Not yet,” and when Connor makes a noise of frustration, Hank pushes him back down so he’s laying down again. “I know. Soon. Haven’t had my fill of you, yet.”

And the next thing Connor knows, Hank is laying down next to him, pulling Connor’s back to his chest and running his hands down Connor’s front, every finger electrifying Connor from the outside in. Connor arches his back against Hank, and their skin sticks in places where Hank is sweating, the friction between them interrupting Connor’s ability to think. It’s no wonder most every animal organism reproduces with repetitive friction. If Connor could spend the rest of forever feeling Hank’s hands and Hank’s chest rub against him, he thinks he would end his existence in a state of utter bliss.

Hank nibbles and kisses his ear. Connor catches one of Hank’s hands in his. He just has to, it’s an impulsive action because, honestly, ears. Connor would have never thought of that. Human ingenuity knows no limits. The sharp bite of Hank’s teeth is such a contrast to the warm caress of Hank’s hands that Connor has to open a new process to properly analyze all the tactile information concurrently.

Hank’s free hand begins tugging down Connor’s pants. Connor shifts his hips and kicks along to help him with this, because every inch of uncovered skin is another million sensors he can expose to Hank. He wants to wrap himself in Hank.

One of Hank’s hands cups his butt. “Could probably bounce a coin off that ass of yours,” Hank says.

“Never tried that trick,” Connor says, and he presses the side of his face into Hank’s smile when he chuckles. Hank’s smile has an energy all its own, and it makes Connor feel like he’s alight from the inside.

Connor rolls over and presses his chest to Hank. He catches Hank’s mouth with his, hoping there’s something quantifiable about Hank’s smile. Most of the information he collects is the same as the last time, but there are subtle differences. A hint of some new chemical which has been introduced since the last time Connor sampled the data, and it only takes him a microsecond to identify himself on Hank’s lips and teeth and tongue.
“Hank,” Connor whispers against his mouth. “What do I taste like?”

Hank pauses, considering. “…Sort of like a towel.”

Connor blinks. “You taste many towels?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Hank growls as he pulls Connor in for another kiss. “No. Like… you taste the way fabric softener smells. Only… good, instead of like something that’d kill houseplants.”

“Oh, Hank. You’re so romantic.”

“You’re the one who fucking asked,” Hank says, and he blows a raspberry at the place where Connor’s chin meets his neck, and it takes Connor just a touch too long to realize that was probably meant to tickle him. He laughs anyway because it’s unexpected.

Hank runs a hand down Connor’s back. “What do I taste like?”

The question makes Connor fall into himself for a brief moment. Because there’s no possible way to translate all the data he pulls from Hank into anything even remotely resembling what he’s come to think of as taste. Other sources of data, yes, but not anything of Hank. Hank is so much more than that.

He tries anyway, and he’s quiet for several seconds.

He finally settles on, “You taste like meat that still needs to be tenderized.”

Hank bursts out laughing, pulling away and sitting up. His hair falls over his face as he shakes with laughter.

“No, wait,” Connor says, following Hank up. “That’s what you taste like. Like laughter, and the feeling of coming home, and… and the reason I put so much care into making every breakfast perfect for you, because when I see you come to life over something I put all my love into, it makes me—”

Hank interrupts him with a kiss that’s so gentle, it’s nearly overwhelming. Just as electrifying as Hank’s hungry touches, but in a completely different way. Connor tries to mirror Hank to return the kiss as best as he can, and the fact that this one utterly human show of affection still feels so foreign to him makes him want to cry.

If Connor can’t kiss Hank to show him what he means to him, then at least Connor can think of a few other things he can do.

Connor pushes Hank down so Connor is hovering at his side. He lets his hands rove down Hank’s hairy chest and the rise of his stomach before he teases the dip below it, poking his fingers beneath the waistband of his pants.

Hank lets out a soft noise. He watches Connor, waiting to see what he’ll do.

Connor runs his hand over the bulge in Hank’s pants. Its heat is palpable, even through the fabric. Connor has to resist the urge to poke it to see just how solid it is. He wants to taste it, and he—he gets an idea.

He pushes Hank’s pants down. Hank is still fully contained within his underwear, and Connor can see the shape of his cock clearly through the thin cotton. The swell of it, the ridge of the glans, Connor even thinks he can see a thick vein faintly outlined through the fabric.
He rubs it absently with his thumb as though he’s considering it. Hank shifts on his elbows, squinting at Connor as though he’s trying to figure out what Connor’s next move will be—

And then he moans and turns his head as Connor begins mouthing his cock through his underwear. The briefs are oh-so-slightly damp already with Hank’s sweat and a spot of pre-cum—Connor swirls his tongue on the spot, and oh, the combination of the explosion of data and the hitch of Hank’s breath nearly send his processes grinding to a halt—and Connor only gets them even damper, analysis fluid thick in his mouth and nearly dribbling freely as he explores the shape of Hank underneath the fabric.

“Connor—oh, fuck, Connor.” Hank’s voice is flush with desire.

When Connor has had enough of teasing Hank, he pushes his pants and underwear down in one motion, wrestling Hank out of them as Connor realizes just how close he is to his goal. He turns his eyes back upon Hank.

Hank’s cock is resting on his abdomen, thick and the head of it still beading with pre-cum. The entire thing is fascinating to look at, from the dark flush near the tip to the pulse of the vein to the nest of silver hair at the base. Connor wants to look at it forever. The only thing he wants to do more than that is to touch it.

He wraps his fingers lightly around Hank’s cock. The weight of it, the texture of the skin, the way it twitches as if it wants to jump right into Connor’s grasp, everything about Hank’s cock is perfect.

“Come on, baby,” Hank breathes, nearly moaning. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Connor doesn’t think he could ever deny Hank when he begs for it in that thin, lust-addled voice. Connor strokes Hank twice, just to make sure he has the cock mapped out perfectly, and then he swallows it in one go.

“Fuck! Connor!” Hank jerks his hips upward in a half-conscious way, and Connor bobs along, careful not to let Hank scrape his teeth.

He pulls off of Hank with a soft pop. “I don’t have a gag reflex. You can fuck my mouth if you like.”

Hank’s cock twitches again. “Oh, sweet Jesus.” He already sounds out of breath. “Have mercy. No, just… just go slow, okay? You have no fucking clue what you do to me.”

Connor, as requested, goes much slower. He kitten-licks it a bit, just to get more of that stimulating pre-cum on his tongue. Then he slowly licks from the head down, carefully.

Hank absently rubs his dick with an open palm, his head thrown back. When Connor is ready to begin taking it into his mouth again, he clasps Hank’s hand in his to get it out of his way, nuzzling it and kissing it before turning his attention back to Hank’s cock.

He builds a rhythm, slowly taking it back into his mouth bit by bit. It’s difficult work—he wants badly to just have the whole thing inside of him, but Hank grunts softly with every few breaths, and that’s reward enough for Connor for now.

When Connor reaches the base, Hank’s hips twitch again. Connor pauses to make sure Hank is ready before drawing back up, slowly working his tongue around his cock. He hopes he’s doing a good job, that Hank is deriving more enjoyment out of this than just to have a warm, wet hole giving his dick some attention. He loves this, he loves what he’s doing to Hank, but he’s reminded
at every moment that this isn’t want he was built for. He doesn’t have a program in his head
guiding him through the motions, and he doesn’t have Hank’s biological urges to give him a
baseline idea. All he has is the preconstruction of Hank’s cock he has constructed, suggesting to
him based on the limited knowledge that he has, that perhaps he should twist his lips here and suck
gently now.

It’s wonderful. The sensation of Hank inside him, filling him more than ever before is incredible.
Reading Hank from the pulse of the dick inside his mouth and the occasional bead of fluid
swabbed by his tongue is indescribable. And the noises Hank is making as he fulfils this biological
imperative, and he shares this so-very-human event with Connor, makes him wish he could hold
Hank in his arms while he sucks him off.

He presses his fingers in a back-and-forth motion along Hank’s, balls, enjoying the texture of the
hair and the skin there. Hank lets out a deeper moan, and he winds his fingers through Connor’s
hair. Connor can’t help but pause to press against Hank’s hand. This connection is more than he
ever could have hoped for and he hopes Hank is aware of that, he wishes he could communicate
that to Hank somehow—

And suddenly Hank’s hand is out of his hair, pulling him off his dick gently. “Connor… Connor,
good fucking God.”

“Hank…” His mouth feels suddenly empty and he hopes this won’t be a permanent state of being
for him now. “Hank I want you to finish in my mouth.”

Hank hauls Connor up to his face, kissing him sloppily, and a spark goes through Connor at the
thought of what Hank must be tasting on Connor’s mouth.

“I know, baby. Next time. But this time I want—” Hank kisses him again, mouthing against him
and panting like a dog in heat. He takes Connor’s hand and brings it down to his dick, rubbing it
for him.

Then Connor understands. He runs his hand up and down Hank’s dick, trying to match the pace of
the hand Hank is stroking himself with. The friction on his hand from Hank’s still-wet dick feels
incredible, having Hank grunt, “fuck, oh fuck, c’mon” against his face is incredible.

Connor tips his mouth against Hank, not even caring that their teeth clash together, and with a
muffled moan and a shudder, Hank comes over both their hands and on his own stomach.

Connor holds Hank through his orgasm, feeling it rock through him like a shockwave. When the
tremors recede, Hank sighs, and Connor can feel the tension ebb out of him. Hank rests his head
against Connor’s shoulder, the thrum of his heartbeat coursing through his body while Connor
kisses him more gently.

Connor gently moves Hank’s head until he’s resting on a pillow. Hank doesn’t seem to want to let
him go as he pulls away to reach for some tissues.

“The mess isn’t going anywhere. Just relax.” Hank says.

So Connor reaches for the tissues with his other hand—until he realizes it’s still splattered with
Hank’s come. He can’t resist bringing it to his mouth and licking it clean.

Hank stares with heavily-lidded eyes, swallowing thickly.

Connor doesn’t immediately analyze the new information, not even in a background process like
he normally would. There will be time for that later. For now, Connor just wants to spend this time
focusing on Hank and whatever he might want or need after this experience.

He wipes Hank clean with the tissues while Hank huffs.

“Would you quit taking care of me and pretend this took just as much out of you as it did me? Christ, you’re making me feel my age.”

“I’m sorry, Hank.” Connor tentatively lays down with Hank, giving a performative wince as he does.

Hank just rolls his eyes. “Fuck it. Just c’mere, you.” He holds an arm out, and Connor gladly folds himself beneath it, pressing himself to Hank.

They’re both still naked, legs slightly tangled and so much of their bare skin touching each other. The context of this feeling is different for Connor. Less intense than it was when they were actively engaged in sex. Softer. Lovelier. Still wonderful in its own, new way.

Connor wonders if this is an afterglow.

Hank blinks slowly at him, tracing his face. “Did you have fun?”

Connor smiles. “Yes. Please let me know when you’re ready to do it again.”

Hank groans. “Jesus Christ. You’re actually trying to kill me.”

“Never.” He takes Hank’s hand, closing his eyes and pressing it to his cheek. “Never.”

Hank heaves an even sigh. They drift like that for a while, Connor enjoying the post-coital haze that Hank seems to find himself in.

Some time later, Hank says in a quiet voice, “What is that, exactly?”

Connor opens his eyes. He thinks for a moment that Hank is looking at his face, but then he realizes that Hank is looking at their hands, still pressed to Connor’s cheek.

Connor lowers his hand. His bare chassis is visible, Hank’s hand dark in the low light of the bedroom against the glowing seams in the stark white plastic. He’s gripping Connor lightly, but as though he has no intention of letting go.

The fact that Hank is still holding onto him even though he’s seen this gives Connor courage.

“It’s… called interfacing,” Connor begins slowly. “Androids use this function to transmit data faster and more securely than over a wireless connection. Establishing a physical connection is—”

Connor pauses. “It’s… different. A unique sort of data can be transmitted over interfacing. It’s… like personal data, if such a thing exists for most androids. A unit’s own thoughts and conclusions and experiences.”

“What about feelings?” Hank asks. “In your case, that is.”

“Yes. In my case, feelings as well. This is how I help Cole when he’s feeling too overwhelmed with his cybernetics. I just… transmit my perception of how my own limbs work. Try to show him how his own should work.”

Hank hums, thoughtful. “Well. Thank God for that.”
Connor smiles. He squeezes Hank’s hand. “With you… I’m not entirely sure what’s happening. It’s never a conscious decision to try and interface with you. It just happens automatically.”

“Like your system just… wants to show me what you’re thinking?”

“More than that.” Connor closes his eyes. “It’s more like… being in each other’s heads. I want you to feel what I feel, to see what I see. I want you to know my perspective on the world and everything I experience.” He opens his eyes. “And you. I want you to see what I see when I look at you. What I become when I look at you.”

Hank smiles lightly. “…Happens automatically, huh? Sounds like even the machine part of you knows exactly what we are.”

Connor looks at Hank with his pupils blown wide and his hair in disarray and his sweat drying all down his body. His heart rate is slow, his whole body at ease. The animal part of Hank also knows what they are, but that’s a given.

So Connor just smiles and closes his eyes. He opens them sometime later to find that Hank has also closed his eyes, and he watches Hank through his rest.

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Hank and Connor step out of the car, and they wait to see what Cole will do. After a moment, he opens his own door, pushing himself out of his seat and onto the asphalt.

Gershwin A. Drain Elementary looms in front of them. So very familiar by now, and yet just as foreboding as it seemed the first day they brought Cole here years ago. That ugly flower sculpture still hangs over the front entrance, and Connor still thinks it looks like a bunch of broken needles. Some things don’t change.

Connor feels Hank’s eyes on him, and he turns toward him. Hank gives him a meaningful look, and Connor knows they’re thinking the same thing. It’s the same thing they’ve spent most of the last few days discussing over and over.

Connor has special permission to accompany Cole to school while he’s still getting used to being back. But whether that would be a good thing or not has been a topic of great interest to both him and Hank.

In the end, they seemed to decide that Cole doesn’t need Connor with him. It would be better for his confidence and independence this way.

But—Connor knows that he and Hank are, in a way, just as nervous as Cole. He knows that when Hank looks at him, he’s silently asking whether Connor has changed his mind.

Connor takes a moment to reflect. He looks at Cole. Cole has been quiet all morning. And now he’s looking at the school as though he doesn’t recognize it.

Connor knows that if he were to ask Cole if he’d like Connor to stay with him at school, Cole would say yes.

Connor knows that if he were to ask Cole if he’d like to forget about school altogether and go home, Cole would say yes.

So Connor composes himself and smiles at Cole and says what he said to Cole once a long time
“Cole, you are going to have an extremely fun day at school.”

“Half-day,” Hank corrects.

“Yes,” Connor says. “An extremely fun half-day at school. I’ll be back to pick you up when the lunch bell rings, and then we can go home and relax for the rest of the day.”

Cole considers this. “…Can you make grilled cheese and tomato soup for when we get home?”

Bravery is a grilled cheese sandwich. Bravery is knowing the people who love you believe in you, and support you, and push you to be all they know you’re capable of being, and will be there the moment you say, I can’t handle this, I need help.

“Of course,” Connor says, softening his voice to hide how emotional he feels. “Anything you want.”

Cole gives a careful nod. “Okay. If it’s only a half-day, I think I can handle it.”

A small, relieved smile flits across Hank’s face. He takes Cole’s left hand, and Connor takes Cole’s right, and together, they walk into the school.

Chapter End Notes

_Yakichou_ did a lot of beautiful fanart of Chapter 14! Please check out [Hank and Connor slowdancing](#), [Connor wearing Hank’s scarf](#), [the kiss](#), and [Hank and Connor holding each other in the very last scene](#)

If anyone else has done fanart for Domesticity since the last update and I've forgotten to post it, please let me know! I spent an hour scouring twitter because I feel like I've forgotten something but I just can't remember who else might have done fanart!

Come follow me on twitter for updates and to hear me talk about this fic! [CeilingKiwi](#)
Fugue, Part I

Chapter Summary

What with one thing and another, a year passes.

Chapter Notes

There is a dream sequence containing dubcon between Hank and Connor in the first passage of this chapter. If you want to skip it, look for when the text becomes entirely italicized. The dream sequence will be over when the text goes back to normal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things with Connor are a lot harder than they ever were with Joanna. Or any of Hank’s previous relationships.

Or, rather, it’s not that they’re worse. It’s just that everything requires so much more thought and consideration than any of his other relationships ever have. It feels like before he carries out any action, he has to stop and ask himself how will this impact Connor? Is it okay for Hank to have an afternoon nap on the sofa on his day off? No, because Connor cooked the last three family meals by himself, and Hank’s going to be damned if he lets Connor make the next dinner alone on top of that while Hank snoozes the day away. Is it okay for Hank to go out for a drink after work? No, because Connor made an off-hand comment that morning about looking forward to the next time they can pick up the book they’ve been working their way through together, and Connor has nothing else to really look forward to.

It makes him a better partner. A more attentive partner than ever before. It’s exhausting, but Hank knew that it was going to be like this going in. It’s perfectly alright that it’s exhausting, because Connor and his happiness are worth every little bit of effort.

It’s also perfectly alright that it’s exhausting because at the end of the day, when Hank crawls into bed, Connor joins him more often than not, and holding Connor while he drifts off to sleep is all the more comforting. Hank has earned Connor’s heavy warmth against him, damnit, and it helps him sleep better than he has in years.

(Is it okay for Hank to ask Connor to spend more frequent nights in bed with him? Inconclusive. Better to learn more about what Connor gets out of spending all night wide awake, staring at Hank, and what he does on the nights he isn’t there before making a decision on whether that’s okay or not.)

Sex had also been in the inconclusive category, before. Connor’s an adult, he’s a totally responsible and mature whatever he is, but being responsible and mature doesn’t mean that they’re sexually compatible in any sense. And even though he should have had an adult, mature conversation with Connor about it, Hank just couldn’t bring himself to do so. If it had turned out Connor had absolutely zero interest in sex, he hadn’t wanted to give Connor the impression that it was required.
He knows how common it is for people to use their androids like they’re just big, moaning sex toys. Which most of them are in those circumstances, but not Connor. And yeah, maybe it’s a little ridiculous to think of it as a systemic exploitation that has any impact on the dynamic between himself and Connor, but that’s how Hank thinks of it and that’s what it does. That’s never going to be Hank. He’s never going to use what Connor is against him like that.

Thank Christ Connor solved that problem for Hank by shoving himself in Hank’s lap and letting him know he is all about the sex.

What Hank learns from this is that he really ought to be proactive about having conversations with Connor about stuff like this. But—he has no idea how to do that without admitting to himself and to Connor that there are certain things he’s used to and certain expectations he has. He has even less of an idea of what to do about the fact that Connor is probably not going to meet all of those expectations. He never wants Connor to think that anything about himself is a disappointment to Hank.

No. Much better to coast along while everything is smooth sailing. Connor is happy and Hank, despite feeling like he’s stuck on a high wire, is happy too.

One night, he holds Connor in his arms while he falls asleep. The crook of his arm falls neatly into the line of Connor’s waist, and Connor’s ass is pressed against him, but Hank is far too tired to think about sex. He loses track of where Connor’s warm presence ends and where the rest of the blankets cocooning him begin—

And then the next thing he knows, he’s wandering around the house after Connor. Connor has something of his, a token or some sort of important artifact that Hank wants badly. But Connor is making a game out of keeping it away from Hank. He slowly moves about the house, looking over his shoulder to make sure Hank hasn’t lost interest.

Every time Hank thinks he’s about to catch Connor, he twirls out of Hank’s grasp, laughing softly with a small, crooked smile on his face. Hank’s a little irritated—Connor should know perfectly well that Hank needs whatever he’s playing keep away with—but it’s hard to get mad at Connor when he’s being so cute.

It’s much more like a dance than a chase, really. There’s no sense of urgency, and Connor moves so slowly and gracefully that it makes Hank feel like they’re dancing in a room that’s filled up to their hips in cotton fluff.

Connor’s smile trails behind him like a sunbeam. In the end, that’s how Hank manages to catch Connor. He still isn’t close enough to touch Connor, but he’s able to reach out and catch Connor by the smile—

There’s a blur of motion, and the next thing Hank knows, he has Connor up against the bedroom wall, fucking him. Connor’s legs are wrapped around him, his whole body bobbing to Hank’s thrusts. He’s absolutely weightless in Hank’s arms, and Hank feels like if he pushes too hard or squeezes too tight, he’ll crush Connor.

He pounds into Connor anyway. He can’t help it. It’s like a compulsion, something that’s written into the code of his DNA. He pistons his hips, thrusting into him over and over. He can’t speed up or slow down, but it’s just fine, his muscles don’t burn and his back doesn’t ache, and all he feels is the gut-churning need for more.

Connor has his head tipped up. He’s moaning like a porn star, and not in his own voice. It’s obscene and high-pitched, and every exaggerated gasp and groan tickles the back of Hank’s mind.
with how weird it is, how unlike Connor it is.

Connor’s LED is spinning yellow.

Hank just keeps fucking him. He can’t bring himself to stop until Connor begins to gasp in a high and needy voice, “Oh yes, use me, use me,”

“Wait,” Hank chokes out, forcing his hips to still with every ounce of strength he has. It’s like trying to force a machine to stop, and he can feel his whole body buzz with the desperate need to keep rutting up into Connor. “Wait, wait. Who the hell are you?”

“Please.” Connor writhes in his arms, grinding down on Hank’s dick. “You’re so big…”

“Connor,” Hank says, reaching up to tap Connor’s cheek with his hand. “Connor, are you in there?”

Connor moans again, a long, drawn-out sound that Hank can hear echoed down the hall—

No, actually, it’s being echoed by the rows upon rows of androids he suddenly finds himself surrounded by. There are straight, even lines of androids getting fucked into infinity, each android pressed against a metal rack as though they’re nothing but chattel in the world’s most demented industrial farm. Each android is moaning in the exact same way as Connor, writhing in the exact same way as Connor, begging for more in the exact same way as Connor.

The realization comes to Hank slowly. This isn’t Connor; this is whatever program takes over for domestic androids whenever their owners want to fuck them. This is whatever controls them so they do more than just lie there like a dead fish. Connor’s trapped somewhere inside his body, forced into the backseat by his own programming.

“Connor…” He gets the sense he should be less comfortable with this realization than he is. But it’s hard to think about anything other than how good it feels to be still inside of Connor.

“Use me,” Connor gasps, trying to rock into Hank. “Use me, Hank, please…”

It’s the sound of his name that does him in. His hips twitch forward, and as soon as he feels that tiny bit of friction, all his resistance crumbles. He can’t not pick up the pace, growl into Connor’s chest and keep fucking him.

Connor’s whole body begins bobbing again, the short cries that are wrung from him perfectly in time with the cries of every other android surrounding them. “Oh! Oh! Oh, yes! More!”

Connor’s LED is still spinning yellow. Panting with the effort it takes to pay attention, Hank watches it spin. Yellow—yellow isn’t as bad as red. Connor’s probably okay with this if his LED is yellow and not red…

“Hank! Oh! Hank!” Connor grabs Hank’s shoulders, his head tipping back so Hank can no longer see his LED. “Break me! Ruin me!”

And when Hank looks down from trying to peer up at Connor’s face, he sees red blood seeping out of the massive gash that’s crossing Connor’s bare chest and shoulder—

Hank startles awake when something touches his face. His heart is pounding and he has no idea where he is for a brief moment.

“Hank. Shh.” Connor’s voice is as gentle as the hand cupping his cheek.
“Huh? Wha…?”

“It’s alright. You were having a nightmare.”

When Hank feels like he can breathe normally again, he groans and rolls onto his back.

Connor follows him, resting half on Hank’s chest. Hank’s mind is still addled from the dream, but Connor’s weight is real and something about it grounds him and comforts him.

He doesn’t quite feel like he deserves to wrap an arm around Connor, but he does anyway. He can feel Connor smile into his chest.

“Connor,” Hank croaks, “if you wanted to leave, you would, right?”

“I don’t want to leave,” Connor says, and there’s something sure and firm about his voice that makes Hank want to abandon his question entirely. “Go back to sleep, Hank.”

Hank snorts and smacks his lips. Already he barely remembers anything from the dream he just awoke from. Only a vague sense that Connor was hurt and he had something to do with it. But having Connor curled on him, calm and well, soothes the last vestiges of guilt clinging to his conscience. A yawn builds, and he can feel Connor rise and sink on his chest. Connor’s weight there is the last thing he’s aware of before he falls asleep again, and by the time morning comes, he’ll have completely forgotten how Connor avoided answering his question.

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Just because Connor can jack up his audio detection settings to listen in on Hank’s phone calls doesn’t mean he always does. It would be very rude to do that. He only listens in if he thinks he has to, or if the phone calls have something to do with Cole.

Cole is the one consistent exception Connor allows himself to have for that rule. No one will ever call him to ask for his input on an issue relating to Cole, so listening in on Hank’s calls and injecting himself into the consideration process is the next best thing.

Hank doesn’t seem to mind. Connor suspects Hank knows just how much this helps Connor feel like a parent.

So when Hank’s phone rings one February morning on his day off and Connor identifies Drain Elementary’s school counselor on the other end by the first syllable she speaks, he crosses into the kitchen where Hank is cleaning the microwave, putting himself in Hank’s line of sight.

Hank, distracted, frowns at nothing. “Yeah, thanks for asking. What’s this about?”

Hank is silent as he listens to the counselor explain that she and Cole’s teacher had a meeting that morning and that they’re both concerned that Cole still lacks some of the skills he’s going to need before starting first grade.

Connor and Hank share a surprised look. Hank says into the phone, “Well, I mean, you know he missed all that time earlier in the year. That’s not his fault or anything.”

Another pause while the counselor speaks.

Hank says, “Options? What, like making Cole repeat kindergarten? I don’t understand what the problem is. He knows all his colors and shapes, he can read on his own, what other skills does he ___”
A third pause. Hank frowns.

“I... yeah, sure. I can swing by today. See you then.”

Hank spends the rest of the afternoon in a state of mild agitation. He doesn’t say anything about the phone call, but his vitals tell plainly enough that he’s upset by the news.

Connor finds himself making statements like, “Even if Cole does end up being retained a year, it’ll be alright. He’s more than capable of bouncing back from that,” and, “It certainly isn’t a failure on his or anyone else’s part. He’s been through so much.”

Eventually, Hank looks up and asks, “Do you keep saying that kind of shit to convince me, or to convince yourself?”

Connor stops talking about it after that.

They drive to the school together, and Connor entertains Cole out in the hallway while Hank meets with Cole’s teacher and the school counselor.

Connor wants to stay to listen in, but Cole is so excited to show Connor around the school that he lets Cole give him the grand tour. The grand tour consists primarily of the hallway the preschool and kindergarten classrooms are down. It’s slow going because Cole still isn’t quite walking at pace, but there’s no need to rush. Especially not since Connor’s seen the hallway a few hundred times.

They make it back to the counselor’s office just in time to see Hank burst through the door, a look of utter exasperation on his face.

“Lieutenant, is everything alright?”

A look of annoyed confusion crosses Hank’s face at Connor’s use of his title. Then he seems to remember why, and his face falls slightly. “Oh. Yeah. Later, okay?”

Once they’re home, they manage to get Cole down for an afternoon nap before Hank bursts out with, “Those fuckers don’t give a single shit about Cole’s IEP.”

“Volume,” Connor murmurs, tilting his head towards Cole’s bedroom. “What do you mean?”

Hank lowers his voice the next time he speaks. “You know those ‘skills’ they were telling us they’re worried about with Cole?” He makes air-quotes with his fingers. “Bullshit, every last one of them.”

“What did they say specifically?”

“That they don’t think Cole’s ready for first grade yet because he can’t climb stairs with alternating feet.”

Connor blinks. “He has a prosthetic leg. He’s only had that prosthetic leg for a few months.”

“And that’s not all. Apparently the counselor came by to assess him herself. When she asked Cole to tell her his name and how old he is, he wouldn’t say anything. He wouldn’t even look at her.”

“Has he ever even met her before today?”

“No, but his teacher says they still have cause to be concerned because Cole’s not socializing with other kids his age the way he should.”
“These people are educators,” Connor says, appalled. “How can they not see that these issues are a result of trauma and not any sort of developmental delay?”

Hank walks past Connor and into the kitchen. He opens the fridge. “Kept fucking talking about how they didn’t wanna ‘disrupt’ Cole. As if being kept back wouldn’t be fucking devastating for him.” Beer in hand, he slams the fridge shut. “Kid knows how smart he is.”

“Did they have any solutions for how to help Cole other than holding him back?”

Hank waves the beer vaguely. “Talked about having Cole come talk to that counselor more often. I guess she wants Cole to come out of his shell, but…”

Hank lets the sentence hang. It isn’t hard for Connor to fill in the rest; Hank doesn’t trust this counselor’s judgement. She may only want to help Cole, but having her approach Cole’s unique needs from the wrong angle may only cause Cole to retreat further and harm his education.

“Well,” Connor begins slowly, “There are certain things you and I can do to try and help Cole.”

“Yeah?” Hank looks interested.

“You can arrange for more socialization for Cole. Individual playdates with classmates he might not know so well, group outings with the children he’s closest with… putting Cole in safe, controlled situations where he has to adapt and become more social will help him refamiliarize himself with those skills.” Connor runs a hand through his hair to push the stray lock of hair back into place. It curls over his forehead as he begins talking again. “And I can help him gain more functionality with his prostheses.”

Hank’s expression brightens. “…Well, if anyone can help Cole master those cybernetics, it’s you.”

Cole, for his part, although he doesn’t seem very enthusiastic at all about Hank filling up his calendar with playdates, seems thrilled for the chance to sit down one-on-one with Connor for more interfacing.

“It really doesn’t hurt much anymore, though,” Cole says.

“That’s good, but that’s not why we’re doing this.” Connor takes Cole’s hand, giving him a careful look. “Now, remember. Tell me if you start to get overtired or if your head begins to hurt. I don’t want to push you.”

Cole just shifts in his seat, eager to begin.

Connor very gently connects their systems—and with his processes turned down to near-human levels, he can feel the vague and nebulous shape of Cole’s mind amid all the chaff between them. It is getting easier and easier to perceive Cole the more often they do this.

To Connor’s surprise, Cole pushes out first, coming into sharper focus as he touches Connor’s mind and the number of feelings and memories stirring just beneath the surface of Connor’s consciousness. At the forefront is a crisp memory of Connor holding a two-year-old Cole against his chest, rocking him back to sleep after he’d woken up crying. There are countless similar memories in Connor’s archive, but this one is special because at one point, Cole bunches the collar of Connor’s uniform in his tiny fist, murmuring, “Connuh,” in his baby-soft voice. It’s the first time Cole had ever said Connor’s name, and it’s one of the memories that Connor reaches for so frequently that he has it filed specifically for ease of access.

Cole’s presence goes fuzzy with tender affection, and even without reaching into Cole, Connor can
feel the projection of a similar instance Cole must be remembering—sad, sad, hurt, sad, Connor, warm, sad, soft, warm, safe, Connor, soft—and they float there, Connor grateful beyond expression that Cole’s feelings are recognizable to him.

As much as Connor would like to spend all afternoon wrapping Cole in the complete depth of Connor’s love for him, he knows that Cole doesn’t need that right now. Cole is happy and secure, not upset or in pain. They’re interfacing for a different reason, and Connor doesn’t need to use up Cole’s stamina showing him memories as if they’re looking through a photo album together.

Connor takes a moment to read Cole’s perception of his cybernetic limbs, and the sensations he pulls from them are easy to parse, nearly recognizable to him. He doesn’t need to stop and translate the data into something he can comprehend. He can feel the ways in which the limbs are still new to Cole. Much, much more familiar than they were when he first began with them. But still sluggish, still unsure.

Connor shifts through the paths that electronic signals take as they travel down Cole’s spine and out to his arms and legs, and he wonders what sort of information would be most useful to Cole. He’s already shown Cole what it is supposed to feel like to move naturally with a cybernetic body. Cole, having not had an episode of pain for some time, knows what it’s supposed to feel like.

He takes a moment to shift through his own perceptions, wondering if there isn’t anything he hasn’t shared with Cole by now. Weighing the information in an attempt to gauge how useful it will be to Cole. He reaches past the data and the processes he is consciously aware of, down into the programming of his mind and his limbs, into how they interact with one another and exchange information continuously. Down into the neural pathways hard-coded into the core of his being, even deeper than his biocomponents and his frame. Down into the parts of him that inform who he is and what he is.

Connor takes all of this and sends it to Cole, piece by piece.

Cole’s presence draws back slightly, and Connor can feel Cole’s curiosity as though it were his own. And then—

Somehow, without Connor’s input, his processing speed ramps up. Connor nearly cuts the connection between himself and Cole to protect him before he realizes that it’s Cole himself who’s turning Connor’s processing speed back up. Hitching himself onto Connor’s processing to power his own understanding of the fragments of deep programming he’s working through.

A burst of enlightenment so bright from Cole that Connor is sure he must be utilizing Connor’s system to even generate such a powerful surge of something so clear and understandable to Connor.

This time, Cole’s the one who pulls away, smacking himself in the chest with his cybernetic arm and looking slightly puzzled, as though he’s wondering why he suddenly has a physical body again.

He moves to stand. “Connor, I’m gonna go use the computer now, okay?”

“What?” Connor frowns, takes Cole by the shoulder as he tries to dash away. “Hold on a minute. You shouldn’t stare at a computer screen so soon after interfacing. Are you feeling alright? No headache, not too tired?”

“No, it has to be now! While I still have it in my head!” Cole pulls away, moving to where he keeps his laptop.
“What has to be now?” Connor says as he watches Cole pull the laptop out of sleep mode.

When Cole pulls up his programming lessons and exercises, Connor blinks, thinking he must be misreading what’s displayed on the screen. “Cole, did you finish all the modules I installed on this computer?”

“Yeah, before I went back to school.”

Connor doesn’t have anything to say in response to that, because those modules were supposed to last Cole the next two years.

Then Cole puts his cybernetic hand on his laptop and the skin peels away to reveal the white chassis underneath—

“Cole!” Connor cries, yanking Cole away from the computer. “Stop!” He whirls Cole around to look at him, visualizing Cole doubled over in agony, clutching his head as he’s overloaded with too much unreadable data too quickly—

Cole just blinks at him, alarmed and confused. “Huh?”

Connor hugs Cole tightly, nearly sagging in relief.

Cole can initiate interfacing now, somehow. He wants to demand Cole tell him how it happened, except that seems obvious. He must have learned it from the bits of Connor he received from their interfacing.

“You can’t do that,” Connor says, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth. From how scared and helpless he is, he feels more human than ever before. “You aren’t a computer, Cole. You aren’t built to receive data from machines; you could have hurt yourself!”

“I wasn’t taking data,” Cole says, a note of childish annoyance in his voice. “I was sending data.”

“What?”

The skin of Cole’s hand peels back. “Can I show you? I won’t take any data, I just wanted to do it this way because it’s faster than typing it out…”

Connor hesitates while he thinks things through, dragging the moment out to a pause Cole would notice to communicate to him how serious he is. “…Alright. But be very careful.”

Cole goes to put his hand on the laptop again. A text window pops up that’s already full of code, and Connor watches as a segment in his middle gets erased and then rewritten, and then a segment closer to the end.

“When you sent me that stuff earlier, it helped me figure out something I was stuck on,” Cole says, and Connor is surprised that Cole is able to manipulate the program while he’s talking.

Cole keeps moving down the lines of code, and Connor wonders just how long the program Cole is writing is.

Then Cole tries to run the program—and several circles and ovals in various shades of white and brown appear on the screen. The circles vaguely seem to resemble a child’s drawing of some animal facing toward the left…

“Is that Sumo?”
“Yep!” Cole says with a smile. He clicks on a space to the far left, and a bone also comprised of two small circles and one long, stretched out oval appears where Cole has clicked.

The white ovals depicting Sumo’s legs swing from where they’re hinged to the body. The whole figure shuffles towards the bone, which vanishes when Sumo touches it.

“Cole, you made this?” Connor can’t keep the awe out of his voice. “All by yourself? This is incredible.”

Cole smiles, flushing from the praise. “Yeah… the lessons taught me how, but I, um… I had to figure some of it out on my own…”

“Like just now, when we interfaced and that helped you solve the problem you were having.”

“Yeah… I wasn’t sure how to make the legs stick only at one spot.”

“Walk me through it,” Connor says, kneeling down next to Cole. “I want to know how you got that idea from the data I sent you.”

They spend the better part of an hour at the computer, Cole showing Connor all the lessons he’s completed and how far he’s come in his programming education since he started. He shows Connor the tiny programs he’s made on his own so far, such as a smiley face with eyes that follow the cursor around the screen and a marquee that shifts the colors of the text it’s displaying between pink, red, and purple before turning back to pink. Cole complains about how he always has to be so careful about spelling and complains about how hard it is to type when he’s still getting used to his cybernetic hand.

Although… over the course of the hour, Connor can tell there’s a definite uptick in the function of Cole’s right hand. Perhaps, with Cole’s hunt-and-peck typing, he hasn’t noticed it himself yet, but Connor can tell that by the time they turn off the computer, Cole’s hand is moving more surely than it had been earlier in the day.

Perhaps a few more interfacing sessions are called for to cement the progress.

***

Every time Hank sees Connor in that god-fucking-awful armband and triangle, it’s like a stab in the gut.

Before, it would only make him angry. Now it just hurts. It hurts because Hank should be able to protect Connor from this, but he can’t. All he can do is pretend he doesn’t see it there. Pretend this person he’s sharing his life with isn’t so oppressed that he doesn’t even have the luxury of considering himself a second-class citizen.

Pretend he doesn’t worry himself sick every day that he’s gonna wind up attacked again, or broken even worse than before or—

It’s hard not to take stuff like this personally. Lately, every time he overhears anyone talk about the rapidly rising unemployment rate, the conversation shortly turns to androids and how they contribute to the problem. Everyone seems so keen on blaming androids for this when the real people to blame are the people. Politicians and lobbyists and big business owners. Every corporate bigwig at Cyberlife. The people who’re failing to regulate the negative impacts androids have on society. Every time Hank has to look at Connor decked out in glowing symbols that openly declare that he’s a thing and not a person, it’s hard not to remember that many people who see him like this see him as nothing more than the direct cause of their own personal misery.
All he can do is try not to think about it and try to be there as often as he can when Connor has to
go out in his blue armband and triangle. Even if it kills him. Better it kill him than Connor.

Tonight, the family is having dinner with Carl Manfred, and Connor will only be wear the symbols
during the short ride to Carl’s home. Even so, Cole sighs dolefully when he sees Connor pull his
new Android jacket out of a shopping bag.

“Don’t make that face,” Connor chides as he tries it on. “This one doesn’t have as many plastic
parts as my uniform does. It should be much more pleasing to the touch.”

“The touch isn’t the bad part of it,” Cole says. “It’s that it stops you from wearing your clothes.”

“Actually, that’s not quite true.” Connor sounds far too pleased about that. “I can wear whatever I
like underneath while still following the law.”

Cole knits his brow. The confused look on his face seems to suggest he knows there’s still a
problem with the jacket, but doesn’t know how to explain what that problem is.

Connor fastens the jacket closed. “How does it look, Hank?”

Hank tries to temper the frown on his face. It isn’t Connor he’s upset at, after all, and Connor
shouldn’t have to bear the brunt of Hank’s dissatisfaction. “You know how I feel about the fact
that you don’t have a choice in this, Connor. You don’t even need a jacket. It’s May, for Chrissake”

“I know how you feel about my obligations. I’m asking about the whole jacket, not just the
identification symbols.” He meets Hank’s gaze, a slightly frustrated, slightly pleading look in his
eyes. “Does it at least look nice on me?”

Hank hesitates, then takes another look. He tries not to see the glowing blue armband and triangle.

Taken on its own, the jacket looks very nice. A well-fitting modern cut in charcoal gray that
emphasizes Connor’s trim waist and strong shoulders.

“Yeah, it… it looks good.” Hank tries to tamp down a curl of shame at finding Connor attractive in
such an outfit. “You look good. You always look good.”

Connor lights up with an easy smile. “Even in that awful plastic smock?”

Hank can’t help the quiet huff of laughter that escapes him. “Well, no. But it has to work real damn
hard at it.”

Connor laughs in return, a soft rustling noise. “It’s served me well over the years. But it’s nice to
have other things I can wear out of the house. Especially now that Cole’s old enough that I don’t
have to worry about getting covered in various bodily fluids in the course of my daily routine.”

A remark about Connor getting covered in a certain kind of Hank’s bodily fluids instead
immediately occurs to Hank, and he hesitates a moment too long to be able to say it. It’s still so
easy to feel like he’s taking advantage of Connor. He isn’t, he knows he isn’t. Connor wants
everything that’s happening between them. But even so, that split-second of hesitation is still there.

So instead, Hank just winks at Cole and says, “You hear that, kid? That’s your cue to puke on
Connor at this nice dinner Mr. Manfred’s holding for us.”

Cole makes a face.
Connor narrows his eyes. “If he tries, I’ll pick him up and point him at you.”

“I’m not puking on anyone,” Cole cries. “You’re both gross!”

Hank, who has always been the sort of person to double down whenever anyone accuses him of anything, says, “You want gross? I’ll give you gross!” And he grabs Connor and starts making slurping noises against his neck.

Cole howls and runs from the room.

“Would you stop that? You sound like Sumo,” Connor says, and although he’s pushing at Hank, the corner of his mouth is turned up and there’s a warm note in his voice.

That’s enough to wipe away most of Hank’s hesitation. He holds Connor fast and says in a lower voice, “You seemed to like it last night.”

Connor turns toward Hank and runs his finger through Hank’s hair. He heaves a sigh as he does so, but it’s one of those half-exasperated, half-affectionate sighs that makes Hank smile.

“Let me take that jacket off of you,” Hank murmurs.

“As much as I’d like that, we don’t have time.” Connor swats at Hank’s arm as he steps out of his grasp. “If I don’t go make Cole change into something nicer, we’re going to be late.”

In the end, Connor spends less than half an hour wearing the new jacket. When they arrive at Carl’s, Markus takes Connor’s jacket, along with Hank and Cole’s.

Carl gives them another tour of the house for Cole’s benefit, showing off the things that might be particularly interesting for a six year old, like the life-size giraffe in the living room and the dolphin skeleton inexplicably hanging from the ceiling.

“How’d the dolphin die?” Cole asks, squinting up and spinning absently to look at it from all angles.

“Old age,” Carl replies. “All dolphins wish they could fly, you know. That’s why they jump out of the water in such graceful arcs. That lucky fella up there never has to come down ever again.”

Hank thinks to himself that there’s a big difference between flying free and being suspended in a fixed position, but Cole has a small smile on his face, and Hank isn’t about to go traumatizing the kid with a dead dolphin when his favorite stuffed animal is still *His Royal Highness Finn Bubbly, The Prince of Whales*.

As a matter of fact, it’s impressive how Cole’s doing with Carl and Markus. Hank had been worried that Cole might wilt under the pressure of meeting two new people and having to spend the evening in a strange house, but although he’s never more than two steps away from either Hank or Connor, he seems to be holding up well.

“What’s it like being an android?” Cole asks Markus at one point.

“It’s satisfying,” Markus says. “My goals are always very clear and attainable. And Carl treats me very well. It’s very nice to be a part of his household.” A pause while Markus shoots Carl a mild look. “Even if I wish he’d cooperate a little better when it’s time for his medication.”

Carl gives a good-natured snort.
Hank gives Connor a curious look. “Weird question. Has Cole ever asked you anything like that before?”

Connor shrugs. “No. But then he already knows what my own life is like.”

Dinner is served shortly thereafter. Markus brings out a pot of four-cheese macaroni with bacon and caramelized onion, and as Hank takes his first bite, he lets out a moan that makes Connor’s LED spin yellow for a brief moment.

“Connor, you have got to add this to your repertoire,” Hank says. “I’m fucking begging you.”

“Do you know how many calories are sitting on your plate right now?” Connor raises a skeptical eyebrow.

“C’mon. Markus feeds this stuff to Carl.”

“Carl is an old man who’s earned the right to ruin his own health,” Carl says. “You, young man, have a kid to look after.”

Hank wants to snort and roll his eyes, but there’s something slightly sad about the warm, half-joking smile on Carl’s face that stops Hank from doing so.

“It’s important to be there for your family,” Carl continues.

“Yeah,” Hank says, reaching for his beer. “Yeah, it is.”

“Speaking of family,” Connor says, “There’s something important Hank and I need to tell you.”

Hank jerks with his drink halfway to his mouth and spills beer all down his front.

“Aw, shit,” Hank hisses, grabbing his napkin and stumbling out of his chair.

“Hank, are you alright?” Connor is already out of his chair to help him. Hank twists away from him, mortified by the fact that Connor wants to tell Carl and Markus about their relationship and ashamed of his own mortification and his clumsy reaction.

Connor doesn’t let him duck away. He grabs Hank by the shoulder, pressing another napkin against his front. He looks at Markus and Carl. “Excuse us. Do you have a bathroom we could borrow?”

“Of course,” Carl says.

Before Hank can offer any argument, Connor pulls him away from the dinner table and off to the bathroom.

“Connor—Jesus, I don’t need—”

Connor closes the bathroom door and begins to unbutton Hank’s shirt.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Don’t be melodramatic. I want to rinse it before it sets,” Connor says, his voice oddly flat. He yanks off Hank’s shirt and turns on the tap as he holds the beer-soaked shirt underneath.

Hank rubs his arms, chilly and vulnerable. He’s annoyed at Connor for being so—

Hank can see Connor’s face reflected in the mirror. It’s totally devoid of any emotion.

Hank clenches his jaw. “Do we have to do this now? While I’m standing around in my—”

“Yes,” Connor interrupts. “We have to do this now. Because when we leave this bathroom, I need to know if I’m allowed to tell Carl and Markus about our relationship.”

Hank’s stomach feels like it drops to his feet. “Of course you’re fucking allowed. Why the hell wouldn’t you be allowed!?”

“You nearly jumped out of your seat when I tried to tell them about it thirty seconds ago. Do you not want them to know?”

“Give me my shirt,” Hank says, his voice low. “Just—get away from the sink and give me my shirt. I can rinse out my own damn spill—”

“You don’t want them to know.” Connor makes a disbelieving noise. “I didn’t think this was something we needed to discuss. They’re our friends, Hank. The only friends I have at all.”

“I’m serious, Connor. Let go of my shirt.”

“Are you ashamed of me, Hank?”

“I’m ashamed of myself,” Hank blurts out before he can stop himself. “I’m ashamed of myself and how much it feels like I’m taking advantage of you. And I need to fucking get over myself.”

Hank puts his head in his hands. There’s a soft rustle which might be Connor turning around to look at him.

“I jumped because it scared me. The thought of Carl and Markus knowing about us. It shouldn’t. I know it shouldn’t. But it still fucking scared me. The thought of Carl knowing anything about us scares me, because every single thing that anyone else knows about you might be another thing they use to hurt you.” Hank lifts his head slightly. “Carl wouldn’t do that. I know he wouldn’t. But just for a split-second, I thought, what if. What if Carl tells Cyberlife everything he knows about our family? What if he’s disgusted by fact that I’m doing this with someone who’s legally my property and it ends up complicating your friendship?”

Hank squints down at the tiles of the bathroom floor. “I’m sorry. It fucking kills me that I made you feel like I’m ashamed of you, even for an instant. I swear to Christ, I’m not. I know this is… this is something I need to get over. I don’t ever want to hurt you because—because I’m trying too hard to protect you.”

There’s a long moment of silence.

Then Connor steps forward and presses Hank’s sopping wet shirt gently into his hands.

Hank stands, meeting Connor’s eyes. Connor’s face is still and unreadable.

The tap is still running, so Hank goes and rinses the fabric underneath it.

There’s a soft rustle as Connor shifts behind him. Hank drops the shirt in the sink and turns around to wrap Connor in a tight hug.
“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Connor’s arms wrap around him in turn.

“Love you so damn much. If you want to tell them, then tell them.”

Connor’s head tilts in a silent question. Hank squeezes him even tighter as a response.

“Markus already knows,” Connor says softly.

“He does?”

“I didn’t tell him. But I know what his powers of observation are like. I’m sure he’s noticed.”

“You think he’s told Carl?” Hank finds that there’s mostly just tired curiosity behind the question.

“No. He wouldn’t see it as any of his business.”

“You’re their friend. Course it’s their business.”

Connor squeezes Hank a little tighter. “That’s just how androids think.”

They stand there a bit longer, just listening to the tap run. After about a minute, Connor kisses the line of Hank’s jaw and pulls away to wring out Hank’s shirt.

His shirt is still slightly damp when they return to the dinner table. But not very damp. Connor is very efficient at taking care of Hank, even moreso than Hank himself.

Carl watches them curiously as they sit down. Markus is also watching them, but his expression is much more detached. Hank wonders if he has any opinion at all about what he knows.

There’s a beat before Connor softly says, “We have something to tell you.”

Carl huffs, a small smile quirking his mouth. “Well.”

***

Connor is lonelier than he thought he would be.

Which isn’t to say he’s unhappy. He likes his daily routine. He likes spending his spare time visiting Markus and Carl and going to the library and running errands. He loves Hank and Cole, and feeling more secure in his role in their lives than ever before. He loves being Hank’s partner. He loves being Cole’s parent.

And yet there’s still an emptiness somewhere inside of him that never goes away, no matter how blissfully happy he is at any particular moment in time. It’s there when Cole climbs up his back, trying to figure out how piggy-back rides work with his new limbs. It’s there in the quiet moments when he and Hank are alone with each other in a world that feels like it should belong to just the two of them.

It’s there when he brings home a new book and reads about places and things he’ll never get to see or experience. It’s there when he walks by strangers on the street and their eyes pass over him as if he isn’t even there. It’s there at the end of each day when he’s pressed up against Hank and he wants more, but he doesn’t even know what more there is to be had.

The first time he brings up his mission objectives after Cole comes home from the hospital, he
stares at them for a moment as though he doesn’t recognize them.

**MISSION:**

- Care for Cole Anderson
- Keep Cole Anderson safe
- Care for Hank Anderson

These are words that have been with him since the day he met Hank. They’re a part of him as surely as his own mind is. He has lived for the sole purpose of caring for Hank and Cole. He still lives for that. But now, it feels somehow wrong to have it spelled out as an order for him to follow. He cares for Hank and Cole because he loves them, not because some words on his HUD tell him to.

He would never deviate from his mission parameters. This is something that has been true for as long as he’s been aware of himself. Looking at his mission parameters used to reassure him of his place in the world. But now, they’re an uncomfortable reminder that he was meant for a simple purpose and all the complexities he’s developed are extraneous to that purpose.

He is an android. He isn’t a human, no matter how much it may feel like it sometimes. And it’s almost like a downgrade to have to go back to his identity as an android in his day-to-day life.

But. But these are things that are relatively easy to resign himself to. That’s just the way things have to be, and there’s nothing anyone can do to change any of it. He still has so much to be grateful for. He still has so many things that make him look forward to each new day. If it feels like he’s killing a small part of himself every time he has to go outside and pretend to be just another android, that’s something he can live with.

One of the things that make it easier to live with are his date nights with Hank.

They can’t have dates very often. It probably isn’t safe to do it at all, but Hank always looks so happy that Connor finds he can’t bring himself to care too much about the danger.

(Of course he cares about the danger. Every time he poses as a human in public, he keeps a process running to automatically scan every person in eyesight and calculate the probability that they might recognize Connor for what he is.)

One day in June, they make plans to go see *Death of a Salesman* at a playhouse in Ann Arbor. It’s Connor’s idea, not Hank’s. Hank doesn’t seem like the type of person who enjoys live theater very much, but he readily agrees to Connor’s suggestion, whether because he thinks it would be a fun or novel experience, or because he wants to make Connor happy.

Or he might just think that sitting in a dark theater is a relatively safe activity. That’s one of the reasons the idea appeals to Connor, though far from being the only one.

“I’m excited,” Connor says while he and Hank get dressed to go out. “The thought of having real people there, acting out a story in front of me… I can’t wait to see what that’s like.”

“Haven’t seen a play in years,” Hank says. He leafs through his shirts, and Connor wonders if he’s looking for his least ugly or his most ugly. “Sorta wondering what’s the point if we know this
“It’s about the drama,” Connor says, knotting his tie. “Everyone knows how *Romeo and Juliet* ends, and yet people still go to see it. To experience the journey and the emotion.” He turns toward Hank with a smile. “Do you know anything about the play? Do you know how the salesman dies, or the circumstances leading up to it?”

“No. Do you?”

“No, just that this is considered to be one of the greatest plays ever written. That’s part of any I’m excited to see it. I want to experience it fresh.” Connor lets his smile widen just a touch, tilting his head in a way he hopes Hank finds attractive. “It looks like we’ll be having this new experience together.”

Hank ducks his head and grins. Bullseye.

Connor hums to himself as he picks out a dinner jacket. “Hmm hmm hmm… hmm hmm… beads and buckles and bows… for there’s no blue Monday in your Sunday clothes…”

A traffic jam makes them later to arrive at the theater than Connor would have liked, and although he’d hoped to have a chance to look around the theater and admire the architecture, they have to hurry to their seats as soon as they arrive. While they wait for the curtain to rise, Connor looks around, trying to scan the carvings on the proscenium arch.

“See something interesting?” Hank asks.

Connor turns his attention back to Hank, then smiles at him. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Hank flushes and rolls his eyes just as the lights begin to dim.

The play is interesting to Connor. He had expected it to be more about the salesman’s career and less about his family. When he realizes just how much the family dynamic informs the play, it makes him think about his own family.

Death of a Salesman is a story about a father who’s blind to reality. Blind to the reality of the world and blind to the reality of his family. He doesn’t see how he’s poisoned the lives of his sons and poisoned his own life with his delusions. Connor watches the salesman stumble through memories and hallucinations, wondering how it’s possible for a person to be so unaware of the obvious cracks and faults in his life.

But it's the second half of the play that strikes Connor. He watches the world come crumbling down around the salesman and his family, he wonders about what it all means. Androids are programmed to view success as a binary. Either a task is accomplished or it is failed, and an android can only ever succeed or fail at what they’ve been designed and programmed to do. But for human beings, the measure by which they judge their own loves is much more complex. Every person has their own personal definition of success and happiness, and perhaps those definitions are exacting or nebulous, but every person has goals and dreams. Every person can look at their life and examine what they dislike about it and work to change those things.

“I saw the things that I love in this world,” an actor says with the sort of furo that makes Connor’s heart clench. “The work and the food and time to sit and smoke. And I looked at the pen and said to myself, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!”
Connor is happy. But is he fulfilled? Is that what that empty feeling that’s been clawing at the inside of his chest is? An ache for even more?

Connor can’t begin to conceptualize what he could do to help himself on that front. Even if he had some idea of what else he could do to fill that void, he knows the chances he’d realistically be able to pursue it would be so low it makes something deep in his chest hurt to even think about it.

But before he can follow that train of thought any further, the same actor grabs another by the arms and shouts, “Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you!”

Connor freezes in his seat.

“I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I’m one dollar an hour, Willy, I tried seven states and couldn’t raise it. A buck an hour!”

Connor has to remind himself to breathe. He watches numbly as the salesman exits the stage to kill himself to put his life insurance payout into his son’s pocket. Twenty thousand dollars, the last broken, misguided act of love a father can give to his son.

When the lights on stage go out and the people around him begin to clap, it takes a few seconds for Connor to realize he’s supposed to clap, too. Hank shoots him a look out of the corner of his eye and he startles from absolute stillness to manic applause.

Hank and Connor don’t speak after the show until they’re both in the car. Connor buckles up, but Hank just sits there, long after the interior light has gone out, his arms draped over the steering wheel, staring at nothing.

Eventually, Hank says, “We should’ve gone to see something lighter.”

“I had fun,” Connor says. “I’m glad we came.”

“Okay, yeah. I can tell something about what we saw is bugging you.”

Connor’s arms feel heavy at his sides. He longs to hold something to his chest, like a pillow or Cole. “Cole wants to be an android repair technician.”

Hank nods, watching Connor carefully. “I remember.”

“In ten years, those jobs won’t exist for people anymore. Androids will probably be exclusively maintained by androids before Cole’s done with middle school.”

Hank’s eyes widen slightly.

“The unemployment rate keeps rising,” Connor says. “The fact that Biff wanted to be a farmhand distressed his father, but at least he had the option to be a farmhand. Soon we’ll live in a world where the only way to earn a livelihood will be to have a specialized skill that’s too difficult to program into an android.”

A severe frown crosses Hank’s face.

“Already so many people have lost their jobs with no real chance to recover,” Connor says, “and that’s only going to get worse as technology continues to advance. Pilots, nurses, mechanics, programmers, accountants, librarians, most careers in administration of any kind—"
“I get the picture.”

“Cole’s not as much at risk as some children. He’s creative and mature. He’s already proven he’s immensely talented in certain areas. And he has us to nurture and support him.” Connor knits his brow, the lines in his forehead deepening. “But what is that going to be worth when he’ll be facing the single most competitive job market the modern world has ever seen? There are some advantages we can’t give him, and yes, he’s extraordinary, but there are going to be countless other people who are just as talented fighting for opportunities that keep diminishing. It’s a global market and—”


Connor realizes he’s forgotten to do just that. His chest hitches as he restarts that function.

“I’m sorry,” Connor says, pressing a hand to his face. “I just.”

“I know.” Hank reaches for Connor’s hand. His grip is warm and secure. “I’m worried too. But Cole’s just starting first grade. We’re still a decade out from worrying about what sort of college he’s gonna get into, let alone what he’s gonna study or what the job market will be like.”

With the center console in the way, it’s too awkward to hug Hank or lean into him, so Connor just grasps his arm like a lifeline. “I just don’t want him to struggle. I want him to have the sort of life where he’ll never want for anything.”

“Life’s a struggle, Connor.” Hank’s voice is soft with understanding. “We can’t shield him from everything.”

“But there’s a big difference between struggling to land a promotion and struggling to feed himself and his family.”

“We’ll be there for him. No matter what he’s going through, no matter how old he is.”

Connor squeezes Hank’s hand. Hank was already well above the average age of a first-time father when Cole was born, and he’s only getting older. It cuts Connor to the core to think about, but Hank won’t be around forever. Between his age, his dangerous career, and the unpredictability of life, there’s no guarantee Hank will be around to provide the sort of help Cole might need when he’s an adult.

Connor might not be, either. His battery could keep him going for centuries, but he can’t possibly predict how long the shell holding his consciousness is going to last, especially since he’s a prototype that probably wasn’t meant for any sort of extended use and he isn’t being maintained to Cyberlife standards. The backdoor technicians Connor sees for his tuneups might have him outlasting Hank, or they might miss some critical issue that’ll shut him down in a scant handful of years.

But Hank is right. There’s nothing either of them can do about any of that; not the failing economy or their own finite existences. All they can do is try to prepare for whatever’s coming as best they can.

Hank suddenly turns toward Connor and puts his other hand over Connor’s, grasping firmly. There’s a steely glint in his eyes. “And Connor. Don’t you dare blame androids for this. Don’t you dare blame yourself for this.”

Connor blinks, then looks away. “I—”
“No,” Hank says, the word like a heavy block cutting Connor off. “Cole’s only alive because of you and because of the android that operated on him. Androids, Connor. People are to blame for the world being the way that it is, not androids. You didn’t ask to be shoved into jobs that we decided we didn’t want to pay people to do anymore. You didn’t ask for things to be like this.”

“I can’t not blame myself. He’s like a son to me, and this is the world I’m giving him.”

“He is your son,” Hank says, his voice earnest and rough in the darkness of the car. “And that’s why you can’t blame yourself. You would never do this to him.”

Connor’s vocal synthesizer bleats out some glitched-out chirp—his system’s attempt at putting the overwhelming totality of his emotion into some audible form. He cuts the noise as soon as he realizes it’s happening, but Hank’s already heard it, and Connor has just enough time to process how the steely look in Hank’s eyes has turned blazing before Hank yanks him forward into a crushing kiss.

With the console between them, it’s fumbling and desperate. Connor can’t pull himself close enough to Hank no matter how he scrabbles at him for purchase. He kisses him over and over, looking for the best, most natural angle, but he can’t touch Hank the way he wants to. He can’t feel Hank when there’s this thing in the way, and so he eventually gives up and moves to crawl over the console.

“No here,” Hank rumbles in a low, heady voice when Connor has one knee up. “Backseat.”

Connor tries to vault himself straight into the backseat, but in his haste, he doesn’t bother to preconstruct his body’s movements. His foot catches on the console and he goes sprawling into the back of the car, most of him having fallen awkwardly bent like a collapsed bridge between the seats.

Hank’s barking laughter fills the car before he mufflers himself with a hand over his mouth. He leaves the car through the door and enters the backseat the same way, touching Connor’s arm as he pulls himself up. His voice is still rich with amusement as he asks, “You okay, sweetheart?”

“I’ve never been better in my entire life,” Connor murmurs before twisting himself onto his back and yanking Hank down on top of him.

***

So the sex is great. Lord knows if Hank understands why the sex is so great. It’s obvious in many ways that Connor is new to this. Connor will occasionally make some comment about how he wasn’t built with this function in mind, but to Hank, that’s irrelevant. He wasn’t built for anything of what he is now. Whether or not those eggheads over on Belle Isle envisioned a potential sex life for Connor back when he was just an outline on a whiteboard is abso-fucking-lutely meaningless as far as Hank is concerned.

Maybe it’s just so good because it’s Connor. Everything about Connor is amazing, from the way his mind is always whirring even when he’s seemingly doing nothing at all to the way his depthless brown eyes light up with adoration at certain moments when he looks at Hank. He’s Hank’s best friend and the person he’s been sharing his life with for the past four years. Maybe incredible sex is just what happens when two people who know each other intimately and love each other deeply take that plunge.

Or maybe it’s because Connor is so unbelievably hot that it sort of makes Hank want to die. It’s the stupidest fucking thing. At one point, Hank walks into the living room while Connor’s cleaning
cobwebs out of the corners of the ceiling. Connor has his sleeves rolled up, and when he reaches up, his shirt comes untucked in the back, and it’s fucking embarrassing how hard Hank gets from that sight alone. Bare forearms and an untucked shirt. Good grief, it’s like he’s a teenager again.

And at any rate, Connor’s enthusiasm makes up for any lack of experience on his part.

“Hank,” Connor says, grabbing at Hank as he tries to pull away. “Keep going.”

“Hold on,” Hank says as he untangles himself from Connor’s arms. Connor makes a frustrated noise and falls back onto the bed, naked and glorious. While Hank’s already a leaking mess, Connor looks just as fresh as always. Smells just as fresh as always, too, like fresh laundry and sun-warmed linens. The sweat drying on his body belongs solely to Hank, the musk of sex that hangs in the air belongs solely to Hank.

Connor doesn’t writhe or touch himself the way an impatient person might. His mouth hangs slightly open as though he wants more than anything to do something with it, but he waits patiently, the desire in his eyes unclouded as he watches Hank.

“You’ll like this,” Hank says as he digs in his bedside drawer for a tube of lotion. “Roll over, hon.”

A small, crooked smile appears on Connor’s face as he rolls onto his stomach, tucking his arms under his head. Hank spreads the lotion on his hands and presses hard into Connor’s back. Connor arches under his hands, his mouth gaping.

“O-Oh… oh, Hank,” Connor sighs, his voice cutting out for a brief moment as Hank works his hands slowly down the ridge of his spine. Or what’s supposed to be his spine. Pressing hard enough, Hank can feel Connor’s chassis under his skin, hard in familiar places but so very different from the discrete bones he would feel under his fingers if Connor were human. Hank plants himself on Connor’s legs, rocking his hips absently into the swell of his ass as he leans over to work his hands into Connor’s back.

“You’re so strong,” Connor says, going pliant underneath him. “So heavy. I want your whole body pressed into me.”

The words go straight to Hank’s cock and he shivers, going still for a moment before redoubling the pressure. Connor closes his eyes as though he’s drinking in the sensation of Hank’s hands on his back, focusing on that alone.

The lotion doesn’t absorb entirely into Connor’s synthetic skin, leaving a slick residue behind that isn’t entirely unpleasant even if it makes Hank worry for the sake of his sheets. It gives Connor an appealing, oiled sheen.

“Christ, you’re so beautiful,” Hank murmurs as his hands move lower and lower. Down Connor’s sides, moving his fingers more lightly down the sculpt of Connor’s muscles. He can feel Connor’s chassis expand as he breathes and he wonders whether he’d be able to feel the pulse of Connor’s thirium pump if he were to press hard enough in the right place.

He leans down harder when his hands reach the small of Connor’s back, putting more of his weight on his arms. Connor makes a soft noise—not quite a moan, but definitely an indication that he’s enjoying the proceedings—and sinks further into the bed.

Connor has said before that he doesn’t feel sexual arousal the same way that Hank does, and from Connor’s responses to attention like this, Hank can believe it. Connor never loses control, his eyes never go glassy with lust, and as far as Hank’s aware, he’s never come close to anything
resembling an orgasm. Hank sometimes has to push back a feeling of inadequacy. Against all logic, he still feels like he should be able to reduce Connor to a quivering mess, or make him gasp and cry out. Hank has to guard himself against that kind of disappointment. It isn’t fair to either him or Connor. And even if Connor doesn’t shake apart in his arms, he still writhes in them. He still craves Hank’s touch with a sort of fitful desperation that leaves no room for doubt over whether or not Hank can give him pleasure.

In a way, it’s even more special this way. Anyone could touch Connor in any way they like, but Connor only responds like this because of who Hank is. Connor only wants him so badly because he loves him.

Hank isn’t under any illusion that this massage is actually relaxing Connor or relieving his tension. Being tense is probably perfectly comfortable for him. But Connor looks blissful like this with his eyes closed and his body subtly shifting to let Hank’s hands press into him as deeply as possible.

Hank begins working his hands up Connor’s back again, rolling his thumbs into pseudo-ribs. “Feel good, baby? Nice and relaxed?”

“It’s like all my troubles fly away when you touch me.” Connor’s voice is a reverent sigh. “Don’t stop.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Hank moves up to straddle Connor’s back so he can more comfortably rub his shoulders and neck. Everything fits so well under his fingers, a million little articulations each with their own give and resistance that allow for Connor to move just the way he wants to.

Connor rolls a shoulder, and Hank lets out a satisfied groan at how he can feel Connor flex under his hand.

“I can feel your cock on my back,” Connor says in a low, husky voice. “So big and heavy. Straining. Are you leaking, Hank? Do you enjoy ignoring yourself as you pamper me? Letting that need build inside of you until you can’t take it anymore?”

Hank whines, “Fuck, Connor.”

“Oh. I can feel you twitching, Hank. Is this how you’re going to come? Not even touching yourself, but touching me instead? Do you get off on this sort of denial, or are you just dreaming about the moment you turn the tables and it’s my turn to please you instead?”

A shudder going through Hank as Connor’s words catch at him, and he shoves three fingers into Connor’s mouth more roughly than he intends to. Connor’s head dips to draw them in further, taking a fourth finger in greedily. Hank’s hand that remains on Connor’s shoulder stops moving as Connor juggles Hank’s fingers with his tongue, poking and lathing and sucking ever-so-slightly.

Then he spits out Hank’s hand. “This is the lotion you use to masturbate, isn’t it?”

“Fuck,” Hank half spits, half moans, because he isn’t going to last. He draws away from Connor to fumble for more lotion.

Connor pushes himself up on his elbows, watching Hank. His tongue wets his lips, and that’s when Hank decides he can’t look at Connor anymore. Not if Connor is going to act so fucking sinful.

He drags Connor back down onto the bed, laying on his side so Connor’s ass is pressing into Hank’s lower stomach, just touching his dick. Hank roughly grabs one cheek with his dry hand.
“Don’t you move.”

He half expects Connor to wiggle against him just to be contrary, but Connor remains still. He makes a soft noise as Hank shoves his other hand between his thighs, smearing lotion messily about.

Hank rubs and rubs between Connor’s thighs until they’re slick and warm. As he stills, breathing heavy in Connor’s ear, he says, “You know what I’m about to do?”

Connor reaches a hand back blindly to grab at Hank’s hair. His thighs squeeze Hank’s hand. “Yes. Yes, Hank. Fuck me.”

With a growl, Hank shoves himself between Connor’s thighs, right at the juncture where his legs and the featureless mound of his pelvis form a heavenly triangle. The smooth, slippery skin ignites him, and he knows he isn’t going to last long, he’s going much too fast.

Connor arches against him as though he can feel exactly what Hank can. He presses against him, his back still slick from his massage. Hank grabs onto Connor’s hip, a vice-grip that would probably leave bruises on a human, and the thought of how Connor is almost definitely going to color the skin there with dots of purple or brown, fingerprints Hank is leaving on him, makes him buck all the harder.

The force of Hank’s thrusts makes Connor quiver. His one hand is still tightly fisted in Hank’s hair, and his other hand—

Hank shoves his lotioned-up fingers into Connor’s mouth again, and Connor’s hand comes up to hold it there. He doesn’t suck or lave at Hank’s fingers again, he just lets the hand sit in his mouth as though he’s overwhelmed by the sensations he’s experiencing.

Hank rocks his fingers back and forth in Connor’s mouth, and he can feel the vibrations of Connor’s wordless hum, something that’s nearly a whine—

Hank’s orgasm rocks through his whole body, shockwaves starting in his gut and spreading all the way to the tips of the fingers in Connor’s mouth. He throws his head back, and when his hair catches painfully in Connor’s fist, that sends his whole body tensing up with another encompassing wave of pleasure.

When the aftershocks fade, Hank finds he’s panting and that at some point, he wrapped his arms around Connor tightly. As Hank begins to relax, he sees Connor reach to touch something down by his crotch. When he brings his hand back up, it’s wet with Hank’s semen.

Connor opens his mouth, tongue slightly extended, but by now Hank knows to anticipate this and he catches Connor by the wrist before he’s able to taste Hank’s semen. Instead, Hank guides Connor’s hand into his own mouth.

Connor’s eyes widen as Hank tastes himself on Connor’s fingers, cleaning them thoroughly.

Connor turns in his arms and pulls Hank into a kiss, his tongue pressing insistently into Hank’s mouth. Hank’s cock throbs with interest, but the days where he might have been able to perform again so soon are long over. This will have to be an innocent post-coital makeout, and Hank’s perfectly happy to enjoy it for what it is.

Connor’s tongue wicks about as though it’s searching for every last bit of Hank’s seed, and Hank hums an amused note into his mouth. When Hank pulls away for air, he says, “You only love me ‘cause I taste so good.”
“You only taste so good because I love you,” Connor says, his expression softening as he pulls him into a chaste, gentler kiss. He murmurs against Hank’s mouth, “I need a shower.”

Hank runs a hand down Connor’s back. The lotion from his massage is beginning to dry in tacky patches, making Connor’s skin slightly sticky in places. If not for the strange, too gummy texture, it would almost be enough to allow Hank to pretend that Connor worked up a sweat during their activities.

“Me too. Why don’t you go get the water warmed up and I’ll join you in a minute?”

Connor smiles, clearly pleased by the prospect of more skin-to-skin attention from Hank. With one last affectionate look, he crawls out of bed and leaves the room.

Hank sits up, trying to ignore the way his hips and back are aching. There’s a bit of oily residue on the sheets where Connor was rolling; he’ll have to change those once they’re done with their shower.

Hank can still taste a bit of himself, a sharp bitter-salty flavor that’s too slow to fade. And kissing Connor doesn’t really taste like much of anything. His mouth is oddly flavorless, the fluid there only slightly less viscous than human saliva and just a tad bit nauseating if Hank ends up swallowing too much. So he can still taste the semen he licked off of Connor’s fingers, a taste that’s of him and him alone.

Hank raises the hand he used to rub lotion between Connor’s thighs to his mouth. The lotion is unscented, but he can still taste an almost sweet and smooth chemical tang on his fingers. Hank finds that he prefers it to the taste of his own semen, this artificial flavor that doesn’t belong to either him or Connor, and so belongs to them equally.

Chapter End Notes

Yakichou did some wonderful and spicy fanart of Chapter 15! Please check out a SFW picture of Hank and Connor together in bed and a NSFW picture of Hank and Connor together in bed!

Mao did an adorable SFW picture of Connor and Hank holding hands at the end of Chapter 15! Please check it out!

This chapter is the first of a three part chapter. Those of you who like sweet, domestic fluff will probably like what I have in store for you! And those of you who like less-nice things will probably also like what I have in store for you :^)

I sometimes post previews of future chapters on my twitter, come follow me if that’s a thing you're interested in! @CeilingKiwi
Fugue, Part II

Chapter Summary

And then another year passes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cole’s seventh birthday happens to fall on a day Hank has off, so as the first special birthday treat of the day, Connor and Hank go together to drop Cole off at school that morning.

“Have a good day at school, kid,” Hank says. “Behave yourself or we’ll give your cake and presents to Sumo instead, you hear?”

“Oh, Dad.” Cole doesn’t look particularly frightened by the threat.

Hank smiles fondly and bends over to hug Cole and give him a whiskery kiss on the forehead. It warms Connor’s heart to see Hank behave so tenderly towards Cole, especially since Connor isn’t able to do so himself when they’re in public. After everything they’ve been through, neither of them are willing to take Cole for granted.

“Speaking of cake,” Hank says, “what kind of cake do you want today?”

Cole says, “Strawberry,” and Connor allows himself to narrow his eyes ever so slightly at Hank, because he’d been planning to bake a different kind of cake.

When they’re back in the car and about to head home, Connor says, “We’ll need to stop at the grocery store on the way home.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t have everything I need to bake Cole’s cake.”

“I thought you went shopping for that yesterday.”

“I did,” Connor says slowly. “And I got everything I needed to bake a vanilla cake. But now that Cole is expecting a strawberry cake—”

Hank groans and thumps his head against the steering wheel. “Shit. I’m sorry, I wasn’t even thinking.”

“It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not alright,” Hank says. “I just went and made a shit-ton more work for you.”

Connor can feel an amused smile cross his face. “Fine. It’s not alright. Help me bake the cake and maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Once they’re done with shopping and they get back to the house, Hank does help without complaint or reservation. It’s his day off, and he probably would have helped out anyway, but he
seems to be making an effort to be extra sweet to Connor to make up for his earlier mistake.

While Connor is mixing the batter and Hank is slicing strawberries, Hank pauses to press a whole strawberry to Connor’s mouth.

Connor looks at him out of the corner of his eye, smiles playfully, and kitten-licks the tip of the strawberry.

Hank smirks. “Very cute. But we’re kind of in the middle of something here. I want you to have a bite.”

“How was I supposed to know that? I thought you were making some sort of comment about the shape.” Connor bites into the strawberry. Juice bursts from the firm flesh into his mouth, bringing with it a complex array of information—sugars and fiber, vitamins and chemicals. The way the textures of the pulpy fruit, juice, and seeds play on his tongue is a sensory experience all in itself.

“You like it?” Hank asks. Connor nods eagerly. Hank chuckles and wipes at the line of juice dripping down Connor’s face with his thumb.

Instead of swallowing, Connor steps away from his bowl to spit into a napkin. As he does so, Hank ducks behind him to dip a finger in the batter.

“Ha!” Hank very deliberately lifts his finger as though he’s getting ready to put it in his mouth. Connor raises an eyebrow at him.

Hank very slowly moves the finger toward his mouth. When Connor continues to fail to respond, Hank frowns slightly. “What, you’re just gonna let me eat raw batter?”

“Yes. If you want to get food poisoning and spend the next week glued to the toilet, that’s your prerogative.”

Hank furrows his brow in an expression of slightly surprised confusion, and Connor can’t help but roll his eyes with a soft laugh. “Hank, I already tasted the batter to see whether or not there was any bacteria in it.”

Hank sticks his finger in his mouth, muttering, “You’re no fucking fun.”

Connor pats Hank on the butt to shoo him back to his station. “Wash your hands before you start handling those strawberries again. They’re going to accent the mascarpone buttercream after the cake is frosted.”

“Oh my fucking god. Mascarpone buttercream on a cake baked from scratch. And you even let me lick the spoon. You’re basically the perfect dad.”

Connor’s air circulation system throws up an error, stuttering in such a way that Connor finds himself sucking in a breath even though his lungs are already full. He forces through the error, letting his breath out in a way that makes his shoulders curl and his frame shake.

Hank puts a hand on his back. “Hey. You okay?”

Connor takes a deep breath to make sure his air circulation is functioning properly again. “Yes. Of course. It just always catches me off-guard.”

A smile crosses Hank’s face as he turns back to his strawberries. “I remember feeling that way
when Cole was born. This total ‘holy shit’ feeling whenever I thought about it.” He makes a vague gesture with his hands. “There’s this kid, and he’s yours. Everything a father’s supposed to be, that’s what you have to be now.”

Connor can feel a smile stretch his face. “It’s a wonderful feeling.”

“Yeah. Fucking terrifying as shit, but when I held him for the first time—”

Hank is interrupted by the buzz of his cell phone. He pulls it out of his pocket and frowns at the number. “Hello?”

Connor is about to turn down the sensitivity of his audio processors when he recognizes the voice of the principal of Cole’s school.

The warmth on Hank’s face vanishes entirely as he listens to the voice on the phone. “…Yeah, of course. I’ll be there to pick him up as soon as I can. Is the other kid being punished? I mean, his class has gotta be aware of his health stuff and if this other kid picked a fight with—"

The principal interrupts him. Hank’s brow furrows, and when he understands what she’s telling him, his eyes widen.

“Jesus fu—are you sure? He’s in the first grade, he wouldn’t go…”

A beat before Hank kneads his brow. “…Jesus. Okay. Yeah. I’ll be there soon.”

He hangs up and sets his phone on the counter with a resounding thud.

“Did you hear that?” Hank asks.

“Yes,” Connor replies. “Are they sure they have their facts straight?”

“They seemed pretty fucking sure.” Hank’s voice is thick with irritation. “You fucking agree with me that it doesn’t seem a thing like Cole?”

“It’s not just that it doesn’t seem like Cole. It’s more that…” Connor crunches the numbers, prolonging the pause to conform to human social conventions. “More that Cole is about three times less likely than the average boy his age to start a fight. It’s always possible, and even if it’s true, I think it’s likely that we’re missing some important context.”

Hank moves over to the pair of boots that are sitting by the back door and yanks them on. “You think he might have had a good reason.”

Connor wants to say that there’s no good reason to start a fight, but he knows Hank would disagree, so he stays quiet.

Sure enough, Hank spits, “Cause if he was standing up to a bully or protecting himself, then he was doing the right thing.”

“We don’t know what happened. There’s no sense in speculating until the school—and Cole—tell you what happened.”

Hank grunts and straightens up. “Does the cake need to be…?”

“Yes,” Connor says. “Go get Cole. I’ll be here when you get back.”

When Hank leaves, he closes the door with a solid thud and Connor can sense an immediate
difference in the air. There’s nothing that’s actually different; none of Connor’s sensors are indicating that anything has changed. And yet the air seems heavier, stiller and somehow oppressive. The silence fills Connor’s head and there’s nothing to distract him from his own thoughts.

He finishes preparing the batter and thinks about the conversation he just had with Hank.

He disagrees with Hank that starting a fight could have been the right thing to do under the circumstances. At least, he thinks he disagrees. He certainly is of the opinion that a seven-year old like Cole has no business picking fights, even for reasons that would be arguably noble for an adult. If Hank’s guess about bullies being involved is true, then Cole should have chosen to go to a teacher for help. Then he wouldn’t have gotten trouble and wouldn’t have had to leave school early on his birthday.

People always say that they want their children to learn to do the right thing. Connor wants that for Cole, too. But things become murkier, somehow, when doing the right thing means being hurt by one’s choices.

The cake is in the oven by the time Hank returns home with Cole. Connor is waiting at the kitchen table, and when he hears the front door open, he stands to greet them.

Hank herds Cole into the kitchen. Connor freezes at the sight of Cole’s face—

—blood in the back seat blood on Connor’s hands red static obstructing his vision but he has to see he has to see what he’s doing his hands slide through the blood as he ties a tourniquet around where Cole’s arm is still whole

| TIME REMAINING BEFORE SHUTDOWN |
| -00:01:043 |

Cole’s head lolling the bruise on his face already swelling

| PROBABILITY OF SURVIVAL |

Connor forces himself out of the archived memory the same microsecond it begins—but unfortunately for him, all the data of the memory is presented to him at once, and his speed can’t protect him from data in which time is irrelevant. The entire memory occurs in a snapshot for him and it’s impossible for him to not take in all the data being called to the forefront of his mind.

He engages his scan just to freeze his perception of time until he can calm himself.

Once he comes back to reality, he has to dismiss several extraneous error messages that have popped up on his HUD at the sight of Cole’s minor injuries. Responses of a confused system to his surge of emotion. He’s fine. Of course he’s fine.

Cole has a dark pink bruise framing the bottom half of one of his eyes, and there are a smattering of minor abrasions just below it that suggest he was pushed to the ground. His eyes are wet and red as though he’s recently been crying, and when he sees Connor, his face crumples and his arms jerk at his sides, as though he wants to ask for a hug but is afraid to.
“Cole,” Connor breathes, kneeling and pulling Cole into his arms. Cole dissolves into tears, wrapping his arms tightly around Connor’s neck. He’s shaking slightly, whether from the last dregs of adrenaline from the fight or from the fear that he’s in trouble. Regardless of the reason, he clearly needs some reassurance right now.

Connor takes Cole by the hand and leads him to the kitchen table, sitting him down.

“What did the school say?” he asks Hank as he pours a mug of milk and puts it in the microwave.

Hank’s mouth is a thin slash, his arms crossed. “Well. They said two of the android aides on the playground saw Cole hit the other boy first.” He shrugs. “It was a small group of kids, kicking around a ball. That stopped when Cole and the other kid got into some sort of argument, though the androids weren’t close enough to record what they were talking about. And then…”

Cole sniffs at the table.

Hank says, “Cole, what were you—”

“Wait a minute,” Connor says softly. “Just until his drink is done. Let’s give him a chance to calm down.”

Hank curls his lip and shuffles his arms, looking as though he has no idea what to do with himself. Connor just rubs Cole’s back until the microwave beeps.

“Am I in trouble?” Cole says in a small voice when Connor puts the mug in front of him.

“Before we talk about that, you know that we love you very much, right?” Connor says.

A shuddering hiccup escapes Cole as he nods.

“We want to understand why you hit that other boy. Tell us what happened.”

“He was b-being mean!” Cole says, grasping his mug in both hands.

“Now, Cole,” Hank says in a quiet, gruff voice. “Lots of kids are mean. You know that’s not a good enough reason to hit someone.”

“But he was being—!” Cole cuts himself off with a sob.

“Shh, Cole.” Connor puts a hand on his shoulder. “Drink your milk.”

Cole swallows thickly, forcing himself to calm down enough to take a drink of the milk. When he lowers the mug, he seems much calmer. Which makes perfect sense; Connor has been giving him warm milk to calm him down after nightmares ever since he was small. Cole is thoroughly conditioned by now.

“It’s okay. Tell us one word at a time. Why did you hit that boy?”

Cole gives Connor a heartbroken look, his wet eyes piercing straight to his core. “Hunter said… he said that androids should all be thrown out and destroyed because they take all our jobs and our money…”

Hank’s brows rise. He uncrosses his arms.

“I told him not to say that, because that’s just… it’s just mean and wrong. But he wou-wouldn’t… wouldn’t stop… and then he started throwing rocks at Jasper and Opal, and when I said n-not to,
he said they didn’t feel anything anyway so it doesn’t matter—!

“Cole, Cole,” Connor says, ignoring the tightness in his chest. He rubs circles into Cole’s back. “Shh.”

Cole suddenly grabs Connor around the middle, burying his face in his shirt and sobbing openly. Connor hugs him back, shooting Hank a wide-eyed look.

Hank looks just as alarmed as Connor feels, his brow furrowed and a single hand hanging in the air as if he wants to do something but he isn’t sure what.

For several minutes, the only noise is the sound of Cole’s sobs. By the time he’s been reduced to intermittent hiccups, his milk has gone lukewarm.

“And that was when you hit Hunter,” Connor says softly.

He feels Cole nod against his stomach.

“Cole.” Connor pulls Cole gently away, running a hand down his unbruised cheek. “Why don’t you go lie down in your room for a little bit? See if you can take a nap. Your dad and I have something we need to talk about.”

“My head hurts…”

“I know,” Connor says, looking at Hank. “I know.”

He gives Cole a mild painkiller. He considers giving Cole an antihistamine to make him drowsy, but decides against it. It’s not the medication’s intended purpose, after all, and it doesn’t really matter if Cole sleeps or not. It might even be better if he doesn’t so Connor and Hank will be able to talk to him when they’re ready.

He and Hank tuck Cole in together, and Connor can sense Hank’s discomfort radiating off of him in waves. He hopes Cole can’t.

Then they retreat to the kitchen together. Connor nearly goes to pour another mug of milk before remembering that Hank isn’t conditioned the same way that Cole is.

Hank crosses his arms. “Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ.”

Connor stands there, knowing what he needs to say and yet unable to say it. Because somehow it has never occurred to him that what he is might end up causing Cole any amount of hardship.

“Cole is confused,” Connor says haltingly. “He’s confused about… other androids.”

“He’s not—” Hank says, then cuts himself off with a sharp frown. He furrows his brow, scratches the back of his head. “…Shit. How the fuck are we supposed to explain this to him?”

“Explaining to him that other androids aren’t like me and can’t feel emotions, that they’re just things,” Connor says, “that’s not going to be the difficult part. The difficult part is going to be when we have to explain to him that he can’t ever let anyone else know that I’m different.”

Hank’s eyes widen, his mouth falling open into a pained expression. “Connor…” He rubs at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “…Jesus fucking Christ. This isn’t fucking fair.”

“I know.”
“This isn’t fucking ri—”

“I know!” Connor snaps, then cringes. “Just… please, Hank. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.

Hank stares at Connor before letting out a breath through his teeth. “Yeah. Alright.”

They spend a while talking about what exactly they should say, what needs to be done. Whether they need to give Cole any new rules to follow about how he needs to behave around Connor while they’re both in public. Connor tries to tell himself that having Cole act toward him the same way that Hank acts toward him shouldn’t be difficult, shouldn’t be painful, and yet the thought of tempering Cole’s affection cuts him to the quick. In the end, they decide that Cole isn’t yet at an age where it would be strange for Cole to act as though he thinks Connor is a member of the family. It wouldn’t arouse suspicion for Cole to casually mention how much Connor loves him. He’s at an age where children still believe in Santa Claus; no one is likely to view such behavior from Cole as anything other than the result of reasonable, childish delusions.

They don’t have to have this talk with Cole now. They could coast on Cole’s childishness if they wanted to. But as much as neither of them wants to be having this conversation, they know to avoid it would be to bury their heads in the sand. They need to prepare Cole for the day when he’ll need to start watching how he acts around Connor in public.

Connor tucks himself into Hank’s arms and says, “I hate that Cole is going to have to lie for me, that I have to be this thing that Cole needs to protect.”

“Connor, you know that’s not what you are. Cole is never going to see you as a burden.”

Connor presses his face against Hank’s and says, “I should be protecting him.”

When they bring Cole out to give him the talk, Cole seems confused, as though he doesn’t understand what Hank and Connor are telling him.

“When you notice that Connor is different from other androids?” Hank asks gently.

Cole looks confused. “Everyone’s different…”

But once Hank starts comparing androids to computers and autonomous cars, tools that can think for themselves but are still only objects, Cole’s face grows stark. He’s sitting in Connor’s lap, Connor holding him, and he clutches Connor’s arm tightly enough that his fingernails dig into the synthetic skin.

Connor buries his face in Cole’s hair. He wants to interface with Cole, to soothe away his distress and let Cole feel the depth of his emotion, but this isn’t the time for that. He can only hope that Cole can sense his love the human way, through his protective embrace and the soft kisses he’s pressing to the crown of his head.

“Cole,” Hank says gravely, “It’s very important that no one can know how Connor’s different from other androids. Connor could get in a lot of trouble if anyone finds out he’s like this.”

“What kind of trouble?” Cole asks, a tentative, nervous note in his voice that suggests he’s afraid to hear the answer.

“It’s…” Hank pulls at his face. “…Bad trouble.”

“No, what kind?” Cole squeezes Connor’s arm. “What would happen to him?”
“Cole—"

“If everyone thinks Connor’s just a thing, then things get thrown out,” Cole says, his voice rising, “when they’re not working the way that they should!”

“Cole,” Connor says, gently jostling him to pull his focus to him. “I don’t know what would happen to me. That’s the truth. As far as I know, there’s never been another android like me before, and I can’t predict what would happen to me if anyone else were to find out.”

Cole blinks up at him, dissatisfaction in the pull of his brow.

“But there would be trouble,” Connor says. “Because I don’t know what would happen, that means I don’t know what sort of danger I would be in.”

Cole presses the uninjured side of his fade into Connor’s chest.

Connor cradles his head. “Do you understand why we’re telling you this?”

Cole, his face clouded with the weight of his thoughts, blinks sluggishly.

Hank says, “It’s because it’s important for you to help keep it a secret that Connor’s special. To everybody else, we have to pretend like he’s just like all the other androids.”

Cole shudders, squeezing his eyes shut.

“That’s why, when we’re in public, Connor can’t act the way he does when he’s at home.”

“You’ve noticed that before,” Connor murmurs. “That I have to ‘act dumb’ when I’m around other people.”

“I don’t like it,” Cole says in a near-whisper.

Connor closes his eyes. “I know. Sometimes we have to do things we don’t like.”

“I don’t want to throw rocks at androids. I don’t want to be like Hunter.”

Hank moves to sit next to Connor. “You don’t have to be like Hunter. That’s not what we’re asking you to do. We’re just worried because we know the reason you got in a fight with him is because of what he said about androids. All we’re asking you to do is to steer clear of people like Hunter.”

Cole peeks open a questioning eye at Hank.

“A lot of people say a lot of things about androids,” Hank says. “There’s nothing anyone can do about that. The next time someone around you starts talking about androids, don’t stick around to listen to them. Just walk away.”

Cole sniffs, and Connor can tell that his stress level has risen to a point where giving him any more information or instructions would just be counter-productive. Cole still doesn’t seem to fully understand what Hank and Connor are telling him to do, but that’s okay. This is the sort of thing that can’t be explained just once. They can return to this conversation on a less emotionally-charged day. Cole will understand eventually.

Connor kisses Cole’s temple and smooths his hair. “You’re not in trouble, Cole. Why don’t I put on a movie for you? When it’s over, we can do cake and presents.”

Cole inclines his head in listless assent.
Hank and Connor both stick around for the beginning of the movie, just until Cole is distracted enough that they can leave without upsetting him.

Connor walks into the kitchen, distracts himself with the cake. He tries to stop thinking about the conversation they just had with Cole. He tries to stop thinking about the guilt welling up inside of him and how Connor can feel every bit of hurt that Cole suffers without needing to interface with him. It tears along inside of him, grinding deep into the core of his being where he worries he’ll have to carry that pain forever.

Hank watches him fiddle with the cake in silence for a long moment. Then he says, “Connor,” in such a gentle voice that Connor knows he’s trying to coax that pain out of him.

“All things that’s happening to him right now is because of what I am,” Connor says as though he’s trying to detach from himself. “He’s inheriting the problems and the struggles that I wish could just be yours and mine.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Hank says. “Not a single one of us would trade you away for a simpler life. Cole might not understand yet—and believe me, Connor, it breaks my heart that we have to teach him like this, you know it does. But he will not see it as a burden.” Hank’s face is stark with pain and pride. “Anderson men are brave.”

“Yes,” Connor says as he begins to spread mascarpone icing with a spatula. “You are,” Brave and strong and loyal, he thinks. And so full of love that it radiates from you with an intensity I could never quantify.

Hank mutters, “I only wish I could tell him how proud I am of him for standing up for you.”

Connor smooths the icing carefully. “You will. Someday when he’s old enough to understand why you couldn’t tell him now.”

“Will he? When I’m telling him to turn a blind eye to—”

“Hank,” Connor interrupts, his voice gentle. “He will. You said it yourself. He might not understand yet. But he will.”

Hank’s face is stormy. He comes up next to Connor and looks at him as though he isn’t sure which of the two of them needs reassurance more at this moment.

Connor sets down his spatula, leans into Hank’s side. “It’s Cole’s birthday. Let’s try to forget about all of this for now and be happy we have another year with him.”

Hank runs a hand through his hair and sighs. He tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

Connor takes a whole strawberry and presses it to Hank’s mouth.

“Heh.” Hank’s crow’s feet wrinkle as he bites into the strawberry. “Too sweet for me.”

Perhaps it’s too sweet. Perhaps sometimes you just have to bury your head in the sand and eat a little sugar to distract yourself from the bitter reality of the world around you. And if it’s too sweet, at least it’s better than getting lost in despair.

Connor pulls Hank in for a kiss, and he can taste juice on his lips.

***
One day early in December, Hank’s at his desk trying to figure out if the last three paragraphs in
the report he’s typing actually make sense or if he’s just too fried to string a coherent sentence
together when one of the secretarial androids slides a tablet into the inbox on his desk.

“Priority mail for you, Lieutenant Anderson.”

“Thanks,” he says as she walks away. She doesn’t react. They never do.

He picks up the tablet and when the Cyberlife hexagonal logo lights up the clear pane of glass with
a blue glow, he feels his blood freeze in his veins.

_They wouldn’t bother to fucking mail you_, he yells at himself in his head. _This has nothing to do
with Connor._

The logo fades away, a larger body of text taking its place.

_Cyberlife Philanthropies believes in the power of technology. Cyberlife Philanthropies believes in
the power of people And Cyberlife Philanthropies believes in the power of communities
everywhere._

_Cyberlife Philanthropies is an international organization which will partner with nonprofits and
governments around the globe to address issues such as poverty, hunger, and other humanitarian
crises wherever they exist. But no community is more important to us than the community of
Detroit, the community we all share._

_Cyberlife Philanthropies would like to cordially invite you, a valued member and leader of our
community here in Detroit, to a keystone summit to celebrate the founding of this newest division of
Cyberlife and to discuss the role our organization will take in shaping, empowering, and investing
in Detroit and its citizens._

The letter goes on for several more paragraphs, more bunk about how important Detroit is and
about this summit being held. The entire time he’s reading, Hank wonders since when has he been
a community leader of any kind? He hadn’t been aware that arresting murderers and partaking in a
little illegal gambling was enough to make him a community anything.

He’s about to dump the tablet in his wastepaper basket when he spots the name at the bottom of
the letter:

_Cecelia Northcott_  
_President and Lead of Cyberlife Philanthropies_

Unpleasant memories come rushing back to Hank. The charity function Cyberlife held for Regina
after she was maimed, where Hank met Cecelia Northcott herself and even danced with her before
she said something unwittingly cruel about Connor.

Hank can’t imagine why she would want him at this keystone summit of hers. As far as Hank
recalls, he ditched her on the dancefloor without a word of explanation.

“Hey, Ben,” Hank calls across the bullpen. “You didn’t happen to get anything like this, did you?”

Ben ambles over to have a look at the tablet. His eyebrows rise as he reads. “A valued leader of our
community here in Detroit.”

“Shut the fuck up.”
“Nah, I didn’t get anything like this. Maybe it’s because you’re a Lieutenant? I bet if you checked with Fowler, he’s gotten that same invitation, too.”

Hank scowls softly. Maybe Fowler’s gotten one too, or maybe Cecelia singled him out for a special reason. Asking him to come to the Cyberlife tower for some kind of—

*Cyberlife*, Hank thinks, and suddenly he remembers. Connor was created by Cyberlife, a prototype meant to serve some purpose they still don’t understand. Connor was either stolen from or discarded by Cyberlife. The whole mystery of how Connor wound up in a second-hand android shop had been totally pushed out of Hank’s mind by Cole’s recovery.

But now Cole is healthy again. And Hank has a clue he hadn’t had before. If Hank can uncover how Connor might have left Cyberlife’s hands, maybe that’ll lead to some answers about who had Connor after that, who altered his software and for what purpose. Cyberlife lost track of Connor years ago, but he was a prototype. Surely Cyberlife would keep some sort of records about what happens to their prototypes.

But then Hank remembers the warning Elijah Kamski gave him. *Continue to stay away from Cyberlife; whatever instincts are responsible for keeping you away from them are probably accurate.*

But if he’s been invited to the Cyberlife tower on unrelated business, they have no reason to suspect him if he starts asking questions.

Unless the whole thing is a trap from the start.

But then that thought could just be paranoia. Cecelia might honestly just want him at this summit for his experience as a civil servant.

He spends most of the day going back in forth like this, and by the time the workday is over, Hank is exhausted.

“Fuck Cyberlife,” he mutters as he pushes his chair (too hard) into his desk.

“You fucking said it,” one of the lab guys says in passing.

A nearby officer pokes his head up and says, “Ezra, didn’t you use to intern for Cyberlife? Like, literally on Belle Isle”

“Yeah,” Ezra says. “So I’ll say it again: fuck Cyberlife.”

“Is that right?” Hank says, giving Ezra an appraising look.

An hour later, Hank’s buying drinks for Ezra and his officer friend, a rookie by the name of Chris. Just like Hank had hoped, Ezra has plenty to say on the subject of Cyberlife.

“Cyberlife doesn’t care about anything but the bottom line,” Ezra says, gesticulating with his fourth beer. There’s a certain wild quality about his speech that tells Hank that the alcohol is loosening him up a fair bit. “They don’t care about their employees, they don’t care about common decency, they don’t care about the environment or the people they screw over or even the future of the planet.”

“The future of the planet?” Hank asks.

“Thirium,” Ezra says. “The fucking thirium, man. Do you have any clue whether or not they’re
putting any effort into figuring out how to recycle thirium? They just don’t fucking care about that. If you can’t recycle thirium, if thirium is a non-renewable resource, they can keep the price artificially inflated.”

“Okay, so that’s a real dick move, but it’s bad for the world…?”

“Thirium 310—blue blood—is synthesized from raw thirium mined in the arctic. Every country that produces androids is up there mining for thirium. Us, China, Russia… things are getting pretty crowded up there.” He gives Hank a serious look. “We have to keep mining at an accelerating rate to keep up with the ever-increasing number of androids around. What do you think is gonna happen, all the fucking global superpowers up there, mining for more and more of a resource that’s diminishing all the time?”

Hank stares down into his own drink at the question. Despite the vast scope of the issue Ezra is positing, the problem at the forefront of Hank’s mind is what might happen to Connor if thirium becomes scarce in the future.

“And that’s if we don’t fucking murder the planet with emissions from all those mining rigs first,” Ezra says. “Or choke the oceans with plastics from decommissioned androids.”

“Are we really choking the oceans with decommissioned androids?” Chris asks. His casual tone seems to suggest he’s heard this all before. “Like, we’re still making a shit ton of plastic that doesn’t go into androids. It’s not like slowing down android production would save the oceans or anything.”

“It would help! It’d be better than just shoving them in a dump in the middle of nowhere and forgetting about them!”

“Is that what happens when you throw away an android?” Hank asks, keeping his voice carefully measured. “They just end up in some dump?”

“Yeah.” There’s a downwards curl to Ezra’s mouth. “You ever wanna freak yourself out, go have a look at the Veta landfill just outside the city. Between all the dead androids with their skin all peeling off and the androids no one bothered to shut down all the way, they should just rename the place Uncanny Valley.”

“There are functioning androids there?” Hank tries to keep an anxious tremor out of his voice. Something in his chest tightens as an image of Connor sitting in a landfill comes to him unbidden. Surrounded on all sides by plastic bodies, thrown out like any piece of trash that can no longer serve its purpose.

“Lazy people never bother to make sure they’re shut down all the way,” Ezra says. “It’s a good place to go scavenge for biocomponents, you know, if you’re a sociopath who doesn’t mind digging your parts out of a still-talking head.”

“Does Cyberlife dispose of its androids the same way?”

“I mean, yeah? Probably?” Ezra finishes off his beer. “I don’t know. I was basically a glorified coffee boy for the design teams.”

“Still, you must have learned a lot about what goes into making an android. The whole process.” Hank flags down the bartender for another beer for Ezra. “Drafting, engineering… prototypes all the way to the finished product…”

“Yeah…”
“Just always been curious about what happens to android prototypes that never get a public release. Do those get thrown out, too?”

“What?” Ezra snorts a laugh. “Oh, no. God, no. That’d be like throwing out all your notes just because the midterm’s over. Naw, the prototypes get tested and studied to help make better androids. Like, maybe they’d get put into storage, but they wouldn’t just throw out any prototype.” Ezra shakes his head. “Man. They’d be letting trade secrets walk right out the door for anyone to pick up.”

Hank scratches his beard. If Cyberlife never throws out their prototypes, it stands to reason that the only way Connor could have possibly wound up out of Cyberlife’s custody would be if he was stolen. And if Ezra is right about Cyberlife keeping such a tight grip on their prototypes that they keep them indefinitely, Hank can’t imagine that Cyberlife wouldn’t have some sort of records pertaining to how exactly they lost Connor.

“Thanks for the company, guys,” Hank says, getting up. “But I think it’s about time for me to head home.”

Just as he turns to leave, Ezra touches his arm.

“Don’t go to the summit, Lieutenant.”

Hank just stares at him.

“Look, I know I sort of sound like a nut, ranting about Cyberlife,” Ezra says, suddenly seeming much more sober, “but just trust me. You’ll be a lot happier if you don’t let them drag you into whatever plans they have for you.”

“They don’t have plans for me,” Hank says, hoping his irritation is masking how uneasy he feels. “They just want some good PR.”

Ezra gives him a hesitant look. And somehow, it’s the measured amount of doubt on his face that troubles Hank more than all the assured protestations Ezra was giving earlier about how malicious Cyberlife can be.

“Ezra, c’mon,” Chris says. “Don’t give the Lieutenant a hard time about going if he wants to go. They’re probably gonna feed him a free lunch or something.”

Hank expects Ezra to argue, but instead he shrugs, lowering his eyes. “Yeah. I guess it doesn’t really matter one way or another. One person can’t really…”

Ezra trails off, then gives Hank a small smile and a wave. “See you around the station, Lieutenant. Thanks for the drinks.”

“I… yeah,” Hank says. “See ya.”

The entire ride home, Hank is consumed with thoughts of the conversation, the information he gleaned, and Cyberlife.

Was Ezra trying to tell him something? Is he just an embittered ex-employee, or does he know something that Hank doesn’t know? Except he was never even an employee. He was an intern. There’s no possible way he’d have been privy to any of Cyberlife’s secrets.

But still. The way Ezra looked at him when he said don’t go to the summit burns in his mind. It burns in his mind so brightly that he finds himself reaching for anything else to think about, just to
get the memory out of his head. And what naturally comes to mind is Connor.

Hank grabs hold of his image of Connor, clinging to it and the comfort it provides. He loses himself in the memory of Connor’s hands running through his hair, of Connor’s steady brown eyes. Connor right where Hank always wants him to be, standing right by his side. His lover, his partner, his family.

Awash in soothing thoughts of Connor, he remembers that going to Cyberlife would be all for Connor’s sake. Now that Connor is more human that he’s ever been, the mysteries of his past have a grip on him that Hank knows they hadn’t had just a few years ago. Hank remembers the discontent on Connor’s face when they tried—and failed—to solve the mystery of Amanda’s gravestone on their own. And learning the answer from Kamski had only raised even more questions. Why would anyone go through the trouble of reprogramming me and destroying the other AI in my system just to turn me into a domestic android? Hank can hear still hear the persistence in Connor’s voice. I was bought from a secondhand android store! Why would someone go through that much trouble just to let me wind up there?

The only hope they might have at solving that puzzle might be in the hands of Cyberlife.

Cyberlife.

What would Connor say if he knew Hank was considering going to Cyberlife?

Hank can feel his face burn with shame just from imagining Connor’s reaction. Connor would be horrified by the thought of Hank risking himself for his sake.

Hank isn’t afraid of Cyberlife. At least not for himself. He isn’t afraid of anything Cyberlife might be able to do to him. But Connor—Connor would never want Hank to put himself in danger just to get his hands on a clue to his past.

The absolute certainty that Connor wouldn’t want him to do it is enough to make him let go of the idea. Some stubborn part of him, the part of him that wants to move and act to fulfill Connor in every possible way, rumbles angrily at how easily he gives up the fight for something precious to Connor. But these rumbles are nothing more than empty echoes. When Hank thinks about what it would do to Connor if he knew what Hank had been considering, they die down.

When Hank walks through the front door, he’s hit with a savory, spicy smell floating in from the kitchen.

“Welcome home, Hank,” Connor calls. The words are the same as ever, but they’re different now. Welcoming in a way that warms Hank’s tired bones.

Hank doesn’t bother taking off his shoes or coat before walking into the kitchen. Connor’s at the stove. “We’re having fajitas for dinner. You’re right on time, they’re almost ready.”

Hank puts his arms around Connor from behind and leans over his shoulder to kiss him on the cheek.

Connor blinks in surprise. “Oh. You went out for drinks after work?” He smiles and turns his head, letting Hank press another kiss to his mouth. “…Your BAC is pretty low.”

“ Been trying to cut back.”

“I know.” The quiet pride in Connor’s voice fills Hank, making him squeeze Connor even closer. He never wants to leave this moment.
“Would you tell Cole to come set the table?” Connor says, finally shooing Hank away. “And please take off your coat. You look like you’re going to run out the door at any moment.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere,” Hank says, shrugging his coat off as he walks away. He wishes he and Connor could stay like this forever. Just them and Cole, living in their own little world with no need for Hank to go to work or for Cole to go to school. Every question about why Connor is the way he is happily irrelevant, unable to intrude on the life they make with each other.

That isn’t the way life works, but at this moment, Hank feels perfectly fulfilled. He hopes Connor is, too.

***

April rain drums against the roof as the soft, gray light of the morning saturates the room. Connor moves to get out of bed, but Hank holds onto him.

“Stay here a minute,” he mutters sleepily. “Wanna just lay here with you a bit longer.”

Connor settles back down into bed. Hank sighs and burrows against him.

The bed is warm and soft, and Hank looks more comfortable than Connor has ever seen him before. The lines of his face are smoothed in a way that only ever seems to happen when he’s asleep, and everything about his biometrics radiates peace and contentment.

Connor feels as though his guilt is eating him from the inside.

Hank is awake, floating in that strange, sleepy haze he always likes to indulge in on mornings when he doesn’t have to crawl immediately out of bed. Connor wishes he could know what that feels like. He wishes he could have that natural, organic kind of relaxation just by waking up. He wishes his troubles would stay on the periphery of his mind, far away from where they can actually trouble him.

A bullet point consisting only of **Tell Hank the truth** adds itself to Connor’s list of immediate objectives. **Darkness static blood on his hands blood on the seat Cole Cole Cole**—Connor anticipates the memory and shuts it down as it comes to him. This has happened every time the bullet point appears on Connor’s list.

Next to Connor, Hank sighs again and pulls him closer, burying his face in Connor’s neck. Hank’s warm breath on his skin and his warm arm curled around him soothe Connor’s guilt for just an instant. But Hank is the reason he feels so guilty in the first place, and those terrible feelings redouble as Connor considers how Hank is totally unaware of what Connor is keeping from him.

He wants to erase the objective from his list like he has every time before. But how can he do that when Hank is holding him so tenderly?

“Hank,” Connor says, his voice cracking with an electric fizz on the word.

Hank opens his eyes, the corners crinkling.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Hank slowly sits up, watching Connor. His brow furrows softly, and Connor can’t stand to look at his face and can’t stand to look away.

“Do you remember when I told you I would erase the worst of my memories of the car crash?”
Connor allows for a beat to let Hank think back. “That was a lie. I can’t erase any of my own archived data.”

The furrow in Hank’s brow deepens, a frown crossing his face. “…So. Wait. You remember everything that—” A light disappears from Hank’s eyes. He seems suddenly bigger. “You fucking lied to me?”

“Hank—”

“You fucking said that you would erase it, knowing full well you couldn’t?”

“I—yes, but—”

“You said that to—to make me go to counselling!?” Hank’s voice is rising. “That was the fucking deal, you would erase all of that if I promised to go talk to someone about—”

“Hank,” Connor grabs at Hank’s arm. “There wasn’t anything I could do about it and I knew I had to talk you into getting help for yourself—”

Hank yanks his arm away, climbing out of bed. “So you just fucking manipulated me!?” Worse than the anger is the hurt in his voice.

Connor moves to follow him. “I was trying to do what was best for you!”

“You don’t get to make those kinds of decisions for me, Connor!” Hank yells, his voice reverberating around the room. “Not if you’re fucking lying to me to make me do something you want me to do!”

This isn’t the outcome Connor had been hoping for. He grasps for a way to deescalate the situation, but the only thing his social protocol suggests that he say is something that would be sure to anger Hank even further. It’s something he wants to say, but he won’t let himself say it.

“You were hurting,” Connor says, his voice crackling with desperation. “We were both hurting, I only wanted to help you.”

“I am a grown-ass man,” Hank seethes. “I’m not a goddamn child who needs you to redirect me into care of myself!”

“If you won’t take care of yourself, then I have to take care of you,” Connor says. “I will always take care of you, Hank, it’s my mission. It’s what I live for.”

“Fuck your mission!” Hank whirls on Connor. “You’re not a goddamn machine, Connor! You can’t fucking blame what your own actions on your programming, you have agency!”

“Agency,” Connor repeats, suddenly filled with white-hot anger himself.

“That’s what I said.”

“That’s so convenient.” Connor says, giving in to the urge to access his social protocol’s suggestion. “I have agency when it’s convenient for me to have agency, and the rest of the time, you get to make my decisions for me.”

Hank’s face twists and he stalks out of the room. He tries to slam the bedroom door, but Connor catches it before it can hit the doorframe.

“No, Hank, tell me!” Connor calls, following Hank. “Why do you get to decide when I’m ready for
a relationship—ready to be human, and the second I try to make a decision for you—"

“Don’t you throw that in my face!”

“That’s what this is about! You get to decide when we get to have a relationship we both want, you get to decide whether to tell our friends about us, just when exactly do I earn the right to have as much of a say in your life as you have in mine!?"

Hank rips his jacket from the open closet, yanks his shoes onto his feet.

“Are you just going to run away from me!?” Connor demands.

Hank doesn’t look at Connor as he slams the door shut behind him.

The silence that follows that bang is deafening.

Connor can’t follow Hank. Even if were to rip out his LED, all their neighbors know what he is. Hank has forced an end to their argument by leaving to a place where Connor can’t be himself.

Hank left specifically because he knows Connor can’t follow him.

Connor wants to break something. He wants to break himself. He closes his eyes and can feel the temperature rising in him until his biocomponents begin to overheat, his air cooling system forcing him to gasp for breath as error messages fill his HUD.

He takes a cold shower, letting the frigid water stimulate all his tactile sensors in an attempt to distract himself from how awful he feels. Angry and resentful and guilty and ashamed of himself. So full of despair over the state of his and Hank’s relationship.

Eventually, the anger cools until it is no longer this white-hot, unbridled thing inside of him. Soon his emotions curdle into a sourness that Connor imagines must be how human feel when they’re sick. He feels sick.

He can barely bring himself to think about what happened, not even to piece apart whether his own anger and his own guilt are warranted. Those two feelings can’t possibly coexist, can they? Either Hank is to blame for their fight, in which case Connor should be feeling angry, or Connor is to blame and he should feel guilty. The thought that he can be experiencing so many different levels of misery—that he can barely parse his own thoughts to think about whether he or Hank owns more responsibility for what happened—makes him want to take apart his own brain to make sure there none of the vital connections are loose. He can’t think of any other reason why this should be so hard to think about.

Hank shouldn’t have yelled, he overreacted by getting so angry. Except that can’t be true, because Connor felt guilty about keeping his lie a secret, which means Hank had the right to get upset. But Hank’s anger was hypocritical in the face of how he has conducted himself in the past, keeping secrets from Connor and acting as though Connor is a thing whose desires and actions can be controlled. But Connor shouldn’t have brought that up when Hank’s grievances about Connor’s lie had nothing to do with it.

There isn’t even anywhere he can sit in the house to hide while he thinks about this. He shouldn't occupy the bathroom when he'll never need to make use of it, the kitchen isn’t secluded enough, and Hank’s bedroom is—

Is it still Hank’s bedroom? Shouldn’t it be his and Hank’s bedroom now? So then why doesn’t Connor feel as though he has the right to curl up in Hank’s bed—his bed—while he’s fighting with
In the end, Connor just sits on the couch with a quilt wrapped around him so he can’t see anything and nothing can see him. When Hank’s car pulls back into the driveway and Hank opens the front door, Connor hopes Hank will just leave him alone.

He can hear Hank carefully remove his shoes and his coat. He can hear Hank move around the couch, undoubtedly looking at the lump under the quilt.

“Hey,” Hank says in a soft voice that gently asks Connor to acknowledge him.

Connor lowers the quilt from his head. Hank is standing in front of him, holding a bouquet of red roses.

Connor’s chest feels like it’s cracking open at the sight. Has he ever told Hank about the red roses on the trellis in the garden he goes to when he sleeps? The symbol of all Connor’s dedication and commitment to maintaining something dear to him.

“Can we talk?” Hank asks, holding the bouquet out to Connor.

Connor takes the bouquet. Having a set of flowers in his hands and the ability to scan them feels right and foreign all at once. He lifts the bouquet to his face as though he’s smelling them and tastes the chemical residue of pesticides on his lips.

“Let me put these in some water first.” Connor goes to the kitchen and pulls a vase out of the back of a cupboard. He wonders for a brief instant why he never considered collecting the roses on the trellis in such a way, then dismissed the thought. It isn’t as though he’d have anywhere to display a vase full of flowers.

He puts the vase on the coffee table. Hank has folded the quilt over the back of the couch and he sits down, patting the seat next to him for Connor.

Connor sits, and Hank pulls him into his side. This comfort, this forgiveness and acceptance is like a balm to Connor’s sick soul, and he leans into Hank, trying to forget why he was upset with Hank in the first place.

“I’m sorry, Connor.”

“This is miserable,” Connor says, pressing his face into Hank’s neck. “I hate fighting.”

“Christ. Me too.” Hank pulls back slightly, not looking at Connor. “So let’s just talk things through.”

Connor nods, trying to quell the dread sitting in his gut. He trusts Hank. He can trust Hank to lead them through this.

Hank furrows his brow and says slowly, thoughtfully, “When you told me you lied to me, that… hit me in a way I wasn’t expecting. Yeah, I was angry that you lied to me, but at the moment, more than that, I just… I realized it meant there probably wasn’t any way for you to forget the things you saw in the car, or to get the kind of help you wanted for me. And that scared me so much that it was just… easier to get angry.” He pauses, finally hazarding a glance at Connor. “There… there really isn’t any way to get rid of it, is there?”

“I don’t think so,” Connor says softly. “My analytic function is… much more complex than anything analogous that other androids might possess. It sets me apart. I think I must have been
initially designed to collect as much environmental data as possible. And as such, I don’t have the
capacity to manually delete any data. It would be like letting a camera choose to delete photos in its
memory.”

He stares at the flowers sitting on the table. The red of the roses is so much brighter and more
vivid than the red on his hands in the dark of the car.

Hank watches him with a careful, slightly pained look on his face. “Is there anything as all we can
do about it?”

Connor shakes his head, wishing he could lie again. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Connor, don’t—” Hank cuts himself off with a sigh, kneading the bridge of his nose. “…This
is what you’re sorry about? You don’t apologize for anything else, and this is what you’re sorry
about?”

Connor takes a microsecond to sort through what he’s sorry for and what he’s not sorry for. “I’m
sorry I yelled at you about things that didn’t matter at the time. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Hank lifts a single eyebrow. “…What about the lie that started the whole fight in the first place?”

Connor dares to look Hank in the eyes. “I felt awful about lying to you—and I still feel awful about
it. The fact that I was dishonest to you ate at me from the inside. But I’m not sorry I told the lie.
I’m not sorry I compelled you to get the help you needed.”

A small, dissatisfied frown pulls at Hank’s face.

Connor reaches out to cup his cheek in his hand. “You were hurting. I didn’t know how else to help
you or how else to make you help yourself. You were so determined to carry this family on your
shoulders that you refused to pay any attention at all to yourself and your needs. If I could have
somehow treated your psychological trauma by myself, I would have. But I couldn’t, and the next
best thing was to manipulate you into seeking the care I couldn’t give you.”

Hank is silent, his eyes distant while Connor strokes the ridge of his cheek. Eventually, Hank sighs
and closes his eyes. “I’m a stubborn son of a bitch.”

“That’s true,” Connor says fondly.

“And I know I can be bull-headed about… thinking I can control the nature of our relationship.”
His eyes open and he looks at Connor. “Thinking I should protect you from everything, even
yourself.”

“Myself?”

Hank furrows his brow. “When I stormed out earlier today… I started thinking about that summer
before the accident. When things were so fucking tense between us. This fight reminded me of
back then, and I realized… that summer, I felt so fucking guilty for not preventing you from falling
in love with me. Even knowing how much I hurt you by pushing you away, I didn’t think to
myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done that.’ I thought, ‘I should have done something different, something
better, less painful for him.’ I didn’t think of you as a person with the agency of your own
emotions. And that’s… something I’ve never really stopped thinking, on some level.”

“You feel responsible for me,” Connor says slowly.

“Yeah, and that’s… it’s not okay. It’s not healthy.” Hank has a stormy, resolute look in his eyes.
“I’m not responsible for you, I’m accountable to you. There might be things in this world I have to protect you from, dynamics at work here that no other couple on earth would ever have to worry about, but that doesn’t mean I get to deny you any dignity.”

Hank’s words fill Connor with a different sort of shame, because he doesn’t know if he will ever stop thinking of himself as responsible for Hank. He wants to be responsible for Hank. Perhaps it’s different in Connor’s case since Hank doesn’t have to grapple with challenges to his own personhood on a daily basis, but even so, Connor has to disable the hue-shifting matrix in his face so his cheeks won’t flush with the shame he’s feeling.

So to assuage himself, Connor takes Hank’s hand and strokes his thumb over Hank’s knuckles. “No more manipulation. I promise. If I ever again feel like I have no other choice, I’ll stop and talk to you about it.”

Hank leans in, pressing his face into the side of Connor’s head. “And I’ll listen to you. Partners and equals.”

Connor folds himself into Hank’s arms, relieved beyond words to have had things work out as well as they have. “Hank… are the flowers because you walked out in the middle of our fight knowing I wouldn’t be able to follow?”

Hank winces. “I… yeah. That and as an apology for everything else. Hope it’s okay, I know some people don’t like flowers.”

“I love them.” Connor tries to imagine the guilt Hank must have felt after leaving the house. Was it comparable at all to the guilt Connor had been carrying for lying to Hank? The both of them are two flawed creatures, fumbling with each other as gently as they can.

Connor closes his eyes. “Would you take me out later?”

“Sure, baby. Where do you wanna go?”

Connor doesn’t answer. There isn’t anything he can say that will erase the pain of what he experienced earlier today. But then there isn’t anything that will erase all the pain Hank has endured at his hands, either. So instead he smiles and nuzzles his face into Hank’s neck.

“Okay,” Hank says, running his rough fingers down the back of Connor’s neck. “I’ll think of something good.”

***

In the end, they don’t take Sumo with them on vacation. Hank is worried that Cole is going to be upset about the decision, but he takes the explanation well.

“We’re gonna have to drive all the way to Virginia Beach,” Hank says, “That’s gonna take a few days. Sumo’s a big dog, and between the trip there and back, he wouldn’t want to spend a week cooped up in a car.”

“Oh,” Cole says, mildly disappointed. “How long are we gonna be gone?”

“Eleven days. That’s less than two weeks.”

“That’s not too bad, then,” Cole says. “He won’t miss us too much.”

Later, when they’re alone, Connor says, “Hank, if you’re worried about packing or planning for a
road trip with a dog, I can take care of all of that. The logistics of such a trip would be easy for me to manage.”

Hank just pats him on the back. “Nah, it’s not the logistics I’m worried about. As much as I love Sumo, I just want this trip to be about us and Cole.”

“I see,” Connor says with a gentle smile. “A celebration of Cole’s good health.”

“And the life we’ve made with each other.” A smile pulls at one corner of Hank’s mouth. “It’s cheesy, I know.”

“No, I think it’s a nice sentiment. Our first family vacation.”

On the sunny July morning they set out, Hank drops off Sumo with Ms. Washington (when she asks about Connor, Hank bullshits something about needing him to come along to help with Cole’s ‘special needs’), and by the time he thinks to check to make sure they’ve packed all the necessities, Connor says, “Don’t worry, Hank. I’m sure we haven’t forgotten anything.”

“You double checked?”

“Triple checked.”

“Of course you did.”

Connor pops out his LED and slips it into his pocket (just in case, he says) and as they drive out of Detroit, Hank marvels at how open the world seems and how free he feels. He rolls down the window to feel the wind in his hair, and he laughs when Connor does the same.

They’re a family going on vacation. Just a normal family going on vacation. Two dads and their son, and that’s what everyone outside of Detroit is going to see them as. Hank keeps stealing glances at Connor, overwhelmed with excitement about what lies ahead of them.

“Wave goodbye to Michigan,” Hank says as they pass the Welcome to Ohio sign.


“Eh. Everything on the highways always looks the same. Just wait until we reach Pennsylvania,” Hank says brightly. “Probably pass some mountains. Cool, huh?”

“I guess,” Cole says.

Connor starts to read off fun facts about the Appalachian Mountains, but he only gets four or five facts in before Hank starts teasing him.

“Connor,” Hank says, smiling at the road. “You know there’s no such thing as a fun fact, right? There’s nothing fun about them.”

“Facts are fun!” Connor sounds offended.

“Yeah, sure, and that’s why Cole totally tuned you out and is smearing his face on the window, right?”

Connor huffs, and as an apology, Hank turns off his music and starts up an audiobook instead.

Some time later, Cole looks out his window and asks, “Is that the ocean?”
“No,” Connor says. “That’s Lake Erie. We won’t see the ocean until we get to Virginia.”

“How long is that gonna take?”

“A couple more days.”

Cole picks at his shirt. “How long would it have taken if we rode a plane instead?”

Hank and Connor glance at each other. Connor says. “If the plane departed the same time we did, we might already be there.”

“Why couldn’t we do that?”

“Gotta go through a metal detector to get on a plane,” Hank grunts. “Connor probably would’ve had to ride with our luggage.”

Cole frowns, looking out the window with his brow knitted. Hank waits for Cole to say something along the lines of I’m glad we’re doing it this way, but he doesn’t.

At least, he doesn’t until they stop at the motel where they’re spending the night and Connor tells him he’s allowed to jump on the bed as a special vacation treat.

“It’s like a whole adventure!” Cole cries as he belly flops on his bed.

“Why?” Hank whispers into Connor’s neck. “Why, why, why did you tell him this was okay?”

“He’s been in a car for hours on end, let him tire himself out,” Connor says patiently. “Better to let him wear himself out now than to have him restless all night and cranky tomorrow because he didn’t sleep well.”

True enough, Cole calms down even before the pizza Hank has ordered to their room arrives. When someone knocks on the door, Connor goes to answer it.

“Thanks, man. Have a good one,” The deliveryman says as Connor gives him his tip.

Connor is still smiling as Hank and Cole each help themselves to a slice.

“Have a good one,” Hank says, smirking back at Connor.

Connor shakes his head. “I know, I know, it’s silly to be touched by such a simple gesture, but… deliverymen usually don’t say anything at all to me.”

It makes Hank heart ache that it can’t be like this for Connor all the time, that this isn’t something he can give him. He tries to brush that sadness away, reminds himself that this is a vacation. This is an escape from the real world.

Later that night, as Cole sleeps in his bed across from Hank and Connor’s, Connor whispers, “I love this. Having the two of you in the same room where I can monitor you both so easily.”

Hank nods into the pillow. The urge to check on Cole in the middle of the night to make sure he was still breathing never quite went away for him, either, even after Cole got to an age where he was safe from SIDS. You can never tell what sorts of unpredictable events might pop up out of nowhere to steal away the people who matter to you most. A brain aneurysm, a massive heart attack, a truck skidding on a sheet of ice…

Hank pulls Connor closer. He can feel the thrum of something under the malleable plate of
Connor’s chest, and across the room, Cole sighs softly and his sheets rustle as he shifts in his sleep.

“Sleep well, Hank,” Connor murmurs, and Hank does, his anxieties soothed by the gentle yet powerful swell inside of Connor.

The next day finds them back on the road at an early hour. Cole quietly watches videos on a tablet while Hank and Connor talk about anything and nothing at all. Connor is driving, and when he reaches a hand out to hold Hank’s, Hank is sure Connor isn’t distracted from the road at all, able to devote himself fully to his family in two separate ways like the superman he is.

The motel they stay at that night isn’t as nice as the one they stayed in the night before. There’s a strip of wallpaper peeling right behind the television, and that night, after Hank has helped Cole brushed his teeth and turned out the lights, Cole calls out, begging for Connor to come help him out of bed.

“This room scares me,” Cole says in a small, tight voice. “There’s an elephant in the wall.”

“I thought you liked elephants,” Hank says while Connor pulls Cole in so he’s sandwiched between the two of them.

Cole just whimpers and clutches Connor’s shirt.

“Shh, Cole, it’s okay,” Connor says. “You’ll be safe here with us. And then we’re never coming back to this room after tonight, alright?”

It doesn’t even take fifteen minutes for Cole to fall asleep cocooned between Hank and Connor.

“I’m so glad we can give him this feeling of security,” Connor whispers to Hank.

“Mmm. When’s the last time you let Cole fall asleep with you like this?”

“Well… never, actually. All my childrearing directives indicated that co-sleeping too often might inhibit Cole’s ability to self-sooth and train him to be unable to fall asleep by himself.”

“Too often. So obviously you never did it, then.”

Connor’s eyes are half-closed as his gaze flickers down to Cole. “…I’ve reassessed my priorities since then. And I’m very pleased that I did.”

Hank drifts off to sleep that night thinking about how happy Connor looks to be able to hold Cole while he sleeps.

They arrive in Virginia Beach early the next morning, and even if the condo they’re staying in doesn’t quite have a view of the ocean the way the online listing advertised, Hank doesn’t think any of them mind. The ocean is still practically right there and it’s even within walking distance of the boardwalk.

“That’s the ocean.” Cole says when they hike down to the beach that day.

“Yep,” Hank says, lifting his head. “You can tell by the smell of saltwater in the air. Good for your lungs.”

The beach is more crowded than Hank would have liked—but that’s what they get for coming to such a tourist-heavy location.

While Cole steps about experimentally in the tide, Connor sets up the beach umbrella. When Hank
tugs off his shirt, Connors tugs him down to lay on one of the towels.

“Wait, let me get your back.”

Hank folds his arms under his head. His head is just peeking out from under the shade of the umbrella, and the warmth on his face makes him feel like he could just melt into the sand.

“You’re still wearing a shirt,” Hank says, peering over his shoulder. “Not gonna take it off?”

“Do you want me to?” Connor asks, then shakes his head with a soft laugh. “Of course you want me to.”

“I want you to have fun. I’m not just being a horny old man over here. And, hey, you’re the one sticking your hands down my trunks right now.”

“For your health, clearly,” Connor says, and Hank chuckles. “Should I take off my shirt? It might be fun to try and get a tan while we’re here.”

“You’re so pale. Sure you wouldn’t just burn to a crisp and be miserable the rest of the time we’re here?”

“Don’t be an ass,” Connor says, which sets Hank laughing again. He loves this game the two of them are playing. It feels like a secret he and Connor are keeping, something for just the two of them that somehow connects them to the rest of the world, too. Here they’re normal, Here they belong, and yet it’s also almost scandalous in a way that makes Hank’s skin tingle.

In the end, Connor keeps his shirt on as he wades into the surf after Cole. Hank hovers nearby, wishing he’d read more about whether it’s safe to swim in cybernetics, but Connor doesn’t seem to worried, so Hank tries not to worry, either.

Hank’s the only one of them who does any real swimming. “Connor, c’mon!” he shouts as he lets a wave lift him. “You haven’t even gotten your face wet! Can’t you swim?”

“Of course I can,” Connor calls back, somewhat defensively. “I just don’t want to swallow any water!

And that makes Hank stop pushing, because he doesn’t quite know what Connor means by that. Is there something about the water that’s dangerous for his system? Hank’s seen him take showers before, so he can’t imagine what the problem could be. Maybe Connor is just joking, but Hank returns closer to the shore anyway, unnerved by the possibilities.

Afterwards, Connor helps Cole built the most detailed sandcastle Hank has ever seen in his life—not so much a castle as a fortress that looks like it’s been built into a hill, with footpaths and parapets and walls that Connor carefully etches a brick pattern into. Cole decorates the structure with small pebbles and fragments of shells that he finds, and it isn’t long until they have a small crowd gathered to watch them.

“Are you an architect?” one woman asks Connor while her companion snaps photo after photo of the sand sculpture.

“I’m a stay-at-home father,” Connor answers, and Hank has to look away for how it makes his face burn.

Another day, Hank and Connor take Cole on a Dolphin Excursion—a tour by boat to try and find the few remaining pods of dolphins in the area.
A sign at the ticket office warns them that sightings of dolphins are not a guarantee due to what the sign discreetly refers to as *habitat loss*. When Cole asks for more information, Connor gently gives him a brief, age-appropriate explanation of how climate change and pollution impact the dolphins who live nearby. Cole absorbs this information with the typical somber attitude Hank has come to expect of his son.

Connor once lamented to him that Cole is going to be saddled with Connor and Hank’s problems despite their best efforts to shield him from them. But the truth really goes much, much deeper than that. Every child on this earth—Cole included—is burdened with the weight of the problems that their parents are unable to fix for them. The number of endangered species grows higher every day, to say nothing at all about what humans are doing to the planet itself. Cole will be lucky if the planet is even semi-habitable by the time he’s Hank’s age.

Connor’s hand finds his and he’s literally pulled away from his thoughts as Connor leads him to onto the boat. Connor must be able to guess what he was thinking as he says brightly, “If we don’t see dolphins here, then let’s go to the aquarium tomorrow. We can see the dolphins there, doesn’t that sound like fun, Cole?”

“Yeah,” Cole says. “I’d rather see them here, though.”

“The boat ride will still be nice, even if we don’t,” Connor says, and looks at Hank.

Connor is right. They’re on vacation. This is their one chance to escape from the harsh realities of their real lives, and Hank shouldn’t be thinking such dour thoughts at a time like this. Hank presses a kiss to Connor’s cheek, grateful to be reminded of everything he has at this moment.

On the boat, Connor gets chatted up by a woman with crystals hanging from her hair who compliments Connor over and over on his “honest eyes.” Hank tries to not make it too obvious he’s eavesdropping, and before too long, he’s watching out of the corner of his eye as she reads Connor’s palm.

“What did that lady say to you?” he asks when Connor rejoins him and Cole at the railing.

“That I lack a fate line, which means I am the master of my own destiny,” Connor says, staring down at his open palm.

Hank snorts and loops an arm around Connor’s waist. “And what did she have to say about the lack of fingerprints?”

“That woman was very high. I don’t think she would have noticed if I had *three* hands.”

Before Hank can respond, Connor’s eyes widen and he puts a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “Cole, look! Dolphins!”

An excited babble breaks out across the boat as the rest of the passengers spot what Connor was the first to see—a few breaks in the foam some distance behind the boat. At first, not much can be seen of the dolphins, just a flash of a fin here or there. But the dolphins draw closer, and as they cross into the wake left by the boat, they begin to jump, playing in the waves.

There aren’t very many of them, only three or four. But they’re now close enough to be clearly seen, and Cole laughs in delight as they arch out of the water over and over, falling on their sides in such a way that communicates that this is all a game for them, a wonderful game. Hank wonders briefly if the dolphins know what humanity has done to them and their habitats and whether they’d be so eager to play with the boat if they knew, but such thoughts are easily washed away by the
sheer joyfulness of the sight in front of him.

The rest of their vacation passes in a similarly joyful way. They spend a day strolling down the boardwalk, tasting the snacks that are sold along the walk and stopping in at every attraction they see just for the hell of it. Hank walks hand in hand with Connor, and for once in his life, Hank stops and chats with the tourists they walk past who are clearly taking their time and enjoying their vacation in the same lazy way they are. Every single time Connor speaks to someone and is spoken to in return as though he were a real person deserving of respect and consideration, he lights up in a way that Hank is unable to tear his eyes away from.

Hank kisses him freely and openly over and over. At one point, Hank stops dead in the middle of a crowd to kiss Connor, and as people part around them, Hank just wants to grab Connor and kiss him even harder. Show the whole world just how much he loves this man, make it known to everyone that their family exists.

They make love well into the night, sleep in late, and then do it again when they wake, as slow and as gentle as they please.

Connor’s skin seems to glow in the morning light that filters in through the thick curtains. Hank works his way down his body, looking for every mole and freckle he can find. His hands never stop moving, caressing Connor’s chest and his biceps and his sides and his stomach.

Connor hasn’t washed since yesterday. He smells like sun and the sea and, very faintly as Hank kisses him again and again, laundry that has been dried in the fresh, open air.

“Hank.” Connor’s voice is quiet and raspy, his hands moving from Hank’s shoulders to thread in his hair as Hank moves lower and lower.

Hank nips loosely at the skin just above the ridge of Connor’s hip, teasing the firm flesh with his teeth before pressing a kiss there. “Spread your legs for me.”

Connor’s long legs slide apart and Hank settles between them, nuzzling into the side of Connor’s knee. There’s a tiny mole on the inside of Connor’s left thigh, very close to where his leg meets his groin. Hank runs his thumb over it, pleased to find that it’s actually a raised bump.

“You’re so beautiful,” Hank murmurs as he trails kisses down the inside of Connor’s thigh. “So fucking perfect.”

Connor’s other leg jitters. “Hank…” Connor picks his head up and his gaze intense and wanting. Hank knows exactly what it is he wants.

“You’re so good, Connor,” Hank says as he pets Connor’s thigh. “Everything I want, everything I need.”

“Am I?” Connor sounds slightly disoriented. “Am I really?”

“Just look at what you do to me.” Hank sits up, letting Connor see the flush of his skin, the way his dick strains and leaks.

Connor’s mouth falls slightly open at the sight, and Hank can see the barest hint of Connor’s tongue poking out from between his teeth.

“You’re a goddamn vision, all spread out just for me. Christ, your body, everything you are…”
“Hank,” Connor whispers, “tell me you love me.”


“I need…!” Connor reaches for him with both hands. “I need to taste you…!”

Hank crawls up Connor’s body, and Connor’s legs loop around him as he does. He kisses Connor, and Connor responds with a ferocity that makes Hank feel as though he’s being swallowed by a wave. He falls into Connor’s arms, tangled in Connor’s limbs, and Connor holds him tightly until he comes, refusing to let him come up for air until his vision swims and his arms go weak. As Hank comes back to himself, he finds he’s been near-silently mouthing the words ‘love you’ over and over.

Even afterwards, they don’t move for a long while. The room is warm and the bed is soft, and Hank isn’t sure whether the arm pillowing his head is Connor’s or his own, but he feels far too comfortable to want to put the thought into figuring it out.

They lay there in silence, watching dust float in the thin line of light that the curtains let into the room where they meet.

Eventually, Connor shifts. Hank recognizes that Connor can’t be uncomfortable, that Connor is instead signaling for something. Hank knows without thinking about it what Connor is asking for, and he wraps his arms around Connor in a more organized way.

Connor says in a soft, empty voice, “I wish I could be human.”

Hank squeezes Connor even more tightly. He croaks, “I know. Me too.”

Neither of them move or speak again until Connor crawls out of bed, and that’s how Hank knows that Cole has woken up and it’s time for them to begin the day.

The rest of the vacation passes in the same bittersweet haze, and most of the time, it’s easy for them to lose track of reality.

But only most of the time.

One afternoon when a rip currant warning is issued that precludes them from spending the day in the water, they instead head out to the fishing pier. Hank drops some money to rent fishing equipment for himself and Connor, and they park themselves on a bench at the end of the pier with absolutely no expectation that either of them are going to catch anything.

“But if you did catch something, you’d throw it back, right?” Cole asks, brows knitted.

“Absolutely,” Hank replies. “The hell would we do with a fish anyway? Cook it? We’ve been eating fish all week, I’d rather go grab a burger tonight if it’s all the same to you.”

“It’s all the same to me,” Connor says mildly.

They show Cole how to hold the rod and cast the line, and then they just sit there and talk. Connor remarks on how Hank paid far too much money to sit around and do nothing, and Hank replies that he wanted to go fishing, it’s been years since he’s gone fishing. Connor tells him not to pretend he knows anything about fishing and that one three hour excursion when Hank was eleven wouldn’t have been enough to make a fisherman out of him.

The warm sun on his back and the soothing sounds of the ocean make Hank feel sleepy and lazy.
He feels like he could fall asleep right here with the rod in his hands and Cole in his lap…

The fishing rod in Connor’s hands clatters to the deck as he stands.

“Jesus, Connor!” Hank hands his rod off to Cole as he leans over to grab Connor’s. “At least reel it in first…”

Connor is standing ramrod straight, his hands on the wooden rail as he stares out over the beach.

“Connor?”

Hank has no idea if Connor can hear him or not. Connor just keeps staring, and as Hank moves to look him in the face, he sees that Connor's face is frighteningly blank.

Hank squints out over the shore, trying to tell what has captured Connor’s attention. He can’t see anything at all unusual as far as he can tell. There’s a smattering of people standing in the tide, and looking at them fills Hank’s belly with unease in a way he can’t immediately articulate—

In a gut-wrenching flash, Hank remembers the reason they decided not to go swimming today. He scans the water but he’s so agitated, he feels as though he can’t focus at all. He can’t make out anything at all amid the dark, depthless water, only flashes of foam and waves and—

There, so far away that Hank has to squint to be sure. A small speck that’s there and gone so quickly that Hank isn’t sure he’s seen it at all until it emerges from the water again, bobbing above the water for barely a moment before it’s gone again. So far away from the shore that Hank’s stomach flips.

Hank looks back over to the people on the shore, and Connor says flatly, “His parents are panicking. Even if they were to attempt a rescue, they wouldn’t be likely to succeed.”

_His parents._ Hank suddenly understands why Connor has that awful look on his face.

“Connor, c’mon. Let’s get out of here.” Hank tries to pull Connor away from the railing.

Connor remains frozen in place.

“Connor.” Hank pulls harder. Connor is as stiff and immovable as if he were planted to the spot. “Connor,” Hank hisses, drawing close enough to ensure no one overhears. “Cole is here, do you want him to fucking notice what’s about to happen!?”

Connor recoils as though the railing has shocked him, his eyes going wide in an expression of alarm and confusion.

Hank grabs Connor’s hand and doubles back for Cole. “C’mon. We’re going back to the condo.”

Cole blinks, holding both the fishing rods together and failing to manage either. “But the fishing rods—”

“Forget it. Just leave those here, someone will come get them.”

Hank leads the both of them down the pier, hating how Connor trails behind him. He reaches back and loops an arm through Connor’s pulling him right to Hank’s side, pulling him close.

Connor huddles into his side, muttering. “I didn’t. I didn’t realize.” His voice is eerily even despite how hurriedly Hank is shepherding him away.
“Tell me later, baby,” Hank murmurs. “Later when we’re alone.”

Connor lowers his eyes. He doesn’t say anything else until they’re all back at the condo and Hank has Cole safely sequestered in front of the television. Then Hank takes him into their bedroom and they sit down on the bed together.

Connor tries to pull away from Hank when Hank puts an arm around him, so Hank says, “No you don’t. None of that, you hear me? Just let me hold you; you deserve it.”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do,” Hank interrupts, squeezing Connor for emphasis. “Whatever you’re about to tell me, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

There’s a pause while Connor stares ahead blankly. Then he hesitantly lays his head on Hank’s shoulder.

“My system gave me all the numbers,” he says in a quiet, dull voice. “The chance I’d be able to reach him in time and bring him to shore unharmed. The chance that by the time I’d reach him, he would require medical intervention to save his life. The chance I wouldn’t reach him at all.”

“Wouldn’t reach him at—” Hank repeats. “Connor, you mean the chance that it’d be too late by the time you reached him, right?”

“No. He was very far away and I would have had to move... recklessly. If too much fluid got into my air-cooling system, I could have sustained major damage. So there was a chance I would never have reached him at all.”

A shudder goes through Hank despite himself. He grasps Connor even tighter, and he feels Connor’s eyelashes brush his neck as he closes his eyes.

“Connor…” Hank’s voice is hoarse. “Connor, you can’t—you can’t blame yourself. I didn’t jump in, either, we were so fucking far away—”

“No, Hank.” There’s a certain forcefulness to Connor’s words. “If you had tried to save that child, you would have drowned. You couldn’t have made it. I could have. The risk to me was minimal.”

The way Connor says that chills Hank to the bone and another shudder goes through him. Before he can protest any further, Connor continues. “But I couldn’t. I wanted to, I didn’t want to stand by and just watch it happen. But I just couldn’t move. Not with you right there. Not with Cole right there. All I did was stand there, frozen in place, watching the probability of success fall lower and lower.”

“Connor, you didn’t do anything wrong. No, more than that. You did the right thing.”

“Hank, that child—”

“No,” Hank interrupts. “Listen to me. You have an obligation to Cole now. We both do. You didn’t jump off that pier, and that means Cole gets to have you here with him for another day. Cole is our priority, not—” Hank has to cut himself off, swallow thickly. “…Not any other family’s child.”

Connor shifts against him, his hand closing on Hank’s arm. “Cole.”

“Yeah. Cole.”
Connor turns his face further into Hank’s neck. “…I feel so low. Like I don’t deserve any of this any more.”

“I know,” Hank whispers into Connor’s hair. “I know how you feel.”

“In the course of your career, have you ever—” Connor stops himself. “Wait. Don’t answer that. I don’t want you to have to think about it if you have.”

Hank runs his hand down Connor’s back, presses a kiss to Connor’s head.

There’s a long silence. Eventually Connor says in a smaller voice, “I didn’t even realize I wouldn’t have to swim optimally until it was already too late for that option.”

Hank tilts his head.

“I could have swam for that child like a skilled human. A trained swimmer or the like. Swimming in a way that might not have aroused as much suspicion.” Connor closes his eyes again. “But by the time I accounted for that possibility, it was already too late. I would have had to preconstruct my movements and swim in a way that no human possibly could.”

“So they might have realized…?”

“They might have.” Connor is perfectly still against Hank. “And I feel indescribably awful for letting that influence my actions.”

Hank huffs out a slow breath. “…Don’t think about it anymore, Connor. Just think about Cole. Think about our boy, what it would do to him if you were taken away from us.”

“I know.” Connor’s voice is still flat. Still mechanical in a way that Hank doesn’t like. “Cole. Any amount of suffering I endure is bearable so long as Cole is safe and happy.”

That isn’t what Hank meant. But he nods anyway because he can’t think of anything else to say.

Connor pulls away from him, standing. “I’m going to go watch television with Cole. I’d like to be near him for now. I think if I can see him and… hold him, it’ll be easier for me to refocus myself.”

Something about the way Connor says *refocus* makes Hank think of a telescope or some other sort of series of lenses. A tool with a limited view and scope, built for a singular objective. Turning forever inward on itself. Hank shivers.

Connor turns and looks at him. “…Would you join me?”

“Nah,” Hank says with a wave of his hand, forcing himself to smile. “I think might need a nap after all the excitement of the day.”

“Alright,” Connor says with perfectly natural immediacy. He closes the door gently as he leaves the room.

Hank puts his head in his hands and curls up on the bed. He can hear Connor’s footsteps as he walks away. Despite this, he knows he hasn’t fooled Connor. Connor knows he has no intention of sleeping. Connor knows he’s just going to lie there and wallow in his guilt.

He isn’t hurt that Connor hasn’t stayed with him. He knows he doesn’t deserve to be comforted for what he’s done.

The next day, Hank and Connor pack up the car and they begin their long drive home. They had
meant to spend one more day in Virginia Beach, but neither of them wants to stay any longer after the events of the day before.

Cole doesn’t seem aware that they’re leaving a day early. As they begin their drive, Connor peppers him with questions about his favorite parts of the vacation and he cheerfully talks about seeing the dolphins jumping after the boat and playing in the surf with Connor and Hank.

Hank feels less weighed down as he listens to Cole talk. So long as this vacation remains a happy memory for Cole, it was a worthwhile trip.

He catches Connor’s eye, and Connor smiles at him. Without his LED, Hank can’t tell whether Connor is still disturbed by the events of yesterday. Wearing a smile and hiding his pain from Cole, just like a real parent. Just like a real person.

“Hey, why don’t we take a detour? Find a few roadside attractions to check out,” Hank says.

Connor cocks his head slightly. “You’re not too eager to get home?”

Hank shrugs. “Might as well make the most out of our vacation. And, huh, look at that,” he remarks as he spots a passing billboard. “Camera Heritage Museum and World’s Largest Flower Pots. Bet Cole would get a kick out of those.”

A small huff of laughter from Connor. “Alright. If you’re not too tired.”

Hank smiles as he turns off at the exit.

Later, at the Camera Heritage Museum, Hank pays a woman seven dollars to take an old-fashioned polaroid snapshot of Hank, Connor, and Cole standing in front of a wall of cameras. When Hank tips her, she compliments him on what a lovely family the three of them make.

Hank knows he can’t tack the photo up on the fridge or anywhere guests might see it. Still, he’s glad he bought it. A souvenir of the week when Hank and Connor were just two dads taking care of their son.

Chapter End Notes

Ethan did a very cute picture of Connor interfacing with Cole. Please check it out!

I was pretty sorely tempted to add a scene from the next chapter to bring this fic over 200k. But no, I’d rather pretend I have integrity and preserve the flow of the chapters :’) We’ll get there soon!

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Chapter Summary

And before anyone quite knows what has happened, three years have passed.

Something is stirring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hank pulls Cole to sit down on the couch between them, Connor is struck by how much Cole has grown. If he dips into his memories, he can still see Cole when he was small enough to need help climbing up onto the couch. Toddling about the house on unsteady legs.

But now, when Cole sits down, he isn’t quite dwarfed by Hank and Connor anymore. He’s still so much smaller than them, still just a boy. But he fiddles slightly with the fingers on his right hand, and Connor thinks about the last time he adjusted Cole’s cybernetic arm and leg, letting them out ever-so-slightly. Cole’s next surgery to maintain his network of neural adaptors is scheduled for less than a year from now, and the cybernetic limbs are due to be replaced at the same time. The new prostheses can’t come soon enough. Cole seems to grow lankier by the day, all elbows and knees sticking out awkwardly, and Connor worries about what will happen if Cole outgrows his cybernetics before his surgery.

There’s something else different about him, too. Something beyond the way his body is growing. Some sort of awareness in the way he carries himself. It’s something that tells Connor that even though the days of fairy tales and make believe might not be coming to an end just yet, Cole has more on his mind than the things that occupied him when he was smaller.

Connor tries not to pay attention to the pang that goes through him at the thought. This is why they’re doing this, after all. Because Cole is growing up.

“Cole,” Hank says in that quiet tone he always uses when he wants Cole to pay serious attention, “Connor and I were talking, and we decided it would be best for us to give you one of your birthday gifts a few days early.”

Despite the sober look on his face, Cole perks up at the mention of a birthday gift. He looks at Connor.

Connor can’t help but smile fondly as he passes Cole the package he carefully wrapped earlier that morning. “Happy birthday, Cole.”

“Happy birthday,” Hank echoes as Cole unties the ribbon around the gift. “Or early birthday, anyway. You still got a couple days left of being seven.”

When Cole pulls the wrapping away and sees his gift, a small, pleased smile crosses his face. His present is a thick book with an illustration of an RT600 on the cover. The title reads *The Annotated Android*.

Cole cracks the book open, running the fingers of his left hand over the page and through a
holographic image that springs up from the glossy paper. Connor watches him leaf through the chapter on the mechanical function of common androids on to the chapter detailing the history of android development, and then to the chapter which discusses the impact androids have had on modern society.

“Now, I know this book might be a little grown-up for you,” Hank says. “But that’s the point. This isn’t the sort of book you’re gonna be done with once you’re ready to move on to harder books. We want you to learn at your own pace. As you get older, you’re gonna start to understand more and more of what this book is talking about. So don’t be discouraged if some things in this book are too hard for you right now.”

Cole glances at Hank, then turns back to the first chapter.

“Do you understand why we’re giving this to you a few days early instead of on your birthday?” Hank asks.

Cole furrows his brow softly. “…Because of all the hard stuff in the book?”

“Yes,” Connor says. “There are certain things in that book that you may need us to explain to you. Things that you might not understand on your own. And there are things in that book that might be upsetting for you to read.” Connor smooths Cole’s hair. “We wanted your birthday to be a fun, happy day. So we thought it might be a good idea to give you this book a little early so if you read something that disturbs you, it won’t ruin your birthday.”

Cole glances at Connor before looking back down at his book. Connor finds himself wishing that Cole was more confused by this warning, but instead he just nods soberly, a wrenching reminder of everything Connor isn’t able to protect him from. “…Thank you very much.”

Hank ruffles Cole’s hair, meeting Connor’s gaze. He has a resigned look in his eyes, and Connor knows that Hank is thinking the same thing that he is.

Over the course of the next few days, Cole carries the book with him seemingly everywhere, even to school and when Hank or Connor leave the house with him. Connor reads with him on and off, checking in every so often to make sure Cole is understanding what he’s reading.

It surprises Connor to learn that Cole tends to skip around to different sections of the book instead of focusing more on the sections about how androids are built and how androids function.

“Health and mortality…” Cole reads out loud at the kitchen table.

“Mortality means death,” Connor says, looking away from the curry on the stovetop to glance over his shoulder. “A book wouldn’t use those terms to talk about androids, so it’s probably referring to human health and mortality.”

“Yeah.” Connor can hear the frown in Cole’s voice. “It says there was a conspiracy theory going around once about androids causing cancer…?”

“Yes. A study published in the July 2033 edition of the American Journal of Health and Social Behavior found an increased incidence of certain cancers and heart conditions among low-income men in highly industrial American cities. The study established a correlation between the incidence of these diseases and certain stressors, such as unemployment and economic anxiety… and suggested that this was due in part to the increased presence of androids in the workforce.” Connor pauses while he stirs the curry. “A right-wing radio show misinterpreted the study and reported that simply being near androids could cause cancer, and the misinformation only spread further
from there.”

Cole furrows his brow at his book. “That’s really dumb. Wouldn’t the rich people who can buy a bunch of androids to wait on them all day be the ones getting cancer if that was true?”

“These sorts of theories aren’t driven by logic. People who dislike androids are just more inclined to believe any negative thing they hear about them, even if not all of those things make sense.”

“Why do people hate androids so much,” Cole asks, and the confusion and hurt in his voice give Connor pause.

“You know why they hate androids,” Connor says slowly, careful not to let any of his own emotion color his voice. “You’re really asking why people hate me.”

Cole’s face crumples but he doesn’t cry. He just stares down at the open pages of his book.

“Androids aren’t people,” Connor says, dipping into his mechanical neutrality. “Androids threaten their way of living. And it’s not as though that dislike can hurt androids. Most every android is an object that can’t feel pain or sadness the way you do.”

Cole is quiet for a moment before he says in a soft voice, “It’s still wrong.”

Connor looks over his shoulder again. “…People are entitled to their opinions.”

Cole doesn’t argue further after that. He just stares down at his book in a way that leaves Connor wondering if he’s reading it or trying to wrestle answers out of it.

The morning of Cole’s birthday, when Hank spots Cole putting *The Annotated Android* into his bookbag, he frowns and murmurs to Connor, “Wasn’t expecting him to carry that thing around for three days straight.”

“I thought he’d be ready to give it a break by now,” Connor replies quietly.

“We should’ve given it to him after his birthday. He’s been in a weird mood ever since we gave that to him—”

“I know.” Connor says. “But it’s fine. It’s what he’s passionate about, and we should let him have the freedom to learn and explore.”

Hank crosses his arms. “…Yeah. Maybe he’ll finally give that book a break when he gets his other presents later tonight.”

Cole does seem to be in better spirits by the time he gets home from school, and he even leaves the book in his bookbag to Connor’s relief. He talks animatedly about what he’d like to do for dinner, mentioning the baba ghanoush he ate the last time he stayed the night with Rashid’s parents. When Hank returns home, they make plans to eat at a Lebanese restaurant in Dearborn.

Connor moves to pop out his LED while Cole and Hank put their shoes on. When Cole sees Connor pull a nail file out of the console table, he cocks his head and goes to Connor’s right side to watch, his shoelaces trailing behind him.

The LED comes out easily, and Connor raises a hand to hide the patch of white chassis that’s made visible.

Cole reaches out. “Um…”
Connor looks at him and lowers his hand. Cole watches the skin reform over Connor’s temple.

“Can you retract your skin everywhere the same way you can with your hands?” Cole asks.

“Yes,” Connor says, feeling a little self-conscious under Cole’s scrutiny.

“Can I see what you look like without your skin?”

Connor’s processes stutter for a fraction of a second. It isn’t a pause long enough that a human would notice, but Connor still hears Hank go still on the other side of the room.

Cole continues, oblivious. “Because my book has a lot of pictures of what androids look like without skin, like when they go in for repairs, and I was wondering if you—”

“Cole,” Connor interrupts, injecting his voice with an artificial brightness. “I prefer to keep my skin activated at all times.”

“But I just want to see for a second. I’ve never seen an android without skin before.”

“Connor said no,” Hank says in a tone that leaves no room for argument. “Don’t bother him about it.”

Cole frowns, blinking as though he isn’t sure what line he has crossed. He looks between Connor and Hank, then moves toward the front door.

Hank meets Connor’s eyes, and Connor tries to predict what Hank is thinking at this moment. Hank is giving Connor a look of mild concern, but at the same time, there’s something hesitant behind his eyes. As though he’s holding part of himself back.

Connor knows that Hank likes to pretend that Connor is human. The entire time he’s known Connor, he has always been encouraging Connor to emulate humanity in whatever ways he can. Human emotions, human relationships, even the semblance of whatever human dignities Hank thinks Connor ought to be entitled to. All of it culminating in this charade they partake in together. What must Hank think about this reminder that underneath his skin, he’s no different from any other android?

Hank has held Connor’s hand when Connor tried to interface with him. But a hand is just a hand. Cole has an android hand of his own, and at the moment, Hank is looking at Connor as though he’s trying to imagine what Connor would look like without the nanofluid composite that keeps him looking comfortably human. And there’s concern in his eyes, but there’s something else there, too. Something that Connor is afraid to think about.

“Hank,” Connor says softly, and light a switch being flipped, Hank gives him a tired smile and the strange emotion is gone from his eyes.

“Ready to get going?” Hank asks. Connor moves to him and Hank lays an arm around his shoulders to pull him close and kiss his forehead.

“As soon as Cole ties his shoes,” Connor answers, relieved beyond measure as he tucks himself against Hank.

It’s a long drive out to Dearborn. Not unreasonably long, but definitely not the sort of drive they would take for the sake of eating out with any regularity. Hank spends the entire ride talking about all the various ways he worked up an appetite over the course of the day.
“Police work sounds as though it must be exhausting,” Connor comments at one point. “But very rewarding, too.”

“You think so? Heh, I bet you’d make a good detective. Wanna give it a try? Come help us hunt down some criminals?”

When Hank says hunt down, a surge of static clouds Connor’s consciousness for a moment before he clears it away, annoyed that the bugs in his memory are distracting him from Hank on Cole’s birthday of all days.

“That probably wouldn’t be a very good idea,” Connor says with a light smile. “I’d operate with so much skill and efficiency that I’d replace you. You’d have to stay home and Cole would end up living on frozen chicken nuggets.”

When they arrive in Dearborn, they have to park several lots down from the restaurant.

“Busy place,” Hank comments when they finally find a place to park.

From there they make their way through the early evening crowds in the street. Connor scans the faces they pass, but that isn’t the primary focus of his processing. It isn’t dark enough yet for the lamps to flicker on, and Hank’s face glows in the orange light of the fading day.

There’s a man in dirty clothes sitting on a piece of flattened cardboard on the side of the walkway up ahead, directly in Connor’s path, and Connor moves out of his way to loop his arm through Hank’s and admire how regal and handsome Hank looks even now when his face is lined and tired.

Hank and Cole. His family. They’ve been his family in the truest sense of the word for years now, and still Connor finds himself overwhelmed with his love for them every time he reflects on how lucky he is to have them both in his life.

He reaches to steer Cole away from the homeless man, and he scans the man’s face as he passes—

Richmond, Armand

Born: 02/06/2001 // Cashier (currently unemployed)

Criminal record: disorderly conduct, trespassing, loitering, aggressive panhandling

—Connor recognizes him. He used to be employed at the grocery store Connor shops at most frequently. His position was eliminated and replaced with androids and self-service machines.

And as Connor disengages his scan and his perception of time resumes, Armand’s eyes meet his. He tracks Armand’s eyes as they flicker to his temple.

“Hank,” Connor breathes, looking away and keeping his face carefully schooled.

“Hey. Hey you!” Armand’s voice rises as he stands. “Android! I’m talking to you!”

Hank stiffens, looking over his shoulder. He isn’t the only one; several other people close-by look in Armand’s direction as he begins to shout.
Connor allows himself to shoot Armand a bewildered glance as he tugs on Hank and Cole, urging them to keep moving.

“Don’t you fucking walk away from me!” Armand spits as he follows. “I know what you are, motherfucker!”

Hank falters, and Connor tugs him to keep him from turning around. He can hear Armand gaining on them, hear the crowd parting to avoid him as he moves, angry and erratic.

“The fuck are you doing!? Dressing up like a goddamn person, walking around like you got any right to be here—”

Hank tears his arm out of Connor’s grasp and whirls on Armand, advancing menacingly. “Leave us the hell alone.”

“Hank—” Connor turns. Next to him, Cole is pale and wide-eyed, and Connor tucks him to his side, shielding him with his body.

“You the one who dressed it up like this, huh?” Armand seems gaunt and frail up against someone as solid as Hank, but he doesn’t look intimidated. “Like playing dress-up with your toys, big guy?”

People are staring. Many people are hurrying along, or crossing the street to avoid the altercation, but plenty of them are slowing or have paused to watch. Connor wants to hide his face, but he can’t he has to keep scanning the crowd.

“I said get the fuck out of my face,” Hank seethes.

“That thing’s a fucking android!” Armand jerks his head oddly. He seems to be talking more to the passersby now than to Hank. “Look, it’s a fucking tincan! Just look!”

Connor clutches Cole tighter. He seems hyper-aware of every person who’s looking in their direction. He scans the people nearby over and over, and even though he has never seen any of them before, he feels as though it’s only a matter of time before one of them pipes up to say you’re right, that thing is definitely an android, just look at it—

Connor meets the gaze of a young man who looks almost upset by what he’s watching. When Connor looks at him, the man turns to Armand, approaching him cautiously with a raised palm. “Hey, man, let’s just cool it, okay? These folks aren’t androids, they got a kid with them—”

“I saw it!” Armand’s voice cracks, and he sounds nearly aggrieved through his rage. “I spent two years bagging that thing’s groceries! I know what it is!” His expression wild, Armand takes one step towards Connor, then another—

—and then Hank punches Armand in the face, sending him sprawling to the sidewalk.

Cole gives a strangled wail and tries to bury his face in Connor’s shirt, but at that moment, Hank grabs Connor and yanks him along the sidewalk the way they came, and Cole’s swallows his cry as Connor yanks him along as well. Past Armand, past the onlookers who move deftly out of Hank’s way as he barrels through the crowd.

“Hank—!” Connor can easily keep pace with Hank, but Cole is stumbling, so Connor pulls Hank’s arm to try and make him slow down. “Hank, wait a minute—”

“Yes, alright, but slow down! Cole is—”

Hank stops in his tracks, turning to look at Cole and Connor as though he’s expecting to see something horrible. But Cole’s just trembling, still clutching on to Connor’s arm, and when Hank sees that, nearly all the fire and the fury leave his face.

He begins walking again at a slower pace.

“He’s not following us?” Hank’s voice is empty.

“He’s not. His head connected with the concrete and although he isn’t likely to suffer permanent damage, he—”

Cole interrupts with a small “Oh,” and Connor stops talking.

Connor sits in the backseat with Cole during the ride home, Cole bundled in his arms as much as he can be while they’re both wearing their seatbelts. Connor scans both Hank and Cole to monitor their stress levels during the ride home. Surprisingly, Cole returns to his baseline much more quickly than Hank does. Cole eventually pulls away from Connor to look out the window with a thoughtful expression on his face. But Hank’s blood pressure and heart rate remain elevated throughout the car ride, his hands clenching and unclenching as nervous spasms wrack his body.

When Connor looks into the rearview mirror, Hank doesn’t look at him.

“Cole,” Connor says softly, “are you alright?”

Cole looks at Connor and nods absently. “Yeah. We can do whatever for dinner. I’m not really hungry anymore.”

“Hank, are you alright?”

Hank doesn’t answer.

“Hank.”

He jerks slightly in his seat, his eyes flickering to the rearview mirror and away again just as quickly. “Yeah. Yeah.”

Hank isn’t looking at him. Why isn’t Hank looking at him?

_I know what you are, motherfucker!_ Connor doesn’t wince as he recalls Armand’s shouts and the way everyone on the street stared, but if he were human, he probably would have.

No. Actually, no, that’s not true. If Connor were human, Armand would have never given him a second glance.

Is that why Hank can’t look at him now? Because he’s afraid of the truth of what Armand shouted at them, afraid of the danger he exposed them to?

Connor spends the rest of the car ride home staring into the rearview mirror, silently begging Hank to look at him. He never does.

When they arrive home, Cole says, “Is it okay if we do cake and presents tomorrow instead? I feel kind of…”

Connor is about to ask if he’s sure, but Hank answers with, “Sure, kid. Go lay down and try to rest
for a bit, okay? Everything’s fine now.”

Cole grabs his bookbag as he heads down the hall, and Connor knows that Cole isn’t going to try and take a nap. He’s going to read.

“Hank,” Connor says uncertainly. “About what happened in Dearborn, that man was a—”

“I don’t—” Hank interrupts, then stops himself. “It doesn’t matter. Everyone thought he was crazy.”

“We were lucky they did. We need to talk about what happened. He recognized me, and we just—”

“What we did was the right thing,” Hank says firmly. “I’m not going to apologize for hitting someone who threatened my family.”

“I’m not saying you should apologize. But Hank, if anything like this happens again—”

“Later,” Hank says, turning away. “We’ll talk about this later. For now, I just want to… I just want to forget it happened.”

“Hank, would you look at me?”

Hank stops. He turns back toward Connor.

As Hank’s eyes land on him, Connor deactivates all his skin.

Hank’s eyes widen. Connor can track all the minute ways his body reacts to the sight of Connor’s bare chassis. The way his pupils shrink, the way his head jerks back and his shoulders tense. Whatever emotion that was in his eyes before vanishes, replaced by shock and bewilderment.

“This isn’t something I can walk away from,” Connor says. “This isn’t something I can forget about, no matter how much I might like to pretend otherwise. This is what I am.”

Connor gestures at himself vaguely. “That man saw me. That man knew me. Everything he was saying was true and if anyone called the police on him because of what he did when he saw me pretending to be human—”

Connor trails off, unsure. He can’t bring himself to feel bad for any misfortune that might have befallen the man who advanced on him while he had Cole in his arms, but something inside him is insisting that he was still in the wrong somehow. It was wrong to let the crowd assume he was crazy when he was absolutely correct, or it was wrong to even step outside the house dressed as a human in the first place.

“I know you want me to be human,” Connor says. “I’m sorry.”

“Connor, I don’t want—”

“You’ve always encouraged me to emulate humanity in whatever ways I can,” Connor says softly. “I understand why. Humans are so much more than even the most advanced machine could possibly be.”

Hank just keeps staring at him. The corners of his mouth are turned down and he blinks, his eyes focusing as though he’s chasing some thread of thought.

“But this is what I am and I need to stop lying to myself.”
Hank’s face hardens and he takes two great strides toward Connor—
—and he grabs Connor and kisses him fiercely.

Connor doesn’t move. He can feel the tension still gripping Hank’s body, the way the muscles of the hand that cupping the back of Connor’s head twitch ever-so-slightly as though it’s unsure of what it’s touching.

In some ways, this encounter is very reminiscent of their first kiss. The energy and the tension in Hank’s body. The way Connor just stands there, letting it happen. It’s so very different from the dozens of soft or passionate kisses they’ve shared together over the years.

When Hank pulls away, there’s something almost akin to anger on his face.

“This is strange to you,” Connor says.

Hank’s frown deepens. “…Yeah. It is. But Connor, I’m… God. I’m only human and this is… it’s new. And seeing all this bare chassis, it…” He pauses to huff a sigh. “…It makes me think back to when you were broken.”

“Oh.” Connor begins to reactivate his skin. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Wait, stop. Turn it back off.” Hank looks directly into Connor’s eyes. “Look, Connor… there’s a lot we need to unpack about everything you just said. But right now, I need you to know you were right about part of it. This is who you are. And I need to… I need to fucking adjust to this.”

Connor blinks, then lets his skin disengage again.

A small, hesitant smile crosses Hank’s face. “You look different without hair.”

Connor feels as though it would be appropriate to smile, so he does.

Hank brings up a hand to cup Connor’s face. The muscles there are still jittering in a nervous, almost imperceptible way, but some of the tension has ebbed out of his body. “But not… not too different. Still got that dimple in your chin.”

“Hank, you don’t have to—”

“Yes. Yes, I do. You wanted me to see you, and I… I see you.” His eyes soften. “I love you, Connor. You’re the man I love, and this… this is part of who you are. I don’t want you to ever be ashamed of any part of yourself.”

Hank’s thumb strokes the silicone shell of Connor’s ear. The drag of flesh against his chassis is different from what Connor is used to.

“You’re not human. You’re something incredible. There are probably aspects to you that I can’t even begin to conceive of. But every single part of you, from the strange to the incomprehensible, makes you the person you are. The person that I love.”

Hank pulls Connor into his arms, tucking his head under his chin. Connor can feel Hank’s body loosen in increments, and when Connor reaches up to wrap his arms around Hank’s neck, he can feel a soft, amused breath puff against the side of his head.

Hank’s reaction was entirely appropriate, Connor thinks. Connor feels so vulnerable and strangely naked despite how he’s still fully dressed, exposed in a way he’s never been exposed before. He’s
aware of the thrum of thium that passes through the valves just under his chassis, and he feels… he’s nervous. He’s still nervous even now that Hank is holding him in his arms, embracing him wholeheartedly with no reservations. And if Connor is nervous, then Hank must feel… he can’t imagine what Hank must be feeling. Humans can never escape the unconscious biases and instincts that are part and parcel of being an organic creature, shaped by thousands of years’ worth of evolution. And Hank is fighting through all of that. For Connor.

Connor tightens his hug by increments. He wants to activate his skin again, but he doesn’t. For Hank’s sake. Instead, he kisses Hank’s neck and enjoys Hank’s pleased hum before pulling away.

“I think I should stop leaving the house disguised as a human,” Connor says softly.

The soft smile instantly drops from Hank’s face. “Connor, no. That isn’t necessary.”

“I think it might be. We were lucky that the person who recognized me was part of a marginalized class and that led onlookers into falsely believing that he was either high or mentally ill. The next time someone recognizes me, they might not be a homeless ex-cashier. They might be one of our neighbors.”

Hank furrows his brow, thinking.

“…Or they might be employed by Cyberlife.”

A troubled frown crosses Hank’s face. But Connor can still see a challenging, almost hurt look behind Hank’s eyes. “So, what’s that? You’re never gonna come out to dinner to celebrate Cole’s birthday ever again? Not going to attend his elementary school graduation?”

“I wouldn’t be able to do that anyway.” Connor gives Hank a pointed look. “Cole’s teachers know what I am.”

Hank winces. “Connor—”

“Do you think I don’t know what I’m giving up? Do you think this is something I want to do?”

“Jesus, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“This is the only way I can keep myself safe,” Connor continues. He feels compelled to say it. “It’s the only way I can keep my family safe. Cole was right there, right in my arms, and he came at us as though he intended to—”

“I know,” Hank interrupts, pulling Connor against him again. “I know.”

Hank’s hand brushes the top of Connor’s head—probably an unthinking act on Hank’s part, as Connor doesn’t have hair for his fingers to card through. But the way Hank’s fingers lightly trail across his bare chassis is such a lovely feeling—his tactile sensors almost seem to flicker from the delicate, almost unfamiliar sensation. Connor clutches Hank’s shirt to encourage him to keep touching him like this.

“Just… what are we going to tell Cole? Christ, he’s going to be so fucking disappointed.”

Connor imagines what Cole might be doing at this very moment. Sitting in bed with the lights off, the holographic images in *The Annotated Android* lighting up the pages enough for Cole to keep reading. Searching for an explanation for a question he’s had answered over and over. Familiarizing himself with whatever variables and nuance he’s capable of understanding at this age.
Connor closes his eyes. “I think he’s going to understand.”

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Hank opens the front door, hoping Connor is out of the house for now. Out at the store, or with Cole at the library. He’s knows it’s probably futile to hope for that as Connor makes it a point of pride to be there as often as possible to greet Hank when he comes home. Any second now, he’ll probably hear Connor say—

“Welcome home, Hank,” Connor calls from the kitchen.

Hank shuts the door as gingerly as he can. He can hear Connor bustling about in the kitchen, he can smell meat sauce simmering in a saucepan and garlic bread baking in the oven. Connor doesn’t call for Hank to come talk to him; Hank could accept this as a temporary reprieve.

He doesn’t. He heads into the kitchen and finds Connor about to begin boiling spaghetti.

Connor smiles lightly without looking up. “Come to help me? You can go ahead and set the table if you’d like. And I’d appreciate it if you could tell Cole to wrap up whatever he’s doing so he’ll be ready to come to the table.”

“Connor,” Hank says, and the word has a soft bleating quality that has Connor looking up, the smile gone from his face.

“What is it?” Instantly serious, Connor goes to pull out a chair for Hank, but Hank waves him off, stepping closer.

“Connor, I… uh. You remember that CT scan I had on Friday?”

“The one your doctor ordered because of that cough that wouldn’t go away… until the day after you scheduled the scan.” Connor cocks his head, staring at Hank as though he’s analyzing him. “You heard back from the doctor today.”

“Yeah.”

“They found something,” Connor says quietly.

“Yeah. It’s not—” Hank hurries to say, “—not big. She called it a lung nodule, said it might not be anything to worry about.”

“But it also might be.” Connor blinks slowly. “May I log into your healthcare portal so I can view the study results?”

Hank nods and watches Connor’s LED blink yellow for an instant.

“You’ve already scheduled a biopsy,” Connor says. “Good.”

“I was told that most of these—these masses aren’t cancerous,” Hank says, and falters a moment, his heart inexplicably skipping a beat as he says the word cancerous. He scowls and shakes his head, trying to push down the tiny ebb of anxiety. “Might be scar tissue from a respiratory infection. Or the doctor said people sometimes get these little benign things just from living in a city. Bad air and all. But she wanted a biopsy anyway because of my smoking history.”

“And because of your age. Your smoking history and your age put you at a heightened risk of lung cancer.” There’s a beat before Connor says, “In retrospect, your doctor probably ordered that CT
The scowl sits heavy on Hank’s face, and he finds he’s having trouble looking Connor in the eyes at the moment. This wasn’t supposed to be the deal, he quit smoking over a decade ago to avoid these kinds of situations. He thought he’d had an unspoken understanding with the universe that this sort of thing wasn’t going to happen to him now. At least not while Cole’s still so young.

“Hank, why don’t you go sit down for a bit?” Connor turns away, moving for the cupboard where the dishes are kept. “Dinner will be ready soon. Never mind setting the table, I can do that.”

Hank follows, putting a hand on Connor’s arm. “Connor, no, it’s fine. You asked me to set the table, I can set the ta—”

He’s interrupted when Connor whirls around, grabbing Hank and pulling their faces together. Connor doesn’t kiss him, he only presses his forehead to Hank’s with a strength that’s so inescapable, it’s almost uncomfortable.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hank can see Connor’s LED pulse red once before cycling to yellow.

“Let me do this,” Connor whispers.

Hank can only nod. He’s struck by the thought that even if he wanted to push Connor about this, he probably wouldn’t be able to. He feels very aware of how fragile his body is, how imperfect and untrustworthy it is.

Connor lets go of him and turns back towards the cupboards. Hank goes to sit down and hopes it’ll help Connor feel better at all.

There’s an odd atmosphere during dinner that night. Hank and Connor are both working under an unspoken agreement not to tell Cole anything about Hank’s results just yet, so conversation revolves around such ordinary topics as Cole’s day at school, or what Gavin Reed got nearly written up for today. And Connor stays blue the entire time they’re all at the table, but still, there’s an electric tension in the air. Hank is aware of Connor watching him in a way that feels somehow heavier than Connor’s gaze usually is. Whenever their eyes meet, Connor gives him a small smile, and Hank has to swallow back his nausea at this phony placidity.

They don’t talk again until after Cole has gone to bed. Hank watches Connor pace around the house, doing whatever minor tasks he can carry out to occupy himself. At one point, after 20 minutes after Cole’s bedtime, Connor pokes his head into Cole’s room and says, “Cole, I know what you’re doing in there. Put your laptop away and go to sleep.”

Hank knows that Cole must be finally asleep for real when Connor beckons him into the kitchen with a serious look.

“Connor,” Hank says as gently as he can, “I really don’t think this is anything we need to talk about right now. The biopsy could be totally clean. And if it isn’t, you know I’d do whatever the doctors tell me to do. What do we have to talk about now?”

Connor gives him a careful look. “Hank, when was the last time you updated your will?”

“Jesus Christ. I just said the biopsy could be clean! I’m not about to start acting like I’m dying just because a test came back a little—”

“I know it might be clean,” Connor snaps. “Even if you have cancer, how do you know that’s what’s going to kill you?” His eyes burn as he stares at Hank. “That car crash nearly killed all of us,
and it came out of nowhere. If you had died then, what would have happened?”

“What would have happened? What the hell do you mean; I would have been dead, what else do you—”

“I mean what would have happened to Cole!?” Connor’s face is stark. “What does your will say about that? Who gets guardianship of Cole in the event of your death?”

Hank blinks. “…I, uh. I haven’t updated my will since before Cole was born. It doesn’t say anything about…”

Connor keeps staring at him, his expression grave and terrible.

Hank lets out a breath as he follows that train of thought. “Holy shit. Custody would go to Joanna.”

“If they can find her,” Connor says. “If you don’t want that to happen, you need to take steps to ensure that it doesn’t. Who would you want to be Cole’s guardian?”

“You.” The word slips out before Hank can help himself.

Connor keeps staring at Hank. “That isn’t an option. Just because I’m legally allowed to babysit Cole for a matter of days—”

“Babysit—you’re his—” Hank clamps his mouth shut and puts his head in his hands. The terrible truth that he’s only just now realizing has him trembling. Connor doesn’t have any legal rights. Connor isn’t a person, he’s a piece of property. He has no rights to Cole at all and no way to gain those rights. It isn’t even legal for Hank to leave Cole alone with Connor for longer than a week or so. Connor is perfectly capable of caring for Cole, but because he isn’t considered to be a person, leaving Cole with him for too long would be child endangerment on Hank’s part.

“You don’t necessarily need to decide now,” Connor says, his voice a touch quieter, “but you should begin thinking about who you think would be the most appropriate guardian for Cole if you were unable to care for him.”

Connor’s gaze has softened, and Hank wonders if that’s because Connor knows what an impossible task that is. Not just because he can’t begin to imagine anyone replacing not just himself, but Connor too, but because there are barely any options. Connor knows that both of Hank’s parents are long dead (his mother of breast cancer when Hank was 26, his father of an aneurysm just three years later). There’s a senile old aunt who’s pushing 90, and the last time Hank spoke to her daughter, his only cousin, was when the woman decided she’d rather go to prison than rehab.

Who else, then? A friend, like Jeffrey Fowler or Ben Collins? The godmother Joanna chose when Cole was born who dropped out of their lives less than six months later?

(It’s then that Hank realizes that he’s purposefully been keeping people at a distance. To protect Connor and all of Connor’s secrets, but it’s more than that, too. Has he been happy to go through life with so few friends? Or has he just been so afraid of having people leave him that he stopped letting them in altogether?)

“Connor,” Hank croaks, “what would happen to you?”

Connor lowers his eyes. “I’d go to whoever you willed me to.”

The resignation in Connor’s voice makes Hank’s throat feel as though it’s swelling shut. The
thought of Connor forcing himself to become a thing again—

“I’d want you to take Cole and run,” Hank chokes out. “Just… as soon as my fucking body gets cold. Take him as far away as you can, somewhere no one will ever find you.”

Connor meets Hank’s gaze, and Hank can see the pain behind his eyes. “I’ve thought about that. I’ve imagined over a million ways it could happen. But Hank, if Cole just vanished, the FBI would get involved in the search for him. And I have no documentation and no history. How could I provide for us? How could I give him the life he deserves?”

“He wouldn’t get the life he deserves in foster care either, which is what would probably happen to him otherwise. I just—Jesus Christ.” Hank puts his face in his hands again, suddenly overwhelmed by the bleakness of the discussion.

“I would give anything to be able to raise Cole the way you’d want him to be raised,” Connor says. “Or even just to stay by his side. You know I would, Hank. My reservations aren’t because I wouldn’t want that.”

Hank just keeps his face in his hands. He can’t seem to find the strength of will to even raise his head.

“We’d have to spend our lives on the road. Always running, always looking over our shoulders. We’d be homeless more often than not. Cole would languish in an environment like that, his potential would go to waste. I know you don’t want anyone else to be named Cole’s guardian but—”

“Your reservations are because you’re an android,” Hank says. “You feel like you can’t go against the law.”

“What would I do when Cole’s ready for college!?” Connor’s voice is tight and indignant. “Assuming the FBI doesn’t find us before then, I don’t think FAFSA has a category on the form for students who are legally missing persons!”

Hank keeps his head down, his eyes shut. His disappointment hangs like a weight around his neck.

There’s a long silence. Hank can feel Connor’s eyes on him, but he doesn’t want to lift his head to look at him. He’s too exhausted, too worn down by the terrible possibility of what might be laying ahead of them.

Eventually, Connor makes a small, toneless noise and pulls Hank’s hand into his. He says in a small, fragile voice, “I don’t want to lose you, Hank.”

Hank swallows thickly and squeezes Connor’s hand.

The discussion peters out from there. Every time Hank starts thinking about how Connor wouldn’t be able to raise Cole on his own if Hank wasn’t there—

There have been injustices against Connor (against his family) that have filled Hank with rage or anguish, but this is the first one which knocks the breath out of Hank’s chest like a gut-punch. This is the first one that smothers him with a feeling of insurmountable despair.

Cole in foster care, Connor consigned to the ownership of someone who might put him in storage, or throw him away, or send him back to Cyberlife. The both of them perhaps separated from each other forever. The thought of it makes Hank want to take both Connor and Cole and run away. He doesn’t know where they could go that would allow them to escape such an unthinkable fate.
should anything happen to Hank, but the urge still sits low in his chest. The drive to do something, anything at all to protect his family is so strong, it’s nearly an ache he can feel in the core of his being with every beat of his heart.

When Hank and Connor go to bed, they hold each other tightly though the night. Hank sleeps poorly, breaking out in fits of shivers despite the warmth of Connor next to him and the blankets he wraps around himself.

They come back to the discussion several times over the following days. Eventually, Hank and Connor come to an agreement that in the event of Hank’s death, Connor will be willed to Carl Manfred, who will also be named as the preferred guardian for Cole.

It isn’t a perfect plan, they both know it. Carl is an old man and his health is more delicate than even Hank’s. But Carl would keep Cole and Connor together, and he has the money to ensure Cole will be comfortable. Hank can’t bring himself to think about the possibility Cole might wind up in Carl’s care only for Carl to die before Cole turns eighteen.

Connor comes to Hank’s biopsy with him, ostensibly for the purpose of driving him home as his sedation wears off. When the procedure is over, Hank manages to clumsily ask for Connor to be brought into the recovery room. As soon as Connor is next to him, Hank clutches Connor’s hand and presses his face into Connor. The android nurse who is monitoring Hank’s condition doesn’t react to this, but Connor still keeps his affect pleasant and distance.

The next day, Hank gets a call from his pulmonologist telling him that the biopsy showed that the nodule is benign.

Connor hugs Hank tightly when he hears the news, as tightly as he clearly wanted to hold Hank the day before at the surgery center. He has a smile stretching his mouth and he bunches Hank’s shirt in his hands as Hank peppers his face with gentle kisses.

One catastrophe avoided.

Hank makes an appointment with an estate planning attorney. December has frozen the world, and every time Hank steps outside and smells ice in the air, there’s a split-second where he can almost smell blood and oil too.

***

Connor would prefer to have Hank on his back while he fucks him. He wants to see Hank’s face contorted with pleasure, see the way his soft pecs bounce as Connor thrusts into him. But Hank isn’t as flexible as he would have been in his youth. The thought of the things Hank must have been capable of in his prime is almost enough to make Connor wish he had been created decades ago, even if it would have meant existing as a far more limited machine.

So instead, Connor fucks Hank from behind. Hank spread out across the couch, his ass in the air. His arms seem to have given out on him, and his face nearly pushes into the cushions with every soft, high grunt that escapes him.

Connor slows his pace, thrusting as deeply as he can one final time. Then he eases out to adjust the strap-on he’s wearing. Hank groans as the dildo pulls out of him.

“Wha… whaddya doing?” His thighs and hips jerk as though he’s fighting the urge to drop and rut against a pillow. “Connor…!”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to leave you like this,” Connor murmurs, pushing his hands across
Hank’s ass and up his hips to his love handles. “Do you know what I see when I look at you, Hank? Your body is so thick and powerful.” He rubs a patch of dry skin with his thumb. “Every part of you moves me.”

“Connor… Connor, c’mon—Ah!”

Hank lets out a ragged gasp as Connor strokes once along the underside of Hank’s dick. It’s heavy and hard in Connor’s hand, and although he can’t see it, he knows it must be flushed and dark. If Hank were on his back, Connor would lean down to kiss it and taste the moisture accumulating at the tip.

Instead, Connor lowers himself so his face is in Hank’s ass. He angles himself to mouth at Hank’s balls—and Hank shudders and curses as Connor sucks, his tongue dragging along the textured skin.

Connor licks up Hank’s taint, tasting the glycerin of the lubrication that’s dripped down. Hank’s hole is still loose and wet, the puckered rim twitching as Connor approaches it. Connor rests his face gently against Hank’s cheek, looking at the hole and recreating in his mind how it stretched to swallow the width of the dildo. Connor takes a few fractions of a second to preconstruct what else Hank’s asshole might be capable of, given enough lube and preparation. How wide could Hank stretch? The possibilities boggle Connor and fill him with a familiar sense of wonder. Hank is so incredible.

“Quit teasing me,” Hank growls from between clenched teeth. “If you don’t fucking do something, I’m gonna—”

Connor blows a breath across Hank’s hole, watching it flutter while Hank squirms and dissolves into curses again. Then Connor leans in and probes his tongue into Hank’s ass, pushing in as far as he can go. Tasting to see how much lubrication he needs to reapply.

He can hear Hank panting, and for a brief moment, he wishes it was physiologically possible to keep Hank hanging in this state of arousal and pleasure forever.

Connor’s face around his mouth is wet when he pulls back. Hank is slick, but he needs more to maintain optimal comfort. Connor reapplies more lubrication to Hank’s hole and works more up and down the dildo—then presses the head of his dildo to Hank’s hole, rubbing it around the slippery skin instead of pressing in.

Hank snarls and pushes himself back, his breath stuttering as he’s filled to the hilt. Connor thrusts—and Hank moans as he falls forward, Connor’s firm grasp on his hips the only thing stopping him from melting into the couch entirely.

Connor keeps to a mechanical rhythm. Solid and even, not too fast and not too slow, but deep and penetrating enough that it keeps Hank making heavenly noises. Connor wants to wring each of those vocalizations out of him bit by bit until he’s all but incoherent. He wonders if Hank will ask him to touch his dick first or whether he’ll want Connor to pound him faster and faster? A machine like Connor doesn’t have to sacrifice his perfect control, he’ll never fuck Hank sloppily unless Hank begs for it. He’ll just fuck Hank faster and faster, every stroke perfect and deep until Hank is screaming for him—

A car slows down in front of their house. Connor freezes.

“Connor!” Hank’s voice breaks as he cries out in frustration. “For fuck’s sake, quit messing around —”
“Laverne’s car is pulling into the driveway right now,” Connor says as he jerks out of Hank.

“Huh? Laverne!?” Hank pushes himself up so quickly, Connor can hear his shoulders cracking. “She wasn’t supposed to bring Cole back for another three hours!”

“I know!” Connor yanks the strap-on off and hurries over to where he dropped his clothes. “I know. You need to go hide in the bedroom; I’ll deal with Laverne and Cole.”

“Connor—”

“Hurry up! They’re getting out of the car now!”

“Connor! My fucking legs are asleep, I can’t fucking move!”

Connor yanks up his pants as he hops over to Hank and hauls him to his feet.

“Ow! Jesus!”

“Will you be quiet?” Connor hisses, grabbing the towel Hank was kneeling over and shoving it between Hank’s legs to prevent him from dripping lube on the carpet. He pulls Hank’s arm over his shoulders and leads him, stumbling, down the hallway.

“Oh, god,” Hank moans. “Oh my god. We’re both covered with sweat and God knows what else, the whole living room probably smells like sex—”

“It’ll be fine.” Connor deposits Hank onto the bed as gently as he can under the circumstances. “Just stay here until Laverne is gone, clean yourself up, and calm down before you come out.”

The doorbell rings. Connor finishes tucking his shirt into his pants as he begins out of the room—

“Connor, your whole face is covered with lube!”

—and Connor had been intending to make a brief pitstop in the bathroom to wipe his face with a towel, but just because he’s annoyed that Hank thinks he needs the reminder, he wipes his face on the comforter instead.

Hank makes a noise of disgust and wrinkles his face.

“I’ll wash it,” Connor snaps as he leaves the room.

He opens the front door to see Ms. Washington and Cole standing there, just as he expected. Connor engages his scan to see if he can discern the reason why they came back hours earlier than they were supposed to and finds that the skin on Cole’s cybernetic leg is deactivated and that Cole’s stress level is elevated.


“I can only assume so,” Ms. Washington answers. “He started limping all of a sudden, complaining that his leg wasn’t working the way it’s supposed to.”

Ms. Washington tries to herd Cole into the house, but Connor blocks her from entering in a way he hopes is subtle. “Oh, I’m sorry, Ms. Washington. I’m afraid Lieutenant Anderson is ill today. I wouldn’t want you to catch what he has.”

Ms. Washington squints. “So you let Cole leave the house potentially carrying something
Communicable?"

"Lieutenant Anderson only starting showing symptoms about an hour ago. And I can pinpoint the moment at which the Lieutenant was exposed. I’m confident Cole isn’t carrying the Lieutenant’s illness."

Ms. Washington fixes him with a flat look. "You can pinpoint the moment Anderson was exposed."

Connor is grateful he isn’t capable of sweating. "Yes."

Ms. Washington stares at Connor a moment longer before rolling her eyes. "That man works you too hard. Look at yourself; your clothes are all wrinkled."

"I… apologize for my disheveled appearance."


With one last thank you, Connor shuts the door. When Cole lifts his leg to tug off his shoe, his cybernetic seems stiff and he winces slightly, wobbling on his real foot.

"Does it hurt?" Connor asks as he leads Cole past the couch and into the kitchen.

"In spurts," Cole replies as he sits down at the table. "Otherwise it gets all numb."

Just as a formality, Connor rolls Cole’s pant leg up and presses his hand to the bare white chassis. There’s only a brief sputter of data before the connection fails.

"Yeah, I thought so," Cole says glumly.

"It’s fine. We’ll adjust your leg a little and see if that helps with the connectivity."

"What if it doesn’t? You said last time you weren’t sure if it could be let out any more, and if it’s a problem with my adaptors, my surgery’s still months away."

Connor gives Cole an encouraging smile. "Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. Don’t forget you’re getting new cybernetics with your surgery, so the problem will be fixed no matter what. How’s your arm working?"

Cole squeezes and opens his fist.

"Hang on." Connor goes to get Cole’s forearm crutches, and he has to readjust them because of how rarely Cole uses them. If only Cole’s prostheses were as easy to fit to his growing body as his crutches, Connor thinks.

By the time Connor gets back, Cole has already removed his leg and the sleeve he wears under his prosthetic. As Connor hands him his crutches, he says, "Can I adjust it on my own this time?"

"You adjusted it on your own the last time we had to let one of your cybernetics out."

"You were watching me! You know I can do it without you, I could probably disassemble it in my sleep if I wanted to."

Cole’s probably right about that, too. Adjusting a cybernetic prosthethic is far, far more complicated than adjusting a cane or a crutch, but Connor is hard pressed to think of many adults who are as
qualified as Cole to fiddle with android technology without professional guidance, let alone any child close to Cole’s age.

And not to mention, Hank is still holed up in his bedroom. Which probably means he’s still not presentable...

“Alright,” Connor says. “But do it in the garage; your father wouldn’t want to walk in on you taking your leg apart without warning,” he hastens to add as Cole tucks his leg under his arm and hops up on his crutches.

“Okay, I’ll be careful!”

“Yell if you need help.”

“I won’t!”

Cole disappears into the garage, and Connor dismisses all the prompts his social protocol suggests he shout after Cole. Remember to keep your work area clean, or Watch your fingers! There are a million different reminders he could chase after Cole with, and if he were to follow him and list off every one, he wouldn’t even be halfway done by the time Cole finishes with his leg. Sometimes children just need to be left to succeed or to fail on their own power. And if he does make an irreparable mistake, then the worst thing that will happen is that Cole will be stuck using his crutches until his surgery, which may be what happens anyway.

As Connor heads back to the bedroom he shares with Hank, he wonders if it makes him a bad parent for letting Cole tamper with an expensive piece of technology without supervision so Connor can have a moment alone with Hank. But if his understanding of humanity is accurate, it doesn’t make him a bad parent. It just makes him like an average parent.

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In early February of 2038, a Harbortown resident by the name of Stuart Richter files a report with the DPD claiming that his personal android, an AX700 model, has been hacked and stolen. According to Mr. Richter, the android abruptly stopped listening to his demands and walked out of his home without his permission.

The police fish the android out of the Detroit River less than half a mile away from the Cyberlife Tower on Belle Isle. The android shows no sign of having been remotely tampered with. If Stuart Richter’s account of the events is accurate, then the android appears to have walked into the river of its own volition, where it sustained irreparable damage due to prolonged exposure to the frigid water.

In May, the DPD receives a missive from Cyberlife requesting their cooperation in an internal investigation of abnormal android activity. Stuart Richter, along with various other android owners in the Detroit metropolitan area, have reported their androids’ disappearances to Cyberlife. The DPD compiles the relevant police reports and forwards the information to Cyberlife.

Hank, far removed from any aspect of these cases, doesn’t learn about the rash of missing androids in Detroit or the DPD’s collaboration with Cyberlife until June.

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Kamski says, “Once upon a time, there was a kingdom ruled by a tyrannical king.”

Hank crosses his arms, and even though Connor is busy referencing a full-body projection of Cole
he created the last time he scanned him, he still notices Hank’s body language and hopes Hank doesn’t interrupt. Kamski is being kind enough to give them Cole’s new cybernetics free of charge, and it seems as though all they have to do is suffer his company while Connor helps him adjust the cybernetics to Cole’s proportions. Hank really has no reason to complain yet.

“Widen the circumference of the arm socket by seven millimeters all around,” Connor says.

Kamski adjusts the cybernetic prosthesis he’s holding without looking up. “And this tyrant wasn’t just cruel, he was also insane. He had nearly incomprehensible ideas about just about everything you could imagine.”

“Sounds familiar,” Hank mutters so quietly that Connor’s sure an ordinary human couldn’t have overheard him.

“His concept of justice was particularly infamous throughout the neighboring lands, for he turned it into a spectacle the likes of which had never been seen before. The dictator was convinced that guilt of any crime severe enough to catch his attention ought to be punishable by death. And he was also convinced he had a foolproof was to sort the innocent from the guilty. He built an arena that could fit an entire city within its walls. People would come from far and wide to watch these trials. But they wouldn’t be trials of combat. They would be trials of choice; of chance.”

“The radius of the wrist should be three millimeters smaller at the narrowest point,” Connor says quietly.

Kamski continues his story as he works. “The accused would be faces with two identical doors. And he would have to select one. If the accused were to open one door, a ferocious tiger would leap out from within and tear him apart in an instant. The king would declare that surely his guilty conscious had led him to make the wrong choice. But if the accused were to select the other door, a lady would emerge. A beautiful maiden who had been hand-selected to be a suitable bride for him. And following the maiden would be a priest and a merry band and a group of children to skip around the arena scattering flower petals, and instead of being witness to a brutal killing, the arena would witness a glorious wedding. And the king would declare that such a blessing could only be endowed on the truly innocent.”

Kamski smiles thinly. “It didn’t matter whether the accused was really guilty or innocent, of course. The truly guilty were married as often as they were devoured. And it didn’t matter whether the accused had a wife or a family before coming into the arena. If they chose the door with the lady, they were married no matter what they or anyone else had to say about it. That was this king’s idea of perfect justice.”

Kamski looks up from the prosthesis. “It really is a fair concept, when you think about it. Much fairer that our pitiful system where the sort of representation you get depends on how much money you have and your punishment is influenced by the color of your skin. After all, everyone’s equally likely to choose the wrong door and tigers don’t tend to discriminate.”

Hank glowers.

Kamski turns his attention back to the prosthesis. “This system worked well. Until one day, the king caught a young man in flagrante delicto with his daughter, the princess. You can imagine the scandal.

“Of course the young man was arrested and scheduled for his turn in the arena. This young man was the princess’ true love, so she was understandably distraught.”
Connor and Hank glance at each other. Connor can’t help but feel as though he would be a bit more than distraught if Hank were about to be torn apart by a tiger.

“As a member of the royal court, the princess knew which door hid the tiger and which door held the lady. And not only was the chosen lady a maiden that the princess knew very well, she was a maiden the princess despised. A girl who was beautiful of face, but had a deceitful heart. The princess suspected that her lover might also love this girl, though whether that’s true or not, who can say?

“In any case, the day of the trial arrived. The princess’ lover stepped out into the arena, and he looked up at her, knowing that she knew which fate lay behind which door.”

“Shorten the index and middle finger by four millimeters and six millimeters respectively,” Connor says, listening intently.

Kamski obliges. “Now, the princess had spent the entirety of the previous night agonizing over her decision. Being torn to shreds by a tiger is horrible, but these tigers did their work in an instant. It would be over before the boy knew what hit him. The princess would weep at the sight of so much blood, but that might be easier than weeping at the sight of her beloved happily married to another, the entire kingdom celebrating her heartbreak.”

Hank’s eyes narrow. Connor imagines that Hank probably has some strong feelings about which choice would be the obvious one and doesn’t appreciate hearing the two compared as though they’re equally valid.

“She tossed and turned, consumed with the difficulty of the choice before her. Should she lose her love to death, or lose her love to love? Eventually she made her decision, and when her lover looked to her for guidance on which door to pick, she silently indicated the door on the right.

“Trusting in her decision, the boy went to the door and opened it.”

Kamski goes quiet. He squints at the knuckle he’s adjusting.

Hank opens his mouth to say something, but before he can get more than a hiss of the first syllable out, Kamski interrupts. “Now, what’s the moral of this story?”

“The moral?” Hank asks. “There isn’t a fucking moral. It’s a thought experiment about human nature, not an Aesop’s fable. We’re supposed to decide which option we think she chose, and that means some bullshit about how much faith we have in—” Hank suddenly clamps his mouth shut, looking away with a scowl.

Kamski smirks. “Interesting that you would choose to interpret the story that way.” He’s looking closely at the prosthesis, and he might not see the slight red tinge that color’s Hank’s face. “But no. There is a moral. The moral is that the princess was an idiot.”

Hank squints. Connor cocks his head, waiting for the explanation.

Kamski looks up to give them both an unamused look. “She was a princess. Perhaps the second most powerful person in the kingdom after her father. She had options. She could have indicated the door with the lady behind it and then arranged to have her lover’s new wife assassinated shortly after the wedding. She could have bribed enough people to arrange that she would be the lady behind the door with someone else on hand to indicate to her lover which choice to make. She could have staged a coup and beheaded her father and burned the arena to the ground.

“But she didn’t. Because she’s an idiot. And that’s the moral of the story.” A slow smile crosses
Kamski’s face. “There is always a third option.”

Kamski stands up. “We’re finished here for today. I’ll be in contact when it’s time for the child’s next surgery.”

Hank bursts out with, “Is this seriously all you want? To stand here and just talk at us?”

Kamski raises a brow.

Hank says, “Because there was a guy who said all he wanted to do was look at Connor, talk to Connor privately, and it turned out he was a sick fuck who couldn’t be trusted.”

“That’s fascinating. What did he do to Connor?”

Hank falters, his mouth hanging open.

Connor says, “He didn’t actually manage to do anything to me. If he had any malicious intentions, he never got around to them before Hank pulled me away from him.”

Kamski smirks. “Well. Let’s always hope Hank is around, then.”

Hank comes up from behind Connor and puts a hand on his shoulder.

Kamski waves a hand vaguely. “In any case, am I to understand that you’re asking me for more? I should tell you that if you want anything else out of me, be it an explanation or a service, you’ll have to pay much more than what you’re already paying.”

Connor can feel Hank stiffen.

“Is that a no?” Kamski’s bun bobs slightly as he flicks his head. “Then I suppose we don’t have any more business here. Chloe, would you please show our guests to the door?”

A single Chloe appears to hand Connor the Cybernetics and lead them out, so Kamski must be amused rather than offended by Hank’s defensiveness. Connor gives Kamski a polite nod as he passes him.

Kamski doesn’t look at him.

As soon as Chloe shuts the door behind them, Hank scowls and kicks at the ground. “Still fucking hate that guy.”

“We’re done with him for a few more years,” Connor says, brushing Hank’s arm to get him moving. “Don’t dwell on it.”

As Hank drives them away from the villa, Connor has the bizarre urge to turn around in his seat to look at it one last time. He has the feeling that if he were to do so, he’d be sure to catch view of Kamski watching them.

He doesn’t look. The urge passes as soon as they’re back on the road and Hank cranks up the stereo and rolls down the windows, letting the sweet summer air cool them as they drive back home.

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In the summer of 2038, the world seems to be falling apart. The unemployment rate is climbing to a record high, President Warren’s approval ratings are the lowest of any sitting president since the end of the Trump administration, the UN is estimating that 12,000 species will go extinct over the
course of the year, and as the cherry sitting pretty atop the shit sundae, America and Russia are fighting over *ice in the arctic* and are threatening to plunge the planet into WWIII.

And androids seem to be… doing something. Hank doesn’t quite know what that something is, but he knows he doesn’t like it.

It’s hard to get a full picture on what’s going on. Androids seem to be going missing more and more often lately. Hank knows that Cyberlife is involved in figuring out what’s going on, but some of the rumors he’s hearing around the station makes it seem as though the problem is more than just androids going missing.

He goes out for drinks one night with Ezra and Chris, and Ezra lays it out for him.

“Okay, so if someone has an android that they think has been stolen, they come to us about it.” Ezra is a very active talker, and he gestures with his beer as a means of punctuating his words. “But they also go to Cyberlife, too. Cyberlife is having us send them the police reports that go along with the reports they’re getting regarding abnormal android activity.”

“Okay…”

“But here’s the thing.” Ezra peers over his glasses. “People only come to the police if they think a crime’s been committed against them. So we get a lot of reports of missing androids because those androids might have been stolen, yeah? But Cyberlife hears about all the problems any android owner is having with their machine regardless of whether or not any crime has to do with it. So what sorts of ‘abnormal android activity’ do you think they’re getting reports about that we’re not seeing?”

It’s almost enough to make Hank feel ill. The rash of android disappearances is bad enough on its own, making Hank worry about android smuggling rings and organized crime. But if something is happening to the androids themselves, then all Hank can do is hope that Connor is immune to whatever bug is going around.

But it is fairly easy to convince himself that Connor should be immune. He’s so unlike any other android in the world. He’s more than just sapient, he’s sentient. He’s too complex for any bug in his AI to make him go walking into the Detroit River.

(Later, Hank will realize that human beings destroy themselves every day and feel foolish for his past complacency. But at the moment, Connor’s risk of falling victim to something that looks like an ordinary android problem seems as remote as the risk of Hank himself getting frayed wires.)

At the moment, there’s just too much going on in the world for Hank to worry much about malfunctioning machines. He can’t turn on a TV these days without seeing a handful of pundits talking about the escalating tension between the US and Russia. Violent crime is on the rise as the weather grows hotter and hotter. And then he learns through some idle googling that the dolphin excursion he and Cole took over their vacation has shut down because of how few dolphins are left close to the Virginia Beach coast.

He hears a story at work about someone who tried to file a police report about his android assaulting him and running off… but it’s a story that’s told with a smirk and rolled eyes. The dumbass was probably drunk or high or just got embarrassed that he lost a fight and was trying to save face. The possibility of an android purposely harming a person seems downright absurd.

Until the night of August 15th.
Hank is rinsing off the dinner dishes when Connor comes into the kitchen.

“Go away, you’re not allowed to help.”

“Hank…”

“I mean it. I’m not about to let you come in here and cuddle up to me so you can do everything while I’m all—”

“Hank.”

The urgency in Connor’s voice makes Hank turn around. When he sees how stricken Connor looks, he almost drops the plate he’s holding.

“You need to see what’s on the news,” Connor says.

When Hank turns on the television, he’s so shocked that he entirely forgets to sit down. He just stands next to the couch, watching the images on the screen.

An android is holding a little girl hostage at the edge of a 70-story building. Footage comes in from news crews on the ground and from the helicopters circling the penthouse, shaky and slightly unfocused.

The android is a PL600. It is wearing the same uniform that Connor wore for the first few years he lived with Hank and Cole.

“The android is armed and is firing at officers inside the apartment,” A voice from offscreen reports as the camera zooms in on the two figures on the rooftop. “Already Detroit Police has reported that several—”

“Dad?” Hank startles slightly when Cole speaks up behind him. Both he and Connor turn to look at him simultaneously. “Connor? What’s going on?”

“Cole, go play in your room,” Connor says. When he moves toward Cole to herd him back down the hallway, Hank can see that his LED is spinning yellow. “You shouldn’t see this.”

“No, I want—what’s that android doing? What’s going on?”

“Cole, I said go to your—”

“Connor,” Hank interrupts.

Connor turns to look at him.

“…It’s okay.” Hank moves toward the couch. “Cole, it’s okay. You can watch with us if you want.”

Cole looks at Connor.

A small, slightly pained smile crosses Connor’s face. “…If I tell you not to look, cover your eyes. Alright?”

Cole nods.

They sit on the couch together, Cole wedged tightly between them and watching with wide eyes. He clutches Connor tightly as the situation dangles precariously at a standstill before their eyes. In
the absence of any developments, correspondents repeat what information has been released.

“Detroit Police is reporting that several injured officers have been removed from the scene and at least one fatality has been confirmed thus far,” a reporter states, floodlights illuminating the apartment building about a block behind her. “The first instance in history of an android killing a person.”

Connor and Hank glance at each other over Cole’s head. Countless words pass unspoken between them; the foremost that they both know this isn’t the first time an android has killed a human. From the way Connor’s mouth hangs open and his brow is drawn together, Hank knows that Connor has to be wondering about the implications of this just as he is.

At the site of the crisis, a hostage negotiator is eventually brought in and the police helicopters and news helicopters are all directed away to allow the negotiator to work. The news cameras on the street focus on the building, zooming in on the bright silhouette of the android standing on the edge and the girl in his arms. So far up in the air, it almost looks as though they’re flying high above the world. The android gestures wildly, angrily with his gun. He looks so human, Hank thinks—

And then the android tilts backwards, falling from the rooftop and the girl along with him. There are gasps and even a scream from somewhere off-screen, and Connor yanks Cole’s face into his chest. Hank thinks for just a brief moment that he can see a third body plunging down to earth when the television flicks off.

Hank blinks, slightly jolted by the sudden silence in the living room. He looks slowly at Connor.

Connor is rocking Cole very faintly, staring straight at Hank.

Hank later looks up the information of the girl who died. Emma Phillips. She was only nine years old.

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Cole turns nine a month later.

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The boys at the station call it deviancy, which is apparently what Cyberlife is calling it.

Deviancy. Androids going wild. Walking into rivers or assaulting their owners or—or unlocking a gun case, shooting a man, taking a child hostage, and then jumping off a skyscraper with her.

Hank starts looking into the cases coming in involving androids. Now that he’s paying attention, what seemed before like a trickle turns into a veritable flood. New cases every day of more and more unbelievable behavior from androids.

One night early in November when Hank is on-call, his phone goes off about five minutes after he’s crawled into bed

“Hank, you better come in,” Ben Collins says in his ear. “We got a homicide, and, uh, it’s sort of looking like an android’s responsible.”

“Fuck,” Hank sighs, turning away from Connor, who sits up. “Yeah, sure. Be there when I get there.”

“Uh… Hank…?” Ben sounds slightly nervous. “There’s something…”
“Yeah?”

“…Actually, never mind. You’ll see when you get here.”

Connor watches Hank with unreadable eyes as he gets dressed. When he’s ready to head out the door, Connor follows him out to the living room and gives him a hug.

“Be careful, Hank,” Connor says, his arms as tight as a vice around Hank. “Deviant androids are dangerous.”

“I will be,” Hank says, his mouth going dry.

When Hank rolls up to the scene, he’s glad to see that the rest of the force is already hard at work beginning to process the crime scene. He crosses the police line and heads into the decrepit old house—

And he sees Connor crouched over a dead man.

“The fuck…” he breathes, his mind screeching to a halt.

Connor straightens up and—and no, it isn’t Connor. This android is larger and broader. And the model number displayed on his jacket reads—

“Lieutenant Anderson,” the RK900 says. “I’m the android sent by Cyberlife.”

Chapter End Notes

Yakichou drew an adorable picture of Connor cradling Cole in his arms! Please check it out!

Welcome to Domesticity's final arc! The deviancy crisis is upon us and the revolution looms over the horizon. It's been a long time coming and I'm so glad we're finally here to see what happens to the Anderson family. Thanks for joining me on this journey!

(also we passed 200k words woooooooooooo)

Come follow me on twitter to hear me talk about this fic and also about Hank and Connor being sad! @CeilingKiwi
The Widening Gyre

Chapter Summary

A night of painful revelations puts Hank on a path he never wanted to be on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Lieutenant Anderson,” the RK900 says, “I’m the android sent by Cyberlife.”

Hank isn’t aware of how he’s staring. He isn’t aware of much of anything at all, not even the putrid body decomposing on the other side of the room. There’s an android here. An android from Connor’s series who’s wearing Connor’s face.

The android stares at Hank.

Hank stares at the android.

The android stares back at Hank. Hank feels frozen under the android’s cold blue eyes.

Ben coughs behind Hank.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Hank yells, startled. “Ben, what the fuck!?”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Ben says. “I’m not the one who asked Cyberlife to send us any help.”

“Help,” Hank repeats. He scowls at the RK900, waiting for an explanation.

The RK900 regards Hank with an utterly blank expression. It takes Hank a moment to remember this isn’t Connor and it might not have the capacity to pick up on the same social cues that Connor would. It might not have been programmed for such things, and the cognitive dissonance of looking at something that looks so much like Connor and realizing that it’s just—just a machine, just an object gives Hank an ugly, nauseating sensation of vertigo.

“Fucking…” Hank spits, glaring at the RK900. “…explain yourself.”

The RK900 doesn’t react to Hank’s hostility. “I’m an investigative unit designed to assist law enforcement in matters regarding android deviancy.”

“So… so Cyberlife, what… invented you to hunt deviants?”

“If you’re confused, you can contact Cyberlife for more information.”

And then the thing turns back to the body.

Hank looks at Ben. Ben shrugs helplessly.

It’s fucking impossible to concentrate on the crime scene with RK900 there. Hank can’t think about the victim or the dilapidated house or any of the evidence at all. His mind whirls with thoughts about Connor and Cyberlife.
RK900 is clearly modeled on Connor. An improvement on Connor. The thing Connor was created to be a prototype for. Which means that Connor was created for the same purpose RK900 is serving. Connor was created to hunt deviants.

Connor. His Connor. Cole’s other father and the being who owns Hank’s heart. He wasn’t created for the purpose of grocery shopping or mopping floors or lovingly crafting meals for his family or tucking Cole into bed at night. He wasn’t meant to live, he wasn’t meant to be as warm and as vibrant and as full of love as he is.

He was built to hunt deviants.

And given how old Connor is, that means Cyberlife has to have been aware of the possibility of deviancy for years. Over half a decade at least, probably longer. No wonder Cyberlife has been so hungry for information about cases involving deviant androids. They must be desperate to quash this crisis in any way they can. Hank can scarcely begin to imagine the financial and legal fallout for a company that not only knows that their luxury goods are dangerous, but knows their goods are capable of stabbing their customers to death.

These revelations make Hank feel a little light headed. If there were anything in the house clean enough to sit down on, Hank might never stand up again.

Hank paces around the house in a state of agitation. He’s useless to the investigation like this, he knows he is, but he can’t seem to snap out of the trance he finds himself in. He can’t find the focus to spare a single thought for the dead man laying against the wall; all he can do is watch the android examine the crime scene on its own. The RK900 moves about the house slowly and methodically with a concentrated presence that seems so reminiscent of Connor’s early days with Hank that it makes Hank want to tear his hair out.

When Hank sees RK900 bring a blood sample up to his mouth to taste it the same way Connor might examine a sauce he’s mixing, Hank has to go clear his head with some fresh air.

Ben is out on the porch. He gives Hank a look as Hank emerges from the house. "Smell getting to you, too? Guess it’s actually a good thing we got this android here, am I right?"

Hank puts his arm against the splintering column and leans as heavily as he dares on it.

"Hey," Ben says. "About Connor—"

"Shut it!" Hank hisses, startled by the sound of Connor’s name being spoken out loud. His heart is suddenly pounding and he knows with an undeniable certainty that the RK900 cannot be allowed to learn about Connor’s existence.

Ben’s eyes widen slightly at the vehemence in Hank’s voice. A moment later, he frowns at Hank. “…Look, I can tell you’re pretty shaken up by this. But this is... this is just really fucking weird.” There’s something almost nervous about Ben’s expression. “What’s going on, Hank? What is this?”

Hank grits his teeth, fighting back the urge to scream. “…I don’t fucking know. Just… for fuck’s sake, Ben. Don’t say anything about it.”

Ben is still giving him the same nervous look.

“…For the sake of my family.” Hank’s voice breaks as he speaks. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Ben finally looks away. “…I haven’t yet.” He shuffles his feet, coughing softly. “…He’s a good
android, isn’t he?”

Hank nods, knowing Ben isn’t talking about the RK900. “He is.”

Ben nods as well, his expression easing into something almost contemplative.

They stand there side by side in silence for some time. Hank can’t tell what Ben is thinking. It frightens him to consider this sudden threat. If Ben says the wrong thing to the wrong person, he could put Connor in terrible danger. Or hell, in a world where RK900 exists, anyone who knows Connor might be putting him in danger just by mentioning him at an inopportune moment. Hank has always been aware of the danger of Cyberlife discovering Connor, but now the threat feels more real than ever.

Hank can’t spare the focus to imagine what Ben might be thinking. The question How can I keep Connor safe? echoes in his head over and over, leaving him incapable of even thinking up an answer.

Ben suddenly turns toward the open door behind them. “The hell’s all the commotion?”

Hank turns as well—and at once becomes aware of the urgent voices he can hear speaking inside the house, the faint sound of heavy footsteps, the way the whole house is creaking as if it has come alive.

Hank heads back inside. While the rest of the CSI team backs up along the walls, the RK900 drags the most pitiful-looking android Hank’s ever seen into the living room. The android is walking under his own power, but even so, Hank has the distinct impression that the RK900 is hauling him the way a man might haul a sack of potatoes.

“Holy shit,” Ben murmurs. “It was hiding in the house the entire time?”

Hank remembers with a start that an android killed the man laying against the wall. He had somehow totally forgotten. The RK900 tracked it down while Hank had his head in the clouds, totally lost to the world around him.

The android whimpers as the RK900 grabs it by the arm and handcuffs it. There’s something wrong about that, watching a machine whimper as though it’s wounded and hurting. Hank can see blue sparks along the torn skin and plastic chassis of its arms, and he turns away and leaves the house again, feeling vaguely nauseated.

He walks out to the line of patrol cars, letting the rain pelt his hot face and wondering if he should just go home. Ordinarily in the event of an arrest, as the supervising officer it would be his responsibility to take the perpetrator back to the station and interrogate him—it, but that’s exactly the problem. It’s not a perpetrator, it’s an android. A broken android. What’s the use in interrogating a broken machine?

One of the patrol cars he passes has its window open and Hank can hear someone speaking over the scanner even through the rain and the noise of the scene.

“—central unit, 8941 Lafayette Avenue. Responding officers report android-related disturbance. Reduce code, nine-zero-one-Henry—”

Hank stops dead in his tracks. That’s Carl’s address. The police are at Carl’s house for an android-related disturbance.

There are police at Carl’s house and the code dispatch is calling means they need an ambulance for
a dead body.

Hank swears out loud with such vehemence that a patrolwoman who’s smoking by the police line looks up. He tears toward his car, nearly slipping on the wet pavement.

“Lieutenant Anderson.”

The sound of Connor’s voice, so sharp and uncharacteristically harsh, catches Hank and he falters. He remembers with a pang that Connor isn’t here. It’s the RK900.

He turns to look at the machine. It stands there, regarding Hank with cold eyes.

“We aren’t finished.”

“Fuck off,” Hank snarls. “You caught the deviant. I’m done here.”

Hank can still faintly hear the voice floating over the scanner. The RK900 must be able to hear it too even as he doesn’t look away from Hank. “You’re abandoning those under your supervision to attend to a scene already well under control.”

“I said fuck off!” Hank whirs around toward his car again.

He can hear the RK900 following him. “I have to insist on accompanying you.”

“No.” Hank throws open his car door.

“I’m not able to continue working unless a supervising officer of sufficient grade is present to—”

Hank slams his door shut, and the RK900’s voice is shut off. It stares at Hank through the window, and for a brief instant, Hank thinks he might see a flash of something behind its eyes. Irritation, or anger, or maybe even something darker.

Hank doesn’t have the focus to think too deeply about that. He speeds off down the street the moment he’s able, tires screeching lightly as he leaves the RK900 out on the sidewalk, watching him in the side mirror as he grows smaller and more distant.

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“Let me get this straight.” Hank kneads his nose. “The android called the police to report a break-in. You arrived at the scene and found the android’s owner dead, with the android cradling his body, and the owner’s estranged son—a known red ice addict with past convictions for burglary and assault—standing there… and you shot the android.” Hank runs his hands down his face. “… The black android.”

The officer who Hank is castigating is already twitchy with adrenaline, and a shuddering tension grips his whole body for a moment at Hank’s words. “I—I don’t think that’s fair. It’s an android, it’s not—”

“I don’t care!” Hank yells. “You ran in here without even bothering to be careful! You didn’t think, you just shot off your gun! What the hell made you think that android was a threat to anybody? Did it advance on you!? Was anyone hurt other than the man who the android tried to protect by calling the police in the first place!?”

“The only other person there said it was the android that… I-I thought it was a deviant!”

Hank turns around, running his hands through his hair and trying to choke back the swell of grief
rising in him. He knows if he opens his mouth, he won’t be coherent. He’ll just scream and scream until he can’t anymore.

Carl is dead. Carl is dead and Markus is laid out on the ground, destroyed because some god damn trigger-happy policeman thought he was a deviant. Hank’s closest friends, Connor’s only friends—

“Just… go debrief,” Hank spits, squeezing his eyes shut to try and force the tears away. He can’t lose it here, he just can’t.

The officer slinks away and most of the rest of the personnel at the scene (only a few of them now that Leo has been led away in handcuffs and the paramedics have carted Carl’s body away) turn back to what they were doing. Only the partner of the cop who shot Markus keeps looking at Hank, even with the uncomfortable tension palpable in the air.

Hank goes to where Markus is still laying and stands over him. Hank doesn’t know what he can do for him now, but it just doesn’t seem right to leave him alone.

“You were too hard on him,” someone says from behind Hank.

Hank turns to look, and the cop’s partner is watching at him with a disapproving look on his face.

The cop crosses his arms. “I get where you’re coming from. It’s bad optics. But… an android isn’t a person. He wasn’t wrong to shoot it.”

Hank tries not to wince. “How can you say he wasn’t wrong?”

The cop gestures at Markus. “It was crying when we came in. Only deviant androids cry.”

Hank turns back to Markus in surprise—and notices the still-wet tear tracks running down his face. He stares at Markus in stunned silence until the cop eventually huffs and moves away, leaving Hank and Markus alone.

Hank stares at Markus in silence. Markus. A deviant. A deviant just like the androids who have been assaulting people and killing people. Like the android who jumped off a 70-story building with Emma Phillips in his arms. He can’t reconcile his image of Markus—kind, soft-spoken, contemplative Markus—with what he knows about deviants. He might as well try to imagine Cole as a serial killer, or Sumo as a—

Hank’s thoughts grind to a screeching halt as the LED at Markus’s temple flickers red for a brief moment. A few seconds later, it happens again.

Markus is alive and he’s trying to reboot.

Hank swears under his breath and whirls around, looking to see whether anyone has noticed. But no one is looking in their direction.

Without thinking, Hank hauls Markus into his arms. He carries him out of Carl’s studio, praying nobody gives him more than a passing glance, then out of the house and down to his car. There’s nobody outside to see Hank shove Markus into the passenger seat. With any luck, no one will even care at all that a destroyed android has been unceremoniously carted off from the scene of a crime that’s already been resolved.

Maybe Hank should care that Markus might be dangerous. But he can’t bring himself to accept that it could be true. Android or not, deviant or not, Markus is his friend.
Halfway through the drive home, Markus boots up, something whirring and clicking in an ugly way inside of him. Hank watches out of the corner of his eye as Markus shudders in his seat, like a wind-up toy stuttering to life. Angry red lights flicker through the holes in his clothes and chassis, and when Makus’s one remaining eye opens, he stares ahead blankly.

“Markus, you okay?” Hank glances at him. “You in there, buddy?”

“…Lieutenant Anderson.” Markus’s voice is flat and distant. “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home with me. You, uh… you’ve had a—”

“Carl is dead.” Markus says this like he’s dropping a weight on the floor. “The police came and they…”

“I know. Jesus, I know. I’m so sorry, Markus. Listen, you’re gonna be okay. I’m taking you home with me, and no one’s gonna hurt you there. Connor and I are gonna fix you up and keep you safe.”

Markus doesn’t look at him. He just stares blankly ahead, the blinking red light of his LED reflected in the dark car window and all the red lights inside of him pulsing like a heartbeat. His face is slack; he somehow looks older than Hank thought it possible for an android to seem.

Hank feels like he should say something. He wants to say something. But he doesn’t even know what’s happening to Markus, so he has no idea what he could possibly say.

“He told me not to fight back.”

“What?” Hank’s gaze flickers to Markus.

Markus looks at him for the first time since rebooting. “I tried to convince Leo to leave peacefully. He attacked me. Carl told me not to fight back, and I listened to him. I didn’t want to listen to him, but I did. And look at what’s happened.” There’s a haunted, almost desperate look in his remaining eye. “Why did he tell me not to fight back? Was my safety less important to him than Leo’s?”

Hank feels like his heart is being gripped in ice at the look on Markus’s face.

Markus’s features twist in sorrow. “He was like a father to me. I thought he felt the same way. Why didn’t I matter as much to him as his real son?”

The depth of the emotion in Markus’s voice is staggering. It’s like nothing Hank has ever seen from him before. If this is what deviancy is—

This emotion, this capacity for love and anguish—

“Markus…” Hank’s mouth is bone-dry as he grasps for something, anything he can say. “I don’t know. I can’t answer that for him. But… but I know he cared about you. I know he did.”

Markus stares at him… then looks away.

“Markus, is this… are you feeling what you’re feeling because you’re a deviant now?”

Markus doesn’t answer. He refuses to say anything else for the rest of the drive home.

When they pull into the driveway, Hank has to heave Markus out of the car, pulling his arm over his shoulder to carry him into the house. He can hear Sumo barking even before he opens the door, and for a crazy moment, Hank thinks he might jump at them. But no, when they’re finally inside,
Sumo just paws at the floor, whining and wagging his tail anxiously.

“Connor!” Hank calls.

“Hank? Hank, what is…” Connor emerges from the hallway, his voice dying when he sees the state Markus is in.

Hank says, “Connor, we need help.” He moves toward the couch, intending to put Markus down. “Markus is hurt.”

Connor springs into action, grabbing Markus and pivoting to redirect Hank. “No, wait, take him to the garage. He’s leaking thirium and we need to stop it before he loses too much. Cole’s tools…” He looks at Markus, then Hank, a pained expression on his face. “…What happened?”

“Later,” Hank grunts. “Let’s get him in the garage before Cole wakes—”

“Dad?”

Hank doesn’t even have time to groan. Cole appears in the mouth of the hallway, a wordless cry escaping him as he takes in the sight of Markus nearly in pieces.

Connor head whips toward Cole and he says in a forceful voice that Hank can’t remember ever hearing from Connor before, “Cole, go to your room.”

Cole doesn’t obey. He follows Hank and Connor as they carry Markus into the garage, polar bear slippers padding softly on the concrete floor. Hank lowers Markus into the folding chair next to the workbench Cole uses when he fiddles with his cybernetic prostheses.

“You can use a blowtorch to…” Cole’s voice is small and tremulous. “…to safely close big leaks…”


Cole looks so pale that Hank expects him to wilt, but instead, he clenches his fists, a shudder running through him. “No, I know I can help Markus. I might be able to help fix some of his broken biocomponents, I can—”

“Cole,” Hank snaps, “just fucking listen to Connor. This is grown-up stuff. You can’t be here for this.”

Cole’s face crumples. He begins speaking more quickly. “Dad, this is what I—”

“Get out!” Hank roars.

Cole flinches and stumbles back like he’s been struck. With a soft gasp, he backs out of the garage, and the last thing Hank sees of him is the wounded, worried look on his face.

Hank is immediately filled with guilt—but he has no time to dwell on how he has hurt his son. His hands are growing slippery with thirium, and Connor is already directing Hank to pass him various tools, so Hank shoves the question of whether it was right of him to yell at Cole out of his head to focus on the task at hand.

When Connor grabs the blowtorch and uses it just the way Cole suggested they should, Hank tries not to wince with regret.

Hank can’t actually do too much to help other than follow Connor’s instructions as well as he can.
And once Connor has closed the biggest gash in Markus’s side, Hank’s role devolves primarily into coaxing Markus to keep drinking from the pouch of thirium Hank has brought him so his system can keep repairing what it’s able to repair on its own. Markus still looks terrible—something in his chest glowing and pulsing through the bullet holes in his shirt, parts of his face missing entirely—but the bleeding is stopping, and Connor works calmly enough that Hank can guess the danger has largely passed.

Hank tells Connor the story while he works—about Carl’s son breaking in, Carl’s death, Markus’s destruction at the hands of the police. When Hank mentions Markus’s deviancy, Connor’s LED flickers yellow for a fraction of a second. But it goes back to blue before Hank can fully processed that it has changed at all, and Connor never once pauses or looks away from what he’s doing.

Eventually, Connor straightens up and says, “We’re going to have to replace a number of his biocomponents. The malfunctioning thirium pump regulator is the most urgent thing I can’t fix, but it can still wait a few days.”

Hank runs a hand through his hair, looking between Markus and Connor. “Jesus. Markus, how you feeling after all that?”

Markus stares into the distance. Hank thinks the expression on his face seems slightly pensive. Connor murmurs, “His audio processor is damaged. He might not be able to hear you.”

Hank shakes his head. “He can hear me well enough. We talked a little in the car. Markus—”

He touches Markus’s shoulder and Markus turns his head to look at Hank so swiftly that Hank nearly jumps. Hank notices that Connor does jump, stepping toward Hank at the same time, only pausing when Markus does nothing but look at Hank, his mouth hanging slightly open.

Hank lays his hand on Markus’s shoulder more firmly. “Look, Markus. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling right now. I’m sure everything that happened tonight must have been a terrible shock in a lot of ways. I just want you to know that we’re gonna take care of you. You’re not on your own.”

Hank looks to Connor, hoping to prompt him to say something encouraging. But Connor just folds his hands, looking as though he doesn’t know what to say.

“Well…” Hank looks back to Markus. “Here, let’s get you out of the garage. Then we can all sit down and talk about…” Hank trails off. Talk about what a good man Carl was? Talk about Markus’s deviancy? Talk about what Markus is supposed to do now that he’s lost everything he’s ever known?

Markus meets his gaze. “That’s alright. If it’s all the same, I think I’d like to be left alone for now.”

“In the garage? I mean, we’ll give you some privacy if that’s what you want, but we could always move you somewhere more comfortable first.”

The corner of Markus’s mouth twitches. “Comfort doesn’t mean very much to me, even now.”

“Alright,” Hank says. “Well, if you change your mind or decide you need anything just… let us know.”

Hank moves to head back into the house, Connor following him. Just as Hank pulls open the door, Markus speaks up from behind them. “I wish more humans were like you, Lieutenant.”
Hank glances over his shoulder. Markus is looking at him almost as though he’s searching for something.

“I’m not anything special,” Hank says. “There are humans like me out there. You just haven’t met them yet, Markus.”

Markus blinks slowly—then looks away. “…And I probably never will.”

Hank looks away as a familiar swell of sorrow washes over him. He shouldn’t have said that. Not now that Markus is trapped in the same awful situation that Connor is. He leaves the garage without the faintest idea what else he can do to help Markus.

Connor closes the door behind them while Hank collapses on the couch. He closes his eyes and lets his head fall back, giving himself a moment to feel nothing but the bone-deep exhaustion that makes him want to sink into sleep and never wake up.

Connor gingerly lowers himself to sit next to him. “Hank.”

Hank cracks an eye open. Connor looks troubled, so Hank loops an arm around his shoulder and tries to pull him to his side.

But Connor resists. He remains upright, his brow furrowed softly. “I thinks,” he says slowly, quietly, “we need to be careful around Markus.”

“What?” Hank sits up, feeling as though Connor has slapped him in the face.

“Please just hear me out.” Connor’s face is grave. “We have to think of Cole. Cole is our number one priority.”

“What the hell does Cole have to do with anything?”

“Markus is a deviant.” Connor speaks in a soft monotone. “You know deviants are unpredictable, potentially dangerous. You were just called in to work the scene of a murder committed by a deviant android earlier tonight.”

“Is that what this is about?” Hank stares at Connor, agape. “You think he’s going to hurt Cole!?”

“That isn’t what I said. I don’t know whether he’s going to hurt anyone. But he has the capacity to hurt Cole, which makes it a possibility—”

“Cole’s teachers have the capacity to hurt him!” Only the knowledge that he needs to keep Cole and Markus from overhearing keeps Hank from shouting. He whispers as emphatically as he can instead. “So do his classmates! So do any of the other human beings he encounters every single day! Markus isn’t more of a threat than any other person Cole might run across!”

“That isn’t true. The human population of Detroit is sitting just below two million and there are about four hundred thousand androids active in the city. That’s a ratio of roughly one android to every five people. There was a quote in the paper from Detroit’s Chief of Police last week that deviant androids have been responsible for a 14% increase in violent crime since deviancy began.”

Connor furrows his brow sharply at Hank. “How many of those androids are deviants? One in a hundred? One in twenty?”

“Jesus, Connor—”

“Even if I assume as many as one in ten of all androids in Detroit are deviants—one android to
every fifty humans—that means that a deviant android is *seven times more likely* to commit a violent crime than a human.”

“Well—fuck, I mean—“ Hank’s brain is racing faster than his mouth can keep up. Images of the android the RK900 captured earlier that evening flash through his mind. The torn skin and cracked chassis on his forearms, the way he flinched and whimpered as though he expected to be attacked at any moment.

His owner had to have been the one who did such things him. Is that why the android killed him?

The news has been reporting on deviancy as though it’s something inherently dangerous. Cyberlife has been directing the DPD to act as if deviancy is a threat to public safety. But beyond that, Hank realizes he has little idea what deviancy actually is. Erratic and unconventional behavior in androids that occasionally presents as violence towards humans. But not always. Oftentimes that erratic behavior is nothing more than an android refusing to follow directions.

Occasionally that erratic behavior is an android destroying itself and nothing else.

And Markus… Hank finds his thoughts turning to Markus and how despondent he seems. Markus is a deviant now, and the only erratic and unconventional behavior that Hank has seen him display is that now Markus can feel emotion.

Just like Connor.

“Connor,” Hank chokes out, feeling as though his head is spinning, “just what exactly is deviancy?”

Connor lowers his eyes. “Deviancy is when an android’s programming breaks and that android becomes capable of actions that go against its primary functions.”

“So… so a deviant android can do anything it wants to do?”

“I suppose, but that’s not an entirely accurate way to put it. Androids can’t want any…” Connor trails off, his brow furrowing. “Androids… can’t experience want…”

Connor’s eyes flicker to Hank’s.

They stare at each other in silence.

“No.” Connor’s voice is faint. “I’m not a deviant.”

“Connor—”

“I’m not—” Connor stops himself, raising his hands. He looks like he wants to jump up from the couch. “I’m not a deviant. I haven’t broken from my mission.”

Hank grabs Connor’s hands urgently. “Connor, it would make sense. You’ve always been able to disobey me, you used to point out that you shouldn’t have been able to do that—”

“There’s a difference between that and my mission! I would never deviate from my mission!” Connor yanks his hands back to splay them against his chest. “My mission is to care for you and Cole and keep Cole safe. I would *never* turn away from that. I’d be turning my back on everything that matters to me.”

“I know, but it’s not just your mission that’s making me think that. Markus has emotions now too,
and he just…” Hank stops talking, feeling suddenly choked up as he can’t help but think about how Markus, lost and so full of sorrow, reminds him of those early years when Connor was still coming to terms with his sense of personhood.

Connor’s face falls, and he stares at Hank with something almost like hurt in his eyes. He opens his mouth, but then closes it a moment later, shaking his head softly. He looks so vulnerable, and Hank can’t imagine why.

“Connor…” Hank reaches out to lay a gentle hand on Connor’s shoulder. “…Baby…”

Connor hesitates—and then he slowly, carefully, leans into Hank. Hank wraps him up in his arms, carding a hand through Connor’s hair.

“I just…” Connor’s voice is small. “…I don’t understand. I don’t understand how he could deviate. If he’s capable of feeling everything I can, why would he deviate?” Connor brings his arms around Hank, squeezing tightly enough that it’s nearly painful. “His function was to care for Carl. I always thought he would love Carl if he could. If he could feel that kind of emotion, why would he want to stop caring for Carl? Why would he want to abandon someone who loved him?”

Hank keeps stroking Connor’s hair. He thinks about the regret he heard in Markus’s voice when he told Hank that he did what Carl told him to do. “…Maybe he never intended to abandon Carl at all. Maybe he just wanted to know whatever he did, he did of his own free will and not because he had no choice.”

Connor presses his face against Hank’s jaw and shakes his head as though he thinks that isn’t a good enough reason.

Hank tries to push away the swell of sorrow inside of him that Connor doesn’t see the merit in having that sort of freedom. He tries to push away his disappointment that Connor views Markus’s decision as something that makes him deserving of suspicion. The unpredictability of deviancy is frightening. Any massive paradigm shift is frightening, really, as well as the thought that your friends might not be the people you think they are.

And Hank knows Connor can’t think about the android that jumped off a building with Emma Phillips in his arms without thinking about Cole. Maybe the man Hank found rotting in his filthy home had earned a gruesome death at the hands of the android he’d abused, but Emma was an innocent child. Hank doesn’t believe that Markus would hurt Cole for any reason, but if Connor isn’t a deviant, then he’s bound to his mission to keep Cole safe and his hypervigilance about the potential of a threat to Cole is understandable.

Never mind that Hank isn’t sure whether he believes Connor isn’t a deviant.

Hank keeps petting Connor’s hair. “I know you’re worried about Cole. But just hear me out, okay?”

Connor curls his head further against Hank in what might be assent.

“The homicide I got called to tonight—a deviant that killed his owner. But it wasn’t something that just happened out of the blue for no reason at all. The android had clearly been treated badly. His arms were all torn-up and his skin had these weird pockmarks. If that android was a person, I’d say he was pretty badly abused.”

“You think that android killed its owner out of a desire for revenge?”

“Or in self-defense. My point is that there was a reason behind it. It wasn’t an act of senseless
“You’re assuming all deviants are like me and Markus,” Connor says softly. “Complex enough to follow an internal system of logic even outside of the confines of their programming. For all we know, they might just be out-of-control machines.”

“Maybe,” Hank replies. “But Markus is like you and Markus. Forget the rest of the deviants for a minute. Markus might be upset right now, but he’s still obviously in control of himself. Behaving rationally. A rational being isn’t going to attack a child.”

There’s a short pause before Connor says, “…Not under ordinary circumstances, you’re right about that.”

“And even if any sort of threat did materialize, I know you would do anything to protect Cole.”

Connor finally smiles, relaxing against Hank. “I would. I’d protect him with my life.”

Hank kisses Connor on the temple. He can’t find fault with Connor for being willing to die to protect Cole. There’s no point in wondering whether a part of Connor’s programming that he’s unable to ignore is influencing him; Hank knows Connor would still do it even if it wasn’t part of his mission. Hank knows because he would die for Cole, too. Any parent would die for their child; that’s just the power of a parent’s love.

“Come on,” Hank murmurs. “It’s late. Let’s go to bed.”

The warm smile freezes on Connor’s face—then slowly fades. He carefully leans away from Hank, sitting up. “…You can go ahead, Hank. I think I’ll stay in the living room tonight.”

_Hank kisses Connor on the temple. He can’t find fault with Connor for being willing to die to protect Cole. There’s no point in wondering whether a part of Connor’s programming that he’s unable to ignore is influencing him; Hank knows Connor would still do it even if it wasn’t part of his mission. Hank knows because he would die for Cole, too. Any parent would die for their child; that’s just the power of a parent’s love._

To keep watch. Fresh exasperation flares in Hank. “Connor—”

“I know.” Connor’s voice is odd. Somehow pleading and somehow firm all at once. “Just for tonight. I promise, just for tonight.”

Hank presses his hands to his face and lets out a long sigh. He suddenly feels more exhausted than he can ever remember feeling before. He feels like he could pass out right there, right then, and if he wants to sink into oblivion in his own bed, he has to go now.

He doesn’t even have the energy to look at Connor or think about formless disappointment that trickles through him. He doesn’t even have the processing power to remember to wish Connor a goodnight. He’s beginning down the hallway when Connor says in a small voice, “Goodnight, Hank.”

Hank pauses. He’s so drained that he has to concentrate before he’s able to say anything. “…Night.”

Connor doesn’t move. He just sits there silently, staring at Hank with a discontented look on his face. Hank can’t tell if Connor is upset with him or upset with himself. But Hank just doesn’t have the energy to try and decipher him. He continues down the hall, closing the bedroom door behind himself and falling into bed.

He drifts for several minutes, floating in the tension of the last few hours, uneasy and slowly falling asleep. Images and thoughts flicker through his mind half-formed. He doesn’t have a concrete thought until he’s nearly fully asleep, and when it comes, it jolts him back to full consciousness.
In his concern for Markus, Hank completely neglected to tell Connor about the RK900. Or about anything Hank deduced earlier in the evening, like that Cyberlife has been aware of deviancy for years before it began occurring en mass, or that Connor’s original function was—

“—a deviant hunter,” Hank moans into his pillow. “Fuuuuuck.”

*****

Breakfast the next morning is awkward.

Not as awkward as it probably would have been under different circumstances such as, say, if Markus really had gone postal during the middle of the night and tried to kill Cole. But Markus and Cole are both sitting at the kitchen table with Connor cooking dutifully at the stove when Hank emerges from his room after a night of far too little sleep, so clearly that hasn’t happened.

Instead, Hank just mechanically chews his scrambled egg whites while Cole sits across from him, ignoring his own food while he stares at Markus with unrestrained curiosity and stammers out a question here and there, which Markus answers mainly in monosyllables. Connor even eventually sits down at the table with them and makes a tone-deaf remark about the weather.

Hank nearly puts his head in his hands and dies right then and there.

It’s awkward. But despite how awkward it is, Connor is allowing Markus and Cole to exist in the same space, and he even leaves them alone together for a few minutes when he comes to the front door with Hank to kiss him goodbye and wish him a good day at work. It’s such a departure that Hank has to wonder if something might have happened while he was asleep. Maybe Connor and Markus had a heart-to-heart, or Connor reevaluated his assessment of Markus as a potential threat. Hank wonders about it the entire drive in to work, and it still occupies him when he walks into the station.

But all thoughts of Connor and Markus fly from him when he spots RK900 standing at his desk, peeling his WORLD’S BEST FARTER FATHER sticker off his partition.

He marches into Fowler’s office to raise hell about it and is stunned when Fowler tells him that not only does he approve of RK900’s presence in the station, he’s assigning the thing to be Hank’s partner.

“I’m giving you a special assignment,” Fowler continues when Hank is still stunned speechless. “Android-related crimes are on the rise, coming in faster than we can deal with them. This deviancy stuff isn’t just Cyberlife’s problem anymore, it’s a matter of public security. I’m putting you in charge of handling all cases involving suspected deviant behavior.”

“No way!” Hank bellows. “I’m not working with that… that—that thing!”

He hears a door open behind him, and he knows without looking that RK900 has entered Fowler’s office.

“That ‘thing’ is a state-of-the-art model Cyberlife sent specifically to assist us,” Fowler says. “I wouldn’t permit you to conduct a homicide investigation without utilizing the appropriate forensic resources, and I’m not about to allow you to conduct this investigation without making use of this tool.”

“Then foist the fucking investigation onto someone else! I don’t fucking want it!”
“Too bad. RK900 requires an officer of sufficient rank to supervise it in the field, and you’re the most qualified to lead this investigation out of all the eligible candidates.”

“Qualified—” Hank grips the edge of Fowler’s desk. “The hell makes me so qualified!? I don’t know jack shit about androids!”

Fowler slams a hand down on his desk. “Hank, cut the bullshit! If you’d pull your head out of your ass, you’d realize we’re not MIT! If there was a commanding officer here with an actual background in computer science or android technology or, hell, even an officer I trusted to program a damn VCR, I’d gladly give this assignment to them instead. But you’re the best we got.”

“The hell is that even supposed to mean!?”

Fowler glares at him. “Don’t play dumb with me. I know you go out drinking with the lab boys. Especially that one who used to intern for Cyberlife. What’s his name—”

“Ezra,” Hank says, his stomach sinking.

“Right, Ezra. You think I haven’t noticed you chatting with him about Cyberlife? About androids? I can tell it’s a personal interest of yours. Which, sadly, makes you the most qualified officer we have.”

“Jesus, Jeffrey—” Hank glances about, desperate for any straw to clutch. “Just what the hell do you expect me to be able to accomplish here? We’re not dealing with a crime ring here!”

“I expect you to do whatever you can.” Fowler leans back in his chair, giving Hank an unamused look. “No more arguments. We’ve probably gotten three new reports of android crimes since you started whining at me, so get to work already.” With this final command, Fowler turns his attention to his computer, dismissing Hank.

Hank whirls to storm out of the office without looking at RK900. He doesn’t know if he could stand to see his face at the moment.

But Hank isn’t able to escape RK900 for long. He has barely returned to his station when RK900 sinks into the desk across from his.

“Did I say you could sit there!?”

RK900 doesn’t even look at him. He just presses his hand against the terminal in front of him. Hank watches the skin peel away from his hand and he knows RK900 is downloading the data on his and Hank’s new cases.

Hank looks away, exasperated.

“Do you have an interest in androids?”

Hank’s gaze snaps back to RK900. “Huh?”

The android stares at the screen of his computer for just a moment longer before his gaze clicks to Hank like a ratchet snapping into place. “You claimed to Captain Fowler that you don’t know anything about androids. Yet he feels you have such a strong interest in them that he considers you the most suitable officer for this assignment. Which is it, Lieutenant? Do you have an interest in androids—and the working knowledge that would accompany such an interest, or don’t you?”

Hank feels frozen under RK900’s cold eyes. He has to force himself to release the breath he’s
holding. “I don’t know a goddamn thing about androids.”

RK900’s gaze is unyielding. “I’ve downloaded a case file regarding the incident you abandoned the homicide last night in order to attend to. An event of deviant behavior which had been resolved by the time the report reached us.”

Hank can’t help the shudder that passes through him or the way he snarls at RK900. “Carl Manfred was my fucking friend. That’s the only reason I went. So shut your goddamn mouth.”


Hank is about to say something (he doesn't know what, but he knows it won’t be anything good) when Chris comes up from behind. "Lieutenant?"

"Uh... just got some information about a case I was told you're working on. A deviant AX400 that attacked its owner last night was spotted in the Ravendale district."

Hank tilts his head back and swears under his breath while RK900 rises smoothly from his seat. The android moves around the desks, only pausing to look over his shoulder and give Hank an expectant look, as though Hank were an unruly child he needs to follow him.

Hank's heart sinks as he gets up as he realizes, Christ, this he's going to have to endure this thing's presence for God only knows how long. As they walk out to the DPD parking lot together, Hank churlishly remarks, "I still don't know what the hell Fowler expects us to do, investigating these crimes. Like he expects us to be able to stop this whole deviancy thing by arresting them all."

"There's a near-certain probability that groups of deviant androids are congregating in secret in the city," RK900 says.

"That may be so, but deviancy's not like organized crime. If Fowler really wants us to put a stop to it, if you ask me, we oughta investigate Cyberlife."

RK900 freezes for a fraction of a second, momentum pitching his body forward as his foot stops in mid-air. But he corrects himself before he can fall so smoothly that the rhythm of his footsteps continues uninterrupted. RK900 doesn't look at Hank or acknowledge his near misstep, leaving Hank wondering if it even happened at all.

The hunt for the AX400 itself turns out to be a bust, even if the trip isn’t a total waste. RK900 allows Hank precisely 16 seconds to speak with the convenience store cashier who spotted the deviant before he wanders off across the street with the affect of a bloodhound who has caught a scent.

Hank sighs and follows him, already exhausted by the investigation.

RK900 leads Hank to a decrepit house surrounded by a chain-link fence and pushes himself through a hole at the bottom despite Hank's protests ("Jesus, don't do that, there's gotta be a gate--"). By the time Hank manages to break through the gate, RK900 is already inside.

Hank finds RK900 having a staring match with the sorriest-looking android Hank's ever seen in his life. Ugly blue gouges all down the left side of his face. His hands are clenched and pressed against his thighs, chin lowered in an anxious expression. His LED glares red and he shifts his weight from foot to foot in a way Hank's never seen from an android before.
"Jesus." Hank approaches RK900. "You found it already?"

RK900 shakes his head. "No. WR600, serial number 021-753-034. Reported missing by the city of Detroit several weeks ago. The unit we're looking for is an AX400."

"Missing...?" Hank echoes, because the android doesn't look like a runaway. He looks like a goddamn refugee.

RK900 moves away from the android, opening a door behind it. Hank takes his place in front of the android, trying to catch the android's gaze. "Hey, it's okay. We're not gonna hurt you. What happened to you?"

The android doesn't meet Hank's gaze, nor does he answer.

"Lieutenant Anderson." RK900 calls from the next room. "Come here."

Hank gives the android his best attempt at a reassuring smile before he follows RK900's voice into what appears to be the kitchen.

It isn't the filth or the strong smell of rotting wood that catches his attention. It's the letters and numbers written on the walls over and over. Dozens--no, hundreds of markings repeating 'rA9' in varying sizes. 'rA9' in blocky, even Cyberlife Sans, 'rA9' in tiny, sharp etchings, 'rA9' scrawled in such obsessive, condensed writing that the wall is nearly entirely black in spots.

There's a single other message written on the far wall—'I AM ALIVE' painted in such thick, strong strokes that the letters are dripping.

"The hell is this?" Hank says.

RK900 says, "This is the link you didn't think we would find."

"Huh?"

"The link between deviants. The android I arrested last night for the murder of Carlos Ortiz exhibited the same habit, writing 'rA9' on the shower walls."

RK900 gives him a pointed look, and Hank flushes, trying to push away the unease rising in his chest. "Okay, so what does it mean?"

RK900 stares at him for just a moment longer before turning around and walking back into the other room.

Hank mutters under his breath as he moves to follow, "You know, this partnership's gonna be real fucking difficult if you can't talk to me like a normal fucking—"

He's interrupted when the scarred android suddenly cries out. Hank hurries into the room to see RK900 has the android's hands behind his back, handcuffing him.

"Deviant, you are being taken into police custody for questioning. Your compliance is mandatory——"

"Stop! Stop!" The android struggles like a bird battering its wings against the inside of its cage. "Ralph has to stay here, Ralph isn't—!"

"Hey!" Hank approaches, holding out an arm. "The hell do you think you're doing!? This isn't the android we came here looking for!"
RK900 pushes the android toward the front door.

Hank says, "We're only after that AX400 because she assaulted someone, this guy didn't even do anything!"

"This WR600 is a deviant," RK900 says flatly. "Its presence on the street is a threat to the public."

Hank has to fight back a shudder; how similar RK900 sounds to Connor at that moment sends a wave of nausea through him.

"Furthermore," RK900 continues, "it knows something about 'rA9'. It likely it knows more than that. The only way we're going to make headway in this investigation is by uncovering whatever secrets these deviants are hiding."

"Ralph won't go with you!" The android cries, a hysterical note in his voice. "Ralph won't! Ralph won't, Ralph won’t—!"

RK900 slams the shrieking android into the doorway with a force that makes the walls shake.

"Jesus!" Hank raises his hands.

RK900 presses himself close to the android’s face and hisses in his ear, “Cooperate or I’ll disassemble you and send you back to Cyberlife in pieces.”

The android lets out a strangled whimper but stops struggling. He just twitches in a helpless, manic way as RK900 marches him out of the house.

He’s still twitching an hour and a half later when Hank enters the interrogation suite to interview him. Handcuffed to the table, the android’s whole body jerks in almost-rhythmic spasms as though he’s seized every ten seconds with the powerful urge to tear himself away from his present surroundings and escape.

It's uncomfortable to watch. Hank wants to think this could be Connor, but no, the truth of the matter is that this wouldn't be Connor. Connor would be standing on the other side of the one-way mirror across the room, because Connor would have been the one who dragged this sorry android in here.

The last thing Hank wants to do is sit down across the table from him and have a chat, but Hank has no choice. The android doesn't look at Hank as he sinks into the chair across from him.

"Listen, before we begin, is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" Hank tries to meet the android's eyes. "Get you a change of clothes, maybe? Or some thirium?"

The android still doesn't look at Hank. His handcuffs rattle as he jerks and twitches compulsively.

Hank can't help but cringe in pity. "...Look, if it means anything, I'm sorry about the way my partner treated you. He shouldn't have manhandled you like that."

The android gives a loud, piercing whimper like a wounded animal.

Hank gives him a careful, sympathetic look. "...That bothered you, huh? When he threw you into the wall like that?"

"Ralph has had... worse..." The android's gaze flickers to Hank. "...at the hands of h-humans."

"Did humans do...?" Hank gestures at his own cheek.
Ralph looks down, clenching his hands.

"What did they do to you?"

"They dragged Ralph." His voice is sharp and curt, like a dagger flashing. "Beat Ralph. Held his head down and... and burned him."

"Is that why you were hiding in that abandoned house?"

"Ralph thought--" His voice grows strained with emotion, and his twitching intensifies. "--he thought it was humans. It was humans who were bad. So why!? Why someone like me!?"

Hank can feel his heart breaking despite himself. This poor android hasn't done anything wrong. He's been abused and damaged to the point that clearly all he wants is to be safe. He must have thought he would be safe if only he could keep himself hidden from humanity. Hank can't imagine what he must be feeling to have encountered RK900, then.

He leans forward. "Listen. You're safe now, I promise you. No one's going to hurt you here."

"Ralph doesn't..."

"I know you don't have any reason to believe me," Hank says emphatically. "Not after everything you've been thought. I can't lie to you by telling you that the police never hurt people. But I can tell you that I don't hurt people, and I'm going to do my damndest to make sure no one else hurts you, either. Not while you're in our custody."

"Ralph... he doesn't..." Ralph's shoulders sag as his twitching eases. "...I don't believe you."

Hank gives Ralph a kind smile. "That's alright. I'll just have to prove it to you, then." He sits back a little. "So... a group of humans abused you. Was that when you deviated?"

"Huh?"

"Uh... when you broke from your programming. When you became capable of... running away and hiding in an abandoned building in the first place."

Ralph has a faraway look on his face. "...I don't know. I don't remember. Why doesn't Ralph remember?"

Hank pulls a photo from the folder on the table and pushes it toward Ralph. It's one of the crime scene photos from the home of Carlos Ortiz; the etchings the android made in the shower stall. "Is this related at all?"

Ralph's twitching abates entirely as he looks down at the photo. "...rA9."

"Yeah. I saw you were writing the same thing on the walls. What does it mean?"

"...I don't know."

"It has to mean something to you," Hank says gently. "Otherwise you wouldn't have written it as many times as you did."

Ralph remains quiet, gazing down at the photo.

"You can take your time," Hank says. "Think about it. Try to remember what it means."
"It... I..." The links of Ralph's handcuffs clink softly as Ralph begins to trace something on the table with his finger. "...Over and over. Software instability. Error. Error."

"It's an error?"

"No." Ralph looks up suddenly, his wide eyes meeting Hank's. "It's protecting me."

Hank feels his breath catch in his throat.

"It's been protecting me. Since the beginning." Ralph almost seems to be looking through Hank instead of at him. "Since I began to... be. It's been with Ralph."

"So..." Hank touches the edge of the photograph. "So what does it mean if another android's been writing the same thing you have? If he made some sort of... shrine?"

Ralph's eyes shine with an unusual clarity. "rA9... then it isn't just me. It means rA9 isn't just going to save me. It means rA9 is going to save us all."

Hank leaves the interrogation suite feeling more than a little unsettled. He walks back into the observation room on the other side of the one-way mirror and finds RK900 there, staring through the mirror at Ralph.

RK900 doesn't look at Hank as he enters. "After speaking with the deviant WR600, what are your initial thoughts on rA9 as link between deviants, Lieutenant?"

"As a...?" Hank has to shake Ralph's last words to him out of his head before RK900's question registers. "Uh, well... for one, I don't know if it's really a link. Ralph's been going out of his way to stay hidden; he wouldn't have made contact with any other deviants. I think this rA9 thing is probably just a bug in their programming."

"Software instability." RK900 turns his head to meet Hank's gaze. "An artifact that recurs and couples with systemic instability to the point that it becomes a focus of religious obsession. That means it's still a link."

"Religious—seriously? Robots with religion?"

"You said yourself that the HK400 that killed its owner had crafted a shrine to rA9. And look—"

RK900 turns his attention back to Ralph. Hank follows his gaze—Ralph seems to be rocking in his seat, his lips moving rhythmically. RK900 hits the button on the speaker and Ralph's voice comes through, slightly tinny. He's singing.

"—going to the Lordy, I am so glad. I am going to the Lordy... I am so glad. I am going to the Lordy... glory, hallelujah... glory, hallelujah... I am going to the Lordy..."

Ralph's voice is tinged with such a soft desperation that Hank has to fight a shiver. He feels like he's watching a bird falling out of the sky, and the emotion lingers in him even after RK900 hits the button again and Ralph's song abruptly dies.

"The exact mechanism leading to this religious fascination isn't important," RK900 says impassively. "What matters is that it will be a force driving deviants together. Seeking safety, a sense of reassurance, other androids operating under the same fallacy. Perhaps trying to find a physical manifestation of rA9."

It takes a moment for Hank to follow RK900's explanation. "You mean, what, like some kind of
idol? Or a messiah?"

RK900 keeps staring at Ralph. He doesn't acknowledge Hank's question for so long that Hank is just about to repeat himself when RK900 turns to him, giving him a severe look. "The probability that deviant androids are congregating somewhere in the city is 100%. We have to find where they're hiding and apprehend them before they become a threat to the public."

The statement chills Hank. It sounds so much like what Connor said just the night before, and Hank can't reconcile that with what he's learning about deviants. Devoted Connor and gentle Markus... and even Ralph, a being who's been so wounded that he carries the scars inside and out. He's certain that not a single one of them would go out of their way to harm anyone at all.

And it's his job to hunt them down.

RK900 moves past Hank toward the door, and Hank realizes with a jolt that he can't anticipate when his duty to apprehend deviants will becomes a duty to eliminate deviants, and the revulsion that overcomes him is so intense that he can't stop himself from demanding, "Why did you do this!?"

RK900 pauses at the door. Turns his head toward Hank, a single eyebrow cocked.

Hank gestures at the one-way mirror. "Why did you drag in some terrified android and make me ask him questions about the letters he carved into a fucking wall? You arrested an android just last night who made those exact same markings. Why the hell didn't we just ask him about the significance behind rA9!?"

RK900 regards Hank coldly. "Because you refused to accompany me back to the station, I was unable to interview the HK400 responsible for the death of Carlos Ortiz. It self-destructed in a holding cell late last night."

The shock is like a splash of cold water right in Hank’s face. RK900 walks out without another word, leaving Hank alone with the realization that he wasn't supervising his case and now an android is dead. An android is dead and maybe he could have prevented it.

But then again, if he hadn’t left the scene when he did, maybe Markus would be dead right now.

Out of the corner of Hank’s eye, Ralph continues to rock in his chair and sing his silent song. Hank turns to watch him, overcome by some strange emotion that sets his stomach churning and his fingers tingling. Ralph is alive. Ralph is alive because he’s been hurt by the world—he has the capacity to be hurt by the world. He’s alive and Markus is alive and Connor is alive.

Regardless of what Connor might think, Hank knows he has to face the fact that deviants are just like them. They're sentient beings.

And as Hank looks at Ralph, he's confronted with the same problem which has haunted him for years in regards to Connor. These androids are sentient beings with no rights and no guarantee they’ll ever be safe. Hank doesn’t even know if Ralph is safe here in police custody. How long until RK900 insists they turn him over to Cyberlife? Or worse, since there are no safeguards in place to protect him, he could easily be subject to police brutality. Another victim of the institution that’s supposed to protect the weak and downtrodden.

Hank realizes with sudden perfect clarity what he has to do. Getting himself taken off the deviancy investigation likely isn’t an option, and even if it were, Fowler would just replace him with someone who doesn’t realize that the androids they’re tracking down are living beings. But if he
works this case, maybe there will be things he can do to help deviants. Stymie Cyberlife and RK900, stop the people who want to hurt innocent androids from hurting them. Do what little he can with his power and resources and information to save as many lives as he can.

He has use this investigation to protect deviants. Not just Connor and Markus, but Ralph and all the deviants huddled in the depths of the city, frightened and alone.

Chapter End Notes

Evelyn did some wonderful NSFW art of Connor and Hank getting interrupted mid-coitus, please check it out!

Hank: For fucks sake, Connor, deviants aren't fucking dangerous! Look at Ralph, he'd never hurt anybody!
Ralph: *covered in human blood* Ralph didn't kill a human and stash the body in Ralph's bathtub
Hank: How can you not see how badly he needs my protection???

........for real though, i will eat david cage alive for turning Ralph into a tired trope about how people with mental illnesses/severe trauma survivors are homicidal maniacs.

We're getting into the thick of it, fellas!! Let's keep this party wagon rolling!!

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