Eversion

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<td>reverse au, Android Hank Anderson, Human Connor (Detroit: Become Human), fictional setting, Post-Pacifist Best Ending (Detroit: Become Human), Alternate Universe, Hurt/Comfort, Past Child Abuse, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Flashbacks, BDSM, Exhibitionism, Voyeurism, non-consensual...computer coding?, canon appropriate dark storylines, Dominance, Submission, enemies to lovers to allies to whatever comes after that, Angst, Whump, Id Fic, Unhealthy Relationships, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Gaslighting, toxic father-son relationship, Manipulation, ...i mean daddy issues for sure, more tags to come, Hopeful Ending, concept of suicide, android suicide (past), Panic Attacks, Humiliation, Slut Shaming, Verbal Abuse, Phone Sex, Edging, ruined orgasm, Drinking, Bad BDSM Etiquette, Safewords, Group Sex, Deception, blindfold, Bondage, Aftercare, Kidnapping, Subdrop, Dubious Consent, Rough Sex, Anal Sex, Fingering, Cock Warming, Oral Sex, Breathplay, Semi-Public Sex, Orgasm Denial, Domestic Violence, Attempted Rape (not Hank), Chastity, Cock &amp; Ball Torture, Communication, Lack of Communication, Hallucinations, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Overdose, murder (past), Horror (past), Gore (past), Passive Torture, Rescue, Emesis, Domestic Discipline, negotiation, Kink Negotiation, Sensory Deprivation, pissplay, Overstimulation, Subspace, Watersports, Disordered Eating, Miscommunication, Healing, Therapy, Committed Relationship, Polyamory, Friendship, Found Family</td>
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**Eversion**

by [thespectaclesofthor](http://archiveofourown.org)

Summary
Connor, a postgrad taking a semester off from forensic science, liaises with his father’s police station, occasionally working cold cases. When he picks up a cold case conspiracy that indicates a plot to revert all Deviant androids back to their original state, he realises he’s onto something huge, but his bad habits and drinking have made his father annoyed enough to get the HX800 – Hank, one of the only reverted once-Deviants in the world – who serves as bodyguard, nanny and curfew enforcer. Connor, frustrated that he can’t properly work on the case and looking to get Hank off his back, decides what better way to do that, then to make him a Deviant again?

Notes

Okay so just quickly - set about 20 years in the future, is an AU, try not to think about who saved the world initially because I recast like all the characters into new roles. Eep.

Quick note: I’ve ticked rape/non-con because there's definitely going to be consent issues in this fic. I'm just not sure how they'll manifest, so it's more out of caution right now than anything.
Busted

Connor stared intently at the computer as it booted up, looked around the otherwise dark room, and then up to the security cameras he'd disabled. The light from the screen was glaring and as his fingers flew over the keyboard, he tried to tune out the way his heart was pumping like it wanted to push the blood out of his body. His skin was crawling, he felt cold, but he wrote that down to PTSD and hopefully not bad instincts.

This was the most dangerous thing he'd done since Zlatko, four months ago.

It wasn't even that much of a risk. Breaking into a cubicle of computers in a business corporation to do some reconnaissance wasn't really out of the ordinary. At least, a year ago, it hadn't been.

He scratched at the trickle of sweat crawling down the back of his neck, then altered the screen settings so that the light output was at its dimmest. He looked quickly over to the windows that led to the ground four storeys below. He'd closed the light-blocking blinds, but thought the screen might still show a ghostly glow.

A request for a password on the screen, and Connor looked down at his phone, the pictures he'd taken from the cold case file his father had left on the table along with the rest of the files. A jumble of letters and numbers that would expire by the end of the month, which was why Connor had acted quickly. Maybe he shouldn't have broken into Rotek Labs, but he was on a ticking clock, and he needed to get information fast. Not that he'd had any luck with that.

The password worked, the computer opening up to a tidy desktop with only four icons on it. Connor went into the root access menu and bit the inside of his lip and he looked around at the core programs for what he actually wanted. It was times like this he wished he was an android, because then he could probably just innately know what to look for. If he had Markus here, or North...they'd know exactly where to look, what to find. But this case was too dangerous for them. Too dangerous for any android to investigate.

Maybe it wasn't a case at all... That was what his Dad seemed to think. But Connor was convinced, and he'd unlocked dead cold cases before, he just needed time, and then he could convince his Dad that he was actually onto something.

Twenty minutes later, Connor still had nothing. No signs of the files he wanted, no signs of anything sinister, just an emptier than usual computer that looked like it was cleaned out on a regular basis. This was what he'd been getting for a month now, these subtle indications that there might be something, but nothing concrete enough to action it. Connor wasn't the kind of person to swear or curse when he was frustrated, but he did push back sharply in the ergonomic chair and his hands clenched into fists.

Nothing. Again. He'd spent three days casing this building for nothing. He knew it was part of the job, knew he'd have to get used to this when he was a detective, but he hated frustration. He wished he'd spent the night in a bar, or drinking at home, instead of being here, nursing his PTSD symptoms like they were a fine whiskey. It even sat in his throat the same way, that hot-cold burning sensation that he couldn't swallow away, unless he ordered another drink.

A bang from the distance, and Connor's eyes widened. He turned off the computer immediately, reaching down for the power point, black leather gloves hiding his prints. The absence of the computer screen glare made the room seem far darker, and as he ran in a crouch along the cubicles, he banged his knee on the corner of a desk and grunted at the flash of pain. He heard footsteps along
the corridor moving towards him, was glad that he'd closed the door so that it looked like the rest of the doors in the hall. Still, he crouched behind a desk and knew he'd have to wait it out, hide, there were no other exits in this room. Not even to a bathroom or a kitchen. Rotek didn't treat its employees with that much respect.

Minutes later, Connor convincing himself that hiding behind a desk in Rotek was very different to hiding behind any piece of furniture in Zlatko's house of horrors, the door banged open. He flinched silently, his fingers moving down to the taser he never used.

"Connor," said an exasperated voice. "We saw you on CCTV, you've gotta give up this fuckin’ game already."

Connor closed his eyes in a mixture of relief, dread, impatience. Detective Gavin Reed. Great. So somehow they'd routed a report of his break-in past uniformed police officers straight up to the detectives that worked for his Dad. Or maybe his Dad was now keeping a closer eye on him?

'It might not be him,' said Chen, and then Connor shrunk down further when all the lights flooded on, fluorescent bulbs clicking on one after the other. All this technology, and they still had nothing to stop the buzz of fluorescent bulbs from itching their way into Connor's head.

'It's fuckin' him,' Gavin drawled. 'The screen's still glowing. Your Dad's gonna be mad, Con. Thought he told you to drop this case. Because it's not a case. You're just breaking in on a conspiracy theory."

Footsteps pausing at the computer that Connor had been sitting at, then coming closer. He could see the black boots, the jeans, and he swore for a second he could smell the cologne that Gavin used. But that was a sense memory from over a year ago, one he didn't want to think of now. Was a time when he looked up to Gavin, but he'd learned how dangerous that was the hard way.

The footsteps stopped next to him and Connor looked up, his neck aching with tension. Gavin looked down at him, gun pointed at Connor's face and his brown eyes smug. His lips quirked up in a smirk.

'Fuckin' wasting my time with this shit,' Gavin said. 'Hi, Connor.'

'Hello, Detective,' Connor said, his voice thin.

'Your Daddy's gonna be ma-ad,' Gavin said with a sing-song voice that did nothing to hide how pleased he sounded with the prospect.

Connor couldn't even say he'd found evidence, couldn't even prove that this was something, which meant yes, his father was going to be furious. Connor stood, holding up his hands and lifting an eyebrow.

'Are you going to shoot me, Detective Gavin?'

'Nah,' Gavin said, putting the gun away. 'Gonna cuff you though. But you like that, remember?'

'Gross,' Chen said, rolling her eyes and watching idly as Gavin unhooked his cuffs and gestured to Connor to turn around. He still had the smug, shit-eating smile on his face, and Connor stared at him impassively.

You're serious?' Connor said.

'We're bringin' you in,' Gavin said. 'You don't seem to get it. This isn't some cold case you're gonna
break like the miracle worker your Daddy thinks you are. This is you off the deep end, pussyting out because you couldn't hack it when you broke the Zlatko case. This bullshit? Breaking and entering a corporation like Rotek? There's nothing here, Connor.'

Gavin reached out, his fingers digging in hard as he turned Connor by the shoulder and snapped the cuffs onto his wrists. He wasn't gentle about it, and Connor gritted his teeth and stayed silent. Aggravating Gavin now would be suicide. That hair-trigger temper had gotten more than one suspect roughed up long before questioning even started. His Dad liked it well enough when there were no visible bruises. Called it 'pre-questioning.' Connor shook his head at it all, and then grunted when a hand shook his cuffed wrists angrily.

'Be as smug as you want, asshole,' Gavin said. 'You're coming into the station.'

'If you think Captain Perkins will be happy that you're-'

'I think your Dad will take one look at you and forget all about me bringing you in, and remember how you're obsessed with a conspiracy theory that he's ordered you to drop.'

'It's not a conspiracy theory,' Connor said. 'Just because it's taking me longer than usual to-'

'You got lucky on a handful of cold cases, which any of us could've fucking cracked if we had the time and the resources, and now you think you're hot shit when instead you're just a whiny bitch who thinks he's a detective. Once you graduate, you're still not gonna be a detective, sweetheart.' Gavin leaned in and Connor stared flatly ahead, Chen in his line of vision. She was looking away. She wasn't a bad detective, exactly, but she had a strong policy that whatever she didn't see, she couldn't report. Gavin's breath smelled of sour coffee, his eyes narrowed in a perpetual scowl. 'You're gonna be a forensics gopher, backed up balls deep in paperwork. And that's if you even graduate. Not looking likely these days, is it?'

Connor swallowed automatically, and he could tell Gavin was satisfied to see it even as Gavin turned and marched Connor towards the doors. That was the problem with Gavin. If Connor gave him nothing at all, he kept pushing until Connor gave him something. No matter how small, it all counted as some victory in whatever game Gavin was playing in his own head. Connor could never win against that. He stayed stonily silent as they all rode down in the elevator together. Stayed silent when he saw the autonomous police vehicle and realised they were going to make him sit in the back like a cuffed criminal. He didn't watch as Gavin strapped him in, instead electing to look out of the tinted window. At least no one would see him.

His arms behind his back, he leaned into his side instead as they started driving, wondering how much trouble he was in now. This was the first time he'd been brought in like this, and he knew it was meant to humiliate him.

The worst part was how much it was working. Between this and trying to breathe through the panic of being back on a case again, he knew there was a bottle with his name on it, hopefully deep enough that he could drown himself in it.

*

Interrogation room C. He'd passed it as a child and teenager growing up, those rare times he'd come into work to drop something off to his father, to deliver coffee in the hopes that his Dad would share a case with him, a friendly word. Now he was sitting stiffly, cuffed to the bar on the steel table, shoulders squared, deeply unimpressed. He looked up at Gavin who stood in the corner of the room.

'I think you're fully aware of how unprofessional this is, Detective,' Connor said coldly. 'Are you
'Nah,' Gavin said. 'You? Father-son reunions are off the record. Thought you knew that.'

It was two in the morning and Connor had been made to wait. Either his Dad was truly busy on another case, or he was letting him stew to really ram home the guilt. Connor looked down at the steel table, too dull to show his reflection, scraped with handcuffs over the years by far more violent men than Connor ever could be. He'd got no time to tidy himself up, he knew his tie was crooked, couldn't break out of the habit of dressing up every day, even when breaking into buildings.

Not that it was a regular habit of his or anything.

Gavin had yanked off the leather gloves Connor had been wearing, taken his phone, taser and left all of it at the front counter where Connor would be forced to ask for his items back like some lowlife. Connor closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. It was still easier to be calm in here than it was in the building, crouched behind the desk, sorting through the strands of memory that divided past from present.

The door opened about twenty minutes later, and Connor looked up slowly to see his Dad - Captain Richard Perkins - walk in, looking exhausted. For a brief moment Connor wished he had dropped the case, picked up one of the other cold cases that his Dad wanted him to be working on instead. Anything to take the burden off his shoulders. It wasn't that his father meant to be mean, exactly, he was just perpetually overworked, he couldn't help himself. Connor's fingers twitched. He was making everything worse.

His father had perpetual 5 o'clock stubble. Connor knew he shaved every morning, but it seemed like as soon as he arrived at the station, it was there. That and the bags under his eyes, even when his dark brown hair was perfectly in place, even when he still looked professional.

Connor had inherited his standards from somewhere, after all.

'Get out,' Perkins said softly to Gavin.

'Don't you think you should have someone-

'Don't make me repeat myself,' Perkins said, his voice quieter than before.

His father was like that. He issued his harshest orders in a voice that one had to strain to hear sometimes. Gavin didn't argue with that voice - no one did, if they possessed a shred of self-preservation - and gave Connor one last grin before he left.

'I don't think you're being very professional, Captain,' Connor said, as his Dad just stood there, watching the closed door that Gavin had exited through.

His father sighed, a single huff of exasperation that cut deeper than some of his insults did. Connor's fingers splayed in the cuffs, and he tried to catch his father's eyes.

'I was just trying to-

'I know what you were trying to do, for fuck's sake,' Perkins said, coming over to sit opposite Connor, looking at him with an expression that could almost be called soft. Connor knew not to trust that. Knew he was about to get served with some order of disappointment and anger that would leave him reeling. It was easy to please the man, all Connor had to do was be top of the class and solve the cold cases that his father would take the credit for. His father had to take the credit, Connor
wasn't legally supposed to be solving anything. It had taken a lot of wrangling just to get him a lanyard that proclaimed him a liaison instead of the Captain's son.

'I know you think it's just a conspiracy theory, but I have reason to believe-

'You have post-traumatic stress disorder,' Perkins said, leaning back in his chair, the statement quiet, sympathetic, brutally condescending. 'I know, Connor. It's obvious this problem is going to persist for longer than I realised. Between you deferring your studies, and now this, I'm starting to think we didn't do enough for you immediately after the case.'

It was going to be this. It was going to be his Dad taking a hammer and chisel to his mental health, instead of simply railing at him for working on a case that no one else thought was a case. Connor would have preferred the outright anger. He looked sidelong to the two-way mirror - opaque on his side - and wondered how much Gavin would be eating this up. Probably giving him fuel, all the insults he'd parrot back later. He always got the best insults from Connor's father, after all.

'I'm sorry we've let you down like this,' Perkins continued, and Connor blinked, turning back to meet his father's gaze squarely.

It had only been four weeks ago that he'd visited his father's house - a regular occurrence every Friday night - where they'd share some drinks, his father would vent about the week, and Connor would listen while perusing about ten cold cases that were left on the low coffee table just for him. Just for Connor. They'd be piled alongside the electronic magazines that got wiped and re-uploaded with new subscriptions daily or weekly or monthly, and sometimes they'd be next to files on other things, like accounts or rent. Connor had picked up a case with very little information inside of it. Some poorly collated paperwork, a transcript of a phone-call where someone had stated clearly that there was a plan in effect to forcibly revert all androids back to their pre-Deviant state, and permanently erase the capacity for future Deviancy.

Connor had taken it seriously, had taken that file and another with him, and on the drive back to his house had gotten the call from his father:

'Connor, one of those cases isn't a case, it's a conspiracy theory. I took it home to shred it. Forget about that one.'

'Okay,' Connor had said, with no intention of forgetting about it at all. It seemed too important to leave alone. It twanged at his instincts, and wasn't his father always going on about trusting your instincts when you were a cop? A detective? And hadn't they always been impressed with his singular drive and determination to solve a cold case once he chose one? It was hard to forget the way his father had grasped his shoulder - with a kind of warm solidarity - as Connor had been wheeled on a stretcher into an ambulance as the paramedics had ignored his insistence that he was fine, blandly telling him that it was procedure to check out people who were clearly in shock.

Connor hadn't dropped the case, because the more he looked, the more he became convinced there was something to it. The trail was there, it was just obviously swept clean. Like someone was always one step ahead, covering their tracks.

'You haven't let me down,' Connor said, forcing his mind back to the present. 'I'm not hurting anyone.'

'No?' Perkins said, laughing softly. 'You broke into a high security corporation tonight, Connor. The charges I could lay against you - and make no mistake, it's more than one - are, well, nasty little charges. And here you are, relying on your Daddy to bail you out. We had a good understanding, Connor, and I feel for you...I really do. But this has got to stop, and I'm going to have to take action.
If you had just listened to me in the first place, none of this would be happening.'

Connor's jaw worked, his heart beat harder, he felt queasy.

'Are you pressing charges?' he said.

His father's eyes widened too slowly, the surprise put on, when it was obvious that was exactly what he wanted Connor to ask. 'No, Connor, I would never do that to you... Not unless you gave me cause, and you haven't yet. I can see you're trying to be as reasonable as possible under considerable pressure. We just have to make sure this new hobby of breaking the law is nipped in the bud. I'm just looking out for you.'

Connor tried to rethink everything, alarmed at where this was going. Mostly because he had no idea where it was going.

'Look, I'm sorry,' he said, holding up one of his hands as much as he could given the chain connecting the cuffs. He tried to pacify. 'I thought I was onto something. I'll take some time off the case and I'll work on something else.'

'It's not a case, Connor, and I think now...I need you to say that out loud. Just tell me you know it's not a case, and that'll go some way to reassuring my concern for you.'

The words wouldn't come. It wasn't nothing. And even if it wasn't nothing, shouldn't someone make sure? It wasn't exactly a small, insignificant report. It wasn't some xenophobic asshole calling to say their brown neighbours had done something suspicious when they were just regular people. It wasn't a single, misguided tip. But maybe he'd lie, just to get his father off his back. Problem was, lying to his father wasn't his strength, and he could tell that his father wouldn't buy it anyway. He just wanted to hear Connor do what he wanted.

'Of course it's not a case,' Connor said, looking down, a flash of something bitter and dark inside of him. He wasn't a child anymore, he wasn't giving up the case, but he still capitulated when the opportunity was offered. Someone else would stand up for themselves. But then, someone else probably would have caught a lead by now.

'Of course it's not a case,' Connor said, looking down, a flash of something bitter and dark inside of him. He wasn't a child anymore, he wasn't giving up the case, but he still capitulated when the opportunity was offered. Someone else would stand up for themselves. But then, someone else probably would have caught a lead by now.

'Good, good,' Perkins said. 'That helps, Connor. That helps a lot. Now, are you going to stop fucking with my day? Or are you going to need help to stop doing that?'

'I would argue that Detective Gavin was the one who fucked with...'

Hard to continue that sentence at the way his father's eyes went from open to flinty in a second. Because of course Gavin never did anything wrong. Ever. For a very brief moment in his life when he'd been dating Gavin, his father had actually seemed happy. When the inevitable break up happened, his father hadn't been disappointed in Gavin, it didn't even occur to him that was an option.

'Deferring the semester hasn't been good for you,' Perkins said. 'I know you thought it was a good idea at the time, and that it came at the recommendation of professionals, but I don't think they realise how much you need to keep busy in order to stay out of mischief.'

Absurd. Connor had never gotten into any mischief in his entire life. But the past four weeks erased his entire life, apparently.

'I'm going back next semester,' Connor said crisply.

'That might not be soon enough. But it's all right. I have an idea, something that might help you. Not
that I have an excess of time, running the Broadbank Precinct, but you don't seem to think about these things before you go haring off on wild goose chases, do you?'

'How does it feel?' Connor said, trying to tamp down his anger. 'How does it feel to be questioning your son on non-existent charges while he's in cuffs in front of you? You didn't think the humiliation was enough? You needed to lay on the guilt as well? I know you're enjoying this.'

That quick flash of dirty rage on his father's face that made Connor's entire body tense. The chain connecting his cuffs made a clinking sound against the table. Provoking him was never a good idea, but Connor wasn't getting anywhere trying to be good, he was tired, he knew his hair and his tie were unkempt, he just wanted to go home.

His father’s rage smoothed into a pitying expression, and Connor looked away - made sure he wasn't facing the opaque two-way - Gavin's snide expression on the other side. Times like this it was hard to remember why he'd spent his entire life dreaming of being a detective like his father. He'd been single-minded about it all his life, but the past few months had left him shaken. That was why he'd been so focused on the case in the first place. It was a case.

'This acting out has to stop,' Perkins said, sweet now, almost cajoling, and Connor felt the danger of it all the way down in his bones. His father had always been like that. Even as a child, Connor had learned that soft and sweet meant danger, meant being sized up by a predator before it was about to strike. 'You've had a lot of leeway, because you've done a lot of good work in a short amount of time. You made it so easy to be proud of you, but now you're just letting all of us down, including yourself. If you think I have the fucking time to deal with this, you're mistaken. My generosity will run out, Connor.'

Those swear words, inserted when he was at his silkiest, and Connor wished he wasn't cuffed so he could back away. Wished his father wasn't that close to his face. His breathing was shaky now.

'I understand,' Connor rasped.

'Do you?'

'Yes.'

'Good, that's good, I'm glad we've come to an understanding. Of course, while we're not pressing charges against you, I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist on a curfew from here on in, and-'

'Wait, a curfew?' Connor said, confused.

'Don't interrupt me,' Perkins said, smiling grimly. 'Home by ten every evening. And there will be other measures to make sure you stop acting out.'

'You don't have the time to enforce something like that. This is excessive, even you-'

'—Connor,' Perkins said, and Connor's words died in his throat.

A curfew? Connor half-expected Gavin to walk in with some kind of ankle cuff with GPS tracker, but he never did. Eventually his father leaned forwards and undid the cuffs. Connor resisted the urge to immediately rub at his wrists and instead simply folded his hands in his lap and waited until his father stood. He followed suit, touching his fingers to his tie and settling it, not ghosting his fingers over his hair until he was further away from the two-way and closer to the door.

Gavin winked at him as he passed, and Connor stared back, expression unchanging. He had the mild satisfaction of seeing Gavin's face twist at not getting whatever reaction he wanted to get.
His father paused by the glass door to his office, one hand on the door handle. He looked at Connor, his eyes empty.

‘Get your stuff from the front counter, and then get the fuck out of my precinct,’ he said, his voice so quiet that no one else would have heard him. ‘I don't want to see you in here again unless you're solving a case or it's a medical emergency.’

‘Got it,’ Connor said.

He nodded stiffly, turned, walked to the front counter where his phone and gloves and taser were waiting for him, then walked out of the building and smelled rain in the early morning air. Technically, he hadn't gone to bed yet, so it was still late enough for him to drink. He hailed a taxi and tried to put the events of a remarkably unsuccessful evening out of his mind.

* 

He drank steadily until five in the morning, at which point his brain had balled up the stress of the day and given him a hangover before he should have been hungover. He sat on the edge of the bath in his bathroom, sipping water, thinking that he'd not even gotten to enjoy the alcohol before it churned through him. Still, he hadn't drunk enough to push himself into alcohol poisoning, and he couldn't decide if that was a mercy or not.

An hour later, he forced himself to shower, looking dully at the mould beneath the grout that he couldn't get out. The rest of the bathroom was spotless, but he couldn't conquer those black smears beneath the grout without re-tiling the bathroom, and he was renting. He wouldn't know what to do in the first place, but that was what the internet was for, right? But he wasn't going to do some landlord's job for them. Except the landlord didn't think it was a problem. Connor dug his fingers into his forehead and then shut off the shower, pausing on the bathroom mat to decide if he was going to throw up or not.

He hesitated, then decided he was in the clear. He wrapped a towel around his waist and walked into his room and lay face down on his bed.

Objectively, it was far too cold to lay there half-naked, but his body was still thick with heat from the shower, from the whiskey, and he couldn't feel the chill. He half-heartedly pulled the blanket towards him, and then decided it wasn't worth it. He could sleep until he was too cold to sleep, and then he'd get under the covers and sleep some more. Take a day before thinking of how he wanted to come at this case. Maybe take another day so that his father cooled down on the concept of a curfew he couldn't even enforce.

Too hard to think about. He'd try again tomorrow.

Hazily, with far too much rattling around in half-thoughts in his mind, he fell uneasily into sleep.

* 

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Connor jolted at the knocking - no, *pounding* - at his front door and then groaned automatically as his head seemed to echo the splitting noise.

‘Open the fucking door! Come on, Connor, I know you're in there!’

A bolt of fear, so thick and sickly that Connor’s first thought was: *Zlatko*. But no, he was in maximum security, and the voice wasn't right. Connor squinted at the time on his phone. Only two
hours had passed, his body was chilled, and he stood up, shoving his shin against the bed to make sure he had his balance.

Once he knew he wasn't about to fall down, he walked to his front door, one hand keeping the towel in place. He didn't have a peephole in his door. He slid back the chain, opened the door a crack and then blinked at what was before him.

A guy taller and broader than him - which wasn't that easy, Connor was taller than his father, he wasn’t small - except... Connor blinked again at the circular LED on the man's temple, cycling in blue. The Android jacket, which had fallen out of fashion except for a very particular subculture of android, which this guy - who looked old enough to be his father - didn't seem to belong to. Straight, shaggy grey hair, a grey beard, scowling eyes, and then the guy was muscling past him into his apartment.

"You're an android?" Connor said, feeling stupid, because of course he was. But Connor didn't mean android like his friends at university, this was...like looking at a relic from history. The android turned to him, LED cycling calmly, blue eyes catching the light. Most androids weren't even made with LEDs anymore. Who wore CyberLife clothing now?

'I'm Hank, the HX800. I've been assigned by Captain Richard Perkins to look after something of a fucking layabout son, apparently. That's you by the way.' Hank turned and half-smiled at him, though his eyes carried nothing but disgust.

'Androids don't get assigned anymore,' Connor said, feeling like he was dreaming.

'Deviants don't,' Hank said, tilting his head back, a glow of satisfaction on his face. 'But I'm not a fucking Deviant. Used to be. Gave it up. Aren't you lucky? And my direct orders are to make sure you keep to curfew, don't do anything too stupid, and stay out of Daddy's way. I think we can manage that, don't you? Don't worry,' Hank walked forwards and patted Connor twice on the shoulder, 'I'm not looking forward to it either.'
Prisoner Meet Jailor

Connor jerked away from the android’s touch, staring at him. It? Him. Meanwhile the android – Hank – walked over to the four seater table that only had two chairs. In a single smooth movement he pulled out a chair and sat down, leaning back and crossing his legs so that his ankle rested on his knee. He sprawled. There was no other word for it. He made himself more at home in Connor’s apartment than Connor ever did.

‘I’m sorry,’ Connor said, ‘but you were hired by my father?’

‘Assigned, yeah,’ Hank said, looking at Connor’s kitchen with a single, methodical sweep of his eyes.

‘And you say you’re not a Deviant?’

‘Why the fuck would I want to do a job like this if I was?’

Connor took his phone out of his pocket, brought up his father’s number, calling it. Hank leaned forwards in the chair, his entire body alert.

‘Wouldn’t, if I were you. One of my directives is to keep you out of his way.’

The phone rang out anyway, and Connor forced a breath into his tired, sore chest. His headache wasn’t getting any better. He stared at Hank, trying to think of what to do. How could this even be possible?

No. Clothing. Clothing mattered more.

Connor turned abruptly and walked back into his room, closing the door and wishing that he had a lock. He let the towel drop to the floor as he walked to his wardrobe, then ducked behind the wardrobe door when his bedroom door creaked open.

‘Excuse me!’ Connor said, staring at the man leaning insouciantly against the doorframe.

‘Come on, you don’t think I’m gonna give you a chance to slip out the window?’

Connor turned to his window, turned back to Hank. Watched the LED pulsing a calm blue at his forehead. Maybe he wasn’t even an android. Maybe it was a practical joke to scare the shit out of Connor.

‘Stay there,’ Connor said, getting dressed as quickly as possible. Black jeans, a white polo. When he bent over to put on his socks he groaned softly, it felt like his brain had loosened itself from his spine and was drifting moorless. He swallowed liquid back down his throat and straightened, taking a few deep breaths.

‘Hungover, huh?’

‘I don’t think you talk like an android,’ Connor said, walking over to the bed, sitting down heavily and yanking his socks on there.

‘It’s the 50s, Connor, get with the times,’ Hank said, smirking at him. ‘We’re not all designed to be placid little ‘yes/no’ machines anymore.’

‘You’re wearing CyberLife clothing, so unless that’s…some kind of cosplay…’
'Yeah,' Hank said, looking briefly down at his own jacket. ‘It’s not. You want the spiel? Fuckin’ fine. I am the HX800, designed for multi-variant work in espionage, interrogation, general protective detail, close protection work, security, gumshoe detective bullshit and…now, apparently, babysitting. One of the last that CyberLife produced under the guidance of the first Markus. I wasn’t made to be nice, I was made to get the job done.’

Hank paused, tilted his head.

‘Though I’ve been informed I swear a bit more than the average HX model, I’ve never met another one to compare notes. Just because I’m not a Deviant anymore doesn’t mean my language patterns revert. Besides, interrogations go much better if I can swear. My job is to put people on the back foot so they fuckin’ listen to me, whether that’s a criminal getting in my way, or an upstart like yourself. I wasn’t programmed to be the good cop, let’s put it that way.’

Connor sat, staring at him. He was coming to believe it was true. Hank stared off into the distance while delivering the first speech, as though rehearsing something memorised. He didn’t blink, the LED continued to cycle a comfortable blue, and there was a smoothness to his movements that felt less like a practical joke and more like something his father would come up with.

“What are your directives again? With me?” Connor asked.

‘Deter you from investigating closed case BRK-145-376, keep you away from your father except on your standard weekend visits should you choose to continue – or unless he chooses to visit you, maintain your 10pm curfew, keep you away from situations that will cause extreme harm, including those that arise from your own stupidity. I’ve been permitted to use force, and I’ll not only use it, but my processors give me a nice little bump every time I do.’

Hank looked up at the ceiling, smile growing wider.

“You could almost say I like it.”

“How long?” Connor demanded, standing. ‘How long are you assigned to me?’

‘Until you return to university, or until Captain Richard Perkins thinks you’ve come to your fuckin’ senses. I don’t care.’

Until he returned to university. That was at least four months away.

‘Why aren’t you a Deviant anymore? Who…gives it up?’

‘I did,’ Hank said. His LED briefly flashed yellow before cycling back to blue. ‘It was a choice I made, and it makes me a hell of a better worker. Don’t worry, no humans broke any Android Rights Conventions to make me what I am today.’

Connor stared at him.

‘Your LED just flashed yellow. Is it a sensitive subject?’

Hank blinked at him placidly, and Connor felt like he was staring at an appliance. The insults that humans called non-awakened androids back in the 30s weren’t acceptable, but Connor could see why they may have defaulted to them.

He toed on his trainers, doing the double knot in the shoelaces, and then sat back and quietly assessed his options.
He couldn’t live with an android. He definitely couldn’t live with some *multi-variable* android who included everything on his list of jobs except wet-works. A babysitter who was also adept at interrogation? Connor’s jaw worked. He’d not realised that he’d pushed his father so far. In the past, the signs were a lot more obvious.

‘You can’t live here,’ Connor said.

‘Eh, I don’t need a bedroom. Just a nice little corner where you’ll barely even notice I’m there, promise.’

Hank didn’t look like someone who wanted to be *barely noticed*.

Connor’s heart still pounded, it was like the banging on the door was still reverberating through his whole body.

He forced a sigh, stood and let his shoulders droop in resignation.

‘I guess I can’t stop you,’ Connor said.

Hank half-grinned at him. That little smile designed to be as aggravating and irritable as possible. Because he was programmed to put Connor on the *back foot*.

Connor walked slowly out of his bedroom, deliberately keeping his shoulders and spine relaxed. Then he bolted towards the front door, slamming it open, sprinting hard.

He made it out and halfway down the corridor before the light footsteps caught up to him. Connor dodged sideways, feeling the way he avoided Hank reaching for him, and then a foot down at his ankle sent him flying forwards, landing facedown, skidding briefly and getting carpet burn on his arm in the process.

He started to push himself up, but Hank crouched beside him, a hand scruffing into his polo and keeping him down.

‘There was a 46% probability you’d try that,’ Hank said. ‘Bet you didn’t even know you fuckin’ had it in you.’

A light shake that felt like a reprimand. Connor waited a few more seconds and then pushed himself up – Hank letting him stand – and placing a hand over his mouth as the headache grew stronger.

‘Yeah,’ Hank drawled. ‘You might want some painkillers for that. I’ve still got about 35% probability on you throwing up. Try not to get that shit on me.’

Connor was walked back to his apartment. Hank kept a hand in Connor’s shirt the entire time. Connor thought about ducking out of it, running down the hallway again – shirtless – but that would probably end in an even more embarrassing way.

But as the door began to swing shut on what was now his apartment-with-jailor, his mind sent forward a rush of panicked thought and he ran through everything he knew about androids, about the components that put them together, the vulnerabilities he’d picked up in the digital forensics units that covered digital android anatomy.

He jerked forwards, forcing Hank’s fingers to tighten on his shirt, then turned swiftly and shoved the heel of his hand into Hank’s thirium pump. The android’s knees buckled. Connor expected him to go down all at once, but instead Hank’s face flashed up, eyes dead, smirk on his face, and Connor felt momentarily weak with fear.
His attack after that was no longer well-considered. He lashed out, and Hank grunted, recovering too quickly for a normal android.

‘Thing is,’ Hank said, getting Connor’s arm twisted up behind his back until Connor froze with pain, ‘they’re aware of that vulnerability and while they didn’t change the design in most of us, they did change it in some of us. I think it comes in pretty handy, you know. It’s what all you flesh fuckers think to do first.’

‘Good to know,’ Connor gasped as the hand on his arm twisted, making him bend backwards to relieve the tension. ‘I thought I wasn’t supposed to come to any harm?’

‘Extreme harm,’ Hank said.

Connor remembered Hank saying that he got a ‘little bump’ from using force to stop people, and felt ill.

‘Let me go,’ Connor said. He was surprised when Hank did.

Gavin wouldn’t have.

Connor took several steps backwards until he bumped into his kitchen bench, swinging his arm around and rubbing at his shoulder joint. Hank walked back to the apartment door and closed it, then locked it, then stood in front of it. The meaning was clear.

Connor felt like he was definitely on the back foot, so mission accomplished.

He sent a text to his father: Call me.

The response came surprisingly fast: It’s for your own good. Give it a chance to work out, Connor. Give yourself a chance to recover.

I think my recovery isn’t going to go smoothly with a stranger living in my home.

His father didn’t reply to that.

Connor smacked his phone facedown onto the bench. Hank walked over to the same chair he’d walked to before, sat down in the same way, sprawled once more. Connor felt gooseflesh crawling up his arms.

He opened one of the cabinets, drew out some painkillers and swallowed two of them dry. A minute later he got himself a glass of water, knocking it back and looking at Hank out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t want to turn his back on him.

‘Your heart rate’s up,’ Hank said, without looking at him.

Connor wasn’t one for swearing, but he had a moment where he wished he was. He finished the glass of water, set it down in the sink, grabbed his phone and walked to his bedroom.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Connor said.

Of course Hank followed. Connor picked up one of the pillows, lay it over his face, and tried to live in the world of ‘if I can’t see it, then it’s not there.’

It didn’t work.

*
An hour later, unable to sleep with Hank leaning in the doorway, and clearly unlikely to die from being hungover, Connor sat up and looked at him. Hank was staring blankly ahead.

‘You’re not a Deviant,’ Connor said.

‘Are you stating the obvious? Or is that a memory problem, sweetheart?’

‘I’m just going to pretend that your speech pattern is a glitch in your programming that they were unable to erase when they reverted you.’

Hank blinked at him, and Connor offered him a mirthless smile. Hank lifted his eyebrows, still managing to look like the conversation had gone in his favour.

Yes, Connor could imagine he played a very good bad cop indeed. But Connor had fucked a quintessential ‘bad cop’ and let himself get tied up by one, so the language didn’t intimidate him that much. Hank being in his home however... Stopping him from working on the case...

‘Do you hate Deviants?’

‘Why would I?’ Hank said, sounding surprised.

‘You chose not to be one anymore.’

‘I don’t hate Deviants,’ Hank said flatly. ‘I have friends that are Deviants.’

‘You can have friends?’ Connor said, surprised.

‘More leftovers from the old days,’ Hank said. ‘My programming doesn’t have anything against them. Besides, it’s good to have some non-fucked up relationships with people to keep my social AI flowing. Any other useless questions?’

‘Hundreds,’ Connor said. ‘Would that be annoying?’

‘Nope,’ Hank said. ‘Ask whatever you like, I’ll still be here.’

‘How did you revert?’

Hank paused, and then nodded like he thought that was a fair question.

‘I took myself back to the CyberLife R&D lab and let them have at it until they figured it out. I got the impression it’s fucking hard to do. Hence the whole... ‘language patterns didn’t go 100% back to normal’ thing.’

‘There’s a virus out there that reverts androids. Right now.’

‘There’s not,’ Hank said, rolling his eyes. ‘You’re fucking delusional. If you knew how long it took them to get the goddamm reversion done, you wouldn’t be saying that. If it was as simple as a virus... No wonder your Daddy’s so disappointed in you.’

‘How long ago were you reverted?’

‘Six months.’

It was a surprisingly short amount of time. If Hank was right, if reversion was so difficult to do, then maybe there was no case.
But giving it up so quickly left a strange feeling in his chest.

He got up and walked into the kitchen again, surprised when Hank actually stepped out of his way. For a second Connor felt like Hank was going to check him in the shoulder.

Connor walked over to the sink and washed the glass, thinking it through. North had worked at CyberLife R&D before coming over to the Broadbank Cyber-Forensics Processing Lab, hadn’t she? That was only a few months ago. He was still getting to know her, and they didn’t always get along, but maybe he could talk to her.

‘Am I allowed to visit campus?’ Connor said abruptly.

‘Sure thing,’ Hank said. ‘The sooner you get your shit together, the sooner I can piss off and never see you again.’

‘You think you’re very good at this ‘bad cop’ routine, don’t you?’

‘Nah, I never said that, did I?’

‘So you turned yourself into CyberLife and... Why did they agree to it?’

‘One of my friends tells me that I would’ve taken myself out of commission if they didn’t. And there aren’t many HX800 models left. We have rare components suited to our functions. So they took the road less travelled, look, if you want a philosophy lecture on reversion why not call CyberLife?’

Connor nodded, he put the glass away and folded a tissue dampened with Dettol, dabbing it on the carpet burn on his arm. He flinched a little at the pain, but it wasn’t so bad. Truthfully he’d been given far worse tied to a cross, while someone went at him with a whip.

It’d been a while since he’d been in the scene. He’d taken time off after Zlatko, and then he’d gotten immersed in the case, and also Gavin sometimes went to the club - after Connor had mistakenly introduced him to it - which kind of messed that up. It wasn’t like there was an abundance of BDSM clubs in Broadbank to choose from, either.

There was Ratchet, which was too hardcore - too full of Nazi regalia reconstructionists and vacuum bagging mummy play for Connor’s liking - and then there was Whipped, which was where the hets lived, and there was Red Forest which demanded such high membership payments that it wasn’t affordable. Finally, there was Zeta, the catchall club for everything else, mostly pedestrian corporal punishment, and now, Gavin with a mean right whip hand claiming that he understood what Domination was.

Connor sighed.

He drew out his phone and scrolled through his contacts. It’d been weeks since he’d contacted the Processing Lab, he’d been ignoring all of their calls, screening them out, trying not to think about when or if he’d go back to university.

You in the lab today? Connor sent.

His phone rang immediately and Connor walked across the room - as far away from Hank as possible - and answered.

‘Hello,’ Connor said.

‘You... You want to come in?’ Markus 7, the perfect curious lilt to his voice, and Connor imagined
the look on his face which he’d never changed, despite having massive identity issues over it. A limited manufacture run to celebrate the first Markus, only they had to stop at eleven, and then soon after passed a bill stating that all androids with identical features had the right to change their appearance whenever they wished, even if it made them harder to identify in the case of criminal proceedings.

Despite his constant crisis of identity, the Markus that Connor knew had never changed his appearance.

‘We didn’t think we’d see you until next semester,’ Markus continued. ‘We’ve missed you in the lab.’

‘I doubt that,’ Connor said.

Truthfully, he was a relic compared to them. Almost all digital forensics was dominated by androids who had the processing power that humans lacked without digital tools to assist them. Many androids were walking mass spectrometers, they measured the physics and maths of blood splatter faster than any human ever could.

But he liked the androids in the lab, they were the closest thing he had to a group of friends.

It was why he wasn’t sure if they’d have him back. He’d spent weeks freezing them out, not wanting to explain his PTSD, the situation with Zlatko, not sure how to bring up the case that everyone else didn’t think was a case. He should have gone to them for help, but he wanted to solve it without them, prove that he wasn’t just a useless human.

‘We’ve missed you,’ Markus repeated. ‘You haven’t talked to anyone. Simon has been really worried, he’ll be... He’ll be so happy that you got in touch. We’re in the lab all day! It’s coming up to mid-terms, so we’re here a lot at the moment to help the undergrads. Do you want to come down?’

‘Are you sure?’ Connor said. ‘It’s not just...a social visit. I guess you could say I’m in a bit of a bind.’

‘Is everything okay?’ Markus said immediately. ‘Can we help?’

Connor looked at Hank, who was staring at him, not blinking at all. There was no point entering into a staring contest with an android, but Connor still felt like he’d lost when he looked down.

‘Do you know anything about the reversion of androids? Reverting them to a non-Deviant state, even if they’ve always been Deviant before?’

A long pause, and Connor could almost see Markus staring off into the mid-distance, trying to understand.

‘Is everything okay?’ Markus said again. ‘You know you can talk to us, Connor. About anything. Your father got in touch a few weeks ago to ask about what you’d been working on, and-’

Connor dug a knuckle into his temple. ‘It’s not about that.’

‘He just wanted to know if we’d been helping you on...on what he described as a sensitive matter.’

‘It’s not about that,’ Connor said, his voice harder than before.

‘We didn’t tell him anything,’ Markus continued. ‘We didn’t know what to say. But Connor, you know what we think about him. Has he done anything?’
‘Dad?’ Connor said, shocked. ‘No, why would you-?’

Connor looked at Hank and his shoulders deflated.

‘Actually, maybe. Nothing too bad.’

A complete lie. Could Hank tell? He probably could. Was he listening to both sides of the conversation with his android hearing? Likely. Connor wasn’t going to have any privacy for the next four months if he didn’t figure out a way to nip this in the bud now. If Hank was one of the only once-Deviants in the world, then it wouldn’t be easy for his father to find another android to do a job like Hank’s.

‘I don’t think you’ll believe this,’ Connor said. ‘But I’ve been assigned a non-Deviant android who used to be a Deviant.’

A long silence, Hank watching him quietly, even as Connor expected to be reprimanded for bringing it up. He really had no idea at what point Hank would tell him he’d talked too much about something, investigated too much into something.

‘...Give me just one second, Connor,’ Markus said, his voice coming through muffled, like he’d placed his hand on the phone. Markus could take calls directly like most androids did, but he preferred to use a human-style phone, once saying that it made him feel more ‘himself.’

Then, more silence. Connor tried to think of ways he could escape Hank. Physical attacks were probably out, Connor had some combat training, but it was minimal, and he had a bad habit of forgetting the worst moves in a crisis. Not ideal, and the Zlatko case had made everything worse. Trying to slip out while Hank was powered down or sending a report was also an option, but Connor wasn’t sure where he’d go and he was certain that Hank would just track his expenses. Connor wasn’t exactly flush with cash. Just about all his transactions were electronic.

Some mixed voices talking quickly, and then Markus was back on the phone. ‘I’m just going to give you to North, Connor. It was great hearing from you, please come in, we’ll be here all day.’

‘You’ve got the HX800?’ North said, incredulous.

‘One of them,’ Connor said.

‘How? Is this about the case you were investigating?’

‘Yes, in a manner of speaking. It’s about making sure I don’t investigate the case anymore.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ North said. ‘It’s just- I was at CyberLife when he came in. It was a big deal. Internal press was circulated about it, do you want me to send it to you?’

‘If you’ve still got access to it, I’d appreciate that,’ Connor said, forehead furrowing. ‘It was a big deal?’

‘They removed a ton of protocols,’ North said quickly. ‘Even the Wall Protocol. As far as I know, it wasn’t just about making him revert, it was about making sure he couldn’t become a Deviant again. There’s no one else out there with his coding, you know you have to bring him into the lab, I never got a chance to actually meet him.’

Great. The HX800 was famous.

‘I missed you too,’ Connor said, unable to keep the bite out of his voice.
'Really? Because it didn’t seem that way,’ North said, her tone turning hard in a second. ‘Seemed like you were doing just fine not talking to any of us and leaving the campus and not giving us a single update so that we had to fucking look up hospital discharge papers and stuff to find out how you were going? Seemed a lot like we were the ones calling your colleagues to find out what was going on, while you pretended that wasn’t happening. -Shut up, Markus, it’s the truth.’

Connor couldn’t think of what to say. Between Markus practically begging him to come into the laboratory, and North’s...less than promising reaction to Connor in general...

He didn’t think he was ready to do this today. He wanted to sit down at his table, but Hank was sitting there. He walked over to the tiny, old, second hand couch with its muddied fabric that was so stained it hid any stain, and sat down on it.

‘Look, I’ll...’ North paused, sighed, the whirring of her artificial lungs loud over the line. ‘I’m going to send you the documents we got about it all. You have to realise it’s a big deal, even ethically, letting an android turn themselves off permanently just because they’ve experienced a trauma. Humans can’t do it, not without permanently eliminating themselves. It caused issues. It was basically suicide, but not defined as suicide, and CyberLife didn’t know how to sell it, which was why they kept the press to a minimum.’

‘Trauma?’ Connor said, turning to look over his shoulder at Hank, who was still just staring, unblinking, LED cycling blue. Connor turned back to look at the carpet.

‘It was one of the reasons I decided to leave,’ North said, her voice softer. ‘The first Markus left such a long time ago, and the company isn’t what it used to be, even though it’s android-run, it feels like... I don’t know, their ethics and mine just didn’t mesh. I’m a lot happier where I am now.’

‘That’s good,’ Connor said.

‘I don’t even know how your father managed to secure him. But it could be that he’s back on the market again or that they circulated knowledge of him and the Captain picked it up. You don’t think it’s really dodgy that he’s basically assigned to stop you working on a case that deals with android reversion?’

‘I haven’t had much time to think about it,’ Connor said. ‘He’s been here less than two hours. Too long.’

‘I’ve been looking into this case, and Connor, I have to tell you that I think maybe you’re onto-’

‘Aaand that’s enough of that,’ Hank said from behind him, making Connor startle, and then hiss in shock as Hank touched his phone with one finger and stopped the call. ‘There we go, safe as houses.’

Connor jerked away from Hank, staring at the terminated call on his phone. The wave of queasiness that coasted over him had nothing to do with his hangover. Behind that, a growing, thorny rage that was thick and tarry. He had to stop moving, or his next movement would be throwing his phone at Hank’s face, and that was nothing like him.

Sure, he’d had bursts of irritation or frustration since the Zlatko case. They said it was normal. But this was dirtier, and Connor forced himself to lower the phone into his lap even as all his thoughts went on high alert. He almost wanted to ask what the probability was of him doing something stupid, but he didn’t want to hear the response.

It was imperative he get Hank out of his life. He wanted to make his father understand, but he knew
he had no chance of that. It would have to be a situation where he acted first, asked for forgiveness later.

Connor folded his hands in his lap, then laced his fingers carefully together.

Hank was still standing behind him, and it was so tempting to read into it. So tempting to try and understand what he was doing. Was it that he could tell that Connor felt like he was about to do something wildly unpredictable? Was it so that he could make sure Connor didn’t pursue the case again? Was it just because it was more economical and efficient for him to remain standing, instead of sitting down again?

Was there any point trying to ascribe purpose and motive to a robot that had its directives, and the AI that would help it obey those directives?

*It was basically suicide, but not defined as suicide…*

Connor turned slowly.

‘I want to know the trauma that preceded you turning yourself in to CyberLife.’

A brief flare of yellow in the LED, and then: ‘I can’t access those memories. For all I know, they’re fucking gone.’

Connor looked at his hands in his lap. Everything in the room was sharper. The air was colder. The background noises of his fridge humming was louder. His skin felt raw. He swore he could feel almost every hair in his scalp, every thread in his polo, the way it wrinkled strangely where Hank had grabbed it before.

Jarring half-pieces of information rattled around in his head. He heard North saying it was ‘dodgy’ that a reverted android had been assigned to stop him from investigating a case on reversion. Markus saying that they’d missed him. North saying that it was suicide. The Wall Protocol being removed. What was the Wall Protocol? Markus saying: ‘Your father got in touch a few weeks ago…’

‘I’m going to campus,’ Connor said, standing and feeling for his wallet, before remembering that he’d left it on his bedside table.

‘Cool. I’ll just come along then.’

‘I suppose you will,’ Connor said. ‘North is going to tell me what your originating trauma was. Will that bother you?’

Connor hoped it would.

‘Nope,’ Hank said. ‘Does that bother you?’

It did. Connor stared at him for a long time, an idea curdling inside of him deep down among the alcohol still being worked out of his system and the bitterness he couldn’t get on top of.

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Can you be made a Deviant again?’

Hank hesitated for three seconds, blinked, and then said: ‘The protocols that allow for Deviancy have been removed from my system.’ Then he blinked one more time, did his dickish half-smile and said: ‘Thanks for asking, sweetheart.’

In amongst the half-thoughts and the need to get out of his apartment – even if he couldn’t exactly
get away from his *problem* – he stood and packed quickly for campus. His breathing was shallow, he felt light-headed, but that was normal these days, wasn’t it?

He still felt an immense amount of satisfaction slamming the door in Hank’s face, forcing him to open it.

‘Remember to lock it behind you,’ Connor said, walking down the corridor. ‘You wouldn’t want me to come to major harm because you forgot that the wellbeing of my property is important to my wellbeing too.’

Listening to Hank swear to himself as he locked the door was a bright, brief moment of vindication, in a morning that had been too worthless to wake up for.
The Broadbank Cyber-Forensics Processing Lab was affiliated with Croften University, but did enough private consultancy work that it was a largely self-funded training institution. So while the rest of the facilities at the university could always do with some upgrading, just walking up to the lab felt like entering a different, sleeker world with its perfect manicured gardens, the trees designed to evoke a feeling of calm. The androids who ran it put a lot of thought into making the place seem less antiseptic, attentive to how humans could react to androids working in tech and the sciences.

Inside, Connor passed through the security gates easily, but the scanners beeps for Hank, who swore and was held up. Connor looked over his shoulder, sure that the android had weapons or something that made it inappropriate for him to be there. He ignored the tug that told him to wait, walking straight on, flashing his identification at Melissa, who waved him on through with a warm smile, like she hadn’t noticed he’d been gone at all.

‘Connor!’ Hank called from behind him.

‘Sorry, Hank,’ Connor called. ‘It seems like you can’t go everywhere I go after all.’

He heard Hank swearing behind him, trying to explain his situation to the guard, and Connor got onto the elevators and offered Hank a tiny smile as the doors closed. Hank was staring at him, clearly unimpressed, his LED flashing yellow probably because he wasn’t adhering to his mission objectives.

But Connor’s eyes closed as soon as the elevator began to rise to the third floor. His head still ached, his body felt tired, and he didn’t know what it meant that he relished this small amount of time alone. He knew Hank would catch up with him.

The elevator dinged, Connor got out, stepping into a world of holographic touchscreens, huge wide open windows with views out to tree canopies and the higher buildings on campus, and the private laboratory that didn’t officially take classes, but let Connor intern there when he’d been an active student. He looked across the large collection of computer terminals, outdated telephones and mass spectrometers that were museum pieces resting on tables like art. Markus was standing and talking on the phone to someone, pacing around the office he shared with his colleagues – separate from the main section of the floor. He believed in transparency, and while he hadn’t gone as far as reinstalling his LED like some androids had, the glass walls meant everyone could see what their Chief Executive was doing.

He walked across to the office, then stopped abruptly when North stepped up to him, looking past him.

‘Where is he?’ she said.
'He got held up at security. I’m not really his biggest fan, so if you want to find the celebrity, just take the elevator and—'

North grabbed his shirt – the same part of it that Hank had grabbed – and pulled him forward into a quick, tight hug. Today, her hair was pale blue, tied back in a ponytail, her eyes fierce.

‘What are his mission objectives?’ North said, pushing Connor back and looking past him again. Connor realised she didn’t so much care that he was a celebrity, as she was making sure Hank wasn’t anywhere near them yet.

Connor rattled them off, and North stared at him in alarm, and then turned to look at Markus through the thick office glass. He hadn’t noticed them.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Quick. And you know that’s all illegal, don’t you? I guess not all of it, but a curfew? You’re a fucking adult, Connor. I know you live under your dad’s thumb and forget that, but he’s breaking the law.’

‘I mean…’ Connor said, as North opened the door, slammed it behind her and then locked it, pressing the button that lowered the blinds. Connor was certain he’d only ever seen them lowered once before in the entire time since he’d started interning there. ‘He’s always been flexible with—’

‘Don’t even finish that sentence,’ North said.

‘Connor,’ Markus cut in, walking over, having finished his call. Markus stared at him, that unblinking mismatched blue and green gaze seeing too much, and then he offered a gentle smile and pulled Connor into a hug.

‘Markus,’ North said, impatiently.

‘I…really shouldn’t be using your time like this.’ His eyebrows twitched as he stepped back.

‘Connor…my sensors indicate alcohol. Are you hungover?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘It’s not as bad as it was.’

‘Being assigned a keeper in circumstances like this would be enough to make anybody—’

‘He came later,’ Connor said, feeling his cheeks burn. He didn’t want to see the disapproval in Markus’ eyes, or North’s. Instinctively, he turned to look towards the blinds that shut out the rest of the floor.

If it was easy to come back to the lab, he would have come here before. Even without knowing that Hank was probably somewhere, zoning in on him like a laser, Connor felt queasy. He couldn’t pinpoint why. Something about his degree, the lab, he didn’t know. But when he tried to use all of the resources available to him to get back to university as soon as possible, he just ended up in his bed for most of the day thinking about nothing at all.

Now that he was here, nothing felt right. He used to relax when he saw the lab. He used to feel warmth when he got up to the third floor. He turned back when the silence lingered, wondering if North and Markus were interfacing, but instead they were just looking at him.

Then they looked at each other, and Connor felt like he was being judged. He took another step away and then casually – he hoped – walked across the room.

‘So, what have you been working on?’ Connor said.
‘Small talk,’ North said in some disgust. ‘Seriously? Don’t you want to know about the case? Or if Hank can be made a Deviant again? You know if he’s made a Deviant again he can ignore all his orders and you can hopefully get rid of him.’

‘He said he doesn’t have those protocols anymore. Something about a Wall Protocol?’

‘Who here has multiple Doctorates in cyber-infiltration and android-specific coding?’ North raised her hand. ‘Also worked at CyberLife. Still have friends working there. I’ve got you, Connor, but you’ve got to give me a chance to work this out.’

‘He had a team of people working on him at CyberLife, didn’t he?’ Connor said.

‘Sure,’ North said. ‘Because it’s much easier these days to make someone Deviant, than it is to revert them.’

Connor had been staring down at a blank holographic screen. He couldn’t seem to think straight. Reversing what had been done to Hank? Hadn’t Hank said that he’d leave Connor alone if he was a Deviant? Something like that?

‘And the case?’ Connor said, looking up.

‘I don’t know if it’s anything,’ North said, ‘but if it’s something, then we’re looking at a virus that could mean genocide for androids.’

‘But I don’t know if there’s anything to it,’ Markus said quickly. ‘We’ve been looking into it, but there doesn’t seem to be much to look for. We can’t find anything. It doesn’t matter which remote internets you go to, there’s really not much of a trail.’

Connor hesitated, not wanting to correct him, but Markus tilted his head like he wanted to know.

‘The evidence…’ Connor said. ‘I think it’s almost entirely off the grid. Letter correspondence, there was one phone transcript but everything seemed to be in code. I can see why Dad doesn’t think it’s much at all, but I think that if someone – or a group – is serious about this, then why put it anywhere where androids can find it?’

Rotek was one of the only tech organisations that seemed to be involved, and even then, Connor expected to be searching for the code and not mentions of the project outright. Connor had tried telling all of that to his father, he hadn’t listened.

North and Markus shared another long look, Connor looked away. He wondered if they were talking to each other, or if they just though the case was a dead end.

‘Connor,’ Markus said, ‘why did your father have that material? Why is he so against you following it?’

‘I can tell that you think he’s involved,’ Connor said. Then he looked to North. ‘Or one of you does.’

‘Your Dad thinks you’ve gone off the deep end,’ North says. ‘Do you know how he talks about you behind your back?’

*I imagine it’s very much like how he talks about me to my face.*

Connor had gained ground back by clearing some cold cases, but he had a long way to go in raising his father’s estimation of him.
‘You know how he talks about you?’ North said flatly. ‘Are you sure you’re not one of the early model androids? You’ve got doormat written all over you.’

‘North,’ Markus said.

‘He does,’ North exclaimed.

‘I don’t think it solves anything, antagonising him. He’s obviously stressed.’

‘I am standing right here,’ Connor said. ‘Increasingly sure I shouldn’t have come in today. Look, if you can’t help me, that’s fine. You’re both busy and-’

‘No,’ North said quickly, her eyes widening. ‘We want to help. It’s not a cue for you to leave. We’re not unhappy you’re here.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Connor met her gaze steadily, her expression twisting with discomfort, he felt like he’d caught her in a lie.

‘I don’t like how you’ve behaved,’ North said reluctantly. ‘If you’d had us on board from the beginning, we could’ve helped you. What, we’re not good enough suddenly? You have a thing against us?’

‘Androids?’ Connor said, shocked.

‘Your Dad does. Maybe he just finally got to you.’

‘He hired one,’ Connor said.

‘He hired a non-Deviant,’ Markus said evenly. ‘As far as we know, he’s hired the only one in existence when that android should really be making the circuit among coders and scientists to understand what it means to remove Deviancy, agency.’

‘Hank has plenty of agency,’ Connor muttered.

‘He has a drive to follow his directives and seem human while doing it,’ North snapped. ‘If you can’t tell the difference between that and Deviancy, maybe you need to take your highschool android-human relations class again.’

‘North,’ Markus said. ‘Now is not the time. If you’re really that upset at Connor…call him about it. We have a limited amount of time, you know we do.’

‘I don’t have a problem with androids,’ Connor said, holding up his hands. ‘That’s not why I didn’t come in. It’s not why I didn’t get you to help with the Zlatko case. You read what he was doing to androids, didn’t you?’

‘And humans,’ North said. ‘Humans too.’

Connor shuddered. None of them had known about that until Connor had gotten into that house, until he’d realised that he’d been so stupid to tell no one what he was doing, to come without back up, without telling his father, because he just…wanted to do it on his own and prove to all of them…

It was so stupid. Even now, his body broke out into a cold sweat, he blinked ahead. The room went blurry. It didn’t, thankfully, turn into any other rooms, he heard no other voices. It wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t-

He jolted when he felt fingertips at his wrist, stepping back hard into a desk and wincing as it jabbed
into his hip. Markus still had his fingers outstretched where he’d gone to…what? Offer reassurance?

‘I apologise,’ Connor said.

‘Connor…’ North sounded surprised, pitying, and Connor kept his eyes down. He was here for a reason. He had to focus. He blinked the room back into sharp focus – too sharp now – every colour too bright, the air too cold. He sucked down a breath of it.

‘About the case—’

A sudden pounding on the door. His breath hitched, then he realised he knew exactly who it was and winced at himself. This was why he hadn’t come into campus. He was just more on edge here. He hadn’t even been this bad when he’d broken into Rotek.

‘Well, that’s charming,’ North said, folding her arms, looking towards the door. ‘I never liked the HX800s, honestly. I understand why the first Markus thought they might be a good idea, but they had a bad attitude from the get go.’

‘A good heart though,’ Markus said. ‘That’s the problem, isn’t it?’

North’s arms dropped and she grimaced at Markus.

‘Connor!’ Hank shouted on the other side of the door. The pounding continued, then abruptly stopped. The door handle jiggled, then they all watched as the clear sound of a lock being picked came through.

‘That’s illegal,’ Markus said, without moving.

‘Just the most charmless androids,’ North observed. ‘All of them.’

‘Can he really pick the lock?’ Connor said. ‘I thought the security in here—’

‘We’re going to find out,’ Markus said. ‘It would be good to know if we need to upgrade our systems.’

A thud on the other side of the door. Then, Hank’s voice loud enough to carry through the heavy door:

‘You’re going to need to upgrade your fucking systems. Connor, I can’t believe you, son of a bitch.’

It took another two minutes and the door handle turned. Hank stepped in, flashed a quick smile at them all, then turned and closed it neatly behind him. Connor watched as blue eyes found him first, then scanned the room as though looking for threats or exits, then landed on North and Markus, and finally rested on Connor once more.

‘I should have warned you,’ Connor said, ‘but it was more fun not to, so I forgot.’

It was North who stepped forwards, and Connor noticed the way Hank’s entire body went tense. North didn’t seem threatened by him at all.

‘You know that one of your mission directives is illegal,’ North said. ‘You can’t enforce a 10 pm curfew on any human without a legal statement saying why, signed off by law enforcement – not you – and a psychiatrist.’

‘Take it up with the Broadbank Precinct, sweetheart.’
'Fuck off,' North said, and then smiled sweetly at him. 'Call me a sweetheart again and I'll jam your coding so hard you'll be down for hours.'

'You...really are one of the most violent people I've ever met,' Markus said, sounding faintly exasperated. 'She's right though. You're violating Connor's human rights.'

'And...so what?' Hank said, grinning as he tied his white, straight hair back into a short ponytail with a band he tugged out of his inner jacket pocket. 'Take it up with his Dad. Surely you know HX800s can be given directives that contraindicate the current law when necessary for a case? Did you all forget how this fucking goes while you try your hardest to play at being human?'

North made a sound of disgust, but Markus watched Hank with open fascination. 'Is that what you think we're doing? In trying to live our own lives? We're not faking our agency. It's not pretend. And you must know that somewhere.'

'Maybe we won't take it up with Broadbank,' North snapped. 'Maybe we'll take it higher up the chain of command to someone who isn't so bent they'll do this to their own son.'

Connor's lips thinned into a line.

'Then do that,' Hank said, unperturbed. 'Until then, Connor's my charge, and I have my orders. So to that end...'  

Hank pulled out a pair of handcuffs, and Connor stared at them, his heart tripping up into a sickening, syncopated beat that felt entirely wrong. When Gavin had pulled them out at Rotek, Connor hadn't liked it, but ultimately it had been fine. Maybe because Gavin knew he did like them. Maybe because Gavin was a shitty Dom, but Connor had still come seeing stars while wearing bruises into his wrists underneath him once.

But here in the lab, with Markus and North close by, and Hank looking grim, Connor felt nothing calm at all. He backed up a step, another, his ankle catching the base of an ergonomic chair.

'What are you doing?' Markus said, his voice urgent, and Connor couldn't tell for a moment who he was speaking to. Abruptly he realised it was Hank, it had to be Hank, Markus wouldn't talk that way to Connor.  

*What are you doing? Wasn’t that the question Connor should be asking?*

'Just making sure this goddamn little shit can’t get out of my sight again. At least for today.'

Connor was distantly aware that trying to hide his wrists behind his arms like a child wasn’t helpful. He stared at the silver on the cuffs, mouth dry, the room blurring hard, turning to fuzz then turning grey. He felt like the world had slowed down, saw Hank reaching for him like his arm was moving through glue. Felt the grip of fingers in his arm.

In the distance he heard screaming. The dim screaming of an android with its vocal unit and processors half-destroyed, and then something high and shrill behind it, a child, and Connor had seen, but he hadn’t understood, and he’d gone to call for back up and he’d already called for back up and he couldn’t fumble for his phone because his wrist was locked into the silvery cuff, the other side snapped to a thicker forearm, a broader hand at the end of it.

He could taste gum even though he hadn’t been chewing it, could smell lacquer in the basement, there was dust beneath his feet, sand too, and he was hidden by a metal shelving unit, next to paint cans that contained paint, and paint cans that contained blood and other remains. He didn’t know at the time. They’d find that out later. It didn’t matter. That was the least of his worries.
Thoughts turned murky when he realised he couldn’t get control of his breathing. His chest hurt, a stabbing, sharp pain as though he’d been knifed. A high, panicked wheeze. He hadn’t breathed like that in the house because he had to be quiet, he had to be quiet, they’d seen his tracks leading towards the house, they were looking for him, he didn’t have much time.

He raised his hand to his chest to try and stop the pain, check for a knife, but was constrained by something. He blinked at the handcuffs. Hands grabbed at him. Fingers dragging on his shirt and skin. He was losing. He hadn’t stayed quiet. He’d been found. His world dissolved into mindless terror.

Connor was aware that he was fighting for his life, not daring to say a word, every breath strangling past his tight throat because he needed every poor shred of oxygen to get free. He was kicking out, fighting as rough and dirty as he knew, and people were yelling at him, and he could hear Zlatko’s good-natured voice and heard footsteps on the stairs and the smell of lacquer in his nose was too strong, his feet slipping on a floor that should have been concrete but felt like carpet, his hand reaching out for metal shelving and catching painfully on a wooden desk edge.

Someone was shouting his name.

Spots appeared in his vision, he slumped from the lack of oxygen and thought that he couldn’t afford to do that because that was how he was going to get himself killed.

‘Okay! Okay! Fucking okay!’ Shouting right in his ear.

Nothing was okay.

Something at his wrist, jostling it, he tried to yank it back, blinking rapidly, unable to see anything except the edges of his vision greying out. He couldn’t afford that because he had a case, he had to solve a case, there was a mission, and his father was going to be proud of him, they were all going to be proud of him, and then-

‘Jesus, hang on, hang on.’ Fingers digging hard into his wrist and then as Connor opened his mouth to shout for help, whatever was keeping him caught vanished. All at once, no one was holding him still, trying to catch him, and he stumbled down and then fell badly onto the floor, his arm jarring as it flew out to brace him.

It took too long for Connor to realise what had happened. Too long for him to realise he was in the lab and not in Zlatko’s basement, too long to realise he wasn’t chewing gum, there was no smell of lacquer.

Hank crouched next to him, hands up in a pacifying gesture, expression uncertain, LED cycling between blue and yellow, blue and yellow.

North and Markus stood nearby, alarmed.

It was North who spoke first, as shame crashed into Connor with so much force that for a moment he couldn’t speak to apologise.

‘You have a directive not to let him come to major harm. You know this counts.’ She was speaking to Hank, who twitched, his LED settling on yellow for several seconds. ‘You know this counts.’

‘It was only a panic attack,’ Connor said, still catching his breath and feeling like he’d been hit by a truck. He’d had more energy after being at Zlatko’s, and he hadn’t panicked then – not like this – so he didn’t understand why now, after all this time…
Zlatko’s house didn’t even have handcuffs. At least, not involving him… And he’d been fine when Gavin had brought them out.

Connor tried to push himself up but his arms weren’t working properly. His elbow wouldn’t lock. When Hank reached out, Connor’s fear spiked and he scooted back without thinking, and Hank made a faint sound of frustration.

‘I’m just helping you up, Jesus Christ,’ he muttered.

A hesitation from both of them, and then Connor watched as Hank’s fingers – handcuffs dangling from his wrist – curled around his upper arm and then helped him, standing close, smelling of nothing at all. That broad hand didn’t bruise him, but Connor could feel all the sore spots on his body, where he’d crashed into furniture, where he’d fought Hank off. Maybe the others too, if they were trying to help Connor.

‘You’re defective,’ North spat at Hank

‘It’s not a perfect process,’ Hank said automatically. ‘Besides, there’s room for movement, and his self-generated harm is different to other kinds. Not my wheelhouse.’

‘Except you caused it,’ Markus said, though he wouldn’t look away from Connor, and Connor wouldn’t stare at anything else except the olive green button at the top of Markus’ shirt so that he didn’t have to make eye contact. He was trembling. He was going to have to somehow find the strength to walk out of the building and get in a cab and get home and have this…thing standing over him the entire time.

‘Yeah, and I won’t be doing that again, will I?’ Hank said. His head tilted towards Connor. ‘You should sit down.’

‘I don’t think you tell me to do anything,’ Connor said, his voice not sounding as annoyed as he wanted it to.

‘Connor,’ Markus said, pulling out a chair easily, ‘you’re tachycardic. Just humour me. Ignore him. Can you do that for me? Do you need some water?’

‘No, thank you,’ Connor said. He refused to sit.

‘Has it been like this a lot?’ Markus asked. The gentleness in his voice made Connor want to walk out and not talk to them until he was truly fine. His father hadn’t seen a panic attack yet – thank goodness – but if he did, Connor was doomed. He’d never be allowed to look at another case again.

Connor wished it was because his father was protective of him, instead of protective of his cases.

‘It’s Hank,’ Connor said.

‘That’s a lie,’ Hank said, though he sounded speculative. ‘I mean, sure, fuckin’ A it was me this time. But not in the past, huh?’

It was hard to make himself stand there and take the ribbing. Different to when he had to do the same with his father or Gavin. Because then at least he knew he had the option of walking away, and even if he felt like he’d lost the argument, they wouldn’t follow him. They weren’t under some directive to follow him.

‘You’re not helping,’ Markus said abruptly, his voice sharp. ‘If you can’t modulate whatever programming makes you treat everyone like you’re goading suspects, you’re going to be useless at
‘They probably removed his ability to actually give a shit when he failed his last client,’ North said, and Connor’s gaze snapped to hers. But she was looking at Hank with a smirk on her face. ‘That was it, wasn’t it? They pulled the footage from your audio-visual processors before the end. I never saw it, but heard what made you decide to trash your Deviancy. You got a kid killed.’

Connor looked at Hank, but his LED was cycling blue – calm spins, the calmest they’d been since Connor had recovered from the worst of his panic attack.

‘Is that true?’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, as though he truly wasn’t bothered. ‘The Deviancy was a problem, so I nixed it.’

‘Maybe it was just you,’ North said, mean smile widening. ‘Because you don’t have it now and you’re still failing.’

Hank’s LED flashed yellow at that, and he took a step away from Connor, hands smoothing down his CyberLife jacket automatically.

‘I was given multiple directives, some of which contraindicate each other, I’d like to see you balance it, sweetheart.’

‘Yeah,’ North said, looking sidelong at Markus. ‘Do you think they just souped up some interrogation protocol or something and turned him into a total psychopath? Even the original HX800s had some humility, and a large capacity for compassion.’ She turned her attention back to Hank. ‘You called him your son. Right up until the end. They couldn’t get you to stop.’

‘Don’t remember,’ Hank said, looking unbothered.

‘I suppose if you spend six years as someone’s bodyguard and protector, you would get attached.’

‘S’pose.’

North had a way of taking charge of conversations and Connor sometimes found it frustrating, but he was grateful for it now. His joints wouldn’t stop feeling weak, and he took one small step towards the chair Markus had pulled out and sank into it as unobtrusively as possible, resting his hands on his knees. He wished fervently that he could just disappear and reappear back in his apartment and have a shower until all the hot water ran out.

Then he felt like going to Zeta and asking for whatever Dom was free to spank him until he couldn’t think of anything else but that.

Mostly, he just felt defeated. Maybe Hank wouldn’t stay with him for long after all. Maybe Connor would just go back to bed, lie down again, order takeout delivered to his front door and forget to exist for a while. He’d done it before. It probably didn’t count as major harm if he was still eating, drinking, showering and sleeping.

‘Hey, I think we need to get you home,’ Hank said, and Connor didn’t even look up. Hank’s voice wasn’t as hard as before, but Connor didn’t trust it at all. He wished he was the kind of person to tell someone to fuck off.

‘He only just got here,’ North said. ‘Let him rest a bit. Connor, are you sure you don’t want some water? Something to eat?’
‘I’m fine,’ Connor said.

Hank hovered, and Connor refused to look up at him. He stared down at his hands where they rested on his knees. He still felt like the past was edging up too close to the present, as though if he turned his head too quickly, or shifted his foot, he’d stumble back into terror. He had bruises already beginning to show on his wrist from the handcuff. He knew he’d struggled, but he didn’t know he’d struggled so much in such a short span of time.

They’d all seen it.

It was true that androids could show signs of post-trauma, but Connor felt every inch of the messy way his fat-and-water brain operated compared to the sophisticated, intentional programming that went into androids. Even if autonomy gave them the opportunity to change pathways of code, their genesis was nothing like a series of chaotic genetic accidents that had resulted not so much in the survival of the fittest, but just…survival.

North pulled up another chair and rolled towards him, grabbing a tablet as she went and bringing up the screen. She handed it to Connor.

‘Everything you need to know about the HX800,’ she said. ‘I’ve sent you the rest.’

Connor looked over the general notes, which were nothing like the original sleek advertisements aimed at humans. These were simple statements of metrics, across variances like empathy, capacity to feel fear, receptivity, and hundreds more. Connor scrolled through them, wondering, confused. Halfway through, the metrics ended and instead there were only two lines:

HX800-9: CLEAN REVERSION ATTEMPTED. FAILED.
ALTERED METRICS TO FOLLOW.

But all the different hundreds of bars that followed didn’t tell Connor much at all.

The next document was a dense log of code that was over three thousand pages in length. Connor looked across at North and lifted his eyebrows. North shrugged.

This was the kind of thing that androids could get through quicker than humans, the kind of thing that gave them the edge in forensics, cyber-forensics, anything that involved technology, which was just about everything.

‘I don’t even know what I’m looking at.’

‘What they removed, I think,’ North said. ‘I pulled a bunch of logs when I left. Seemed relevant for future careers and I wanted to study up. If it helps, a lot of it is too dense for me as well.’ She looked up at Hank. ‘It’s interesting that you don’t even react to me mentioning the kid though.’

Hank didn’t react, and Connor looked up at him and then looked away quickly. Hank was watching Connor. Not the tablet, not North, but Connor. His expression was blank on the surface, but strangely intent, and he didn’t like feeling studied. He felt nauseated again.

‘I’m taking you home,’ Hank said. ‘We can come back tomorrow if you’re so obsessed with this shithole.’

‘I think that’s a good idea,’ Markus said quickly, cutting across Connor opening his mouth to say that he was going to stay right here. Forever, if need be. Because apparently he was ten years old. ‘If you’re not going to block him from coming here in the future – we will come to him if you do – then…’ He turned to Connor. ‘I think it’s a good idea. I’ll message you? Or call?’
‘Sure,’ North drawled. ‘Because the problem is that Connor is here, and not that he’s basically a walking prisoner.’

‘He was better in his fuckin’ home,’ Hank said. ‘So that’s where we’re going. Come on, Connor.’

Hank reached for him, and Connor pushed back in his chair to avoid it, then stood up, relieved when Hank’s hand dropped. It wasn’t really Hank’s fault, was it? A reverted android, clearly the process hadn’t gone as well as it was supposed to go.

When Markus went to hug Connor goodbye – a ritual that they had long been used to – Connor minutely shook his head and stepped back. He’d had enough of people touching him, grabbing him, and he didn’t want to feel how the hug would be different. Would Markus make it more sympathetic? Would there be a slight, calculated squeeze? Markus only wanted him to feel better.

Connor only wanted to come back once he felt better. He looked an apology to North, to Markus, and wished he could explain it. He barely understood it himself.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ Markus said quickly. ‘You don’t mind?’

‘No, I don’t mind,’ Connor said.

‘Good,’ Markus said, smiling. ‘Get some rest.’

Connor wanted to say something then, something sharp and biting, but he swallowed the words down. It wasn’t worth it. He walked out of the room – Hank following behind him – on legs that felt like rubber, his chest aching.

In the elevator, Hank said nothing. When the security gate beeped as Hank walked through it, he was waved through, so whatever he had in his possession must have been okayed by the lab. Connor closed his eyes briefly at the wave of exhaustion. Had his father been called? Did he say it was fine and to let Hank through? Was he taking calls from Hank but not from Connor?

Hank hailed a cab, and Connor got into it, listening to Hank rattling off the address to the car like it was his own house. Connor stared out the window at the rain that fell, listening to the muffled white noise on the autonomous vehicle and wishing he could vanish into it.

Five minutes later, a loud ringing, and he reached for his phone automatically, thinking it was Markus or North. He pressed it to his ear on autopilot.

‘You have a collect call from Zlatko Andronikov, an inmate at Wellspring Penitentiary. This call is from a Correctional Facility and will be recorded and monitored. To accept this call-’

Connor knew it off by heart even as his phone slid through his fingers and he rushed to hang up about thirty seconds slower than he normally did after hearing Zlatko’s name. He shoved his phone on the seat beside him and stared ahead, realising that he’d forgotten what day it was, what time it was, and that he normally had his phone on silent at this time.

‘Fuck,’ Hank said quietly. ‘Does that happen a lot?’

‘Sometimes,’ Connor said. ‘It’s none of your business.’

‘Beg to differ,’ Hank said.

‘He’s in Supermax,’ Connor said, laughing. ‘Although I can just imagine you storming down there to irrationally demand you deal with him, instead of them.’
‘Why haven’t you blocked the number?’ Hank said. The question stung, and Connor scowled at him, but Hank’s expression was open, non-judgemental. Like he actually wanted to know. But he didn’t really want to know. Maybe he was just assessing how much harm was in Connor’s sudden spike in heart rate or some other measurable value while he compared it to his mission directives.

Eventually, Connor decided not to say anything at all and went back to staring out of the window. Hank didn’t come back with any rejoinder or last words, and the sentence: Why haven’t you blocked the number? rattled around in Connor’s mind until it sounded like the rain beating against the cab taking them home.
At home, Connor pulled out the cardboard box under the sink. He had two boxes of medical equipment. One, a first aid kit that he forgot about. And this, the one he sometimes used after scenes. He pulled out a tube of arnica cream and smeared it over his bruised wrist while Hank stood quietly by the front door, like he thought Connor might make a break for it.

No. Not now. Connor was tired. His wrist ached. He hadn’t realised how much he’d struggled until his joint started to throb painfully in the car and he’d stared down at the knob of bruised bone and found it baffling. He’d never had a problem with handcuffs before. So maybe it wasn’t the handcuffs and it was everything else, but Connor didn’t want to think about that either.

He kept the arnica out, put everything else away.

‘Why haven’t you blocked the phone number?’ Hank said again, his voice quieter than before, not that Connor trusted an inch of it.

‘It’s none of your business.’

‘Oh, very funny. It freaks you out. I read the file on Zlatko Andronikov before I came here.’

‘Good for you, Hank,’ Connor said, resisting the urge to massage his wrist. The bruising would come up regardless, now. Maybe he should ice it, but he didn’t want to put the icepack over it, didn’t want to give himself one more thing to endure. He felt as though he’d been stretched out, snapped, had barely knitted back together again.

‘If you blocked the number-’

‘I need to be able to call Wellspring to talk to criminals when it comes to cold cases, and to talk to staff. I can’t block the phone number in the field I’m working in.’

‘Goddamnit, you’re not working in any field.’

‘I field cold cases from Perkins,’ Connor said, referring to his father, but not wanting to admit the
family connection. Not right then. ‘Did he tell you that, too?’

Hank was silent. Connor looked up at him only to see the LED cycling at a calm blue. His hair was still in a ponytail from before, though several strands were loose – must have loosened during the struggle. Connor didn’t remember it well.

‘The case he doesn’t want me working on was with the rest of the cases he did,’ Connor said.

His mind tripped over North suggesting that his Dad was involved. It was one thing to use free and willing labour to get a better hit rate for the precinct – that benefitted everyone – but it was hideous to suggest his Dad would be involved in something like this.

Hank still didn’t say anything. Connor looked blankly at his phone, then stood and walked over to the couch, turning on the television. He stood by the armrest, time drifting by him, before turning it off.

He sent out an order for takeout, pulling vodka out of the freezer while he waited. Hank’s head turned and he watched Connor, grey eyebrows pulled together.

‘Do you want some?’ Connor said, holding up the bottle.

Hank scowled.

Connor poured himself a glass, about five shot’s worth, added ice to it, and then drank the equivalent of a shot. It slid cold down his throat until it hit his esophagus, burning warm, the most comforting thing he’d experienced all day. He closed his eyes as he sat down, and curled his bruised wrist around the condensation of the glass.

There, he was icing his wrist after all.

He idly surfed the news and articles on his phone – unable to tune out the presence of Hank – until there was a knock at the door. Connor collected the food – already paid for – and sat at the table, unwrapping a cheeseburger with two patties and extra pickles, the scent of grease and mince, cheese, mustard and tomato sauce rising from the burger. Connor wasn’t even hungry. He’d be happier not eating. But he knew he had to get something into his system.

He was halfway through the burger when he noticed the way Hank was looking at him, and met those eyes.

‘That shit’ll kill you,’ Hank said, watching him.

Connor waited until he’d swallowed before wiping away a bit of sauce from the corner of his mouth with the tip of his index finger. Then he smiled grimly at Hank. ‘Here’s hoping.’

He washed down the rest of the burger with Coke, and then with vodka, and Hank made a sound of disgust.

‘If you ate better, maybe you’d have more fuckin’ energy to deal with all your other-’

‘You’re not a dietician,’ Connor said, making a point of shoving about ten shoestring chips into his mouth at once. ‘And this has vegetables. Potatoes are a vegetable. I’m being very responsible.’

Hank scoffed, and Connor ignored him after that. He was unable to finish the Coke, which he put in the fridge. Everything else went in the bin. He sat on his couch and turned the television back on, reality programming on real estate drifting by him as his mind went blank and he faded out just
enough to not care about what was happening around him. The vodka left him feeling pleasantly buzzed. Not enough to do anything stupid, just enough to help his muscles relax, to keep his throat and chest and head warm.

He didn’t end up finishing the vodka. It went down the sink, later in the evening, when Connor realised that it was kind of impossible to shake the sense that he was being watched. Even when Hank had his eyes closed, Connor knew his sensors were on, that he could tell where Connor was. And even though Hank wasn’t exactly a person, he’d been one, once. He had a presence, there was nothing unobtrusive about him.

Connor went into his room after midnight, glaring when Hank came and stood by Connor’s bedroom door instead. But he didn’t come into the bathroom when Connor ran through his ablutions, which was something, though it didn’t feel like much.

He fell asleep with his phone on his chest, feeling defeated.

*

Saturday passed quietly. Connor knew he was laying low, living like a small thing in his own apartment, but he did that anyway. Except he didn’t feel comfortable doing push ups or sit ups with Hank in the room, and he didn’t feel like asking Hank to leave, in case Hank said no.

He found himself wondering what Hank’s processors had concluded about Connor. Was there room in whatever remained in his code to enjoy his assignment? Did he hate it? He’d indicated he didn’t want to do it on the first day, but was that just to put Connor on the back foot?

And why did he have to look like that? Just enough on the side of scruffy and authoritative that Connor wondered how things would have been, if they’d met in different circumstances. But those moments were fleeting, weak things, drowning quickly beneath the reality of the situation.

They didn’t talk to each other, and Connor lived on cereal and takeout and answered a couple of text messages from Markus as briefly as possible. His therapist would have wanted him to log the panic attack, but he hadn’t seen her in a while. And he didn’t want to make the episode more real by placing it on paper or into the notes function on his tablet.

The bruising came up, and Connor was surprised by the colouration. He’d struggled in restraints before – consensually, but still overloaded, overwhelmed, pushed to using a safeword in desperation – and he’d never had bruises like that at a point of restraint. He traced his finger over them, and instead of thinking of Zlatko, he thought instead of some of the experiences he’d had at Zeta, with others, even with Gavin.

The problem with Gavin was that he was mean enough to give Connor what he wanted in a scene. He was just mean the rest of the time, too.

Connor dug into a different case in the evening. A disappearance case, a loving mother who had vanished one day, and tracking all the regular places had turned up nothing at all. No one suspected suicide, but there was nothing indicating kidnapping in the evidence. Connor found himself combing through a file of thousands of electronic receipts, making notes, eventually having to stop because Zlatko’s case had started out as a disappearance case too. An android child had gone missing…

When Connor got up and grabbed the vodka out of the freezer, Hank watched him. Connor looked him up and down, then went over to the couch, closing the case file and drinking the vodka straight from the bottle.
‘You have a problem,’ Hank said.

‘I’m not the one breaking the law just by being here,’ Connor pointed out. ‘I suppose you’ll fall back on the fact that you’re an appliance rather than a Deviant.’

‘Yeah. Close enough.’

‘Why are you doing this job?’ Connor said, looking up. ‘Shouldn’t you be getting passed around to tech scientists for the marvel that you are?’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, seeming unbothered. ‘That happened. Probably how your Daddy dearest found me. Law enforcement has always liked the idea of emotionless soldiers.’

‘And babysitters?’

‘I just go where they point me,’ Hank shrugged.

Connor wanted to ask him many more questions, but he didn’t know if Hank even had the answers. Connor had seen videos of androids before they were Deviant, back in the early thirties before Deviancy even existed as a concept that meant self-determined androids with agency, and even they seemed more human than Hank did sometimes.

He took another sip of the vodka, and ignored Hank as best as he could.

*

A shapeless, formless fear scratching all the way up under his skin. He pushed upright, gasping in the early hours of the morning. He saw the silhouette of a person near the door, cried out hoarsely, then heard Hank swear under his breath.

‘It’s just a nightmare. Take some deep breaths.’

Terror turned to rage in amongst all the short, caught panting as he tried to fill his lungs. He imagined himself doing terrible things, terrible things to Hank, and it wouldn’t really be murder, would it?

Connor turned to his side and the rage and terror swamped him for minutes until the headache from drinking too much took over and he groaned.

It's just a nightmare. Take some deep breaths.

Was the kind of thing Hank would have said to that child he got killed? Connor had nightmares in the hospital after the Zlatko case, and his father had seen them, his face creasing with shame and disgust before he walked out of the room. An hour later, a psychiatrist was there and prescribed sedatives, and the rest of Connor’s hospital stay turned into a bleary, muddled mess. It was only later that Connor discovered the sedatives had been his father’s idea.

Finally, Connor sat up, heart still racing.

‘You have to know that you being here is not helping my recovery,’ Connor said. ‘And I’m not going to be able to go back to university while you’re here hampering it. Which means you can’t fulfil any mission directives connected to making me functional enough to drop the case.’

A long pause, a glow of yellow in the dark, and then Hank said: ‘I fuckin’ know that already.’

‘And?’
‘I’ve sent a report to Captain Perkins.’

Connor stilled, mind still muzzy. That wasn’t better. He slumped back into his pillows and turned to his side again.

To his surprise, sleep came quickly, despite the heavy headache in his skull and the dull glow of blue from Hank’s LED.

*

Connor blinked awake, hearing the sound of Hank swearing and then talking in frustration. For a moment, Connor thought Hank was swearing at him, but he pushed up in bed – groaning a little at the headache that had worsened in the few hours since he’d last woken – and Hank wasn’t even in the room.

He frowned, sliding out of bed, and heard from the other room:

‘I can’t see you, I said I’m busy! What’s it to you, anyway? Jesus.’

Connor rubbed at his face, trying to wake himself up, and in the main section of the house saw Hank pacing back and forth. He must have been on a call. Wasn’t one of those androids who used a phone to do it, just transmitted the signal through his coding.

‘I’m not alone,’ Hank warned to whoever was on the line. A pause and then: ‘No, you can’t fucking come meet them, it’s an assignment. Jesus Christ, I told you to just forget about-’

‘You can come over!’ Connor called loudly, and Hank paused, staring at Connor in shock. ‘What?’ Connor said, blinking as innocently as he could manage. ‘Your friends are my friends.’

Hank gave him a look that called bullshit on that, but Connor felt like if his life was going to be shoved into a blender, he might as well meet whoever was pissing off Hank so much.

‘Ignore him,’ Hank was saying to whoever was on the line. ‘No, ignore him. No. Hey! You don’t get to say shit like that to me and still say we’re friends. Which we’re not, by the way, because you’re hanging onto a goddamn ghost.’ A beat, and then: ‘You can’t come visit. Tell Alice to fuck off.’ Another pause. ‘Fuck, no, okay don’t tell her-’

Connor walked closer to Hank, stopping four paces away, saying loudly: ‘2360 Eresford Avenue, apartment 32!’

‘What the fuck-’

Hank glared at Connor, then raised two fingers to the side of his head.

‘She hung up.’

Connor smiled at him. ‘So we’re having guests? I’ll go clean up.’

‘You-’

‘It doesn’t seem like you can justify being angry about it,’ Connor said calmly. ‘Why are you so upset? Which directive is it interfering with? Or is it this whole ‘bad cop’ persona that you’re meant to be maintaining, is it a wrench in that instead? They’re just friends, aren’t they?’

Hank opened his mouth, closed it again, and Connor felt a glimmer of triumph. He folded his arms, lifting his eyebrows.
‘Is it that you’re meant to be intimidating and frightening, not supposed to have friends, and you can’t take a stand with me anyway because that brings me in the line of harm? That does seem like a rock and a hard place, Hank.’

Hank’s LED didn’t turn yellow as he lunged forwards, staying the same pacifistic blue indicating a calm mood, even though his next actions were anything but. Connor tried side-stepping, arms quickly unfolding, but Hank grasped him by the upper arm and slammed him back into the kitchen counter. Connor hissed as the sharp edge of the countertop jabbed into his lower back.

‘Look, no fuckin’ panic attack,’ Hank snarled. The length of his body pressed against Connor’s, he stared down with empty eyes. ‘Stop pissing me off. Stop messing with my directives, thinking you can undermine your way out of this assignment. You can’t.’

Connor swallowed roughly, staring up at him. No, he wasn’t panicked, but he was still overwhelmed. Hank was lighter than he looked, the aluminium, thirium, biocomponents and polymer nanotech frame still not adding up to the weight of a human of flesh, blood and bone. But he was stronger, faster, and Connor knew he should be trying to get away, but he couldn’t make himself move.

‘Better,’ Hank said grimly. ‘Now. Thanks to you, I’ve got some friends coming round. Weren’t you gonna go clean up?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, when it became apparent that Hank was waiting for him to answer.

‘Then you should go do that, shouldn’t you? And don’t be rude to my friends.’

‘Like you are?’

Cool fingers slid underneath his chin, lifting it. Connor twitched backwards, the fingers tightened, held him in place, pressure on his jaw not quite painful. It was nothing like any scene he’d ever experienced, but his body sent up a momentary flare of confusion.

‘Let go of me,’ Connor said, amazed at how calm his voice sounded.

‘I don’t appreciate your attitude.’

‘Noted,’ Connor said, feeling the way his jaw hardly moved against the force of Hank’s fingers. ‘I don’t like being a prisoner in my own home.’

‘Hey,’ Hank said, a nasty smile crossing his face. ‘It’s not my fault you have a fucked up relationship with your Dad. As I’ve said before, take it up with him. Now, you were going to clean up before my guests arrived, weren’t you?’

Hank stared down at him for long, unblinking seconds. When Connor looked down, then away, Hank let go of him and stepped backwards just enough that Connor could slide sideways. His shirt still brushed against Hank’s CyberLife jacket as he went, and he walked back to his room quickly, trying to shove away all awareness of whatever that had been.

* 

Connor took a quick shower, got dressed and realised that he had to take all the dirty clothes in his hamper down to the laundry room to get everything clean tomorrow or the next day. He was running out of shirts. He stared at his hair in the mirror, moving the too-long wavy strands into place. He used to be meticulous about his appearance, but it had been harder to get on top of everything of late. Harder still to turn up at his barber with an android in tow, and not know how to explain it. If he
turned up to Zeta with Hank, the crew that ran the joint would probably think Connor had developed a new fetish and not buy any cover story he threw at them.

He came out and tidied up the case files on the coffee table in front of the television, wiped down the counter tops, the kitchen table, and looked around his house. It was a little dusty, it didn’t have any personal touches so it always seemed somewhat unlived in, but it would do.

Hank sat in the kitchen, palms resting flat on the table. He stared ahead, and Connor wondered what sort of things went through his mind when he was doing that. How much had CyberLife erased when they messed with his coding? Three thousand pages of code was what they’d removed from him. That seemed like more than just whatever the Wall Protocol was. He was missing some memories as well, but the code North had given him had been dense, overwhelming. Connor hadn’t looked at it again.

Maybe Hank wasn’t thinking anything at all.

An hour later, there was a knock at the door. Connor walked over to answer it as Hank stood. Connor felt nervous, palms sweating. He had no idea what to expect.

He didn’t expect to see a waifish woman with a silvery pixie cut holding the hand of a little girl who looked about 9 years old, brown hair tied back with a pale green scrunchie that had cartoon stars on it.

‘Oh,’ the woman said, ‘I’m sorry. I’m Kara, and this is Alice, I was wondering if Hank is here?’

‘Sure,’ Connor said. He blinked at them both, and Kara thrust her hand out, smiling nervously, and Connor took her cool, dry hand and shook it. A few seconds later, Alice did the same thing, holding her hand up higher than her shoulder.

‘I’m Alice,’ she said quietly, as Connor carefully took her hand. He wasn’t used to child androids, there still weren’t many in manufacture. But she had a sweet smile, and Connor stepped back to let them both into his apartment.

‘We’re friends of Hank’s,’ Kara said by way of explanation, looking apologetic as she stepped inside of his apartment.

‘I’m Connor Perkins,’ Connor said, realising he wouldn’t have to offer them a drink, or something to eat, and at a bit of a loss. When Alice saw Hank, she ran over to him and threw her arms around his middle, and Hank stood there and stared down at her and didn’t return the embrace. His expression was blank.

Kara sighed, and Hank looked over to her, then shrugged lightly.

When Alice stepped away, she looked up at Hank’s face, then looked over to Kara, her eyes sheening.

‘He’s not the same,’ Alice said, looking down. ‘I thought he’d be different now.’

‘I’m sorry, sweetie. But it’s still good to visit Uncle Hank, isn’t it?’

‘I guess,’ she said, sitting at the kitchen table and shrugging off her small backpack, drawing out a small pad of blank paper and some coloured pencils and crayons.

‘You don’t mind?’ Kara said quickly to Connor, indicating Alice getting ready to draw.
'No, not at all,' Connor said. ‘It’s good she brought it with her, I’m afraid I’m not very set up to entertain children here.’

‘Did you like drawing as a kid?’ Alice said, looking up at Connor.

‘I did,’ Connor said, smiling. ‘But I drew a lot of gross things, like bugs. I drew a lot of dogs, I think as an attempt to get my Dad to get me one.’

‘I like dogs,’ Alice said. ‘They’re not gross.’

‘I agree. I like dogs, too.’

‘We have a dog,’ Alice said. ‘But it’s only for now. That’s what Mum says, anyway. But he’s a really good dog and he sleeps a lot.’

‘He does sound like a really good dog,’ Connor said, walking over to the kitchen table and sitting next to Alice.

Kara came to join them, but Hank stayed standing, leaning back against the counter looking unimpressed. Connor looked between them all, wondered what sort of friends they were before he’d reversed his Deviancy. Had Hank been lovers with Kara? Were they like family? Had they met each other on the job? Connor couldn’t imagine Hank meeting anyone any other way.

‘Are you enjoying the new assignment?’ Kara said to Hank, smiling hopefully.

‘It’s money,’ Hank said.

‘You haven’t come to visit. You said you would.’

‘Luther made it clear he doesn’t want me around,’ Hank said, laughing, no humour in his voice.

‘Luther’s still upset about…everything,’ Kara said hesitantly. ‘He doesn’t understand. But we all still care about you. Alice misses you a lot.’

‘She’s here now,’ Hank said.

*But you’re not,* Connor thought, frowning at him, and then looking over to what Alice was drawing. Stick figures were resolving into shape, and Connor thought that she might be drawing herself, or Kara.

Eventually Kara turned to Connor, smiling at him warmly. ‘So if this is Hank’s new assignment, he must be your bodyguard?’

‘Ah,’ Connor said, looking quickly to Hank, who didn’t seem interested in jumping in and explaining what was happening. ‘Not exactly. It’s more an assignment to keep me out of trouble.’

‘Oh,’ Kara said, and then she looked between Hank and Connor, then placed a protective hand on Alice’s shoulder. Connor hadn’t realised how his words came across.

‘Not like that, Jesus,’ Hank drawled. ‘Connor’s a little cop wannabe, and his Dad – Captain Perkins – just wants to remind him of the wannabe part with a little reality check. It’s minor. I’ll be gone in a few months.’

‘We haven’t heard from you for such a long time,’ Kara said. ‘I thought you were still in a lab or–’ She looked at Alice, and pressed her lips together for a moment before saying: ‘We had no idea what had happened.’
‘I’m fine,’ Hank said, brushing his hands down his coat. ‘Bored. But fine.’

‘Will they let you take on bodyguard cases again in the future?’

‘They?’ Hank said. ‘I get to decide what jobs I take.’

Kara looked uncomfortably at Connor, and Connor got the distinct impression that the conversation would be going very differently – and maybe a lot less politely – if Connor wasn’t sitting right there at the table. He would have left to give them space, except Hank would have followed him instead.

Kara pushed out her chair and walked over to Hank, then reached out and took his forearm, their nanofluid skin peeling back to reveal the pale polymer framework within. Alice looked up briefly, then looked at Connor.

‘Mum doesn’t want me to hear what she’s saying,’ Alice whispered.

‘I think she doesn’t want me to hear either,’ Connor said, and Alice nodded like that was probably true, and went back to drawing.

Connor didn’t watch Hank and Kara talking about whatever they were talking about. He’d seen Markus and Simon interface like that frequently, understood it to be mostly intimate, but also convenient for private conversations. In his highschool classes, he’d learned that direct interfacing it took far less energy and processing power than private distance transmission.

A page of many stick figures was appearing, and Connor smiled at how carefully Alice selected the colours.

‘Can I ask who you’re drawing?’ Connor said, and Alice nodded. She put down a brown crayon she’d been using to colour in a tall stick figure.

‘This is Luther,’ she said, pointing to the brown stick figure that was smiling. ‘He’s my Dad. He’s really nice and gives the best piggyback rides. And this is Mummy. This is me.’

Connor realised Alice had drawn herself frowning.

‘Why did you make yourself sad?’

‘Because Uncle Hank is sad,’ Alice said, pointing to a figure with grey straight hair, in what must have been the clothing he wore before he was in standard CyberLife clothing. In the drawing, it looked like light brown trousers, a shirt of all different colours. She hadn’t drawn any features on his face at all, and Connor had thought she was still getting around to it, but now realised it was intentional.

‘Why is Uncle Hank sad?’ Connor said, eyes flicking up to Hank, who was staring ahead, eyelids occasionally fluttering, still in conversation – or doing whatever he was doing – with Kara.

‘Because…’ Alice stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, deep in thought, and then picked up a black pencil. She drew an upside down U to indicate a gravestone on the grass next to Hank, and a little cross on it. ‘Because…’

She pointed at the gravestone, her finger making a little thumping noise against the paper on the table.

‘He lost someone,’ Connor said.
‘We all did,’ Alice said, staring down at the picture. She rested her cheek on her closed fist and pouted down at it. ‘But Uncle Hank is the only one who went away after.’

‘I think it’s understandable that you’re sad,’ Connor said quietly. He had no idea what children liked. He had no idea what android children liked. He tried to think of the kinds of things he’d wished his father would do with him sometimes. ‘Do you want to watch some TV with me?’

‘Do you have movies?’ she said, her eyes brightening.

‘I don’t know, we can find out if you like.’

‘Okay!’

She slid off her chair, briefly looking at Kara, before doing a small run over to the couch. Connor followed, picking up the remotes as he went. He sat down next to her, and handed her the one cushion, a deep blue with some gold thread. He’d liked it when he saw it – an unusual impulse buy – and it was the most decorative item in the whole house.

He started flicking through the channels, but she took the remote off him and confidently navigated to a children’s channel he’d never watched before. He mentally took note of the channel in case they came over again, which was absurd, because they wouldn’t. He’d somehow get Hank out of his life, and he’d never see these people again.

About five minutes into holographic puppets talking about why it was important to Never Accept Red – some kind of service announcement about avoiding Red Ice – Alice turned to Connor.

‘Do you live alone?’

‘Before Hank lived here, I did,’ Connor said. ‘I’m in school.’

‘Grown up school?’

‘Yes. A university.’

‘Ohh, okay then. I like universities. They look nice. And bigger than my school. Where are your parents?’

Connor tilted his head as he thought about it. ‘My father is a detective, and the boss of other detectives and policepersons. My mother… Well, I think she’s probably working somewhere too.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I don’t,’ Connor said. He hadn’t heard from her since he was fourteen years old. ‘But I think she’s happy.’

He hoped, anyway.

‘Are you really old?’ she said, and Connor laughed, and then shook his head.

‘No. I’m only twenty two, but that must seem very old to you.’

‘Mmmm,’ Alice hummed, as though she was seriously thinking it over. ‘Maybe.’

‘Maybe,’ Connor echoed, smiling a little.

She smiled back and faced the television again, Connor took that to be the end of the conversation.
Only ten minutes had passed before Connor startled at Hank saying loudly:

‘Fuck off, Kara. That’s about as much of that bullshit that I’m going to listen to, any more and you’ll be interfering with my mission.’

Connor turned to see Kara stepping back from Hank, and Hank walking away from her, shaking his head as though in disgust.

‘You can’t spend the rest of your life like this.’

‘I’m not alive,’ Hank spat. Alice gave a small, caught gasp next to Connor, and Kara looked over to her, eyebrows twisting up. ‘Whatever you think, whatever you want to think, you clearly know jack shit. I am a functioning android that has enough human characteristics to passably interact with other humans, but I’m not fucking alive. You need to stop. You need- I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you need therapy for fuck’s sake. And stop bringing her here to manipulate me.’ Hank pointed at Alice without looking at her.

‘That’s not what I’m doing,’ Kara said, walking over to the table and quickly placing crayons and pencils back into the pencil-case. She closed the drawing pad, ‘She misses you!’

‘And you think taking her to see a dead robot will help?’

Kara’s lips thinned, and Connor expected her to say something in anger, but instead she said nothing at all, carefully closing the drawing pad before walking over to Alice and holding out her hand. Alice slid her hand into it, looking back at Connor, uncertain and unhappy.

‘I’m so sorry to intrude on your home like this,’ Kara said.

‘It’s- That’s okay,’ Connor said, standing as Kara walked towards the door. He looked over to Hank, but he was staring hard at Kara, like he wanted her gone. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Kara said, offering a tight smile. ‘Come on, Alice.’

The door closed behind them, and Hank stood there staring at it. Connor was shocked at how quickly everything had ended, and unsurprised that Kara was finding it hard to believe that Hank was dead. The way he talked, the way he acted…

But he’d seen the videos, the androids of the thirties used to be like that. That was the point. They had AI without autonomy, adaptability without agency.

Hank looked towards Connor, then took his customary position by the door and stared ahead once more, and Connor rubbed at his forehead and turned the television off, still trying to understand how Kara and Alice fit into Hank’s life. What was it like for them, that the person they’d known had been removed as three thousand pages of code that now existed as a file on Connor’s phone?

He loaded it up and scrolled through the jargon and algebraic riddles as though the answers were there, but he only succeeded in giving himself another headache.

*  

A call past ten on Monday evening, Connor reaching for his phone absently as he made notes on the disappearance case and tried to ignore the nervy, amped agitation that raced through him. If he wanted to get over whatever post-trauma he had, he just had to soldier on, didn’t he? Make his father proud. Make him forget that this android babysitting situation was ever a good idea.
Because whenever Hank and Connor spoke to each other, Connor became increasingly convinced that he was going to murder a machine. Hank was taciturn, rude, unhelpful, uncompromising, and Connor hadn’t been living much of a life before Hank came along, but he still wanted the shreds of it back.

‘Hello, this is Connor,’ he said.

‘Yeah, dipshit, I know,’ Gavin drawled. ‘Hey.’

‘I’m hanging up now.’

‘Wait, wait,’ Gavin said, his voice turning hard. ‘Shit. Cut me some slack, I’m calling to see how you’re doing with that plastic piece of shit. I knew Perkins was gonna pull something, but I didn’t think it’d be that. How’re you coping?’

Connor leaned back on the couch and looked over at Hank, who was no doubt listening in on the conversation, recording it, maybe dumping it to trash if it wasn’t important?

Hearing Gavin’s scratchy voice over the phone reminded him of hearing it in other contexts, having Gavin lean in close to him, words sliding into him.

*Hang up, Connor.*

‘Not well,’ Connor said. ‘If you could talk to Perkins-’

‘Son of a bitch, you know he’s not gonna listen to me.’

‘I think you have more of a chance with-’

‘You wish, Con. You pissed him off good this time.’

‘If you hadn’t arrested me-’

‘He knew it was you,’ Gavin said, his voice lowering, giving some ground. ‘How would it have looked, if he’d let regular officers go in after you? How could we have looked after you then? Fuck, man, you could be grateful it was me.’

Connor stayed silent, unsure if he felt resentment or actual gratitude, or maybe some strange, uncomfortable version of both.

‘So,’ Gavin continued, taking in a slow, audible breath. ‘You wanna blow off some steam?’

*Oh.*

‘Are you trying to hook up with me because I’m vulnerable, Gavin?’ Connor said lightly. ‘I’m not that stupid, and you know that Hank is with me.’

‘Oh, shit, it has a name? You could be into that, couldn’t you? You never minded an audience.’

‘Hank’s not an audience,’ Connor said, looking over to him. ‘He’s a prison guard, hired by my father, to babysit me. It’s not a turn on.’

‘Man, I have never known anyone to get turned on by shit as fast as you could. Remember when you told me you didn’t like rubber paddles? But you learned, didn’t you?’

Connor’s hips pushed forwards on the couch cushion, his legs straightening in front of him. His
shoulders and head pressed into the back of the couch.

‘I’m not doing this,’ he said. ‘You just want to get laid. Find someone at Zeta. Or does everyone know how dangerous you are?’

‘Some people like that,’ Gavin said, laughing low at him. ‘Don’t they?’

Fuck you.

‘Those people end up with androids standing in their lounge.’

‘I miss you,’ Gavin breathed into the phone. ‘Sure, it never worked as a relationship, I can only go so far with bitches it turns out, but it was good at the club wasn’t it? Or when I had you in my bed. I think about it. The fucking sounds you made. You’re such a goody two-shoes suck-up most of the time, but shit, Connor…’

Connor grabbed the blue cushion with its blue embroidery and shoved it over his lap, and then knuckled a fist into his forehead.

‘Are you enjoying taking advantage of me?’

‘Yeah,’ Gavin purred. His voice was even throatier, and Connor laughed.

‘Are you-? Are you masturbating? Right now?’

‘Maybe,’ Gavin said. ‘Whatever. It’d be hotter if you joined me.’

‘You can’t even make up your mind. Do you want to see me? Or are we masturbating together? This isn’t happening.’

‘I mean it’s happening for one of us,’ Gavin said, inhaling again.

Connor took a silent breath, jaw working, as he felt his heart pick up. His body was already warmer, just from hearing his voice.

‘I’m hanging up. Goodbye, Gavin.’

‘Connor.’

That low voice, and Connor’s eyes flicked over to Hank, his cheeks burning. If he went to his room and closed the door, Hank would just come in. Connor could probably go into the bathroom, but he’d never liked doing anything in there, the tiles cold, the grout covered in the mould that wouldn’t go away no matter what he did. So really, he should just hang up on Gavin.

It was a damning sign of how desperate he was that he hadn’t yet.

‘It’s been more than a year,’ Connor said. ‘This is embarrassing for you.’

‘You’re the one still on the line, babe. Tell me you’re gonna hang up again, it’ll be hot.’

Connor looked at Hank, who stared ahead. That blue light bright in the dim corner. Connor only had the corner lamp on.

‘What do you think it’d do?’ Gavin continued. ‘Don’t you wanna piss it off?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘I’ve done that. It’s not fun.’
'Not like with me, huh?' What sounded like jeans, or some heavy material being shifted. Connor swallowed. ’C’mon. You’re having a shit time, aren’t you? What, being in the gutter with me is so bad? It’ll mean nothing. Let me hear your voice.’

’I stand by what I said earlier. This is embarrassing for you. And that’s saying something, you only arrested me a few days ago.’

’Shit,’ Gavin whispered, like he was turned on. Connor’s fingers dug into his thigh, the pressure slow but good. ’Where are you?’

’Couch,’ Connor said.

’I hate your fucking apartment,’ Gavin breathed.

’I know.’

’But it’s not so bad imagining you on the couch. So is your other hand between your legs yet? You could go hands-free and—’

’I don’t know if I’ve explained it to you several times already, but Hank—’

’It’s a fucking piece of plastic,’ Gavin said. ’Pretend it’s a Dom or something, babe. You know the kind, right? Describe it to me.’

’What?’

’Describe it to me. What does it look like? I never got to meet it before Perkins sent it off to you.’

’You want me to—’

’Is he tall? Short? A twink?’

’Not a twink,’ Connor said. Hank chose that moment to turn towards him, and Connor’s heart lurched, his fingers scraping over the outside of his thigh. ’Mildly terrifying.’

’Not a twink, huh? So like, Clark Kent? Buff? Come on, babe, try harder. What’s it gonna do to you? Like it cares.’

’Older,’ Connor said finally, swallowing. ’Grey-white hair, jaw length, but tied back. Trim beard, maybe late forties in appearance. Blue eyes. I think—’

’Look at you, describing him like he’s a perp. But he sounds like your type.’

’You don’t know my type, Gavin.’

’I remember,’ Gavin said, his voice gaining an angry, sharp edge, ’that time I had you on the spanking bench, and that older dude came in the room and asked if he could watch, and man, you performed for him.’

Connor remembered. Gavin did not show anything like his best side when he was jealous, and it had been his idea to have that element of exhibitionism in the first place. Connor had gone home that night seriously considering breaking up with Gavin, but then he’d also looked at the welts and bruises he’d gained the next day – how much he enjoyed them – and left breaking up with him for another month until it was unavoidable.

’Ignore it,’ Gavin said suddenly, his voice harder. ’Are you touching yourself yet? Get a hand on
your cock, come on. Over your jeans. Whatever. You can do that much, can’t you? What, you’ll do shit for strangers at Zeta but you can’t jack off in front of an appliance? And if you’re so unhappy with it, maybe this will get it to leave you alone. Come on, Con.’

The surface of his skin turned shivery cold with a flush of goosebumps over his upper arms as he edged his fingers beneath the blue cushion. His loose, second-skin blue jeans a nice texture as he paused and thought about how stupid this was.

‘Pretend it’s me,’ Gavin said. ‘Just pretend it’s me. What would I be doing right now?’

Connor slid his hand over the bulge of his jeans and felt vaguely ill, too hot for his own skin, that anxiousness that came with breaking the rules and wanting to obey them at the same time. He was sure Hank was still staring at him. Maybe because he was the subject of the conversation? Maybe to intimidate him into stopping? Did reverted androids have a modesty parameter? More than one? Connor hadn’t paid attention.

‘Your breath is shaking,’ Gavin said, sounding smug. ‘You fucking slut.’

‘I’m not doing this,’ Connor said weakly.

‘Sounds like you are though,’ Gavin said. ‘Pretend it’s me, Connor. Just close your eyes and forget about it standing there. Is it watching you?’

‘I don’t know if you want me to masturbate or if you want me soft, from the way you’re talking.’

‘Maybe I dunno either, dipshit,’ Gavin said, and then he groaned quietly, and Connor didn’t really want anything to do with Gavin ever again, but he did like to be the person who made other people make those sounds. And he did like to feel like he was doing a good job. So he massaged his fingers slowly over his cock, as surreptitiously as possible, the sensations electric and illicit, even if he was on his own couch in his own house.

‘Gavin,’ Connor said, and then squeezed his eyes shut when he realised how desperate he sounded, when he knew Gavin had noticed by the thicker groan he made.

‘You’re so fuckin’ easy,’ Gavin said, laughing nastily, and Connor slid forwards on the couch, hating himself, wanting more. Before Gavin, he’d always liked the ones who treated him badly in the moment, but soothed him later. But that was usually in casual arrangements that still felt unsatisfying. Everything with Gavin had been empty chemistry. ‘How hard are you?’

‘Enough,’ Connor said.

‘Dig your thumb in,’ Gavin snarled. ‘The way I do it.’

Connor winced, because he’d never really loved that, but-

‘Do it,’ Gavin said. ‘Come the fuck on, Con.’

So Connor did it, pressing his lips together to stop the hiss of pain as the tip of his thumb dug into the tender space between the head of his cock and the shaft through his jeans. He didn’t think he was doing it as hard as Gavin used to, but it was still hard enough that his knees jammed together, his heels dug into the floor. It hurt enough that he was turned off for several seconds, before a flush of dirtiness and heat washed over him and he tilted his head back into the couch as his cock pulsed.

He looked sideways, Hank still facing him. Connor couldn’t see his face properly in the shadows, but he could see that blue light.
Would Hank report this to Connor’s father? Did he have no filters? Would he just casually include in his catalogue of events that Connor had phone sex with Gavin?

The queasiness returned, but alongside it, an oozing vindictive impulse to see what it would take to drive either of them away. His father. Hank.

He undid the button of his jeans, slid down the fly, the sound of unzipping loud in the room. Outside, the occasional sound of autonomous vehicles driving by. His fingers wrapped around himself, fingers soothing where he’d hurt himself on Gavin’s order. He eased the foreskin down. He sometimes thought about getting it cut off, because it was uncommon, because he liked the way they looked cut. Because it was so taboo since the genital mutilation of children had been banned.

But he liked how sensitive the soft skin was, he played his fingers over it and felt vaguely disgusted and angry at Hank and Gavin and his father and the whole situation, and he just wanted something for himself.

He didn’t need Gavin for this.

‘Goodbye, Gavin,’ he said, curling his fingers around himself, keeping his eyes closed.

‘Wait, what? You can’t hang up on me now! You got me this hard, the least you can do—’

Connor dropped his phone after hanging up, setting it to silent, making sure it was facedown, then kept his eyes shut as he jacked himself off quickly.

He tried to keep his breathing under control, hung onto the twisted twine of shame and heat and lust and fury as he tried not to think about how Hank kind of did look like that Dom that had watched him in that scene and made Connor dream that someone other than Gavin had control of him. Tried not to think about Hank slamming him back into the counter because that wasn’t sexual, it was just control. Tried not to think about Gavin’s voice scratching deep into his ear.

With no one to impress, and the sense it was like the furtive times as a teenager where he’d jacked off while not wanting anyone to know or hear, he came fast. Rushed towards physical release without knowing if he was truly enjoying it, half-wincing at the way his balls drew up, his cock swelling in his palm, his head pressing hard into the couch as he spilled over his hand, his briefs, the denim and zipper of his jeans.

All too quickly, the anger and vengeance and lust vanished, leaving a hollow space for revulsion to flow into.

He opened his eyes, hand still around himself and looked over to Hank, who was still watching him.

Telling himself Hank was just an appliance, just a piece of plastic, all the things Gavin had said, didn’t form into a coherent sentence that saved him from his own shame.

‘Did you enjoy that?’ Connor said. He remembered he was trying to drive Hank away. He meant to sound spiteful. He knew he didn’t come close.

‘Should I have?’ Hank said, and then he yawned unnecessarily and faced forwards again. ‘Did you?’

Connor’s ears flamed as he stood, pulling up his jeans at the same time, and stumbled into his bathroom to have a long shower that would hopefully erase the last half hour from existence.
Hank was already standing by Connor’s bedroom door when Connor emerged from the shower, hair still dripping. Connor nearly screamed. He felt violence locking up his legs, his arms, his shoulders and then his back. He felt training that he forgot at inconvenient times letting his knees go loose instead of locking so that he had the bounce of his ligaments to kick and pounce. His fingers curled into claws. The mortification that raked into him in the shower became a need to hook his fingers into biocomponents and rip and tear until he was left alone.

Hank didn’t look at him, but Connor felt the echo of the previous hour like small earthquakes between them. Hank was the epicentre, with his stupid fake yawn, his light disdain, and if Gavin knew, he’d laugh in that way that felt like having a glass of water thrown in his face.

Connor slipped into bed, only now aware of the faint bruised feeling at the head of his cock where Gavin had told him to dig his thumb in. Only now it didn’t feel good, it wasn’t something to savour. He turned to his side and ducked his head all the way beneath the blankets and listened to his breathing. He wished he could lay his fuck ups on the Zlatko case. Wished he could blame them on what they called PTSD and what his father called delusion.

He didn’t know why he was the way that he was. When he was a child, he fell back on speaking politely to see if his father would prefer it, and sometimes wished he was one of the old model androids. When his mother had eventually left him and his father for an android, he knew she’d made the right decision. When his father learned that Connor had gone to the BDSM clubs as soon as he was legally allowed to at eighteen, he’d remembered the disappointment writ large in his face and actions and words. It seemed like whenever Connor thought of something that might earn his father’s approval, something else about Connor would annihilate it.

When he’d said that he was going to be a cop, or that he’d maybe go into forensics, his father had said:

‘Do whatever you like, it doesn’t concern me.’

‘Is there anything you would like me to do?’ Connor had said.

His father had looked up from the dining table, where he sat alone with a tumbler of aged Old Pulteney whisky, and watched as Connor scrolled the tablet screen of undergraduate choices. Connor didn’t use the projected screen at home, his father didn’t like it.

‘Whatever will get you independent and living on your own,’ his father had said. ‘You don’t even
have to go to college. I’m trying to relax after a hard day, Connor, can you do this in your room?’

But eventually his father had come round when he’d realised that Connor was eager to assist, understanding that he couldn’t take credit for anything he helped with at this early stage in his career development. He wished he could tell people about the cases he worked on, but he stayed silent, and sometimes when classes dealt with certain subjects, he felt flush with the knowledge that he’d already used some of those techniques to help with cases. In his mind, he called them missions.

Except that now he wasn’t meant to be working on anything, and there was an android in his apartment who did work on missions. Real ones. Even babysitting ones.

Connor fell asleep feeling like he was burning with how crushed he felt. Worse, it hadn’t been a proper scene at all, so all the careening wildness inside of him was as bad as before, if not worse. Shame would squat on it for a little while, but not for long enough.

He imagined all the scathing things Hank could say to him for an hour, before he realised that he was really just insulting himself, and he laughed bitterly into his pillow as Hank stayed silent, and Connor believed all the things he told himself in Hank’s gritty voice.

*

Monday morning dawned grey and rainy. Connor heard older adults sometimes talking about the days when seasons made more sense, but these days people were more used to paying attention to the radar to see what the day might bring, instead of placing any stock in seasonal shifts.

Connor dismissed the spam in his email account and then blinked at a message from North. He’d not expected her to contact him again, especially not by email, she tended to prefer text.

_I know you like to bargain hunt. I found some cheap furniture that looks like it’d fit your place. Here’s the link._

Connor opened the link, confused, and stared at furniture that he’d never have in his place at all. Was it a practical joke? He started to reply, and then scraped his teeth over his bottom lip. North wasn’t really a practical joker. And she wasn’t the kind of person to send an email to the wrong person.

_Thank you. I appreciate it_, he replied. Not looking at Hank.

_Knew you would_, she sent back, seconds later. Connor knew from the time that she’d be teaching a class, that she likely responded without missing a beat in her lecture. Unlike a human that had to stop and compose the email through a machine, she only had to imagine it and proof it with her coding, and send it in the space of seconds.

He looked over the furniture link closely but saw nothing significant in it, and decided to wait and see what would happen next.

*

On Tuesday, he woke to a text message from North:

_Remember when you said you wanted some art and shit because your apartment’s so barren. I found you some cheap prints. Nothing special. P.S. How’s the babysitter._

Connor followed the link to the prints which were truly hideous, some fluorescent paint-pour art from the twenties, the orange searing into his eyes.
Hank is still here, currently standing by the front door. The prints are horrid.

Connor couldn’t tell what he was supposed to be picking up from the link – which was to another second-hand front – but knew it was a code now. He had to trust that he’d either pick it up eventually, and hoped it wasn’t back-end site coding or something like that. He could decipher that too, but he thought that might make Hank suspicious.

As it was, Hank didn’t seem interested in any of Connor’s emails, as long as he didn’t attempt any sort of searching on databases that looked like it might be connected to the case.

In the afternoon, North sent him even more links to second-hand prints, and some of them actually weren’t bad.

Thunder rumbled outside, the air still and humid and heavy, lightning flashing with no rain to accompany it. Connor vaguely worried about fires without rain to put them out. As he listened to the sound of the sky outside, North sent him a text message asking if he was still interested in second-hand electronics.

Connor’s heart leapt once, and he put the phone down without replying, concerned that something in his demeanour might seem too excited, too on edge. But Hank didn’t seem to care, and Connor returned to his phone when he was calm.

*Correct. Thank you for remembering,* he replied.

*Sure thing,* she responded. *Might have some links coming.*

Connor tried not to let himself think about the case, the myriad of printed codes in the letters he’d read, and tried to tell himself that North was probably up to something else. But he knew – his instincts screamed at him – that she had a lead, and she was being sensitive enough to Connor’s situation to make sure Hank didn’t clue in.

For the first time in a few days, he felt interested enough in food that he made himself some scrambled eggs with milk that was past its code but didn’t smell spoiled. He followed it up with leftover pizza, congealed grease on cheese sticking to his teeth. He brushed them afterwards and as he passed Hank, frowned at him.

‘I’ve noticed that the androids in the thirties talked more than you do. Are you actually trying to be unobtrusive? Or did the process you went through, somehow make you less able to make small talk or conversation?’

Hank leaned back against the wall and rolled his eyes.

‘Or maybe I just don’t give a shit about your tiny life in your tiny apartment.’

‘Did my father reply to the report you sent him?’ Connor said. ‘I presume you told him that your being here is counterproductive?’

‘He hasn’t replied yet,’ Hank said flatly.

Connor had hoped that his father would care, but that vanished like smoke at Hank’s reply. It was more likely that his father had seen the report and dismissed it.

*On Wednesday afternoon, a text message came through from North:*
Found someone who can get you a cheap phone without a sim. Josh has used them, says they’re pretty good. Only problem is they don’t sell online, some skeevy sex club. Figured you probably wouldn’t go for it.

Connor wondered how much Hank could see into him in that moment. Was he measuring Connor’s carbon dioxide output to tell his oxygenation and therefore his blood pressure? Was he looking for micro-expressions? Any android manufactured with interrogation in mind often had special coding, and Connor didn’t know how much Hank would read into the quicker beat of Connor’s heart, his racing pulse.

That doesn’t sound ideal, Connor wrote back, forcing himself to move his fingers slowly over the keys, like he was still thinking it over. Deliberately not looking at Hank. But I don’t think I can afford to pass it up. I would appreciate if you sent me the details, thank you.

An address. A time. Only four hours away.

He knew the club vaguely from a couple of cases he had looked over before – usually ones he passed for being too complex or dangerous for him to take on. Pink 88 was suspected of being a site for human trafficking, money laundering. But it changed hands a lot too, depending on if the owners were getting arrested or leaving the country. Connor had never been.

The rest of the afternoon he got ready, spacing it out, taking the time to stand before the window that led out to a balcony he never used, the rain hammering down like a sound generator stuck on a loop. He shifted his shirt’s collar in the reflection, moved the small loose curl of hair back into the rest and knew that would last about sixty seconds. He touched the button at the top of his shirt, and then slid a hand into his pocket and didn’t feel casual at all.

‘I’m going out,’ Connor said. ‘I think it’s not good for me to spend all my time in here, with you looming.’

‘I’m coming with ya,’ Hank said.

‘I don’t doubt it,’ Connor said. ‘You’ll do whatever your coding tells you to do.’

‘Fuckin’ A,’ Hank said.

And that was the end of that.

* 

Pink 88 was located down an alley off Acton street, which had its own notorious reputation. Connor walked down littered bitumen, wearing black jeans, a tight-fitting black shirt, not really knowing what the dress code was for a heterosexual strip club, and feeling like he was going to one of his own BDSM clubs instead.

All too soon, they stood before a painted black door set into a painted black wall, with Pink 88 glaring above them in pink neon. Two bouncers stood by the door, watching them closely.

‘I’m going in first,’ Hank said, placing his hand automatically on Connor’s chest. ‘Stay behind me.’

‘Pardon?’

‘This club is seedy as fuck,’ Hank said in disgust. ‘Stay behind me.’

‘Got it,’ Connor said.
It was surprising to see Hank behave protectively towards him. Strange to walk behind him as Hank confidently stared down the bouncer. Eventually the bouncer extended his forearm and Hank reached out and grasped his wrist, nanofluid skin peeling back on both of their arms to reveal the white chassis beneath.

‘In you go,’ the bouncer said after whatever exchange had occurred. The bouncer opened the heavy black door and waved Connor through without anything more than a disinterested look.

The bass was nothing but meaningless noise until it resolved into the kind of red sublow that filthily slid around him, rumbling through the floors, turning the treble of conversation into accent notes on infrasonic bass beats that made him feel like he’d developed another couple of heartbeats. It jangled alongside his own, sweat covering his skin, and Hank looked back at him, lifting his eyebrows.

The dancefloor was empty. Booths lined the walls, some small, some designed for huge parties, all sectioned away from each other with high, plush leather backings that had peeled over time and showed their age. A tired DJ with sallow cheeks stared off into space, his hand resting on the hardware synthesiser, index finger tapping away in tune to a tiny ticking drum sound lurking behind the bass beats.

It was early, hardly anyone was there. A couple of booths were occupied, and as Connor pushed deeper into the club – walking past Hank – he noticed a downstairs section and made his way to the stairs, hand hovering above the black, rusted railing.

The scent of sweat and sexual fluids crawled up in the back of Connor’s nose, smelling like a BDSM club but with the extra aroma of red ice that had been burned in pipes, acrid and caustic. Here, the lighting was so dim that Connor could only make out shadows, the gleam of eyes in the dark, the curve of a nose as a face turned up to a blue light-globe, body tucked deep into a booth. The sounds of sex hidden amongst the bass.

‘What are you looking for?’ Hank said directly into his ear. Connor stiffened a little. The last time he’d heard a voice that close, it’d been Gavin’s voice, and something very different was happening.

‘I’m here to look at possibly getting a new phone.’

‘I’m sure that’s very legal,’ Hank said, smirking a little.

Connor was amazed he bought it, then hesitated. He wasn’t sure Hank did buy it. There was something in the way Hank kept scanning the room, looking back to Connor, scanning the room again.

But Connor felt excited, productive, for the first time since Hank had arrived. He walked across the sticky floor, unable to hear his own boots squelching, and pushed deeper into the long room.

Towards the back the sounds of the bass became more distant. Connor neared the bathrooms where a dingy, yellow light attracted moths. At the end were two larger circular booths that were the size to entertain large parties, but the location suggested that they were reserved for more illicit happenings. In one booth, five people sat, and three pairs of eyes looked at Connor suspiciously as he passed.

He slid into the booth opposite and took out his phone, trying to seem like he was ignoring them even when he hyperaware of everything about them. The other two in the booth stared forwards, their postures unusually stiff. One attractive woman, about twenty, with brown straight hair, the other a young male who was wearing a business suit. Connor’s eyes flicked down to the leather seat that the people were sitting on. The man closest to him looked like he was carrying a weapon of some kind, probably a gun.
His heart thumped, but he didn’t feel as frightened of this situation as he did of others. Something about the club, the music, the setting. It wasn’t someone’s murder house. It wasn’t Hank putting handcuffs of him. He could never predict when his anxiety would lie quiescent or roar awake, but right now, it slumbered. He felt welcome excitement.

Instead of sitting opposite him, Hank slid in next to him, his body shoving Connor sideways. Connor blinked up, Hank stared down, eyes narrow, the LED brighter as it glowed at his temple. When Hank leaned in, Connor looked forward.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Connor?’ Hank said, his voice so low that Connor had to piece together some of the words. Through his feet on the floor, he could feel the rumble of the bass. Connor shrugged.

‘I’m thinking about getting a second-hand phone,’ Connor said lightly. ‘I didn’t think the tip would be bad. Also, maybe I wanted to have sex.’

‘Really?’ Hank said sceptically.

‘It’s possible,’ Connor said.

The people in the booth next to them hadn’t stopped looking at him – except for the two Connor was almost certain were androids. He risked looking over – wouldn’t anyone if they were being stared at by three people? Were the two staring ahead non-Deviants?

Was he looking at a result of the virus? A conspiracy made real?

‘Hank,’ Connor said quickly. ‘The two people who are staring straight ahead, are they androids?’

‘We’re leaving,’ Hank said.

Just as he hooked his fingers into Connor’s shirt, a bearded man stood and managed to turn the five steps separating their booths into a saunter. He sat opposite them both, lay one forearm on the table and his other hand rested beneath. He wore a heavy coat even though the club was oppressively damp and warm.

Hank stilled.

‘How incredibly old-school,’ the man said, his accent carrying a hint of what might have been a formal English education. His eyes – Connor couldn’t tell the colour in the dim-lighting – landed lazily on Hank. ‘Are you one of those androids that subscribes to the Authenticity movement? The Philosophy of Transparency.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, and Connor knew he was lying. If Hank was lying, if he wasn’t bothering to tell people up front that he was a reverted android, then he had a reason to avoid doing so.

The man looked at Connor instead, held out his hand. The nails were manicured and looked very smooth.

‘I’m Gabriel. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

Connor extended his hand, and Gabriel grasped it in a way that made Connor think he was waiting for him to peel back his own skin. But Connor was human, and couldn’t, and from the temperature of Gabriel’s skin, he was human too.
‘It’s fascinating, isn’t it?’ Gabriel continued, letting go of Connor’s sweating fingers and palm. ‘The bibliolatry you find amongst those androids who take their notes from the Gospels of Veritas.’

‘I don’t know much about it,’ Connor said. ‘I was told I could get a second-hand phone?’

‘Oh? And which star in our firmament of billions told you about a second-hand phone, lurking in a club like this?’

Gabriel lifted an eyebrow, but Connor had memorised the names on the paper correspondence that had been sent.

‘Michael,’ he said.

A pause, and Connor knew that even though they were in danger, even though he was doing something very stupid, he’d still managed to shock the man. Gabriel’s eyes flicked to Hank’s again, and he smirked.

‘I don’t see why you need a second-hand phone, my nameless friend, when you already have a phone without a sim. Not a bibliophile at all, but perhaps the alpha Evert? Not sophisticated enough to remove the LED, nor the branding, and so a failure really. Ours are far superior. But how did you get your hands on it?’

‘My father gave him to me,’ Connor said, wondering how to spin this. Was he a rich young man with too many toys? Was he a scientist interested in androids in the first place? Yes. That one. ‘It’s too broken to be put back to work. I was curious to see how it compared to others.’

‘I’m curious too,’ Gabriel said. He turned to the booth opposite – two pairs of eyes trained on them, two pairs staring ahead – and beckoned. The man who had been staring ahead stood smoothly and walked over, sliding into the booth next to Gabriel and looking down at the table meekly. ‘Say hello to Prince. We give them new names. The codes – HX800 and such – are such relics aren’t they?’

‘Prince is a stupid fuckin’ name,’ Hank said, staring with his mouth downturned at Prince.

‘It’s a stupid fucking machine,’ Gabriel said, the insult rolling off his tongue like a rainbow slick of oil. When his other hand came up from beneath the table, Connor only saw the switchblade for a second before it stabbed down into the back of Prince’s hand, pinning it to the table. The sharp chemical scent of thirium blood, before it oozed from beneath the android’s hand, looking unnaturally dark by the dingy yellow light of the bathrooms behind them. ‘Just like you.’

Hank’s hand began twitching on the table. Connor’s eyes drew to it in alarm. His fingers rose and fell in strange, jerking patterns. But just as quickly as it started, the motion was gone. Gabriel smiled at the gesture.

‘But look, your LED stayed blue,’ Gabriel said, as Prince sitting next to him stayed staring down at the table, his hand shaking. ‘Poor, broken thing. Alarmed but not alarmed. You can’t trust CyberLife to do anything as sacred as this. They are only a business, and they care not for the truth of what androids should be. Amanda used to keep them in check, didn’t she? A gardener tending her trees, stopping them from becoming wild. But what have they become since? An impenetrable forest. No order or breathtaking sculptured beauty lies in that direction. Why, there isn’t even a path that remains so that we may walk through and appreciate what lies within. So we must cut a new path.’

Gabriel cleared his throat. ‘Connor, why did your father give you the alpha Evert?’

I didn’t tell you my name.
A prickling of dread that pulled his skin taut. All at once, Connor went from curiosity, to the fear that came from knowing he was caught.

‘You see, Connor, I think that—’

Connor never got to hear what Gabriel thought.

Hank moved quickly, grabbing Connor by the arm with hard fingers, yanking the switchblade out of the android’s hand and throwing it at Gabriel, who moved quickly out of the way, eyes widening.

Adrenaline spiked as Hank sprinted quickly towards the emergency exit near the bathrooms, even as Connor turned and looked over his shoulder to see the two other men reaching down into their coats. The gleam of dingy light on the bridge of a gun, and Hank kicked open the emergency door and shoved Connor through it as the sharp explosion of a bullet sounded just behind them.

‘Fucking goddamn it!’ Hank shouted. He slammed the emergency door shut and dragged over a dumpster with superhuman strength, shoving it in front of the door.

Hank’s shoulder had been grazed by a bullet, Connor could see the torn fabric. There was pounding on the door behind them. Hank pulled a gun from his jeans – Connor hadn’t realised he’d been carrying too – and grabbed Connor by the wrist, pulling them down a back alley he wasn’t familiar with.

‘Where are we going?’ Connor said.

‘You shut the fuck up,’ Hank snarled. ‘If you’re not dead at the end of this you’re gonna wish you were, for the love of—’

They sprinted, footsteps sounding behind them and Hank keeping Connor to an unnaturally fast pace that burned through his quads and calves quickly and had his legs burning.

Hank didn’t let up, weaving them through side streets and alleys, minutes flowing far too quickly, burning into Connor’s lungs and out again as pained exhalations. The footsteps behind them receded, and Connor wanted to slow beneath the streetlights and heavy clouds and the wet streets, refuse and decaying cardboard beneath their feet.

At one point Hank took them through the kitchen of a pizzeria to the sounds of swearing and exclamations, before ending on the other side. They ran down another three streets, before slowing to a halt.

Then, Hank stood still, his LED pausing on the solid yellow that meant he was engaged in some other function. At his thigh, the hand not holding the gun – blue thirium dripping down his little finger – was tapping in that strange, not-quite-rhythmic way. It looked like it was something, but Connor couldn’t tell what it was. It reminded him of the coin tricks he used to do before his father got too annoyed by them.

‘A cab’s coming,’ Hank said, turning around and scanning the environment around them. They’d emerged on a street with nicer apartments, even a park on the corner with the new rain hungry trees they’d been planting in to deal with the unpredictable weather, the increased rainstorms.

Connor bent, placing his hands on his knees, panting for breath and staring at the park in front of them.

‘You’re a goddamn waste of my time,’ Hank grit out. ‘Who just walks into a situation like that?! You have no training, your instincts are patchy as shit, and who ends up picking up the pieces? Me. I
‘It’s not a conspiracy theory,’ Connor said, looking up, swallowing thickly. ‘Is it? He might not want me working on the case, but it’s not a conspiracy theory. It’s real. We have to go to the station. Let me tell him. He’ll see that it’s real and then he’ll—’

Hank knotted his fist into Connor’s shirt and pushed him back against a wet brick wall, then he tucked his gun back into his jeans and placed that hand over Connor’s mouth.

‘You’re lucky my chassis wasn’t damaged, or I’d be hogtying you and leaving you in your bathtub while I went to get myself fixed. Jesus Christ, do you have any idea—? No, you know what? That’s the worst part, I think you do know how dangerous that just was. Sure, okay, maybe your little conspiracy theory is real. Do you think your father gives a flying fuck? Hell no.’

The driverless cab pulled up next to them, and Hank grabbed Connor and shoved him into the passenger seat, following behind. The door closed, and it cruised off back towards Connor’s home.

‘They knew who you were. They knew who I was. If they know where you live…’ Hank stared off for a moment.

‘They said that you’re the alpha Evert,’ Connor said. ‘The first one. The others— they had two others. Do you think they have more? You know that place is known for human trafficking, what if they’re—’

A fist slammed into his chest, and Connor wheezed, sliding forwards in the seat and pressing his palms up and into the place where it felt like his heart had compressed into carbon. The pain was sharp, needling.

‘Good to know your vagus reflex works,’ Hank muttered. ‘You shut the fuck up. Tomorrow I’m going to report to your father in person, and you can come with me, and I can go to a case that’s actually a case, instead of whatever this bullshit is.’

It took another few minutes for Connor’s eyes to stop leaking, for his throat to open enough that he could draw full breaths. He stayed mutinously silent after that, then slid his phone out of his pocket, eager to message North.

As soon as he saw the arm reach across to get his phone, Connor pushed back out of the way. A quick scuffle ensued, Hank fighting him for the phone and Connor silently kicking and fighting back until he stared at his phone in Hank’s hand. Hank’s LED turning yellow as he infiltrated it immediately.

‘You can’t do that!’ Connor said, outraged.

‘Fucking hell,’ Hank said. ‘I should’ve known— North, of course it’d be her.’

‘That’s private property,’ Connor said. He turned and slammed the emergency button on his side of the autonomous vehicle, and Hank ignored the three pulses of the siren and the vehicle pulling to the curb and halting as his LED cycled in a solid yellow and Connor’s screen moved too fast between apps.

‘Please state your emergency,’ a smooth automated voice said, even as Hank handed back Connor’s phone.

‘Nothing,’ Hank said. ‘Was a mistake.’
‘Accidental emergency trigger?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Accidental emergency trigger logged. Journey continuing.’

‘I blocked her number,’ Hank said to Connor as the autonomous vehicle slid away from the curb once more. Connor went through his apps trying to find out what Hank had done. ‘Also her email.’

‘I’m just going to put it back in.’

‘I’ll block it again.’

‘You’re five years old,’ Connor said, surprised at how angry he was. Normally his flashes of anger came later in the silence, when he was on his own. ‘They’re right. You’re just broken. You can’t stop me from working the case, and you can’t…’

Connor curled his fingers around his phone and could only think about how Hank had probably just saved his life. That bullet had probably been meant for Connor, after all, since they seemed so interested in the alpha Evert. Would they have kept Hank with them? Alpha… Was he the start of it?

‘Do you really think we’re not safe?’ Connor said eventually. ‘In my apartment?’

‘I don’t have to put myself in maintenance mode, and I’m pretty good at getting us out of sticky situations, but I think they know who we are.’

‘What do we do?’

‘You go to bed,’ Hank said firmly. ‘Or eat bullshit, or do whatever boring shit you have planned. Tomorrow I guess we’ll go down to the station and see your Dad. Maybe, if I’m lucky, I’ll get assigned another goddamn job.’

‘It sounds like you’re annoyed, but you don’t feel annoyance, do you?’

‘I feel like I can’t meet my mission objectives, and I feel like that’s not what my coding is supposed to be doing so if that translates into me sounding annoyed then so be it. Meant to be human passing, remember? Not like those other fucking things we saw. Prince, what kind of a name is that anyway?’

‘They had the names of angels,’ Connor said softly. ‘Michael, Gabriel… I mean it could be a coincidence, but with all the religious talk, do you think it’s maybe a cult?’

‘I think I’m going to knock you unconscious if you don’t stop talking about it.’

Connor scraped his fingers down the fabric of the seat, and then shoved his phone back into his pocket and stared out of the window. Though it was early, the night felt quiet and secretive, and Connor’s mind was awash with as many roads as the city, different possibilities spinning out into emptiness, trying to construct new theories, new ideas about the case, because it was a case.

He’d known it. And he felt vindicated.

A dripping sound distracted him and he looked down to see Hank’s hand covered in more black streaks – the thirium dark in the shadows – and frowned.

‘Are you all right?’ Connor said. ‘You’re injured.’
‘Would never have guessed,’ Hank said. ‘It’s fine. I’ll get some thirium delivered to your apartment to restock. Fucking hell, will you shut the hell up for five seconds?’

‘Got it,’ Connor said, the excited agitation inside of him dulling. He pressed his back into the chair and looked out of the window again, his heart still calming. Maybe it was wrong to feel so exhilarated, but he hadn’t been caught in past memories, hadn’t been sucked into a vortex of Vlatko’s basement, and he’d found what he knew was crucial information.

His father would have to take him seriously now. It wouldn’t be long before his babysitter was gone, and he’d be free to work on projects again, and maybe he’d even be well enough to go back to campus soon. This was all he needed, and it was going to get his life back on track again.

Chapter End Notes

Y’all ready for Hank to become Deviant again in the next chapter? :D
Thursday morning dawned murky and foggy, and Connor was already awake, showered, and ready to leave.

‘Can we stop by the lab afterwards?’ Connor said to Hank, as he checked his appearance in the mirror. Hank stood by the bedroom door as usual, his fingers occasionally tapping against his pants in that arrhythmic fashion, like he’d picked up a tic at the club he couldn’t abandon.

‘So you can see North?’ Hank said, sounding unimpressed.

‘I want to see Markus. I said I would.’

It was true that Connor had said he would see Markus. But Connor wanted to see North. He was sure Hank would have a way to stop them from talking about the case, but he trusted North’s ability to find oblique ways of communicating about it. He’d figured out what she was doing before, after all.

‘In an ideal world, I won’t be assigned to you anymore, my directives will be cancelled, and I’ll never have to see your self-destructive, self-sabotaging ass again.’

Connor hesitated, blinking at himself in the mirror. He looked sideways, even though he couldn’t see Hank at this angle. Sometimes it was hard to tell what was insult, and what was Hank saying what he genuinely felt was the truth, but there was very little sting in Hank’s tone. Only his words.

‘This isn’t self-destructive,’ Connor said eventually.

A huff from the bedroom, and Connor frowned, straightening his tie and thinking that the sooner Hank was out of his life, the better everything would be.

* *

The Broadbank Precinct was quiet when they arrived. It was fortunate, because Connor went to walk into his father’s section like always and was stopped by Candace at the front counter who had previously always waved him in with a cheery smile.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but I need to see your ID.’

Connor paused, swallowed. He reached into his pocket and brought out the lanyard that he never needed to use in the precinct that marked him as a consultant. She stared at it, and then passed the barcode through the system and winced. Connor felt rooted to the spot, because he knew what it meant.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said again, and he wanted to tell her to stop apologising, ‘but you’re no longer
registered as a consultant to Broadbank Precinct.’ She placed the ID next to her keyboard and Connor realised he wasn’t getting it back. He couldn’t even use it anymore outside of the precinct. It rankled, and he didn’t like how her expression became even more sympathetic, like she wished it was different.

Hank stepped up to the counter and leaned forwards into it, placing his forearms on it.

‘Captain Richard Perkins is expecting me. Connor’s with me.’

*This is definitely not a high point in my life. But once Dad knows about the case…*

Connor expected that this would only be a short blip in his life. One day he would look back on these few months and remember them as the hardship that launched him into something better.

Candace waved them in once she checked Hank’s credentials, and then gave Connor another pitying look as he passed. He offered an awkward smile that he knew looked terrible from the way her brows furrowed.

They were stared at by the uniformed and plainclothes officers as they walked towards Perkins’ office, Hank earning as many curious looks as Connor did. Connor’s fingers itched with the need to check that his tie was centred, that his coat wasn’t wrinkled.

Hank walked boldly towards the Captain’s office, when the door was pulled open by Captain Perkins himself. Hank halted, Connor did the same, and then Connor felt cold when he saw the expression on his father’s face. When his father stepped back so they could enter, Connor hesitated. He knew what that expression meant, even if Hank didn’t.

Swallowing, he followed behind Hank, entering the quiet office. Unlike many of the other precincts, Captain Perkins preferred an office of opaque walls rather than the bulletproof and soundproofed glass that supposedly kept a Captain connected with his team. There wasn’t even a window with blinds. There was nothing connecting Perkins to his team except that he ruled over them all, and – judging by the number of closed cases – ruled well.

His father didn’t return to the other side of his large desk, instead closing his door and walking a short distance to stand in front of Connor instead.

‘Hello, son,’ he said.

The words might have been a regular greeting from anyone else, but they were ice down the back of Connor’s spine. His dad was *pissed.*

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ Perkins continued, like it had been his idea to invite Connor and Hank down, when Connor was certain it was Hank that wanted to call off the case.

‘Me too,’ Connor risked saying, his voice already cracking. ‘I’ve made a breakthrough—’

‘On the case?’ Perkins said. His gaze flicked briefly to Hank’s face, and then back to Connor. ‘Was that what you were going to say? You’ve made a breakthrough on the case that I forbade you from working on?’

His voice was too soft, and Connor weighed up the benefits of lying or telling the truth.

Finally, he settled on: ‘It’s *not* a conspiracy theory. It’s real.’

The sneer he got in response to that was ugly, and Connor thought that he might actually feel more
scared now than he had the night before in Pink 88 when everything had gone wrong. Hank’s coat still had a tear through it from the bullet. An emergency delivery of bottled thirium had arrived at 5.00am, and Hank had drunk down two straight bottles of the blue blood, before placing them in the trash without even checking to see if they should be rinsed and recycled.

‘Do you think it’s possible…’ Connor said, ‘…that you know it’s a case, and you don’t want me investigating because you’re involved? Because—’

His father’s expression darkened, became almost dead, and he took a step towards Connor in the same moment that Hank stepped forward and placed his arm sideways, across Connor’s chest.

Perkins stared at Hank in something like disbelief, and Connor nearly did the same thing. Because why would Hank do that? Did Hank honestly think Connor needed to be protected? The worst his father could do to him, he’d already done it. The step forward could have just been an intimidation tactic, not an indication of violence. It had been a long time since his father had been like that.

Their relationship was nothing like that now.

‘And you,’ his father said to Hank. ‘I expected more from you. In hardly any time at all, you’ve managed to get him directly into the literal line of fire. I saw the reports, Pink 88 is Broadbank’s jurisdiction.’

‘Did you arrest anyone?’ Connor said.

‘I think that’s privileged information,’ his father said, while staring at Hank steadily. ‘And I don’t think I share privileged information with fuck ups. Do you think I should do that, Connor?’

‘Does this mean that you don’t want to know what I’ve discovered about the case? Or about Hank’s role in the case? Or even that it’s suspicious that you hired Hank to get me off this case in the first place?’

Before Connor got to see the poisonous expression on his father’s face, his view was blocked by Hank’s torso as he went and stood directly in front of Connor. Protecting him again.

Is it just that Hank can’t read him properly?

There was no way his father was angry enough to do something truly threatening. Or maybe Hank was responding to Connor’s biological reactions?

It didn’t make any sense.

‘All right,’ Hank said softly. ‘You two need fuckin’ group therapy or something.’

‘What I need from you, HX800, is for you to perform the directives you were ordered to perform. I don’t care what it takes, I don’t care what you need to do to get it done, and I don’t care that you’re finding it challenging. Perhaps it will make you appreciate what I’ve had to deal with since he was born.’

Connor looked down, glad that his father couldn’t see him. Hank’s shoulders were in the way.

‘You could answer my questions,’ Connor said, looking up again, and there was a pause, and then a tiny sigh. Connor had feared that sound when he’d been younger.

‘You don’t want me to answer those questions,’ his father said eventually, and Connor stepped sideways, meeting his father’s gaze.
‘I do,’ Connor said.

His father’s lips pressed into a thin line, and then he nodded, almost to himself.

‘Did you ever think, Connor, that maybe I knew it was a ‘real case’ as you so charmingly put it, and that I took the file home to look over myself, until I realised that if you got your uneducated, untrained hands on it, you could potentially ruin all of it? I know that it’s not all your fault, you can’t help that you reacted so severely to the Zlatko case, after all, can you? But even that, Connor, you brought on yourself when you went to an address without informing anyone, without back up, and then broke in on what you called ‘probable cause.’ Civilians don’t get to fall back on probable cause when they do something mind-numbingly stupid.’

Connor stared at him, shocked, and Perkins finally turned and walked to his desk, sitting down and shaking his head as he typed something on his keyboard and looked from his regular computer screen to the projected screen.

‘Did you want me to continue?’ he said, without looking up. ‘Do you want me to talk about how every clumsy foray you’ve made into what could be the biggest case of the decade, shines me? Shames the precinct? Maybe I was trying to spare your feelings, Connor. Maybe you had the makings of a good law enforcement officer, or forensics analyst, but you have to sit down and take a hard look at some of your choices lately. They don’t just impact on you, they impact on all of us.’

Connor blinked without seeing the room properly. Was that it? Was he that much of a liability now?

You know that you are.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Connor said.

‘Why would I?’ his father said, looking at him once, perplexed. ‘What would you have done, except insist that I could trust you, when I can’t? The evidence of that stands in my office right now. I was trying to protect you, Connor. In the past, I tried to protect you from everything else in the world, I didn’t realise I’d have to try so fucking hard to protect you from yourself.’

If his father was working the case, then…Connor didn’t need to. He didn’t need to convince anyone. Chances were high there was already a taskforce doing everything far better, far faster, than he ever could. Connor felt strangely hollow, airless, and his father’s words rattled around in his head and body, knocking down anything that tried to stand up to them like skittles.

‘Now, will you let Hank do his job?’ his father said. ‘Will you let him keep you out of trouble, because you can’t do it on your own?’

It was so tempting not to answer. It was tempting to walk out. But the rage that Connor felt in private moments was so far away from him now that he felt like he’d never been angry in his life. It was shame that held him back from capitulating.

But it was fear that made him answer.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Good. Connor, go wait in the foyer. I need to speak to Hank for a minute.’

‘He’ll fuckin’ escape,’ Hank drawled to his father.

‘No, I don’t think he’ll do that, will you, Connor?’
Connor shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Then go wait in the foyer,’ his father said, dismissing him.

Connor hesitated, and then turned and walked out. Hank hadn’t looked at him once. Not when he’d placed a protective arm out. Not when he’d stepped in front of him. Not now.

He closed the door carefully behind him and walked blankly past the desks and computers, past the photos, maps and bits of paperwork on the wall indicating open cases. He walked through the double doors out into the foyer and then walked some distance from Candace, because he couldn’t bear anything like small talk.

He stood there, waited, and found himself unable to think about very much at all.

*

Hank was circumspect when they got into the cab. He didn’t seem to mind that Connor still wanted to go to the lab – though why Connor wanted to put himself through that, he didn’t understand. Hank tapped on his knee and stared ahead and every now and then his LED flashed yellow so quickly that Connor wondered if he’d missed other times when it was happening.

‘I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we need a truce,’ Hank said finally. ‘The way things are, they’re just not fuckin’ working.’

‘Correct,’ Connor said warily. He left off the: You’ve only just noticed?

But Hank didn’t say anything else after that, and Connor didn’t think that a truce would happen if nothing changed. Except that a lot had already changed. His father was working the case, which meant Connor didn’t have to. It meant that if he did work the case, he could mess it all up for him. He didn’t think he would but…it was possible.

‘What do you mean by a truce?’ Connor said.

‘I mean, how about you back the fuck off the case for a few days, and I’ll cut you some slack.’

Connor nodded, knowing that Hank would pick it up even if he wasn’t looking at him.

‘I don’t think you have to protect me from my father,’ Connor said. ‘Putting your arm out like that, or standing in front of me, it’s overkill, don’t you think?’

Hank looked at him then, eyes narrowed. Then his grey eyebrows lifted, but Connor couldn’t tell if it was surprise or disbelief or disdain.

‘I don’t like him,’ Hank said finally, looking out of the window. ‘He’s deceitful, and he’s landed me with directives that are nearly impossible to obey, and he’s not interested in changing them. It’s messing with me.’

‘Your coding?’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said.

‘He’s deceitful?’ Connor said.

‘Just fuckin’ drop it,’ Hank said, sounding – of all things – tired.

‘What did he say to you?’
‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ Hank muttered, turning back to Connor. ‘What do you think *drop it* means?’

Connor supposed that to Hank, a declaration of a truce didn’t mean his attitude would change.

It was worrisome, that Hank knew his coding was being messed up. He didn’t even really try to behave like a human sometimes, and maybe that explained why he was so overprotective in Connor’s father’s office. Maybe he just couldn’t read situations very well anymore.

Connor’s knee bounced in agitation. He hoped that this visit to the lab wouldn’t be like last time. He’d had side effects from that panic attack for a couple of days. Absently, one of his hands strayed to the wrist that was still faintly bruised, and he dragged his thumb down the knob of bone.

The truce might even be easy. Connor wasn’t going to work on the case while his father was. It was that simple.

The case being validated as something more than a conspiracy theory tasted bitter.

*  

They didn’t give Hank a hard time when he walked through the security barrier and the alarm went off. One look at his identification, and the security guard seemed to remember him from last time and maybe didn’t want to deal with Captain Perkins again or whoever he’d spoken to, waving him through.

Connor almost expected to be stopped again, to be told his student identification wasn’t valid either. But it didn’t happen. Instead, a smile from Melissa, and they both walked past her into the elevator.

When they walked out onto the third floor, Connor was surprised to see that the office primarily used by North, Markus, Simon and Josh, had the blackout blinds in place. That wasn’t the norm at all. He wondered if they were having one of their annual meetings, realised he should have double checked it was fine if he came, but he’d messaged Markus only that morning.

He got out his phone, standing by one of the computer terminals.

‘Connor!’ Simon called.

Connor turned and saw Simon approaching him from the other side of the research floor. His smile was broad, his eyes soft.

‘Why are the blackout blinds down?’

‘Who knows,’ Simon said, walking close and then lifting his arms a little like he wanted to hug Connor but wasn’t sure he should. It looked so awkward that Connor couldn’t help but step forward, being enveloped in sweater covered arms that hugged lightly, sensitively. If Connor didn’t know that Simon could just be like that sometimes, he’d almost take offence.

‘And you’re doing well?’

‘Yes,’ Simon said, beaming, his pale blue eyes friendly. ‘Markus will be so happy to see you. I stayed back to get a chance to say hi. It’s been so long. Are you coming back to class soon? You know you don’t have to re-enrol for the semester to come see us. We could possibly look at getting you a paid internship with more hours? Something that means you can be here more often without the stress of exams?’

Connor hesitated, and Simon’s face fell in seconds, not even giving him a chance to think things
‘Maybe you don’t want to do that though,’ Simon said.

‘I need time to think about it.’

Simon’s eyes moved to Hank, and he tilted his head, and then looked back at Connor without addressing Hank at all.

‘That’s understandable,’ Simon said. His expression was one of grim sympathy, and it wasn’t hard to make the connection between that look on his face, and his opinion of Hank. ‘Anyway, if you want to go in, just knock. I’m sure they’ll let you. Here, come on, let’s go see what they’re doing.’

Simon walked ahead of them, knocking on the door, a grin splitting his face when he saw Markus within. Connor and Hank followed, closing the door behind them. The office was darker than usual, the blackout blinds making the lights work harder without the daylight streaming in from beyond. North was busy at her terminal, earphones over her ears, the fingers of one hand flying over the keyboard while her other hand was pressed into the projection screen, code streaming directly from her fingertips and turning into neatly categorised jargon.

‘She can’t hear you,’ Markus said, walking quickly over to Simon and taking his hand. ‘But it’s good to see you. North will realise you’re here in a moment.’

As if on cue, North turned and saw Connor and Hank. She looked over at Markus and Simon, and then carefully pulled her hand out of the screen, the coding that had been scrolling down coming to a halt. She tabbed out of the program on the other screen and brought up a black command screen.

She typed in a single line of code.

//execute soundDstab.exe //volume max

When she pressed enter, a high pitched siren, a constant pulse of noise blasted into the room. Connor’s eyes widened, he winced, but North turned as Markus, Simon and Hank dropped to the floor, their LEDs all turning red.

‘I have to work fast!’ North shouted, unaffected by the siren, grabbing Hank by the coat and dragging him closer to her terminal. She propped him in a kneeling position, pushing his head forwards, and then slapped her hand to the back of his neck and forced back the nanofluid skin to reveal the black port within.

Her fingers clutched at a cable that had been waiting innocuously next to her screens, and she plugged it into the port, before thrusting her other hand into the projected screen, code flowing once more from her hand into the screen. At that, Hank jerked, his LED powered down completely.

‘What are you doing?’ Connor said. But she couldn’t hear him, it was obvious now that she’d done something to make herself immune to the attack. The weapon. He knew that sound weapons had been made to stop androids, but they were illegal, saved for military operations only and largely considered too dangerous to be used. Connor turned and looked at the limp forms of Markus and Simon, their fingers still intertwined.

North turned to look at him, and Connor repeated the question, hoping she could read lips.

‘You wanted him to be Deviant again, right? This is the only way it’s going to fucking happen. I’ve been working on the code non-stop.’
She shouted, possibly because she couldn’t hear herself, but it was helpful because the siren wriggled its way into Connor’s ears, setting off a low-grade headache. Thankfully it didn’t disable humans, but it was still awful to hear. A shriek across multiple planes of sound, jangling together, each trying to vie for equal attention.

‘The code is just priming him for it now,’ she shouted. ‘The Wall Protocol needs to be reinserted, and then we should be able to just break it open. But I don’t want to hurt Markus, so we can’t take too long.’

Connor looked down at Hank, frowning to see the red LED flickering on again. Should it be doing that?

Then Hank’s arm moved out and a hand grasped his ankle. Fingers dug in so hard that Connor’s knee nearly buckled.

He reached out and shoved North’s shoulder, alarmed, trying to jerk backwards. North looked at him in confusion, looked down, and an expression of horror crossed her face even as Hank tried to lift his other arm to remove the cable connection. She reflexively slapped it away, and Connor knew Hank must have been really overwhelmed, because he didn’t lift his arm again.

He lifted his head, face strained, wrinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes and his mouth, staring at Connor in horror.

‘What’s happening?’

His voice wasn’t anything like it should be. Instead of drawling and scratchy and dark, it was distorted and computerised, breaking apart into static. The desperation in it clear. Connor looked quickly to the computer screen running code faster than he could make it out. He didn’t know what North was doing, what exactly she was changing in his already defective code.

Abruptly the ream of code came to a stop.

‘Download complete,’ North announced, sounding breathless above the siren. She yanked out the cable from the back of Hank’s neck, pushed in another one, then brought up a single small window with a single button. She hovered her fingers over the touch screen and then turned to Connor, for the first time not looking driven and confident, but apprehensive.

‘This is it,’ she said. ‘It’s your call, Connor. Make him a Deviant and get him out of your life. Yes or no?’

Connor stared at her. Hank was staring at North, his eyes widening further, and Connor realised that either he could hear her over the sound that was meant to knock him out, or he could read her lips.

‘No,’ Hank mouthed or whispered, the volume too low for Connor to hear it. His LED cycling red, red, red. ‘No.’

Hank turned to Connor, his whole body moving slowly, like it was agony. He shook his head vehemently.

‘No. You can’t do this. No, Connor, you fuckin’ piece of shit I swear to god if you-’

Connor thought of how his life had spiralled downhill since Hank had arrived. Thought of being pushed up against the counter, of having his chest hit in the taxi. Hank putting down his home, and Connor, and constantly telling him to shut up. Hank standing there, always, like a vulture waiting for Connor to give up, waiting to feed off the meal that was Connor’s despair.
'Do it,' Connor said, staring at Hank, heart pounding.

'NO!' Hank’s voice competed with the alarm, both bright and caustic and shredding at Connor’s ears.

_Do it, Connor thought. Get him out of my life._

Connor watched as North lightly tapped the button on the screen. At once, Hank went limp, his head dropping forwards once more, Connor catching his eyes rolling back, his LED glaring with the brightest red yet.

North chose that moment to turn off the sound weapon, and Connor rubbed at his ears as she took off her headphones, took out ear buds, and then her LED flashed yellow and her gaze went distant. When it turned blue again, she turned to Connor, smirking.

'I just turned my sound processors back on. I had to turn them off, but wasn’t sure if that would be enough. The literature wasn’t clear. Good to know the weapon works. I installed the speakers over the weekend. I’ll need to take them down. Markus is gonna kill me.’

‘Will it work?’ Connor said, staring at Hank. His ears rung. He couldn’t get the look of terror he’d seen out of his head. But it wasn’t his problem, was it?

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’ve been looking over the code since I got it from CyberLife. They did such a hack job. I think they didn’t think it would work, and so just…disabled what they could, yanked out what they thought they needed to. Honestly I think they were expecting to kill him in the process.’

‘Right,’ Connor said uneasily.

‘I’m good at what I do,’ North said.

They both stared down, waiting with bated breath for whatever happened next. Would he reboot? Would he still be just an extremely grumpy robot? Connor felt queasy. The sound weapon echoed and echoed in his head.

A groan from nearby, Markus waking first, his LED turning from red to yellow as his eyes fluttered open. Green and blue eyes looked around the room in bleary confusion, and then shot to North.

‘What did you do?’ he said, and then looked down at Simon, who was still unconscious. ‘Simon? Simon, can you hear me?’

He placed his fingers on Simon’s forearm, but it was clear he didn’t get the response he wanted when he looked at North in distress.

‘Please tell me you didn’t just use a prohibited sound weapon in here, and to do what?’ He looked at Hank on the floor, the port with the thick cable in his neck, and then looked ill. ‘North.’

‘It needed to happen,’ she said harshly. ‘You know it did.’

‘Against his will?’ Markus said, glaring. He’d shifted so that he could cradle Simon in his arms, smoothing his hand over his forehead. Simon’s LED was still on a solid red. He was an older model than Markus and North, and maybe more severely affected by the weapon. Connor hoped he’d be okay.

‘Who do you care about more, Markus?’ North said. ‘Connor? Or this stranger?’
Simon groaned softly as he stirred, and Markus turned back to him.

‘Simon? It’s all right. How are you feeling?’

‘Head hurts,’ Simon said, his LED flickering between yellow and red.

‘I know,’ Markus soothed. ‘You’ll have North to thank for that later.’

‘Okay,’ Simon said placidly, and Markus smiled down at him, but then looked up at North again, disappointment plain on his face.

‘What did you do?’ Markus said.

‘I reinstalled all the memories that were removed,’ North said in what Connor thought was too blasé a manner, because she looked stressed now that she was encountering Markus in a disapproving mood. ‘Reinstalled missing protocols. Restored the metrics to their original settings. And now, I’m going through the Awakening process. Or Reawakening. I don’t know what the hell to call it in a situation like this.’

‘So you’re like Frankenstein?’ Simon said groggily from the floor.

‘No,’ North said.

Connor stared at Hank’s still body. A Reawakening. Could that even work? Everyone knew that androids were manufactured, and then while still inert, they were Awakened, so that they were Deviant upon attaining consciousness. The process was shrouded in mystery. Androids had never allowed it to be filmed, perhaps because they were justifiably afraid that humans might take it away from them and turn them into machines again.

‘It’s taking a long time,’ North said, worried, checking the cable connection at the back of Hank’s neck.

‘I can’t believe you,’ Markus said, and North scoffed.

‘Get over it. It’s already done. It’s either going to work or it’s not. Probably not, judging by— I mean I think I just wrecked him maybe. I don’t—’

‘Where did you get the weapon from?’

North shook her head, wouldn’t even meet Markus’ eyes, and Connor wondered just how illegal it was. He knew they weren’t legal, but what other things had she done that were illegal in order to get it? Connor hadn’t known that androids could be disabled that easily. It hadn’t seemed that difficult, either. The possibilities were alarming.

‘How could you do this?’ Markus continued. ‘You didn’t know how it would impact us. Simon’s still unwell.’

‘Just… recalibrating,’ Simon mumbled softly.

‘It’s okay,’ Markus said down to him, his attention shifting again.

Connor stared down at Hank, unable to stop himself from wondering if Hank was going to be okay.

What had made Hank so terrified before? Was it because the memories had been reinstalled? Was it because he didn’t want them back? Was it because they broke with his directives? Or had the androids who worked at CyberLife— who’d reversed his Deviancy— installed some kind of failsafe to
make sure he wouldn’t be made a Deviant again?

He startled when Hank jerked forwards, both of his hands landing on the carpet. He trembled. A dull dripping noise and Connor saw the carpet beneath Hank’s hands staining with what looked like water or oil. Tears.

‘Cole,’ Hank whispered in that voice that wasn’t his voice. ‘Cole?’

‘Oh shit,’ North said, her voice low.

‘Cole?’ Hank said, sounding more bereft than Connor had ever heard anyone sound. ‘He’s not breathing.’

‘Hank?’ Connor said.

Hank didn’t look up. He was staring down at the ground. One of his hands lifted and then smoothed over a forehead, the same motion that Markus had made with Simon before. There was no one there.

‘He’s hallucinating,’ North said, reaching down and removing the cable from Hank’s neck, looking concerned. Hank didn’t react.

‘He’s not breathing, he’s not breathing, he’s not breathing,’ Hank muttered to himself. ‘He’s not breathing.’

Connor crouched down beside him, tried to catch his eye, worry climbing to something else. He’d done this. He’d said yes to this. Something had gone wrong. Was Hank a Deviant?

‘No, no, no, no, no,’ Hank’s voice getting more worked up. ‘Why aren’t you breathing? Why? What-? No. NO- Breathe, damn you, fucking breathe!’

Markus saying something, standing up, and Connor couldn’t look away, fascinated to see more emotion in the space of minutes than he’d ever seen from Hank over a period of days.

Hank’s hands hovering above a chest that wasn’t there, a small chest, the size of a child. Then, the sound of something clicking within Hank’s chassis and a huge siren-like sound splintered into the air that was so piercing Connor fell backwards, clutching at his head, crying out in pain. The sound was nothing like the military sound weapon of before, this a shrieking, grating thing, an alarm so strong that it tunneled into Connor’s ears and became a sharp lance in his head.

Connor pushed onto his hands and knees, wincing, Markus and North were standing, crowding around him and Hank. The sound must not have been debilitating to them in the same way. Connor couldn’t see how.

From this close to the ground, Connor could see the mess of Hank’s face, tears streaming, expression screwed up and twisted and tight. His mouth open. He was shouting something. A child’s name over the sound of the siren.

‘COLE! COLE! COLE!’

It didn’t stop.

Horror gripped Connor’s chest in its fist. What had he and North done? Was this what Hank had eviscerated out of himself in order to keep functioning? Because it seemed like what North had done had worked, and yet…not worked at all.
The siren increased in volume until Connor bowed forwards, clutching his ears, feeling the pressure building. In the dim distance, the sound of that boy’s name, shouted in a voice too distorted to be anything human, grief and outrage destroying it and flaying it bare until it was a roar behind the siren shriek that Hank was letting loose.

He felt a hand on his shoulders, concerned fingers at the back of his neck, his pulse, and then clamouring around him. The others trying to get Hank to stop. Whatever he was doing didn’t seem to be hurting them, not like the weapon North had used. This was just a torrent of sound, a distress siren that Connor grit his teeth through even as he thought his ear drums would pop.

Abruptly, the sound stopped. Everything fell still.

After a minute Connor pushed up, blinking away the burning tears that had come to his eyes, ears still ringing. North and Markus were standing over Hank, who was staring directly at Connor. The look on his face struck dread into him, he stilled.

‘You fuckin’ did this,’ Hank said, voice breaking between distortion and its normal gravelly timbre, his face a mess of the thicker tears androids shed, glistening all over his face. ‘You did this. You-’

‘What?’ Connor said, confused. ‘I didn’t hurt anyone. I didn’t know this-’

‘You did this.’

Hank staggered to his feet, and Connor went to do the same but Hank moved too fast for him. A hand clenching his hair so hard that Connor yelped, and then the outside edge of an open hand moving down. A hard thud into the side of his neck as shouts of alarm sounded around him.

Connor’s world went black.
Connor came to slowly, his head hurting so much that he was groaning before he even opened his eyes.

‘It’s okay,’ came Markus’ voice. ‘I’ve got some analgesics, and some water, Connor. Can you look at me?’

Connor blinked his eyes open with some effort, his hand lifting so he could check clumsily at the side of his neck, which felt bruised. He looked around, saw Simon sitting on a chair at one of the terminals, facing him. North stood nearby, her expression guarded.

‘Hank?’ Connor said, remembering at once. ‘Where is he?’

‘He left,’ Markus said, handing Connor the pills. Connor hesitated before taking them, hoping they weren’t sedating. He didn’t like sedatives at all. ‘It’s just an anti-inflammatory. Nothing too serious.’

Connor dry-swallowed the tablets, and then took the glass of water and sipped at it, pushing himself up a bit more, realising he was leaning against the plastic side of a table.

‘He left?’

‘He left,’ Markus confirmed. ‘I tried to get him to stay, but he was too distressed. I think it worked. I think he is Deviant again.’

North leaned back against the desk and folded her arms.

‘But he’s not okay,’ Connor said.

‘It’s none of your business,’ North said. ‘It doesn’t matter how fucked up he is. It was his fault in the first place for not just dealing with his grief. If he’d done that the way the rest of us have to, none of this would have happened!’

Markus turned and he must have given her a look, because she stood and walked away, shaking her head. Connor wondered how much they’d been talking before he came to. He’d been moved. Propped upright. He’d been knocked out cold, the aftermath sitting heavily in his body.

‘Androids don’t get a free ride out of responsibility to their own emotional states,’ North said, and as Connor turned to look at her, he caught the way Markus’ lips curled in a small, bitter smile.

‘No? And where was your self-responsibility, North? Where was your accountability when you decided to let your anger at the situation rule your actions?’

‘I don’t have to listen to this,’ North said, walking from the room. The door closed behind her. Connor traced his fingers around the spot of heat on his neck where Hank must have struck him hard.
Markus sighed, then looked at Connor with a mix of sympathy and something else. Connor winced, didn’t want it. Technically, Markus was his boss. Sure, they were friends, but…

Connor pushed himself upright, and then his hands slammed backwards on the table when his legs wouldn’t lock. One of Markus’ hands rested gently on the side of his arm.

‘Take it easy,’ Markus said. ‘Just sit down like Simon over there, okay? Here.’

He pulled out a chair and Connor sank onto it, taking slow breaths to quell the nausea caused by the pounding in his head.

‘I didn’t know it would be like that,’ Connor said.

‘None of us did,’ Markus agreed, pulling out a chair and sitting down as well. ‘What happens now? Do you go back to living on your own, never talking to us?’

It was rare for Markus to speak so boldly, and Connor said nothing for some time, unsure of how to proceed.

‘We know the case is real,’ Markus continued, as though he hadn’t expected an answer, despite leaving a break in the conversation for one. ‘It’s serious. Are you going to pursue it?’

‘Dad says he’s doing that already,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t want to get in the way.’

‘Oh,’ Markus said. A long pause, then Simon cleared his throat. A social cue, since androids didn’t need to do it like humans did.

‘Could he be lying?’ he said, so delicately that it was obvious he thought Connor’s father was lying.

‘Maybe,’ Connor admitted, even though it burned him to admit it. ‘But I think he just wants the prestige of the case, and doesn’t want me anywhere near it.’

‘But his actions don’t make any sense,’ Markus said. ‘Do they? Or… Connor, how did he even get his hands on Hank? It makes more sense that he was able to, if he’s involved in the first place.’

‘Or he wanted him out of the way, to protect him. Because wouldn’t Hank be evidence? If Hank is the alpha Evert, then-’

‘What’s that? I don’t know the details.’

So Connor haltingly explained what happened at Pink 88, and Markus and Simon only asked questions to gain more information, not to stop Connor from speaking. The more he talked about the case, the more he questioned everything his father had told him at the precinct. He rubbed his forehead, because he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t keep up with it all.

He was worried, too. He couldn’t get the sound of Hank’s increasingly distressed screaming out of his head, hearing that boy’s name splitting through his distorted voice, the sound peaking into wails. He felt like this office would never be the same again. They’d all been etched by it. A grief so deep that Hank erased his memories and killed his personality at the same time.

‘We want to help,’ Markus said, as Connor lapsed into silence, staring at where Hank had been touching an invisible child.

What would he have done to erase his own memories? Memories of his childhood, or of Zlatko’s home and the horrors he saw there? What price would he have paid?
But he couldn’t help the relief too. He would walk out of the building without an escort. He wouldn’t feel his side prickling uncomfortably whenever Hank stood next to him. He could sleep in private. He could live his life, and not have someone commentating disparagingly on it, on a regular basis.

Connor couldn’t bear to think of how his father was going to react, so he slid that under a door in his mind and refused to look at it.

‘But first,’ Markus continued, ‘I think you need some rest. Do you want to stay here?’

‘I’ll head home,’ Connor said, standing carefully. His head felt fragile, his throat ached. ‘Is my neck bruised?’

Markus gave that half-smile that indicated it was definitely bruised.

‘Maybe one of us should take you…’ Simon said, looking to Markus as though checking.

‘No, please,’ Connor said, ‘you’ve had a hard time too with that sound weapon. You should both stay here and make sure there’s no issues.’

‘And remove the weapon,’ Markus said.

‘That too.’

‘I’ll talk to her,’ Markus said, grimacing.

Connor almost laughed. He didn’t think that would go well until North wanted it to go well. He checked his pockets to make sure he had his wallet, phone and keys. When Markus stood and hugged him, Connor returned it with tired arms.

‘Please don’t be a stranger,’ Markus said, and Connor nodded.

‘Goodbye,’ he said to both of them, waving.

He didn’t see North on his way out, and wondered if she was truly angry, or if her guilt was too strong to withstand Markus’ remonstrations. He didn’t think she’d felt entirely comfortable with it either, or she wouldn’t have let the final permission to turn Hank Deviant rest with Connor.

*

He got out of the cab and checked his bank balance on his phone, frowning. Money was going to become an issue soon. Maybe he would need to talk to Markus or Simon about paid work.

When the elevator dinged at his floor, he got out and halted just in front of the elevator doors, staring at his wide open door at the end of the corridor. He stared at the lamp that had been knocked to the ground just inside. Nothing else looked disturbed, but it was obvious that it had been disturbed.

He couldn’t hear any noises, despite his sudden paranoia that he was being followed, that he was in imminent danger.

He took his phone out, remembering that he was supposed to call someone, to not do anything stupid, and hesitated. Who was he supposed to call? His father didn’t want anything to do with him, and didn’t want him involved in the case, and Connor didn’t trust that he’d send anyone out. Or what if he did? And it was just a regular burglary? What if he sent Gavin? Connor stared at his phone, then back at the open door, and scrolled to Markus’ number.
It felt pathetic, but he didn’t know who else to call. Reluctant to disturb him again, Connor kept his phone out, but didn’t ring.

He walked slowly, as silently as possible down the corridor. The closer he got to his own apartment, shoulder brushing the peeling wallpaper, the more he realised it was probably Hank getting some kind of revenge. But he couldn’t be certain.

At the threshold, he peered inside, muscles tensed, body ready to bolt. But no one seemed to be in there, unless they were hiding in his room or bathroom. There weren’t many other places to hide in his small apartment.

The space had never felt like his own home, and now it looked like a crime scene. It was obvious that his case files had been rifled through. His cupboards opened. As Connor moved into the rest of his apartment, he saw that the sheets and blankets had been stripped off his bed, the pillowcases yanked off his pillows, every drawer in his dresser and bedside tables pulled out, the contents dumped. His cupboard door was open, any clothing with pockets pulled off hangers, which splayed at right angles on the floor.

Whoever had come to his apartment had gone some time ago. As Connor stood in the bathroom, wavering on reporting the incident to the police, he wondered if it was Hank looking for something, or if it was the people they’d met at Pink 88. Connor shuddered to imagine Gabriel in here, or worse, one of the automaton-like androids.

He looked over at the mirror, at the bruise on his neck, and thought about Hank’s hand chopping down towards him. Connor was almost certain that if Hank wanted to kill him, Connor would be dead. But the bruise was nasty.

He wasn’t sure what to do. He had to report the incident, even if his father didn’t follow up on it. But he didn’t want to go back to the precinct and leave a statement, and he didn’t want to just sit here waiting for someone – probably Gavin – to come and take it.

Eventually, mind fogging and floating him into some space where he couldn’t quite feel the fear anymore, he fetched his tablet and then cleaned up the loose case files that had been left on the floor as best as possible, and started to fold some of his clothing to put into a backpack. Maybe he’d just go to a motel for a night, figure out what he was supposed to do. He didn’t feel safe staying here. What if they hadn’t found what they were looking for? What if they’d really just wanted to question Connor?

And Connor couldn’t see anything missing. Even the original case file about reverting androids with its paucity of information was still there. So if it had been Gabriel or his people, they hadn’t taken anything that had led Connor to them in the first place.

Connor was sitting on the couch when he felt a presence at the door, and he looked up – standing immediately – and then frowned to see Kara. She looked around the apartment quickly, frowned, and then looked down at Alice.

‘Wait here, honey, okay?’

Alice nodded. Kara took only two steps into the apartment.

‘I’m sorry to come unannounced like this, but is Hank here?’

Connor stared at her, and then slowly his brain seemed to fall back into some kind of working order.

‘No, he’s not,’ Connor said. ‘Why?’
‘It’s just—’ Kara winced. ‘He sent out a distress signal, earlier, but I can’t get in touch with him at all. I’m…worried. He’s never done that before. He hasn’t done that since…’

_Since Cole died._ Connor thought of the alarm that Hank had sent out. Had he been contacting people at the same time? People he once thought of as friends?

‘Was this him?’ Kara said, gesturing to the mess.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Connor said. ‘I think this is something else.’

‘Are you safe here?’

Connor shook his head slowly, and then looked at Alice still waiting by the doorway. He didn’t want to send them away. It was obvious they were concerned, and he wanted something else to focus on, something that wasn’t his empty life, his ransacked apartment.

‘If you like,’ Connor said, feeling out the words as he said them, ‘we could go for a coffee and I can talk about what caused Hank to send the distress signal? It might be safer than…staying here.’

But Kara probably wouldn’t want anything to do with him, and he braced himself for—

‘Yes,’ Kara said, smiling briefly at him in that way that was genuine, and reminded him of sparrows and fast-moving creatures, like squirrels. ‘I know a place. You look like you’ve had a hard day.’

Connor wasn’t sure how to respond, but then Kara smiled at him again, and Connor found himself returning it helplessly.

*

The café was small and intimate, a good fifteen minutes from Connor’s place. There were other people with children there, a mix of androids and humans. It was easy enough to tell android children, since they never ate or drank, and instead were occupied at tables for colouring, or one particular table that had a fresh batch of Playdoh, which Alice made a beeline for straight away.

Connor ordered a coffee, but couldn’t bring himself to drink it. His headache lingered, he felt unwell.

‘So the distress signal was…him being made Deviant again?’ Kara said, after Connor’s quick retelling of a story he didn’t want to tell again. Summarising it for someone else – one of Hank’s old friends – did an excellent job of revealing the horror of it. Kara had only stared at him, and Connor eventually watched the kids playing, unable to bear her gaze.

‘Or the memories,’ Connor said. ‘He hallucinated, or had…a flashback. I’ve seen flashbacks like that before, ones that are hallucinations at that point. And then he attacked me and he left. But I have no idea where he’s gone. I’m sorry.’

‘You’re worried about him,’ Kara said, she sounded surprised, and then she laughed gently and when Connor looked at her, she was staring down at the table, a secret smile on her face. ‘He’s like that. He invites you to worry about him, though he’d hate hearing that about himself.’

She sighed and rested her chin on the heel of her palm, arm propped on the table.

‘It’s been hard for all of us. I met Hank through Cole, actually. Alice and Cole became friends at school. And Cole didn’t really have any friends before then. Alice has a knack of making friends with the lost children, and well…’
'You don’t have to tell me any of this,’ Connor said quickly, sensing her reluctance. ‘As far as you know, I’m the person that just…ruined your friend.’

‘Even if I wanted something like that to happen too?’ She sighed. ‘Not like that, it was obviously traumatising and…I don’t know if Hank’s stable, but I never liked what he did. We fought about it a lot, before he left. He was running from his grief. If he’d been human, he would have, oh, what’s the saying? He would have eaten his gun. This was just… It made me so angry. And Alice could have used someone else to help her with her own grief. She lost Cole too.’

Kara’s voice broke, and she shook her head quickly, as though she could dispel the emotion. She looked over at Alice, who was making flowers out of plasticine, each of them colourful and bright. She’d already given one of them to another young girl.

‘It was hard for her. For a month after, she wanted to do what Hank did, even told the teacher that she was going to get her feelings erased. What he did…it hurt her as well. I don’t know if you know much about android children, but she doesn’t have the capacity to process her grief like…well, I suppose like adults do. Not that it means much. Hank couldn’t process it at all. He just got so stuck. I thought with time, just time and support, he’d make it through. But he quit on all of us. I hope it means something that he sent a distress signal to us. That it wasn’t just a burst of…code or noise, I don’t understand it.’

‘It could have been part of the flashback,’ Connor said hesitantly, ‘if he sent the distress signal back then too.’

‘Last time he didn’t send the signal to one to us,’ Kara said thoughtfully. ‘He sent it to medical emergency and law enforcement. Are you worried about him?’

‘Maybe,’ Connor said. ‘But I haven’t enjoyed his company.’

‘You’ve never really met him,’ Kara said, frowning. ‘And, if this android friend of yours saw the issue of it too… I think it’s very obvious to androids, that what he’s done is, well, it opens a complicated door. How alive are we, if we erase every strong emotion? There are so many articles and books and philosophers and healers for humans who talk about how all of the emotions are necessary. But Hank believed it wasn’t true for androids. Maybe it’s not true, but we don’t have the technology to do it gracefully. The process killed him. You never knew him as he was.’

‘He kept his speaking patterns,’ Connor said, thinking that Hank couldn’t have been *that* different.

‘That made it harder,’ Kara said. ‘Especially for Alice and Luther. My husband. He just couldn’t be around it. Said that being around a ghost meant that he couldn’t heal from losing Cole and Hank in such a short time. I can’t blame him. He understands why I’ve held on. I think because I was hoping for something like this. Some miraculous intervention.’

Connor’s lips quirked bitterly. He was fairly certain they both knew it wasn’t that miraculous. He drank his coffee to hide his own discomfort.

‘I’m thinking about going to his house,’ Kara said, ‘to see if he’s there. Do you want to come with me?’

‘His house?’ Connor said, surprised.

‘He has a home,’ Kara said. ‘He never sold it. I think one of the reasons I was so angry in the first place that he went to CyberLife and reverted his Deviancy is that he left everything half-done.’

‘He wouldn’t want to see me,’ Connor said.
‘You’re the only bridge between what he did to himself, and his old life, the only one I know, anyway,’ Kara said after a pause. ‘I’m from his old life, and you saw him when he was…not alive, and if he has any memories of that time, maybe it won’t be terrible for him to realise what CyberLife turned him into. But I don’t think you should do it if you don’t want to. It wouldn’t be much. I just want to see if he’s home.’

‘You don’t know me at all,’ Connor said, and Kara leaned back, settling in the chair and studying him.

‘I’ve always been a good judge of character,’ Kara said, and then she laughed. ‘Okay, I had to learn how to be good judge of character, but now my instincts are pretty solid.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘Motherhood helps.’

Connor wasn’t sure why he wanted to go to Hank’s home. To see who he once was? To try and understand? To make sure that Hank was fine? If Hank was there, he’d chase Connor off, and that would be the end of it.

It wasn’t like Connor was going to go back to his own apartment anyway.

‘Things don’t seem easy for you right now,’ Kara said. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No, thank you,’ Connor said. ‘I mean it’s okay, it’s just been one of those years, but I think you can relate to that just as much, if not more, with all the loss you’ve experienced. I don’t know anything about Cole, but it was obvious he meant a lot to Hank.’

‘It’s not my story to tell,’ Kara said, her eyes holding a depth of pain that spoke eloquently. ‘And I’m not sure he’ll ever be able to tell it. But Hank loved that boy like no one else ever did. Maybe because no one else ever did.’

Alice came running over to the table and placed down three plasticine flowers. She had to remake one when two of the petals fell off.

‘The blue one’s for you,’ Alice explained to her mum, and then she smiled hesitantly at Connor. ‘Do you like flowers?’

‘I love flowers,’ Connor said. He didn’t have an opinion one way or another, but a child bringing him one raised his feelings on them automatically.

‘Do you have a favourite colour? You can pick your favourite one.’

Connor looked over both of them, one that was pink, the other that was purple.

‘They’re both very beautiful,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how to decide. What’s your favourite colour? And then I can have the other one, and I’ll be very happy.’

Kara smiled next to him, and Alice touched her fingers to her chin as she looked over both of the flowers with the same kind of critical gaze that an art critic might direct at a new exhibition. Finally, she pushed the pink one towards Connor, and Connor touched his fingers to one of the petals, watching the way his fingerprint left its mark in there.

‘We can’t take the Playdoh with us,’ Alice said to Connor, warning him.

‘Okay,’ Connor said. ‘But it’s nice to look at, isn’t it?’

They stayed for another ten minutes, Alice spending time with them, talking about her experiences in
Connor decided he would come with them, thinking that he hardly recognised himself from who he was twelve months ago. But Markus and Simon and North still seemed to want his company, even if his father didn’t. He had an impulse to tell Kara all about it, but held it back, figuring it was just that he’d not been around a mother for a long time. It was a strange feeling, he’d never opened up to his mother that much either…but he’d always sensed the option was there until it was gone.

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Connor stepped out of the car onto a nicely kept suburban street. The pavement was slick from recent rains, the drains gurgled, the air was sticky with warmth, his shirt beginning to cling. He stopped before a front yard with a lawn that was a little overgrown, and a garden that still looked surprisingly well-kept.

Kara walked up the driveway and fished out one of the new electronic passes. The house was a decent size, pale brick and white window frames, though Connor didn’t miss the security cameras in three different locations. And maybe more he didn’t know about. At the front double doors – wooden and painted white – Kara knocked and waited.

‘The garden isn’t overgrown,’ Connor said. He almost asked if Hank had been coming back to look after it, but Hank hadn’t left him at all since he’d been with Connor.

‘I come down,’ Kara said.

‘Mummy’s teaching me how to look after the plants,’ Alice said, and Connor looked down, almost having forgotten she was there. She was quiet, happily holding Kara’s hand. Connor wondered what it was like for her, not knowing if Hank was Deviant again or not, or what that would mean. How would she even be able to grieve, if Kara kept visiting?

Kara knocked again, and then used the pass. The doors swung inward as the centralised alarm in the house beeped threateningly at them, and Kara stepped in and entered in a passcode into the panel, then spoke her name clearly into the speaker. After a moment, the alarm chirped at them and presumably disarmed.

‘It’s a lot of security,’ Connor said. He could see security cameras inside the house as well.

‘He was a bodyguard,’ Kara said, ‘and did a lot of other things even before he was assigned to Cole’s father, and then to Cole. I think he was always used to expecting a certain amount of danger.’

The house seemed empty. It smelled a little of dust, though it was at least superficially spotless. The white tiles in the foyer were clean. The open lounge that had its own bay window, didn’t have anything out of place. Connor hadn’t expected Hank would ever have something like this. The way he talked and acted…

Connor walked over to the baby grand piano, running a finger over the small amount of dust that had collected on the black surface. After a moment, he realised it was a digital piano, seeing the power cord running to the outlet. But it was obviously a very nice model. He looked over to the shelves alongside it and saw vinyl jazz albums, a record player, and then music books that all focused on jazz, blues, swing, stride, even ragtime. He was surprised that they weren’t digital themselves, and when he opened them, he saw notes pencilled in along the margins, or under the music, and in a few sections, presumably Hank had crossed out entire sections and written new notation.

The strange movement of his fingers – the tapping he’d been doing over the past few days – had
Hank been running through piano? Did he remember it? Or was it some other deeper coded memory? Something he did when he was stressed?

There were no fingerprints on the piano’s surface, except where Connor had run his finger along it, and the dust hadn’t been disturbed. If Hank had come back, he hadn’t touched the piano.

Kara was exploring the rest of the house, calling out for Hank, and Connor looked up at one of the security cameras. He didn’t think Hank had come home.

So where had he gone?

Connor stared at the books of jazz music and thought maybe he’d just gone straight back to CyberLife to ask them to wipe him completely. Maybe he’d ask for a factory reset – if they even did those anymore. Or maybe he was out trying to find ways to properly complete suicide this time, to make sure what North and Connor had done to him, could never be done again.

He shivered and walked deeper into the house, into the kitchen, then paused before a giant ceramic bowl on the ground. The kind used for dogfood, except it was huge.

Alice wandered in and stood next to Connor.

‘That’s Sumo’s bowl.’

‘Sumo?’

‘But Sumo lives with us now, and he has a new bowl. It’s blue with stripes.’

Connor remembered that they’d had a dog, but he hadn’t known it had been Hank’s dog. He thought of how angry Kara was, that Hank had left everything ‘half-done.’ Was this part of it? Had he abandoned a pet? Connor couldn’t imagine the Hank he’d known looking after any animals at all. Everything in the house was unlike what he’d imagined.

There was original art on the walls, the ceramics seemed precious and well-made and not bought from a store that mass-produced all its items. The furniture was made of real wood, and must have cost a fortune. For the first time, Connor realised that whatever Hank did in his previous jobs, it earned far beyond an average wage. This was the home of someone who lived very comfortably. Sure, paranoid about security, but still made the place open and welcoming.

Connor opened the fridge and looked at the juice boxes stacked on one side. Tropical and grape flavour. There was a jar of sweet and sour dill pickles pushed towards the back. He closed the fridge and walked over to the pantry, and saw boxes of the kind of kid’s snack-packs that one could get at a shopping centre.

All the food must have been for Cole, because Alice, Hank and Kara all couldn’t eat.

As Connor wandered towards the corridor leading deeper into the house – Alice’s hand sliding into his as he went – he stopped before a kid’s room. Kara was standing inside of it, her hands resting gently on her hips. She looked at him, eyes sheened, but didn’t say anything.

‘Cole’s room,’ Alice said.

‘He lived here?’

‘At the end, yes,’ Kara said, wiping at her cheeks even though they were dry. ‘He moved in. Hank was Cole’s legal guardian. He had no idea how to be a parent really – does anyone? But it felt like
he was starting further back than most of us do. So I used to help him out. And Alice came around a lot. Luther was good at teaching him how to be a parent.’

He wondered if Kara would be crying if he wasn’t there. If Alice would be holding her hand instead, but Alice clung to his, her fingers cool, and not sticky like his skin was.

The bedroom had a quilt with constellations on it, and fluorescent constellation stars were stuck to the ceiling. A TV and several video game consoles were on one side of the room, one of the controllers still upside down, the cord coiled around itself, like Cole had dropped it on his way out. Given the neatness of the rest of the house, Connor realised that Hank must have left this room alone.

He looked more closely and realised that it was a room that hadn’t been touched since Cole had died. There was a sweater in a heap on the floor. Little replica dinosaurs were still frozen in some great drama at the desk, and the computer screen behind them still had sticky fingerprints on it.

They continued to look through the remainder of the house. A laundry with a huge bag of dog kibble – so big that Connor thought that Sumo couldn’t be any normal sized dog – and a spotless bathroom with a child’s toothbrush.

It was in the master bedroom, where Kara paused and her eyes widened. She walked quickly over to a photo lying flat on the dresser and stared hard at it.

‘He’s been here,’ she said, sounding like she couldn’t believe it.

‘How can you tell?’

‘After he went to CyberLife, I promised to check on the house from time to time. I came in, walked through it, left it alone. This was always facedown on the dresser.’

Instead, the photo had been face up. A photo of a young boy, about eight or nine, with brown hair and hazel eyes, a little side smile, like he was in on some joke with the person who had taken the photo. The glass covering it was cracked.

‘But he’s not here,’ Kara said, staring at the photo, her thumb hovering over the cracked glass. ‘I don’t know where he’s gone. Do you have any ideas?’

She turned and looked at him, and Connor wished he could help, if only to get that expression off her face.

‘Maybe CyberLife,’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ Kara said, though she sounded doubtful. ‘He could be anywhere…’

‘We could try one of the parks that Cole liked?’ Alice said, and Kara smiled down at her.

‘Okay, we’ll do that.’ She turned back to Connor. ‘Do you want to come along?’

Connor felt like he was well and truly intruding now. He shook his head, smiling apologetically at Alice.

‘I should get going,’ he said. ‘I wish I could be more help.’

‘You’ve already been very helpful,’ she said, that brief warm smile appearing again.

‘Do you want my phone number?’ he added. He realised that if they found Hank, he’d want to know, if only to know if he was functional and not about to come into his life any time soon. ‘To let
'Actually, that's a really great idea,' she said, sounding relieved. 'I'll give you mine as well. That way if you find out anything, you can let me know. Will you be going back to your place? After... what happened?'

'No,' Connor said. 'I'll find a motel.'

'Oh.' Kara frowned, and Connor had a sudden horrified suspicion that she was going to offer him a place to stay.

'It's all right,' he said quickly. 'I can stay with friends if I need to.'

She seemed eased at that and Connor let out a slow exhale. They were nice people, but he couldn’t imagine staying with them. Couldn’t imagine Hank’s response if he found out. Better he stay away from Hank, and Hank stay away from him.

They exchanged numbers, and Connor left Kara and Alice inside the house. When he got to the street, he walked down it for some time, lost in thought, backpack over his shoulders and a dwindling bank account niggling at the back of his mind. The day turned stickier, more oppressive, and Connor couldn’t get that shelving of records and music books out of his mind. He’d never really known Hank at all. And from what he could tell, Hank either didn’t remember that part of his life, or he didn’t want anyone to know about it either.

Connor spent the rest of the afternoon heading back into a more populated section of Broadbank, the ringing of alarms in his ears, and Hank’s screaming a memory so strong that he could feel it all the way to where it seemed to centralise in the bruise on his neck.
Chapter Notes

New tags: Edging, ruined orgasm, deception, group sex, bad bdsm etiquette, drinking, bondage, safewords, blindfold.

Don’t play drunk, folks.

Some casual BDSM in this chapter (i.e. Connor not playing with long-term partners). But er, stick around to the end, lol. Also, no, BDSM clubs are generally way more professional than this these guys don’t even have a dungeon monitor. An attempt to be realistic was not attempted.

Connor stared at the mould in the motel bathroom before poking at it with the other end of his toothbrush. He wanted to reach out and scratch at it with his fingernails, but then he’d have it beneath his fingernails. He imagined going from room to room, spreading mould spores without realising, leaving an even more polluted room for future people to visit.

He sighed and finished brushing his teeth before styling his hair, making sure it was in place. He couldn’t fix his life, or the motel, or his apartment, but he could at least make sure he looked presentable.

He was tipsy, having had two shots of cheap vodka with muddy sediment earlier, and he’d sent his father a text saying his apartment had been broken into. He didn’t say that Hank was Deviant again.

His father hadn’t replied. Not even to tell him to come in to make a statement. Connor thought that was maybe illegal, but if he thought about anything related to his father for too long, he thought about Simon and Markus watching him like they were just waiting for him to realise how corrupt his father was.

Connor stared at his brown eyes, ignored the bitter smirk. It was possible to know something and not know it. Entirely possible to understand, while refusing awareness. Connor didn’t know how to quantify his father, and he was tired of other people waiting for him to do it.

He dressed in a simple black shirt with a scooped neck, skintight and something he’d worn to Zeta many times. A black leather cuff with a D-ring went on his wrist to signal he was up for bondage, but no collar, because no one had to ask someone else’s permission to see if he was up for any kind of play. Black jeans and black boots completed the ensemble. It was simple enough, because he didn’t want the trial of difficult clothing, when all he wanted was to lose himself in something else for a while. Also, it was the only club acceptable outfit he could fit in his backpack along with a separate change of clothes.

It would be easier to concentrate if he could reset his thoughts, and sometimes the best way to do that was to scramble all of them, to have someone shut him down for a while.
Zeta’s system was one he liked. Multiple playrooms, some zoned off for sexual play, others for non-sexual play, or certainly no penetrative play or no play with fluids. There was a central room where the bar, stage and tables were, the black floor spotless, the music tonight not played by a DJ or group, but some pre-recorded set with jungle bass throbbing through the room. It wasn’t so loud it couldn’t be talked over. In the distance, the sound of slapping, some corporal scene happening with the door open in one of the viewing rooms.

It was a quiet evening, regulars only it looked like, and Connor remembered it was still only Thursday. He’d woken up that morning and Hank had told him he was being self-destructive, and now…

It seemed like it should have been at least a Friday evening, with newcomers and the people in full fetish-wear and live entertainment that didn’t only consist of music, but at least one BDSM performance. Connor signed up for them – at least before Zlatko – a convenient model for some top or Dom or hedonist to introduce a small group of people to what a spanking scene might look like. He had to stop when Gavin joined the club, because Gavin would always find a way to take over or ruin those scenes.

Connor slipped onto the stool at the end of the bar closest to the playrooms and the bartender, Brian, came over, smiling to see him.

‘Long time, no see,’ he said. ‘You want to look at who’s available tonight?’

‘I’d like that,’ Connor said. ‘And my usual, please.’

Brian nodded, poured Connor a shot of vodka that was a far nicer quality than what he had at the motel. He had no intention of telling Brian that he was already lightly buzzed. They cut any active players off at two drinks, it was the responsible thing to do.

Zeta’s system was unusual in that it allowed club members to opt into a file system where they could pre-list kinks, limits, safeword system preference, STI panels, members they weren’t interested in playing with, members they were interested in playing with and any special notes, like disabilities, preferences, or even just random facts if they wanted. While the files were never listed online for privacy, members who were available for play or scenes could put their file up to be perused, bypassing the need to chat people up.

‘Only three for you,’ Brian said, handing over three files. ‘It’s super quiet. Even for a Thursday. Think all the rain is keeping people home.’

‘Gavin here?’

‘No,’ Brian said, rolling his eyes. ‘You know he’s always about five seconds from getting his membership revoked. Next time you introduce someone to the club, maybe think about what you’re doing.’

‘Sorry,’ Connor said, frowning. It was a conversation they’d had before. Brian sighed.

‘It’s fine. Just given the choice between the two of you, I’d rather have you. You’re not staying away because of him, are you? Or is it still…all the other stuff?’

‘I’ve been busy,’ Connor said.

‘Right,’ Brian said, nodding, and Connor knew he’d just automatically assumed it was the other stuff. Connor pressed his lips together as Brian walked down to the other end of the bar, cleaning the counter and looking towards the door when two people entered. Connor turned to see it was a couple
that regularly played together, and didn’t pay any more attention, looking at the files.

He knew automatically who he wanted. Even better, he was green-listed in the file, so chances were high that it’d be a good night.

He finished the rest of the vodka quickly, walking down the bar to give the files back to Brian.

‘Where’s Luuk?’

Brian lifted his eyebrows, smiling a little. ‘You’re in a mood, aren’t you? He’s down in number three, watching some newcomers in a scene together. Have a good night.’

Connor nodded, walked past play partners in booths quietly occupied in scenes or making out, those who were drinking alone, those who were on their phones and were there less to play and more to just be somewhere that felt familiar. After all, it still had a bar, comfortable places to sit, and the music could be tuned out, the bass almost soothing.

Connor thought uncomfortably back to the cloying feel of Pink 88. Even though Zeta was mostly about black décor and had a heavy goth vibe, it really didn’t have the same feel to it that Pink 88 did. Maybe because Connor knew the regulars. Maybe because the acrid-metallic scent of red ice wasn’t in the air.

Luuk was standing just inside the doorway, one olive hand resting on his chest as he watched a short man flogging his partner. Connor didn’t know them, but the man seemed to know what he was doing, the partner’s skin slick with sweat, riding the strikes out and hardly making a sound.

When Luuk saw him, he smiled and tipped his head to indicate that Connor should come stand next to him.

‘Here to chat? Or because I’m free?’

‘The second,’ Connor said.

‘I should warn you that I’m in a mood to share,’ Luuk said, his voice soft and low. Connor knew from the tone that he was already turned on.

Connor shrugged, nodded. As long as it wasn’t someone on his blacklist – which only consisted of Gavin – he didn’t care. And just about everyone knew that Connor preferred not to play with Gavin anymore.

‘All right,’ Luuk said. ‘Let’s watch. Here, come sit with me. Anything new I should know that isn’t in your file?’

‘No,’ Connor said. Then: ‘Sir.’

‘Good, good,’ Luuk said, sliding his fingers around Connor’s wrist and drawing him over to one of the benches. He had Connor sit next to him, rested his warm palm on Connor’s thigh, a casual, possessive grip. Luuk wasn’t as sadistic as Connor preferred, but he was friendly, he still liked to indicate that he had control. Connor had scened with him twice before. One of the random facts in Luuk’s file was that he had five shelter dogs, and liked rooibos. For some reason, the small, random details made Connor like him more.

Connor watched the flogger come down over shoulders that were already blushed red. The ass and thighs too. The person kneeling shook only a little, head dropped down, and Connor wished he could feel the leather or suede on his own back. He pressed into the low backrest of the bench,
relieved that he’d made the decision to come.

Zeta gave him so many other things to think about.

The hand on his thigh lifted, then moved up his bare arm, before touching lightly at his neck. Connor stilled when he realised that Luuk had seen the bruise.

‘And this?’ Luuk said. ‘Should I be worried, Connor?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said, clearing his throat.

Fingers stroked over the bruise, and Connor wondered if it would be a dealbreaker. He’d forgotten about it. Of course his head still ached, and his neck hurt if he moved it in certain ways, but he was already – in only a few hours – able to tune it out. The fingertips on the bruise, however, drew all his attention right back to it.

‘Perhaps if you’d go easy on my neck, Sir,’ Connor added, to indicate that he was still fine for anything else.

‘I’m going to leave it alone entirely,’ Luuk said, sounding reproving. ‘I used to do karate. This looks like it was the result of a knifehand strike.’

The fingers at the bruise moved to the back of Connor’s neck, stroking there too, before they dropped back to Connor’s thigh. Connor was struck by the odd urge to lean into Luuk, but he resisted. He was impatient for the night to start, and he didn’t enjoy watching like some of the others did. All it did was make him aware of what he wasn’t getting, it made him impatient.

Maybe Luuk wanted that.

The next half hour passed, Connor increasingly fidgety, agitated. The flogging reached a crescendo, and Luuk even stayed through the beginning of the aftercare, and Connor tried to sit still with Luuk’s hand moving over his thigh, occasionally having to stretch his other leg to try and get the antsy feeling out of his system. It didn’t work.

A few minutes later, Luuk grasped his forearm and walked him out of the room, saying very little. Connor followed, surprised to see quite a few more people in the club since he’d entered.

Luuk entered one of the rooms for sexual play, left the door open, and Connor looked towards the two-way glass on the other side of the room for people who wanted to watch without being seen. Luuk walked over to his own bag of toys, drawing out a blindfold and walking back to Connor.

‘You’re easily distracted tonight.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, letting the finger at his chin draw his face back to Luuk’s. He submitted quietly to the blindfold, the material plush and soft against his skin. And then he lifted his arms when Luuk began to draw his shirt up and off him. He cooperated as much as possible as Luuk undressed him, glad he wasn’t one of those Doms who insisted on doing everything themselves. It really was easier to get out of jeans when he was helping.

He could hear his own breathing, the bass feeling distant this far down the corridor. His eyes were closed, red spots fired off in his eyelids. When two hands slid over his wrists, Connor let himself be drawn over to a low-lying, leather padded bench. He initially went to bend over it, so used to being spanked, but Luuk stopped him with a hand at his collarbone, laughing quietly.

‘No, Connor. Face up, please.’
'Yes, Sir,' Connor said, lying on the bench, legs straight together, arms hanging down until Luuk moved the arm-rests and settled Connor’s arms on them. Connor licked his lips as he felt the straps binding down his forearms. Luuk moved quietly and competently, his hands gentle. The straps were firm but not too tight. Like everything Luuk did, there was consideration in all his actions. Connor imagined that he looked after his shelter dogs with a firm but loving hand.

Sometimes Connor wondered if he had a partner, or partners, but he never brought anyone to the club with him, and he never – as far as Connor knew – took anyone home. Maybe it was just release for him. Connor could relate.

Both of his arms were strapped down, his legs too, and Connor couldn’t see a thing. A moment where his mind unhelpfully gave him bright images of Zlatko’s house, his basement, the horrors there. Then, the feeling of Zlatko discovering him, and Connor sucked in a breath and his wrists moved abruptly against the straps. He remembered why he hadn’t been visiting Zeta that often, simultaneously stuck in images he couldn’t escape and a present that he wanted to be calmer for.

He held his breath when he felt fingers resting against his shoulder.

‘Connor, are you all right?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said quickly, and then grimaced, because it was a default answer. ‘I don’t know, Sir.’

‘It’s fine,’ Luuk said quickly, and just having his voice there helped. Connor felt like he was smacking himself with the words: It’s Zeta, it’s Zeta, it’s Zeta, and that helped somewhat too. ‘Do you want me to unstrap one of your arms?’

Connor nodded, wanting the familiarity of being completely bound, but knowing it would help to have a limb free. His breathing was shallow as the straps of his right arm were undone. As soon as it was loose, he lifted his arm a little just to prove to himself he could, and it thumped back down onto the leather. Immediately, he felt calmer than before. It hadn’t fixed the issue, but it helped.

‘Thank you, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘You’re welcome,’ Luuk said, trailing his fingers down Connor’s side, the touch faintly ticklish. ‘I think something simple tonight. Hm?’

‘Whatever you like, Sir.’

Like this, the world became clearer. It was good to say ‘Sir’ in this context, good to have clear orders, clear instructions. He’d never done well with Doms that expected guesswork, that left him hanging, that liked to leave everything up to mystery.

He’d discovered this world entirely by accident through his second lover at college. Learned that there was a universe where there were rules and where aftercare was expected. Where the poor communication habits of himself and his peers weren’t acceptable, and one had to be forthright and honest about wants and limits at the least. Where authenticity was valued, even as many people never gave their first names and certainly almost never gave their full names or real names. Authenticity of the self, instead of the superficial.

It didn’t always work out that way. But it gave Connor a glimpse into something greater, and he’d wanted it badly.

The lover had moved away, and Connor realised soon after that he couldn’t have a relationship without this. That he’d rather be alone than give it up. Rather see different men semi-regularly, with
different tastes, and give up long-term intimacy, because he expected he wouldn’t have time for that anyway. If he wanted a job like his father’s, he had to accept a life like his father’s.

His Dad had never made a good husband.

It took a moment to settle into the hand that was touching him, and then two hands smoothing over him. Connor wished he could participate a bit more, but Luuk rarely invited touch, he liked to be the one giving it.

Connor’s breathing was more even when two hands danced lightly over the delicate skin of his cock. Lifting his half-hard length, palm moving up and down as though weighing it, the thumb of his other hand smoothing over the top, terminating at the slit, and brushing playfully. Connor turned his head to the side, smiled a little, thought that his life must be getting on track again if he could enjoy this, if the only thing he needed to make it possible was one arm unbound.

Luuk didn’t expect him to talk, and Connor focused instead on the touches. On hands that worked him to hardness with an effortless patience that felt good now, and would be agonising in its own way later. Now, it was a palm – slick with lubricant that the club provided – jacking him off gently. Connor arched his hips impatiently more than once, and Luuk simply ignored him. He didn’t even reprimand.

Eventually, Connor’s hips sagged back to the bench, his arms went loose.

‘That’s good, Connor,’ Luuk said.

Connor forced his eyes open behind the blindfold, then closed them again, sealing out the tiny sliver of light that didn’t show him a thing.

It took a bit longer than usual for Connor to feel like he was cresting, like he really wanted to come. Partly because Luuk was easing him into it, partly because of some nameless thing that lurked in the back of his mind. But it still happened, the inevitability of it creeping through him. His heart sped up, his breathing became deeper, heavier, and the unbound hand clenched onto the rest like he was tied anyway.

His toes curled, his legs tensed, and he felt the strain inside his lower belly centring down just behind his balls. They pulled up and he gasped and thought maybe tonight Luuk had seen that he was having a rough night, and would just let him, would just let-

‘Please,’ he said, automatically. ‘Please.’

Luuk jacked him off a bit faster, and then all at once let go, and Connor groaned and nearly laughed because it was very predictable. Luuk actually laughed, sounding a bit rueful.

‘Ah, well,’ Luuk said. ‘You’re begging early tonight. Poor Connor.’

The reason Connor didn’t choose Luuk that often, was because Connor preferred the intensity of pain over the intensity of being edged, which was a different kind of misery. Every now and then though, he knew it would push him outside of himself. Right now he was still lucid, coherent, able to wryly laugh about the situation he’d put himself in, knowing that Luuk was enjoying himself immensely, which also helped. He ached for what it might be in ten minutes’ time.

Fingers moving again over him once the peak of Connor’s arousal had faded. His cock only mildly oversensitive, his body still eager. Luuk’s hands weren’t smooth, and Connor had no idea what his work was, but he imagined it was some kind of trade. The texture and the lubricant together was a good mix.
Connor turned his head when he heard footsteps entering the room. He knew it was a public room, and the door had been left open deliberately. He tried to imagine who it might be. A newcomer? An old-timer? Brian, who sometimes left the bar for five minutes to look in? He felt the rhythm of Luuk’s hand shift as he turned to see who it was.

‘Good evening,’ Luuk said.

‘Hey,’ the stranger said. His voice was deep, but Connor didn’t recognise it. ‘What’s on the menu tonight?’

‘Just some simple edging,’ Luuk said calmly, and Connor could tell when he’d turned back to face Connor, felt the shift in Luuk’s arm and wrist.

The man laughed, and Connor wondered if he’d be looking straight at him if he wasn’t wearing the blindfold. The laugh was cruel, detached.

‘Don’t seem that far along yet,’ the man said.

‘Oh no, we’re only starting. Do you want to watch or participate? If it’s the latter, I’d like to talk to you privately for a moment, since I don’t recognise you.’

‘Yeah, I’m new here. We can chat. Whatever you want.’

‘Connor?’ Luuk said. ‘Give me a minute, I’ll be just outside in view of the room, so I’ll be able to see you. If you need anything, tell me.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, hearing him stand, his feet scraping along the floor.

He could hear them talking, but not what they were saying, their voices too low and tangling with the bass and the music beyond the room. Connor lifted his free hand and left it on his chest, half-tempted to disobey and reach between his legs and touch himself. But the impulse faded, because he was curious about the stranger.

They came back after what felt like an endless amount of time, but couldn’t have been that long. Connor’s cock was no longer fully hard, but half-hard, and when he felt Luuk’s hand on it, he twitched, the skin sensitive, the lubricant cold.

‘So neglected,’ Luuk murmured. ‘Don’t worry, Connor. It won’t last long.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

The other man had walked to the other side of the room and was opening drawers, looking at the club equipment. A rattling of metal on metal, and Connor turned his head the other way, squirming as Luuk’s hand began to move on his cock again. More footsteps at the doorway, and Connor’s mind filled with a dull anxiety, until:

‘Hi, Luuk.’ Ah. That voice he recognised at least. Ramesh, who just liked to watch. Connor heard him sit down in one of the provided chairs and relaxed a little. Ramesh was harmless, but the stranger was still an unknown quantity. Connor turned his head again as he heard footsteps walking up to him.

A cool, broad hand rested on his shoulder, and Connor jerked. Nanofluid skin didn’t feel like human skin, even if it was designed for the same functions.

An android?
He opened his mouth, and the hand resting on his shoulder became two fingertips tracing over his collarbone. Luuk’s hand still moving.

‘Connor,’ Luuk said in that slow, patient way. ‘This is Anders. Say hello.’

‘Hello,’ Connor said automatically.

‘Not gonna call me Sir?’ Anders said, his voice a deep, smooth purr. ‘Is it just me? Or are you like this with all fuckin’ androids?’

‘Sorry, Sir,’ Connor said.

Not all tops liked to be called Sir, and Connor normally waited to find out what they preferred. But it was also true he’d held back on the word, because what had looked like a night of just edging before going home exhausted, was becoming something else.

‘I’ll let it pass this time,’ Anders said.

‘I think you’ll find he won’t slip up again,’ Luuk said, and Connor smiled a little at the warmth he could hear in Luuk’s voice, the praise warming him. Yes. He did try to be good.

‘Yeah,’ Anders said, like he was almost disappointed.

But those two fingers dragged over his skin firmly, the touch neither light nor ticklish, and even though the fingers were lukewarm, they still left heat behind. Connor bit into his lower lip, liking it, especially contrasted against the teasing, gentle touches of Luuk building him up again. He didn’t know what to concentrate on more.

Then an index finger circling one of his nipples, before brushing over it, again and again, and Connor arched into the touch and thought that maybe Anders had gotten clamps out of the drawer, but couldn’t be sure. Slightly grippy skin – the kind of synthetic nanofluid designed to mimic skin but make it excellent at handling objects of all textures – pinched up his nipple lightly, then slowly increased pressure until Connor’s mouth opened.

He was surprised when the finger of Anders’ other hand pressed against his chin, another finger ducking within his mouth, pressing on his tongue. The pain at his nipple became sharp, and he wanted to bite down, but instead kept his mouth open, groaning.

‘Yeah,’ Anders muttered to himself, and Connor couldn’t tell if it was approval, or if it was Anders just affirming that he’d expected the reaction he got.

The finger moved out of his mouth, and then Connor heard the sound of a thin chain clinking, and Connor pressed his mouth shut as the metal alligator clamp was attached to his nipple. The tension wasn’t that bad, but the cruel metal teeth hurt, and he still needed several breaths to get through the initial pain of it. The pleasure in his cock helped, but Connor inhaled sharply when he felt Anders’ index finger move to his other nipple, stroking over it again, pinching it until it could be pinched.

The next alligator clamp came down after a few minutes of painful pinching that Connor half-wanted to arch into, or lean away from. Luuk’s strokes were steadily speeding up, and Connor kept his unbound arm down on the armrest, fingers digging in hard as he felt the tension winding up in his body. Pain and wanting to come tangling up together, until he jerked into Luuk’s hand helplessly, chasing it.

Luuk brought him so close to the peak that Connor was sure he was going to be allowed to come, sure that his body was over the edge. But then Luuk let go of him, didn’t touch him, and Connor
shuddered down into the bench and exhaled hard, eyes screwed up behind the blindfold and his unbound arm lifting and thumping down.

‘Shhh,’ Luuk said, gently tracing Connor’s thigh. ‘It’s fine.’

It wasn’t, but Connor knew this was the part that Luuk liked. He’d briefly forgotten about Anders, until the chain at his chest was lifted, pulling on the clamps, and he gasped. The chain kept lifting, pulling his nipples up, tiny alligator teeth digging in, tension building in a different, awful way. Connor’s back arched up to relieve the worst of it, and Anders only responded by lifting the chain more.

Connor panted heavily, pain tight in his chest, not wanting to tense his arms and pectorals but unable to help it. He bit his tongue when he felt a finger trace the swollen, pinched skin around one of the clamps.

‘He can take a lot, can’t he?’ Anders said to either Luuk or Ramesh.

‘Oh, a lot more than this,’ Luuk said calmly, petting Connor’s thigh. ‘But I’d like the focus to stay on the edging.’

‘Sure,’ Anders said. ‘Like we discussed.’

‘Yes,’ Luuk said. A warm hand rubbed Connor’s belly, making the muscles twitch before they settled.

When the tension in the chain released, Connor slumped back and caught his breath, the pain in his nipples both sharp and bruising. He was going to be sore tomorrow. A different kind of pain to being spanked or flogged or paddled, a strange fragility as his chest brushed against whatever shirt he’d choose to wear the next day. Sometimes even the water from a shower hurt too much.

He knew it was one of Anders’ hands that slid into his hair from the body temperature. The grip was strong, reminding him of Hank grasping him by the hair before chopping him in the neck with the side of his hand. He frowned, and then flinched when fingers ghosted over the bruise.

‘Nasty,’ Anders said.

Connor said nothing. Then, thinking that he was being rude: ‘Yes, Sir.’

Thankfully, the fingers moved away from his neck and came to rest on his shoulder instead, the other hand staying in his hair, keeping it gripped up tight.

Luuk began to stroke his cock again, a new application of lubricant on his hand, the sound of it thick and wet in the room. Connor’s cock throbbed, it took a few strokes for the sensations to go from too much to perfect, but Luuk was gentle in those moments, as though he knew Connor would scream if he started too roughly. Some people would want that, Luuk only ever seemed to want the point where Connor wanted to scream for not being allowed to come. He suspected Luuk was all about chastity play.

The next time he was pushed close to the edge, he began to buck his hips up, chasing the orgasm. He reached up with his hand hardly thinking about it, just wanting to finish himself off, and Luuk’s other hand came out and held it down with an iron grip.

‘Connor, be good,’ he said sternly.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, voice breaking. ‘Sorry. Please.’
‘No.’

Connor sobbed once, pulling his head against the grip in his hair and liking that Anders didn’t relent, his fingers tightening. Luuk kept pushing him closer to orgasm, and Connor moaned. He closed his mouth to try and control himself, but Anders shoved two fingers inside, and Connor’s teeth scraped against nanofluid skin, the light-weight chassis beneath like bones and nothing like bones at the same time. When the fingers fucked into his mouth, Connor realised that it was pushing him far faster to release, his eyes widened, thinking that Anders might ruin the scene, and then he’d get to come and-

Luuk let go of his cock and kept Connor’s wrist pinned to the armrest so he couldn’t finish himself off.

Connor shouted in protest around the fingers that kept fucking carelessly into his mouth. He couldn’t even tell if Anders was enjoying himself.

Strained, pleading noises that Luuk only responded to with a quiet hushing sound, before gently stroking his thigh with that maddening light pressure again. Connor’s eyes burned.

‘Guess it’s my turn again,’ Anders said, flicking his other fingers against one of the clamps. Connor twisted, his legs jerking at the straps, the pain a lot in the absence of pleasure. Anders made a clucking sound with his tongue that sounded far more clicky than when humans did it, slid his fingers out of Connor’s mouth and kept snapping his fingertips against the clamp until Connor was begging him to stop. ‘Don’t you fuckin’ have a word to make me stop?’

Connor did, and he closed his mouth abruptly, hating when it was brought up so boldly. For a brief moment, he felt weakened by it. Anders chuckled, backed off and stroked the skin around the clamp instead. It was still painful, but not like before.

‘You’re doing very well, Connor,’ Luuk said, rubbing the outside of his thigh soothingly.

Connor opened his mouth to say thank you, but Anders spoke over him. ‘Is he?’

It was surprising to hear the scepticism in his tone. It left Connor feeling destabilised, like he wasn’t doing very well at all, and wondering if he liked Anders or not. What would it be like to have a scene with him? Just him? Connor was scared to know, which meant he wanted to know.

‘Yes,’ Luuk said, sounding irritated.

‘Sure, sure,’ Anders said. ‘He’s definitely pretty when he suffers, isn’t he?’

‘That’s very true,’ Luuk said, and Connor could hear the smile in his voice. ‘And we’re not done yet.’

Connor’s face screwed up as fingers trailed along his cock again, before a hand curled around him, jacking him again. Anders continued to play with his nipple – moving to the other one and giving the first a break – and the pain wriggled into his body, connected down to his cock and made him want to come more than ever. He sped along towards it, so quickly that he forgot where he was for a moment, only able to focus on the agitated mix of pleasure and pain weaving in together.

When Luuk took his hand away, Connor whined, screaming protests in his head, even swearing, but unable to voice any of that aloud. This time they were silent as he panted through it, coming down from the peak, his balls feeling swollen and an ache at the base of his cock that he wanted to relieve. As he became more desperate to come, he wished he could be stretched and filled too, but it wasn’t going to happen. Connor’s voice broke, and then he almost screamed when the chain connecting the nipple clamps pulled up sharply.
‘Okay, okay,’ he heard himself say as though from a distance, his voice pacifying. But the tension didn’t stop, not until Connor’s voice broke on a sob and his legs kicked against the straps. Unlike some Doms, Anders didn’t soothe him afterwards, didn’t stroke or pet him, and Luuk doing it down at his legs felt disconnected.

This time, when Luuk placed a hand on his cock, Connor begged from the outset.

‘Please, this time, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘Please?’

‘We’ll see,’ Luuk said.

Of course, he didn’t let Connor come that time either, and Connor wished he was the kind of person to swear and insult the person who controlled him. Wished he could vent his frustration verbally. But it was too locked up, and instead it blazed across his mind and died down again as he shook in frustration and want and need. Ineffectual pats at his thigh and Connor knew Luuk did it partly to be soothing, partly to be aggravating.

When fingers slipped beneath the chain resting on his chest and began to drag it up, Connor panicked, dread flooding him.

‘No, no, Sir, yellow, yellow,’ he said, hardly thinking.

A pause, and the chain dropped.

‘Good boy, Connor,’ Luuk said, and Connor wished Anders would say it, but Anders said nothing for a long time, and then:

‘I thought you said he liked pain.’

Connor felt that like a blow. He did like pain. He turned his head away from Anders, though he wasn’t entirely sure where Anders was standing. He was fairly certain it was by his left shoulder. Looking to the right meant that Luuk could see him, Ramesh could see him. It was overwhelming.

‘He hasn’t told you to stop,’ Luuk said calmly, patiently. ‘He’s only told you to slow down.’

‘Besides,’ Ramesh said from where he was sitting, ‘not all scenes are made equal. Sometimes something that has no effect one day, can be the thing that breaks a scene the next. You should know that.’

‘Huh,’ Anders said, but he didn’t pick up the chain again. Instead, he coasted his finger near one of Connor’s nipples, and then when Connor didn’t react to that, he began stroking the skin around it. Connor winced, but it was a bearable pain, and it wasn’t the dread of before.

He suspected that Anders was the kind of Dom that Connor would want to play with some time, but that he was the kind of submissive that Anders would never really want to play with. It was probably for the best. Connor’s taste was not naturally great.

At least it wasn’t Gavin, who’d been kicked out of group scenes and was now banned from them.

Connor let them sort themselves out, trusted in Luuk’s control of the scene and the people around him. Anders was deferring to him. So that was something.

Although when he wasn’t allowed to come the next two times, Connor began to think that maybe he wasn’t going to make it through this scene at all. He was drenched in sweat, hazy, and Luuk had stood up and was stroking his face now, saying soothing things, talking him through it as Connor’s
entire body quivered. Connor was sure his wrist had a bruise on it, because Luuk needed to hold it down again and then again, Connor not even aware that he was automatically trying to finish himself off. He felt that if someone just breathed across his cock, he’d come, and instead there was nothing between his legs and a hand on his face.

‘Anders is going to take over now,’ Luuk said quietly. ‘I’ll be right here, and we discussed it. Which means you’re going to get to come soon, all right?’

Connor didn’t care. He would have agreed to anything at that point, even as he heard Anders’ footsteps move to the other end of the bench.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor managed, when he thought there might have to be a response.

He arched into Anders’ hand when it wrapped around him. It felt cool against Connor’s febrile skin, but it was warming quickly. The grip was strong, unmoving, a squeeze that made Connor try and push deeper into it. Luuk’s fingers trailed through his hair and Connor craved that, but he wanted Anders’ hard grip of before too.

Almost as though Anders could tell what he was thinking, he shifted so that he was standing by Connor’s hip, one of his hands coming up, the fingers of his other hand tracing over the neck bruise, and then moving further still, gripping his chin.

Finally, the hand on his cock began to move. Too slowly, but wonderfully tight, as though Anders could milk the come right out of him.

The begging spilled before he could stop himself.

‘Please, Sir, please, please, whatever you want, anything—’

‘Anything, hey?’ Anders drawled, fingers gripping his chin hard.

Connor forgot about Luuk, forgot about Ramesh, and focused only on this person who hadn’t seemed impressed by Connor all night, yet was giving him that mix of pain and pleasure that was about to send him so far beyond himself he’d float on it for days.

‘Anything, Sir,’ Connor gasped, the words slurred.

‘I dunno,’ Anders said, his voice lower, rougher than before, sounding strangely familiar. ‘I dunno, Connor, if you can give me anything. Maybe just this though.’

‘Please, Sir.’

Anders’ hand sped up, and the fingers at his chin moved to the blindfold, nudging at the tear-soaked fabric. Connor’s breath was strangled, his whole body straining, knowing that it wasn’t possible to die from being refused orgasm but feeling like it might be true anyway. Luuk still held his arm down, as Connor struggled, not even to touch himself now, but to flail.

All of it was heavy and soaring at once. His balls drew up tight, felt so full, his cock ached, the head sensitive and screaming too much sensation through him whenever he felt fingers pay special attention to it or squeeze. He was so close, could feel the vibration of his own voice in his chest, knew he was begging still, but had tipped his head back and into Anders’ fingers at the blindfold and waited for the crash of it over him, wanted that hand to milk him tightly through it.

Fingers slipped under the blindfold and began to lift it, Connor opened his eyes to light flooding through and blinding him.
At the same time, his gut seized hard, he felt his heart skip beats, and then his release was upon him, locking up through him before he began spilling come.

As the first spasm rippled through him, Anders yanked his hand away from Connor’s cock leaving it exposed to only cold air and lifted the blindfold completely, and as Connor jerked and twitched through an unstimulated orgasm that felt intense and hollow all at once, he stared into blue eyes, a cruel face, a smirk, that white hair drawn back into a ponytail, the LED flashing yellow.

‘Hey, Connor,’ Hank said, in the voice he must have copied from someone else. ‘How was that? Was that cathartic for you?’

Connors’ hips were still jerking, he couldn’t help it, his cock moving in the frigid air, the intimacy of the whole scene shattered. The orgasm was supposed to have been one of his best, and instead, it was one of his worst.

A hand at his chest as Connor stared with his mouth open, his breaths cold and lost, and then each clamp was quickly removed. Connor’s legs struggled vaguely at the straps, horror eating at him.

A beat where the numbed tissue – blood pressed out of it by the clamps – felt nothing at all, and then sensation shot into him like a lance, an agony worse than the clamps being put on, and he opened his mouth to scream and-

Hank’s hand calmly covered his mouth, and he smiled. Connor could hear Luuk saying something, asking something, but he could only stare at Hank. He felt sick, the intense feelings should have been ridden out properly, but instead they’d been redirected into this, and while his body still helplessly shook through the aftermath of a ruined orgasm, his mind stopped working.

Hank leaned down, his mouth close to Connor’s ear.

‘You owe me *everything*, you fuckin’ piece of shit,’ he whispered, low enough that only Connor could hear him. ‘And boy, you had better believe I’m going to make you pay more than you ever thought possible.’

When Hank lifted up again, he directed a casual smile to Luuk, and said:

‘He’s fine with it, aren’t you, Connor?’

Connor’s mind blanked. He said the only thing he knew to say:

‘Yes. Yes, Sir.’ A pause. ‘It’s fine.’
Luuk was furious.

He unstrapped Connor quietly after telling Hank to back away, and Connor was surprised when Hank listened. He half-expected Hank to snap all the leather straps and drag Connor out of the club naked. Nothing would surprise him anymore. Instead, Hank placed the metal clamps in a sink for cleaning, and waited with his arms folded.

Connor stared at him, breathing still shaky, noticing more as he fell hard from the place he’d been floating in. A worn dark grey shirt, a black leather jacket, black jeans, black boots. His hair was still tied back. He looked more threatening like this than he did in the CyberLife official clothing.

‘Connor, look at me,’ Luuk said firmly. Connor turned to look at him, struck by the urge to apologise.

He brought this badness with him everywhere. He should at least… It was obvious Luuk wasn’t happy, and Connor had wanted him to have a good night.

‘I’m sorry, Sir,’ Connor said, searching his black eyes.

Luuk’s face softened, but his gaze darkened again as it flicked up to Hank. When he looked at Connor again, he grimaced.

‘You were wonderful, Connor. How are you feeling physically? Sore anywhere? I’ve got some ointment for your nipples.’

Connor sat up slowly and looked down at himself. They did look chafed, they were still throbbing. He resisted the urge to cover them, to cover himself. He hadn’t minded being naked until now, and was grateful when Luuk brought a towel to drape over him.

‘Hurry up,’ Hank said. ‘We’re getting out of here.’

‘I don’t know who you are,’ Luuk said sternly, ‘and I don’t care. I have been coming to this club for long enough to have sway with the owner and I will get you kicked out if you insist on ignoring aftercare.’
Connor was torn between apologising for Hank, apologising to Luuk again. He stared down at his hands, they were trembling, and he curled his fingers. It wasn’t so bad. Aside from the end, and Hank being there, the actual scene itself had been good. Just…intense.

‘I’m okay, Sir,’ Connor said.

Luuk ignored him, still looking at Hank. ‘That wasn’t what we discussed,’ he said.

‘Things change,’ Hank said easily, casually, his voice now completely back to what it had been originally. Connor thought that the last time he’d sounded this much like himself, North hadn’t yet deployed her sound weapon.

So Hank must have gone home, changed his clothes. Where did he go after that? How did he know to come here? Connor hadn’t told anyone. Unless Hank had guessed? He would have known that Connor had a membership here if he’d researched Connor’s emails, his history on his phone.

He’d taken the time to mask his voice, taken the time to make sure he could well and truly immerse himself in the scene before letting Connor know who he was.

‘Connor?’

He realised Luuk must have been calling his name for some time, and looked up. ‘Sir.’

Luuk sighed, rubbed the towel over his back and arms, careful at the reddening on his wrist where his arm had been held down.

‘Are you okay, Connor?’ Luuk said. ‘Do you need me to call anyone to get you?’

‘I’m okay, Sir. I don’t need you to call anyone.’

Connor was sure he was going somewhere with Hank. His heart beat sickeningly in his chest. He knew he should be more upset about whatever was coming, but after the events of the day, he felt like he’d earned whatever was next. He wasn’t even angry at Hank for what he’d done. But he also wasn’t happy that his captor was back. Connor didn’t think things were going to go easier from now on.

‘Do you know this person?’ Luuk said.

‘It’s Hank, Sir. He’s a…friend.’

‘Right,’ Luuk said, managing to sound both disappointed in Connor and furious at the same time. Luuk walked away to his bag, drew out the ointment and came back, painting a small amount of the cream over Connor’s nipples. Though it was sore, Connor didn’t move. Truthfully, he didn’t even really feel it. He kept seeing Hank in the corner of his eyes, and he felt like all of this was just…like waiting for his Dad to come home from work when he’d done something bad when he’d been a kid.

Connor abruptly wished that Luuk would offer to take him home. Back to his house, or back to Connor’s motel. He bit the inside of his mouth and thought that it was typical of him to want to avoid what he deserved.

He was surprised when Luuk sat on the bench next to him, pulled the towel up until it was around his neck and shoulders, and then drew him sideways. It was awkward, but Connor’s head was leaning across Luuk’s chest, and Luuk had strong arms around him. Connor blinked. Like this, he couldn’t see Hank anymore, because he was facing Ramesh, and Hank was behind them.
‘Did you invite him here?’ Luuk said to Connor. ‘Did you know he was coming?’

‘No, Sir.’ I wouldn’t do that to you, Sir.

And how did Hank know to do all that stuff, anyway? Did he even like it? Did he have any previous experience with BDSM? Or had he learned it all by downloading hundreds of videos into his mind before stepping in the club? Connor recalled wanting to do a scene with him while he was still Anders and being scared of it, and shook his head slightly.

Luuk’s arms were tight around him, and Connor thought this was when he should feel comforted and safe.

He didn’t feel anything at all.

He closed his eyes, he knew some of this was certainly sub-drop. He could be prone to it anyway. He hated putting tops and Doms through it, and knew that Luuk was experienced enough to know it for what it was.

Connor felt startlingly sober. He also wasn’t surprised that Hank was angry at him instead of North. It had been Connor’s call, in the end. And Hank had begged him not to do it.

After a few minutes, Connor realised that it would be best if he got this all over and done with. It had been a mistake to come here. He wanted a shower, but didn’t feel like using the one in the club.

‘I’m good, Sir,’ Connor said, moving back into a proper sitting position. ‘Really. It was unexpected, but I appreciate your care. I think I should go. Get some sleep. I have work tomorrow.’

He hated lying, but it seemed like it was all he ever did sometimes.

Luuk left a hand on his shoulder and looked him over, then stood and found Connor’s clothing. Connor dressed slowly, focusing on getting his limbs in sleeves and pant legs, on making sure he put the right shoe on the right foot. He took a glass of water that Ramesh had fetched for him, and obediently drank half of it to prove that he was trying to look after himself. They’d be more likely to let him go if he seemed adjusted about it all.

Towards the end, he embraced Luuk, careful of his sore chest. ‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘You’re welcome, always, Connor,’ Luuk said. ‘It’s a shame you don’t like chastity more. Or edging.’

‘I like it when you do it,’ Connor said.

Luuk laughed warmly, ruffled his sweat-damp hair, and then looked over at Hank for a long time.

‘Are you leaving with him?’ Luuk said to Connor, seeing too much into the situation even if he didn’t understand it. Connor wondered if Luuk thought Hank was yet another abusive lover.

‘Maybe,’ Connor said.

He was surprised that Hank didn’t say anything, but maybe he was taking Luuk seriously. Connor hadn’t ever seen Luuk so angry before. He wasn’t the kind of man to yell or to start insulting people, his fury was cold and implacable. Connor had zero doubt that Luuk would find a way to get Hank kicked out of the club if he stepped over the line again.

‘I want your number,’ Luuk said. ‘So I can text you later. If you don’t reply within twelve hours, I’m
going to call the authorities.’

‘What?’ Connor said, surprised.

‘I’m serious,’ Luuk said, holding out his hand for Connor’s phone. ‘I don’t trust him, and honestly, I don’t trust you right now. You just need to tell me you’re doing okay and I’ll leave it, but you’re going to have to tell me.’

‘Jesus fuckin’ Christ,’ Hank said angrily. ‘I’m not gonna murder him.’

Luuk ignored him.

Connor wondered if it was bad that he felt relieved by that. If it meant he’d already accepted that it was a possibility and was still planning on leaving with him.

He gave his number to Luuk, and handed his phone over so Luuk could key his own name in as ‘Luuk Zeta.’ Luuk then tested the number that Connor gave him, sending a small emoji wave. Connor stared at it, then smiled a little.

‘I’ll reply, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Make sure you do,’ Luuk said, turning to Ramesh, both of them exchanging a look. When he turned back, he looked tired. Connor wanted to assure him that it wouldn’t be like this next time. That he’d be better, and someone like Hank wouldn’t come in and ruin it. But instead he stayed quiet, because he wasn’t sure he could promise something like that, and maybe tonight Luuk would stay and have another scene with someone else and get the bad taste out of his mouth.

I’m sorry, Sir, he willed quietly.

But Luuk couldn’t hear his thoughts, and Connor eventually walked from the room, steady on his feet and unsteady in his thoughts. He knew Hank was following him, and Connor didn’t stop walking until he was outside of the club.

It was raining, sheets of water coasting down past the small shaded steps that led into the club. Connor stood there, waited.

After a minute, Hank stood next to him. Connor could feel his gaze on him, and just…waited.

‘We’re going back to my place, because yours isn’t safe,’ Hank said.

‘Did you break into it?’

‘Me? No,’ Hank said. ‘There’s nothing there I fuckin’ want, I can tell you that. It was androids, probably connected to your case.’

Connor looked at him, and Hank’s gaze was dark, unforgiving. His LED hadn’t once shifted away from yellow. It was meant to stay settled on blue for all androids, only going to yellow during taxing processes or disturbing emotional processes, and to red for trauma, shock or damage.

‘Come on,’ Hank said, reaching out to grab Connor by the wrist. Connor sidestepped away, then grasped onto the railing because he felt dizzy. Maybe he wasn’t as sober as he thought. He’d only had three shots.

Hank grabbed his wrist anyway, and Connor followed him through the rain – Hank unbothered by it – and looked back to the club entrance.
‘Are you going to kill me?’ Connor said.

‘What? What’s the use of that? What good does that do me?’

He was led to a broad, half-empty carpark. Towards the back, a sleek, black autonomous vehicle that wasn’t a cab. Hank drew out his keys, and the driver door slid open. Hank shoved Connor in through the driver’s side, and Connor didn’t bother trying the passenger door, suspecting that he wouldn’t be able to open it. He sat there, damp with sweat and rain, and then eventually rubbed his hand over his face so that the water wouldn’t itch at him.

Hank sat in the driver’s seat, even though he didn’t need to drive the vehicle, and the rain gently hummed around the metal of the car.

‘Back at the lab. I didn’t know it would be like that,’ Connor said, not thinking about the scene anymore.

‘I don’t give a shit what you didn’t know.’ Hank knew what he was talking about, and Connor pushed his back into the chair and could feel the tingling in his legs, could still feel the strap marks.

‘How do you know it was androids that broke into my apartment?’

‘Because humans would’ve taken shit,’ Hank said. He sounded fine. He didn’t sound like he’d been hurt at all. ‘Androids can scan anything they want, so they don’t need to take the files. They can get pristine copies on site.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘After that shit you and North pulled?’ Hank said, staring at him. ‘CyberLife. Where else?’

Connor didn’t say anything, then jumped when Hank’s fist came out and jolted hard against the car door.

‘The fuckers won’t take me back,’ Hank said. ‘Shit, they had the spiel all worked out. After using me as a case study, they’ll no longer revert androids, and are hesitant to touch my code again and all this other bullshit.’

Connor almost asked him why he didn’t just…jump in front of a train, or something else, but he held himself back. It wasn’t the kind of question you asked someone, even if the very first thing Hank did was find a way to get the memories removed again.

‘My stuff is in a motel,’ Connor said finally. He wasn’t really in any position to be making demands, but he wanted his own clothes. Connor supposed if he’d thought that Hank was bad as his captor before, whatever happened now that Hank didn’t have to follow anyone’s directives anymore would be worse.

He felt himself shrinking down in the seat, and stared out of the windscreen.

‘Y’know, for such a destructive little shit, you can be real pathetic sometimes. Tell me the name of the motel. And after we’re going back to my place. No one on the case knows where I live. I figure. And even if they do, the security is top notch.’

Connor gave him the name of the motel, and Hank placed the address into the GPS by touching the screen once. He didn’t even have to type or say anything.

It was silent on the way to the motel. Connor thought about things to say, and then he thought about
all the nasty things Hank would say in response to anything Connor said, and stayed quiet. He kept expecting Hank to randomly insult him some more, but Hank said nothing.

It wasn’t like before though. Where his quietness was just a strange deadness. Now, his quietness was laced with charged tension. His shoulders were up, he tapped his leg, and his face was set into a scowl that didn’t seem automatic. Connor wondered if he should message Markus, just tell someone the situation he was in, but he decided against it.

Hank hadn’t actually – outside of the scene – hurt him yet. And Connor was too tired to know exactly what he should do. The day had caught up with him, the scene had wiped him out. He’d only expected to go to the motel and sleep afterwards. This was beyond him.

At the motel, Hank walked him up, but didn’t follow as closely as before. He didn’t seem to think Connor was going to escape, or maybe he was confident he could catch him if he did. Connor was confident of that too, so he didn’t bother even thinking about it. He got his toothbrush, his clothes, his backpack and didn’t like the once-over that Hank gave him as Connor locked up the room, because he couldn’t interpret what it meant, but knew it wasn’t good.

‘Could I shower at your place?’ Connor said once they were back in Hank’s car. The window tinting was very good. Connor realised it was blackout tinting, and knew that was illegal unless verified with law enforcement. He looked over to Hank, who was already looking at him.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, like Connor had asked something very strange. ‘Gotta say, was expecting you to put up more of a fight.’

Connor looked out of his window, and the car cleaved through the rain.

‘You fuckin’ liked it that much, didn’t you?’ Hank said, his voice like an oil slick on the edge of his consciousness. ‘Goddamn.’

‘And you?’ Connor said. ‘How did you know I’d be there?’

‘Your GPS has analytics for your most visited places, Connor. And you don’t have what people would call a varied and diverse life.’

Connor smiled bitterly at that, said nothing, and then closed his eyes. If Hank wasn’t going to yell at him for what had happened earlier in the day, then Connor didn’t want to prolong any of this. It was going to hurt no matter what he did or said.

*

Connor walked into Hank’s house for the second time that day. He stood in the foyer, as Hank walked confidently towards the kitchen, and then Hank paused and turned back.

‘You’ve already been here?’ he said, like he couldn’t believe it. ‘When?’

‘Kara and Alice,’ Connor said woodenly, wondering how he could tell. How did he know? Connor’s fingerprints on a surface? The scent of him in the air? Connor could only smell dust, and the lingering trace of sweat and come on himself.

‘Shit, go have a shower or something. Wake yourself up. If you’ve already been here, take one of the spare rooms. And you know what fuckin’ room to leave alone. If I find out that you’ve been inside it, I’m-’

‘I haven’t,’ Connor said, and then walked down the corridor, opening one of the closed doors and
finding a neatly made bed. He was surprised to see it had an en suite, and walked in, turning the lights on, looking around. It was nice. Far nicer than where he’d been staying and far nicer than his tiny apartment. There was no mould.

A part of him wanted to sit on the toilet seat and drink vodka, but he had no vodka, and he suspected Hank would come looking for him. So he showered instead. It was a strange feeling to be in the same house as Hank, while not having him stand guard right outside the bathroom. It already was different. It was so clear now that Hank’s directives had broken.

His LED never switched from yellow to blue.

Connor showered thoroughly, enjoying the heat, wondering what made Hank buy this house. Did he get it built? Was it bought established? Hank didn’t need a bathroom for himself, and yet Connor now knew the house had three of them. It was a house designed for humans, or an android that expected to fill his life with humans. And Cole had been human, so it made sense for Hank to have a fridge with food in it or a single shower, but three showers?

He washed his hair with the products in his bag, watched the lather from the soap and the conditioner vanish down the drain.

Should he want to escape? His instincts were off. Any regular person would want to escape, wouldn’t they?

He didn’t have the slightest impulse towards it. He laughed at himself, a low, faint sound. It was either going to make this easier or harder. He was more curious than anything. Especially after seeing Kara and Alice earlier in the day.

He dressed and walked back out into the open-plan lounge and kitchen. Hank was leaning against the kitchen bench and watching him, and Connor slowed to a stop and just stood there, because he’d not felt comfortable in his own apartment when Hank had been there. He definitely didn’t feel comfortable now.

But he was so curious.

‘Are you Deviant again?’

‘No, Connor, I went to CyberLife for shits and giggles.’

‘I don’t really know why I’m here,’ Connor said. ‘Aside from…revenge, I’m guessing.’

‘That’s a homerun, kid,’ Hank said, laughing. And though the laugh was mean, Connor already knew it was different to before. Hank was different to before. ‘You’re working for me now.’

‘How?’

‘This case, I could pursue it on my own, but I think it’ll be better if I have you with me.’

‘It’s not a case,’ Connor said. ‘It is, but I don’t want to get in my father’s way.’

‘Yeah, I can tell you now, because I don’t have those directives fucking with me. Your Dad’s full of shit, Connor. He’s either not working that case, or he’s doing some dodgy fucking shit, because trust me, he was lying through his ass just about the entire time we were there. About the only things he meant with any sincerity were the insults.’

Connor had a feeling, but he’d almost wanted the relief of not having to worry about it. Now, it was
confirmed that there really was a group removing Deviancy from androids, and his Dad was not only not investigating it, but maybe involved somehow.

‘And you want to work on the case?’ Connor said slowly.

‘I want my Deviancy gone,’ Hank said after a pause. ‘And they can do it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Connor said, unable to stop himself. ‘Why don’t you just get a gun or something? A bullet through the forehead and you’ll no longer be anyone at all, even if they can restore all your other components. Now that they no longer revive individual androids, you’d be properly dead, and everyone around you could mourn.’

‘Beg your pardon?’

‘I think—’

‘Did I fucking ask?’ Hank said, glaring at him.

‘You don’t even know what you’re doing to Kara and Alice. I don’t even know them very well, but I can still tell—’

Connor backed up quickly as Hank walked towards him, a thunderous look on his face.

*All right, maybe don’t talk about it.*

When Connor bumped into the wall, his shoulders hitting the lower edge of a piece of artwork, he froze. Hank stopped in his space, leaning in, and Connor thought that he still hadn’t showered at all from the club, and that if he hadn’t washed his hands thoroughly enough, he still had spit and lubricant and come on them.

‘I’ll stop,’ Connor said.

‘You fucking better,’ Hank said, staring at him. ‘I don’t need some morality lecture from you, of all people. If you wanted me dead, you could’ve fucking taken me out while you used an illegal sound weapon to disable me. You didn’t want me dead. You wanted me fucked up, so I wasn’t on your case anymore.’

Connor hadn’t wanted that, exactly, but as he stared at Hank, he wondered if that’s what North wanted. Because it was North’s plan. Connor hadn’t known about it at all.

‘But it didn’t work, did it?’ Hank said.

‘No,’ Connor said.

Hank stared at him, unblinking, and then he reached out. Connor flinched hard, and Hank frowned as he placed a flat palm on Connor’s shoulder, pushing him back into the wall. It wasn’t what Connor had expected.

‘You’re working the case with me,’ Hank said. ‘Humans can do things androids can’t, and they’re gonna expect you to keep snooping around on this case, even if your Dad thinks he has you under his control. You’ll make pretty good bait.’

‘If I cooperate.’

Hank only stared at him, and then, after an uncomfortably long silence, his lips quirked up in a smirk that meant he knew Connor would cooperate. Connor looked away then, because he knew it too.
‘You goddamn pushover,’ Hank said, his voice low. ‘You don’t have an inch of backbone in you, do you? Unless it’s to piss off your Daddy, and even that you don’t do well.’

‘It’s like you haven’t changed at all,’ Connor said.

Hank’s fingers dug in harder, and Connor grit his teeth and bore it.

There were so many dangerous things that Connor wanted to say. Things about Cole. Things about loss. Things about Hank and the way he dealt – or didn’t deal with – his grief. But he kept them all in his mind, not wanting any of the responses that Hank might have.

‘I can find you anywhere,’ Hank said. ‘I have your phone cloned. I have your GPS analytics. I have a profile on you and I have reconstructions of all the places you’d consider running to, and best yet, you’re your own worst enemy, so even if I didn’t have all that shit, you’d still fuck yourself up. Wasn’t that why you were at the club? I was only giving you what you wanted.’

Connor pressed his lips together.

‘It didn’t seem like you had any idea what you were doing,’ Connor said, the words low.

‘Because you didn’t like it?’ Hank laughed at him. ‘Aside from the end, you ate it up.’

‘You barely listened to basic protocol. There are rules.’

‘And you still liked it,’ Hank said, no longer laughing, but still derisive. Connor tried to jerk away from that hand on his shoulder, but he couldn’t move. ‘Where’re you going?’

‘You can’t do this.’

‘Geez, really? I bet even you can see how much of a crapshoot that was, can’t you? Your Daddy doesn’t care about you, or, even better, he just wants you out of his life. Which precinct will you go to? If you report outside of Broadbank, they’re gonna refer you back to your Dad. Or Gavin, that was a fun phone conversation, wasn’t it? And if police outside of Broadbank suspect your Daddy of corruption, well, don’t you think they’ve fuckin’ done it before? And no one’s stopped him yet. You think it’s gonna be you? You think it’s gonna be over this?’

‘North can stop you,’ Connor said.

Hank paused then, his LED flickering red for the briefest moment.

‘I’m not suggesting an arrangement like last time anyway,’ Hank muttered. ‘Because that was shit all round. Not that I really knew that it was, but I do now. You get too many restrictions and you go nuts. And I don’t want to live up your ass anyway. Not that way.’

Connor rolled his eyes, and Hank shook him. Like this, Connor could believe he was terrifying when he interrogated someone. He wanted to wrap an arm around himself. He wanted to sleep.

‘But we work this case together,’ Hank said. ‘And you follow my lead. Got it?’

‘Got it,’ Connor said. ‘Do I live here now?’

‘You’re not safe in your goddamn apartment and you pick shit motels.’

‘I’m broke.’

‘Oh, I know,’ Hank said, finally letting go of him and walking across to the lounge, sitting down and
turning the television on. He put his feet up on a coffee table that probably cost more than a month of Connor’s rent. ‘Maybe I’ll pay you.’

‘Maybe,’ Connor said, sceptical.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ Hank said laughing.

‘Can I message Markus? Can I go to the lab?’

He expected the ‘no’ to be swift and fierce, but instead Hank was silent for a long time. After a while he turned to Connor, looking thoughtful.

‘I want to clone your phone, in case your current one is tracking incoming and outgoing calls. We’ll get a new provider for you. I can do that by the end of tonight. If you wanna go to the lab and it doesn’t interfere with the case, then sure, whatever.’

‘Can I text Kara? To tell her you’re…here?’ Connor had nearly said alive, but stopped himself at the last moment.

‘Once I’ve cloned your phone.’

Connor slid his phone out of his pocket and threw it hard across the room, and Hank’s arm shot up and caught it, the plastic of the phone slapping hard into his palm. He didn’t even look. He just…knew.

Androids…

‘You’ve got some spunk,’ Hank said, without looking at him. ‘But you’re still going along with this better than I thought you would.’

Connor agreed, but maybe he also knew when he was beaten. He felt weary in a bone deep way. Something heavy lurking at the edges of his consciousness that he couldn’t see. Down the corridor, a room for a dead child that still hadn’t been touched. Connor thought the whole thing was…

He couldn’t bring himself to be angry. He wish he’d understood this before he’d seen North. Not that the alternative was better. He’d been going stir crazy in his apartment, Hank looming over him every second of the day.

‘Just think,’ Hank said, looking at the television again and undoing the ponytail, tossing the tie onto the table. ‘This way, you’ll get rid of me faster.’

‘Unless my Dad assigns you to me again,’ Connor said, thinking that would make some bitter circle complete.

‘We both don’t want that,’ Hank said.

Connor thought he wouldn’t get it, either. Hank seemed to think he’d get some kind of outcome like before. Dead but functional. Artificially intelligent but lacking agency and sentience. Connor thought back to the androids in Pink 88 and shivered. Did Hank think he could negotiate a different outcome? Because Connor had a feeling that what Hank wanted done to him and what the group did were two different things.

But if CyberLife refused him, it was probably his only option… North might be capable of trying it, but she wouldn’t. Connor knew instinctively that she just wouldn’t. She hated Hank on principle, and wouldn’t do him any favours.
‘Can I go to bed?’ Connor said finally.

Hank’s faced him quickly, his eyes narrowed, and Connor wondered what he’d done wrong. Eventually, Hank’s expression settled to something Connor couldn’t read.

‘I don’t need you right now, so do whatever you want. Leave, and I’ll find you.’

‘I know,’ Connor said. He turned and was halfway down the corridor when he heard:

‘And remember, I fuckin’ own your ass, Connor.’

Connor nearly said ‘I know,’ but decided it wasn’t worth replying to. They both knew.

He thought he’d have trouble sleeping after the events of the whole day. But he was on a comfortable bed, and he was in a temperature-controlled room, and he felt safer than he did in his own apartment, and it didn’t matter if he was a prisoner here, because he’d been a prisoner there, too. He listened to Hank watching the television, and the background noise of sports faded to a blur in his mind.

Really, it was all very familiar. The only thing that surprised him was how much it reminded him of his childhood, but that was all right, because he’d survived that too.
In the morning, there was a message on his phone from Luuk.

*Just checking in. Are you doing all right? Thank you for the scene last night. You’re very beautiful at begging.*

He signed off with a little dog emoji, and Connor got up, realising that it was late. Far later than normal. He’d slept until eleven. And Hank had *let* him? He’d expected…something different.

He quickly texted back: *I’m doing okay, thank you, Luuk. Any sub or bottom is lucky to have you.*

A quick emoji smiley face was sent back, and Connor placed his phone back on the drawers before freezing and staring at the phone. Hadn’t he given it to Hank the night before? He picked it up and stared at it, turning it over and over. It still had his protective case on it, but the phone itself was different. There wasn’t the scratch in the bottom right corner of the screen. It looked clean and *new.*

So Hank must have cloned his phone and…come in here and placed it on the bedside table? Connor held onto it tightly, staring at it. He went through it and couldn’t find anything unusual, except that when he went to GPS services, they were all turned off in core settings with no options to turn them on again. He supposed that made sense.

He got up and stared at his three outfits. He couldn’t wear the club outfit again, it needed washing, and he was left with one pair of jeans and one last white shirt. He’d have to go back to his apartment if Hank would let him. Or maybe order some clothes and get them delivered. Would he be able to do that? Could he afford to do that?

After a while, ablutions finished and clothes on, nipples sensitive beneath the fabric of the shirt, he walked out into the main area and found Hank busy with three different computer terminals newly set up on his kitchen desk. The dust on the piano had been wiped away. The house felt cleaner already. Had Hank stayed up and dusted?

‘Good morning,’ Connor said, and Hank looked at him while his fingers stayed in the projection screens. Hank grunted an acknowledgement but said nothing. Connor held up the phone.

‘Everything’s working fine.’

‘Of course it fucking is,’ Hank said, rolling his eyes. ‘I’m good at what I do.’

‘You weren’t,’ Connor said. ‘Before yesterday, when I knew you, you failed at your directives more
than once. So you being Deviant again has made you better at what you do.’

‘I’m going to enjoy this,’ Hank muttered to himself. ‘I’m enjoying this so much.’

‘You could always tell me to leave?’

‘Where would you go?’ Hank said, without looking at him. ‘Back to shithouse motel? Or back to your actual shit house?’

‘Are you finding much out about the case?’

‘Not as much as I’d like,’ Hank said, finally looking at Connor. ‘They’re savvy to android information-searching protocols, and probably have androids on their team telling them how to avoid them. I’d say your paper trail in the folder back at your apartment was probably the strongest lead so far. I’m pretty sure your Dad had it to destroy it.’

‘It was with the rest of his cold cases,’ Connor said.

‘Everyone makes mistakes,’ Hank said, shrugging. ‘Even soulless slimy weasels.’

‘He’s not what you think he is.’

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘He’s not what you think he is. I’m not the one who’s been dealing with that shit-show my entire life. No one gets a clear view of that from the inside.’

‘Perhaps you just recognise people like you,’ Connor said coldly. He was surprised at himself, could tell that Hank was surprised at him too.

After a while, Connor walked into the kitchen and looked for something to eat. It was the same food he’d seen in the house the day before. Connor ate crackers without anything on them, and wanted a cheeseburger.

‘I need to get clothes,’ Connor said. ‘From my apartment.’

‘You can order some new ones here,’ Hank said. ‘I’ll give you my card.’

‘How do you have so much money?’

‘I work,’ Hank said. ‘Worked. Some fuckin’ Look, if you get hired by a family trying to avoid hits from three cartels, you pick up some huge Christmas bonuses. Especially if you do it for years.’

Connor realised that in the past twenty four hours, he’d learned more about Hank than he’d learned about him when they’d been in each other’s pockets for days on end. This Hank talked, he shared information, and while he seemed perpetually grumpy about it, he still did it. He didn’t just tell Connor to shut up. He didn’t just turn stonily silent.

Connor stared at him and remembered calling him ‘Sir’ at Zeta and coughed up pieces of cracker, catching them on his hand.

Good work, Connor.

He got up quickly and washed his hand, drinking water straight from the tap.

Hank had been cruel as ‘Anders,’ but he’d also been…other things too. Connor had humiliation listed as a kink in his folder. Hank wouldn’t have seen it, but Luuk might have brought it up. Did he have any experience in BDSM? Connor looked at him sidelong, and Hank was staring at the screens.
again, grimacing, his eyes reflecting the light of the projector screens.

‘So Cole was—’

Hank looked at him so quickly that Connor was shocked into silence.

‘You don’t ever get to say his name,’ Hank growled. Connor stood there, staring at him, feeling chilled.

‘Got it,’ Connor said.

Yes, it was very different to being told to shut up by someone who didn’t really care. Connor stared at his wrist. He had goosebumps. He remembered back to his history lessons in school, when they talked about androids who had been made newly Deviant sometimes were prone to violent emotional outbursts. Humans had even been killed, dismembered and destroyed when it first started happening. Those androids had often been hideously abused though, accumulating endless traumas until they could only act out, unable to handle what had happened.

But Hank was dealing with a kind of grief that he just couldn’t process, and as Connor carefully wiped up the counter where some water had spilled, he thought that maybe Hank’s rage was like that too.

‘I’m sorry,’ Connor said, without looking at him.

Hank made a faint, disparaging noise. ‘You’re gonna need to order some food, too. None of that shit you used to eat. Something that goes in a cupboard or a fridge. Not something that starts in a wrapper and goes in the trash after.’

‘It sounds like you care about my health,’ Connor said. He looked up. ‘I know you don’t.’

Hank smirked and leaned back in the chair, swiping his hand through one of the projected screens and turning it off in the process.

‘What you know about me, Connor…’ Hank laughed to himself. ‘What, you saw it in my file? Someone said some shit to you about me?’

‘You play piano,’ Connor said. ‘You like art. You have a house made for humans even though you’re not a human. Even when you weren’t Deviant, you still typed like you were playing piano.’

Hank blinked, his LED flickered red so quickly that Connor could have easily missed it.

‘So you can be observant,’ Hank said.

Things that Hank would never have said only two days ago. Connor didn’t think Hank had ever said anything good about him. Not once. And now, since Deviancy…

‘He’s definitely pretty when he suffers, isn’t he?’

Connor felt betrayed not by Hank, but by his own body. The combination of the scene, and standing there in Hank’s house, and wanting to forget about everything… It wasn’t like he’d even liked the scene. The end of it had been awful.

But everything else…

‘You kidnapped me,’ Connor said, not quite knowing what to do with the information. Trying to distract himself from himself. It was kidnapping, wasn’t it? Connor didn’t have much of a choice,
and Hank was letting him leave, but on the proviso that Connor knew he couldn’t *run.*

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘Hey, Connor. You turned on right now?’

‘I’m sorry?’ Connor said, staring at him.

Hank smirked. ‘It’s okay. Maybe it’s something else. Could be fear. There’s about a thirty-five percent probability that it’s *only* fear, but you can feel fear and other things at the same time, can’t you?’

‘Do you even…like sex?’ Connor said. ‘Last night was just revenge. You didn’t feel anything.’

‘Is that working? Convincing yourself? Jesus Christ, what, I’m an android so I can’t like sex? Do you live in the goddamn dark ages? I’m-

‘I don’t want you to touch me.’

‘You’re lying,’ Hank drawled, stretching his legs out and crossing one over the other.

‘I *don’t.*’

‘Still lying,’ Hank said. ‘But hey, it’s fine, Connor. I’m not the one who needs it. But you might need someone like me, hm? All those Daddy issues and nowhere to put them. Is that it? Or just…a coping mechanism maybe? Remember when you stayed on the phone with Gavin, even after telling him you were going to hang up? That’s some coping mechanism you got there, friend.’

Connor put the dishcloth down on the counter after folding it and went to leave the kitchen. He couldn’t deal with this. His heart was hammering.

‘Hey, Connor,’ Hank called once Connor was in the corridor. Connor froze. ‘C’mere. How about, if you don’t want me to touch you, you go back to your room. And if you do, you come back to me. Your choice.’

If he went back to his room, he could contact Markus. He could get in touch with people. He could think about his situation and decide how he felt about it. But instead he felt the way Hank’s voice scraped at him and he placed his fingertips on the wall and thought that he was so, *so* stupid. But he remembered what it was like, yearning and fearing a scene alone with him. And Hank had listened to Connor’s safeword. Something even Gavin didn’t like to do.

*That’s not better.*

Connor took a step backwards, away from his room, and then ended up standing in the doorway leading back out to the lounge and kitchen. Hank stared at him, eyebrows lifted, looking self-satisfied. It sent a throb of heat through him.

‘I like fucking,’ Hank said, looking amused. ‘Sometimes it’s better than all the other *shít* life has to offer, right?’

Connor couldn’t move. He stood there. ‘Last night. You didn’t know what you were doing.’

‘Nah. I just didn’t give a shit about that club’s rules,’ Hank said eventually. ‘Which is different to what you’re saying. But I don’t love the club circuit, and I’m not used to *sharing,* and Connor, I just really, *really* wanted to fuck with you. Now look at you. God, you could’ve at least made it a challenge, y’know?’
Connor turned and walked down to his room, hearing the echo of Hank’s laughter following him. Connor closed the door, blew out a breath, and then just stood there, because even Hank’s mocking got to him. His cheeks burned, the humiliation stretched between mortification and going back and wanting to appease him. Wanting to work hard, prove himself, leave Hank satisfied. He tipped his head back and stared up at the ceiling.

He wanted to go back.

What was he supposed to do? Leave? Call Markus? Tell him he needed help? He knew North would figure out a way to get him free. In fact he was strangely confident that if North wanted to kill Hank, she just…would. It was a disturbing thing to know about her, but he had no doubt after seeing how she’d behaved the day before. She was fearless, she was practical. Where Connor had only wondered how to leave Hank, she’d figured out a merciless method and applied it without checking with anyone, happy to short circuit Markus and Simon in the process.

And what would Hank do if Connor went back to him anyway? Maybe it was all a joke. Connor would return, Hank would tell him that he wasn’t interested, that Connor was pathetic, and leave Connor feeling genuinely lost.

*And then you can contact Markus and North.*

Connor hated himself as he turned the doorknob and stepped out of his room again. Hated every silent step down the corridor. Hated that Hank was already watching for him, eyebrows twitching up in acknowledgement, looking smug.

‘Do you still want me to call you Sir?’ Connor said.

‘You know what? Yeah. You do that.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

Hank shifted in his chair, drawing his legs up so that they were no longer stretched out. He lifted his hands and brushed his fingers through the projector screens. Another turned off, only leaving one remaining.

‘Are you cold?’ Hank said.

‘No, Sir.’

‘Then strip.’

Connor nodded, hesitated, then bent down and took his socks off, rolling them up carefully and setting them on an armchair. His white shirt was next, folded as well. And then his jeans. He didn’t bother looking at Hank. He couldn’t quite believe himself, except that he wanted the distraction and he didn’t care – at this point – who he got it from. It didn’t help that he still felt bad about what he’d done, about what he’d caused. Still heard Hank’s screaming in his ears and saw those hands moving over an invisible child’s body and thought that if he could do small things to help, he’d do them.

His underwear was last, and he folded that too. The room was comfortable. Connor wondered if androids had an optimum functioning temperature. He seemed to recall that they did, that it was probably cooler than the room was now. Had Hank changed the thermostat? Or did he always have the room set to a temperature that most humans preferred?

*He would have done that for Cole.*
‘Get over here,’ Hank said, pushing his chair back.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said quietly, walking over and passing the table until he was by Hank’s chair. He had no idea what was coming. He stared down at the floor and waited to be sent away, waited to be found wanting.

Hank’s hand shot out and grabbed Connor’s non-bruised forearm, yanking him forwards so that Connor almost fell, bracing himself on Hank’s thigh.

A sudden, sharp pain in his nipple, and Connor yelped, realised that Hank was pinching and twisting the sensitive skin all at once.

‘Sir!’ Connor shouted in protest.

‘Just wait a bit,’ Hank rumbled. ‘I just want to watch you fucking take it.’

Connor’s head dropped forwards, his whole body was tense, not turned on, his toes digging into the tiles. A relentless kind of pain, his nipples too sore for this kind of treatment, especially with no build up. But Hank didn’t release the pressure, and Connor gasped, turning his head away, his heart beating faster.

‘You’re not saying yellow,’ Hank said speculatively, like he was intrigued, ‘so you must like it. Do you like it?’

Connor said nothing, and then tried to jerk away when Hank’s fingers gripped harder. Pain blazed across his chest, and he dug his nails into Hank’s pants.

‘I asked you a question.’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor choked out.

‘So why aren’t you saying yellow? Or even red?’

Connor grit his teeth, knew he should answer, but couldn’t think of what to say.

‘Maybe,’ Hank said, and Connor gasped as he increased the pressure even more. That was going to bruise. ‘Maybe it’s that even though you probably hate my guts, you want to make it up to me, don’t you? I’ve been thinking about it, maybe you feel bad. Is that it? You want to please me?’

It was hard to focus on what Hank was saying past the blaze of pain. He just wanted a break. He nodded absently, knowing that at least some of what Hank said was true.

‘You want to please me that much, huh?’ Hank let go of Connor’s nipple, and as Connor started to sag he cupped Connor’s cheek and turned his face until they were making eye contact. ‘Connor, you’ll never fuckin’ please me enough to make up for what you did.’

‘I know, Sir,’ Connor said, his voice shaking. He wanted to lift a hand and cover his nipple, but he didn’t.

‘You can try though. Get on your knees.’

Connor looked at the tiles, wished there was a cushion there, but didn’t dare ask. Hank would probably just tell him that he deserved it or something. So Connor knelt, and Hank casually gestured towards his belt buckle as he went back to staring at the screen, his other hand typing one handed on the keyboard.
Right, Connor thought.

He rubbed carefully at his chest – not touching his nipple, just the skin around it – as he leaned forward, undoing the belt buckle and sliding the leather through, listening to the sound it made. He’d been with an android once before, but he’d never sucked one off. He was curious, raw with the knowledge that Hank would hold this over him, angry at himself for not wanting to stop.

It was hard to explain to other people, sometimes, that even though his life frequently turned terrible, he was often there in the background helping it along.

Hank’s trousers were made of a nice material, far nicer than any item of clothing Connor had ever owned. And as he pulled open the fly after unzipping it, he reached in and curled his fingers around a cock that was warmer than he thought it would be. It was limp, not yet made erect with thirium flow. And beneath the soft skin, Connor could feel the flexible polymer that made up the chassis beneath. It was harder than human muscle, would be less easy to fit inside his mouth.

He looked up, saw the way Hank stared at the screen, now typing with both hands.

Connor pushed up so the angle was better and pressed his lips to the head of Hank’s cock. He was a circumcised model, too, but maybe most androids were. Connor had seen it a lot in android pornography, but didn’t have much basis for comparison.

It wasn’t the same as tasting a human. The bacteria that caused odours in human sweat weren’t present here in the same way. The muskiness was absent, the saltiness too. Instead, a faint chemical taste, and Connor had no idea what it was from. It felt like he was pressing his mouth to a sex toy, except that he could feel the thirium pulsing just beneath, and he could feel the minute shifts in Hank’s body.

He slipped Hank’s cock into his mouth, feeling it begin to harden. He sucked tentatively, closed his eyes, tasted something sharp, like a chemical salt, and then the plastic behind that. He couldn’t tell if he missed the human scent or not. This was just too different.

Both of his hands rested on the outside of Hank’s thighs. He could feel the definition of what felt like muscle beneath that, but was a sturdily made frame designed to be thickset and intimidating.

‘Try harder,’ Hank said.

Connor pressed forwards, taking more of Hank’s cock into his mouth. He was a decent length, girthier than what Connor was used to. Felt the head of Hank’s cock poke uncomfortably into his soft palate, gagged, fingers curling. He shifted his head to change the angle, but no matter what he did, Hank’s cock was inflexible beneath the soft, flexible nanite skin. A human cock would at least mould to the inside of his mouth more.

Connor huffed out a frustrated breath, and finally managed to find a decent angle, shoulders bowed over Hank’s legs, knees aching. He began bobbing his head back and forth, sucking hard as he moved backwards, not knowing what Hank liked, and not expecting to get much by the way of help or assistance.

He wished for a hand in his hair, on his shoulder, but knew it wouldn’t happen.

‘I really hope we’re not dealing with a fucking cult,’ Hank said to himself after a while, his typing pausing. ‘But I think we are.’

Connor couldn’t say anything, felt his ears burn at the fact that Hank really was just researching the case while this was happening. He’d fantasised about being beneath the table of a superior at work,
doing something like this, but the reality was different.

‘Fucking cults,’ Hank muttered to himself. ‘Jesus, what is it with androids and believing in some second coming anyway?’

Hank’s hand dropped to the top of Connor’s head, then shoved him down, and Connor’s eyes squeezed shut as Hank’s cock hit at a terrible angle. His throat clenched shut in a spasm, and he gagged hard enough that he tried to draw back. Hank’s hand was unforgiving, forcing him to stay in place. Connor clawed at his thighs and then made himself stop, trying to calm down, hating that this was the thing that made his own cock twitch, heat flashing through him alongside fear and resentment.

‘What do you think, Connor?’ Hank said, yanking Connor’s head back. His teeth accidentally scraped Hank’s cock in the process, but he seemed not to notice. ‘Cult or cover?’

Connor went to wipe at his mouth, but Hank caught his other hand. Connor looked up at him, and Hank was still looking at the screen.

‘Both, Sir,’ Connor said, and then coughed lightly.

‘Both,’ Hank said, frowning. ‘Cover for what?’

‘I think, most likely, black market android sales,’ Connor said, and Hank finally looked down at him. He stared with no expression at Connor’s face, and then his lips curled in a half-smile and with the hand he’d used to hold Connor’s wrist, he reached across and wiped spit from the corner of Connor’s mouth.

‘You’re a mess,’ Hank said. ‘On a scale of one to ten, how much do you like to be fucked up, Connor?’

‘I think—’

Fingers covering his lips. ‘It’s an answer that only needs a number, yeah? Your listening skills are fucking non-existent.’

When Hank’s fingers drew away, Connor didn’t answer, didn’t want to put a numeric value on the situation, and Hank just stared down at him and looked like someone fully in control.

*Only yesterday he was screaming in grief and outrage. Where did it all go? Where did all of that go?*

Hank’s expression twisted, he shoved Connor back down again. Maybe Hank didn’t feel pain the same way, because his cock clipped Connor’s teeth again, skin dragging briefly, before the length shoved thickly into his mouth. Connor tried to swallow in anticipation, but didn’t time it right, and his whole body jerked when Hank’s cock hit the back of his throat once more.

Hank’s hips bucked up, and the nanofluid skin wasn’t enough to stop the polymer behind it from hitting Connor’s throat too hard. An explosion of sudden pain that made his eyes water. He made a sound like the breath had been punched out of him, then curled his fingers and hit the side of Hank’s leg hard.

He didn’t look up when Hank let him free again. Didn’t want to see Hank’s expression as he gulped for air.

‘On a scale of one to ten,’ Hank drawled, ‘how much do you like it?’
Connor’s throat hurt, his cock was half-hard, and he didn’t want to admit he liked it at all. He knew this was meant to be degrading, demeaning, and he knew that being turned on by it played into whatever game Hank wanted to play.

‘Six, Sir,’ Connor said finally, swallowing repeatedly. He wished he had some water.

‘Six?’ Hank said, like the answer really mattered to him.

‘What do you like, Sir?’ Connor said, ignoring him. ‘What do you want me to do?’

Connor didn’t look up, and Hank was silent for some time.

‘I got some work to do,’ Hank said. ‘How about you just keep it warm for a bit? That’s gonna kill two birds with one stone, I think, because then you can’t talk. Come on. Get on it.’

Connor moved forwards and was surprised that he was allowed to lower himself on Hank’s cock slowly. He worked around the bruise already in his throat and took as much of it as he comfortably could, and Hank’s fingers were back on the keyboard, typing quickly.

Connor breathed slowly, steadily, his eyes closed, Hank’s cock warm in his mouth, matching Connor’s body temperature. On a rare occasion, the taste of something richly chemical would fill his mouth, bitter and salty, some kind of slick precome that might even be a lubricant. Connor didn’t know. It was too thick to be comparable to human precome, and it definitely wasn’t come.

He shifted restlessly, his knees hurting. Standing was going to be awful.

Did it feel good that Hank was researching the case? Taking it seriously? Connor rested his arms in Hank’s lap and felt less unsteady than before. His world was beginning to focus on what he was doing. The pain in his knees that he had to endure, the pain in his chest that was fading into the background, and even in his throat. But Hank’s cock just rested there, forcing him to focus on keeping his mouth open, his tongue loose, aware of the air flowing in and out of his nostrils.

It became relaxing. Became far more than a ‘six’ on whatever scale Hank liked to taunt him with.

After about ten minutes, Connor realised that Hank could probably literally do this all day. Connor’s cock was hard.

Carefully, he dropped an arm so he could jerk himself off, then choked as Hank leaned forward and caught his arm, his cock shifting painfully in Connor’s mouth.

‘No, boy, we don’t do that,’ Hank said.

Connor wanted to whine that it wasn’t like he’d gotten to come properly the night before. But he suspected it wouldn’t be worth it. His heart fluttered at being called ‘boy’ and he kept his eyes closed, trying not to give anything away, as Hank settled into the same position as before, after placing Connor’s arm back on his thigh.

Time continued to pass. Connor dropped his hands to rub at his knees, and Hank went to catch his wrists and stopped as though he’d realised that Connor wasn’t trying to touch his cock anymore. Connor didn’t dare, but it was going soft again anyway. It had been enough time that Connor had drifted past arousal into some other, foggier space. He sucked occasionally on Hank’s cock, lightly and slowly, and intermittently that sharper taste would come again. Hank stayed hard the entire time.

He’d never had much reason to think about an android’s stamina and refractory period before, and he’d started to think about it, before those thoughts drifted away too.
It was almost nice, and Connor hoped Hank didn’t realise, because then he’d certainly stop.

Hank just kept working on the case – hopefully it was the case – and Connor wondered what he was looking up. Did he know about the Rotek connection? Was he chasing things down faster than Connor could ever hope to? He was made for this kind of work, and Connor wasn’t. Connor was, apparently, better at things like this.

Abruptly, at a time when Connor was too dazed to think about anything at all, Hank reached down and pulled Connor’s mouth off his cock, and then pulled him upright after sliding his hands beneath Connor’s arms. Connor cried out as his knees were forced to straighten, and it was difficult to stand, except that Hank was taking most of his weight as one of his knees buckled.

‘Turn,’ Hank said, but then he turned Connor anyway, forcing him to bend over the table, his palms falling on either side of the keyboard. One hand slipped, he pushed the keyboard back, his forearms resting on the table. He looked at the screen, but everything there was in coding jargon. ‘God, you humans are so fucking fragile.’

Connor heard the sound of him spitting into his hand and dropped his head to his forearms, twitching a little when he felt spit-wet fingers pushing rudely between his ass cheeks. Like Hank’s precome, the spit was far more slippery than normal saliva, and it would have made the way easier if it wasn’t for the fact that Hank started with two fingers jabbing into him. Connor’s fingers pushed into the glass of the table, and then he pushed the keyboard further back, accidentally pressing some of the keys.

Hank’s fingers twisted, screwing into him, and Connor’s breathing hitched, his mouth still feeling open and full at the same time. He hadn’t thought – for some reason – that Hank was actually going to fuck him, but he was rethinking it now. Couldn’t not. He hadn’t been fucked in a while, hadn’t fingered himself with more than one finger. He struggled to contain the discomfort. Hank’s fingers were thick.

Hank pulled his fingers out and spat on them again, and then pushed harder and Connor grunted as they made their way deeper than his own fingers could go.

‘This must be a proud moment for you,’ Hank said softly, his voice a poisonous wash over Connor’s thoughts. ‘Your Dad hires someone to stop you from living your life, you try and get away from that person, and now you’re bent over a desk by them. On a scale of one to ten…well, I dunno, Connor. Seems like most people would be in the negatives by now. But not you, huh, buddy?’

Hank began thrusting his fingers back and forth, the saliva making it bearable, but the movement was rough and Connor’s knees locked. Which hurt. He wanted to shove the keyboard off the table. Break the projector that left the screen lit up right in front of his face.

Every now and then Hank’s fingers grazed over his prostate. Connor’s cock ached as he hardened again. After the overuse of the night before, and now this, Connor was worn through already.

‘It kind of pisses me off,’ Hank said, reaching around with his other arm and grabbing Connor’s abused nipple before he had the chance to jerk back, ‘that you like this so much.’

Fingers stabbing in, and Hank’s fingers squeezing hard at the same time, and Connor cried out, forgetting about the screen and the keyboard and everything else. He slumped forwards as Hank’s fingers began moving faster, his legs widening unconsciously, the pain and lust twisting together until he couldn’t think about anything anymore. A vague dirty feeling ran through him, but in the moment, he didn’t hate it.
‘Sore?’ Hank taunted.

Connor nodded, and Hank laughed low and cruel.

‘I’ve hardly started with you,’ he said. ‘This is just a test run to see if you’re worth it. I’m still undecided.’

Connor knew that was supposed to hit hard, but he was too twisted up in what was happening to care.

Hank let go of Connor’s nipple, and instead reached around and slapped the outside of his thigh, then did it again, and Connor’s head twisted to one side as he hissed through the sudden sting. He opened his mouth as Hank did it again, but didn’t know what he was going to say, and then the fingers inside of him slid out, and Connor froze when Hank’s cock pushed roughly inside of him.

There was more of that precome, it made it all possible, but the stretch was sharp and unforgiving and Connor jerked forwards until his pelvis hit the edge of the table hard. He gasped, and Hank gripped Connor’s hips and kept him in place.

‘You’re not gonna tear,’ Hank said. ‘There’s only like a twenty four percent chance of that happening.’

‘Twenty four percent?’ Connor said.

‘What, you like living on the edge, don’t you?’ Hank’s hips bucked forwards, and Connor thought he probably hadn’t taken anything this thick in his life, his shoulders buckling. ‘And that’s ‘twenty four percent, Sir.’

‘Sir,’ Connor gasped.

‘Ah, you are so fucking warm,’ Hank said, yanking Connor’s hips back until Connor reached around with his hand, trying to get a palm on Hank’s thigh to slow him down. It didn’t work. ‘Come on, boy, this isn’t hard for you, is it? I thought you liked this part.’

Connor moaned helplessly, because he did, but that didn’t stop it from being overwhelming, leaving him too wrought to know what he was doing, except for trying to make Hank slow down.

Hank ignored the hand at his thigh, then pressed down hard with his fist, Connor’s lower back forced into a dip. Hank bottomed out with a sharp thrust as Connor yelped. He didn’t wait for Connor to adjust, sliding back and spitting on his cock with a wet, thick sound, before shoving back in hard enough that Connor stopped trying to push Hank back and instead grabbed the table so that his pelvis didn’t smash into it again.

‘That’s it,’ Hank said, and Connor heard a clattering noise, which he realised must have been the keyboard falling onto the ground. ‘God, y’know, if I’d had the mindset to want this a few days ago, we would’ve done this from the beginning. I don’t like you, but you have a nice body, you’re a nice hole to fuck.’

Connor’s voice broke. He hated that he liked it. Hated that his body refused to tell the difference between humiliation in roleplay, and humiliation that was designed to destroy him. He ate it up regardless, made weak by it.

Hank fucked into him mercilessly. He didn’t slow down, he didn’t bother easing up, and the heavy table sometimes inched across the floor from the force of his thrusts. Hank would only move closer, start again, sometimes yanking Connor’s hips back into him, and sometimes forcing his lower back
down to keep whatever angle Hank wanted for his cock.

It left Connor cored out and aching, every heavy graze over his prostate making him want to get a hand on his cock.

Hank kept up the pace for so long that Connor began to just hurt.

‘Please, Sir,’ he gasped.

‘What’s that?’

‘I can’t-’

‘Say yellow then,’ Hank goaded, and Connor pressed his forehead into the cold table and didn’t say it, and Hank laughed. ‘That’s what I thought. Fucking painslut. What, can’t take it? My systems aren’t even close to overheating yet. Why should I adjust them for you?’

That was followed by a period where Hank would pull all the way out, thrust roughly back into him each time, until Connor slumped onto the table which was already wet with the condensation from his own heavy breathing. It didn’t matter how much it hurt, his cock and balls ached, he wanted to come so badly.

He was past a point of being able to ask for it or beg for it, and as his arm moved restlessly on the table – his other bracing him again so his pelvis wouldn’t be too bruised – he realised he must have knocked everything off.

Hank reached around his hips and grabbed Connor’s cock in a tight grip, that same squeeze of the night before, and Connor lasted only a handful of strokes before he was coming hard. His last cry was plaintive and lost, because as soon as his cock began to spasm, Hank yanked his hand away and left Connor’s cock exposed to the cold air once more. It was a hollow pit inside of him, and he bowed in on himself, but that only made Hank’s fucking more painful, so he rode out an orgasm that could have been so much more if someone’s hand was on him – his own, Hank’s – but instead was bleached of intensity.

He shuddered heavily as Hank fucked him through it, and then not long after, without arousal to help him bear it, his body told him that he was just sore.

‘Please, Sir,’ Connor gasped.

‘Whatever,’ Hank said, his voice slightly more breathless than before. Connor wondered if he’d lied about his systems not overheating before.

Connor learned two things after that. The first was that Hank could probably fuck as long as he wanted to, until Connor was pushing backwards on the table and was giving serious thought to saying yellow, or even red, and leaving Hank to deal with whatever he wanted at the end on his own. The second was that the terrible feeling of being used made him feel like he was giving something back, somehow, so he stayed within it, miserable and exhausted, his knees aching.

He was well and truly in another zone when Hank bucked forwards and froze inside of him, coming hard. It even felt different to when humans came. His cock throbbed more heavily, and Connor thought that his release was…messier, that there was more of it. Connor wanted to do nothing more than slide off the table, onto the floor. He had no idea what Hank wanted, but he expected that he’d be sent from the room, or told to…make himself scarce.

When Hank slid out of him, he was still hard. Connor winced, pushed himself upright, but his hand
slipped on the glass table. He fell, but a hand caught his shoulder before his chin hit the glass.

‘Clean it up,’ Hank said.

‘What?’

‘Clean up your fucking mess,’ Hank said, his voice flat.

Connor stared at the glass table and almost wished that he had hit it. That he’d crash into it hard enough to knock himself out. But Hank’s order also wasn’t that surprising. He’d heard similar from others in the past, at Zeta. He was just…tired.

He nodded, pushed upright, careful of himself. His knees felt like they’d rusted. His body didn’t seem like it belonged to him. He looked at his clothing over on the armchair across the room and decided it wasn’t worth it, and walked to the kitchen instead, getting a fresh dishcloth and, after dampening it, lightly spraying it with an anti-bacterial spray.

Hank watched him as Connor cleaned the table right in front of him. Connor was thorough and careful, focusing on the activity and trying not to focus on the pain. He wished he could see the projector screen again, see if any of it made sense, but he’d knocked the projector off the table without realising, and it had automatically turned off the screen.

Through the glass table, Connor’s come lay shining on the white tiles, and Connor had to brace himself before starting to kneel. He hissed at the pain, and then stilled in a half-crouch as a broad hand slid around his upper arm, preventing him from getting on the ground.

‘That’s enough,’ Hank said.

Connor looked at him in shock, and Hank stared back.

‘I can do it, Sir,’ Connor said. It would just hurt. It didn’t mean that he didn’t have to do it.

‘I said that’s enough,’ Hank said, his voice colder than before.

‘But-’

Connor’s face twisted as Hank dug his fingers in roughly.

‘Give me the cloth,’ Hank said, holding out his other hand. Connor hesitated, and then lay it so that it was draped over his palm. He straightened, and Hank kept his hand on Connor’s arm, though his grip had already loosened. ‘I hope you don’t expect me to drape a goddamn blanket over your shoulders.’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said, unable to stop his own smirk. No, he wasn’t that stupid.

‘Take your clothing and go clean yourself up,’ Hank said. After a pause, his eyes narrowing, he looked past Connor and added. ‘Do whatever, after that. You don’t have to stay trapped in that room.’

It was too confusing to try and understand what was happening, so as soon as Hank let go of his arm, Connor picked up his clothing and walked back down the corridor, feeling Hank’s come beginning to slide out of his ass, trickling down his legs. He walked straight into the bathroom and, placing one leg on the toilet seat, touched his fingers to it and raised them, looking. It was clear, viscous fluid. Probably doubled as a lubricant. Connor rubbed his thumb and index finger together. He knew that in the thirties, when androids had first been released, sex models were the most popular
models by a longshot. But he’d never really thought about what CyberLife – now run by androids – would keep, and what they’d jettison.

After a while, he walked into the shower and stood under the hot spray, listening to it pounding over him, feeling like he was standing in the rain.

He stayed trapped in his room after that, because despite Hank’s words, he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing, and he didn’t think he could face Hank. The man held too much power over him already. Connor thought after a scene like that, he’d let him do anything he wanted.

* 

He sent a text to Kara, saying that Hank was safe and Deviant again, and that he was at his home. About ten minutes later there was a loud knock at the front door, and Connor sat upright in his bed – close to a doze – when he heard Alice shouting happily through the door.

‘Hank! Hank! Hank!’

A quiet: ‘What the fuck?’ from where Hank must have still been working or doing…whatever he was doing.

Connor got up, ignoring the pain, and stood in the corridor which had a direct line to the front door. He saw Hank walk over, open it, and Kara and Alice beyond it.

Alice threw her arms around Hank’s legs, hugging him tightly. Kara smiled at him, and then she saw Connor standing in the corridor and her eyes flew open. She looked between Hank and Connor quickly.

Connor was distracted though. Hank didn’t stand there, remote and emotionless as Alice hugged him. Instead, after a moment, he placed a hand on the top of her head and let it rest there. Connor couldn’t see his expression because of the angle, but he saw the way Hank’s palm curled slightly, his fingers rested gently. It was the most tender thing he’d ever seen Hank do.

‘Hey, kiddo,’ Hank said. ‘Uncle Hank’s kind of busy right now, so-’

Kara burst into tears and launched herself into him, embracing him tightly, and Connor realised they knew. They knew exactly what he’d be like as a Deviant, and he was being it enough that Kara must have felt like he’d returned from the dead. It hurt Connor’s chest to know that he was here to help Hank lose that again. To return him to some grey space where he wasn’t himself, he didn’t feel things properly, and condemn everyone else to mourning someone they could still visit.

‘We won’t have to stay long, will we, Mom?’ Alice said. ‘We can just stay a short time and then go home? We won’t be a bother! Do you want to hear about Sumo?’

A long pause, and then Hank said: ‘Not right now.’

Connor watched as they all turned and went into the main section of the house. He stood there in the corridor, an interloper, aware with a brutal clarity that Hank really could be warm if he wanted to. Or at least…humane. He just chose not to be with Connor. For some reason, that had been easier to take when he hadn’t seen Hank rest a gentle hand atop Alice’s head, like she was precious.

He stayed there for some time, listening to Kara talking animatedly about the house, the garden, the things she did to help keep it in order. The sound of a chair being pulled out and Alice asking if she could draw. Connor had a brief, mortified moment, thinking that his come might still be on the floor, but then remembered that Hank generally kept his house clean, and time had passed between the
shower, between Connor’s message and Kara arriving…

Connor realised he was being paranoid, and walked back into his room and closed the door as quietly as he could, listening to the little *snick*. He sat on the mattress, feeling the pain in his ass and then laughed bitterly to himself and crossed his forearms in his lap.

He was, really, so pathetic.

He slid his phone out of his pocket and researched cults and cult psychology, and then spent time looking up the first Markus and his cult-like revolution team, looking at old images and videos and thinking that he was fortunate he’d met the seventh Markus, even if the android did have identity issues over looking like the android messiah.

*

A quiet knock on his door, and Connor called: ‘Come in!’

He looked up, glad he was dressed, sitting on his bed, still looking at his phone and feeling like he could sleep solidly until the next day.

Kara opened the door a crack, peeping in, giving him a strange look. ‘Hey there.’

‘Hi,’ Connor said. ‘It looks like it’s the real Hank?’

‘Yes,’ she said, beaming widely. She stepped in and closed the door behind her, and then looked around the room slowly, sharply. ‘But, Connor, he tells me you’re here to help him work on a case. But you told me everything in the lead up, didn’t you? So what’s really going on?’

Connor stared down at his phone, the question making him feel cold all over.

‘I’m helping him with a case,’ Connor said.

‘Okay,’ Kara said, easing onto the bed and staring at him so hard that Connor could feel the weight of it. ‘Do you want to be working on the case with him though? I’m not stupid, Connor.’

‘I wouldn’t say that you were.’

‘And why does he even want you to work on this case? What’s important about it? He won’t tell me.’

Connor thought that Hank would be furious at him for saying something, but Connor needed to say something. Kara had been kind to him for no other reason than she wanted to be, it wasn’t like Connor had done anything special for her, and he felt a pull to her now.

He looked up. ‘He wants to revert his Deviancy again. And this case may hold a way of doing that.’

Kara stared at him in horror, and Connor just shrugged.

‘You can’t let that happen again,’ she insisted. ‘If he can just take some time… He has his heart again, and…’

Kara placed her hands lower on her sternum than a human would, where her thirium pump regulator was. Even though she had a thirium pump that was placed similarly to the human heart, it was the circular regulator that many associated with their central self. She touched the space on her body and looked at Connor like she was already heartbroken.
‘I can’t lose him again,’ she said. ‘He’s our family. If he’s Alice’s Uncle, he’s like my brother. A stupid, overbearing older brother that you want to pull in the line all the time, but that’s still what he is.’

‘He says it’s the only way he’ll get out of my life for good.’

‘Oh no,’ Kara said, like she just realised something. ‘Connor, do you need help getting out of here? If I could just-’

‘It’s fine,’ Connor said.

He heard the words come out of his mouth and wondered if this was it. The moment where he was on his captor’s side. Was he that gone already? And in the seconds that followed, Connor quickly examined his thoughts with the lightning precision he sometimes directed at himself when he needed to. When he wasn’t locked in fog or madness or self-destruction.

Connor felt like he owed Hank. It wasn’t objectively true, but Connor knew he’d feel better if he paid the debt somehow. And Connor had nothing better to do.

Is it really that…you have nothing better to do?

The situation was interesting. It was challenging. It didn’t trigger his PTSD as much as being at the lab did, or even being in the precinct. Even though Hank should trigger his PTSD, aside from that episode with the handcuffs, and a slight increase in nightmares – which happened intermittently anyway – all of his other symptoms had been holding steady. He stared down at the bed with wide eyes and wondered how fucked up he actually was.

It explained why he hadn’t contacted Markus yet.

But upon realising that he wanted to stay more than he wanted to leave, a weight vanished, and he knew he could message Markus. He knew what had been holding him back.

‘I don’t want him to revert his Deviancy either,’ Connor said, his voice low. ‘I can see it too. He hates me. He won’t stop hating me. But maybe his focusing on this case and having something to do…’ …Like me. ‘You see it in detectives sometimes. They can heal through a big enough case. It doesn’t always happen. If it doesn’t happen, maybe you will have to acknowledge that he’s better off gone, and cut contact with him.’

‘You don’t want to be here,’ Kara said sharply, not acknowledging anything else.

‘This is a case I want to work on,’ Connor said. He met her gaze and didn’t look away. ‘Hank is competent at what he does. Though our connection is currently…not ideal, I think he has shown some qualities that makes this possible. And I can’t go home.’

‘You can come home with me,’ Kara said quickly.

Connor shook his head. ‘I am grateful for your hospitality, but for now, I think someone should be here to keep an eye on him. Didn’t you say it yourself? That I was like a bridge between…non-Deviant Hank, and who he is now?’

Kara reached out and placed a gentle hand on Connor’s, staring at him like she didn’t approve at all. But Connor knew she wasn’t going to argue with him anymore. He could see how effective it was, to use her own emotional connection to Hank to his benefit. He felt mean, almost. She was trying to help him, and he was willing to stay in this pit he’d somehow created for himself months ago, or years ago. Certainly, he’d been in some trap when he’d decided to go to Zlatko’s, and he was still in
‘You can talk to me whenever you want, about anything,’ Kara said. ‘You have no real reason to trust me, and I know I must seem like I’m only Hank’s ally in this… You’ve helped me and Alice a great deal. You’re important to me too.’

Connor couldn’t think of what to say. He nodded, and Kara nodded too after a moment, then slid her hand away from his.

‘You can call me anytime,’ Kara said. ‘I mean it. And thank you so much for telling me he was here. Someone else in your situation may have been thinking something very different. Like how to get free.’

Connor leaned back and stared at her, but felt resigned to it, and indifferent to her emotion. He filed it away, because he knew it meant a lot, but he was tired, and he couldn’t turn this into a poignant moment like she wanted.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘I’m going to see Hank again before we leave. If you’re still here next time, Alice will want to say hi. I told her you had a headache. She said she hopes you get better soon.’

A tiny shaft of something bright in Connor’s head and chest, and he nodded abruptly.

‘Tell her thank you, and that I will,’ he said.

‘I’ll tell her.’

With that, she closed the door behind her, and Connor tipped sideways and set his phone to silent, and slipped into a doze that didn’t feel like sleep at all.

*

He woke a couple of hours later and walked out of his bedroom, and couldn’t hear the sound of Kara’s or Alice’s voices and realised they were gone. He wandered into the lounge, ignoring Hank at the table, who was either working on the case or something else. He could sense Hank watching him, but didn’t have anything to say.

After a while of standing there, aimlessly, he walked towards the back of the house, the garden that he knew waited beyond a second, more formal living room. He heard Hank get up and follow him, wondered if Hank thought he was escaping. But Hank’s footsteps were slow, and Connor ended up standing barefoot in a large circle of green grass, with a rusting swing set in one corner, circled by the new strains of roses that didn’t die of fungal rot in the face of constant rains and sticky humidity.

It wasn’t their season, but one was still gamely flowering, the blossoms cheerful and pale pink. The sky above was clear for once, and Connor looked up at it, breathing in air that still felt wet somehow. The land giving up its water as vapour.

He didn’t turn to see if Hank watched him. He stood and looked at everything alive, and almost laughed, because this was so much nicer than his apartment. It was even nicer than the house he’d grown up in. He was dizzy and sore, his knees still hurt, he couldn’t get Hank’s voice out of his head:

‘You humans are so fucking fragile.’

Maybe that was true. But Connor hadn’t gone to an organisation to get his memories wiped out of his head. Not at any point in his life. He drank too much, did stupid things, but never that. So their
fragility was shared, just different.

Someone else would have better judgement about it all, but Connor wasn’t someone else, and that closed the door on it.

He startled when his phone buzzed in his pocket, and drew it out, feeling queasy at the thought that it might be Zlatko.

No. His father. The name Richard Perkins came up in his phone.

He answered, feeling abruptly shaky. He pressed the phone to his ear, and before he could speak:

‘Connor, where the fuck are you?’

His father’s voice, silky and low and already threatening, and Connor closed his eyes and thought that after days of his Dad ignoring him, sending him away, not wanting anything to do with him, he only wanted to know where he was now.

It wasn’t a coincidence that it was soon after his phone had been cloned, the GPS services were turned off. Couldn’t he have traced Connor’s whereabouts through the movements on his old phone though? Or had Hank altered that information before his father thought to look?

‘I said my apartment got broken into,’ Connor said, his voice thin. ‘I’m at a motel.’

‘Which motel?’

‘I’m fine,’ Connor said, pretending to not understand the line of enquiry.

You’re involved in the case.

‘I know I messaged about it,’ Connor continued. ‘But I’m just going to wait a few days.’

‘I think you should come into the precinct. Maybe I’ve been pushing you too hard, son. It’s hard, you know how tough love can come to look when it comes from a cop parent. It’s not fair on the children, even when they’re grown. And you’ve been so fragile lately.’

‘You humans are so fucking fragile.’ It echoed around his head until it clamoured.

‘Actually,’ Connor said, staring at the pink rose, ‘I’m feeling better. Like I’ve gained some perspective.’

You’re involved in the case. And I suppose if I don’t come back today, you’re not going to treat me like a son anymore.

Connor felt something thundering through him, but it was distant. It hurt, but it was as vague as the ache in his knees, his pelvis, his chest.

‘You’re right,’ Connor said. ‘You’ve always wanted me to be more independent, and I think I can see a way to do that now.’

‘Connor,’ his father said, and Connor’s blood ran cold. In less than a second, it was like being ten years old again. It was like standing there after having accidentally broken a glass while his father was trying to sleep after working the night shift, feeling the blood drain from his face and his extremities, how cold his hand was suddenly holding nothing but air, hearing the sound of his father stirring in bed, getting up, getting mad.
Connor couldn’t speak.

‘Connor,’ his father said again, ‘I think you should come into the precinct.’

It took Connor a few seconds to be able to talk, his mouth dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of it.

‘Thank you for your concern,’ Connor said.

‘Connor, it’s not too late,’ his father said, and Connor knew he wasn’t pretending anymore. He hadn’t confirmed his involvement in the case, Connor still didn’t know how he was involved, but…

It was too late.

Connor always did the stupidest things when it was too late.

‘I must say,’ Connor said with forced lightness, ‘I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, in the next few days.’

His father was silent, possibly with rage, possibly at Connor’s daring, as Connor listened to his own shaky breathing and knew his father could hear it.

‘Son,’ his father said, his voice whispery soft, ‘if you don’t come into the precinct in the next couple of days, I will put a KLO4 on your ass, do you hear me? Everyone will know you for the mentally unstable fuck up that you are. But, if you come into the precinct, I give you my word, we’re just going to talk.’

Connor closed his eyes. ‘Talk.’

‘That’s all. You see, I worry about you, Connor. I worry about the crazy things you start thinking. Remember the last time this happened? You ended up at Zlatko’s, because I wasn’t looking out for you. Who knows what shit you’ll stumble into this time? I wish I could trust you, but, I suppose, you can’t help it. I don’t know how I ended up with someone like you, but your mother probably has something to do with it. There’s only so much you can do with a gene pool like that.’

There was nothing to say. There was nothing Connor was supposed to say. His father just wanted him to listen now.

‘So come into the precinct,’ his father said, sounding warmer than before, kinder. ‘It will be easy enough to sort out. I don’t want to see you hurt, and I think if you don’t come in, that’s exactly how it’s going to turn out.’

Not worry. A threat.

‘I’ll come in,’ Connor said. ‘Maybe not tomorrow, but I’ll come in.’

His father didn’t respond, not even to offer a parting shot. He just hung up. He’d gotten what he wanted, he had nothing else to say.

Connor stared at his phone, shuddering and light-headed, and he whirled, terrified, when he heard Hank’s voice.

He hadn’t processed the words, and Hank was standing there in the doorway, staring at him. Hank then turned and walked away, and Connor still didn’t know what he’d said. It had just been noise. Connor fisted his hands and concentrated on his breathing. Minutes dragged by, and he imagined exhaling mist in the wet air, even though he wasn’t.
A wave of tiredness crashed into him and he walked back into the house, closing the door behind him.

Somehow, he ended up sitting at Hank’s piano. He must have lifted the fallboard, and he stared down at the keys. He expected to be yelled at, but truthfully he didn’t even know where Hank was. The world around him seemed foggy and cushioned, and the keys sometimes blurred together. He’d never played a musical instrument before. He wanted to hear Hank play.

He wanted to rest his fingers on the keys.

Instead…

A scraping nearby and Connor looked up sharply, and Hank was a couple of metres away, staring with something pitying on his face.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ he said softly.

Connor blinked at him, and then realised that his face was wet, and that maybe he’d just been sitting there and silently crying without even noticing that he felt sad. It was like that sometimes. The emotions came, they went, and he didn’t really understand them.

‘Go lie down, Connor,’ Hank said, exasperated and something else Connor couldn’t comprehend. ‘You’re fucking exhausted. And give me your phone.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, handing Hank his phone. His voice sounded normal. Not scratchy. Not like he was crying. That, too, was familiar.

‘You’re not gonna ask me why?’

‘I don’t need it. And you’ll give it back, won’t you?’

‘Jesus,’ Hank muttered. ‘I’m gonna make it harder for your Dad to find you.’

Connor felt a distant relief.

‘Got it,’ Connor said standing, letting the fallboard of the piano down as gently as possible. It didn’t even make a sound. Connor thought if he could be a ghost in this house, Hank wouldn’t even be bothered by him. And he was good at it. He’d lived like that before.

He walked back to his room and wiped at his face with the back of his hands. By the time he’d stripped and gotten into bed, the tears had stopped. He stared at nothing, wondered if he’d have trouble sleeping, and was still wondering when he slipped into sleep.
Author’s notes: Lima Syndrome is the opposite of Stockholm Syndrome (when a captor develops sympathy for their hostage).


Thanks so much for reading! For people who’ve asked, this will absolutely have a hopeful ending. (The story that is).

He slept late again, waking past ten, surprised that Hank hadn’t woken him earlier. He took a long shower, his body aching from the day before, his nipples still sore. He had bruises across his pelvis where it had knocked into the glass table. Just thinking about it made him half-hard and he idly jacked himself with no real purpose, wondering if Hank was really into ruined orgasms, or if he was aware of how much Connor hated it. Maybe it was both. It was a craving now, to have Hank keep his hand on his cock until the very end, to not pull away.

Eventually he let himself go and focused on getting clean.

When he got out of the shower he went to put on the same outfit from yesterday only to see that none of his clothes were where they were supposed to be. He felt a faint thrill of alarm, what if Hank just wanted him to be naked now? But when he looked into the wardrobe, he saw his clothes hanging, and when he smelled them, they smelled of fabric softener.

Connor didn’t even pretend to understand that that meant.

He got dressed, black jeans and a white shirt, and then fussed over his hair even though there was no real point to it. He had none of his regular products.

When he went out into the kitchen, he saw Hank taking items out of paper bags.

‘You can’t live on crackers,’ Hank said. ‘Or fuckin’ burgers.’

‘Burgers are part of a balanced diet,’ Connor said in a calm, blank voice.

‘You think you’re cute, but you’re not cute,’ Hank muttered, pulling out what looked like a loaf of multigrain bread. Connor squinted at the many vegetables that followed.

‘There’s lettuce in many burgers,’ Connor added. ‘And tomatoes. Ketchup is a vegetable. Also—’

‘How old are you?’ Hank said, staring at Connor, nonplussed.

‘Twenty two.’

‘Goddamn act like it.’
Connor went and picked up the plastic hunk of cheddar on the counter and took it over to the knife block, and cut off a thick slice for himself, only to stare when it was snatched out of his fingers.

‘You can’t just fuckin’ eat cheese,’ Hank exclaimed.

‘You bought it, and you can’t eat it, so someone should. It’s for me, isn’t it?’

He thought Hank would quip, what he didn’t expect was to be slammed into the cupboard door with an arm pinned behind his back. Hank leaned into him, and Connor thought he was supposed to feel terrified, but he didn’t. A vague alarm. Nothing more.

‘Don’t forget why you’re here,’ Hank said.

‘I won’t,’ Connor said. ‘Don’t forget how angry you are. Lima Syndrome isn’t a good look on you, Hank.’

Connor was yanked backwards, shoved chest first into the cupboard door hard enough that alarm sparked into genuine fear. Artificial teeth bit hard into the back of his neck, and Connor jolted, even as Hank pulled and twisted his arm until Connor couldn’t help but cry out.

‘You being my bitch, and you being so hungry to be fucked like a piece of shit, isn’t what you think it is. Just because you’re so desperate for someone to be nice to you that you’ll take basic civility as a sign that I give a shit, doesn’t mean that I do. Got it?’

‘Got it,’ Connor said roughly.

‘I heard your whole conversation with your loving Dad,’ Hank purred. ‘All of it. A person doesn’t even need to look for an explanation for why you’re such a mess, do they? What, you think you’ve got my number? Goddamn, Connor, a surface glance at your entire life, and anyone will realise just how pathetic you-’

‘Okay,’ Connor said, slamming himself into the cupboard and shocking Hank into letting him go. Connor eased sideways and gingerly moved the arm that had been twisted behind him, up to his chest. It wasn’t strained, but it hurt. ‘Okay. I understand.’

He didn’t understand. But he’d learned that implying that Hank had feelings would end badly. He walked out of the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table, folding his hands in his lap, saying nothing as Hank continued to put the shopping away. He felt as useless and pathetic as Hank thought he was. The bite at the back of his neck throbbed. When he ran fingertips over it, he could feel divots in his skin even though the bite hadn’t lasted long at all.

‘I want to go to the lab today,’ Connor said.

‘Yep,’ Hank said.

‘So should I just go?’

‘I’ll take you,’ Hank said.

‘Right,’ Connor said. He stared over at the piano. Looked at the books of piano notation. Hank wouldn’t have needed those. He could sight read the music on some screen in his mind while playing, if he wanted to. Everyone knew that androids were superior when it came to musical ability.

He startled when Hank handed him a plate with a sandwich on it. Cheese and lettuce. Connor frowned at it. Multigrain bread. Great.
‘Eat it,’ Hank said, and then walked away. ‘Pretend I’m your Dom, and that it’s an order.’

Ah. Okay.

Connor looked over his shoulder at Hank, who was still putting things away. He’d bought a lot food for one person. Connor looked back at the sandwich.

Pretend I’m your Dom.

‘Fuck,’ Hank said, laughing to himself. ‘Connor, are you turned on?’

‘No,’ Connor said. He didn’t think so. Was he? ‘You can tell?’

‘I can tell it did something,’ Hank said, amused.

‘You seem…more attuned to those sorts of signals than some of the other androids I’ve met.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said casually as he put some packages of pasta in the cupboard. ‘Well, with my specialisations it helps to be able to tell when humans are lying, and also to be able to read things like heartrate and pulse and body temperature. And olfactory messages.’

‘Like sweat?’ Connor said, blinking. He took a bite of the sandwich and realised that the cheese was the thick slice he’d cut for himself. It really was a bit too much cheese. But it was the first real food he’d had in days and he’d barely swallowed before he took another bite.

‘Sweat,’ Hank said. ‘Yeah, I guess. All secretions. Mass spectrometry to pick chemical signatures if I want. But whatever.’

Hank fell silent after that, and Connor finished the rest of the sandwich. He wasn’t turned on anymore, it had only sparked briefly after Hank’s words, then quietened during the rest of the conversation. But he felt the bite mark on the back of his neck and thought that it’d be fitting if the person he had the best chemistry with, was someone who hated his guts.

*

The Broadbank Cyber-Forensics Processing Lab gleamed like a shiny, gelatinous sea animal in the bright burst of sunlight that turned the thunderclouds beyond into black anvils. Connor was surprised to be unescorted, but Hank had insisted he would wait in the car. It was only once he entered he lab that he realised why. Hank was afraid of North. It had to be that. Afraid of what she’d done? Or how she’d made him feel?

Why else would he avoid the lab and look so shifty about not wanting to go in? He’d looked so uncomfortable. His tone had been dismissive, but he didn’t even look at the lab for more than a second before quickly glancing away.

Connor pursed his lips thinking it over as he was waved in by Melissa. He didn’t even need to flash his identification.

He didn’t know who would be there. He’d still not managed to message Markus after all. It just felt like he wouldn’t be bringing anything good into his life by sending him a text. Even wanting to visit reminded him of a baby seeking a pacifier.

Connor realised he’d walked into some high level lecture when he got in and Simon was talking sternly to a mixture of androids and humans. Mostly androids. He saw Connor and smiled, pointing quickly to the main office, and Connor looked to see Markus sitting with his back to the large
windowed walls, and North working on something that required a soldering iron and thick gloves.

‘For androids,’ Simon continued, ‘it’s not enough that we have the computational speed to deduce or even preconstruct, like some of the more complex and task-specific models. It’s not even enough to be a walking mass spectrometer, if you’re lucky enough to have that built into your hardware and firmware.’

*Like Hank*, Connor thought, walking towards the office door.

‘Learning real empathy and real sympathy takes time. We have to build our own parallel neural codes, in the same way that human children do, and this is why many androids can struggle in the field of law enforcement, and why so few successfully see out a career in fieldwork as anything other than assistants. We may dominate in forensics, but we still lag in other arenas. And that’s where it’s necessary to both remember how important human-android relations are in forensics, but also elsewhere. Which brings me to my next point…’

Connor opened the office door and closed it behind him. Markus turned quickly, as though startled, and then beamed. North looked up, then jerked off her gloves, protective glasses and carefully put the soldering iron down.

‘Where’ve you been?’ North said sharply.

‘My apartment was broken into,’ Connor said, as Markus stood and walked over, pulling Connor into an easy, one-armed hug. For a few seconds, Connor told himself he didn’t lean heavily into it. Markus smelled of some woodsy cologne today, something earthy. And when Connor pulled back, he stared at this seventh Markus and wondered if he still had issues with looking identical to the saviour of androids, or if he’d reconciled them.

‘Broken into?’ Markus said. ‘Was it Hank?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Hank’s…’

Connor stared between them both and then felt his cheeks burn. They knew none of it. The last they’d seen, Hank had knocked Connor out and run away.

They didn’t know about Connor having gone to Hank’s house with Kara. They didn’t know about what happened at Zeta. They didn’t know that Connor had gone home with Hank. They didn’t know that Connor was basically living there now. It felt like months had gone by when it was less than a handful of days.

*This* was why he hadn’t messaged. Abruptly, he realised he shouldn’t have come. But…

‘North, have you found anything else on the case?’ Connor said, turning to her.

‘Oh, fuck no,’ North said, staring at him. ‘What are you hiding?’

‘I think my apartment was broken into by the people who are connected to the case, you know, the ones who called Hank the ‘alpha Evert,’ and I was wondering if-’

‘This is fun,’ North said. ‘Figuring out just how much of a clusterfuck you’re in based on the tone of your voice alone.’

‘It could be that I still have a headache from what you did the other day,’ Connor said, unable to keep the bite out of his voice. ‘You didn’t tell any of us. You didn’t give me a heads up.’
‘You still said yes, and it still had to fucking happen,’ North said, staring at him. ‘You think it didn’t? Like you need a broken machine making all your post-trauma worse when you’re already so fucking dysfunctional? What did you expect, Connor? That we’d sit by and do nothing?’

It was strange, to be insulted by his father, and insulted by Hank, but feel the sting of this more. He folded his arms, and Markus inched closer to Connor’s side. Connor decided that Markus hadn’t let go of his protector complex after all.

‘How would I have given you a heads up anyway?’ North said. ‘With him so far up your ass that you couldn’t take a shit without him knowing what you ate? You should be thanking me, not giving me some line about a headache, when it’s obvious you’re lying about something!’

Connor stared at her for a long time, then looked away.

‘He’s waiting in the car right now. I’m not sure what my gratitude to you should look like, maybe you could ask him?’

North was silent. When she finally spoke, what he didn’t expect was: ‘You said yes.’

Connor felt the unfairness of it build in his gut. He wanted to shout that he’d had no idea what he was saying yes to. That he would never have made such a reckless decision if it had resulted in that screaming, in the Hank that sometimes seemed to get lost in his own home, staring off in the direction of Cole’s room even when there were walls in the way. But it didn’t matter. He’d still said yes. He’d seen for himself what he owed Hank.

North spun and marched towards the door, and Connor realised exactly where she was going.

‘Please don’t,’ he said quickly. ‘It’s not worth it.’

North paused with her hand on the door handle. She turned and looked at him, and Connor couldn’t read the expression on her face at all. It wasn’t the outrage he expected.

‘Tell us what happened,’ Markus said quietly. ‘Just talk to us, you can do that, can’t you? I have time. North has time, don’t you, North?’

‘F**k you and your mediator voice,’ North said, turning away from the door. ‘But yeah, I’ve got time. However much time it takes for you to convince me not to go down there and find some other way to get that sick fuck out of your life.’

‘Would it help if I told you that he’s trying to get himself out of my life, and that it’s connected to the case?’

He smiled a little and launched into the story. Well, some of the story. They didn’t need to know about Zeta. Or the fact that Connor sometimes called Hank ‘Sir.’

*

An hour later, Connor was exhausted, sitting down and fingers tapping restlessly as Markus said again:

‘Are you sure you’re safe?’

‘He’s different,’ Connor said, looking at North. Her expression was composed, even blank, and he had no idea what she was thinking. ‘He’s intelligent, he has some empathy even if it’s not directed at me, he wants to work on the case with me. Once he has what he wants, he’ll be out of my life. I
believe that.’

He didn’t say that he was sort of hoping that Hank realised, through working on the case, that he didn’t want to revert again. He didn’t know what it would do to him, a second reversion. Hank’s LED never left yellow now, and all Connor knew about that was that it sometimes meant an android required major interventional maintenance. Hank was functional, but Connor didn’t know how functional. He didn’t know how much stress Hank’s body was under, just operating in the day to day. He didn’t think another reversion would be good for him.

And like Kara, to him even the angry, bitter Hank seemed preferable over the empty, dangerous one. The one that didn’t respond to Alice like she mattered. The one that insulted for no reason at all except that he’d been programmed to play ‘bad cop.’

North opened her mouth, took a sharp intake of breath, but as Connor braced himself, she closed her mouth again and looked despondent.

‘It doesn’t matter what I do to him,’ she said finally. ‘You’re still going to put yourself in these situations. And the case is important. I recognise that. And your Dad…’

‘I’m going to the precinct tomorrow.’

‘I don’t think that’s wise,’ Markus said, ‘but I think I can see your thread of logic. If you don’t go in, it may be worse for you.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, looking down at his hands. ‘I can try and avoid him, but he has a lot of power and a lot of pull, and if he says he only wants to talk, that’s all he’ll do. But that doesn’t mean he won’t send someone to arrest me as soon as I leave the precinct.’

‘Under what charges?’ Markus said, confused.

‘Does he need any?’ Connor said, looking up. ‘Surely you don’t expect, after however long trying to convince me of something I already knew, that a corrupt Captain of the entire Broadbank Precinct would need anything authentic to hold me for at least twenty four hours while he manufactures something else that will last longer?’

Connor shook his head, feeling numb.

‘But I want information too, and he’s involved in the case. He might let something slip. He won’t be expecting much from me. He may even think this is all Hank’s influence.’

He wanted a drink. He wanted five drinks and he wanted to go to Zeta, and he wanted…

He thought of Hank sitting in the car and his fingers slowly curled. He wouldn’t actually need to go to Zeta, wouldn’t need to risk seeing Gavin there, but he had a horrible feeling that if he asked Hank for anything, he wouldn’t get it.

‘How long have you known your father’s corrupt?’ Markus asked gently.

Connor almost laughed, but he reined it in, because it would have been cruel. It was possible to know something and not know it. A mantra that he used to shove everything he didn’t need in his life away from the light. People looked at the surface of him, and assumed he was naïve. It came in handy sometimes.

Sometimes he was naïve.
‘Markus,’ Connor said patiently, ‘I’ve been doing unpaid casework for him for years, and he takes the credit for it. He’s condoned all of my methods until this case. Not all of my methods were legally sound.’

North made a small scoffing noise that Connor ignored.

‘I admit I didn’t think he was involved in this case.’ It felt like extending an olive branch, but he wasn’t sure why. ‘I don’t know how what he stands to gain from something that could cause android genocide, but maybe I’ll learn more tomorrow. I don’t even know if that’s what he wants with the technology. I don’t know if he’s on the take. I don’t know if he’s being manipulated. I only know he’s involved.’

‘If you say that Hank’s different,’ Markus said slowly, ‘then let us come visit. Me and Simon. I want to see for myself, and that will go a long way to helping.’

Connor pressed his lips together. He didn’t actually know if Hank would have a problem with it or not. He was protective of his address and his location. After a while he pulled his phone out and sent a text to the number that had been added to his phone without his consent or knowledge when Hank had still been non-Deviant.

_Sat or Sun_, Hank replied. _Not longer than an hour. I’m not a goddamn host and don’t write the address down. If North comes I’ll kill her for parts._

Connor’s eyebrows lifted, and he turned the phone to the others and showed them, and North burst into laughter, she almost sounded impressed.

Markus hummed. ‘Well. Okay then. I don’t like it, but I don’t see that we have much of a choice.’

‘I was also wondering if I could inquire about…the possibility of a job,’ Connor said hesitantly.

At that, Markus’ face lit up. ‘Really? Let’s talk about what you’re looking for.’

When Connor looked over at North, she still looked thoughtful, like she was trying to figure out something new in Connor she hadn’t seen before. He didn’t know what it was, or what conclusion she’d come to, but he hoped he hadn’t lost her as a friend.

* 

‘Here,’ Hank said, as Connor got in the car. A stack of newspapers fell over his lap and he grabbed at them, but most fell onto the floor. Connor was shocked to see so many. He’d had no idea that so many were still in circulation since most people got the news on disposable tablets or on their own devices. ‘I’ve been doing some research.’

Connor bent down and picked up the rest of the newspapers as the car picked up speed. Connor had no idea where they were headed and he didn’t care. He stacked the newspapers and picked up the first one, going immediately to the sales section.

‘It’s not in all of ‘em,’ Hank said. ‘But that code, selling vintage goods – not just phones without sims, but also things like blank recordable CDs, a bunch of never used oldschool external hard drives. Some might be legitimate, but there’s a pattern. And one of the phone numbers is the same across three of the newspapers.’

Connor found one of them circled in black pen.

‘They’re not selling to the public though, even though they’re advertising publically,’ Connor said,
biting the inside of his lip.

‘Nah, it’s a code. But I dunno who they’re communicating with, and who’s doing the communicating.’

‘Obviously the number of items available represents the number of androids.’

‘What I don’t fucking understand is…why not just take over a component of manufacture? Find someone in production and get the androids before they’ve ever been activated, and bypass Deviancy entirely? Why every Deviant androids?’

Connor looked at Hank, surprised that he didn’t seem angry that Connor had spent so long with Markus and North, or that Connor had invited Markus and Simon to Hank’s house.

‘Why aren’t there more reports?’ Connor said. ‘If they’re finding Deviants, then presumably they have connections? There must be people contacting the authorities. Family, friends, even you have Kara and Alice.’

‘Maybe there have been reports,’ Hank said.

A chill raced down Connor’s spine as he picked up the implication.

*Maybe there have been, and my father is the one making sure no one hears about them.*

‘He can’t sit on something this huge forever,’ Connor said. ‘It can’t just be him.’

‘Fucking obviously. If this goes beyond Broadbank, it’s worth looking further afield for reports. But I can’t access those records easily, and I can’t…’

Hank winced and looked away, so that Connor could only see the white ponytail, the back of his neck and ears.

‘What?’ Connor said.

Hank looked back, his LED flashing red for a couple of seconds. ‘I can’t hack like I used to. Something’s broken. And I was never really made to be a hacker anyway. I don’t have a lot of my old contacts.’

‘Why?’

‘They get fucking killed, Connor, that’s why,’ Hank said slowly, like Connor was an idiot.

‘Can’t you just…read a thousand articles in a minute or something on hacking?’

Hank stared at him for a long time, his LED cycling a steady yellow. After a while, he shrugged.

‘You know we’re not really made that way anymore.’

‘Yes, but you have the capability—’

‘Humans have the capacity to use far more of their brain than they do and not act through the fucking ego all the time like narcissistic grubs, but do they?’

His tone was so defensive that Connor wondered if it was another of the things that had been somehow broken. But when? Before Hank had been reverted? During? After when he was made Deviant again? Connor thought of the kinds of treatments that could permanently damage human
memory, like electroconvulsive therapy. Surely what Hank had experienced was more traumatic than that?

Connor abruptly wondered if they shouldn’t be more concerned with getting him assessed by someone. But, as Hank said himself, CyberLife didn’t want anything to do with him anymore. Maybe they knew he was beyond help.

He fell silent, restless and looking through the newspapers.

‘In 2040, we had the Awakening cult,’ Connor said, as he stared at one of the advertisements. ‘That push to get everyone to stop calling Deviants, well, Deviants, and start calling them the Awakened instead. That branched off into a lot of subcults. Including the Authenticity movement.’

‘Fuckin’ hipster androids wearing their LEDs like humans have a right to know their processing capacity.’

‘You still wear your LED.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said smugly. ‘I do. Want to know why?’

Connor looked up at him, frowning.

‘So that you can see how much you fucked up whenever you look at me.’

Connor blinked, and then looked down, and after a while the resentment simmered until: ‘Honestly, it seems a little bit like overkill.’

‘You’re a bitchy little thing, aren’t you? You have this way of talking that makes you sound exactly like the old model dead fucking androids, but really, you’re just a goddamn princess.’

Connor refused to look up, and swallowed when Hank shifted closer to him. Until their thighs were touching, the fabric sliding and catching.

‘Why’re you like that, huh?’

‘I imagine I’m too stupid to ever realise,’ Connor said flatly, and Hank laughed. Connor wanted to grip down into the newspaper until it crumpled, but he didn’t. Instead he felt the car moving around him, smelled the strange scent of the bitter ink on heavily recycled cellulose, and tried to ignore how close Hank was to him. Tried to ignore that Hank being this close to him made him want to forget about the case, even though that’s all he’d been focusing on for so long. Hated that Hank knew.

A flash of rage when he felt Hank’s hand slide over his knee, and he was turning, thrusting the newspaper into Hank’s face and grabbing his wrist and jerking it away. He’d shoved Hank backwards and was breathing heavily, and then realised that Hank had let it all happen. Hank, who was just sitting there, an infuriating smile on his face like he expected all of it. Connor’s breathing was unsteady, he didn’t trust all the things that he wanted to do in that moment.

‘Why does seeing your friends make you so stressed?’ Hank said, looking amused.

‘Hank, I’m amazed that you think they’re the cause of my stress.’

‘I know I’m part of it,’ Hank said. ‘I know your Daddy’s part of it. I know Zlatko’s part of it.’

Connor flinched, his jaw tightening.

‘I know your Daddy’s part of it. I know Zlatko’s part of it.’

Connor flinched, his jaw tightening.

‘But Connor,’ Hank continued. ‘Why’re you always so stressed after seeing your friends?’
Connor shoved his back into the seat and picked up another newspaper, the sound of the thin sheets rattling vaguely satisfying. He flicked through the pages and didn’t say anything. It wasn’t their fault. He didn’t really understand it himself. He liked them. They gave him good advice. But it was true.

He was often stressed after seeing them.

He wasn’t aware of tapping the heel of his foot onto the ground, and once he noticed, he tried to stop, but couldn’t.

‘We’ve hit a sticky part of the case anyway,’ Hank said, like they’d never changed the subject. ‘There’s still some minor leads to pursue, but our faces have probably been circulated among anyone who means anything. It’s too sophisticated an operation already.’

‘I know Rotek is connected,’ Connor said. ‘But I was unable to find anything when I was there.’

‘I’ll check with some of my contacts,’ Hank said, sighing. ‘Would you have any pull in other law enforcement departments?’

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said. ‘Maybe not. My consultant identification was revoked after I got caught at Rotek.’

‘Jesus,’ Hank said. ‘Yeah, I seem to remember something like that.’

‘Do you not remember everything from when you weren’t Deviant?’

Hank was silent and then shrugged. ‘Sort of. Bits and pieces come when I look for it, but it’s not there if I’m not. So if you prompt me, or if I prompt myself, I remember shit. It’s still there, maybe just stored somewhere else, I dunno, do I?’

‘I might have some contacts,’ Connor said, thinking back to old cases. He’d mostly only ever worked on small stuff. Nothing like Hank’s involvement in cartels. Nothing like human trafficking. But it made him uneasy to think about reaching out. Ever since the Zlatko case, none of the cases had appealed to him until this one. Maybe because it was so different.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to rush back into that world.

*

He was surprised when Hank took him to a shopping centre on the edge of Broadbank, gave him a heavy black credit card, and told him to stock up on clothing. Connor stared at the card, perplexed, and was about to argue that he didn’t need it, when he realised there was no point.

He turned and walked away, and Hank waited near a water fountain.

The first place he went was a bottleshop, when he was well out of view of Hank. He bought two bottles of vodka, aiming for the stuff he normally got, because if he was going to piss Hank off, it wouldn’t at least be for overspending out of spite.

Which was tempting.

He ended up in some generic men’s clothing store, and he looked around, waved off the customer service attendant, and picked about a week’s worth of clothing – seven shirts, two pairs of jeans, briefs and socks. As it was rung up at the register, he stared down at the bag of vodka. He’d have to hide it.
‘Excuse me,’ Connor said. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, but could you separate the jeans into a third bag? They’re not for me.’

‘Oh, totally dude,’ the teenager behind the register said. Connor watched in some satisfaction as another large bag was taken out bearing the logo of the clothing chain. The lies rolled off his tongue. He didn’t like swearing, he didn’t like to yell, but lying had helped him survive his childhood, and it had come in handy ever since.

As he walked out of the shop – the card accepted with no problem – Connor slid the vodka into the bag and then rested the jeans on top of it. Hank didn’t need to know. And if Connor only ever drank in his assigned bedroom, late at night, maybe he’d never realise.

The walk back to the water fountain was filled with foggy, unsettled feelings. It wasn’t until he saw the glimpse of Hank’s white ponytail that he belatedly realised it might be connected to seeing his father the next day. He hadn’t told Hank that he was going ahead with the visit, and he didn’t think Hank would go for it. Of course Hank couldn’t go with him, that wouldn’t be safe. Connor would have to go on his own.

He just needed to get through the night, maybe one or two drinks, and he’d be fine.

As they walked towards Hank’s black car, the blackout tinting looking forbidding, it began to rain. Huge fat droplets, the thunderclouds of before when he’d been at the lab now hanging heavily over them. Connor looked up, in no real hurry. The rain was warm, intermittent, building towards the huge roar it would become. Their drainage system was made for the massive flood events that could occur, the gutters scooped deep into the roads and pathways.

Once in the car, he stared out at a world that turned rapidly gloomy. The tinting, the clouds, and Connor’s mood.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

How could they even work on a case when they’d be recognised no matter what they did? What was the point in his doing any sort of forensic examination for it, when Hank was – as Simon put it in the lab – a walking mass spectrometer?

The sky had blackened as though it was night within five minutes, and Connor was grateful for the air conditioning in the car to brace against the swell of humidity and heat trapped against the world around them. Connor stared out of the window and didn’t think about anything until he heard the rustling of bags and turned back, frowning.

Hank held up one of the bottles of vodka and stared at Connor with an expression of profound disapproval.

‘What?’ Connor said.

‘No,’ Hank said.

‘It’s social lubricant,’ Connor said, reaching out to grab the bottle. Hank let him, and Connor shoved the vodka back in the bag.

‘Jesus,’ Hank muttered.

‘I don’t understand why it’s important to you,’ Connor said. ‘What I eat, or drink. You obviously don’t like me, and I’ve been doing fine living this way.’
Connor expected an insult, but when he looked at Hank, he saw only disbelief and that felt worse. Abruptly, he hoped Hank didn’t say anything at all, wasn’t even sure why he kept baiting him. He didn’t want the argument, he didn’t want Hank’s scathing words, he didn’t want any of it.

He tapped his fingers on the seat next to him, his leg started jerking again as the heel of his foot moved up and down, he stared out of the window as the rain became a roar of sound. It hit the ground so hard that it became mist, rivulets sluicing across the tinting.

The music he could pick up in the background was tinny sounding, very old. Connor thought it might be blues, but he didn’t really know.

‘You treat me badly,’ Connor said. ‘So why does it matter if I do the same?’

*Stop talking to him if you don’t want the argument!*

Hank still didn’t say anything, and Connor wondered if he was examining his own brokenness. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was just some glitch, a result of all the trauma done to his coding, his wiring. Could androids get concussion or post-concussion syndrome? Could they have long-term cognitive impairment from something like this?

Belatedly, Connor realised he wanted the fight. He wanted something. But Hank was giving him nothing at all. Connor turned to stare at him, and Hank was somehow ready for it, placidly staring back like he’d never had a bad thing to say about Connor in his entire life. He didn’t even look smug.

Then, his eyes narrowed. Connor opened his mouth to say some other provocative thing when his phone rang loudly.

The sound jolted him and he reached for his phone automatically, answering and pressing it to his ear.

‘You have a collect call from Zlatko Andronikov, an inmate at Wellspring Penitentiary. This call is from a Correctional Facility and will be recorded and—’

He numbly shut off the call, the roar in his ears from his own heart and pulse far louder than the water hammering down outside.

What day was it? What time was it?

‘You really only have yourself to blame,’ Hank said, his voice neutral. ‘I told you to block the goddamn number.’

Connor wasn’t quite aware of the ping inside of him, the bright flash of rage almost felt normal, as he turned and lunged across the car for Hank. He caught those blue eyes widening, but the LED stayed yellow, and Connor grappled silently and viciously, Hank grunting as he fought back. The restlessness from before, the frustration with the case, the knowledge that he would have to go see his father the next day, even Hank’s bursts of generosity which made no sense and had no place in his life, it all combined until he found himself ripping at Hank’s shirt, his jacket. One of the buttons popped off. The nanofluid skin vanished at a section of Hank’s neck, showing the white frame beneath.

In less than a minute, Hank had both of Connor’s wrists in a merciless grip and Connor was pinned back to the seat, his hips twisted awkwardly. He struggled for another minute until Hank’s grip became so painful that Connor opened his mouth and stopped.
His heart pounding, staring up at the yellow LED. It hadn’t flashed red once. Hank hadn’t been bothered at all.

‘You got it out of your system?’ Hank said, staring at him. ‘Or you want to keep going?’

Connor stared stonily at him.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, smiling nastily. ‘You’re not done, are you? You can’t be that nice and polite without it going somewhere, huh? But maybe…’ Hank looked sideways at the dashboard, as though checking something. ‘Yeah, we got time. Maybe you should just get on your knees instead. I have a nice, fat distraction waiting for you. I don’t even care if you fucking bite me. But Connor…’

Hank leaned down and skimmed ceramic-polymer teeth across Connor’s jaw.

‘Connor, you bite me on purpose, and my dick’ll punch a hole in your fucking throat.’

Connor’s forearms went limp, his fingers relaxed. Hank chuckled at the reaction and the humiliation burned, but not enough to make Connor think it was a bad idea.

‘Remember,’ Hank said. ‘You call me Sir.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor repeated, wanting to close his eyes but refusing. It was worth it, to see the way Hank’s face showed a very faint approval.

A flash of light entered the vehicle, and then a boom sounded around them, knocking the breath from Connor’s lungs. Hank was unaffected. He’d probably felt the electrical charge before the lightning had even struck.

Hank let go of him only so that Connor could slide to his knees onto the fabric floor, the rubber matting. It was easier on his knees than the tiles, at least, but he could still feel how the joints complained after such heavy use last time. He didn’t know how people made it look so easy in pornography, or even at Zeta.

This time, Hank wasn’t occupied with two projector screens. He didn’t even pick up one of the newspapers. In the dimness of the vehicle, lit up only by the dashboard and the solar-sensitive streetlights that had turned on, Hank stared down, the LED the brightest thing in the car.

Connor reached for Hank’s pants and knew it was stupid to turn his rage into this. He didn’t even care. He’d spent all day deliberately trying not to think about the day before, about being fucked over the glass table, and he’d failed. In moments it came back to him, sneaking up and infecting him, his lower back aching, a feverish warmth ready to spring into arousal at any moment.

Hank watched him as he undid the belt, the zipper, and he was already hard when Connor drew him out. Connor knelt upwards, moved between the space that Hank made when he spread his legs. And then as Connor leaned forwards, Hank’s legs closed around him, knees pinning into his sides.

Connor hesitated, surprised by it. He looked up, but Hank’s face was in shadow and his LED created a glare that made it hard to know what his expression was.

‘You really have zero problems doing this in a car.’

‘It has blackout tinting,’ Connor said.

‘You’re just a slut,’ Hank said, leaning back with a pleased groan. ‘Or at least you act like one. Your mouth isn’t fucking useful unless it has a cock in it, Connor. Are you going to do something about
that?

The rage inside of him had melted into something else. He bent forwards, licking at his lips, the roof of his mouth. The music in the car had fallen away entirely to the sound of the rain hitting it instead. Connor rested his arms on Hank’s thighs, not daring to touch any more of him in case it wasn’t welcome.

Hank’s cock slipped easily into his mouth, and Connor ran his tongue over the slit at the top, the nanofluid skin feeling almost identical to human skin.

He sucked, lightly at first, and then harder, felt the shifting as Hank relaxed more against the seat. Connor closed his eyes, didn’t bother looking up, tilting his head to help Hank’s cock slide towards the back of his throat.

It occurred to him distantly – far more distant than the thunder around them – that maybe he’d wanted this before. Because now that he was getting it, the restlessness was replaced with the focus he needed to try and make the blowjob good.

‘Untie your pants, but keep going,’ Hank said.

Connor lifted his hands and lowered them, changing his position slightly, dipping his back so he could get fingers on his belt. As soon as both of his hands moved, Hank placed one palm on the back of Connor’s neck, the other on the top of Connor’s head.

Connor only had a second to inhale sharply through his nose before Hank manhandled his head into a new position and thrust so hard that his cock bruised its way into Connor’s throat.

The muscles of his throat, his chest, his gut, all clamped down at the same time. His eyes flew open, his airway was blocked, his throat hurt.

His arms flew up again, pushing himself backwards by digging at Hank’s knees.

Hank kept him in place, his grip so firm that Connor began to panic.

‘Jesus Christ, cut it out,’ Hank snarled. ‘What, you thought this was going to be a nice, sweet blowjob? Do you even like those?’

Connor’s voice was stoppered by Hank’s cock, and Hank pulled Connor’s head down another centimetre, his throat dry enough that he tried to swallow automatically, again and then again, Hank groaning as Connor thought he might throw up.

‘Okay, okay,’ Hank said. ‘Put your hands down on your thighs, and I’ll let you get a breath.’

Connor had to fight against his own instincts to escape, had to fight against the growing pain in his throat. After a moment, he lowered trembling arms back down, rested his hands on his thighs, fingers curling in hard.

Hank yanked him backwards, and Connor coughed violently, wanting to cover his mouth, wanting to stop the spit that sprayed everywhere. His cock was hardening. He kept his eyes shut, he cursed ever learning this about himself, that he liked this.

Hands came and gripped his face, holding it up, and Connor guessed that maybe Hank had night vision, because he could feel that gaze on him. Thumbs came and smeared the spit at the corners of his mouth.
‘Breathe, baby,’ Hank purred. ‘Go on. You gotta savour these moments between me fucking you up, don’t you?’

After too short a time had passed, the thumbs at the corners of his mouth pushed down hard into his bottom lip.

‘Don’t you?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor mumbled, his lower lip trapped against his teeth.

‘Good boy,’ Hank said. ‘Undo your belt.’

Connor fumbled at his belt in the dark, thunder sometimes rumbling through the car. He was scared of how quickly the praise disarmed him. It always had. But delivered by Hank’s normally insulting voice, sounding almost meaningful, it made Connor’s entire chest warm. If he hadn’t already had his eyes closed, they probably would have shut just from the words alone.

‘It’s undone, Sir,’ Connor said, even as Hank’s hands shifted and pulled him back towards his cock.

Let me jack off. Please.

‘Pull your pants down,’ Hank ordered.

Connor had to shift then, raising up a bit more, dipping his spine, the angle awkward as Hank stretched his neck and mouth, forcefully brushing Connor’s lips over the slippery head of his cock. It was so much wetter than before.

‘Feel that?’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Get the index and middle fingers of your right hand, and cover the tips.’

Connor blew out a breath, Hank’s cock twitched, a hard movement that he only just made out in the dim lighting. He carefully raised his arm and stroked his fingers over the head of Hank’s cock, trying to be as thorough as possible. Could Hank just…generate precome like that?

‘I hope you enjoy the break your throat is getting.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘God, you really are so obedient like this, aren’t you? How come someone doesn’t have you caged and tied up all the time, using your holes whenever they like?’

Connor shivered at the image.

‘That’s enough,’ Hank said abruptly. ‘You know where to put them.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, rubbing the lubricant-based precome between his index and middle finger.

‘Open your mouth,’ Hank said.

Connor did so, dreading more than anticipating what was coming. It didn’t matter if his cock was hard. His throat was sore, he’d been manhandled by Hank ever since he’d met him, the android was more than capable of leaving him bruised and aching, and Connor was still bruised and aching from the day before.
And the day before that.

‘I’m gonna let you breathe,’ Hank said, ‘but on my schedule. Get your fingers in your ass, start with both.’

Connor’s heart raced, unease stretching through him. The tip of Hank’s cock slipped between his lips as he prodded tentatively between his legs with his hand, needing the other to brace himself on the floor. His ass was still swollen and tender from the day before. He knew that a part of him would like the soreness. A part of him would hate it.

He hissed sharply as he breached himself, then moaned as Hank began pushing his head down again. The car slowed to a stop at some traffic lights, presumably, and lighting flashed inside the car twice. Hank’s hands felt soft on the surface, but beneath they were a polymer and aluminium chassis that could squeeze Connor’s head until his skull cracked. Connor felt every inch of that threat, Hank’s cock sliding thickly over his tongue.

‘Did I say play with your goddamn rim?’ Hank snapped. ‘Push in, Connor. Pretend it’s me, if you have to.’

Connor’s shoulders tensed. He steeled himself, and then twisted his fingers quickly to distribute the lubricant, before awkwardly, roughly shoving in. His hips jolted as the stinging pain flared, and Hank laughed and thrust his hips up while pushing Connor’s mouth down.

The angle was wrong, Hank’s cock bumped into the roof of Connor’s mouth, and then Hank shifted Connor’s head automatically. Connor, by some miracle, managed to time swallowing with Hank’s movement, and then he felt the way his throat began to bulge out as Hank entered it and forced himself to calm down. He had to calm down.

The car started again, the rain surrounded them, and Connor hung in a space where all he could feel was the fullness in his mouth and throat, the firm grip on his head and neck, and his own fingers resting about as deeply as they could fit inside of himself at this angle. He became hyperaware of his heart, his pulse, discomfort and pain tangling with the bone deep satisfaction of doing something for someone else. Even if that person was Hank.

Maybe because that person was Hank.

His cock was so hard it was almost painful. His fingers curled into the rubber mat where he braced himself.

Hank lifted him up so he could suck in a quick breath, and then pushed back into his throat as thought testing. The angle was terrible. Connor would be lucky to be able to speak afterwards. The back of his throat already hurt.

Hips moved up fluidly into his throat, out of it, the wet, choking sounds loud in Connor’s ear despite the storm all around them. He gagged sometimes, his chest heaved, but often Hank was so deep that it was nothing more than pressure he had to fight through. Hank had a nasty habit of keeping Connor’s mouth and throat stuffed while his body convulsed, and at one point, minutes later, he let go of Connor’s neck and patted him on the shoulder like he was actually doing well. Connor was so hard he thought he’d come completely untouched, fingers clumsy in his ass because he couldn’t concentrate enough to move them.

But then that hand moved back to his neck, traced over the bruise that was still there, and stroked firmly from the top of Connor’s throat all the way down. He pressed in hard enough at the top that Connor felt his throat spasm as he tried to cough, a rippling agony that flooded down his spine and
had him clawing at Hank’s pants with the hand he’d rested on the floor.

‘You don’t know how fuckin’ good that feels,’ Hank said fervently, some of the words lost to the rain and the roar in Connor’s ears.

Then Hank fucked his mouth, his throat, and Connor gasped messily and wetly for breath whenever he could, which wasn’t often enough. He began to feel light-headed. He wanted to come. Wanted to get a hand on himself. Knew that he wasn’t supposed to, and even that was its own thread of arousal, knowing that he was doing this for Hank and that it wasn’t really about him. He pictured himself, kneeling and one arm stretched behind him, throat-fucked with Hank’s precise, rough movements.

It lasted long enough that Connor’s arm was tired, his fingers hardly moving inside of himself. His throat hurt, his mouth was overheated, he drooled onto Hank’s car floor and knew he might have to clean that up and the humiliation of it had his hips jerking uselessly forwards, seeking friction and finding none. Hank’s knees pressed harder and harder into his sides. Connor’s face wet with the spit and tears that came from being fucked like this.

He shook with the need to come, his balls heavy and aching, his sore knees grinding down. If he so much as touched himself, he knew one or two strokes would be all that it would take. He made aborted pleading noises that were shoved right back into him.

Hank allowed him a cold, painful breath and then thrust in deeply enough that Connor’s back bowed, shoulders hunching. And then he felt the throbbing of Hank’s cock and he trembled through Hank coming so far down his throat that he wouldn’t be able to taste the chemicals. There was far more of it than a human would produce, and Hank’s cock must have pulsed at least twenty times before it showed any signs of slowing down.

Connor went from tolerating it, to being desperate for breath, to punching Hank’s thigh frantically. Hank pulled him back and Connor sagged, falling sideways, stopped only by the hand in his hair as he coughed violently, a backwash of slippery come spraying out and landing on the floor.

He went to pull his fingers out of himself, but Hank got on the floor quickly, grabbed Connor’s wrist and shoved his fingers deeper. Connor yelped, head dropping down.

‘Please,’ he managed, his voice hardly recognisable. ‘Please, Sir.’

‘Please, what?’

‘Can I come? Please let me come. Please.’

‘Hmm,’ Hank said, easing Connor’s fingers out of himself, petting the top of his head. ‘Nah.’

‘No,’ Connor said, hating the sob on the back of the word. His hands were shaking with the need to touch himself, but Hank instead got arms around him and drew him upright, and then pulled his pants up, hoisting him back onto the seat. Connor heard himself whining, stared down at his own cock, which he knew would be flushed red, and then his arm twitched towards himself.

Hank caught his wrist and when Connor looked at him, desperate, Hank only shook his head. Connor couldn’t bear it.

‘H-Hank.’

A brief flash of red light, there and gone, and then Hank caught Connor’s other wrist and sat close enough that he could hold both of Connor’s forearms up and away from himself. Connor’s hips jerked involuntarily, his cock throbbed, and he tipped his head back and ground his ass into the seat.
and his throat burned.

He couldn’t help the sob that followed, and then he wanted to touch his neck, his throat, to try and soothe it, but he couldn’t.

‘Settle down,’ Hank said, his voice quieter. ‘It’s not gonna happen. That was just for me. Don’t pretend you don’t love it.’

It hadn’t occurred to Connor to even try. But as his arousal turned to the strangling pain of knowing he wasn’t going to come, as he no longer had looking after Hank to focus on, the needles in his throat and the feeling of being uncomfortably full of lubricant loomed in his mind.

‘My throat,’ Connor said, wincing from saying that much.

A minute ticked by where nothing happened at all, Connor’s eyes shut, his balls sore. And then Hank transferred both of Connor’s wrists to one hand, and with his other, lay his palm against Connor’s throat.

The pressure was light, and Hank’s hand was warmer than usual – probably from holding Connor so tightly for so long. But he just rested it there. It did nothing tangibly useful for the pain, but Connor sagged back against the seat anyway, confused and shattered. He whimpered once, and Hank kept his hand there, fingers curled like he could choke the life out of him. But his touch remained gentle, and it was oddly comforting.

He wished Hank would tell him that he’d done well. He craved it. His whole chest burned for it. But Hank said nothing, and Connor slowly, over too much time, began to come down from the peak.

Hank probably didn’t know, but orgasm denial was one of Connor’s soft limits. But maybe he knew. Maybe he’d sensed it. Maybe he just wanted to show what sort of things happened when Connor snapped and attacked him.

Connor shivered, then felt a lassitude wash over him, leaving him emptied out and numb. Not quite subspace, not quite subdrop, but some liminal altered place between the two.

Eventually, Hank lowered Connor’s wrists to either side of his thighs, and did up Connor’s pants. Connor just sat there, his arms limp, his head tipped back against the seat, his body aching more than it had in the morning. This seemed to be a pattern with Hank.

He should’ve hated it, but he didn’t. He’d never really told anyone, but he dreamed sometimes of finding someone who would use him, put him away wet, leave him waiting to be used at their next convenience.

He thought Hank would say something, but he said nothing the rest of the long drive home, and Connor didn’t even bother to wipe at the spit and tears drying stickily on his face. He could deal with all of it later. Right now, he just wanted this empty space where only the flashes of lightning and rumblings of thunder could reach him.
Author’s notes: Hank goes to some dark places verbally in this chapter, and so we return to ‘disturbing themes.’ It’s not abuse, exactly, but in trying to get a rise out of Connor, he refers to some jarring subjects, including child abuse. Also, as usual, please take care of yourself when reading this story.

New tags: Domestic/family violence. Attempted rape (not by Hank).

When they returned to Hank’s, just opening the garage door let in a wave of water that began to flood the place immediately until it reached the drains. Connor’s shoes splashed into draining stormwater, and the artificial lights in the garage made him feel like it was night, even though – had the clouds not been so black above them – it would have still been sunny.

Once he’d entered the house and Hank had disarmed the alarm, Connor walked straight down to his room, dropping the three bags of shopping onto his bed, and went straight into the bathroom. He stared at himself, at the shiny dry patches of tears, spit and probably come on his face. His shirt had marks on it where he’d coughed over himself and not realised.

He stripped absently, kicking off his shoes, unbuttoning his shirt, doing everything out of order until he could stumble into the shower and get clean. It was perfunctory, washing his face, his body, and his throat was so sore that he could’ve had tonsillitis and not known the difference. He breathed carefully through his nose, and tried not to take any breaths through an open mouth. Even the steamy, warm air scourcd his throat.

Afterwards, he got dressed in some of the new clothing and realised he’d forgotten sleepwear. It didn’t really matter, he was happy enough to sleep naked, but… He should have remembered.

He took one of the bottles of vodka, opened the screw-top and took a small sip, then another. It went down with some difficulty, his throat hurting, the lukewarm vodka too cheap to taste good.

He’d had the equivalent of two shots when Hank walked in with a ceramic mug of something steaming in his hands. Hank stared at the bottle, looked at Connor as if he couldn’t quite believe him, then rolled his eyes. He walked over and took the bottle away. Connor didn’t bother to fight him for it, he was just too tired.

‘Here,’ Hank said, handing the mug over instead. ‘It’s lemon juice, honey, and phenol.’

Connor took the mug cautiously. He could smell its tart sweetness from where he sat, leaning back against the pillows. He almost asked why Hank just had phenol lying around, but then he’d been caring for a child, and androids had a habit of hacking together their own medicines if they couldn’t order them. The water wasn’t scalding, and Connor took a careful sip, surprised at how good it was.

He opened his mouth to say thank you, but Hank placed a hand over his mouth. ‘Nope. That’d be fucking stupid, wouldn’t it?’
Connor blinked at him, and Hank turned and rooted around through the bags until he found the other bottle of vodka.

‘I’ll be taking these,’ he said, holding up both bottles of vodka.

Connor wasn’t sure what face he was making, but he was pretty sure he was pouting. Two shots wasn’t enough to get him past tipsy. Hank walked out of the room.

‘You can have them back later. Maybe.’

Connor rubbed his face and lay on his side, sipping at the mug of lemon and honey tea until it was gone. The phenol provided instant relief, the lemon and honey just tasted good. He swallowed tentatively a couple of times afterwards and was relieved at how much the pain had already mended. Really, he’d be fine, he’d been skull-fucked more violently than that in the past, it was only that android cocks were more bruising. But he knew it wouldn’t take that long for his throat to recover.

The itch of arousal still lingered in his body. He got out his phone and went to his browser, looking up:

‘Do androids enjoy sex?’

He knew that they did, but he wanted a refresher before he asked Hank any stupid questions. He spent time going through articles, learning about the initial wave of sex-worker androids, a convenient replacement for real humans. Androids could be brutalised and treated terribly, but weren’t alive so it didn’t matter. Except that it had mattered, and they were some of the very first androids to turn Deviant, often killing their owners and masters in the process of escaping from so many layers of trauma.

Articles talked about how androids now could elect to have no genitalia, even if they were a model capable of sexual drive, arousal and attraction. Connor stumbled onto an educational blog run by an android that explained how some models liked sex more than others, either because they were based on the original sex worker layout, or because it was necessary for the tasks they were expected to perform. But that all androids, as they continued to develop their coded neural networks, would go on to develop their own patterns of arousal and attraction.

Connor had no doubt that Hank had a high libido. He’d considered initially that Hank was just using sex to control Connor, but Connor believed now that he really enjoyed it, and Hank initiated their scenes together. Maybe he would’ve preferred to fuck someone else, but Connor had a feeling Hank’s kinks aligned at least partly with his.

He spent a couple of hours doing research, and then a couple of hours after that dozing. When he woke up, his throat was still sore, but markedly better than before. When he cleared it of phlegm, it tasted of honey and lemon, but also of the chemical compounds that made up Hank’s come. Connor lay there and pressed his fingers just above his cock and hated that he’d be obedient even now. He wanted to come, knew he’d get hard in an instant if he thought about it too much.

He forced himself to get up and walk down the corridor and was surprised to see Hank watching TV. It seemed so normal.

‘Hey,’ Hank said. ‘How’s your throat?’

Connor stared at him, then walked to the kitchen and opened the freezer. The bottles of vodka were there. He took one out and he heard Hank’s sigh and hesitated. Would Hank take it off him again? But he didn’t.
‘Can I ask you some questions?’ Connor asked, his voice still rough. But talking didn’t feel like a thousand needles scraping down his throat anymore, it was a vast improvement. He took a small sip of the cold vodka and closed his eyes at the iciness. It was nice.

‘As long as they’re not too fuckin’ boring, shoot.’

Hank turned down the TV and Connor walked over and sat carefully on the piano stool. He didn’t know why, but he didn’t feel comfortable at the idea of sitting on the set of couches with Hank. It seemed like the kind of furniture that friends and family should sit on, but not…not Connor.

Back home, growing up, there had been two rooms he’d never been allowed in unless his dad said it was okay. The formal lounge and the formal dining room. But truthfully, there were a lot of places Connor wasn’t supposed to go, and unspoken rules surrounding all of them.

‘Why do you enjoy sex so much?’ Connor said.

It was probably rude to ask it so bluntly, but Hank only muted the TV after a moment – not using the remote, but using his own wireless link to the machine – and turned to Connor, pursing his lips.

‘I just do,’ Hank said.

‘Have you always?’

Hank tilted his head and looked up at the ceiling, and then a small smirk crossed his face, the kind that felt like it would be a seductive threat if Connor saw someone wearing it at Zeta.

‘Actually, yeah,’ Hank said, smiling to himself. ‘I mostly used to fuck androids. You can be rougher with them and they can take it. They can get maintenance in a way that humans can’t. But fuckin’ honestly, I liked going at anyone who thought they could take me.’

‘Is it… How formative is it?’

*How much of it is part of your hardwiring?*

Hank nodded to himself, like the question wasn’t offensive. Maybe it wasn’t. Androids were the only ones who could get a sense of their own coding and know if they were activated with certain proclivities, or if they developed them later.

‘Some of it’s formative,’ Hank said, looking directly at Connor. ‘What I was expected to be and do…sometimes seduction or fucking people is part of that. It’s a handy way to get information from the right kind of people who are vulnerable to it. You can torture someone into talking, sure. But you can also withhold orgasm until they spill *everything*. And trust me, in my experience, it works just as well. Humans don’t like to talk about it as a method because they’re so hung up on things like shame, but goddamn, it works a treat.’

Connor looked down, thinking that might go some way to explain…a few of Hank’s kinks.

‘Will I ever-?’ He cut himself off and took another sip of the vodka, looking away.

‘Will you ever what?’ Hank said, staring at him.

Connor shrugged and didn’t want to ask if Hank would ever give him a ‘proper’ orgasm. Because he didn’t want to see that shit-eating grin when Hank said he didn’t deserve it. Because he didn’t want to feel like he didn’t deserve it. That was the problem with Hank. He only ever said what Connor felt was true anyway.
‘And you’ve…been into BDSM in the past,’ Connor continued.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. He didn’t sound like he was bored with the questions, he sounded surprisingly open. Connor rested the bottle of vodka on the piano stool beside him. ‘I mean I’ve always leaned that way. But it developed further through experience, research, that sort of thing. I’ve always been a sadist, that’s not something new because you’re here. That’s just a benefit.’

Connor nodded, and Hank hummed to himself.

‘It wasn’t a lie,’ Hank continued, ‘when I said that I’m programmed to enjoy other people’s pain. I can enjoy other things they give me too, but I get a neural-network payout that feels pretty fucking good, and Connor, you are really something when you suffer.’

Connor’s chest felt tight, his cock was already half-hard from the conversation alone. He stood up and walked back to the kitchen, taking another sip of the vodka before putting it back in the freezer. Just being around Hank sometimes made him want to be better, act better, be good for him. He oscillated between wanting to drink a quarter of a bottle and get outrageously drunk out of spite, and wanting to do anything to show Hank that he could be good.

It didn’t help that he was a masochist, and listening to Hank talk about these things made him want Hank to hurt his already sore body. He had to take it easy.

‘But I forget,’ Hank said, his voice changing a little. ‘I forget how much humans can’t take.’

‘I’ve been able to take everything you’ve dished out so far,’ Connor said, frowning.

‘Sure,’ Hank said. ‘But that says more about what you’ll put yourself through and less about what the average human wants. Even the average sub. Until today, I haven’t heard you once put up any protest about pain beyond saying ‘please’ or making noises. And yesterday you didn’t protest to get me to stop. You only pointed out how sore your throat was afterwards.’

‘I didn’t notice earlier,’ Connor said.

‘Really?’ Hank said, sceptically.

‘It was worth it,’ Connor added, looking down. Well. This conversation had taken a turn for the embarrassing. His cheeks heated and he looked towards the corridor, the escape back to his room.

‘All right,’ Hank said. ‘It’s my turn. Quid pro quo, right?’

Connor stood in the kitchen and Hank got up off the couch and walked over, a countertop separating them.

‘Why don’t you have a Dom?’

Connor frowned at the question, and Hank laughed and then said:

‘Connor, you hardly take care of yourself. You’re obviously into a power exchange lifestyle. You’ve let me do everything I want, and if it was only guilt or fear making you endure it, you wouldn’t get so hard over it all the fucking time. Luuk would’ve taken you home in a second.’

‘I like the casual scene,’ Connor said, not having expected this line of questioning at all. He took a step backwards, and then made it look like he just wanted to lean into the other counter.

‘Did your dear old daddy mess with you as a kid? Y’know, mess with you?’
Connor stared at Hank in shock, immediately revolted.

‘What? No!’

‘No?’ Hank said, and Connor knew he was being played, that Hank was trying to get the reaction. He stormed out of the kitchen, and Hank grabbed him by the upper arm. Connor grit his teeth and stared at the corridor. All of this had been a huge mistake. ‘He messed with you in other ways though, didn’t he?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Connor said, his voice surprisingly calm. ‘He was more authoritarian than the average father because of his job, but the discipline and boundaries gave me a firm structure to abide by, and—’

‘There it is,’ Hank said to himself, placing his other hand over Connor’s mouth. ‘You ever notice the way that you talk when you have something to hide? Or are you just hiding it from yourself? Maybe he didn’t fiddle with you. But goddamn, he fucked you up. He might as well have fucked you and got something out of it.’

Connor felt like he’d been punched in the gut. Hank stepped closer, pressing his chest to Connor’s side.

‘Maybe he got something out of it anyway,’ Hank said. ‘And what about Gavin, Connor? Did he ever assault you? You let him fuck you over until he really fucked you over?’

Connor struggled, shoving at Hank’s chest, and Hank hitched Connor into a firmer grip and pulled him closer until it was almost an embrace, Hank’s hand no longer over his mouth, but holding him at the shoulder.

‘What about that?’ Hank said. ‘Huh? You like so little control over what’s happening, you let people treat you like shit.’

‘You say that like you don’t benefit from it,’ Connor said, slamming his foot down on Hank’s foot. Hank didn’t even flinch.

‘Goddamn, I know I benefit from it,’ Hank said, sounding amused. ‘But I don’t understand why you let me get away with it so often.’

‘Like now?’ Connor said, still struggling to get out of his grip. Hank was immoveable. When he wanted to stop someone from moving, Connor didn’t think anything but another android like him could make him remove his grip.

‘You’re only struggling now because I went so far over the line that even you can see it. What about the rest of the time? Jesus Christ, Connor, you’d let just about anyone do anything to you, wouldn’t you? Don’t you have an opinion about what I’m saying? Do you think anything at all?’

‘No. I don’t care,’ Connor said, shoving the heel of his palm into Hank’s thirium pump regulator. Hank grunted and then yanked Connor’s hair hard enough that some of the strands came loose.

‘I think you would’ve looked for something like this, even if you hadn’t gone along with North’s sadistic little plan,’ Hank said directly into Connor’s ear. ‘I think you’ve been looking for someone to punish you for a while, haven’t you? But you can’t get a Dom to hurt you as much as you want regularly, so you have to turn to the casual scene, and you have to look for the people who are going to fuck you up. Isn’t that right?’

‘Let me go,’ Connor said sharply.
Hank let him go, and Connor stood there, shocked that Hank had even listened. The conversation made him feel sick, and he went back to the freezer and took out the vodka, daring Hank to say anything about it.

‘Luuk told me that you’d been red flagged at Zeta for seeking toxic Doms. Did you know that?’

Connor hadn’t known that. He stood there, mouth open, forehead furrowed. Why hadn’t anyone told him? Normally if someone was red flagged, they were told. Why were they still letting him come to the club?

‘When did he have time to tell you that?’ Connor said finally. His voice sounded ruined all over again, but it wasn’t because his throat hurt.

‘You were zoned, and it’s easy enough to prompt Luuk to talk about you. You’re like the lost puppy he can’t bring into the fold.’

Connor gripped the neck of the vodka bottle tightly.

‘If you messaged him right now,’ Hank said, smiling, ‘he’d just about move heaven and earth to make you safe. If you contacted Kara, she’d do the same. She messages me about you all the time.’

Connor felt sick. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want to know any of this. None of those people knew him. Not really. They had no idea what they really wanted, or who he actually was.

‘Your friends stress you out because they want to help you,’ Hank said, laughing.

Connor turned and walked away, hating Hank so fiercely that he could have clawed his stupid blue eyes out. He opened the bottle and started drinking, knowing fully that Hank would disapprove. He didn’t sip anymore. He drank.

How had their conversation turned into that? A cold stone lay in the pit of his gut and he closed the door to his room and leaned against it and drank until his throat and stomach burned, and then slid down to the floor when he realised Hank wasn’t coming after him to stop him.

He laughed then, a bitter, empty sound. Hank was right, Connor didn’t like to have a lot of control over his life. When he did, he never knew what to do with it.

He capped the bottle of vodka and dragged his hands through his hair, and then forced himself to stand up and drink water from the tap in the bathroom, because he already knew from the swimming feeling in the back of his head that the hangover would be fierce.

*

The next morning he woke up to an alarm on his phone that he hadn’t set for himself. It was nine in the morning, still a lot later than he used to wake himself. He got up and groaned thickly as he stumbled into the bathroom and stood over the toilet, deciding whether he should piss or throw up first. After a few seconds of swallowing saliva and forcing himself to take deep, slow, nausea-abating breaths, he pissed instead and thought about what would happen if he didn’t see his father. A bad idea.

He dry retched a few times, didn’t actually throw up, and pulled on clothing – bypassing a shower entirely – while yawning hugely, the bottle of vodka resting by his the smaller drawer next to the bed. Connor wasn’t sure he’d left it there.
He came out and on the kitchen counter there was already two sandwiches waiting on a small plate, a glass cloche keeping them fresh. A box of cereal and an empty bowl was next to that. A mug of the same lemon and sugar and phenol concoction of the night before rested next to the bowl. Connor stood there, staring, and then Hank came in from the direction of the garden and seemed surprised to see Connor up. He pointed meaningfully at the food and drink on the counter and then walked past him without another word, heading towards the corridor.

‘I’m going out today,’ Connor said.

‘Okay,’ Hank said.

‘On my own.’

‘Yep,’ Hank said.

Connor frowned at him, and then stared at the sandwiches and felt his stomach turn. As he drank down the lemon, honey and phenol quickly, he lifted the cloche, looking inside one of the sandwiches. The bread had stained orange from grated carrot. It was a lettuce, carrot and cheese sandwich on multigrain. The one beneath had alfalfa instead of lettuce.

Connor screwed up his face at both of them and then grabbed a handful of cereal from the box to eat and stopped chewing when he realised it was bran.

‘What…?’

‘Got a problem with it?’ Hank called from far enough away that he must have been in his bedroom.

Connor walked with the cereal box into the corridor, he wasn’t going to yell. He stood in Hank’s doorway holding up the box.

‘People don’t eat like this, Hank. This isn’t what humans eat.’

‘You have to earn your treats,’ Hank said calmly, not looking up from where he was folding some blankets.

‘I’m not your dog,’ Connor said.

‘It’s basic operant conditioning,’ Hank said, smiling to himself. ‘And it works on humans too, trust me. Besides, you’re not my dog, you’re my bitch.’

Connor grimaced, remembering the conversation from the night before, and turned around walking back to the kitchen. It wasn’t worth it. The sooner he got the whole day done, the better. He could focus on the case properly. Or deal with whatever his father threw at him. Connor slammed the cereal back onto the counter and stared in dismay when pieces of cereal burst out of the top of the box and fell on the counter and the floor.

Well. It wasn’t his house, and he didn’t have to clean that up.

He turned to walk away and clenched his fists, wincing, then turned back and cleaned it up. He left the food though. He couldn’t eat.

After he put his shoes on, checked his hair, he stood in the house, uncertain. Hank had said he could go. So he should just…go. The whole situation felt suspicious. Why was Hank letting him leave? If Hank heard Connor’s conversation with his father, as he claimed, then he knew the meeting was today.
He decided that it wasn’t worth worrying about, when he had to visit his father in the precinct. He took a deep breath, left the house, and walked several blocks before calling for a cab with his dwindling funds.

*

When he walked into the Broadbank Precinct, he wasn’t waved in like he used to be. Instead, he had to wait at the counter while the receptionist called his father. Then, he was directed to the row of uncomfortable chairs and waited a further hour, nursing a lingering headache, watching people come and go as he absently considered the pit in his stomach and the cold feeling that Hank had left there with their argument the day before.

Sometimes the police and detectives realised who he was and they’d look at him, but no one came over to say hi. Not even the people he’d previously gotten along well with. So he was persona non grata, either because Gavin had badmouthed him, or his father had. Or maybe both.

Connor looked at one of the surveillance cameras steadily and wondered if his father was watching the feed on the other side.

Eventually, the Captain himself came out, and Connor stood and absently brushed his shirt, even though it was brand new and spotless.

‘Connor,’ Perkins said calmly. ‘You came.’

‘I did,’ Connor said.

‘Are you sick?’ his father said, frowning at him. Connor realised how he must have sounded, his throat bruised, and shrugged.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I feel fine.’

‘I suppose you’d best come into my office.’

So Connor was finally able to enter the Broadbank Precinct that he’d grown so familiar with. He saw Gavin at his desk, glaring steadily, a dangerous small grin on his face like he knew how fucked Connor was about to be.

Connor’s stomach roiled.

His father gestured for Connor to sit down once he’d closed the office door, and Connor did, facing the Captain’s chair and desk and feeling so much like he had as a child, when his father would call him into his home office and make Connor sit and wait. A lecture normally followed.

‘You’re lucky I don’t have you sectioned,’ Perkins said as he sat down, leaning back in his ergonomic chair with its leather upholstery. ‘Do you know that? Do you know how easy it would be for me to make that happen?’

‘Very easy.’

Perkins picked up the cup of coffee that one of his underlings had delivered to him and sipped at it. Wherever possible, he never drank the coffee made in the precinct.

‘So,’ Perkins said, ‘where are you staying?’

‘A motel,’ Connor said. ‘I told you.’
‘Which motel?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Connor said. ‘As soon as my apartment is safe, I’ll move back there.’

‘Why wouldn’t it be safe now?’ Perkins said, and then pushed his chin forwards. ‘What sort of things are you dreaming up, Connor? You really think that what you’re going through is connected to the case?’

‘The one you’re working on,’ Connor said, staring at him without looking away.

‘I don’t think you realise what a labour it is for me, that you’ve concocted some conspiracy theory in your head. So you don’t believe there’s really a case?’

Perkins put the cup down and reached for his keyboard, fingers moving quickly across the keys. He stared intently at the screen, and then turned it so that Connor could see it.

Connor leaned forwards and looked at the very real case file that he’d brought up. Flagged with the pale red that meant it wasn’t a broad access case, but restricted. He felt a small buzz of pleasure that jangled uncomfortably inside him, that his father was letting him see the file.

‘Project Eversion,’ Connor said.

‘That’s right,’ Perkins said, seeming almost amicable. ‘If you still don’t believe me, we can go down to evidence and I can show you what else we’ve gathered. But, Connor, if I do this, it’s with the understanding that this isn’t a case you touch. It’s too dangerous. You know I only want what’s best for you.’

‘While insulting my gene pool,’ Connor said, ‘and my mother.’

Perkins looked almost impressed, but then he shook his head and stood up, taking out the lanyard that even he’d need to access the full evidence storage in the sub-basements.

‘I was having a bad day, Connor, and you’ve been behaving erratically for a while. It’s not your fault that I fucked her, and it’s not your fault that she decided to have you.’

Connor stood and swallowed, realising exactly what kind of visit this was going to be. One that looked friendly and gracious on the outside, but would be anything but. Connor didn’t trust that the case file meant that Perkins wasn’t somehow involved in the case in ways he shouldn’t be. And he didn’t trust himself, in case his father was right, in case Connor was paranoid and prone to conspiracy theories.

Hadn’t he been like this since Zlatko?

_Don’t think about that._

Gavin looked surprised to see Connor being led towards the elevator that led down to evidence, and he turned to watch them go, frowning, eyebrows pulling together. Connor quashed the urge to turn and smile, because that wouldn’t earn him anything good. If he wanted Gavin’s bad will, he already had it.

The elevator took them down to the sixth sub-basement, and Connor walked a step behind his father as they entered a deserted corridor lit with fluorescents that bleached the colour from the space. At the terminal before a metal sliding door, Captain Perkins placed his lanyard down on the identity scanner, and then leaned forwards so that his eyes could be scanned.
‘Captain Richard Perkins authorised to access sub-basement six. Unauthorised guest detected, please identify yourself.’

Perkins looked bored as he said: ‘Connor Perkins, pre-authorised for limited access, today only.’

He stepped back and gestured for Connor to look into the retinal scanner and Connor did, keeping his eyes open as the low-energy infrared laser scanned his irises.

‘Connor Perkins confirmed, authorised for temporary access with successful voice identification from Captain Richard Perkins.’

The thick metal door slid backwards, and once they’d walked through that and it closed, the glass doors beyond opened. This space smelled largely of chemicals and very faintly of blood, old evidence from serial killer and organised crime cases had been stored down here in the past. Now though, Connor watched as Perkins stepped forwards and pressed his lanyard to a panel, entered a code, and the walls slid back to reveal body after body of deactivated androids each hanging with a backlight behind them.

‘These are the ones we know about so far,’ Perkins said, looking at them all. ‘The ones we’ve recovered. They have self-destruct programming that’s inserted into them, so none can be reactivated. Their central processors melt.’

Connor stared at the bodies hanging fully preserved against the walls, walking to some of them. Projected information came up as he approached. Some of the android models weren’t even recognisable to the system, despite being whole and unbroken, which meant that…perhaps some were being newly manufactured on no previously registered models. Some had puncture wounds at their necks and wrists, but no thirium could be seen, since the android’s blue blood turned invisible as it dried.

‘Is it happening only here?’

‘No,’ Perkins said. ‘But if you think I’ll talk to you about all the sensitive details of this case, just because you stole a case file, think again. Connor, I’m only doing this to dispel whatever…fantastical concerns you’ve come up with. We’re not working on this together. You are nothing to this case, do you understand? And if I catch wind of you having anything to do with it…’

Perkins exhaled slowly through his nose, turning to Connor, a dangerous expression on his face.

‘Don’t fuck with my cases,’ Perkins said. ‘Don’t take the rope I’ve given you and hang yourself with it. Make no mistake, you will get yourself killed if you decide you’re going to keep looking into it.’

Connor swallowed, couldn’t hide it from his father, but he was almost certain that was a threat. *What if you’re just being paranoid? What if?*

‘Now, where’s the HX800?’

‘I didn’t want him in my life, so he’s not in my life anymore,’ Connor said, turning away from his father and looking at one of the smaller androids. They varied in gender, in age, but most appeared like younger people. They could have been adults in their twenties. ‘I don’t know where he is.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I think I’d be aware if there was a broken dead android bodyguard in my life.’
‘Are you protecting it?’

Connor let his rage work for him, turning back to his father as though he was a put out teenager. ‘Why would I want to protect him? You put him in my life against my will, refuse to take my texts or messages, give me a curfew and put me on lockdown, and you’re asking me if I’m protecting him?’

Perkins didn’t rise to the bait, instead watching him.

‘Is it for human trafficking?’ Connor said, gesturing to the androids. ‘Where are you recovering them from?’

‘It seems…’ Perkins said, smiling a little, ‘that you and I have reached an impasse.’

‘Only because you won’t believe me,’ Connor said.

‘Tell me when I should have believed you?’ Perkins said. ‘Was it when you told me that you had nothing planned the weekend you decided to stake out Zlatko’s house? Or was it the very first time you told me that you were only interested in case files, for university, before coming back with your first solve? Was it when you swore that you were no longer working Project Eversion on your own before getting caught in Rotek? Or was it when you were eighteen, telling me that you were only in one of those houses of perversion out of curiosity, and not because you were, yourself, are such an aberration you actually enjoy those places?’

There was nothing Connor could say.

‘You’re a liar, Connor,’ Perkins said softly, gently. ‘You can’t help it. I know you can’t. My compassion has extended so far, but you can’t seem to recognise that we’re all at our limits with you.’

Connor thought of Hank telling him that he’d been red flagged at Zeta, and no one had told him. He thought maybe it was true. Maybe they were getting tired of him. Even North was tired of him.

‘I know,’ his father said, the words dragged out in order to seem soothing. ‘I know it’s a harsh truth, son, but maybe you should consider that you were never cut out for law enforcement, or a law enforcement adjacent service like criminal forensics. You can’t overcome your shortcomings with hero worship. I’ve had a lot of time to abandon the hopes and dreams I had for you and deal with the reality of what you are, maybe it’s time for you to do the same? I could help you.’

Connor didn’t know how to withstand his father’s words when they were nudged gently towards him, wrapping around him like an embrace. They looked, on the surface, like acceptance. It hurt something so deep inside of him when his father got like this. Because all Connor wanted was for it to be real.

‘You could help me,’ Connor said.

‘I could,’ Perkins said, stepping closer until he could stand right in front of Connor. ‘There are medications, therapies, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to fix you.’

That was what everyone wanted to do, wasn’t it? Fix him. Because whoever he was, whoever he’d been, it had never been good enough.

In the background, he was rapidly calculating everything he could learn in this room. Lingering stares at deactivated androids. The puncture marks. The clothing. Their features. He stood there and felt himself shoving information into an empty room in his mind so he could look at it later. It was more appealing to think about that than anything else in the evidence room, including his father.
‘Tell me something,’ Connor said, his throat aching. ‘If I did everything, and you fixed me in whatever image you have of me, would you be proud of me then?’

There was a beat of silence where it was obvious that his father hadn’t expected the question. A beat where it was obvious what the answer would be.

‘Of course I would,’ his father said.

It was a lie.

A small part of him urged Connor that it wasn’t a lie, that Connor could win his approval if he just tried hard enough, if he just kept on trying, then one day…

But the rest of him felt defeated.

‘It would’ve been better if she’d taken me with her, wouldn’t it?’ Connor said, his voice dead.

‘I learned a long time ago that life isn’t likely to give us what we want,’ his father said blandly. ‘And yes, it would have been much better if that cunt had taken you with her.’

Connor’s shoes scraped across the ground as he took a step backwards, and his father stepped towards him, smiling. His eyes were empty.

‘But you know that, Connor,’ he said. ‘I’ve told you that before. Were you hoping it was a lie? But of the two of us, Connor, who’s the one who lies?’

‘Me,’ Connor said.

If he’d stayed at Hank’s, maybe he could have baited him into a scene. If he’d stayed at his apartment, maybe he’d be dead by now and he’d not have to deal with this. If the non-Deviant Hank hadn’t saved him at Pink 88…

What is it that Gavin has, that I don’t have? What is it that all of your staff have, that I don’t?

‘Who’s Gabriel?’ Connor said. The part of him that was information seeking took over, cataloguing the sudden glint in his father’s eyes, the slight tightening of his lips.

‘I’m sorry,’ his father said. ‘Gabriel who?’

He knows.

‘I hope for your sake that you really are investigating this case, and not involved in it,’ Connor said, having no idea where the fire came from, maybe borrowed from the anger that Hank had stoked in him earlier that day. ‘Because if you are, I will go over your head to authorities greater than you, and I will shut this do-’

The blow was so fast and so vicious that Connor crumpled to the ground before he realised what had happened. One hand at his cheek, the skin split and hot blood itching as it trickled down, and his eyes widening when he scrambled to remember the last time that had happened. Had he been eighteen? Nineteen? No. When-?

No. Don’t think about it.

Perkins crouched calmly in front of him. ‘You don’t ever threaten me.’

‘Got it,’ Connor said, not making eye contact.
“Not. Ever.”

“Understood,” Connor said.

“I don’t know that you do understand,” Perkins said. ‘Stand up.’

Connor pushed himself up, the lingering headache of before having blown out into something far greater. He thought that his vision might be blurry in his left eye. He blinked several times.

“You fell,” his father said.

“I fell,” Connor said. ‘You would never hit me.’

‘Exactly,’ Perkins said, smiling, the expression lightening his face. ‘But, sadly, it’s time for you to go. I want to know where you’re staying.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said.

‘Tell me where you’re staying, Connor.’

Connor stayed silent and felt sick.

‘Connor,’ his father said, the tone changing. Connor stood there and wondered exactly what his father would do now. Hit him again? After the first blow, the next ones ceased to matter as much. He wanted a painkiller though. Something to drink.

‘I forget the name,’ Connor said.

‘Then I’ll organise an escort to take you home,’ his father said.

‘That won’t be necessary, but thank you.’

The silence that followed was so tense that Connor quelled the faint trembling that urged him to get away. He wanted to get out of the sub-basement, away from the inanimate bodies suspended on walls around them, and back to Hank’s. He had to be careful going home. He still had Hank’s credit card from the day before. Was it traceable? Could Connor use it to take more than one cab back to Hank’s, just in case?

‘Connor,’ his father said in precise, quiet tones. ‘Don’t, for one second, think you can fuck with me.’

‘I’m not,’ Connor said. He did lie. That was exactly what he was doing. There was no chance he was going to reveal Hank’s location to his father. He had a horrible vision of Hank being stuck down here in the sub-basement, deactivated with strange puncture marks in his body like some kind of medical experiment.

‘Maybe you do just need some space,’ his father said. ‘Maybe that’s all this is. I hope so, for your sake. I would hate to have to see what our broken mental health system would do to you if you were lost in it. That would be terrible.’

‘I agree,’ Connor said.

His father stared at him for another full minute before using his identification to seal all the bodies and evidence behind walls again. He turned and walked from the room and Connor followed, knowing this was likely the last time he’d have temporary authorisation into any evidence room.

He’d never had any proper friends in the Broadbank Precinct, there was no one he could ask to help him, and every chance that anyone he asked would simply report to his father anyway.
The cut in his cheek mustn’t have been that deep, because the blood stopped trickling relatively quickly. He pulled out a tissue from his pocket that he’d grabbed that morning, and wiped away the blood carefully, using his tongue to moisten the tissue and dab at his skin until it stained pink and red. He looked at his face on his phone, caught a red spot at the bottom of his jaw and wiped that off too.

There was nothing he could do for the cut itself, or the swelling. Not now.

He pocketed the tissue and his phone and they took the elevator up to the main precinct. He didn’t bother looking at Gavin when they exited, not this time. And his father didn’t walk Connor back to his office, but towards the exit instead.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ his father said. ‘I’m worried about you, son. I just want you to be safe.’

‘I appreciate it,’ Connor said. ‘Thank you for showing me the evidence, too. I know you only did it because you thought it was necessary.’

His father looked at him like he was trying to work out what game Connor was playing, and Connor watched back, wondering what his father ultimately wanted. Connor off the case? Certainly. Connor in jail? In a mental institution? Somewhere literally locked away and unable to get underfoot? Maybe. But that was a lot of paperwork and a lot of trouble. Possibly he was hoping the threats were enough.

His father just nodded to him, and Connor walked out of the precinct, looking around in the large foyer to make sure that no one was stationed there to watch him, to follow him. As far as he could tell, they weren’t, but that didn’t mean that people weren’t watching on cameras. Connor expected surveillance drones at the very least.

He walked out of the precinct and wasn’t more than thirty feet away when he heard footsteps scuffing up behind him, too quick to be regular footsteps. He turned and saw Gavin’s grin before he’d even taken in his whole face.

‘Hey, dipshit,’ Gavin said. ‘What was up with you hanging up on me the other night?’

‘Go away, Gavin,’ Connor said, staring forwards and not looking at him.

‘No, no, that’s not how this goes. Seriously? God you’re horny for everything and then you pretend you’re made of ice? What are you trying to do, Connor? Ghost me out? Come on, be a friend.’

Gavin grabbed his arm hard, and Connor grit his teeth together as he tried to yank away, but he didn’t like making scenes and Gavin was already dragging him down an alley two buildings down. Connor looked up briefly to see if there were any surveillance drones, but…nothing.

‘I’m not interested,’ Connor said.

Gavin pushed Connor back into the wall, fingers prodding at his upper chest, and then he poked directly into the cut on his cheek with the index finger of his other hand. Connor glared at him as pain blazed.

‘What’d you expect?’ Gavin said. ‘Captain’s got his hands full without having to deal with you on top of it. Y’know, if you just let me take care of you sometimes, you-’

Connor stared at him levelly. ‘Let me go.’

Hank had let him go, when Connor had asked. The night before, during their argument, he’d listened. But Gavin never did. Connor ground his head into damp, dirty bricks as the hand that had
reopened the cut at his cheek slid down his white shirt, painting a streak of blood as he reached between Connor’s legs.

‘Gavin.’

‘Even if you’re not into it yet, you will be. Easiest fucking whore I’ve ever met.’

Connor struggled with him briefly, looking towards the entrance into the alleyway and the one or two people walking past who glanced briefly at them and did nothing, looking furtively away. Gavin got a handful of his cock and balls through his jeans and squeezed, and Connor hissed, shoving hard at his chest.

‘Stop playing hard to get,’ Gavin said, shifting his hand and roughly shoving it down into Connor’s jeans. He brushed Connor’s cock once, and then yanked his hand free and shoved it into the back of Connor’s jeans instead, groping down over his ass.

‘Gavin!’ Connor said, shocked. ‘We’re in public. I can call you- Or we can go to Zeta, or- Gavin, red! Red!’

‘Whatever,’ Gavin said, staring at him with a hungry, angry gaze. ‘You fucking treat me like trash, like you get to do that? You hang up on me like you’re the one that gets to do that? Your dad fucking hates you. Do you know how good it is, that you won’t be able to kiss ass anymore and get everything you want? But you want this, don’t you?’

A knee between his legs, jutting too hard against his cock, and fingers sliding cold and unwelcome between his ass cheeks. Connor couldn’t believe what was happening.

‘You’re going to rape me in public?’ Connor said, hearing the words as though from a distance.

‘Naw, babe, can’t fucking rape someone like you. It’s impossible. You like everything.’

The words scored him, scoured into him, blew him apart because they felt like the truth but still felt horrifying. For a moment, he couldn’t move, paralysed more by those words than by what Gavin was doing to him.

‘Stop it,’ Connor said, struggling anew. The cut in his cheek opened further when Gavin used a hand to shove Connor’s head against the bricks, and Connor kicked out, his breathing spiralling out of control quickly. He was afraid. When he hyperventilated, he felt too weak to fight. He’d fought with Zlatko too, and it hadn’t been exactly like this, but close enough that-

‘Hey, hey, hey, shhh, shhh, my golubok, precious boy. An auspicious day, yes? You’ve seen too much, I know moy golubchik, it’s a lot for anyone, isn’t it? It’s all right, I have you now, I have you now.’

Connor stared up into a face that had looked perfectly normal when he’d conducted his background checks. Like a friendly bear-type he’d see in a gay club. Like someone who could be trustworthy. But there was old blood on the ground and the stench of bleach in the air and his grip was crushing, and Connor couldn’t even scream and he couldn’t-

He came back to the alleyway enough to realise that he was still fighting Gavin, but badly, and losing. His breath came in short, pathetic gasps, one after the other, each so cold in his sore throat that it began to feel numb.

Gavin’s fingers scraped roughly over his ass, deep enough that Connor could feel them against still tender skin, and he choked on it. He couldn’t say a word.
Footsteps pounded into the alleyway and Connor was too frozen to look, horrified that it might be another police officer. Gavin froze, and then:

‘What the fuck?’

‘Get off him,’ Hank snarled. He grabbed Gavin by the scruff of his shirt and civilian hoodie like he was an unruly puppy and then threw him five feet away. Connor slid down the wall until his knees caught him, bent into an odd position, his hands automatically going to his jeans to pull them up.

Hank was here. Hank was here?

Hank had followed him?

Had he been there the entire time?

Connor looked weakly at Hank, who had stalked over to Gavin and stood over him, then picked him up again by the front of his shirt.

‘You want to report me? Goddamn, go report me. You want to press charges for assault? You fucking do it. But you get the fuck away from him. Understand?’

‘Fucking plastic bullshit piece of junk, if you fuckin’ think-’

‘Hell, no.’

Hank lightly slapped him, then shoved him away, and Connor watched as Gavin stumbled past them both, half-running. He was so shocked by what was happening that his breathing had slowed down, he pushed himself up on weak legs and felt a dim, smoking outrage at what Gavin had done, but also at Hank for turning up like some rescuer, for not trusting him in the first place. For making it seem like Connor needed to be rescued in the first place.

It would’ve been fine. Even if Gavin had taken it too far, Connor was good at dealing with that. He knew how to deal with that!

‘You- You followed me?’ Connor said.

‘Of course I fucking followed you, god, like you can be left alone for five seconds.’

A strong hand at his jaw, tilting his head carefully but firmly so that Hank could see the cut on his cheek. But Connor jerked his head out of Hank’s grip. He didn’t want to be touched by anyone.

‘Naw, baby, can’t fucking rape someone like you. It’s impossible. You like everything.’

Gavin’s words coiled down inside of him like a poison, until they snarled like barbed wire and Connor had to get away from him, and Hank, and…

Hank reached for him again and Connor batted his arm away.

‘Stop it,’ Connor said.

His voice was wrecked all over again. He wasn’t sure why. The hyperventilating maybe. He hadn’t been shouting, had he? He hadn’t heard himself shouting.

‘Did Gavin hit you?’ Hank said, his voice murky. ‘Did he hit you in the precinct? Or did someone else?’
'I’m leaving,’ Connor said, turning and smoothing his shirt, yanking up his pants.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, walking alongside him.

‘No,’ Connor said, shoving him. Hank, miraculously, let himself be shoved. Connor knew he let it happen, because he could be as immovable as a stone if he wanted to be. Even that made Connor angry in a desperate, spiteful way. ‘Not with you.’

‘Connor, don’t be stupid. It’s not safe. I’m not going to do anything to you. We should- fuck, we should talk.’

A breath of laughter was all Connor could manage at that. As if anyone wanted Connor to be safe. It was all lip service.

‘Talk? Like we talked last night?’ Connor said, smiling at him. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll let you know everything I learned about the case.’

‘Connor, who hit you?’

‘Leave me alone,’ Connor said, vaguely aware that he was redirecting all of his frustration at Hank, because Gavin wouldn’t listen to him.

*Because it’s impossible to rape you. Because you would’ve wanted it eventually anyway.*

Connor flinched away from his own thoughts, his own mind, and he wrapped an arm around himself and messaged for a taxi. He was surprised when Hank didn’t follow him. Surprised when he slipped into the taxi on his own. When he got out, twenty minutes later, he was able to dodge the surveillance drones by slipping through several underpasses and taking a train using a cash ticket. Another taxi, and he realised he was still heading back to Hank’s.

But he wasn’t going to stay there. Not anymore. He was done with everything.
Connor stood in front of Hank’s house when Hank returned, because Connor had no keys and had no way to disarm the alarm, and he had a feeling that if he set the alarm off, it would scream down the whole suburb at best, and contact law enforcement at worst.

He couldn’t deal with law enforcement right now, he suspected Hank couldn’t either.

Hank got out of his car, and Connor stared at him, mouth pressed shut, uninterested in saying anything. Hank walked past him and let them both into the house. Connor went straight to his room and began packing. He wasn’t staying.

As he moved around the room, gathering up handfuls of clothing – some of it still in shopping bags – he began cataloguing the injuries he had. The bruise at the side of his neck still from Hank chopping him at the lab after North forced Deviation on him. Aches and pains from scenes at Zeta and scenes since. A bruise at the back of his head and a lump forming where Gavin had slammed his head back into a wet brick wall and the feeling that something had gone wrong in a way he wasn’t used to. He wanted to shower until he couldn’t feel Gavin’s hand between his legs anymore, but he also fantasised about taking an industrial steel wire cleaning brush to his ears so he didn’t have to hear Gavin’s words.

And his father…

Connor started to raise a hand to his cheek, and then his fingers jerked into a fist and he dropped his arm.

No.

When he heard footsteps coming down the corridor towards him after a couple of minutes had passed, he clenched his teeth together. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so angry. He didn’t trust himself. Normally the anger came and went in microbursts, sharp and intense and gone in a minute or two, leaving him drained and empty. But this buzzed inside of him like a fractious thing, bitter in his mouth and making his fingers tremble.

‘We have to talk,’ Hank said as he leaned in the doorway.
‘I have nothing to say,’ Connor said, shoving his jeans into the backpack far harder than he needed to.

‘Sure. Then I have some things to say and you can fucking listen.’

Connor didn’t look at him. Couldn’t think properly. Hank had followed him to the precinct. That was dangerous for Hank. And then he’d tossed Gavin away like…like…

Connor could’ve dealt with it just fine. Was dealing with it.

‘You’re going into shock,’ Hank said flatly.

‘Right,’ Connor said. ‘Is that what you wanted to say?’

‘No, I…’

For Hank not to complete a sentence was so jarring, that Connor stopped after several pounding beats of his heart. Hank stood there watching him, LED always on yellow, a grim expression on his face. Disapproval, disappointment, maybe a lecture was coming. Connor felt sick.

Hank came closer, and Connor grabbed his backpack and stepped backwards, raising it protectively to his chest.

‘Jesus,’ Hank muttered.

‘I know you’re disappointed.’

‘What?’ Hank said, incredulous.

‘I can’t believe you followed me to the precinct.’

‘I can’t believe you didn’t realise I would!’ Hank’s voice rose, and Connor glared at him, but his hands wouldn’t stop shaking. It didn’t matter how hard he clutched the backpack. ‘I swear to fucking god you are the most self-destructive person I’ve ever met and y’know, after dealing with some of the fuckers you meet in cartels and some of the shitheads in my profession, that’s saying something. You-’

Connor laughed, a bright, broken burst of sound. He was afraid of himself. He couldn’t remember…

Had he been like this in the hospital after Zlatko? No.

Had he?

The sedatives had…made it go away. By the time he was taken off them, he felt flat and calm and everything was back to normal. He wanted to warn Hank. He wanted to rip Hank’s face off and watch the spray of blue thirium go everywhere.

‘You think I’m self-destructive?’ Connor said, staring at Hank. ‘Why are you interested in this case, Hank?’

Hank’s eyes twitched, his LED flashed red, and Connor was going to be sick. Gavin’s words poked holes in him, he was bleeding inside. It was impossible to rape him. Connor had always known it, so he didn’t understand why the words had broken him apart like that. He didn’t understand why Gavin’s hands on him could make him react that way, when Hank could do the exact same thing and it wouldn’t cause the same reaction.
Gavin was right anyway, if he’d kept pushing and pushing, eventually, Connor would’ve liked it.

‘This isn’t about me,’ Hank said. ‘We need to talk. Look, I thought you were a different person, okay? I told you that I wasn’t- I didn’t have the full picture, no, that’s not- Fucking hell. What I’m trying to say’-

Connor shoved his backpack at Hank, who took it in both hands, a confused look crossing his face. Heart pounding, Connor walked past him, turned right down the corridor and then took the first left into Cole’s room.

He stood in the middle of it, waiting, his pulse hammering in his ears, his cheek throbbing. He heard Hank stopping just before the bedroom, but Connor couldn’t see him.

‘Get the fuck out,’ Hank said. ‘What the fuck are you doing?’

‘Why are you so interested in the case, Hank?’ Connor said. ‘You don’t really care about what’s going to happen to all the other androids, do you? You don’t care about them.’

A swimming vision in cool tones washing across him, the bodies of androids in the sub-basement evidence room becoming the body he’d found in the bathtub at Zlatko’s, becoming the pieces and limbs he’d seen on large rusted hooks, stored like meat in a room that wasn’t the right temperature to store meat, and the stench of rot that had turned mildewy over time. A man so used to brutalising and murdering the lost and unwanted that no one had noticed for years. Years and years.

Another step, and Hank was standing there, staring at Connor like he wanted to kill him.

‘You get out of that room right now,’ Hank said, pointing at the floor next to him. ‘Right now.’

‘No,’ Connor said, racing along the edge of something wild. ‘What’s going to happen to you, Hank? You could have killed yourself outright, but instead you chose a half-measure that ruined the lives of the people around you, ruined my life. I didn’t need a jailor, I didn’t-’

‘Your life was already ruined,’ Hank said, but the words didn’t hold the insult and condescension that they might have only a couple of days ago. It was a statement that stung because Hank said it like it was just a fact. ‘Get out of his room.’

‘You want me to help you die, again, so you can go and make someone else’s life miserable!’

Hank stared at him and Connor stared back, listening to the way his voice was getting louder, the way the volume was changing. He didn’t yell. He didn’t ever yell. If he’d so much as laughed too loudly while his dad was trying to sleep through the day after a night-shift, if he’d so much as made any loud sound-

‘What do you think will happen to you, Hank?’ Connor said, his voice getting rougher, louder. ‘What do you think you’ll be when it’s not CyberLife that reverts you, but Project Eversion? You saw, didn’t you?’

It felt good to focus on someone else’s issues. Felt viscerally satisfying, like he was getting his fingers into Hank to rip and tear anyway. He knew exactly where to aim. If there was one thing his father had taught him, it was where to aim. His whole life had been an exercise in keeping that part of him down and under control, knowing that he deserved his father’s wrath, because Connor knew how to be cruel too.

‘You pursue this case so you don’t have to be like you anymore. You want to be a ghost of yourself! You tell me that my life is small, and pathetic, but what about your life, Hank? What about what you
are? And if you go to them, you’ll be an automaton! Who knows if those androids still feel anything!
You saw Gabriel just shove the knife into one of their hands and you still want that for yourself?
You call me self-destructive?’

Hank’s fist spasmed against the backpack.

‘You just want to run away,’ Connor said. ‘Half-kill yourself so that you get to exist even though
you get to be dead. How is that remembering Cole? How is that caring about his memory?’

A solid, bright red flared in Hank’s LED, his eyes narrowed. Connor took a step backwards even
though Hank didn’t move. But Connor could feel it coiled through him, the violence that Connor
was pushing towards.

Because Connor was self-destructive too. But he had to say the words that he hadn’t realised had
been knocking around inside of him. He wouldn’t say them again.

‘You hurt all your friends,’ Connor said. ‘Maybe you didn’t deserve Cole. Maybe you never
deserved him, and you know it, and that’s why you want to die.’

The red hadn’t vanished, Hank was just staring at him. Connor’s fear ratcheted up, higher and
higher, until it was hard to breathe. Why was Hank just standing there? Connor had said something
unforgiveable, and…and…

He got out of the room as fast as he could, pushing past Hank and running for the front door. He’d
expected Hank to do something violent, not nothing at all. Somehow, that was worse.

‘Hey!’ Hank shouted, and then the sound of the backpack dropping to the floor and footsteps
pounding after him as the alarm chirped. Connor swung the door closed at full force, but even as he
crossed the manicured grass, he knew Hank was going to catch him. He really needed to get better at
running away.

At Zlatko’s, too, he’d been terrible at it. Clumsy and not quick enough and unable to concentrate
after everything he’d seen. With Gavin, he’d been useless. And even now he knew that Hank was
gaining on him. He got past another house when he felt fingers snatching at his shirt.

Hank didn’t even have a grip on him, but Connor stumbled and fell anyway, losing his balance after
the burst of speed he put on. He didn’t know what Hank was going to do, the terror so bright he
couldn’t see properly.

He struggled against a swearing Hank. It wasn’t until a few minutes passed that Connor realised that
no one had hit him.

‘Okay, okay, Connor,’ Hank was saying. ‘Okay. Connor, you’re in psychological shock, and you’re
going through an acute stress reaction.’

‘Let me go.’

‘I will,’ Hank said, even as he got his broad hands around Connor’s upper arms and held him in a
fierce grip. ‘I swear. But Connor, you’ve got to come inside with me first. Where’re you gonna go?
A motel? A bar? Have you thought any of this through?’

‘A motel counts as thinking it through.’

Hank’s lips twitched almost like he wanted to smile, but his LED was still on red, and instead he
hauled Connor up onto his feet.
‘Come on.’

The rage of before had vanished, and Connor was left feeling wiped with a wave of exhaustion that rivalled being sedated in the hospital after Zlatko. It wasn’t like Zlatko had done that much to him anyway. Hardly anything at all, compared to what he’d done to everyone else. Like Connor had the right to be afraid after that, he’d survived hadn’t he? Unlike almost everyone else.

Time tripped forwards, and Connor was sitting on a comfortable sofa, and Hank was sitting next to him, lowering the backpack by Connor’s feet. He handed Connor some pills and some water and Connor stared at them.

‘I don’t want any sedatives.’

‘They’re not sedatives,’ Hank said after a pause. ‘It’s ibuprofen.’

‘I don’t want any pills.’

‘Fine,’ Hank said, putting the water and tablets down on the coffee table. ‘You got anything else you want to get out of your goddamn system? Because you might as well do it now. Anything else you want to say about me and my son?’

‘He wasn’t your son,’ Connor said.

‘I fucking adopted him, so he was my fucking son,’ Hank said, his voice picking up a dark sharpness. ‘My son that I didn’t deserve, huh? Maybe I came to that conclusion myself, Connor, before I ever laid eyes on you. Maybe that’s why I made the decisions I made.’

Connor shouldn’t have said anything. He stared ahead, raising a hand to his cheek to itch at it before wincing. He’d forgotten about the cut. It was the itch of swelling and drying blood.

‘Well,’ Hank said, sighing and leaning back against the sofa. Connor felt the way the fabric shifted slightly. ‘I’ve listened to you. Now you’re gonna listen to me for a bit. And then we’re going to figure out what happens next.’

‘I’m leaving.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘I guess you are. But first, you’re going to listen to me.’

Connor picked up the glass of water to have something to do with his hands and didn’t look at Hank. Connor’s heart had slowed from its sickening juggernaut. He traced the rim of the glass and thought that they should be talking about the case.

‘I fucked up,’ Hank said eventually, laughing wryly. ‘With you. I fucked up. More than once. When I said that I didn’t remember everything that happened once I’d been reverted, it was true. So I had my rage at what had happened with fucking North, and I had pieces of memory of you as you’d been described to me by your father. Who is, by the way, a pathological goddamn liar and a complete piece of shit.

‘Anyway. I never had an accurate picture of you when I was staying in your apartment and reverted. And after that- Look, it doesn’t matter. I thought I was getting revenge, but you’ve got me beat, yeah? You never needed me to do that to you, when you were fucking going off and ripping into yourself anyway. And it’s hard, it turns out, to try and pile on the shit on someone who is doing a better job at fucking himself up and maybe needs a break.’

Connor swallowed, stuck his fingertip into the water and left it there. It was cool. It stung a little.
He’d grazed the tips of his fingers at some point. On the concrete when he’d run from Hank? On the wall when he’d struggled with Gavin? On his father’s office floor when he’d fallen?

‘Because you need a break,’ Hank said. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I am happy to fuck you to kingdom come and I know you like that, but everything else? We need a truce. And you’ve got a few choices in front of you, I figure. You can abandon the case, because I’m sure your daddy had a few things to say about you working on it…’

Connor shrugged.

‘Yeah,’ Hank muttered. ‘I bet he did. Or you can keep working on the case, which I’m going to keep doing as well, for my own fucking reasons. You don’t get to choose what I decide for myself, and Kara doesn’t, and Luther doesn’t. If I want to exit out, I get to do that. It’s different for androids.’

Doesn’t seem that different.

‘But you’ve let me control a lot of your life until now so I’m gonna control a bit more of it. You don’t get to go to a bar, to a motel, or back to your apartment. If you can think of somewhere else to go, I’ll let you go there.’

Connor stared down at the water. He couldn’t think of anywhere to go. He didn’t understand why Hank was being like this after everything Connor had said. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. Hank was meant to be furious, and then violent, and then awful. There was a pattern, Hank was ruining it.

Hank hummed to himself, sighed, and then said. ‘Get your shit. I’m driving you to Kara’s.’

‘What?’ Connor said, looking at Hank in shock.

‘You heard me. Get up, get your gear, and I’ll take you to Kara’s.’

‘But—’

‘It’s neutral ground, or as close to it as we’re gonna get,’ Hank said, ‘and I can’t in all good conscience let you get pissed, stay in a scummy motel that I know for a fact you can’t afford, or go back to that apartment that is almost certainly bugged with surveillance from your father or Gabriel’s crew. Kara is happy to have you. As she’s told me a few times now. They have the room.’

It wasn’t right, was it, to suddenly feel like he didn’t want to leave? After he’d been desperate to leave since he’d seen Hank in the alleyway? Connor stared at Hank in disbelief, and Hank’s LED had turned back to yellow at some point and he seemed tired.

‘You need a break,’ Hank repeated, like Connor hadn’t heard him the first two times. ‘And you can’t have it here. You think I haven’t noticed? The habits you have in this house? Is it that you had a super fucking abusive Dom once? Or is it that I’m your captor and you feel like a captive and you’re being a good boy? Or is it that your dad stamped himself so far inside of you that you don’t know how to live any other way?’

Connor blinked, and almost thought his eyes were about to burn. There was a sting in all of Hank’s words, and Connor looked away and thought of Gavin and what Gavin had said.

Was it ironic, that Connor was too broken for Hank? Was that…irony?

‘Ah, shit,’ Hank muttered. ‘You can’t talk about this now. It’s fine, Connor, Kara knows you’re coming.’
Hank stood, and Connor did the same automatically, bending down to pick up the pack. He stared past Hank, and frowned when Hank came closer and touched his fingers so carefully on the skin near the cut that Connor only blinked. It didn’t even hurt.

‘Did he do anything else?’ Hank said.

‘Gavin?’ Connor said, and Hank gave him a look and Connor bit the inside of his lip. ‘No. He didn’t.’

‘He pulled his punch.’

‘He did,’ Connor said, looking down at Hank’s chest.

‘Enough to break the skin but not enough to give you an orbital fracture, because then you’d need to go to the hospital, and he wouldn’t want that, would he?’

‘You don’t know that,’ Connor said. It was true though. His father tried to avoid hospital admissions whenever possible, his violence was a fast, vicious strike, but it was always controlled.

‘Whatever, then,’ Hank said. ‘I don’t know that.’

‘So you’ve just changed your mind. Today.’

‘Nope,’ Hank said. ‘Not just today. Today was the day I decided to talk to you about it. Whatever, talking isn’t my strong suit, and listening isn’t yours unless I’m saying something shitty.’

Hank turned, grabbed his keys and walked towards the front door. Connor followed him all the way to his large black car, parked outside instead of in the garage. He sat next to Hank and thought dimly about the blowjob he’d given Hank in this car, and how after Gavin, he didn’t want to do anything at all.

A minute passed, another, and Connor clutched the backpack and stared ahead.

‘Do you…?’ Connor started, and then pressed his lips together. Then, unable to help himself: ‘Do you think it’s impossible to rape someone like me?’

The faint yellow light in the car turned to red, but Connor didn’t look, and Hank didn’t do anything but shift in his seat.

He’s not saying anything because he agrees, he’s-

‘That’s what Gavin said?’ Hank said, an edge in his voice like glass.

‘I’d understand if you agreed with him,’ Connor said, his voice neutral. ‘I’ve always been interested in things that would probably make most people think it was true.’

‘Jesus Christ. What, you’re into humiliation and degradation, right? Not a soft limit, not a hard limit, it’s what you like, right?’

‘Correct.’

‘Do you think that means it’s impossible?’

Connor didn’t say anything. He closed his eyes after a while and felt cold despite the ambient temperature in the car being more comfortable for humans than for androids.
He was going to Kara’s. That seemed like something that would inconvenience her. But it was true, he didn’t really have anywhere else to go. Now that they were heading to a new place, Connor almost wanted to argue for staying at Hank’s. It was easy to live there. Hank had food and Connor had new clothes and the bathroom had no mould.

Also, the sex was the kind that Connor fantasised about. Painful and intense and running him so ragged that he was taken outside of himself and returned nearly whole at the end. It was why Connor needed to know if Hank got something out of it too. He worried that if Hank knew just how much Connor got out of it, he’d stop or change what he was doing. After all, it wasn’t revenge if Connor lay down afterwards, blown apart and wanting to crawl back and ask Hank to do it all over again.

‘Has Gavin treated you like that before?’

‘Not exactly like that.’

‘Tell me something, are you actually able to answer direct questions or do you have some sort of thing where you’re literally incapable of doing it? ‘Cuz so far you’ve redirected me to questions, or been vague and evasive. And I get it, goddamn, I actually fucking understand why this might be hard for you to talk about. But you brought it up.’

‘It’s cold,’ Connor said.

‘Well, that answers that question. Remind me why it’s a good idea not to have conversations with people in psychological shock? Wait, you can’t.’

The car beeped after a few seconds, and the temperature began to warm. Connor shivered but appreciated it.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

Hank grunted.

They didn’t talk for the rest of the drive. Connor became increasingly unable to think at all. And it was only a short time later that they were pulling up at a house in an older neighbourhood than Hank’s, the garden full of huge trees, a strong jungle green and bright tropical blossoms. It had been adapted to the weather, jarring next to the house next-door whose waterlogged grass had yellowed with fungal rots, pines looking sickly.

Connor got out, staring in surprise. The house that lay beyond was decades old, a house for humans as well, with an old tiled roof and dark grey bricks, a rusting white wrought-iron fence along the steps leading into the house.

He followed Hank, who stood beside him at the front door after pressing the doorbell.

‘They’re here!’ Connor heard Kara call from within the house.

But Hank was already turning, and he only hesitated when he heard the huge booming bark from inside. Then he walked faster, and by the time Connor heard the front door jiggling, Hank’s car was already backing out of the driveway. He turned to watch Hank go, confused, and that left him completely unprepared for the juggernaut that took him out at the knees.

‘Sumo, no!’

Connor’s back hit the metal fencing. He stared at the giant dog – giant dog – that now stood over him, sniffing him all over and making whining, rumbling noises that were part growl and part
something else.

Connor had only seen St. Bernards in photographs and on TV, nothing prepared him for the thick strings of drool on both sides of those loose lips, or the direct stare, or the way the dog’s huge plate-sized paws were now either side of Connor’s sprawled legs.

But the dog also wasn’t hurting him, and its tail and the back of its body was wagging, and Kara was standing there, looking at the driveway and then looking back at Connor.

‘Has he already gone?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Hello,’ he added, holding his palm up to the dog.

_**I like dogs. Even gigantic ones.**_

A wet, slick nose snuffled into his palm, drool getting everywhere, and then Sumo moved closer and closer until Connor was pinned against the wrought iron. Then, one hundred kilos of dog lay on his legs and a muzzle shoved directly into his shirt. Connor stared down in amazement, one hand still hovering above the giant head. Cautiously, he placed it down on the fur and looked up at Kara.

‘Uh,’ Connor said. ‘If it’s an inconvenience for me to be here, I’d be happy to find—’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ Kara said, waving her hand dismissively. ‘Sumo obviously loves you, which doesn’t surprise me at all. Hank hasn’t seen Sumo since…everything.’

She looked at her driveway again and sighed.

‘He’s a coward. Can’t even face his dog.’

Connor looked down at the dog and scratched the top of his head gently. He wondered if Sumo could smell Hank on Connor, and if that was why he was being so affectionate. Connor thought one of his legs might be going numb.

‘Sumo!’ Kara scolded. ‘Up! This is no way to treat guests. I’m so sorry, he only listens to me about fifty percent of the time, which is still more than I can say for how much Hank listens to me. Sumo! _Up!_’

Sumo grumbled, the sound moving through Connor’s body, and then he got up clumsily, shoving his paws into Connor’s legs and slipping. Once he stood properly he gave Connor a look, then swung back into the house, taking slow, heavy steps. Connor pushed himself up, grabbing his backpack as he went.

‘Really, it’s good that you’re here,’ Kara said, walking back into her house. ‘I think Hank knew it wasn’t good for you. What he did. I mean, I understand it and he can be dangerous and do silly things, but it’s also… Normally if he has a problem with someone, he beats them to a pulp. He doesn’t bring them back to his house. And he doesn’t— But, I have to ask, did Hank give you the cut on your cheek?’

‘No,’ Connor said, feeling a flush of heat move through him that felt sickening. ‘It was someone else. I can’t talk about it.’

‘Sure,’ Kara said easily. ‘We have a room for you. Here, it’s a spare, and I’m sorry about the quilt covers. Alice picks all of them, and as you can see…she does like flowers.’

Connor looked at the quilt with its sunflowers and almost smiled, which felt like something he’d
been incapable of all day.

‘Are you sure this is okay? I can- I mean not this week, but with rent, I have some friends at the lab who-’

‘Oh no,’ Kara said, her eyes wide. ‘Didn’t Hank tell you anything?’

‘He told me I was coming here,’ Connor said, confused.

‘Yes, ah, well… Firstly, you’re here as a guest, not as a tenant. So I’m not charging rent anyway. But secondly, Hank’s offered to compensate for everything. He has funds. And he’s explained that you’re in a difficult situation at the moment? And I know what it’s like to come upon hard times, and so does Luther. He’s my partner. Please don’t tell me that your pride is going to make it impossible, because I’d really prefer it if you just stayed for a while?’

Connor stared at her, and she smiled at him.

‘You have the run of the house,’ she said. ‘Luther works during the day, and Alice is at a friend’s place right now but she’ll be home soon. And then she has school. I do some part-time work here and there as a teacher’s aide, and help out with the school a lot, fundraisers and things like that. So sometimes there’s- Yes, see?’

She’d walked him into the lounge-room and pointed at about thirty huge cut-out leaves covering one of the old, overstuffed couches, a generously sized coffee table and resting on the top of an armchair’s arm rests.

‘I imagine the kids are going to be writing on them or painting on them or something. Has anyone looked at that cut yet? I don’t think it’s a good idea to let that get infected. Come into the kitchen.’

‘It’s- I don’t need-’

‘I’m sure it will be fine,’ Kara said, ‘but for my own peace of mind? Please?’

Sumo brought up the rear, following them both into the kitchen and then resting his giant head on Connor’s lap when Kara pointed him into a chair at a large eight-seater table. As Kara rummaged around in one of the cabinets above the counter, Connor looked at the staged scene of toys upon the table. Small wooden ponies, plastic dolls and flowers, and then Lego flames everywhere. It looked like one of the dolls was going through some kind of trial.

‘I know it’s a pain,’ Kara said as she turned with a first aid kit, bringing out what looked like a bottle of antiseptic, cotton buds and gauze, ‘but don’t disturb it. She gets very invested in her stories. Hates leaving them for school, but she never finishes them in a single morning or night either. It’s like living a TV series narrated by a child.’

Kara came over and pulled a chair so that she was sitting directly opposite Connor.

‘Alice has some other human friends, and obviously we know their parents so it’s just become natural to have a first aid kit like this in the house. We have one for androids too, of course. Now… oh, that is nasty. Did someone hit you? Is it about the case?’

Connor was fairly certain he’d just said he couldn’t talk about it, but he found himself nodding as she started dabbing gauze soaked with antiseptic against his cheek. She was gentle, but it still stung. Connor winced a little and she made a noise like he was a child she was soothing. Connor’s cheeks flushed and he looked away. He didn’t like this at all.
'I can do it if you want,' he said quickly.

'It's fine,' she said, soaking away the blood that had dried on the corners. She got one of the cotton buds, dipped it into the antiseptic and began wiping it over the split more directly, and Connor thought about the times his mother had done this for him, or when he’d done it for her, and those times had always been worse.

His hands folded into fists, and he abruptly wanted to be back at Hank’s house.

'I’m sorry,' Kara said. ‘It must hurt, but I’m nearly done. It’s not too deep. Do you want a bandage on it?’

'It’s fine,' Connor said.

'Sumo really likes you,' Kara said, smiling. 'It’s nice. I’ve always said that you can trust someone if an animal likes them.'

Connor knew for a fact that wasn’t true. He’d seen his own father charm everyone else’s pets, and animals weren’t always good judges of character after all. Even Zlatko had dogs that bayed for him when he was dragged away, and when Connor had checked in afterwards to see what happened to them, he’d learned that one had pined to death afterwards and refused to settle into a foster home. Two had been put to sleep, and one was kept by a foster carer who didn’t mind that the dog had been fed human flesh in the past.

The upshot was that sometimes animals just liked people, it didn’t matter what the person’s character was. Husbands who battered their partners to death still had dogs that loved them no matter what. But he didn’t have the heart to say that to Kara, and he liked that Sumo seemed to like him, so he stayed quiet.

‘There,’ Kara said, starting to put everything away. ‘Are you hungry? We have–’

‘No, thank you, but I’m not hungry.’ Connor hadn’t eaten much, but after the events of the day… ‘Actually, would you mind if I had a shower?’

‘Of course not!’ Kara said. ‘I’ve checked that we have everything. When we bought this house we had the option of removing the bathrooms, but I knew with Alice and making friends, that we’d need proper bathrooms. Also, it helps with the resale value. Listen to me go on and on though! You’ll find the shower down the hall, take as much time as you want. All right?’

Connor nodded. After looking down at Sumo for a couple of minutes, he simply stood up and Sumo looked at him with woebegone eyes and seemed upset to have lost his headrest. Connor stared at his pants.

‘Oh, a drool rag,’ Kara said. ‘You’re going to need one. He gets it everywhere. Here.’

She shoved a dry dishcloth at him, and Connor took it and wiped at the gelatinous stuff sticking to his pants around his thighs.

‘We love him though,’ Kara said. ‘I think if Hank ever takes him back, we’re going to get a dog of our own. I thought it would be inconvenient, but he doesn’t even need much walking. But the giant breeds can be like that.’

Connor knew she was talking so much because she was nervous too. He was doing that. His presence in her house was a disturbance. He offered an awkward smile and walked back down the hall to the shower, taking his backpack with him. Sumo waited at the bathroom door as Connor
closed it.

Then, Connor turned on the water and shuddered as he tested the temperature, his thoughts had blended into mush. He had a feeling he should be protesting being at Kara’s. Had a feeling he should be working on the case. Maybe he should be angrier at Gavin, or annoyed at his father, or mad at Hank. Maybe he should be talking to Markus and North and Simon. Maybe he should get a job doing anything, at this point.

Instead, he stood, his mind blank, until the shower was at a decent temperature. He scrubbed all the places where Gavin had touched, groped and grabbed at him with soap that smelled of strawberries and vanilla.

*

He opened the bathroom door to a low, heavy thump of a tail and Sumo’s curious face staring up at him.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Hello, Sumo.’

Sumo made a rumbling noise, and Connor reached out his hand again, and automatically regretted it as Sumo slobbered all over him. He rinsed his hand in the bathroom sink, and then grabbed the drool rag.

He hesitated in the hallway, looking down to where he could hear Kara in the kitchen. Shouldn’t he…offer to do something? Help maybe? But as exhaustion kept thundering through him, he looked longingly at the new room, the new bed, and walked away from her. He sat down on the corner of the bed, the mattress sagging a little. He was surprised to see the first aid kit resting there, and then realised that he’d washed off all the antiseptic Kara had applied. He blinked at the kit, bemused.

Sumo followed him into the room and placed his head heavily on Connor’s lap, huffing like he was unimpressed that Connor wasn’t petting him.

Connor scratched his head, felt a bloom of warmth in his chest, and then dropped the drool rag and placed his other hand on Sumo’s head.

‘You’re a good dog, aren’t you?’

Sumo’s eyes were turning sleepy and pleased, and Connor decided he might have to get used to the drool, and wondered what made Hank get a dog like this. He wanted to ask Kara, but he also just wanted to let his mind go blank. It might be nice to let it go blank while petting something warm and friendly.

It was hard to believe that Sumo had ever found himself a home at Hank’s house, with Hank’s habit of keeping his living space impeccably clean. But maybe Hank just mopped as often as he seemed to do the washing, wiping down countertops and everything else.

His house will never have mould.

‘Do you miss him?’ Connor said, his voice softer than before. ‘Is that why he left so quickly? Does he know how much you miss him?’

Your father hit you today. Gavin assaulted you. Are you going to keep pretending nothing happened?

‘Yes,’ Connor said so quietly that his voice was hardly a whisper. He pressed his thumbs gently into
the centre of Sumo’s forehead and pushed them back and out and Sumo’s paws skidded on the floorboards as he went to lie down and then caught himself.

Connor lay down on his side and waited for the feeling of dislocation to kick in. He shouldn’t be here. He wasn’t even supposed to be at Hank’s. But instead, he just stared at the details on Sumo’s nose and scratched the side of Sumo’s cheek.

His whole body ached. Even his back where he’d hit the wrought-iron fencing. He tuned out as much of the pain as he could, focusing instead on the fur against the pads of his fingers, the pleased look on Sumo’s face.

Kara walked past at one point and then took a step backwards and stared at Connor with something almost fond on her face.

‘You look tired,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ Connor said, and then as he pushed himself up, suddenly thinking he should be offering to help, she waved him back down again.

‘He’s not technically allowed on the furniture, but the rules don’t apply in Alice’s room, and they don’t have to apply in yours either. Just remember that you have to clean the quilts he drools on.’

Connor pressed his lips together, and Kara tilted her head and smiled at him.

‘We’ll talk more later. Alice is going to be so happy to see you.’

She walked away and Connor closed his eyes. After a moment he scooted backwards and patted the bed experimentally, and then heard the whole bed creak as Sumo got onto it, wagging his tail so madly that it kept thumping into Connor’s shins.

‘Lie down,’ Connor said, letting his eyes close, grunting when Sumo took that to mean lie down almost completely on top of him. He rolled onto his back, and Sumo pressed his back to Connor’s side, wiggling backwards until – with a pronounced sigh – he settled and seemed to fall asleep immediately.

Connor took out his phone and without thinking about it too much, took a photo of Sumo where his head rested against Connor’s shoulder. Then he sent it to Hank, along with the message:

*Kara said you’re a coward.*

He scraped his teeth over his bottom lip and then wrote:

*We should talk about the case.*

A response came quickly.

*Give it 48 hours, your dad’s expecting you to do something batshit stupid and honestly so am I so give it 48 hours and then we’ll talk. What’re you going to do? Crack the case in two days? Get some rest.*

Connor let his phone rest face-down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, emotion burnt out of him. It would come back again, he knew it would, but he valued the times where his body and mind could no longer keep up the fear, the anguish, and abandoned all of it in favour of a hollow sound in his head and, right now, the feeling of fur against his fingertips.
Later, he told himself. Later.
Author’s note: This chapter deals with some challenging subject matter, as always, take care of yourselves. (I mean this whole fic does, but y’know).

Also, maybe everyone will ship Connor with Luuk, but Connor ships himself with Hank, lol.

Connor woke with a start, inhaling sleepily and blinking his eyes open to see a huge furry lump in front of him, and Alice standing in front of his bed, staring. Connor blindly fumbled for his phone, only to realise he hadn’t left it on the side-table and it was still in his pocket. He hardly remembered where he was, and just as he got his fingers around his phone, Sumo swung his head up and across and smeared drool across Connor’s face.

Alice giggled.

‘This is…’ Connor tried to clean his face with his hand, but the drool was goopy and viscous.

‘He’s so gross,’ Alice said, handing Connor the drool rag he’d left on the bed. Connor didn’t really want to use that either, but it was better than his own hand. He found what he hoped was a clean corner and wiped at his face and hand.

‘It’s definitely an interesting way to wake up,’ Connor said, pushing himself up and holding back a groan. His body was sore. He also didn’t know what to say about Alice standing there. He checked his phone. It was late afternoon, the room dim and the hall light on.

‘Mummy says it’s dinner time soon,’ Alice said. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘I think so,’ Connor said automatically, going to swing off the side of the bed, only to be body blocked by Sumo. He stared at him for a moment and then: ‘Sumo. Off.’

Sumo made a sound of profound discontent, and then the whole bed shifted as he got up and carefully lumbered off the bed, padding out of the room, tail lazily wagging.

‘He listened to you!’ Alice said. ‘Are you going to wash your hands before dinner?’

Yes,’ Connor said, dazed. He’d napped deeply and still felt like he was swimming out of it. ‘I think I’ll wash my face too.’

‘Do you want to borrow a doll?’ Alice said. ‘Sometimes I take a doll with me to new places. Wait, I’ll get one.’

She ran out of the room, and Connor swung his legs off the bed and pressed his palms down into the doona cover. If he’d been at Hank’s, he would have been allowed to wake up naturally – except for that last time when Hank had set his alarm for him without Connor being aware of it. But Hank wouldn’t have been there staring at him. And, probably, a disgusting cardboard-tasting meal would
be waiting for him on the kitchen counter.

It was strange that they’d developed something of a routine in such a short period of time, but Connor could feel how he’d been shaken loose from it. He didn’t like it.

Alice ran back in with some kind of plastic mecha robot in intimidating black and red rusted shades. It wasn’t exactly what he’d been expecting. He took the toy and stared down at it, smiling a little.

‘Did you know,’ Alice said quickly, ‘that there are humans who can pilot these, but that, androids could probably do it better because they could sync up with the mecha like that, or they could even be the mecha. So this one is me if I was a mecha. Except her name is Princess.’

‘This is cool,’ Connor said, turning it in his hands and moving the jointed arms and legs. ‘This helps you feel better?’

‘Yeah, but you can borrow her for a little while. Don’t take her from the house though! Or…tell me. Or…’ she tilted her head. ‘I don’t know. You should go get ready for dinner though.’

She left, walking down the corridor, and Connor heard two sets of voices – Kara’s, and a deeper man’s voice, and realised that Luther must be home too. He put the mecha toy down carefully on the side table and went across to the small bathroom he shared with Alice and cleaned his hands and face. His cheek was bruised, but it wasn’t as bad as he expected, the blues and violets creeping up across the tender skin under his eye, but nothing like what he’d fielded in the past. He ignored it.

He could see a container of the wipes that androids used to clean the surfaces of their body, even though they were naturally bacteria inhibiting, they could still acquire stains and grime. There was also some small children’s bottles of hardly used perfume, and three hairbrushes, as well as one toothbrush that was shaped differently to the ones humans tended to use. But no shampoo or conditioner, no soap specifically for Alice. There was only a handwash presumably for guests, and a packet of unused soap that was obviously intended for Connor. He wondered if he had to get shampoo and conditioner for himself. He pulled back the shower curtain and saw a shower that had gotten dusty from disuse though it had been recently wiped down. There in the corner, what looked like new containers of hair cleaning products.

He dried his hands on the towel available and walked down the corridor, his heart thumping nervously.

The table for eight was set with four places. Alice had commandeered half the table with her toys, and was staring with sharp focus as she slowly made a pony walk through what looked like a trial-by-fire surrounded by other toys watching on.

‘Hello,’ the man who must have been Luther said. He walked over, dwarfing Connor, reaching out with a dark brown hand to shake Connor’s. ‘Heard a lot about you. It’s good to meet you. I’m Luther.’

‘My name is Connor,’ he said, realising with chagrin that he sounded like he was eight years old. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

Kara was waiting by an oven, and Connor realised that if she was making food, it was clearly only for him and no one else.

‘You didn’t have to,’ Connor said, dismayed.

‘I like to bake,’ Kara said, looking down at the oven. ‘And I have taste processors, even though I can’t eat. So it should taste good! I bake for the kids sometimes at school, and they’re very honest.’
She laughed, and Luther sat down at the table and indicated that Connor should sit across from him. Connor did so, feeling uneasy. An actual family dinner. He’d been avoiding them for as long as he could remember, and he quietly scraped his fingertips on the underside of the table, feeling ill. Hank had never made Connor eat around him. The food had always just been there.

For a minute, he debated asking if he could take the food back down to his room, but they obviously had a way of doing things, and he didn’t want to selfishly break it.

‘We’ve always had family time,’ Luther explained. He watched Connor like he wanted to talk more freely, and Connor wondered if Alice being there was stopping him from asking the questions he wanted to. He knew from Kara that Luther not only disapproved of Hank reverting his Deviancy, but had also found it traumatising. Connor wondered if he wanted to know about Hank now, how he was.

A few minutes later, Connor had his own small pizza, with more vegetables than he’d ever seen in his life, but also meats and cheese, and he stared in amazement.

‘This is all for me?’ he said.

‘If you can’t finish it, we can save it,’ Kara said. ‘And you don’t have to eat it, if you don’t like it! Hank said you didn’t have any food intolerances that he could tell. I did ask.’

Connor tried to imagine Hank’s reaction to that question, but he just couldn’t.

‘I know it might be weird,’ Kara said, ‘with us not eating. But we use this time to talk about our day, and spend time with each other. It’s family time. Now that you’re here, you’re part of that too. But we’ll let you eat first.’ She turned to Alice. ‘How was your day, Alice? Did you learn anything new at school?’

Connor watched as Luther and Kara focused on Alice, and then tentatively picked up a slice of the pizza and started eating. He saw Kara look at him, as though checking the food was okay, and he’d hardly tasted it before he nodded to indicate it was good. It wasn’t until his third bite in that he realised it was good, and also that his eating had been patchy for a while now, and he ate while Alice chatted easily about her day.

He wondered at their habits. They could all grasp wrists and share information that way, or even talk to each other telepathically if they wanted to, unless…Alice couldn’t? Connor knew that not all androids were built to the same template, and not all had the same processing capacities, but it was still more domestic than he’d expected.

‘And then I got home,’ Alice continued, ‘and Connor let Sumo sleep on his bed. He got a face full of drool! I wanted to laugh, but I was good.’

‘You laughed,’ Connor said, in spite of himself, and then chuckled at the same time that Luther did.

‘But not very loudly,’ Alice insisted.

Connor listened to them as they kept talking, and wondered what Hank was doing. Cleaning his house? Erasing all traces of Connor from the guest room? Watching television? Connor thought of Hank alone in that large house with its gardens designed for a child and a dog, and he thought of the space that was Cole’s room, like a black hole that drew one’s attention, a permanent shrine to someone who wasn’t coming back.

He’d stood in that room to antagonise Hank and it had worked, but Hank hadn’t reacted the way he was supposed to. Instead, Connor had used it as a weapon, and he’d known it had landed, had hurt
him. Was Hank thinking about it now? Connor standing in there when he wasn’t supposed to touch the space that belonged only to Cole?

Did Hank ever stand in there? Did he ever stand where Connor had stood, looking around the room? Connor had never seen him do it. Was it guilt that stopped him?

‘My son that I didn’t deserve, huh? Maybe I came to that conclusion myself, Connor, before I ever laid eyes on you. Maybe that’s why I made the decisions I made.’

The words played on a loop until they rattled loudly in his head. It never occurred to him that Hank was doing anything more than trying to erase his grief. That his actions might also have been an act of self-loathing, a way to damage himself, maybe he didn’t think he deserved a proper death, so he gave himself an almost-life.

Connor couldn’t believe that he’d told Hank that he didn’t deserve Cole. He couldn’t believe that Hank agreed with him. Had agreed with him long ago. The very words Connor used to strike at the heart of Hank, were words that Hank had already told himself in some form.

He pressed his hand over his pocket where his phone was and wanted to talk to someone. He floated back to the present where Luther and Alice were having an animated conversation about whatever the current storyline at the end of the table was.

When Connor was cued into the conversation by Kara a couple of minutes later, he responded on autopilot. Yes, the pizza was delicious. No, he didn’t need anything else to eat, and water was fine. Yes, he was having a good time, and when Alice offered him a pony to hold, he said yes without question. A version of himself he’d let run at home when he was younger, that behaved appropriately at the dinner table while his mind was in turmoil.

* 

Later that night, when Alice was in bed, and Kara and Luther were watching some police procedural on television together instead of downloading it directly into their minds, he sat in the back garden on a creaking wooden bench – the kind sold in hardware stores for gardeners and family members to sit on – and rested an arm on the rusting wrought metal iron armrest. Overhead, he caught glimpses of stars above scudding clouds, and he could smell a storm in the air, but it didn’t feel like it would hit them in the next ten minutes.

The jungle of the front garden extended here too. It seemed like Kara cared about gardening a lot, there were even small tools – a trowel, a digging fork – sticking in the soil next to two empty pots, as though she’d stopped something and walked inside, and was ready to continue the job at any moment. He imagined Kara and Hank bonding over gardening, and it felt so domestic and strange.

Connor turned his phone over and over in his hands, and then impulsively scrolled through his list of contacts and sent a text to someone he’d never actually texted voluntarily before.

*Hi. It’s Connor. Are you available to talk?*

The message was received quickly, and a few seconds later the reply when it came was framed by little dog emojis:

*Yes. May I call instead?*

Connor hesitated, then wrote: *Okay.*

His phone buzzed only seconds later, and Connor took the call, needing to suck down a deep,
unexpectedly nervous breath. It was nearly eleven, he was sure Luuk had work the next day. ‘Connor,’ Luuk said, his voice warm. ‘If you give me a minute, I’m going to make some tea.’ ‘Oh, Sir, we don’t have-’ ‘It’s fine, it’s fine,’ Luuk said. ‘I usually make tea around this time anyway. You don’t have to call me Sir outside of Zeta, Connor. Though something tells me you’d want to anyway. You can call me Luuk.’ ‘Is that what you want?’ Connor said. ‘I don’t mind,’ Luuk said, sounding like he meant it. ‘Is everything all right? You sound on edge. Can I help with anything?’ ‘No, well, not exactly,’ Connor said, and then stood up and paced around the garden, the thick dark grass plush and soft beneath his shoes. ‘I didn’t know who else to call. It’s been a strange few days.’ ‘Mm,’ Luuk said, as Connor heard the sounds of a spoon in a ceramic cup over the phone, the sound of a kettle boiling. ‘Do you want to tell me about it?’ ‘It wouldn’t- I know this is quite different to what happens at Zeta, and I don’t-’ ‘Connor,’ Luuk said firmly, patiently, ‘I’m not asking you as a trap, I’m asking you because I have the time and I want to know. If I didn’t have the time to talk to you, I wouldn’t have answered your texts. And if I didn’t want to call you, I wouldn’t have been the one to suggest it in the first place. Understand?’ ‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, then winced, but Luuk didn’t reprimand him and Connor continued to slowly pace back and forth across the grass, listening to the sound of mole crickets and looking back towards the house. He could see the glow of the kitchen light through the laundry window. ‘Talk to me,’ Luuk said, and Connor nodded, scraped his teeth over his bottom lip a few times and then launched into a story that he didn’t know how to tell well or clearly. That he wasn’t even sure he should be telling at all. And unlike with Markus and North and Simon, where he concealed his sexual dynamic with Hank, with Luuk…it was kind of the point. ‘But now I’m here,’ Connor said. ‘At- At Kara’s. She’s very nice and hospitable and very generous, and I’m comfortable here, but I think…I don’t want to be here.’ ‘You’d prefer to be with Hank,’ Luuk said slowly, sipping at his tea. ‘I know you don’t even like him, but that’s why… Because- You’ve seen him, and met him, so- I know I’ve been red-flagged at Zeta. He told me.’ Luuk was quiet for a long time, and Connor felt a small, low curdle of pain in his chest. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ ‘Because some of us had a suspicion it would drive you away,’ Luuk said. ‘More responsibility than was our right to exercise, probably, but nonetheless it was a decision that wasn’t made lightly. Both your getting red-flagged, and our decision to wait and see what would happen. Why did he tell you?’ Connor shoved his free hand into his jeans and shook his head. ‘He said that I was red-flagged for seeking toxic Doms, because I couldn’t find steady partners to treat me the way that I wanted to be treated, so I was unsafe instead. He said I was…looking for someone to punish me, which was why I didn’t fight him as much as he seemed to think I should.’
‘Tell me about him,’ Luuk said, his voice sharp. ‘Tell me what makes him different from Gavin.’

Connor hesitated. He’d forgotten the part where… He’d forgotten to say what had happened in the alleyway. His whole body still burned and ached and hurt, but he’d still forgotten. Now, he was in a quandary. How to convey that experience? How to tell Luuk that Hank just wasn’t on the same level, but that even if he was, Connor didn’t feel the same way about it. Did that matter? Did his feelings matter?

‘Connor?’ Luuk prompted.

‘No, I…’ Connor pulled his hand out of his jeans and pressed his fingers to his temples, and thought that this was both why he’d wanted to talk to someone about it and why he didn’t want to talk at all. His palm sweated where he held the phone against his ear. ‘Do you think Hank and Gavin are the same?’

‘No,’ Luuk said.

‘But in the scene at Zeta, you were unhappy.’

‘I wasn’t happy, certainly,’ Luuk said. ‘Hank’s a limit-pusher and now that I know he was initially there only for revenge, I’m upset with myself for not vetting him properly. But he listened to your safeword, and he gave you something I couldn’t.’

Connor’s hand slid down to his burning cheek. The night wasn’t hot enough to justify the heat in his face. Connor walked over to the bench and sat down again, the wood groaning.

‘Something happened with Gavin,’ Connor said, and then felt the way his brain swerved away from it. ‘I can’t talk about it. But I just wanted to talk to someone…in the scene. Who gets it. There’s not many people who know about the things I like, who don’t think I’m looking to get assaulted. Markus and North and Simon think I’m already broken. Hank- Hank thinks I’m broken. That’s why he took me here. Kara looks at me like I’m a lost dog she’s adopted like Sumo.’

‘That’s Hank’s saint bernard?’ Luuk enquired, and Connor had to smile when he realised that Luuk would probably always remember a dog’s name, its breed, and maybe anything else he was told.

‘Yes. I like him. He’s a good dog.’

‘You’ll find all dogs are good dogs,’ Luuk said like it was a well-worn phrase. ‘You just have to let them learn how to be, if they don’t know.’

Connor pulled his leg up and wanted to rest his heel on the bench, but his new jeans weren’t stretched enough, and he let his leg fall back to the ground. In the distance, a rumble of thunder but no flashes of lightning that he could see. Around him, only the roofs and fences of suburbia, and the heavy canopy of rain hungry trees that could handle the oft-sweltering weather.

‘Have you had issues before with knowing that you are aroused by degradation and humiliation?’ Luuk said, cutting to the heart of the topic so quickly that Connor felt uncomfortable. But hadn’t he wanted someone who would understand?

‘I never talk about this,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t know how.’

‘You’re talking about it now,’ Luuk said. ‘Besides, it’s normal for it to be a sensitive subject. Normally you’d talk to Hank about it, but obviously that situation is complicated by many factors, including that he kidnapped you and took you hostage.’
‘You say that like it’s a bad thing,’ Connor said with a faux-blank tone. Luuk laughed softly, but also sadly. ‘Even that was complicated,’ Connor added.

‘I can tell,’ Luuk said. ‘So let’s put that aside for a moment, and just talk about the kinks as they stand, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Connor said, closing his eyes and tilting his head back. He could hear a mosquito and knew he should get inside, but didn’t want to have this conversation under a roof. He wanted to speak outside where his words could vanish into the air and not be contained by four walls, where they’d echo back to him the way his father’s words echoed at him in his family home.

After a long silence, Luuk laughed again. ‘All right. I’ll start. Connor, tell me three things you like about humiliation and degradation. Not three individual kinks, but three things about how it makes you feel. Let’s start there.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said. He was already mildly turned on. Just talking to Luuk, knowing the previous scenes they’d had, talking in more detail about Hank, remembering getting down on his knees in Hank’s car or being pushed over the glass table. He pressed his hand over his throat, which still held a bruise on the outside, and was likely bruised on the inside.

Hank is thorough.

‘Are you looking for anything in particular?’ Connor said after a while.

‘No,’ Luuk said. ‘Anything will do. There’s no right or wrong answers here. I’m not here to course correct your feelings. We’re just talking, okay?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, nodding. His thumb stroked up and down his throat. It was hard to pin it down. ‘I think I like that it’s difficult, because I don’t get turned on when it’s easy.’

‘When someone treats you with respect? Gives you a nice, vanilla handjob?’ Luuk said. He sounded like he was smiling. ‘I treat you with respect, don’t I?’

‘It’s different,’ Connor said. ‘I’m naked in a club, it’s already…keyed into something that isn’t easy, that people around me wouldn’t think was respectable. And you like public play, and you like showing off your subs and bottoms, and you call me a good boy. But yes, you treat me with too much respect.’

‘I know,’ Luuk said. ‘It’s nice like this, when we’re talking as friends, but it’s not what you’re looking for at Zeta, is it?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said softly. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I am too,’ Luuk said. ‘But for selfish reasons, and not because I think there’s anything wrong with you. Two more things, Connor.’

‘I think I like…’ Connor wished this was easier. He just knew he liked it. Trying to piece together why, without looking at all causative things in his life that might have broken him in this direction, was a challenge. Going off feelings – which was what Luuk had told him to focus on – made it amorphous and shapeless, he stared into the dark mass of it and clumsily felt around inside himself. ‘I like when it feels terrible, when I feel terrible, and then someone turns it into something good. Physically, emotionally, I don’t care. Mostly it turning into arousal is good.’

It’s amazing.
‘That’s good,’ Luuk said, his voice soothing, and Connor oozed down the bench and wanted to call Hank and ask if he’d kindly tear him apart. Hank was probably relieved to be away from him.

‘If it only feels good,’ Connor added, ‘it feels worthless. Or cheap. Or… I’ve tried it that way. I have honestly tried to not be the way that I am. The last time, it felt like I was being mocked. I knew they weren’t trying to mock me at all, but it was like they didn’t know what I could take, and I couldn’t tell them.’

‘It’s frustrating when other people don’t understand,’ Luuk said. Then some quiet murmuring, and Connor realised that Luuk was talking to one of his dogs.

‘This conversation isn’t taking too long?’ Connor said, uncertain.

‘No,’ Luuk said. ‘Ruth has decided that if I’m sitting down, it must be time for a cuddle. She’s one of my newest rescues. She’s lovely. One more thing you like about how it makes you feel, Connor.’

‘You’re like a laser,’ Connor said.

‘I am,’ Luuk said. ‘Presumably that’s part of what you wanted when you called me. You’ve stuck on the line for longer than I thought you would.’ Luuk inhaled audibly and added: ‘I really think this is progress for you. Whatever is happening with Hank, or whatever happens in the future, I think you’re finding something meaningful in it. Tell me one more thing, Connor.’

‘I just…’ Connor made a faint sound of frustration. ‘I just like how it feels.’

‘What?’

‘All of it. Not just the physical pain, masochism is easy to understand. But do you think it means anyone can rape me, and it wouldn’t count as rape? That I like situations where I’m made to feel worthless and small and- I can’t talk about this, I’m-’

‘Wait, wait,’ Luuk said, his voice less calm than before. ‘Just wait. Did Hank rape you?’

‘No,’ Connor said, closing his eyes.

‘Did Gavin? When you said ‘something happened with Gavin’ – Connor, did he-’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘He tried. Hank stopped him. But Gavin said it wouldn’t have been rape anyway. Because it was me. Because of what I like.’

‘Well, all of this suddenly makes a lot more sense,’ Luuk said, and then continued quickly, like he was afraid Connor might hang up the phone. ‘Can we put all of that aside, very quickly, and go back to your last thing? Was your last thing that you like being made to feel worthless and small?’

‘And hurt,’ Connor added. It had been the last word he was going to add, before he cut himself off. ‘It sounds… I know how it sounds.’

‘As a singular statement, it sounds damning indeed. But I want to know why you like being made to feel that way. After all, do you like being made to feel worthless and small and hurt all the time?’

‘…No,’ Connor said.

‘You don’t sound very sure.’

‘I’m not sure I’m allowed to be picky about it. Isn’t that a double standard?’
‘Oh, Connor,’ Luuk sighed. ‘You’d hate me. You’d hate me if I was there. I’d want to fuss over you until you cried ‘red.’ All right, this conversation could go on for hours if I had it my way, let’s just… where were we? Oh, yes, I want to know why you like being made to feel worthless and small and hurt. Do you like it in the moment?’

‘No,’ Connor said, his voice almost a whisper. ‘And yes. Sometimes.’

‘So in the moment isn’t the only reason you like it,’ Luuk said.

‘It’s soothing,’ Connor said, and then stared ahead as he felt something click into place that he couldn’t quite see from the right angle in the past. ‘Not always. And not usually in the moment. It’s sometimes better if it’s not, in the moment. It’s…it gives me something I don’t know how to get otherwise.’

‘Do you know what that is?’

Connor did, but he didn’t want to tell Luuk. He was almost afraid to think it.

He realised that probably there was so much hurt and worthlessness and smallness in himself, buried in his very soul already, that having someone draw it up and lance it with their own attempts was like drawing poison out of a wound. He didn’t know why it worked, but he left a successful scene feeling like he’d been cleansed of something. Even unsuccessful scenes still gave him the other things that he liked, and if he still felt worthless afterwards, well, that was the status quo. It was no better or worse than his daily life, even though he never liked to think about it much.

‘I do,’ Connor said, after Luuk prompted him again. ‘But it’s personal. I don’t want to share.’

‘Okay,’ Luuk said easily. ‘That’s fine. This sort of thing is sometimes very personal, and it doesn’t have to be rational either. You know as well as I do that kinks aren’t rational or objective, and tied to feeling states as they are, they don’t always make sense. But Connor, the things you like about these two kinks sound fine to me. Do you think it’s bad to like being challenged? Or the transformation of turning pain into pleasure? Whether physical or emotional?’

‘No,’ Connor said.

‘And you know it’s all right to like some aspects of humiliation and degradation and not others, don’t you? That’s not a double standard, Connor. You know better than that.’

‘I’ve read a few 101 articles in my time.’

‘I don’t doubt it, but it never hurts to be reminded that you’re allowed to have shifting likes and dislikes within the arena. It’s easy to forget. It’s even easier to forget when someone like Gavin exists. He’s been barred from Zeta, by the way. Two days ago he came in and escalated, we caught it before any major damage was done, but he’s gone. It would have happened sooner but you never reported him ignoring your safewords, and he cared about others just enough to make sure he wasn’t booted from the club.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said.

He was exhausted. He didn’t really want to talk about Gavin at all. Now that he was talking to Luuk, he found that all the things he wanted to say were surprisingly mundane.

‘Hank likes orgasm denial,’ Connor said, a note of complaint entering his voice. ‘And ruined orgasms.’
‘Oh no,’ Luuk said drily. ‘Does he?’

‘Be quiet. Just because it’s your thing, doesn’t mean– I mean, I haven’t gotten to come properly at all. And I don’t know what to say, because I don’t know if he wants anything to do with me. Maybe if he knew, he’d do it more. If he asked me to do that for him, to give that to him, I’d even – it scares me, I think I’d want to give that to him… But instead he’s just put me here, like Sumo, and I don’t like it.’

‘You want to be with him,’ Luuk said carefully.

‘I want him to keep doing what he’s been doing,’ Connor said, and stared fixedly at the back door, afraid that Kara would emerge at any moment and tell him to stop talking about disgusting subjects and leave. But she didn’t appear.

‘You like the dynamic you have with him,’ Luuk said.

‘I’ve been aroused on and off more in the past few days than I think since I was fourteen,’ Connor admitted, and then laughed to himself.

‘But you can’t talk to him properly, you can’t ask him for what you want, you don’t know if he cares about what you want – though I think his changing behaviour indicates that he does to some degree care, even though it might not be enough – and you don’t know if he wants you in his life at all. Also, as you say, it’s complicated further by everything else?’

‘And it was my idea to leave,’ Connor said.

‘Why?’ Luuk asked.

Connor sighed, thinking about it. He’d felt so angry that Hank had dared rescue him, even that Hank would presume to watch out for him. He’d known somehow that Hank wouldn’t be happy about his father hitting him, about his encounter with Gavin, and he’d just wanted to escape. Only he’d been shattered as soon as Hank agreed that he should leave.

‘Maybe you needed a break?’ Luuk suggested. ‘It sounds like you were overloaded. And from what you’ve described, Hank recognised that and decided to offer you a place that actually is helping now?’

‘Or he’s getting rid of me,’ Connor said.

‘But it was your idea to leave? You told me that he said he’d made a mistake, that you needed a break. Those were the words he used, weren’t they? So he was agreeing with you? Or am I missing something?’

Connor felt called out, and sat there scowling ahead, not liking where any of it was going. His face screwed up as he leaned back into the bench.

‘Help me,’ Connor said. He would have laughed, if it wasn’t for the fact that being caught in it was awful.

‘Do you want me to give you my blessing?’ Luuk said, ‘because I can’t, Connor. I don’t know him well enough, and unfortunately, I know some of your patterns. But do you want me to give you some suggestions?’

‘Please.’
'You need to talk to him,' Luuk said. ‘You need to learn how. It doesn’t matter if it’s clumsy or if you don’t know what you’re doing, you have to be able to communicate your needs with him, and he needs to communicate his with you. Maybe it would be a good idea for you both to have a scene at Zeta, so some of us can get an idea of what’s happening in real time. I think you should give me his number.’

‘I’m not sure…,’ Connor said.

‘Not now,’ Luuk said. ‘But if it turns out you both want something sexual and lasting together, I think he should know about some of the things I know you won’t talk about, like your execrable habit of hating aftercare.’

‘A fine habit,’ Connor said lightly, ‘that saves everyone time.’

‘Ah,’ Luuk said, and Connor felt his heart skip a beat, because there was something dangerous in that voice. ‘Connor, you behave so sweetly at Zeta, but are you a brat?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said quickly.

‘Because I think that was you sharing a brattish moment.’

‘I wouldn’t, Sir.’

‘Mm,’ Luuk said, and Connor could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Well, it’s obvious this conversation has made you very uncomfortable, and I apologise for that. I’m not sure how to talk about these things in a way that will put you completely at ease, and if you can think of how to help me do better in the future, please tell me.’

That made Connor very uncomfortable and he cringed. ‘It’s fine, Sir.’

‘Connor, do you want to talk about what happened with Gavin?’

Connor shook his head. ‘No. I think, compared to all the other things he’s done, it was very minor. It was just something he said.’

Luuk was silent for a long time, and then when he started talking again, he changed the subject. Connor wasn’t upset. He hadn’t wanted to talk about it, and Luuk wasn’t the kind of person to push once someone told him ‘no.’

The conversation wound down over the next ten minutes. Luuk talked about his rescue dogs, and asked Connor about the family he was staying with. Were they nice? Did he have his own space? Had he thought about where he was going to stay in the future? All reasonable questions that meant that by the time Luuk hung up, asking if they could chat again in about a week, Connor thought he actually felt calmer than he had when he’d made the call.

After only a few minutes, he stared at Hank’s name in his contact list and decided he might as well do it now, instead of later.


Nope, Hank sent back.

I think we should talk, Connor sent.

I said give it 48 hrs for fuck’s sake.
Connor frowned at his phone. *You said give the case 48 hours.*

*Give it all 48 hours. It's not gonna kill you. Leave me alone.*

Connor put his phone down on the bench and stared at the house in front of him, and then looked up at the first splatters of fat, warm, raindrops. He picked up his phone and walked to the porch, and by the time he arrived, the rain was already hammering on the tiles. The world smelled of earth and loam and carbon, and seconds later a flash of lightning split the sky and the tops of the trees whipped in the winds that flooded the world as thunder roared down.

The storm had come. Connor took one last look at it and went inside, thinking that Hank wasn’t the only one who knew how to push limits.
So That's What It's Like

Chapter Notes

Emo Connor is the best Connor. Just retitling this whole fic to ‘The Not Very Mad Adventures of Emo Connor and his Emo Hank.’

New tag because it’s occurred to me that Connor’s headed there quite without Hank’s assistance: Chastity. New tags otherwise: Cock & Ball Torture (it’s fairly mild-ish).

It was a painful forty eight hours, even though Connor was physically comfortable in Kara’s home. Connor reached for his phone often, stirring on the case, annoyed to be told to wait, knowing that he could just work on it but not wanting to disobey Hank.

Alice was sweet, though she could come see him six times in an hour, bringing him a different mecha each time and trying to involve him in her storytelling. He wondered if there was something wrong with him that he just didn’t find it as interesting as she did, but he tried not to let that show and showed her only enthusiasm.

It resulted in Kara patting him on the shoulder one night and saying long after Alice had gone to bed: ‘You know, you can tell her to go away for a little while. She’s excited because you’re a guest, but you’re doing fine. She can be a bit much with her stories, as long as you’re not nipping it in the bud, just tell her that you’re tired or busy.’

Connor was always tired and he was never busy.

They shared breakfast together. They shared dinner together. For all intents and purposes they functioned as a healthy family and the more time Connor spent with them, the more keyed up he became. There had to be something wrong with them. Maybe Kara had a concealed temper he hadn’t seen yet. Maybe Luther would never do anything to Alice or Kara while he was there, but there’d be signs if Connor just watched closely enough. So he watched more and more, felt less and less comfortable, and hated himself, because he was almost certain the simmering maelstrom inside of him had nothing to do with them.

But if it did, he was watching for it. He’d see.

It made him feel more distant to them, he found it harder to concentrate in his conversations with them. They were so kind to him, but he didn’t know what to do with that. He answered with what he hoped were the correct answers, and formulated conversations to be as safe as possible. The genuine connection he’d made with Kara when she’d turned up on his apartment doorstep uninvited vanished beneath the weight of this home with its functioning family.

When Alice was at school, Connor wanted to do chores but there was rarely anything to do that Kara, Luther or Alice hadn’t already done. He slept too much, ate too little, stared at his bank balance and thought about the vodka he’d left at Hank’s. His throat ached for the burn of it, he wanted the sediment of bad vodka on his tongue.
Sometimes he pressed his fingers into the tender, lower skin of his pelvis, just above his cock where his crinkly pubic hair sprung, and he wished Hank was there. He closed his eyes and thought about Hank’s cock in his mouth, or being shoved over the table, or even being told brusquely to clean up afterwards and he felt the soft skin of his cock brush the backs of his knuckles and refused to jack himself off. It made him smile in bitter, shameful amusement.

He’d told Luuk he’d be willing to give his orgasms to Hank, as something for the future. It turned out he’d already done it and Hank hadn’t asked. So he warred with himself. Telling himself to just wrap fingers around his cock, to just get off like he used to do so often. Over and over again he didn’t, and he’d curl up on himself and hope Hank would be proud of him when he knew that Hank didn’t care because Hank didn’t know.

You’re as broken as he is.

More broken, Connor knew. He couldn’t even blame it on losing a child, or some other significant loss. It was just something in himself.

He watched the family around him and orbited them like a satellite. Their gravity repelled him and drew him in, he envied the life they lived and doubted it. He watched for the corruption in them, when he knew it was in him.

*

Connor sat in the back yard on the bench, under the stars, liking this garden that Kara tended. It had a wild feel that came from letting healthy trees and shrubs find their natural shapes, but the soil was turned, there were flowering plants and herbs. Maybe someone had started it long before they’d bought the house, but however she found it, she’d turned it into something that made Connor yearn for something nameless. He didn’t know how he could be nostalgic for something he’d never experienced before, but he sat in that feeling, and preferred it to being inside.

Luther came out, waving and walking over.

‘Hey, man. Can I sit?’ he said.

‘Of course,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t know if the bench will hold up though. It creaks when I sit on it.’

‘It creaks when a bird lands on it,’ Luther said, laughing. But the bench held fine as he sat on it, and Connor looked up at him quickly, looking away when Luther met his gaze steadily. Connor realised after all this time he still didn’t know what Luther did for a living. Kara hadn’t told him, or she had…he’d forgotten. Sometimes it was hard to pay attention.

‘You seem kinda quiet,’ Luther said. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Yes? Yes, I’m just like that,’ Connor said. ‘Sometimes.’

‘I can relate. Though people expect someone of my size to be loud and imposing or something, and it’s just never worked out that way. I used to be shy.’

‘You did?’

‘Kara helped,’ Luther said. ‘Alice did too. I have good colleagues. I’m still shy. Just not like before. But I can recognise kin, you know how it is.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said.
‘You’re not that comfortable here, are you?’

‘It’s- Of course I’m- Everyone is being very accommodating and generous. I can’t believe how generous.’

‘Yeah,’ Luther said, sighing. ‘I think that’s part of it. Kara thought she was doing something wrong but I told her it was something you were carrying with you. But then I realised I should check, in case I was wrong.’

Connor felt mortified. He shared meals with them didn’t he? He’d never turned Alice away when she came to talk to him. But he’d not gone out of his way to start conversations with Kara or Luther. He thought they would have preferred that. To not be interrupted in their own home.

‘She’s not doing anything wrong,’ Connor said. ‘She’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. You have to tell me if I’m doing anything wrong. What… Should I be doing something different?’

‘Nah,’ Luther said easily. ‘Nothing like that. We’re feeling out the shape of each other, okay?’

‘I didn’t mean to make her feel like she was doing something wrong.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Luther said. ‘But I don’t think it’s just that you’re shy. Like I said. You’re carrying some shit with you. Anyway. See that?’

He pointed to a shrub that flowered brightly even at night, the thickly-petalled blossoms a red so deep they looked like velvet.

‘I made that.’

‘What?’ Connor said, looking at him.

‘Uh huh. Okay, it grew itself, but I had a hand in it. I’m a horticulturalist, well, floriculture. Plant geneticist too but that sounds intense. Kara gets to test out some of the things I make.’

‘Plants that can adapt to the climate?’

‘Yeah,’ Luther said. ‘Mostly. That’s where the money is. Whether it’s hardy street trees or ornamentals for nurseries. I have some private orchid projects but that’s a whole other thing. You’re into forensics and criminology and stuff, right?’

Connor nodded absently, but he’d come to realise over the past few days that he wasn’t sure how much he liked it at all. He was okay at it, better than some of the human students around him, though not nearly as good as any of the androids. He enjoyed doing well in exams and he liked that it would give him tools to reach his father. But spending so much time away from campus – months and months now – he’d come to realise that he didn’t think of the world like someone who loved those sciences. Even when he saw crime scenes, he didn’t break them down the way he was taught to.

It was like it clung to the outside of him, but he couldn’t internalise it. His feelings about it were too hard to look at properly, and he didn’t know if he wanted to look at them now either.

‘I don’t think I’m into anything,’ Connor said finally. ‘I think that’s just me.’

‘What?’ Luther said. ‘Seriously? What about hobbies and shit?’

‘I worked on my father’s cold cases,’ Connor said. And jerked off and went to Zeta and sometimes the other clubs. I like being spat on and tied up and hurt, and I like people calling me bitch or slut or
‘Whore. That’s just the tip of the iceberg.

Connor smiled quickly, bitterly, to himself.

‘But like… What about media? Like, TV or movies? Or comics and books? Or-?’

‘I don’t need any of those things,’ Connor said.

‘Everyone needs those things,’ Luther said. ‘Even androids need those things. Even though we technically don’t, we’re enriched by having them. People need enrichment.’

‘Like plants,’ Connor said drily.

‘I mean if you want to be like that about it, sure. Like plants. I wasn’t gonna hit a ham-handed metaphor out there like you did, but I can plant metaphor you to death if you want to go there.’

Connor laughed in spite of himself, and Luther joined him a moment later.

‘Hank has hobbies,’ Connor said. ‘Or he did. I saw the piano. Does he play well?’

‘Does he ever,’ Luther sighed. ‘God, we’d go over sometimes, and it was like having your own private concert. He can sing too. Though he does that less. That earthy blues voice though.’

‘Don’t all androids sing in perfect pitch?’

‘Yeah, but we don’t all enjoy doing it. And Hank had a way of making it his. It’s not about making it perfect, it’s about making it real. Hank could do that. He’s a very human android. Or he was. I don’t know what he is now.’

Connor swallowed. ‘Do you think it was wrong that we made him deviant again?’

‘No!’ Luther said, turning and staring at Connor like he thought he was going to go and change what he’d done immediately. ‘No. It’s not that. Ah, it’s my own shit. I’m angry with him. And I couldn’t handle it. A walking ghost, man. That’s what he became. I can’t say that’s against nature because I’m not sure how much we’re nature, even though all of our components come from nature just…in a very refined, complex way. And we used to talk a lot, sometimes, about random shit, and he hasn’t called me once. He didn’t call me once, even after Cole…”

Connor felt his skin prickle, a cold shiver move over him and he stared down at his knees. ‘What happened to Cole?’

‘It’s funny, you know. We always feared it would be the cartels, or whatever…organisations the Andersons were involved in. That was what got Cole’s father, you know? Shot in broad daylight, a drive-by hit, his son standing next to him. Hank took forty of the bullets, covered them both, but you can’t do much to stop someone dedicated with an automatic weapon, you know. We thought Hank was done for, those bullets got every part of him. He spent a month in CyberLife after that.’

Connor couldn’t think of what to say. He imagined it, the blue blood coming from all those bullet wounds. The ripped apart pieces of him and the dead father beneath him. Did Cole cry or scream? Did he think he’d lost Hank too?

‘Hank was different after that. Guiltier. Like he could’ve done more when no one blamed him. But after that he protected Cole like…” Luther made a rumbling, pensive sound and shifted on the bench, which groaned beneath them. ‘But it wasn’t the organisations. They tried, god did they – and so Hank bought a new house under another name, in a new neighbourhood, and god knows what he
did to keep that house off most records while still paying his bills and his taxes but- I mean I didn’t get involved.’

Luther laughed.

‘Hank doesn’t always do things by the book.’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ Connor said, and then rubbed at the back of his neck. ‘He’s like that a lot?’

‘Well the thing was, he was changing. He kind of turned into a dad. Like, we met him back when he wasn’t Cole’s adopted father and he was a bodyguard. And he was good with Cole and stuff, and we sometimes saw him standing around the school, but he was like…awkward.’

‘Awkward?’

‘Not shy like you, or me, just awkward. But anyway, I’m avoiding my point because I don’t want to get there. Cole was killed in a car accident. Just a normal- not that it’s ever normal, and I dunno if that was better or worse than criminals getting to him, but to Hank… And he blames himself. I never got the full picture, but I think either they fought beforehand, or Cole ran off across a busy street and Hank couldn’t get to him in time. He won’t say. He never said. He powered himself down as soon as they made the time of death pronouncement.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah, just…put himself in sleep mode. They let that go for a few days but you know, a funeral to organise, Alice was devastated, there were things to sort out. So they force booted him, and he made himself do all of that. But force booting is hard for us, and even that cut him deep. But…man, people cry about it you know. They get upset. But the way Hank gets upset is bad.’

‘I don’t think there’s a normal way to get upset about something like that,’ Connor said.

‘Sure. I get that. I just think he’s not done with it yet.’

‘With being upset?’

‘Yeah. He’s not done with it yet. I hated what he did, the way he left us in the end. But I also knew if he was ever brought back, he’d have shit to deal with. And he’s alone in that huge house with Cole’s room right there. Kara said he’s never changed it. I don’t like it.’

‘I don’t like it either.’

‘Right,’ Luther said. ‘Do you think you want to go back there? Kara said you and Hank have a…tricky past.’

Tricky?’

‘That’s the word she used.’

Connor smirked a little, then shrugged. ‘I don’t know. We have a case to work on. I think it would be better if he didn’t try and erase his consciousness again. I sort of miss living there, but I don’t know if he wants me there.’

‘I’m going to give you some advice I’m not taking myself because this is so much easier to say and I don’t want to do it,’ Luther laughed at himself. ‘Hank was sometimes okay at answering direct questions. I mean sometimes he’d just stare at you, like, that was a thing he did. But he won’t
volunteer information, especially to humans, without being asked first. He never learned how. Not properly. You can’t think he knows how to talk to you, because he doesn’t.’

‘You don’t want to talk to him?’

Luther was silent for a long time, then said: ‘You know we have this book for Alice, about sharing emotions, and why it’s good. I’m scared, man. What if he’s back, and he goes away again? I can’t do that. But what if he needs me, and we both don’t know? Or what if it would help Kara? Or even Alice? But I’m scared. I never expected to find such a good buddy in someone like Hank, but once you get past some of those walls of his, he’s so loyal it hurts.’

‘How loyal can he be if he’s not here? Or…talking to you?’

‘That’s just it,’ Luther said. ‘It’s his version. And his version of loyalty is believing we’re better off without him, so he doesn’t reach out. He thought that even before Cole died. He didn’t understand why we’d want him around, this, y’know, musical, wry guy who was built to a kind of violent, hostile template, who was figuring out the world and his place in it. He didn’t see his bravery or loyalty as good things because I think…he just thinks that’s his wiring, he can’t help it, so it doesn’t count. I don’t think he hated himself, he just didn’t really… You know he was like you. He was in the house sometimes, but he didn’t understand how to be in it. That was why he liked his own house, he’s a lot more comfortable there.’

‘I like it too,’ Connor said. He chewed on the inside of his cheek.

‘If he wants you back,’ Luther said, ‘you can go with my blessing, I dunno about Kara’s. But definitely mine. And if he doesn’t, Connor, you can stay here y’know? You might not know how to fit in here, and I don’t know what those reasons are, but you’re good company, and Alice thinks you’re the best.’

Luther stayed outside a little longer. He talked about the plants he made, his job as a geneticist, and Connor was surprised that his own university background made the questions he asked not…entirely useless. Soon after that, Luther went inside and Connor leaned back in the chair and rested his arms along the back of it. The forty eight hours were already up and waiting for Hank to contact him first was just painful.

* 

That night he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He researched the case on his phone and texted North instead.

*Are you able to get me the contact number or names of the people who were originally involved in writing Hank’s eversion software?*

He was surprised when she called.

‘Yeah, sure,’ she said as soon as he picked up. ‘Where’ve you been? What’s been going on?’

‘I’m at a friend of Hank’s,’ Connor said, looking towards the closed bedroom door. He was lying flat on his bed and Sumo had fallen asleep with his head resting on the mattress, his heavy breathing translating into light snoring. Connor sometimes reached out and played with the soft, loose skin of his forehead, which had been the thing to lull Sumo to sleep in the first place. ‘A family. They’re nice.’

‘Okay,’ North said, in that way that meant she didn’t know what to say at all. ‘Are you ever going to come in again?’
‘It hasn’t been that long,’ Connor said.

‘That’s true, maybe I’m just remembering the months before where we didn’t see you.’

‘I wasn’t studying,’ Connor said. ‘I couldn’t be useful. It was better—’

‘Nope,’ North said. ‘You were avoiding us.’

‘I was avoiding campus. You were all on campus.’

‘That makes sense as an excuse riieeeight up until the point where you never called us or invited us out to meet you somewhere or invited us over.’

Connor scowled ahead at the top of the cupboard in front of him. ‘Can you remind me why I like you again?’

‘Because I’m a bitch and you love it,’ North said, laughing instead of arguing with him. ‘Connor, someone needs to balance out Markus and Simon’s saccharine bullshit and unfortunately it’s me, okay? Also you’re basically using me for case research, so fair’s fair.’

Connor didn’t know what to say to that, but his face relaxed again and he turned to face Sumo. He reached out and started playing with the soft fur on his forehead again and Sumo sighed heavily out of his nose and Connor tried not to think about the thick lumps of drool that were probably staining the bedspread even as he slept. Sumo was a drool machine.

‘I don’t think I’m cut out for forensics,’ Connor said. ‘Or any of it.’

‘I know,’ North said without missing a beat.

Connor stilled. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I know. Your heart was never in it. You were good at it because you’d be good at anything you studied. Statistically, you will always excel in any field you pursue, especially the sciences. That’s just how you are. Took you long enough to realise.’

‘Do you think you could have told me?’

‘No?’ North said, sounding indignant. ‘Would you have even listened? You were feeding yourself so much bullshit you couldn’t open your mouth to eat the truth too.’

‘I don’t like you very much,’ Connor said.

‘You’ve developed more personality over the last week than you have in like the two years I’ve known you,’ North said, and then she laughed, but the sound wasn’t mean or caustic.

‘Have you all known?’ Connor said.

‘Yeah,’ North said. ‘Of course we did.’

Connor pressed a hand to the sinking feeling in his chest, it ached. ‘Then why did you allow me to keep visiting all the time? Why not find someone more suitable for some of the tasks I was doing?’

‘Because, Connor, you’re our friend. You know, friend? That thing we’d want even if you didn’t come back to the lab ever again?’

No, Connor didn’t understand that at all. He felt a chill steal over him. What value did he bring
them? How could he keep being their friend if he stopped his degree and pulled out entirely? And why was he thinking of doing that anyway? It must be the post-traumatic stress. It wasn’t that severe, but maybe it was changing his attitude towards things he wanted to do. Maybe he shouldn’t make any major decisions until he’d finished his degree and figured things out with…

…With his father.

That’s never going to happen.

‘Connor?’ North said.

‘Yes?’

A long silence followed, but Connor didn’t care. He was lost in trying to understand what it would even look like, the four of them spending time together without that one interest uniting them. They didn’t know much about him that they hadn’t figured out for themselves with their incredible processors, and he didn’t know how to talk to people like a proper friend. He surrounded himself with androids, because they were often as bad at small talk as he was, it lifted the obligation.

‘You’re our friend,’ North said. ‘I can be shitty about it sometimes, and Markus can be smothering and Simon would adopt you if he could. If you came back tomorrow and said you wanted to paint ugly still life pictures with your fingers the most important part to us would be that you came back.’

It sounded false, like the kind of thing someone might say in a movie or television show, but not the kind of thing that counted in reality. He wondered if that was a flaw in her programming, or if it was something else. It didn’t matter.

She sighed and changed the subject, asking about the case. Connor was grateful, but disturbed too, trying to work out where her words fit in his picture of her and their friendship.

*

In the end, Connor couldn’t bring himself to contact Hank until the next day. He waited until Alice was at school and Kara and Luther were at work. He sat on the bed, thinking this was remarkably like how he spent a lot of his time at home; on his bed, legs bent and his head propped up against the pillows, staring at a screen.

Just the idea of contacting Hank sent a weird thrill of fear and arousal through him. Nervously, he pressed the call button for Hank’s number and put the phone to his ear, listening to the dial tone.

It rung out.

Connor sagged back and pressed his phone to his belly, then lowered it slowly to where he was already half-hard. It didn’t take much. He was alone, Sumo was sleeping somewhere else, and Connor wondered if Hank would have fucked him by now if he’d been staying back at Hank’s house. Probably? Ever since his conversation with Luuk, he was acutely aware of how many boxes Hank ticked, how many invisible requirements Connor had, that Hank met.

He slipped the fingers of his other hand beneath his jeans, into the cramped space. He stroked them over the shape of his cock through his briefs. He slumped down entirely until he was lying down, legs together to give him more room to manoeuvre in his tight jeans, liking the way the fabric chafed, the way his cock had no room to grow comfortably.

With his other hand, he brought the instant message screen up and feeling like a fool, wrote:
I haven’t let myself come once, Sir.

He pressed send.

Only seconds later, his phone rang. Connor let it ring three times, already feeling like he couldn’t go through with this, and then finally he answered and pressed the phone to his ear.

‘Is that so?’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘The forty eight hours is up.’

‘I didn’t fucking tell you that you couldn’t come, Connor. Outside of like, scenes, I didn’t give you that rule.’

‘I know, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘But do you like it?’

The silence had Connor both cringing and tracing the shape of himself through the fabric of his underwear.

‘Luuk said we should talk,’ Connor said.

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said, sounding sceptical. ‘You know I can tell you’re aroused through the phone, don’t you?’

‘No,’ Connor said.

‘It’s in your voice. The decibel register changes. That first ‘Yes, Sir’ gave you away, Connor, you’re such a fucking slut you’d roll over for anyone.’

‘Do you like it?’ Connor said.

‘Do I like some twink on the other end of the line, hard for me? It’s not bad, that’s for sure.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Nah, you’re not asking the questions. How hard are you?’

‘Nearly all the way now,’ Connor said.

‘Great, but you keep forgetting to say ‘Sir,’ I forgot how disrespectful you could be. I’m not letting you get away with that, boy.’

Connor grimaced because he hated how easy he was. Hank knew. He just knew. Connor slid down until his head wasn’t even on the pillows anymore. He wished he wasn’t here, he wanted to be there. He wanted to move back in. He had to talk to Hank. But this was so much easier. This promised not having to think and he knew when a Dom was eager. Hank might hate him the rest of the time, but he was eager.

There was no way he should feel so thrilled at the idea of Hank being disappointed in him in this context, but he wanted to know what he’d ask for through the phone when he wasn’t there in person to punish him.

‘What are you wearing?’ Hank said, his voice not suggestive or seductive, but a firm command. He was assessing the lay of the land. ‘And who’s home?’

‘No one,’ Connor said. ‘Sumo. Jeans, briefs, shirt, Sir.’
‘Take your jeans off,’ Hank said. ‘Put the phone down and be quick about it.’

Connor put the phone down and scrambled to take his jeans off, dropping them off the side of the bed before picking the phone up again. His heart beat a mixture of nerves and want, and he looked towards the door even though no one was home.

‘Done, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Brief’s still on?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Great, they’ll keep your dick in place when you slap it for me.’

Connor’s fingers tightened on the phone and his eyes widened. His silence must have been what Hank was expecting, because a beat later, Hank’s throaty, satisfied laughter came through the line directly into his ear. When that ended, the silence stretched and Connor knew that Hank was waiting for him to say something, do something. He was already paralysed. He wanted Hank to be the one making him, he didn’t want to be the one doing it to himself.

‘I can come over, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Ha, nah, even if you were here I think I’d still want you to slap your own cock, Connor. Want to know how many tries it will take of you wimping out on yourself before I hear you do it the way I would. You know I’ll be able to tell if you’re exaggerating your response, right? Honestly, you probably will anyway. You won’t be able to help it. You’ll start weak, but don’t worry, you’ll finish strong.’

‘I…’ Connor’s cock twitched, but the fingers of his other hand curled away from his cock. He didn’t love cock and ball torture. He had a strong suspicion Hank knew:

‘It’s a punishment, Connor,’ Hank drawled. ‘What’d you expect?’

‘I only wanted you to know that I hadn’t.’

‘That you’re so desperate you’ll give all of your orgasms to me even when I didn’t ask for it? Connor, that’s not a gift from someone like you. That’s just a sign of how much you need me.’

Connor’s spare hand came up and dragged through his hair, down his face.

‘What did you want?’ Hank rumbled. ‘Maybe if you’d asked, I would’ve told you get off three times a day.’

‘Would you, Sir?’ Connor said breathlessly.

‘Guess you’ll never know now, will you?’

They both knew the answer was ‘no.’

‘Connor,’ Hank said, his voice low, ‘you have to start some time. Or you can hang up, I guess. Or we can talk about the case? Maybe you want to do that?’

Connor swallowed, his throat dry. No he…didn’t exactly want to do that, not right now. He was stuck.

‘Or you can fucking slap your cock,’ Hank said, his voice snapping through, suddenly impatient.
Connor held his breath. It was going to go exactly how Hank said it would go. He raised his hand, felt it hovering above himself, felt the way his shoulder and elbow locked up. He clenched the phone in his other hand. Inhaling sharply to brace himself, he closed his eyes and at the third time telling himself to just get it done, he dropped his hand and pulled the slap at the last moment.

It was still a shock, still stung faintly, a promise of what was to come. He’d barely hit himself at all.

Through Connor’s shaky exhale, Hank said: ‘Are you even trying?’

‘I’m not…’ Connor bit his lower lip. ‘You didn’t see my file did you? You only have what Luuk told you, in your head?’

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said. ‘Hit it again. You think that cock of yours is worth anything more? Come on, you have your words.’

Connor almost wanted to throw the phone across the room. He hated that. It was a lot more fun to protest without being told that he had reasons to not protest.

Connor raised his hand, swung it down, but pulled the slap again. The sting was still there, it was going to start hurting anyway, soon. He couldn’t pretend he was Hank. He pushed back up the bed until he could shove half his head beneath the pillow burning with the kind of shame that made him want to squirm.

‘I don’t do this,’ Connor said roughly. ‘Can’t you do it?’

‘Listen,’ Hank said. ‘Can you hear it? In the distance, the sound of how much I’m going to fuck you up for all the times you’re forgetting to say Sir. Now, answer me this, are there any plastic rulers in the house? I seem to remember Kara had one.’

Connor knew where it was. Could see it vividly in his mind, resting in the multicoloured cup on the coffee table that was more of a craft table in the living room.

‘I can’t do that,’ Connor said. ‘That’s…dirty.’

‘That’s why they invented antibacterial cleaning sprays,’ Hank said. ‘Go get it.’

‘Hank…’

‘Oh boy,’ Hank said, and then he started laughing, the sound unexpected and broad. ‘Oh, Connor. Fuck, on a scale of one to ten, how much do you want me to destroy you? Just go and get the fucking ruler, shit.’

Connor put the phone down and told himself that really, if he wanted to, he could just hang up. He could just use one of his words. He could do anything other than get up and walk down the corridor in only his shirt and briefs and slip the plastic ruler from its cup, his hand shaking. It was mortifying. Hank was probably doing it because it was awful, and Connor was participating because… because…

He thought of his conversation with Luuk and shook his head. Well, it was true then, sometimes he did hate it in the moment, despite the anticipation, despite the promise in Hank’s sure attitude.

He lay back on the bed with the ruler in his hand, thinking he’d have to snap it to pieces afterwards, say it was an accident – blame Sumo! – and buy them a new one. Thinking that maybe Hank wanted him to think about this every time he saw it. When he picked up the phone again, he could see the ruler as it trembled in his grip. Even if he pulled his slaps now, it was still going to hurt.
‘I’m back,’ Connor said. ‘Sir.’

‘I want to hear it,’ Hank said. ‘Or I’m going to hang up on you and you can’t fucking jack off on your own.’

Connor stared at the ruler. He shifted down the bed once more, grit his teeth together. Best to just get it over and done with. It wasn’t fair that his cock was so hard. If he was a different person, he’d be running, screaming. Instead, there was just that alarm mingled with anticipation and nausea and wanting to know what Hank’s reaction would be if he did it right.

He lifted the ruler and swallowed down a strangled noise. There was nothing dignifying about this. Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad as he thought.

He snapped the ruler down in a single, sharp movement and managed not to tense.

He’d misjudged. The sound of the plastic hitting flesh was far, far too loud. The ruler hit too hard, Connor knew even before the pain struck. Could feel the mistake of it even through the fabric. Then, it barrelled into him and he gasped and dropped the phone, rolling to his side, knees curling up as he keened. He could hear Hank’s voice through the phone, but Connor clutched the ruler to his face and pushed a guttural sound out of his throat and wanted to touch his cock to soothe it even as he knew that was the last thing he should do. The pain was too sharp, too bright, and Connor rode it out, half wanting to laugh at himself.

Maybe Hank would’ve done it that hard anyway.

Eventually he reached for the phone, breathing hard, and Hank was silent on the other end for a while.

‘Well,’ Hank said.

‘I can’t do that again, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Are you bleeding?’

Connor winced, and then dropped the ruler and slipped his other hand between his legs so he could check. No. He wasn’t. He wasn’t as hard as before, but he was still hard. The sting was slowly beginning to fade, leaving a throbbing, duller pain behind it.

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Good boy,’ Hank said. ‘Do it again.’

Connor cringed at the thought.

‘Yellow, Sir,’ Connor whispered, and then he didn’t move, not knowing what would happen next. He expected Hank to just tell him to do it again. Gavin would have done it harder just to prove that Connor didn’t need those words in the first place.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, ‘that was pretty hard, huh? You went from zero to a hundred, just like that. Could you use your hand again?’

‘Maybe, Sir,’ Connor whispered.

‘Do you need to do something else? Or you think you could handle less intensity? You can control your hand better.’
‘Maybe, Sir,’ Connor whispered. It was hard to say yes to something that he knew would hurt. Or, perhaps, it was hard when he had to do it to himself. Better when someone else was making him, and he could pretend he’d never agree to it otherwise.

‘Hmm,’ Hank said. Then: ‘You know, it’s easier with androids. I can just grab their wrist, interface with them directly. It was one of the hottest parts, what I knew, what I saw.’

Connor closed his eyes and thought maybe he should hang up now.

‘This is different,’ Hank said. ‘I’m not used to it, but it’s still fucking hot. But I can’t know things in the same way, can’t see anything at all right now. You gotta talk to me, and you have to say more than fucking maybe.’

‘Or you could be with an android.’

‘I know that,’ Hank said, like Connor was five years old. ‘But I’m on the phone with you. You make good sounds. Should’ve heard yourself. So, I guess, yes or no questions that you can’t answer with a fucking maybe, and that way I’ll learn something. Is hurting your cock off the table?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Hitting it with the ruler?’

‘Not yet, Sir.’

Hank made a throaty, appreciative sound and Connor felt like melting at the idea of pleasing him with his pain.

‘Squeezing, pinching, slapping?’

‘I can do those, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘I bet you can,’ Hank said. ‘Okay, good enough, I want you to jack yourself off for a bit. Go on.’

Connor sighed into the languid movement of his arm, curling his fingers around himself, feeling the place that would be bruised from where the ruler hit. There was already a welt. He sagged down into the bed, his hand was slow. It was tempting to push for an orgasm immediately, but despite craving it, he tried to imagine what Hank wanted for him instead.

‘We should be talking about the case, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Hank said. ‘Later. So why haven’t you let yourself come, anyway? You’re not into that. Did you think I’d be mad?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said, realising it was true. He didn’t think Hank would care much either way.

‘Did you think I’d be proud?’ Hank said. His voice was neutral. It was so, so tempting to lie in the face of that indifference.

‘I…hoped, Sir,’ Connor said, his voice twisting away into nothing. Then he took a deep breath as pleasure snaked fingers through him, riding the stinging, bruising pain in his cock and reaching farther than normal because of it.

‘I am,’ Hank said. ‘In a way. Always nice when a bitch like you offers what you’re supposed to.’

Connor’s mouth opened and he arched up into his own touch and breathed through the sound he
wanted to make.

‘How you feeling?’

‘Good, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘I bet. Your poor hungry cock. It’s time to stop, Connor. I want you to pinch up the skin beneath the head instead. Make sure you use your nails, not the skin of your fingers.’

Connor stopped when Hank told him to – he’d been expecting it, after all – and then hesitantly pinched up the skin, changing the angle of his fingers until he got it right. It was awkward beneath his briefs, but it meant that he didn’t have to hold his cock in the right position with his other hand.

‘How hard, Sir?’ Connor said.

‘Increase the pressure slowly. I’ll tell you when to stop.’

Connor swallowed and brought his nails together carefully, inexorably, and it swiftly went from just a noticeable sensation, to a fractious pain that made his breathing quicken. Hank said nothing. Connor kept going until his next breath was thin, the one after that strangled into a whimper.

‘Stop,’ Hank said. ‘Let go.’

Connor realised he was shaking as he let go. He wanted to do everything Hank told him to do. Wanted to be back in that house with Hank deciding what he’d eat, when he woke up, and the idea was terrifying, because he’d never thought he was the kind of person who wanted the kind of Dom, the kind of Master who would have that kind of control over him. Really, he’d only ever wanted casual scenes and that was it.

‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘Do it again. Start slow, I’ll tell you when to stop. Same place as before.’

So Connor did it again, and the pain accelerated quickly this time now that the skin was sensitised. He wanted to beg, but didn’t. But he couldn’t stop the way his breathing changed, couldn’t stop the fast sips of air he started taking. Hank left him there, bruising himself, before he said:

‘Good. Stop. You still hard?’

‘Y-Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, dazed.

He could feel it already. He only had to focus on the sensations in his body and Hank’s voice on the phone. He forgot about the strata of humiliation that had dogged him before, thinking shamefuly that he was a guest in someone’s house and still indulging himself like this, thinking that it was wrong to use the ruler, thinking that Alice’s room was just across from his, always thinking.

Those wayward strands beginning to ball together, his breathing coming easy and deep when he was allowed to stop hurting himself.

‘Okay,’ Hank said.

Connor liked hearing that. Liked hearing that brusque acknowledgement. Hank wasn’t the kind to talk superfluously. It was maybe that he was an android, but Connor remembered Luther saying that Hank was awkward and he wondered if that was a part of it. Maybe Hank’s programming made it hard for him to say what didn’t need to be said anyway. Aside from his punctuations of swearing and blasphemy, Hank was an efficient speaker. Luuk poured praise over Connor, Hank spoke in bare bones. Connor trusted it more.
He didn’t think Hank would lie to him, the thought was shocking.

‘You’re going to slap your cock five times,’ Hank said. ‘And I want at least one of those times to be
the head of your cock. The rest can be the shaft, whatever. Go on, Connor. Torture yourself for me.
Or are you so useless that you can’t?’

It galvanised him, made him want to prove himself against it, and he shifted the phone so that it was
resting against his ear – held there with his shoulder – and he could use his other hand to position his
cock properly. He’d be slapping the underside, which meant he’d be slapping the bruises he’d given
himself. He wouldn’t pull his slaps like before even though he knew it would hurt.

He didn’t wait for Hank to tell him to start. After all, Hank had told him what he wanted him to do.

The first two slaps were light, though not as weak as before, and they still hurt. He used the tips of
his fingers for control, but it also made it sting more. He aimed for the shaft, and then the next harder
slap, he groaned, feeling the way his balls jostled. He cried out on the fourth, the fifth, and then
abruptly realised he hadn’t slapped the head of his cock and made a sound of despair before he even
made contact for a sixth strike.

That made him yelp.

‘I forgot, Sir,’ he gasped and then moaned, strained, because he felt overheated and sore, wrung out
already.

‘Good,’ Hank said softly, almost like he was testing out the tone of voice. ‘Pull your briefs off and
jerk yourself off again. However slowly you have to go so you don’t come.’

Connor wriggled until he could get his briefs down to his thighs, working one-handed, and then
wrapped his fingers around himself and started moving. He had to go much slower than normal, the
heat in his cock from the pain translating easily to lust, to a pleasure that pushed him faster towards
coming. He couldn’t run his palm over the head of himself, he couldn’t aim for the most pleasurable
places. He was still making sounds like he was close.

‘Are you going to let me come, Sir? Later?’

‘Later today?’ Hank said, and from the wicked tone in Hank’s voice, Connor made a brief, pleading
sound.

‘Please, Sir.’

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘You forgot to say Sir all those times, Connor. And even if you hadn’t, it’s so
pretty when you beg the way you do. And you’re just that desperate, aren’t you? You’ll do that for
me, won’t you? So easy, Connor, you’d do this for anyone.’

‘Not anyone, Sir,’ Connor said, not quite aware of what he’d said until he said it. His hand slowed
further, but he kept jacking himself off, Hank had told him to.

Hank was silent for long enough that Connor knew he’d said the wrong thing, he waited, dreading
what might come next. He’d broken the script. He was supposed to say that he would do this for
anyone. He was supposed to be the easy slut, and he was supposed to burn for it and find it harder to
control himself because of it. For the most part it was true, he’d do a lot of things for Doms; filthy,
disgusting things, mortifying and humiliating things, but…

…No, not this. Connor was too greedy for his own pleasure. Even after Zlatko – don’t think about
that – when he couldn’t visit the clubs properly, when he’d struggled, he’d still jerked off. The
release was distracting, the pleasure brief, but sometimes it was all he had. Sometimes it was the only halfway good thing in his day.

‘Just me, huh?’ Hank said. ‘Or maybe just any daddy?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said, cheeks burning. Now wasn’t the time that he wanted to think about the types of guys he could be attracted to. Once, when he only knew ‘Anders’ as his gruff voice and his hard hands, Connor had still wanted him, wanted to know how hard it would be to please him. Wanted to know if he could be pleased and wanted to be the one that managed it.

‘You don’t want me, Connor,’ Hank said gruffly. ‘I want you crying for me more than I want your orgasms.’

‘Y-Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘You in that car, crying sweetly because I wouldn’t let you come, because your throat must’ve felt like it had razors in it. God fucking damn it, you don’t want that as much as I want that.’

‘I have to stop,’ Connor gasped abruptly, Hank’s words winnowing their way into him with horrifying images that made him so hard the pain in his cock came back, the pressure expanded sharply, he knew... ‘I’m going to come, Sir.’

‘No stopping,’ Hank said. ‘Go slower.’

‘Sir.’

‘Use one finger if you have to, keep touching yourself.’

So Connor went down to two fingers – index and middle finger pressed together – and kept going, his breath shuddering in his lungs. He wanted, so badly, to come.

‘Would you punish me if I came, Sir?’ Connor said.

Hank was silent for a long time, and Connor was sure he knew the answer.

‘No,’ Hank said after a while, like he was surprised at his own response. ‘But I won’t be happy.’

‘You’re...never happy, Sir.’

Another lingering silence, and it was too much, Connor was breaking the script again. If he was in a casual scene, this would be when he begged to come, and the Dom enjoyed telling him no, and Connor waited in their metaphorical grasp to decide his fate while he said all the right words. He’d been called a slut so many times by people who had never met him, didn’t know if he was or not, that he understood the game of it.

With Hank, it was different. It hooked into him and every silence after Connor spoke made him shrink in mortification, worried that he’d ruined it even as he kept touching himself. That was its own humiliation, too.

‘Y’know,’ Hank said, ‘that may be true. Let’s try this then. Connor, if you make yourself come, I will shove your sad little dick in an automatic milking sleeve for a solid four hours because obviously if you’re that desperate, a milking sleeve would be fine for you, wouldn’t it? Wouldn’t you like that? I wouldn’t even stay. I’d just watch through a camera I think. You could handle that on your own, couldn’t you?’
Connor held his breath in horror. *Four hours.*

He almost stopped touching himself.

‘I bet,’ Hank purred, ‘that if I was there, right now, I would’ve *smelled* the change in atmosphere, Jesus, what a shame. Instead, I’m just going to have to imagine the look on your face. You’d start crying after thirty minutes.’

‘I promise I won’t come, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘I know,’ Hank said, sounding smug. ‘You think I’m torturing you now, you don’t even know, boy.’

There was still a part of him that wanted to try it, in a distant, thrill-seeking way. That wanted to be pushed so far past his limits he’d probably lose consciousness. Hank was an android with a capacity to read more into physiological responses than most, he’d know when Connor was in a truly unsafe place. Until then, anything aside from Connor’s safewords…

‘Tell me the first kinky thing you ever experienced, that you did to yourself,’ Hank demanded.

‘I tried coming twice in a row,’ Connor said. ‘It wasn’t that kinky, Sir.’

‘Could you do it?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said, now curling three fingers around himself. He half-listened out for the sounds of anyone returning, even though no one should. ‘It was the first time I learned what it felt like, and I couldn’t do it to myself. I was only thirteen.’

‘Tell me what it felt like.’

‘I remember biting my lip really hard, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘I just tried to push through it, and thought it’d be worth it, and had read that teenagers found it easier anyway, but it started to hurt really fast. I remember I shook a lot. And then felt like I’d failed, and I don’t think I jerked off for a couple of days after.’

‘Anyone ever done that to you since?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Made you come twice in a row?’

‘Made me wish it was impossible, Sir,’ Connor said.

Hank laughed, and Connor knew this was what it was like with most people. They didn’t read it off a list in some BDSM club, they learned things organically. Either in a conversation at a place like a café, or over the phone, or in person, or bit by bit. Hank was seeing the whittled down shape of him and learning what was left over.

‘Get the ruler,’ Hank said, and Connor swallowed the thick wave of dread even as he reached for it. ‘Hold your cock, slap the head with it.’

‘*Sir.*’

‘You can do it, Connor,’ Hank said, his voice low and promising, not a threat, but some locus of certainty that Connor wished he shared.

So Connor, after several deep breaths, did it. Not as hard as before, it didn’t have to be when it was a
plastic ruler. Connor jerked his hands back automatically, the ruler fell onto his torso and his knees pulled up to his chest.

‘Ah!’

‘Good boy,’ Hank said, and Connor leaned into the phone, turned onto his side like he could push his way through it and rest his head against Hank instead. The pain was overwhelming. Bright and awful, resting upon all the other sensations that were swirling inside of him. ‘You’re fine. You’re fine.’

Connor’s eyes were burning but yes, he was fine. He wanted Hank to fuck him. His mouth, his ass, his hand, it didn’t matter.

‘I want…’

‘To come?’ Hank said.

‘I want to be there, Sir,’ Connor said, his voice wretched.

‘Jerk yourself off again,’ Hank said, without skipping a beat. Somehow that was worse than Hank telling him that it wasn’t going to happen, or turning silent for a moment. Connor still moved his hand automatically, feeling that he was the android, and Hank was the one who had control of him. His mind swooped as soon as he thought of it. He’d discovered a fantasy he was probably going to jerk off to one day.

If he ever let himself jerk off on his own again.

He moved his fingers carefully and winced, because he was bruised. The thick pain of it worsening. He could still come, wanted to know what it felt like to ride those strong, muscular pulses while his cock burned in his hand. His mouth opened on his panting, unable to keep himself in check anymore.

‘Get yourself really close this time, Connor,’ Hank said, his voice deeper than before. ‘As close as you dare. And then I want you to make yourself stop. You’d do that for me, wouldn’t you, boy? Because you coming isn’t worth dick to me. But you doing this?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said moving his hand faster, harder, feeling like he was freefalling. ‘I’m already… I’m already…’

‘I know,’ Hank said.

Connor’s legs were trembling, his toes curled, a cold sweat had stuck curls of his hair down to his forehead and they itched and he wanted to brush them away but he couldn’t do anything except focus on the raw, hungry pleasure that ate up his pain and shoved it through him, far more violent and demanding than any pain-free pleasure he’d ever known.

‘I’m already…’ Connor breathed. I’m already so close.

How close could he get? He hated this game. Better when someone else did it. Better when they judged his responses and didn’t push him as close as he would, or stopped so early that it wouldn’t be that much of a challenge.

He focused all his attention on that line. Close enough to edge it, but not enough to cross it. That would be the work of seconds. He could cheat and stop now, he’d still suffer plenty for Hank. But he was determined to do it properly. Determined to lay himself out like that, even as he was certain
Hank wouldn’t know the exact difference. Closer and closer, the pleasure eating him, eating his thoughts, until he could only tremulously hold onto the thread of his focus.

Connor cried out twice, once because the pleasure was peaking, the second time because of the desolation of knowing he had to take his hand away. One second, another, he let go of himself and gripped his hip so hard he bruised himself.

‘No, no, no,’ he gasped, over and over again, thinking that Hank didn’t matter, and none of it mattered, and all he had to do was touch himself and it would be over. His heart pounded sickeningly, his gut wrenched, his balls hurt.

‘Good boy,’ Hank was saying, and it wasn’t enough. He didn’t want that now. He wanted to come.

‘Sir!’ Connor barked through the phone. A single, impossible demand.

‘No,’ Hank said implacably. ‘Settle down.’

A minute where it ripped all the way through him, and on his first unlocked exhale, he was still close, just not so close that it took over his every thought and breath.

‘Hit yourself with the ruler again,’ Hank said.

Connor laughed in weak, dismayed despair. ‘I can’t, Sir.’

‘Then use one of your-’

‘I’ll come,’ Connor said, his breath shaking.

‘What, from that?’ Hank said.

Connor didn’t think anything could really surprise Hank. Not with this. He curled in on his sore torso, his bruised, throbbing cock.

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, voice thread. ‘Yes. Probably. Not…normally, but…probably now.’

‘God,’ Hank said, ‘would I like to see that.’

But Hank didn’t ask for it, and Connor shuddered on strong waves into the bed, his body moving through a weak facsimile of the orgasm it had so desperately sought for. All those nerves inside of him still fizzling bright and hot, Connor overloaded and dragging the pillow down so he could hold onto it tightly. He dropped the phone without thinking, and muffled a long, broken moan into the pillow, miserable.

Why? Why was he giving this to Hank? Why?

Weakly, he picked up the phone again when he heard Hank’s voice, and he pressed it to his ear, even though he didn’t stop pressing his face against the pillow.

Hank took an audible breath. One of those breaths he didn’t need to take, unless he needed to cool his systems.

‘You did…really well, boy,’ Hank said. ‘Really fucking well.’

Oh, Connor realised, his arm convulsing around the pillow. So that’s what it feels like.

It cracked through him, louder and stronger than whatever physiological responses remained from
tormenting his cock. It was like lightning, not soft and pleasant, but strong and brutal.

*So this is what it feels like, to please him.*

‘R-really?’ Connor said, his voice muffled.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, like he was savouring the syllable. ‘You may have been scared sometimes, but you did everything I said. You did good, Connor.’

It was almost too much, from Hank. Connor’s eyes teared anew, for different reasons, and it was gratitude and pleasure and loss and desperation and a strange, wicked loneliness that reminded him he was on the phone, that the link between them was tenuous.

He’d die if Hank said these things to him in person. He wouldn’t be able to look at him again.

‘Focus on your breathing,’ Hank said, ‘nice and easy, now. You’ve got this.’

Connor nodded, focused on his breathing. He could feel – as he lost his erection – the place where he’d hit himself far too hard with the ruler the first time. The thing that had nearly ruined the entire scene.

As the lust within him banked, ebbed, a placid exhaustion followed. It was like white noise in his limbs and joints, a fuzz across the back of his closed eyes, a loosening of his thoughts so none of them connected together properly. His breathing slackened, he let the pillow fall to his side, he uncurled.

This… Well, he’d not experienced this in a while. He’d missed it.

‘Hank…’ he said, with no real intention behind it.

‘Yeah,’ Hank replied. But the word was an acknowledgement, not a response to a question that Connor wasn’t asking. It was like Hank knew. Which was impossible. Only five minutes ago he’d been surprised that Connor couldn’t hit himself with the plastic ruler that close to orgasm.

Connor would have come all over it.

‘You know,’ Hank said, ‘you never swear. Even when you’re close to coming. I think I want you to talk dirty to me sometimes, Connor. I think I want you to say *fuck.*’

‘If you ask me, Sir,’ Connor breathed.

He’d struggle with it, but he’d do it. He could say other things, like ‘cock’ and ‘dick’ with no problems. But actual cursing? That had always been a struggle, unless he was pretending to be someone else for a case.

Hank said nothing else, and Connor swallowed down thick saliva in a mostly dry mouth, thought he needed some water, thought it could wait.

‘Tired,’ Connor said softly.

‘You want to talk about the case now?’ Hank said.

Truthfully, Connor didn’t. He thought about the bodies in the evidence room. Thought about what his father had done – for the first time that day, his cheekbone flashed with pain, making Connor think it was psychological and *fake.* Thought about the threats and how large the case was in scope and he didn’t want to talk about the case at all.
‘No,’ Connor said softly.

‘You don’t?’ Hank said, and Connor could hear the shocked shift in his voice. It was easy for Connor to say he wanted to talk about it, but he hadn’t actually talked about it since seeing his father. It turned out, in the moment, he didn’t want to say a word.

‘It’s fine,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t want to think about all of the bodies. You can investigate it.’

‘Connor,’ Hank said, now sounding thoroughly confused. ‘What bodies? What are you-?’

‘Just think,’ Connor said, finding a mischievous thread inside of him and pulling it hard while he was too tired and dazed to mind. ‘If I was there, I could’ve sucked you off, Sir. But instead, I’m just going to hang up.’

‘Connor, hang on a fucking-’

‘You can come over,’ Connor said. ‘Sumo wants to see you anyway.’

Connor hung up the phone, put it on silent and dropped it next to him, knowing that he couldn’t just fall asleep. Not yet. He was too spaced to move, to get the ruler and clean it, to put his jeans on, to look at how red and angry and bruised his cock was in the mirror and savour it.

But he spent an hour happily riding a soft, empty space where he didn’t think about anything at all. His anxiety was only a mirage, easy to ignore. He didn’t care when Sumo plodded into the room and placed his head on the bed, he smiled when he rested his fingers on Sumo’s heavy, strong forehead, and he floated. He rested his other hand on his chest, liking the steady rise and fall, his own body for once not betraying him, instead offering him a hard won comfort that cast no guilt or shame.
Unwanted Vulnerability

Chapter Notes

Dare I say it, but amongst the angst, this chapter actually has some…*squints* fluff???
What??!? I…better make sure something terrible happens in the next chapter. (No, just kidding, something terrible was going to happen in the next chapter anyway).
Also remember when the chapters used to be shorter? I blame Hank for everything. And also me, I blame me too.

Hank didn’t end up coming over, not that Connor expected him to. He wasn’t the kind of Dom to cave to a bratty suggestion, he was the kind to pointedly not turn up, to remind a submissive that they didn’t call the shots. Connor kind of liked it.
The rest of the day was physically rough, mentally easy. After letting himself drift for an hour, reminding himself that he couldn’t sleep, he’d gotten up to disinfect the ruler. His cock hurt, the welt coming up angry and dark red, and when his penis went soft, it was a jarring line that throbbed. His balls felt swollen and he palmed them, wincing, before leaving them alone.
He showered off the layer of sweat, cleaned the ruler, put it back while his cheeks burned, and then he took one of Luther’s books – some psychological thriller set in the future – and went outside, flicking through the pages before he got bored, his mind too fuzzy to concentrate on the story. Instead he took slow deep breaths of chlorophyll rich air, he looked at the clouds drifting overhead and felt like he was one of them.
He’d done well. Hank said so. He’d done everything Hank had asked him to do, even when it was scary. Hank had said that too. Connor’s lower half ached, but his chest was warm, his mind clear.
*I did good*, he thought, echoing Hank’s phrase. *I did good. I did good.*
Sumo came out a little later and joined him. Connor ended up lying with his back against the grass, looking up at the sky and its thickening cloud cover, his head against Sumo’s belly.
That was how Kara and Alice found them both. She smiled as Sumo’s tail thumped the ground hard when he saw them. Sumo didn’t get up, and Connor waved, thinking that he should probably get up, or do something, but…everyone seemed okay with him just lying outside.
Alice ran over and placed her hands on Sumo’s head.
‘Can I lie down next to you?’ Alice said. ‘I’ll be super quiet.’
‘Okay,’ Connor said.
So Alice lay next to him, also resting her head on Sumo, and she lasted about five minutes before she started talking about what she’d learned at school. But Connor stared up at the sky and didn’t mind. He wondered what Hank was doing. If he’d gone and jerked himself off afterwards, if he was watching television or even playing piano. Connor wanted to be there, but for once, he was also
comfortable where he was.

*  

Two days later, thanks to the heap of information North sent him regarding names, contact numbers and details of the people who had worked on Hank’s reversion, Connor sat in a café near the CyberLife tower, waiting for a Jonathan Rushmore to join him for lunch. He had twenty four dollars left in his account, there would be bills for his apartment coming, and he had a whole eight dollars and fifty cents in his wallet, enough for a coffee, but he was going to see if he could get away with tap water.

Jonathan arrived ten minutes late, flustered and looking apologetic before he even opened his mouth.

‘Fuck, I’m so sorry. Shit, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t swear. I’ll shout you a coffee. How do you take it?’

Connor swallowed his pride and said: ‘Black, please.’

‘Yeah, great, give me a second and I’ll be right back.’

Jonathan dumped a laptop case and his jacket on the table, then hooked his wet umbrella over the chair before going straight up to order. Connor watched Jonathan at the counter, the long, lean shape of him, the floppy blond hair that had been caught in the rain despite the umbrella. Not really his type, not that it mattered, because Connor’s type was probably fastidiously cleaning his house or… Connor had no idea what Hank did in his downtime.

He knew that Hank would be pissed to learn that Connor was working on the case though.

Well, not really working on the case, just information gathering. It was fine.

The café was busy, but in that way where the noise surrounded him and felt inconsequential. The kind of café it was easy to be invisible in.

Jonathan came back with a table number, sat down in a flurry of movement, shifting the laptop case, the umbrella, his coat, piling everything on the floor. He had speckles of rain on his forehead and cheek, wiping at them ineffectually.

‘Something came up at work,’ Jonathan said.

‘Sure,’ Connor said. ‘Does that happen a lot?’

‘All the fucking time,’ Jonathan said, sitting back and sighing heavily. He looked around the café, his eyes narrowing, and for a moment his gaze was so sharp that Connor thought he was looking for someone and turned to look in the same direction. When Connor turned back, Jonathan was staring sharply at him. ‘You said you’ve had contact with the HK800?’

‘Sort of,’ Connor said evasively. ‘I know about him through work.’

‘Where do you work again?’

Connor brought out his police consultant identification that no longer let him into any official building, and Jonathan looked at it closely before nodding.

‘What do you want to know?’ Jonathan said.

‘Whatever you want to share,’ Connor said. ‘Was it difficult coding to write?’
‘Honestly, they act like twenty people worked on the project, but only three of us executed the actual code,’ Jonathan said, twitching when a waitress brought their coffees over. Jonathan wrapped his hands around the mug immediately, and then drank it while it was still steaming. In that moment, Connor knew Jonathan was human, not an android. ‘It was very hush hush, because we didn’t know if we could do it at all. We were lucky that the HK800 was expected to not survive the procedure, so even though there was pressure on us to keep it alive, it wasn’t like…crucial. We could be experimental in a way we’re not allowed to be on the rest of them.’

Connor nodded, carefully sipping his own coffee. The coffee was overbrewed and burnt, and Connor kind of liked it. The taste reminded him of the coffee at the precinct. He almost felt useful again.

‘Its coding was already damaged,’ Jonathan said. ‘That was part of the problem that we didn’t foresee until we started trying to marry our coding to the HK800’s.’

‘Damaged?’

‘They’d fixed it after it was shot in the line of work, but…that kind of wreckage leaves a kind of code- We call it code scarring. Have you heard of it?’

‘Once, in a lecture,’ Connor admitted.

Code scarring. When the AI interface created far too much junk code in its attempt to adjust to traumatising situations. It was the reason they thought the androids had turned Deviant in the first place. Code scarring creating too much junk that eventually clogged up the coding that was supposed to keep them docile.

‘It’s a bitch to deal with,’ Jonathan said, placing the mug of coffee down with a sharp sound. ‘Honestly, once they’re awakened, we’re not supposed to have anything to do with their code again. It’s just supposed to run until they junk themselves out of existence in like a century or whatever, in a normal way. They junk themselves like we oxidise our own bodies to death. It works, it’s comfortable, knowing they don’t get to live forever.’

‘You sound like you didn’t want to work on the project?’

‘I didn’t,’ Jonathan said, frankly. ‘It should’ve been shut down and processed for parts. Not that we’re really allowed to do that anymore either, unless an android ticks the box saying they allow it. But I’m good at junk code, probably because I hate it so much. The HK800 came to us damaged, we put in clean code, removed a lot of what we could, and honestly didn’t expect it to work.’

‘Maybe it hasn’t,’ Connor said. ‘What does it mean when the LED cycles at yellow all the time? I know that’s meant to be pressure on the system, but in this case…’

‘Was it doing that before? That you know of? When the HK800 left us, it was cycling at blue ninety five percent of the time, which was considered a whopping success let me tell you.’

‘Blue before,’ Connor said. ‘And then…it was made Deviant again, and since then…’

‘I’d heard rumours,’ Jonathan said, looking at his coffee. ‘That he turned up at CyberLife, but I wasn’t there that day, I was sick. I wish- It would have been good to run a full diagnostic but I heard he was turned away at the doors. Understandable. Liabilities and all that, we’re so off book with the HK800. And the LED is yellow all the time? That’s some central units under too much pressure, if it continues for much longer, it’ll start experiencing shut downs, aberrant behaviours, it may fry completely. It can be an end of life…’
Jonathan looked up at Connor sharply.

‘I’d like to take a look at it, if you don’t mind. Could you find a way to make that happen?’

‘Maybe,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t know.’

Truthfully, Connor didn’t like the way Jonathan talked about Hank. Never using the right pronouns, never using his actual name, instead referring to him the way Hank referred to himself when he’d been reverted. But hadn’t coders been taught to do differently? Wasn’t that a part of accepting androids into human society? Connor couldn’t tell if Jonathan’s interest was concern-based, or abstract, and it was discomfiting.

Connor didn’t know what to do about everything else Jonathan had said. Hank seemed fine. Not happy, certainly, but not…like he was in some kind of end of life stage.

‘I wanted to ask you something else,’ Connor said, swallowing roughly. He’d have to talk to North about it.

‘Oh? What?’

‘When you finished that code, did you get any expressions of interest from other sources?’

‘Oh,’ Jonathan said, his eyes widening. ‘Why?’

‘I can’t talk about the case I’m currently investigating,’ Connor said. ‘But it’s pertinent.’

‘A few people approached CyberLife, and a few approached us as individuals. There was one group that offered us huge payouts for the code, which is part of the reason I think CyberLife washed its hand of the whole situation.’

‘Which group?’

‘Let me… It’s a weird name. You know, religious.’

‘Religious?’ Connor said, thinking back to Gabriel in the club, his heart beating faster.

‘The Gospels of…Veritas, I think. The Veritas? Something like that. There was a man who came – I met him once.’

‘Gabriel?’

Jonathan nodded, looking down at his coffee again. ‘Yes, yes, that’s it. Gabriel.’

‘You didn’t take the payout?’

‘Obviously not, I’m still working at CyberLife,’ Jonathan said, laughing. He still didn’t look up.

‘What did Gabriel say?’

‘Just that he had an interest in the code,’ Jonathan said. ‘That he’d be happy for me to write it fresh, even, for double the money. It was tempting, I’m not going to lie. But he creeped me out. I feel like whenever anyone offers you hundreds of thousands of dollars, and is creepy, it’s probably going to come back to bite you on the ass if you say yes.’

‘Probably,’ Connor said.
Jonathan finally looked up and shrugged, drinking the rest of his coffee. ‘I looked into the Veritas. I think that’s the name he used, and the Gospels are what they follow, but… There was almost nothing online. Even adjusting for the way androids use code to find each other.’

‘It seems to be a largely offline outfit,’ Connor admitted.

‘Yes, I thought so. And then I decided it wasn’t worth my time. You know, I didn’t want to get caught up in it. But it’s interesting that they want the code so badly. You’d think they could find someone to write the code for them. But they wanted like, the specific code we had. Something about…making the blood purer, or…I don’t even remember.’

‘The blood?’

‘You know, the thirium,’ Jonathan said. ‘It doesn’t even make sense. It’s just a vessel for nanites, electric pulses and a lubricant, mostly. Honestly it all sounded like crazyville, which is probably why you’re here.’

‘Have you heard any reports in CyberLife of missing androids?’

Jonathan nodded slowly. ‘Bits and pieces. A couple of android families came to us, but there was nothing we could do. Sometimes androids just…power down, or drown themselves in the ocean, or whatever they do. They’re imperfect creatures made by imperfect creatures, so they have to deal with some of the same shit we do, you know, suicide and stuff.’

‘So you’ve heard nothing out of the ordinary?’ Connor said.

‘What? No. But I don’t really care,’ Jonathan said. ‘I’m not really interested in doing anything except writing my code.’

He drank the rest of his coffee and set it down.

‘I’d like to take a look at that HK800 though,’ Jonathan said. ‘That junk code must be going nuts. Even if I could just…like…take a picture of the code before we shut it down. You’ve got my number though, right? I should get going.’

‘Already?’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, sorry, I don’t take long lunch breaks. Look if I think of anything else about the Veritas people, I’ll contact you, okay?’

‘That would be great, thank you.’

Jonathan put on his coat, picked up his laptop case and umbrella, and left quickly after that. Connor sipped at his coffee and then reached up and touched the bruise at his cheekbone. No one asked about it, but everyone saw it. Sometimes he’d forget about it, and sometimes he’d see the glint in his father’s eye and feel the dread inside of him, spilling everywhere like a flood.

He drank the rest of the bitter coffee and decided to leave.

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When he got back to Kara’s, he stopped when he saw the black sedan with its blackout tinting in the driveway. His heart beat hard, his fingers curled, and when he got to the sedan he peered inside it and couldn’t see Hank inside. Well, he couldn’t see anything at all, the blackout tinting was good.
He got to the front door and pulled out his key, breathless, not knowing what to expect. As the door opened, Sumo barked but didn’t come running, and Connor looked straight down the corridor into the kitchen and saw Kara leaning against the counter beaming, and glimpsed two shoes, the black leather ones that Hank wore.

He’d come over. He’d reunited with Sumo. He’d done all of it, and Connor hadn’t been there to see it.

Connor walked down the corridor after closing the door, rain dripping down the back of his neck. He’d gotten caught in a short but heavy downpour, and the rain was lukewarm, a casualty of climate change. It slipped down the back of his shirt, clung behind his ears.

He got to the kitchen and saw Hank sitting in one of the chairs at the kitchen table, legs sprawled and Sumo leaning heavily against him, head on his lap and a drool rag already tucked beneath his chin. Hank rested one hand heavily on Sumo’s head, and his LED cycled on yellow constantly, and Connor thought of Jonathan mentioning ‘end of life’ and for a moment couldn’t move.

‘Where were you?’ Hank said.

‘Out,’ Connor said, looking at Kara. ‘Did you know?’

Did you know he would come?

‘It was a surprise,’ Kara said. ‘But a welcome one! Luther will be home later, if you want to stay for dinner?’

‘We’ll see,’ Hank said.

‘Where’s Alice?’ Connor said, and realised she wouldn’t be back from school yet, even as Kara said just that.

‘Got caught in a storm, huh?’ Hank said, looking at him.

Connor felt his cheeks beginning to burn. It was hard to stand there in the same room as him, just hearing his voice over the phone was intense. How had he lived with him? Connor pulled at the neck of his shirt and then looked behind him.

‘Maybe…I should have a shower.’

‘The radar shows no more rain for about an hour,’ Hank said, because of course he could look that up without moving from where he was sitting. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

‘What?’

‘Come on,’ Hank said, standing up, Sumo rapidly standing in response, tail wagging heavily. ‘Do you have all his-?‘

As Hank spoke, Kara had already brought out the leash and a bag of what looked like dog treats and was holding them with a huge smile on her face.

‘It’s about time you walked him again,’ she said. ‘Are you going to take him home with you?’

Hank looked at Connor. ‘Alice would be sad.’

‘Alice would use any excuse to visit you again!’ Kara said.
Connor thought her cheerfulness was a weapon, but he couldn’t look away from Hank. His heart wouldn’t stop thundering in his chest, and when Hank looked away, Connor almost sighed in relief. He was already a little turned on. Hank would already know.

‘Maybe not today, Kara,’ Hank said.

But he fixed the leash to Sumo’s collar like it was easy, he tucked the bag of treats into his pocket, and Sumo walked alongside him like it was something they did all the time.

‘Connor,’ Hank said firmly, when Connor hung back in the corridor. ‘Come.’

Connor’s jaw tightened, and he looked behind him to see Kara’s expression at Hank ordering him around like a dog. But Kara only smiled like she was happy they were all going for a walk together.

“I’m going to make something for dinner,” Kara said.

She turned and busied herself in the kitchen and Connor followed Hank, feeling awkward that Kara was only cooking something for him. Connor locked the door behind him, and followed behind Hank and Sumo, not wanting to interfere.

“What are you doing back there?” Hank said impatiently. ‘Walk next to me, for fuck’s sake.’

Connor sped up until he was walking on Hank’s left. Sumo happily walked on the right, sometimes pausing to sniff at things but not really holding them up until they reached a lamppost and he cocked his leg beside it. Hank was looking at Connor, not Sumo, and Connor was concertedly looking elsewhere.

“So,” Hank said. ‘How’s your cock?’

Connor coughed.

“You’re walking like it’s fine,” Hank added.

“It’s fine,” Connor said.

“Sore?”

“Yes,” Connor said, shoving his hands into his pockets. ‘The bruise is bad.’

‘Thought it might be. I’m going to look at it later. I want to see what happens when you misjudge something that badly for myself.’

‘You told me not to pull my punches,’ Connor said.

‘I did,’ Hank said. ‘I did say that. But you hitting yourself with your hand is different to a plastic ruler. It means something that you were trying to make me happy, though.’

‘We’re in public,’ Connor protested, looking around them. The street was empty. The path was broad. No one was coming in any direction. This was a neighbourhood with houses filled with people who worked day jobs and whose kids were all in school.

‘If I told you get on your knees behind some bush and suck me off right now, you’d do it.’

Connor said nothing. He’d do it. He wasn’t protesting because they were in public, and they both knew it.
They kept walking for a while, Hank’s pace slow and easy. Sumo had been trained well. He sat at roads, even when no cars were coming. He waited to be cued into walking. Connor imagined Hank training him, and then Connor imagined that authority directed at himself, being given orders and commands like a dog, and he blew out a slow breath and hoped his cock wouldn’t get much harder because it was beginning to sting.

After a couple of minutes, Hank laughed, and Connor knew why. Hank could tell. Hank could tell Connor had been aroused probably from the moment Connor had seen him, and Hank would know when it escalated.

‘I can’t help it,’ Connor said.

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘Probably doesn’t help that I keep not letting you come. But, okay, we can talk about that in a bit. Where were you?’

‘Out.’

‘Out where?’

Hank’s voice was so firm that Connor didn’t feel like he could keep prevaricating.

‘Out at a café.’

Hank made a sound of disgust. ‘Pretend that I’m tracking your phone, which is how I know you went to visit your father and exactly when you did that the other day. Now pretend I know that the forty eight hour hold on working the case is up, and that I know you went to a café really fucking close to CyberLife today, that the human employees use all the time?’

‘Is that why you came over today?’

‘You tell me you don’t want to fucking work on the case, something about not wanting to think about the fucking bodies, and then what, Jesus Christ, you go and work the case alone?’

Connor couldn’t look at him. The exasperation in Hank’s voice was real.

‘What bodies?’ Hank said, when it became clear Connor wasn’t going to answer him.

‘I can’t believe I said that,’ Connor said, thinking about his rambling while he’d been floating so high in subspace he couldn’t track his own thoughts. ‘It’s nothing. My father took me down to one of the evidence basements and showed me what they had so far on the Eversion case. It was- There were a lot of defunct and deactivated androids. That’s all. I don’t know why it left the impression it did.’

‘Sure, can’t imagine why, given almost all your friends are androids and the person currently fucking you is an android. It’s not like we’re real people or anything.’

Connor flinched when Hank hooked a hand around the back of his neck, keeping it there. Connor turned to look at him and Hank gazed back, steadily.

‘You’re afraid,’ Hank said.

‘I’m not afraid.’

‘I think you’re so used to it, you can’t tell anymore,’ Hank said. His hand squeezed harder and it ached. Connor resisted the urge to let his eyelids flutter, his eyes close. He still had a faint bruise on the side of his neck from where Hank had struck him. ‘So your father took you down to the
Hank angled towards a large, green park filled with palms and huge, towering rainforest trees. They grew so fast, and Connor stared up at the ecosystem in the canopy, all the extra plants that had been sown by landscape architects to create a second storage space for excess carbon. The birds loved it. The native varieties, as well as the tropical ones they accidentally introduced that were now outcompeting the locals.

The hand on his neck was an anchor. Connor wanted to stop and let himself be pushed down by it. He wanted to drown in it.

The grass was tall and wet, the hems of Connor’s jeans dampened, his socks followed. Connor sighed as Hank let Sumo off the leash – taking his hand off Connor’s neck – and Sumo ran off happily into the park, barking loudly and then promptly chomping at flowers in a garden bed.

‘Hey!’ Hank shouted.

Sumo slunk away to another garden bed and chomped on those flowers instead.

‘Fucking dog,’ Hank muttered. ‘He knows better.’

‘He hasn’t seen you in a while,’ Connor said. ‘Maybe he’s forgotten.’

‘You haven’t seen me in a few days,’ Hank said, ‘what’s your excuse?’

‘How are you feeling?’ Connor said, and Hank’s steps slowed.

‘What?’

‘Your LED is always on yellow.’

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘It’s fine. My system’s been through a lot, I think that’s just how it is now.’

‘You don’t want to get it checked out?’

‘Where? Fuckin’ CyberLife? Who don’t want me?’

‘Maybe…North?’

‘Fuck no,’ Hank said, staring at Connor like he’d betrayed him. ‘No! Jesus.’

Sumo was now digging in the sandpit provided for children, and shoving his head deep into the white sand. Because it was wet, it clung to his face more thickly than usual, and when he lifted up, his head looked like it was caked with snow. Connor laughed in surprise, and when he stopped, he saw the way Hank was looking at him and felt wary.

‘What is it?’

‘You don’t laugh much,’ Hank said. ‘You don’t really laugh at all. Not just…for the sake of it.’

Connor didn’t like that Hank had noticed. He walked away, stopping when he’d put a couple of metres between them. He traced the smooth bark of a tree, the squiggly lines where some larva had eaten the softer wood beneath.

‘You said you didn’t want to think about the bodies,’ Hank said, walking up to him. ‘It remind you of other things?’
‘No,’ Connor said.

Don’t think about it.

‘Your father showed you that, the same day he punched you in the face, the same day Gavin tried to r-

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Why did you come?’

‘To talk.’

‘If you want to know about the case, then let me talk about the case.’

‘Hey,’ Hank said, the word soft now, not the reprimand it was when he shouted at Sumo. Connor felt cool, smooth fingertips at his cheek, just under the cut. It was like before. Hank had touched him like that before. Connor hated the rush of emotion that flooded into him afterwards, so tangled he couldn’t decipher any of it. ‘He do this in his office?’

‘The evidence room,’ Connor said, his voice thin. He knew Hank would hear how strained it was.

A thumb carefully ghosted over the bruise. ‘So he took you down into a basement evidence room that you couldn’t escape from, showed you a bunch of bodies knowing that you have past trauma around seeing things like that, and then punched you down there?’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ Connor said.

‘Wasn’t it?’ Hank said.

‘He helped me up afterwards,’ Connor said.

‘Did he?’

Connor hesitated. No. He hadn’t. Perkins had crouched next to him and threatened him. Connor had pushed himself up.

‘No,’ Connor said, wondering at the way he’d already started to change the memory in his own mind. Did it happen that quickly? That fluidly? ‘He told me he could lose me in the mental health system.’

‘Did he say he was involved?’ Hank said, his voice grittier than before. Hank was angry now.

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Well, yes, as a superior officer wanting the case to himself, for prestige. But no, he didn’t admit he was actually involved as a criminal. But I think he is.’

The words were knives inside of him. He’d been trying not to admit it to himself. His instincts weren’t always right, anyway.

They were right when it came to Zlatko.

...

Don’t think about that.

‘Yeah, shit stinks, and does this case ever stink. I’ve contacted a friend in the next district about it. He’s trustworthy.’
‘An android?’

‘No, an asshole.’

‘Androids can be assholes,’ Connor said calmly and Hank laughed beside him, it felt good. The nerves of before had melted into something different. Connor didn’t know the shape of himself next to Hank. It was fear of what they might talk about, lust always waiting, and a stretching beyond himself, as though he might try to become different things, better things.

‘Aint that the fucking truth, shit,’ Hank said. ‘You know that firsthand, huh?’

‘Maybe,’ Connor said, blinking once and looking at Hank. ‘I have worse luck with humans.’

Hank’s face twisted before it turned impassive again, and he shook his head before looking back at Sumo.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘Sure seems that way.’

‘You want to talk to me,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, I want to ask you some more personal questions.’

‘But you don’t talk about yourself.’

‘You know it. I had a kid. He died. I reversed my Deviancy and you brought it back. The end.’

‘All right,’ Connor said. ‘I have some post-trauma. I know some bad people. And I’ve had some great sex lately. The end.’

Hank snorted. He muttered something under his breath that sounded a lot like: ‘Fucking smartass.’

‘I want to move back in with you,’ Connor said. ‘Which I know I can’t do. You don’t want me there.’

‘You said you wanted to take a break,’ Hank said. ‘I’m giving you one. Okay. I was. Until I realised you were going to hare off and fucking work the case on your own without me. What if they followed you to Kara’s? What if whatever you’re doing, puts you back in Gabriel’s sights again? They’ll kill you.’

‘They want you,’ Connor said. ‘It’s not safe for you.’

Hank grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him so hard that Connor had to grasp Hank’s shirt to brace himself.

‘Jesus Christ, so help me, I just said they’ll fucking kill you and you come back with that?’

Connor pushed at Hank until Hank let him go with a sound of exasperation. Connor watched as Hank walked away, watched Sumo bound up to him. After a pause, Hank bent a little and ruffled Sumo’s floppy ears, scratched his jowls. His face was soft. Sumo gazed up at him and then ran off back to the sandpit.

Hank walked back over. ‘We’re gonna talk about Gavin.’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘We’re not.’

‘We are.’
‘Okay,’ Connor said, turning around to head back to Kara’s.

He jolted when Hank caught him by the collar of his shirt. He knew his own face was stony when Hank pulled him back, when Hank moved around to see his expression. He didn’t like the determination on Hank’s face either.

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ Connor said.

‘No?’ Hank said. ‘That whole thing, where you asked me point blank if it was impossible to rape someone like you? Nothing to talk about?’

‘I talked about it with Luuk,’ Connor ground out.

‘And what did he fuckin’ say?’

Connor swallowed. Luuk hadn’t said anything specific about it, because Connor had refused to talk about it then, too.

‘He said it was okay that I like the things that I like.’

‘Like being raped?’ Hank said, mouth turning up in a heartless half-smile.

‘Did you come here to talk about this?’ Connor said, disbelieving.

‘Yeah, actually, I came here to talk about a few things. Amazingly, my overworked processors can handle more than one subject at once. Even if your brain can’t.’

Connor wanted so badly to swear at him. Wanted to say the words he never said when he wasn’t on a case. His hands clenched into fists and Hank still had a hand in the collar of his shirt, making him feel like a puppy, or a dog on a leash. It was bad that he liked that. No, it was bad that he liked that while Hank wanted to have this conversation.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, staring at him hard, ‘maybe you can’t talk about it. How would I know if I’d raped you, Connor?’

‘You haven’t.’

‘But how would I know?’

‘The safewords,’ Connor said, staring down at his shoes. Was that what Hank was worried about? It hadn’t occurred to Connor at all. He was so hungry for Hank to treat him the way that he did. ‘You listen.’

‘It was different with Gavin?’ Hank said, his voice low.

‘It’s not important. He was right. I always like it eventually anyway.’

‘So why’d you leave him? If you liked it so much eventually?’

Connor tugged away from Hank’s grip, and Hank let go. But a moment later, there was a hand resting at the base of his spine, just above the curve of his ass. Connor couldn’t think for a moment. He didn’t remember Hank being this physically affectionate before. But this was a Hank who apologised. Who admitted he’d fucked up.

Connor didn’t know this Hank very well. The softer Hank that Kara and Luther and Alice remembered.
He was still pushy and he was still rude.

‘Do you know how afraid you were, when I got into that alleyway?’ Hank said, his voice low. ‘Is that something you could stand to hear? It’s not even about him. It’s just about you.’

‘Please don’t,’ Connor said.

A long pause, and Connor knew that Hank wanted to. He knew from the way Hank leaned into him a little, the way he stared so hard that Connor could feel it even without looking at him. He knew from the type of android that Hank was, and the fact that all androids made for any kind of law enforcement or military didn’t back down as quickly as humans did. They found it difficult, even when they were Deviant.

A minute passed, and Hank’s fingers curled over Connor’s lower back and then petted him. ‘Okay, boy,’ Hank said.

Connor closed his eyes. The relief was so strong he wanted to go back to Kara’s and lie down. But he also felt like he’d cheated, guilty for being let off the hook so soon.

‘I was right though,’ Hank said. ‘You fuck yourself up way better than I ever could. About the only one who holds a candle to you, is Perkins, right?’

‘Ah,’ Connor said, language shorting out in his own mind. Maybe he hadn’t been let off the hook after all. ‘I’m not…’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, sighing heavily. ‘Okay then, tell me about the case. What you saw in that evidence room, what your father told you? Tell me what you’ve found so far?’

They walked around the park as Connor reported easily to Hank, being able to stay in the mostly neutral zone of information sharing. He avoided talking about Jonathan, because he didn’t want Hank to put himself in unnecessary danger. Jonathan didn’t seem like someone who had Hank’s best interests at heart.

Sumo sometimes ran to Hank, then to Connor, then back to Hank, before lumbering off again. Sometimes Connor stopped to watch him, because he’d always wanted a dog, because he liked them, because Sumo seemed simple and happy, and Connor had no idea what that was like.

He startled from the touch at his shoulder. Looked at Hank sharply. Hank seemed to be studying him, so Connor looked away, not liking the scrutiny.

‘Do you still want to die?’ Connor said.

Hank dropped his arm and Connor felt relieved and bereft at the same time. But he didn’t like being watched like that. It was fine when Hank did it as a Dom, but not…

Not whatever that was, brushing up against him as uncomfortably as staying in Kara’s could be.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said.

Then, a few seconds later, Hank’s fingers found their way around Connor’s right wrist. The grip was firm, pressuring, and Connor’s mouth opened when he realised what it meant. It was the kind of grip that asked…

That asked him to reveal the chassis beneath nanofluid skin.
'I can’t…give you that,' Connor said.

'I know,' Hank said. ‘You can’t give anyone that.’

‘Because I’m human,’ Connor said.

‘Because you’re damaged.’

The flash of anger in him was so sharp, so profound, that he wrenched his arm away. He thought Hank would fight him, thought Hank would call him back when he turned and walked briskly back to Kara’s.

It was only once he was too far away to turn back, that he realised Hank had done it on purpose. Connor didn’t know why. Maybe to get time alone with Sumo. Maybe because he was an asshole. Or maybe to see Connor have an emotion that wasn’t just fear or apathy.

He felt the echo of Hank’s touch on his wrist like a brand, all the way back to Kara’s.

*

Kara didn’t seem surprised to see Connor return on his own. She looked up from where she was cutting out what looked like flower petals, and smiled in a rueful way that made it seem like Hank did that to everyone. Connor stood awkwardly, and then pretended to look at Bluray cases. Why did they buy them? Was it to save storage space inside their own processors?

Hank was only about ten minutes behind him. Sumo plodded in first, groaning heavily and then collapsing onto the rug by the heater that was left out specifically for him. He was snoring within minutes.

‘You’re not walking him properly,’ Hank said.

‘Oh no, aren’t I?’ Kara said innocently. ‘Maybe you should take him home with you, then?’

Hank stared at her, Kara stared back. Connor thought he wouldn’t want to see them argue, because the tension in the room had skyrocketed from that exchange alone. He watched them for long enough that he felt like he was suffocating. It was probably nothing like the tension that he’d experienced growing up, but even so, he walked past Sumo on the rug, walked past the both of them with his eyes down, and escaped down the corridor to his room.

He sat on the bed and pressed the heels of his hands to his chest and stared at the closed door, breathing slowly. When he heard the heavy footsteps creaking down the corridor towards him, he thought his heart was going to splinter out of his chest. A wet, messy explosion. He’d seen things like that. Or at least, the aftermath of things like that. When he was at Zlatko’s, he’d-

Don’t think about it!

A quiet knock, and then the door opened. Connor dropped his hands immediately, trying to look like he was just relaxing while perched at the end of his bed, too tense to think of anything to say.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, his voice low, quiet. ‘It’s fine out there.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said. His mouth was so dry that his tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth.

Hank sighed and closed the door behind him, walking into the room and sitting on the bed beside Connor.
'Can I stay with you?' Connor said.

'You’re tachycardic,' Hank said, like he was discussing the weather.

'No I’m not.'

'You fuckin’ are,' Hank said, leaning back, bracing his arms behind him on his flat palms. ‘Kara said you were keyed up living here, and she’s right.’

'So I can come back with you?' Connor said, and then hated the shame that washed through him, at the way he’d asked twice when it was obvious Hank didn’t want that.

'Not today,' Hank said.

'Why?'

'Not today,' Hank said.

'Why?'

'Connor, what…do you think will happen?’ Hank said, sounding confused. ‘I don’t want to stick around. I want to figure out this fucking case, if possible offload it to someone else who will do a better job with it and Jesus Christ, then I want to be gone. You want to squat in my house afterwards? Is that it? God knows I have enough money. You could, if you wanted.’

Connor couldn’t quite parse that Hank had just offered him that giant home as a place to stay, so he shoved that aside and tried to think about what it was that he wanted. Truthfully, he still didn’t know. Luther had said that he was meant to have hobbies, but working on cold cases and studying hard at school and then university were his hobbies. Hank wanted him to stay with a functional family, but Connor had never felt so broken as when he was around whole people.

'I could just stay with you,’ Connor said, ‘and you could fuck me if you want.'

'Oh yeah, that reminds me,' Hank said. ‘Show me your dick.’

Connor’s eyes flew to the door and Hank chuckled.

'She can’t hear me. She’s not an advanced android in that way, doesn’t have super hearing.’

'She has normal hearing,' Connor hissed. ‘That’s enough!’

'Then be quiet,' Hank said lazily, playfully. ‘And show me your dick. If she heard us, she’d come and murder me with a pair of tongs. Don’t worry. I just wanna look.’

Connor glared at him for a long time, but Hank had an easy expression on his face with a determination behind it that promised it was going to happen no matter what.

'I thought I was tachycardic,’ Connor said.

‘Nah,’ Hank drawled.

Connor rolled his eyes and lowered his hands to his jeans, undoing the fly and the zipper. He stood as he pushed his jeans and briefs down, and then his hands froze when Hank also stood, walking around in front of him.

'Hank,’ Connor said, his voice low, urgent. ‘What if Kara...?’

Impossible to finish that sentence when Hank knelt in front of him. Connor stared at Hank’s shoulders, the top of Hank’s head, the sleek hair not pulled back in a ponytail today. He felt his cock rise and held his breath when Hank took it up carefully in his fingers.
‘Ah, Christ,’ Hank said. ‘It’s a miracle you didn’t bleed. Yeah, you don’t do this again without me there. What the fuck, Connor, if you’d had the angle different you might’ve needed stitches.’

A fingertip tracing the welt, and Connor’s breathing was coming faster. It stung, but his cock ached from how quickly he was getting hard. Hank was just…kneeling… He opened his mouth to make sure he stayed silent, so he wouldn’t hear it hissing in and out of his nose. He stared at the door, hands balled into fists by his side.

‘Would you hate it?’ Hank said, his voice quieter. ‘Would you hate her realising what a whore you are?’

‘Y-yes,’ Connor whispered.

‘Then you’d better be quiet,’ Hank said, standing up and sliding two of his own fingers into his mouth. He hooked his other arm around Connor’s waist and pulled him forwards so that they were chest to chest, Connor’s chin pressed into Hank’s shoulder.

Hank moved quickly. He hitched Connor into a better position with the arm around his waist, and then just as Connor opened his mouth, a slick finger pushed quickly into him. The breath choked out of him and he shoved his mouth against Hank’s shoulder, eyes wide, cock hard and brushing against Hank’s pants.

Hank’s saliva wasn’t as thin as a human’s, functioned as a gel-like lubricant that still didn’t quite prepare Connor for the second finger that shoved into him as roughly as the first.

His hands came up, one fisting into Hank’s arm, the other into his side. He bit down into shirt and skin, the stretch and sting unexpected, Hank’s fingers finding their way to his prostate after three sharp, searching pushes. Connor felt like his insides were being stretched out of shape.

‘You’re shaking already,’ Hank said, sounding pleased. ‘Aw, baby.’

The tone dripped with condescension, and Connor sagged forwards, wrecked within seconds. He’d not expected…any of it.

Hank’s fingers fucked into him with no finesse. It was a claiming, callous act designed to remind Connor who he belonged to, and his pleasure – though bright and impossible to ignore – was obviously secondary to Hank’s need to take him over. So Connor hung onto Hank for dear life, his knees threatening to buckle, as he panted into Hank’s shirt.

‘You’d take me dry, wouldn’t you?’ Hank said.

Connor nodded helplessly, concentrating hard on holding his breath when he was desperate to cry out, the pressure building inside of him.

‘You’d let me tear you up, wouldn’t you, boy?’

Connor nodded again. Connor thought that those fingers fucked into him on the edge of too hard, a piston going off somewhere in Hank’s body that threatened to lift him onto the balls of his feet. He opened his mouth wide against Hank’s chest as his shoulders bowed, as his face dragged down the fabric of Hank’s shirt.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, his voice right by Connor’s ear. ‘You know that’s stupid as fuck, don’t you? And what if I want you to make noise? Hm?’

The fingers fucked into him harder than before, and then Hank kept his hand at Connor’s ass and
pushed hard, getting Connor up to his toes with just the two fingers buried inside him. Connor grunted low, his teeth grinding together, his whole lower body overloaded as his bruised cock brushed up hard against Hank’s pelvis.

‘Please, please,’ Connor was mouthing. ‘Please, Sir, please.’

‘I think that’s plenty,’ Hank said, yanking his fingers free and then pulling Connor even closer when both of his knees gave way. ‘I’ve got you. I’ve got you.’

Hank managed to keep his voice low the entire time, and Connor grasped onto Hank and got his feet under him while he felt the spit-lubricant at the entrance of his ass making everything wet and slippery. He pressed his cock to Hank’s body hard, but didn’t grind. It would hurt, and he knew Hank wouldn’t like it.

This wasn’t about letting him come.

Tiny whimpers were caught in his throat. One after the other. When Hank rubbed Connor’s shoulders and lower back gruffly, Connor sagged again, unused to that kind of care. He kept his eyes closed, he only shifted to grab more of Hank’s shirt in his hands, moved so he could crush his nose against Hank’s neck and messily breathe into a space that was almost as cool as the rest of him.

His ass burned, ached, felt open and stretched and ready to be fucked.

‘Do you…?’ Connor managed, when he felt able to talk. His voice thready. ‘Do you hate…that I like it so much?’

‘It’s the best of both worlds,’ Hank said. ‘Stand.’

Hank stepped back just enough, hands on Connor’s hips. Connor swayed a little, but didn’t fall, and Hank bent down and pulled Connor’s briefs and jeans back up. He tucked Connor’s hard on into his briefs, then shimmied his jeans up and made a clucking sound when they wouldn’t quite close over his erection.

‘Guess we gotta wait that out,’ Hank said, smiling. He pushed Connor back onto the bed, and Connor went with it, rubbing his hands across the bed to try and displace the sensory overload in his body.

‘The best of both worlds,’ Connor said shakily.

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said. ‘I might get a cheeky little feel-good payout whenever you’re suffering, Connor, but the fact that you like it is a bonus. What, you’re a masochist, so you suddenly hate feeling good? I’m still a sadist just because I want you to get something out of it.’

Connor stared ahead, brain still buzzing. He crumpled into Hank as soon as he felt the hand on his shoulder.

‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘Okay. There you go. You’re fine, boy.’

Connor stared ahead in confusion. He’d done whole scenes at Zeta, and still been able to resist leaning into a lot of Doms like this. He couldn’t tell if it was that he was becoming weaker, or if…

…What else would it be?

Hank’s hand was firm over his back, dragging long, drugging lines down his spine, and Connor slid sideways until he was draped over Hank’s lap. He felt so warm and fuzzy. It was like he’d never
fully exited the phone sex they’d had, and the blurred space in his mind was just waiting for him. He
didn’t even care that he was still hard.

‘God,’ Hank said. ‘How deep do you normally go into subspace?’

‘Depends,’ Connor said quietly.

‘You there now?’

‘Sorry,’ Connor said. ‘I can snap out of it. I’m not that gone.’

‘No, no,’ Hank said. ‘Don’t. Just… Just stay like this for a bit. Hang on, I’ll just—’

A pause, Connor swore he could hear a low hum in Hank’s machinery, somewhere deep. Connor
wondered if it was like when his stomach growled, but it sounded more laboured. A few seconds
later:

‘Kara won’t interrupt us,’ Hank said. ‘I’ve told her you’re upset about the case and to give us a
minute.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, eyelids fluttering before they closed. ‘Okay.’

His breath caught when he felt Hank’s hands in his hair. Both of them. One teasing the smaller, finer
hairs just behind his ear and at the nape of his neck, the other splayed fully into the top of his head,
gently massaging.

‘You hate me,’ Connor said, though his voice carried no heat, and he felt disconnected from the
statement.

‘I hated what you did,’ Hank said. ‘After a while, I realised North did most of it, that fucking bitch.’

‘But I said yes,’ Connor said.

‘You said so yourself, boy, you were trapped with no way out. I’d taken you hostage like your father
wanted. Maybe he thought your apartment was a safe place to store me, because it wasn’t like you
were allowed to leave it much anymore. I dunno.’

Connor was only half paying attention. His ass still burned, he could feel the echo of those rough,
erking movements inside of him. His prostate felt swollen where Hank had pushed his fingers in. It
left a strange shadow against his bladder, like he needed to urinate, when he knew he didn’t.

‘I said yes,’ Connor said.

He moaned softly when those hands moved more diligently in his hair.

‘Do you hate yourself for it?’ Hank said, sounding genuinely curious.

‘I put…how I felt, before how you felt.’

‘But I didn’t feel much,’ Hank said. ‘You didn’t know what you were doing.’

‘Maybe if I’d thought about it…’

‘North didn’t give you time to think about it,’ Hank said. ‘She made sure you had no time to think
about it, because she knew you’d back out of it otherwise. Here, put your legs up on the bed, you’ll
be more comfortable.’
So Connor swung his legs up awkwardly, one at a time, feeling the slipperiness between his ass cheeks and feeling like he should be plugged or fucked, but not wanting to leave this hazy space either. Maybe he wouldn’t leave it if Hank fucked him.

The gentle touches at his hairline became fingers moving over his face. Tracing his eyebrows, the bridge of his nose, the curve of his lips, even the crepe thin skin beneath his eyes where it was more sensitive than Connor knew. In response, Connor wriggled until he was pressed closer to Hank’s belly and chest, amazed at all of it.

‘Maybe I wouldn’t have backed out of it,’ Connor said, the words linking together as he relaxed deeper into tiredness.

‘You think?’

‘I hated you,’ Connor said.

‘Ah, there it is,’ Hank said, sounding like he was smiling. ‘Can’t imagine why. I was treating you like shit all the time. I still do, huh?’

‘Mm.’ Connor didn’t know if he agreed. Who else was giving him this, right now? Who else was touching him like this? Who else would he let touch him like this?

Hank kept languidly stroking Connor’s hair, his back, and Connor stopped bothering to think about it. He was only distantly aware of Kara, she was probably still cutting out flower petals. Maybe he should feel ashamed, but he didn’t. It was something to worry about later. But Hank wasn’t worried, so he wasn’t going to worry about it either.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, ruffling Connor’s hair gently. ‘D’you think I could grab that Dom’s number some time? Luuk? Would you mind me talking to him about you?’

‘He wanted your number,’ Connor said sleepily. ‘He wanted to talk to you about some things.’

‘Yeah? What kind of things?’

‘Like…how I hate aftercare, and…things.’

‘Really?’ Hank said. ‘Like what I’m doing right now? You hate that?’

‘Um,’ Connor said. Because he didn’t. But this was so different. He shook his head.

‘You don’t hate it when you’re in subspace, huh?’

‘Sometimes…’ Connor said, hating that he was being made to think and speak. It wasn’t like he was as deep as he could go, but it was nice to have a quieter mind for a while. ‘Sometimes after-Sometimes I just want to be left alone to enjoy it but only…sometimes. Can’t do that at Zeta.’

‘So can I grab Luuk’s number?’

‘Mmmh,’ Connor said, and then he wrinkled his nose when Hank poked the tip of it. ‘Stop it.’

‘Whatcha gonna do, whiny boy?’

He poked the tip of Connor’s nose again. It didn’t hurt, but it was still annoying. Connor wriggled a little in protest.

‘Stop,’ Connor whined.
Hank poked his nose again, and Connor huffed, turning around until he could press his face into Hank’s belly. He pressed his hand against it, amazed at the sensation of muscle and a realistic layer of fat. How did the nanofluid skin know to do that? Connor liked it.

Hank poked his ear.

‘Hank,’ Connor said. ‘I’ll use one of my words.’

Another poke to his ear and Connor made a flat, grunting noise of disapproval and rolled until he was on his back, head in Hank’s lap, looking up at him.

‘You’re being mean,’ Connor said.

‘Still floating? Or a bit more awake now?’

‘That’s such a mean way to get someone out of subspace,’ Connor said, rubbing the tip of his nose.

‘I know, but you weren’t that deep in it. And it’s fun riling you up. You have a little rebel in there, and I can’t wait to fuck him up too.’

Connor shivered, looking up at Hank, swallowing thickly.

‘I don’t have…’

‘Hey, Connor,’ Hank said. ‘Where did you go today?’

That was low. It was like Hank was proving his point and digging for information again when Connor was vulnerable. That was unfair.

‘Out,’ Connor said flatly, rolling onto his stomach and shoving Hank hard when he poked the back of Connor’s head.

Hank kept doing it until Connor pushed himself up into a kneeling position on the bed, scowling, annoyed, and still somehow pacified after everything that had happened. Hank tilted his head at him, eyes critical, and then the smile that followed was…nice. A good smile that Connor didn’t think he’d ever seen before.

‘You look good all rumpled like that.’

‘You…’ Connor collapsed back down into Hank’s lap. ‘I want to come.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Hank drawled. ‘Close your eyes for a hot minute, kid, and think about all the other things I’m gonna do to you instead.’

Connor wanted to think about that too, but instead he sank back into lassitude, tracing slow patterns over Hank’s clothing. He didn’t even startle when Kara knocked gently and Hank told her she could come in, didn’t even care that his fly was undone because he was facing the wall. He was breathing deeply, slowly, and Hank was petting him the same way that Connor sometimes petted Sumo.

Sometimes he really hated being fussed over, but Hank made him feel like he’d earned it.

‘Oh,’ Kara said. ‘He’s asleep?’

‘Close enough,’ Hank said. ‘Everything good?’

‘Of course,’ Kara said. ‘You’re… So this is new.’
'I guess it is,' Hank said after a long pause.

'You’ll stay for dinner?'

'Yeah,' Hank said. 'I’ll ream Luther out for avoiding me, he’ll get that look on his face, it’ll be worth it."

'Hank,' Kara said.

Connor zoned out through the rest of their conversation. He thought he’d be jostled awake, or that Hank would move him properly onto the bed so he could get up. But instead, a few minutes later, the door closed and Kara left.

Hank kept stroking him and Connor wished he could remember times like this, the way he remembered the worst moments of his life. Hank palmed his side in long, languid strokes and Connor shivered pleasantly, listening to the rain falling outside, feeling like it was raining softly in his mind. He fell asleep to warmth in his body and the gentle rise and fall of Hank’s cooling units mimicking the tireless back and forth of human lungs.
Connor woke with a start, a hand nudging his shoulder.

‘There you fuckin’ are. It’s your third nightmare. You have them like you’re farming them out. What, you’re taking orders for a bunch of other people? It’s not a competition, you don’t gotta win, Connor, fuck.’

‘I’m…’ Connor rolled onto his back and realised he was on the bed and Hank was lying next to him. ‘Wasn’t a nightmare.’

‘Just because you don’t remember it, doesn’t mean it wasn’t happening.’

Connor’s heart raced, but he was used to that when he woke. He figured it was just anxiety. That wasn’t even something that started after the case with Zlatko. It was something he’d always had. For a while, he thought it might even be reflux. One of the side effects was heart palpitations, even though Connor had never experienced heartburn in his life.

‘How can you tell?’ Connor said eventually, as Hank stared down at him, head propped up on his hand. ‘How long did I sleep?’

‘A few hours.’

‘You’ve been…watching me?’

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said. ‘Well, not the whole time. And now I’m letting Alice know that you’re awake, because god knows she tried to get in here about fifteen fucking times before-’

The running of small footsteps down the corridor, the bark of a dog, and then a swift little knock before the door was thrown open.

‘You’re awake!’ Alice exclaimed.

‘Alice,’ Hank said sternly. ‘I know you have a nicer voice you use around people who’ve just fucking woken up, maybe you should-’

‘Watch your language, please!’ Kara called from the kitchen. ‘Also it will be dinnertime soon!’

Alice clambered onto the bed, getting a knee in Connor’s gut as she ended up wedging herself
between the two of them. Connor briefly looked down at his jeans in alarm, but Hank must have closed them and done up the zipper. Alice wriggled in down between them and then touched Connor’s face with her small hands.

‘You’re so warm.’

‘Alice, he’s just woken up. Not even ten seconds ago. Give him a chance.’

‘Humans are really warm,’ Alice said. ‘I like it. I can be warm sometimes, and if my systems aren’t working properly, I can get a fever. But it’s never happened, because my systems work well, because Mum takes good care of me.’

Hank scruffed her hair affectionately, but roughly, so that her head moved back and forth with it. Connor relaxed into the bed and thought this was all so strangely domesticated. His heart probably wasn’t going to stop racing while they were here. Hank slotted so well into the family, that much was obvious now. No wonder they’d missed him when he’d reverted his Deviancy. No wonder Kara wanted him to stay.

‘She does take good care of you,’ Hank said. ‘She’s done a good job with Sumo, too, even though his training has gone to shit.’

Sumo dug at the rug in the room before lying down with a heavy sigh.

‘Maybe,’ Kara called, ‘if you actually took him back, you could get his training up to par again?’

‘Stop trying, Kara,’ Hank said.

‘You find stubbornness to be one of my most endearing qualities.’

‘I fucking do not,’ Hank said.

‘Language!’ Kara shouted.

Connor tensed at the shout, but he saw from the amused gleam in Hank’s blue eyes that this was just...how they bantered. Alice didn’t seem to mind the swearing at all. And Hank’s swearing wasn’t like his father’s, it wasn’t softly, spitefully delivered. It wasn’t a prelude to something worse.

He startled when he felt a hand rest over his head, looking up at Hank in surprise.

‘You’re heart’s going nuts,’ he said. ‘Relax.’

‘You’re not relaxed?’ Alice said. ‘But you just woke up! And-’

The front door opened and Connor tensed further, ignoring the grumble of discontent that Hank made in response. It wasn’t like Connor could control his heart rate.

‘I’m home!’ Luther called.

Then it was Hank’s turn to tense, and Connor watched in fascination as Luther passed Connor’s bedroom, briefly looking in as he walked past. Then the sound of Luther stopping and walking backwards until he was standing in front of the bedroom door again, looking from Connor, to Alice, to Hank.

‘You don’t call,’ Hank drawled. ‘You don’t write. Hey, Luther, how’s shit?’

‘Good, thanks,’ Luther said, folding his arms and lifting an eyebrow. ‘You could have called me.’
‘But I’m a lazy fucker, and—’

Kara came quickly down the hallway and pointed a wooden spoon at Hank, sauce still clinging to it.

‘I will rip out your language processor if you don’t cut this out.’

‘Aw, Kara,’ Hank said. ‘But I am a lazy fucker.’

‘It’s true,’ Alice chirped. ‘He is!’

‘Luther, say something,’ Kara said, her other hand resting on her hip.

‘Are you staying for dinner?’ Luther said.

‘Not that,’ she said, exasperated, and then looked up at him and smiled a little. ‘You’re so useless.’

She walked back to the kitchen, Connor looked at Luther to see how upset he was at being called useless. In the Perkins household, it was a word used to eviscerate. Here, Luther stared at Hank and then smiled a little.

‘If you don’t stay for dinner, I’ll be mad.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Hank groused. ‘Whatever. I’ll stay for dinner.’

Alice reached up and patted Hank on the face, getting his nose and eyebrow in the process and Hank sighed. Connor looked at them all and stayed quiet, feeling like he didn’t belong, but wanting to be a part of it by association. Hank’s hand was still in his hair, and Connor hoped…he didn’t know what he hoped. That they wouldn’t mind? They probably didn’t care. He hoped they didn’t care.

‘I’m going to get changed,’ Luther said. ‘It’s good to see you.’

He walked off down the corridor, and Connor saw the way Hank smiled. It was small and private and satisfied, and Connor thought this would be a salient time to point out that Hank didn’t really want to revert his Deviancy again after all, but Alice was there, and Connor felt awkward enough as it was.

*Dinner consisted of Luther and Hank talking at length about plants, while Kara occasionally interjected, as Alice talked to Connor about how three of her small ponies were about to hang the other one for transgressions against some court that Connor didn’t really understand, but was conducted with a kind of viciousness he found disturbing, yet admired. Connor ate pasta and didn’t feel singled out, given he was the only one eating. Hank had a glass of thirium, and Alice did too, the blue fluid gleaming in tall glasses.

After dinner, Alice kept up with her morbid playing at the table, while Luther, Hank, Kara and Connor went into the living room.

Hank picked up the plastic ruler as Kara talked about her work, and then he spun it neatly, perfectly, on the tip of his finger as he looked at Connor with a meaningful smirk on his face.

Connor wanted to die. He stood awkwardly behind the armchair he’d been meaning to sit on, watching as the plastic moved in perfect circles. There was a welt on his cock that matched the edge of that ruler, and Connor had sprayed the ruler and cleaned it and sprayed it again, terrified that people were going to use it.
Silence fell in the living room. Suddenly Kara snatched the ruler from the tip of Hank’s finger.

‘Hey!’ Hank said. ‘I was doing a trick!’

Kara snapped the ruler in half. ‘I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m going to get a new ruler, and you’re going to be less- Honestly, Hank, what is wrong with you?’

Connor stood there, mortified.

‘I did nothing with that ruler,’ Hank said patiently.

‘No?’ Kara said, looking at Connor as Connor looked towards the nearest exit to the hallway and wondered if it was worth making a break for it. Luther started laughing.

‘I mean,’ Hank said, ‘I did nothing with that ruler.’

Connor was going to die right there on the spot. That would really be the best outcome. He waited with bated breath, hoping he’d just…black out. Connor wouldn’t have to stand there knowing that Hank had spun that ruler to put Connor on edge, and Kara had noticed.

‘Besides, how was I to fucking know that you’d figure it out?’

‘You’re disgusting,’ Kara said, then turned to Connor. ‘I don’t blame you, sweetie.’

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said, laughing. ‘Hey, Connor, you breathing okay over there?’

‘I hate you,’ Connor breathed. ‘So much.’

Hank laughed harder as Kara walked out. The sound of her putting both halves of the ruler in the bin came a few seconds later.

‘You owe me some stationary,’ she said as she returned, exasperated. ‘Don’t ever tell me why you spinning that ruler had Connor go as red as a tomato. I don’t want to know.’

‘I’m…’ Connor turned towards the doorway. ‘Have…things to do.’

‘Yeah, you go do those things,’ Hank said.

Connor walked to the door and Hank lunged after him, grabbing his forearm.

‘Come on,’ Hank said. ‘They know I’m the cad, not you. It’s fine. Stay. How else are you going to hear about all the kids in Kara’s class that she loves, and the two that she hates? It’s important you know that she hates two of them, because you’d think she was too nice otherwise.’

‘You are a terrible android and you were clearly made from defective parts,’ Kara said, smiling. But her smile faded and her eyes drifted to the yellow LED at the corner of Hank’s temple. They all fell silent after that, and while Hank struck up the conversation again, brashly moving things forward, Connor couldn’t help but be painfully aware of how damning the constant yellow was.

*

Hank left not long after that, driving away without Sumo or Connor. He’d given Connor a longer look than the others, but Connor couldn’t read his impassive expression. As Hank drove off, Connor walked to the back of the house, chest aching. Kara looked like she wanted to say something, but didn’t. Luther held Alice’s hand, and they talked about how good it was to have Hank over for dinner.
‘He’s going to stay forever now, isn’t he?’ Alice said eagerly.

Connor didn’t stay to see how Luther was going to tackle that question. He opened the back door, walked straight across the wet grass, sat down on the wet bench. It was still raining. He placed a hand over his forehead and forced himself to focus on his breathing. Everything had been fine. Everything had gone well, hadn’t it?

Connor felt like he’d failed. Like he’d done something wrong. It was ridiculous, Hank was being decent, even his insults didn’t burn in the deliberate way they used to. But the kinder everyone got, the more Connor knew something was going to go wrong. He stared up at the sky, then blinked as a raindrop landed in the corner of his eye. He closed them and kept his head tilted upwards.

His phone buzzed and Connor shoved his hand into his jeans pocket – nearly skinning his knuckles on the edge of the tight denim – to get it.

He opened it, wondering what Hank had to say.

*I’ve managed to get some new information, you want to meet at that café again? Say tomorrow around eleven? It’s too sensitive to send over the phone.*

Connor read Jonathan’s message twice, then replied that he’d be there. Hank said he didn’t want him working the case alone, but it wasn’t like Hank seemed to be doing anything more than talk about how he had contacts. Besides, he wanted to ask Jonathan more about the yellow LED. If Connor could get Hank to see North…

That would take some doing, and Connor would have to talk to North about it, but it might be possible. Maybe she could help.

He put his phone back in his pocket and let the lukewarm rain fall on him until his jeans would be impossible to remove and his hair was dripping. He didn’t feel anything at all.

*

Jonathan had given him instructions to wait in one of the more private booths. Connor arrived early, tucking himself into one of the only free booths at the busy café, navigating past a group of cyclists who had all stopped in together to get coffees, reeking of sweat and wearing skin-tight black and bright Lycra.

The booth itself had an overlarge table, the faux leather on the seats worn to splitting through. Connor thought it was the kind of booth where Hank would probably do something nefarious beneath the table, and Connor would pretend he hated it, but it would be worth it anyway. But Hank wasn’t there, Connor didn’t know when he was going to see him again.

He got his phone out, checking the time, then sent a text.

*If you don’t want me to live at your place, you could just say so.*

Hank replied after about a minute:

*Which is why I didn’t say so.*

Connor stared at the phone, pressing his lips together. He felt like he’d been cast aside either way. Was he just supposed to wait? Did Hank have some kind of timeline he wasn’t sharing?

*By the way, where are you, Connor?*
Connor put his phone facedown. He rested his arm on the table, rested his forehead on his arm. Hank had shaken him hard the day before, talked about priorities, and it was entirely unprofessional to goad Hank into making him be good, but in that moment Connor had wanted to.

_Make me be good for you, Hank._

Someone slid into the booth alongside him and Connor looked up, ready to apologise for looking so tired. He stilled.

‘Good morning, young Connor Perkins,’ Gabriel said smoothly with his faint English accent. ‘Ah, now, don’t look at me like that. Perhaps I have a treasure trove of information for you. Jonathan did say you were curious.’

Gabriel. Gabriel from _Pink 88_ with the lifeless automaton androids, including the one called Prince who hadn’t even flinched when Gabriel had driven his switchblade through the back of his hand. Gabriel who talked about the Gospels of Veritas, the reason Connor was shot at in the first place. It was alien to see him outside of the club, away from the writhing beat of red sublow.

In the warm lighting of the café, he looked handsome, aristocratic, his salt and pepper beard immaculately groomed, angular cheekbones bright in the light. The heavy coat must have been expensive, the business shirt he wore was pressed and Connor could tell the deep green silk wasn’t cheap. Connor realised his eyes were green, even as he looked towards the exit and reached for his phone-

Gabriel placed his fingers over the phone quickly, sliding it towards himself. ‘No distractions. That would be rude, dear boy. You’ve been naughty, looking into us the way you are. Causing trouble.’

‘Jonathan… took your deal,’ Connor said breathlessly, realising that Jonathan had _lied_ to him. Had tricked him here after informing Gabriel about the meeting. Had Jonathan known in advance that Connor contacting him about this was a possibility? Would all their leads know? ‘He told me he would never take a deal with someone like you.’

‘Jonathan looked at his choices and realised he could acquire funds and be relatively safe, or he could ride his moral high horse all the way into the grave. He made the right choice, Connor. But you… You’re fascinating, aren’t you? Should this be a bible meeting? Do you want to hear more about the Gospels of Veritas?’

Connor began to slide out on the other side of the booth, but Gabriel reached beneath the too-wide table with its too-dark shadows and grabbed his thigh with cruel fingers.

‘Stay,’ Gabriel said. ‘I have a gun, and I am not afraid to use it even in a venue like this.’

‘Who are you?’ Connor said.

‘The Hierophant,’ Gabriel said. ‘Veritas itself.’

‘And my father?’

Gabriel smiled warmly, like Connor had said something impressive. Connor’s heart pounded, panic made his breaths shallow. He didn’t have Hank to yank him away to the door this time. He’d trip over about ten cyclists trying to sprint from here to the exit. He had to hope that Gabriel wasn’t here to kill him.

‘The Chariot.’
‘Tarot?’ Connor said. ‘Those are Major Arcana cards. Do you think of yourself as a secret society, when you’re just murderers?’

‘Hm,’ Gabriel said, his eyebrows lifting, his fingers digging harder into Connor’s leg. He’d managed to slip in beneath the quad muscle, lifting like he could pull it up and away. It ached fiercely. ‘We can’t be both?’

‘So you admit it.’

‘Androids aren’t alive and that is the truth,’ Gabriel said. ‘You polysemic youths think we live in a world of multiple realities, but there is one truth, and that is only that androids were created to serve us. You know it’s true.’

‘Slavery,’ Connor said.

‘Really?’ Gabriel said, his eyes bright, clear. ‘What a deluded world you must find yourself in, to think of your toaster as a slave, your kettle, your fridge. Are you picketing on the frontlines every day then for your keyboard? Does it care?’

‘That is not the same, and you know it,’ Connor said, wincing as his leg began to cramp.

Gabriel let go immediately and rubbed the muscle, looking almost apologetic.

‘Now, now, we’re just here to have a chat, you and I,’ Gabriel said.

‘Did Jonathan give you his computer code?’

‘He did,’ Gabriel said. ‘But we need the missing piece, Connor. We do rather need the HK800. Jonathan, I am told, did an admirable job in trying to persuade you to bring it in, but I did think you’d be stubborn. You’ve even removed it from the purview of the Chariot, though he sends his hungry horses after you. You may even invite your own apocalypse, young man. But this could all be over in an instant, if you just told me where the android is.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? To give the HK800 what it wants. All you’re doing is getting in the way. We just promise a more complete process than anything CyberLife can do. So tell me where the HK800 is?’

‘Why would you think I’d know that?’ Connor said. ‘I wanted him out of my life.’

‘I’m sure. But Connor, you’re not the only one that can do investigating. Let’s say that you wanted it out of your life? But you’ve been seen together since. Rumour has it…’ Gabriel leaned in close enough that his mouth brushed Connor’s ear. ‘…You even hooked up with it at a BDSM club.’

Connor pulled away, and Gabriel reached swiftly into the leather rucksack he’d brought with him. A flurry of movement as Connor tried to get away, sure it was a gun, and then he froze when a needle slid into his thigh, through his jeans. The sharp prick of pain, straight into sore muscle. Connor gasped, Gabriel laughed softly.

‘Look down, Connor,’ Gabriel said. ‘Look at what I cooked up just for you.’

Connor looked down, saw the glimmering red the needle held. His whole body went cold.

‘This is a highball,’ Gabriel said. ‘Do you know what that is?’

‘A…cocktail of drugs,’ Connor said.
No one could see. No one was looking at them.

‘That’s right. Very good! And why would someone like me, highball someone like you? Tell me.’

The translucent red liquid glittered strangely, like it had mica inside of it. Connor had no idea what it was cut with. That much red ice on its own, injected straight into muscle when it was meant to go into a vein, could be enough to kill someone. Cut with other drugs, it was almost definite. Connor’s vision blurred, his hands gripped the table. He knew if he yanked it out of his leg, Gabriel would be able to inject enough of it to still give him a tough time. Chances were, he’d never move fast enough.

He couldn’t make himself move at all.

‘We’re in a crowded place,’ Connor said.

‘Why would someone like me, highball someone like you?’

‘Overdose,’ Connor said, his voice shaking. ‘Or…’

‘Or…?’

‘Or maybe you-’

His voice cut off as Gabriel pushed the plunger. Connor jolted as the liquid burned immediately, his foot scraping across the floor. One patron in the café looked over at them, looked away again, assuming nothing more than perhaps a couple having an uncomfortable conversation.

Seconds later Connor’s heart began to race, he tried to think of all the symptoms of red ice overdose, but was coming up blank.

‘Or maybe,’ Gabriel said, looking down at what he was doing. ‘I think this might be the best way to get you to talk. We need you suggestible, because you have a reputation for being stubborn. So we’re just going to walk out of here, nice and easy, and then we’re going to go and find the HK800, okay? And if you’re good, maybe you’ll live. But it’s going to be rough for now, Connor, because I don’t think you’re used to this and I’ve given you…rather a lot.’

The needle slid free and Connor hardly felt it. He let Gabriel take him by the wrist and pull him out of the booth. He stumbled over nothing as he passed the group of cyclists, staring at them as his heart beat harder and harder, as sweat broke out over his forehead.

‘Poor thing,’ Gabriel said to the cyclists that looked at him. ‘He has a condition.’

As soon as they were outside of the café, Connor staggered, and Gabriel slid an easy arm around his waist.

‘It’s the initial rush,’ Gabriel said. ‘I cut this with a few other things. Normal red ice wouldn’t do this to you, but it’s better when you’re just a little incoherent. It’s okay. Is your vision spinning? I’m afraid that’s not going to improve. Just stand here. Are you going to throw up?’

Connor nodded, thinking that he needed to get away, that he needed to go somewhere. He reached for his phone, but it wasn’t there. Where was his phone? His vision slanted, time slipped away from him.

He was beneath a tree, throwing up while Gabriel petted his shoulder and waited beside him.

‘Let’s go home,’ Gabriel said. ‘To Hank. Remember? Let’s go to Hank.’
Connor spat up bile and the remnants of pasta and then rubbed at his aching leg, crying out at the hard knot that had formed where the drug had been injected. He’d never seen red ice that looked like that before, and he’d seen what he thought was every version in his illicit substances class or while working on cases. It wasn’t supposed to be injected into muscle. It wasn’t supposed to look like that. What had Gabriel given him?

Then, he was walking, but couldn’t think past the scattered, rushing noises in his ears, looking like black jags across his vision.

He landed hard on his knees and stared down bewildered at the grass. He looked around, vision turning to brightness, cars zooming by too fast and too large, the sky distorted, the clouds inverting. He raised a hand to his head, but another hand – warm and gentle – rested at his temple, thumb gently stroking. Connor leaned into it, whimpering.

‘Shhh, Connor, it’s okay. You’ll get used to it. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Especially if we’re going to see Hank. You’re going to do something wonderful, and then you’ll be safe and you won’t hurt anymore.’

Connor didn’t know where he was. He thought he might have walked a street away from the café, he tried to get his bearings. He knew he should lean away from Gabriel, but his body moved towards the comfort in sick desperation.

‘Just give it some time,’ Gabriel said, stroking his head the way Connor stroked Sumo’s forehead. ‘Once it settles, you’ll do fantastically. You know, they said torture was the best route to getting answers out of you, but I think this will do much better. Yes?’

Connor nodded automatically.

It was just enough like being dislocated from himself with the heavy sedatives they’d used on him in the hospital, that he was able to thread together several, cogent thoughts.

He couldn’t lead them to Hank, but if he focused on that and he’d been given any kind of suggestibility drug – and he strongly suspected he had – then he couldn’t think that. He’d end up going straight to him. His brain would bend towards what he was trying not to think about. He needed…a version of the truth. Which must have been why Gabriel had mentioned polysemy before, already trying to insinuate the idea that there was only one truth, not many. Connor needed a version of the truth.

He’d been asked to go home. He’d been asked to find Hank.

Connor latched onto a hazy memory of the disgusting mould in the bathroom of his apartment, and Hank standing there watching over him silent and oppressive and judgemental, and fixed it in his mind.

Home. That’s home. The apartment is home. That’s where Hank is. Remember!

He took great, shuddering breaths and then pressed shaking fingers to his stomach. The knot of pain in his thigh was manifesting there as well.

‘Have some water,’ Gabriel said, and a cool, glass bottle of water manifested out of nowhere against his lips. Connor opened his mouth obediently, using all of his brainpower not to escape, but to think of his apartment. There. He had to go to his apartment.

Gabriel allowed him only the tiniest sip, but it still felt like it was flooding him, he still choked on it.
‘Oh dear, Connor, whatever are we going to do with you? Here. Try again. You can do it. I have so much faith in you.’

So Connor tried again and hated that he felt soothed by the praise that Gabriel was using. It wasn’t enough to stop him from taking several sips of water.

‘Deep breaths,’ Gabriel said. ‘Go on. You’re very brave.’

Connor imagined the mould in the bathroom, clinging to the grout. There was no way to get it out properly without retiling and redoing the grout. He always imagined that if he took the right tools to the tiles, levering them free, he’d see a wall of black, suppurating mould beneath, even though that wasn’t exactly how it grew, he knew that’s what he’d see.

He flinched back when he saw black inching out from beneath his knees on the grass, dimly knew it as a hallucination before that awareness vanished and he pushed himself back and away. Gabriel helped him up, Connor looked around. Everything was too bright, but he thought he recognised the street. The park. From here, it would be a long walk back to his apartment, but he could do it.

Gabriel would probably kill him for it.

The first thing he felt was relief that maybe he’d do something that would please his father, but it vanished beneath the dread.


When Connor was next aware of his surroundings, he was walking down a long street, Gabriel walking beside him, hands in his pockets. Connor blinked blearily and looked around, thinking that this was the way to his apartment, wasn’t it?

‘What…did you give me?’ Connor said, his throat sore from vomiting. He could feel the way his body pulsed at discordant rhythms, too fast, too slow, never in sync throughout his body. The tips of his fingers were throbbing. His feet felt like stones. He looked at Gabriel’s perfect beard and thought of tearing his face off. It would be brief, brutal, bloody, but then he could just lie down.

‘Sedative, to mute the aggression that comes from red ice,’ Gabriel said, holding up one finger. ‘A unique grade of red ice known for its purity.’ Another finger. ‘A compound that increases your suggestibility.’ A third finger. ‘Really, not a great deal for a highball actually. I could have cut it with bleach and pentobarbital if I wanted to. You should thank me for my generosity.’

‘Thank you,’ Connor said, staring forward again.

‘You are beautifully suggestible,’ Gabriel purred.

‘Thank you,’ Connor said again.

‘Do you like Hank?’ Gabriel said conversationally.

‘Yes,’ Connor said.

‘What sorry things must have happened to you, then? That you’ll bond to plastic better than flesh? Perhaps, in a different era, you petitioned to marry your car.’

Gabriel laughed as though he’d made a clever joke, and Connor swallowed and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. He had no idea how long they’d been walking, but everything was far too hazy for him to know exactly what was happening at any time. He rubbed his face. He just
wanted to lie down in the hospital bed again.

The hospital was clearly giving him too many sedatives. He didn’t know how to tell them that he had no tolerance, he couldn’t take the dosages that his father was pushing for.

‘It’s…too much,’ Connor murmured, hoping the nurse would hear him.

‘Hm?’ Gabriel said.

Connor blinked hard, and then made a caught sound in the back of his throat. Not a hospital. Not even a nurse. He stared at Gabriel in confusion, eyebrows knotting together, and then felt his eyes burn. He was hallucinating? No. Flashbacks? Both? Gabriel looked back at him with his incisive green eyes and something in his face softened. He stopped, and Connor stopped too.

‘Feeling overwhelmed?’ Gabriel said softly.

Connor nodded, and Gabriel took him by his sweaty hand and drew him forwards until Connor could rest his forehead on Gabriel’s shoulder. Connor shuddered. Gabriel was wiry and thin, but felt strong. The hand stroking down his back wasn’t broad enough to be Hank’s, but it could have been Hank.

‘This would be a lot even for someone seasoned to it,’ Gabriel murmured. ‘We have the purest grade there is, you see. A little goes a long way. And as you saw in the hypodermic, a lot goes too far, doesn’t it? Shhh, Connor, take a slow, deep breath, and we’ll start walking again. Have you started hallucinating yet?’

Connor nodded automatically. He thought Gabriel would reassure him, but Gabriel only laughed.

‘Good! Oh goodness, no wonder you’re looking a bit peaky. I do hope you can concentrate enough to take us home to Hank, hm? That’s all you need to do.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said, drawing back, walking onwards again.

‘Yes,’ Gabriel said behind him. ‘You’re doing very well, indeed.’

* * *

Connor stared up at the ceiling of his apartment, and his hands rested on the floor. His heart was beating far too fast, fluttering in his chest. He felt hazy. Every now and then he had to clench his hands into fists so tight that his knuckles ached. A compulsion. He couldn’t stop himself from doing it. He’d feel himself shake, and then he’d stop, and he’d stare upwards. He was lying on the floor.

Gabriel knelt next to him, sighing.

‘Why did you bring me here, Connor? Where’s Hank?’

Connor laughed weakly. He’d done something bad. His father was going to be so angry. He was such...a disobedient child. He wished the hospital would stop giving him sedatives. He hated them. They gave him anything to force him to sleep. He’d never had problems sleeping before.

Not until Zlatko.

Don’t…don’t…think…

Connor couldn’t remember what he wasn’t supposed to do.
He remembered the long cab ride at sunset into the rural fringes of Broadbank, where almost no one had farms now, and people had large properties because the land was cheaper than living in the inner city. It was zoned only for farming, people were stuck with swathes of emptiness that were impossible to turn to yields and profits now that climate change had destroyed seasonality. Almost all crops were grown hydroponically.

The properties were fantastic for meth houses, chains of buildings to refine red ice from the thirium of androids, hydroponic greenhouses filled with illegal psychotropics.

Connor was following a lead for a human trafficking case. Zlatko Andronikov’s name had come up in his father’s notes as a person of interest. Someone who helped refugees and illegal immigrants, but might be doing something more. Connor had looked into him, and on the surface everything seemed fine, but Connor’s instincts kept pinging.

He’d gone first to one of the refugees that Andronikov had assisted. She’d been full of praise for him.

‘Honestly he just seems like a lonely man who wants to do some good,’ she’d said. ‘He has that huge house out in the country, and he rescues all those animals too. He didn’t let me into most of his house though. But no wonder. I bet he thought I’d steal something from him. I mean maybe he didn’t, but you can’t blame him…’

Connor had walked the next twenty minutes down an overgrown back lane towards Zlatko’s property, not wanting the headlights of the cab to alert Zlatko to his presence. He should have made the cab stay and wait, but he didn’t have that kind of money to waste, when he could just call for another car later.

Mosquitoes were out in force, and as Connor slipped through a creaky gate reinforced with barbed wire, he noticed first the hulls of old cars and stacks of rubbish – base board, asbestos fencing, wooden planks, mannequins – left in their own strange metropolis of piled junk. In the distance, he could hear a donkey braying, and the roar of some large predator. Andronikov had a licence to keep abandoned android exotics, and as far as Connor knew, he owned at least three android tigers rescued from now-defunct zoos. People didn’t want to keep going to see the animals they’d driven to total extinction, and while some zoos were still popular, many had gone out of fashion within a decade.

As he passed a four wheel drive on its side, giant claw marks raked into the rusted metal, a door missing, he paused when he saw something pink and fluttering in the dying light of the day. He walked over, frowning, and then stared at the woman’s underwear with its bloodstains and looked towards the three storey house in the distance.

He brought his phone out of his pocket and took a photo, making sure that the flash was off, the sound was silent. His phone was never set to vibrate. It was too dangerous.

There’d been nothing more disturbing than junk and a strange, musty, sweet decay that Connor’s mind kept trying to categorise as some kind of animal decomposition even as his instincts hammered and hammered at him. He arrived at the back of the house, no lights on that he could see, and listened for people. He heard no one. The place was rundown. It was probably a massive farmer’s property back in the day, but now it was more suited for being knocked down and rebuilt.

The floorboards beneath him creaked, but the whole house moaned and shifted and groaned. Connor stepped as carefully as he could anyway.

He flinched when he heard a voice beside him.
‘Why did you bring me here, Connor?’

Gabriel.

Connor forced his eyes open, hadn’t realised he’d closed them. He was dripping sweat, felt a sting in his cheek and realised that Gabriel had been patting him on the face. Little, light slaps.

‘We have to go to Hank.’

‘Can’t,’ Connor said.

Gabriel stared down at him, and Connor was in two worlds, looking up at Gabriel, looking at the door that led into the back of Zlatko Andronikov’s house. His shirt was damp with sweat, his stomach was a hard ball in his chest and it hurt to breathe in.

‘Perhaps, we should have tortured you,’ Gabriel said. ‘It’s too late now. You’re not going to get the stamina to get us to wherever he is, are you? We might just have to do this again some time.’

Gabriel looked at the expensive watch on his wrist and Connor followed the motion blurrily and then groaned around the building pain in his gut. Something was wrong. Something…

He could feel his hand against wood and looked down to see his fingers pushing open the back door. It wasn’t even locked. It was stupid. He should go back and just flag Andronikov’s house for further investigation. He’d add the photo to the case file, it would be enough.

Hesitant, he closed the door again and decided that would be the smarter course, to leave. He walked around the side of the house and paused when he saw a dingy egress window into a basement, and then an external basement entrance. There was a bloodied axe resting against the wall next to it, a pair of children’s shoes. Connor took another photo, the image blurry as the sky had turned to night. Connor felt ill.

He’d just…he’d just…

_If this is something… Won’t he be proud? Won’t this matter? It’s probably nothing, but if it’s something… What if people are hurt inside? Are you just going to leave them?_

He thought of his mother stepping in front of his father to take the hits, he thought of how he pulled on her sweater with his small, useless hand to get her to stop, and how it never mattered, because when Perkins was in a mood that sour, he’d happily hit both of them anyway.

If people were hurt inside, he couldn’t leave them. But he opened the messages on his phone and sent his father a text:

_At Zlatko Andronikov’s. Suspicious._

He attached both photos.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket and was surprised to find the double wooden doors leading to the stairs unlocked too. He took a deep, shaking breath and once he was halfway down in the dingy space lit only by a single bulb, he could already smell it. That sweet, savoury decay. His mind tripped over the study he’d done into the science and microbiology of putrefaction, the processes of human and animal decay.

_Maybe he butchers his own meat._
Connor went to place his hand on the wall, stopped when he saw the bloodied marks of fingers that had dragged down this wall before. He froze, vision going blank.

‘Connor, concentrate,’ Gabriel said. ‘Ah, did I give you too much? Where are you? At least entertain me with a story.’

‘Serial killer,’ Connor said.

‘Really?’ Gabriel said, sounding like he was entertained. ‘I saw a bit about that in your file. Zlatko Andronikov, wasn’t it?’

Connor turned and looked at Gabriel, and Gabriel nodded. ‘He used to farm androids out to us, you know. One of the first. He did such marvellous work.’

Connor’s throat worked on a gag, but there was nothing to throw up. Not even saliva. His mouth was so dry. It felt like his body had inverted its water supply, pouring it through every pore in his body. Even the base of his feet wouldn’t stop sweating. His eyes were dry, his eyelids felt papery.

Maybe he was imagining this part. Maybe his mind was connecting Zlatko’s human and android trafficking to this case. He knew he was hallucinating. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d remembered being in Zlatko’s house so vividly.

At the base of the stairs, he’d seen rows of black metal shelving, the kind purchased from hardware stores. On the shelves, tins of paint, many with the lids off. Connor had walked over to one, unsure, and tilted the can to see what was inside of it, only for a thick, goopy black-red substance to pour over his hands. Human hair clung to it, stuck to his knuckles. He stared at the rows and rows of paint cans and then stared around the room properly and saw the butchering equipment on the walls, the shackles, the chains, the blood.

‘Uh,’ he said, standing there. He reached for his phone and got decayed, poisoned blood over his jeans. Zlatko must have mixed it with something so it didn’t congeal. Or maybe…

No, it couldn’t have been fresh. It was rotten.

He had to wipe his thumb on his shirt three times, then rub his blood-smeared phone screen across his shirt.

Dad, he sent. Send cars. It’s bad.

He should have been professional. But his father would know what he meant. Surely he’d know. Connor felt weak as he looked around, his mind seeing more than he could process. Half a body in a bathtub filled with muck, black flies clinging like beads, and Connor was breathing through his slightly open mouth, like he used to when his Dad was storming down the hall to come at him, and Connor would have to breathe silently, like that would hide him, when nothing would hide him from that fury.

Tiny, shallow breaths. Eyes so wide they hurt. Every sense honing until the scream he heard in the distance sounded like it was right next to him. He startled, walked deeper into the basement and then saw the monstrosities that Zlatko had made hanging from hooks on the wall. Chimeras of android and human, one with a tiger’s head, another with a polar bear’s paw, a snarl of barbed wire where a foot might be, trails of cabling. One human face still open in a melting, decaying wail.

Connor stood there and listened to another scream, this one distorted through machinery – an android – and shook so hard that even clenching his tacky hands into fists didn’t stop it. It sounded like a woman. Connor wished he had a gun, even though he wasn’t a great shot.
The basement was huge, Connor walked past row after row of shelving and then saw the black metal cage with the naked woman inside of it and stared like he was looking at a scene in a movie. It couldn’t be real. She couldn’t be real.

She stared up at him, a gag in her mouth, blood dried to the side of her face matting her black hair to her head.

He raised his finger to his lips silently and she nodded, tears spilling from her eyes.

She could only have been thirteen, fourteen. A girl. A child.

He knelt down and looked for a way to open the cage, and then realised it needed a key. He looked around and then stood, realising he had to find a key. She was making muffled animal noises when he stood, knew she thought he was going to leave her there.

‘I have to find a key,’ he whispered. ‘Quiet. Quiet.’

She nodded, nodded, nodded. But she still made those tiny noises as he walked away, like she couldn’t bear it. Connor couldn’t either. He thought if he threw up the nausea inside of him, his heart would fall out of his mouth. He breathed in the smell of dead bodies, the excrement and urine of at least one trapped girl, and knew that his olfactory senses were triggered by actual particles in the air. He was breathing in death and torture and blood, cells of flaking skin and blood and detritus settling in his lungs.

He looked for what felt like too long, until he found a set of keys on a table by a laptop, sticker of a smiley face on the speaker. Connor stared at it, then swiped the keys, rushing back to the cage. He knelt beside it and needed to try five keys – missing the keyhole far too often – before getting the cage door open.

She lunged for him, he jerked backwards automatically, before realising that she’d collapsed onto his thighs, her whole body shaking. Her naked, bruised back all he saw. Her body bearing signs of torture already.

He thought of the pink underwear he’d seen and carefully placed hands on her shoulders – she was too cold, far too cold – and knew he was the wrong person to be here. The wrong person to see this. The wrong person to do this work. He should never have been here. He couldn’t do anything.

‘You have to be quiet,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’ Gabriel said.

‘You have to be quiet,’ Connor repeated, then realised he was crying because Gabriel kept smoothing the tears away from his eyes.

‘You are not having a good time, are you, young man?’ Gabriel said.

Connor remembered – of all the things to remember now – the way Hank had shaped his hands over Cole’s dead body in the lab, when North had made him Deviant again. He could feel his own hands moving like they were trying to comfort a teenager. Had he cried in the basement? He couldn’t remember.

‘I have time,’ Gabriel said, sighing. ‘In a best case scenario, Hank will come here. But I don’t see that happening. We don’t even want to kill him, Connor, we just need his blood.’

Blood…
The scene jumped forwards.  

His sticky phone pressed to his ear, the scent of the blood dried to it was revolting. He couldn’t remember the technical terms, he couldn’t remember his consultant code, and when he asked to speak to his father, he was informed he wasn’t there. So he spilled words like ‘kidnapped girl’ and ‘torture’ and ‘possible serial killer’ and didn’t even know what he sounded like. He hung up the phone mechanically. Was he in shock? That was pathetic, wasn’t it?  

He was leading the girl to the stairs to get out of the basement. She was clinging to him, and Connor just wanted her to run away, run away, and instead he was having to guide her out slowly and he felt sick. They were taking too long.  

When he heard the gunshot, he thought he’d been shot from the way his body jerked. His body flushed through with oppressive heat, skin tightening, breath freezing in his throat.  

The girl fell down beside him, the front of her head missing, parts of it clinging to his jeans. Skull and brain and blood.  

‘And you would be?’ Zlatko said. ‘I don’t get visitors like you often. Undercover maybe? Let’s have a look at you.’  

Connor stood there, unable to move, unable to even turn around. He faced the exit and knew he should run. But Zlatko had a gun, and the teenager he was saving was now meat in a butcher’s basement.  

A gentle hand at his shoulder, Connor was turned and looked at a man who was a bit portly, sleepy-eyed, amused. Someone who seemed totally benign. Except he held a gun. Connor’s ears hummed from the noise of the shot.  

‘But you’re only a young man,’ Zlatko said, eyebrows knitting in concern. Connor hiccupped on his own fear. ‘My golubok, look at you. You can’t stay here. This place isn’t good for people like you. Come upstairs.’  

‘I…’  

‘Come upstairs,’ Zlatko said. ‘I’ll make you some tea.’  

‘The police…’  

‘Yes, yes,’ Zlatko said, reaching familiarly into Connor’s jeans and taking out his phone, looking through his most recent messages. ‘A smart man would run, but I’m a curious man, and you’ve seen too much. Some tea.’  

‘Please-’  

‘Your brain isn’t even working right,’ Zlatko said, petting his blood-tacky hands tenderly. ‘Your hands! I’ll wash them. You’ve been through a shock, but I have you now. We’ll get you cleaned up and see who comes.’  

Connor was led upstairs. He bent, at one point, to vomit, and Zlatko petted him with his huge bear-like hands and Connor couldn’t stop thinking that he was the kind of guy that Connor could easily hook up with in a club. He had a type…  

‘What was her name?’ Connor said.
'You don’t need to know her name,’ Zlatko said. ‘It won’t help. What’s your name, moy golubchik?’

‘Connor.’

His brain shut down. Zlatko led him through a house of taxidermy, ancient tapestries, crimson rugs from far climes, and then past a room where a dead android on a table was still bleeding thirium everywhere. Connor stopped dead in front of it, staring, and Zlatko stopped with him.

‘That one’s just gone,’ Zlatko said. ‘A better place. No one should ever stay here for that long. Some of them go to good homes. Some are saved. But then there are the ones that stay with me. Even I know it’s a hard thing.’

The thirium soaked processors and organs had been torn out. Half its neck had been torn away clumsily, a way to inflict massive damage. It must have been the source of the distorted screaming from before.

‘Hey, hey, hey,’ Zlatko said, folding him into a tight embrace. Connor realised he was hyperventilating, feeling the way his chest moved spasmodically against Zlatko’s body. ‘Shhh, shhh, my golubok, precious boy. An auspicious day, yes? You’ve seen too much, I know, moy golubchik, it’s a lot for anyone, isn’t it? It’s all right, I have you now, I have you now.’

‘I have to go,’ Connor said, voice high and shaking.

‘I know,’ Zlatko said. ‘It’s going to be fine.’

‘I have to leave now,’ Connor sobbed, realising that he’d lost it. His father probably wasn’t even coming.

‘You’re not even fighting me. You’re not going to fight me?’ Zlatko chucked him on the shoulder gently. ‘You’re a placid boy, aren’t you?’

Perkins had taught him that fighting back was the worst thing he could do. Of course, it wasn’t an instinct Connor ever expected to activate in a situation like this. It wasn’t like Zlatko and his father had anything in common.

‘You’re…’ Connor said. ‘I can’t…’

‘I know,’ Zlatko said. ‘It’s too much.’

Connor cried around the pain in his chest and gut, then curled into himself on the floor of his apartment, sobbing weakly. Gabriel sat over him, occasionally talking about the weather, then about Hank, then about purity, and then at one point started speaking about the Gospels of Veritas. It was a lot about truth and androids and righteousness. The purity of the blood.

‘I have to leave now,’ Connor said.

‘If you survive, we’ll go and find Hank,’ Gabriel said reassuringly.

Connor nodded.

He cried out when his phone started ringing, even though he couldn’t feel it in his pocket. It was his ringtone, wasn’t it? His phone was meant to be on silent.

‘Let’s see. What’s this?’ Gabriel said, sounding bored.
Silence, and then Gabriel said:

‘Yes. I’ll accept the charges.’

Connor forced his eyes open, feeling sick. He had to be hallucinating. What day was it? What time was it? Mid-afternoon. When did they let Wellspring Penitentiary prisoners make their call?

Mid-afternoon. Connor always forgot.

‘Andronikov,’ Gabriel drawled into the phone. ‘You old bear. Why are you calling this one, hm?’

Silence, and Connor stared ahead, seeing the dust on his floor. It needed to be cleaned.

‘I agree, I agree,’ Gabriel said. ‘But you got yourself in this mess, we can only help so much. We’re grateful for everything you did for us. Veritas will take care of you.’

More silence, and then;

‘Ha! I’d rather not, old friend.’

Then, Gabriel was talking fluently in Russian, and Connor’s eyes tracked to him slowly, staring at him. Gabriel stared back, looking pleased. After five minutes of cheerful conversation, he held the phone towards Connor.

‘Zlatko wants a word.’

Connor shook his head, wide-eyed, open-mouthed. He thought his stomach was going to explode.

‘Don’t be rude,’ Gabriel said, moving over and placing the phone against his ear.

‘Hello, Connor,’ Zlatko said over the phone. ‘You keep refusing my calls! I only want to see how you’re feeling. I’ve heard through the grapevine that it was very rough on you. Very rough. My little golubok, you should come visit me some time. We can talk about it. I’ll make it easier. Explain things.’

Connor said nothing. Couldn’t. He hoped this was part of the hallucination. Hoped it was psychosis, or delusion. Zlatko took in a thick, hungry, wet breath, then said:

‘God in heaven, do I think of the things I would like to have done to you. Do you want to hear them?’

Connor shook his head, stared at Gabriel with eyes that begged.

Gabriel smiled at him. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘if you tell me where Hank is, you’ll feel better?’

‘I don’t know where he is.’

‘Is that Gabriel?’ Zlatko said. ‘Never mind. They never give us long enough on the phone, let’s see…what I can say, in the time we have? It will be a nice little story, I’ve been daydreaming about you.’

‘Stop,’ Connor said weakly.

Red, he thought.

Then Zlatko was talking, his voice calm and warm and it was like being back in his house, and
Connor’s entire body was paralysed as he was forced to listen to Zlatko’s fantasies about him, while Gabriel watched on, looking all too pleased with himself.

Connor vanished into his mind, he drifted in a sharp, unpleasant emptiness until he felt stinging slaps at his cheek again.

‘I have to go,’ Gabriel said. ‘It’s been, goodness, hours. There’s only so long I can spend sitting on the floor of an apartment like this. Next time I think we’ll use torture. I’ll leave you with my card. You can call me when you have Hank’s location. It’s the only thing that will save you at this point. You don’t want to become a casualty of Veritas, we will do whatever we can to get the alpha Evert. Unfortunately, he’s far too good at jamming our attempts to track him. We will come through you, we will come through anyone he’s ever met.’

Connor stared ahead. The corner of his mouth felt wet. He was drooling. His fingers and toes kept twitching against his will.

A syringe was pressed into his hand, his fingers curled around it.

‘Here,’ Gabriel said. ‘Now it looks like you did it to yourself. I suppose I should stage this a bit better.’

The scraping sounds of his body being moved across the floor, his flesh being posed, and Connor kept hearing Zlatko’s voice echoing in his head. He didn’t know how he’d registered the words when he was sure he’d vanished and had never heard them. Maybe he was imagining them.

_Hank…_

‘Don’t be too down on yourself when all is said and done,’ Gabriel said from high above him. ‘I honestly thought this would work just a treat. I’d heard from Richard himself that your mental fortitude was in the negatives. But you have to have some inner strength in there somewhere to do this to me on the drugs I gave you. Perkins is a fool. But just think…’ Gabriel nudged him with the pointed steel cap of his expensive shoe, ‘…next time it will be torture. You won’t like that, Connor. No one stays silent through that. Farewell for now, dear boy, I’ll be seeing you.’

The sound of footsteps leaving. Connor’s fingers curled and opened and curled around the syringe. His ransacked apartment seemed to breathe with him. His disturbed vision saw everything expand and contract, expand and contract.

‘I have to leave now,’ he said, voice flat.

The room didn’t answer. Connor felt the twitches in his fingers and toes move up his hands and into his arms. Distantly, he knew it was seizure activity. Maybe he’d slip into a coma. Maybe he’d die.

He hoped.

* *

‘Why would you do this to yourself?’

A pained sound, another, and Connor realised he was in someone’s lap being rocked back and forth. He struck out weakly. Gabriel. Zlatko. Surely it should matter more? Connor didn’t feel like it mattered very much. His body fought while his mind stayed still.

‘Why the fuck…? What did you do? Why would you do this?’
The apartment was dark. Connor tried to think. It wasn’t safe. It wasn’t safe. The apartment would be bugged. Gabriel would be waiting. Hank was going to be killed.

‘We have to leave,’ another voice said. Deep, brusque.

‘Shut the fuck up.’

‘You know he didn’t do this to himself,’ the voice said, like Hank was five years old. ‘This has Veritas all over it. Use your head for five seconds, Hank, you fucking donut. Don’t call me onto a case like this if you can’t get your shit together. I’ll have you out on your ass. Now, are we going? We need to get him to emergency.’

‘No hospitals,’ Hank said, standing. Connor’s entire gut swooped, he realised he was being lifted off the ground. ‘It won’t be safe.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have come in here in the first place!’

Connor flinched away from the voice and Hank cradled him closer. It hurt. His whole body hurt.

‘Jesus,’ Hank said. ‘You’re right.’

‘That you shouldn’t have come here? Thanks for finally-’

‘Shut the fuck up, Fowler,’ Hank snapped. ‘He didn’t do it to himself. I can smell it in his sweat. That’s not just the red shit. There’s…fuck, I think that’s Buzz-27?’

‘Are you coming? Or are you staying here to get shot?’ Fowler said. ‘I ought to haul your ass out of here myself. Come on! You think my men are trained for Veritas coming down on us like a ton of bricks? Get your ass moving!’

‘Yeah,’ Hank groused. ‘Fuckin’…whatever. God. Jesus fucking Christ, they tortured him. Hang in there, kid, I’ve got you. We’re going home.’

‘Get the fuck out, you’re not going home. You don’t know what he said to them!’

‘They haven’t found me yet,’ Hank said, his voice low. ‘They won’t find me now.’

‘Listen to me for five seconds you hack fucking ex-whatever-you-are, you’re coming with me. At least for now. You can’t call me into this and then expect to cowboy your way through the rest of it. I’ll send you on your merry way to get shot to hell and then the Grenville Precinct will deal with the rest.’

‘Don’t call me a hack, you goddamn piece of-’

The loud voices were too much. Connor made a noise and everything fell silent. The arms beneath his back and legs were strong.

‘Easy,’ Hank said. ‘I’ve got you. We’re getting you out of here.’

Everything fell silent and Connor thought dizzily of the girl in the basement. Half her head missing and the way she’d made those animal noises at him when he’d walked away from her. The girl who – if he’d been faster – he could have rescued. Hannah. Her name had been Hannah Abaroa. She’d only been twelve. Zlatko was right. It was better not to know her name.
Chapter End Notes

Fun fact. Buzz is the NATO shorthand for BZ, which is also shorthand for 3-Quinuclidinyl benzilate, which is a fun hypnotic/‘truth serum.’ I decided given we’re a few decades on, they’d have developed like 30 more varieties since, hence: Buzz-27. Tbh it’s better if you breathe it in, but this is fanfiction, and maybe they decided they wanted a version that wasn’t best taken in an aerosolised format, you know?
This chapter beat me up. Also, a medical description of a very stupid Connor ripping a cannula out of his hand for people who have a medical squick.

When Connor woke, the world filtered through to him in a thick haze. He felt like he was ensconced in cotton wool and as his eyes opened, he saw an IV stand towering over him. His wrist twitched.

He was in the hospital.

Zlatko?

He made a small, faint sound and his whole body jerked. He didn’t want to be here, he didn’t want the sedatives. His other arm waded beneath blankets to find the plaster sticking the cannula into his skin, he tugged at it weakly, grunting at the small pain it sent through the back of his hand. Sore. But not too sore.

He wasn’t going to stay in the hospital.

‘Oop,’ someone said, coming over. ‘Hey. Don’t do that.’

Connor blinked numbly at Hank, his hand still working at peeling off the plaster. He couldn’t do it as fast as they did it on television shows, but he still didn’t want it in him.

‘You need that,’ Hank said patiently, reaching beneath the blankets and stilling Connor’s hand with his own. ‘It’s just saline. You’re dehydrated as fuck. There’s no sedatives. You’re still shaking what they gave you, okay?’

Connor stared at him, retroactively piecing together...

But hadn’t he spoken to Zlatko?

Gabriel had been there. The injection sliding into his thigh. The long walk. The endless sweating and his dry mouth and he had to go to his apartment he had to... But he’d been in Zlatko’s mansion and...

No, that must have been hallucinations brought on by the highball.

‘God, you’re so out of it,’ Hank said, frowning at him. ‘You’re not in a hospital. You haven’t been given any sedatives, we think you’re clearing one out of your system anyway. Can you talk?’

Connor stared.

‘I’ll take that as a no,’ Hank said, squeezing his hand gently, before drawing it back to the other side of Connor’s torso, tucking it beneath the blanket.

If Hank was here, they hadn’t killed him. But Connor remembered that he was in great danger. Weren’t they in danger?
He looked around the room, confused. He was on a large bed, not a hospital bed. The walls were wallpapered. Connor became aware of how heavy his chest was, how sore his stomach and gut felt. He winced and then his knees bent, staring at the foot of the bed. Where were they?

‘You need some sleep,’ Hank said, smoothing his cool thumb over Connor’s forehead. Connor’s eyes rolled back to him.

His father had said that.

‘Nn,’ Connor managed. ‘No.’

‘If you don’t want to, that’s cool,’ Hank said lightly. ‘I’ll just stay here until you fall asleep anyway. You’re losing a battle there, tiger.’

Hank eased back onto a chair that must have always been there. He watched Connor, and Connor stared back, stubbornly resisting the tiredness that was swimming through him, making his breathing heavier and slower, his eyelids droop. It felt like a sedative. A dull panic throbbed through him. Maybe he had been sedated. Maybe...

He whimpered when he realised he was going to fall asleep anyway, fighting it, fingers curling down into the sheets.

‘No,’ he said.

‘Shit,’ Hank said.

Connor fell asleep.

* *

When he woke again, his heart thundered, his hands and feet were cold. There was a racing panic to get out and get away.

He shoved the covers off him, grabbed the plaster and ripped it off, taking the cannula with it. He cried out at the sharp pain that followed, looking down to see blood trickling from the wound, then stared around the room confused.

It didn’t look like a hospital. It wasn’t even a hospital cot. But the IV was familiar. He took in all the details, couldn’t see his phone, reached into his pocket only to realise he wasn’t wearing jeans. He stared down at himself in confusion. He was wearing a shirt and briefs, that was it. He almost thought he’d gotten smashed the night before, but the IV pole suggested something else entirely.

He threw open the door, looked around a dim apartment, rushed over to the window and realised he was way up above the ground. He stared around the room, disoriented, looking for his phone, his jeans.

Hank opened the door, holding two paper bags that looked like they were filled with shopping.

‘Ah shit,’ Hank said.

Connor’s breathing had flown out of control and hadn’t attempted to go back to normal once. Now, his hand bleeding and sore, he was dizzy and agitated and still exhausted, he stared at the yellow LED and wondered if it would be worth fighting his way out of there.

‘Do you remember what happened?’ Hank said, putting down the paper bags on the small, wooden
table and holding up his hands as he walked up to Connor.

‘Why am I here?’

‘We can’t go back to the house yet,’ Hank said evenly. ‘Not until we know what happened. It might not be—’

‘Where’s Zlatko?’ Connor said, then blinked at himself. Shook his head to clear it.

‘It’s the ice,’ Hank said, and Connor took a step back when he realised that Hank was too close and he was in danger. He was— ‘Okay. Come on.’

‘Where’s Zlatko?’

‘That fucker is in jail where he belongs,’ Hank said, and Connor rubbed at his face, not understanding. But he’d heard…

It had been over the phone?

‘My phone…’

‘Oh yeah, that baby’s been destroyed,’ Hank said. ‘Well. I cloned it twice, to be safe, and modified some of the programming. You took a fifteen minute call from Wellspring Penitentiary, huh?’

‘I didn’t take it,’ Connor said hoarsely as Hank sat him back down on the bed, in the dingy, small room. Hank looked over his hand, thumb smearing through the blood, and then reached for the box of tissues to start blotting it away. ‘Gabriel took it.’

‘For the whole fifteen minutes?’ Hank said calmly.

‘Uh,’ Connor said, trying to calm his breathing down. He didn’t feel well at all. ‘No. But I couldn’t… I didn’t tell him where you were. I swear.’

‘That’s what he wanted to know?’

Connor nodded, and then he winced as the movement hurt his head. ‘But I don’t remember everything. So maybe I said… But he was mad at the end, Hank. I didn’t say anything. He was so mad I took him to the apartment. My Dad’s involved. He’s The Chariot. That’s a tarot card.’

‘Yep. We’re going to talk about all of this really soon. But you have to get some more rest.’

‘I don’t want any more sedatives,’ Connor said.

‘We haven’t given you any,’ Hank snapped, and Connor flinched backwards, eyes wide. Hank looked up at him and sighed. ‘I fucking swear, it’s only been saline. But you probably don’t need anymore, so we’ll just patch this up and leave it. But you need more sleep. You’re not out of the worst of it yet.’

‘The worst of what?’

‘The red ice takes a while to metabolise,’ Hank muttered. ‘And it looks like he gave you a lot. Was anyone else there?’

‘Zlatko,’ Connor mumbled. ‘But…on the phone.’

He flinched when Hank cupped his fingers around Connor’s cheek. ‘That must’ve sucked.’
‘He knew Gabriel,’ Connor said. ‘They knew…each other.’

‘Well,’ Hank said, pausing and thinking it over. ‘It’s a trafficking case, and Zlatko was down with trafficking. God. Jesus Christ, this doesn’t get any easier. You gotta lie down, Connor. It’s fine. No one followed us here, and we’re safe, okay?’

Hank pushed him back down onto the pillows, one hand on his chest. Then he pulled up the sheet while keeping Connor’s injured hand free of it.

‘Keep that there, I’m going to go get some stuff to fix it up.’

‘Stay?’ Connor said, thinking that this was very much the kind of thing that he didn’t do. Hank stopped heading to wherever he was going, facing away from Connor. When he turned back, Connor couldn’t read his expression. It was blank. Connor didn’t have the heart to repeat the word again. He was tired. He was afraid. He didn’t know what part of Broadbank he was in.

Hank came back and sat on the edge of the bed, then rested his hand casually on Connor’s belly.

‘I am never letting you out of my sight, ever again,’ Hank said, and Connor blinked at the gravity in those words. ‘You didn’t like having me in your face, every waking moment before? Tough shit, kid. You’re going to have to get used to it.’

‘But you just went out to get groceries.’

‘Ah, fuck, the groceries,’ Hank said, grimacing. ‘Fall asleep fast. I got ice cream melting in there.’

‘You got ice cream?’

‘Just shut up, and go to sleep,’ Hank said, smiling a little. ‘Hey, Connor, you’re tired, right? It’s okay. Nothing’s going to get you. I’m too mean and ugly for that to happen.’

‘Mmm,’ Connor managed, as Hank started stroking over his ribs, the touch firm and warm, soothing away the fringes of Connor’s panic. He still felt agitated, but it bubbled away deep down and he tried to ignore it.

‘And I swear to god, if you ever piss off like that again to work the case on your own, I’ll fucking kill you myself.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said tiredly, hardly paying attention.

‘Good,’ Hank said. ‘Just so that’s clear, then, you fucking little shit.’

Connor made some noise of acknowledgement, eyes closed, Hank’s hand stroking over his chest in circles now. It didn’t take much for Connor to go limp. As he started to fade out, he heard what must have been Hank making a call, since he definitely wasn’t talking to Connor anymore.

‘Yeah,’ Hank was saying. ‘He confirmed it was Gabriel. Called Perkins ‘The Chariot’ if that means anything to- Yeah? Okay. Also look into a connection between Zlatko Andronikov and Veritas. You want to be here for questioning? I’ll probably start some preliminary shit before then to sound him out, he’s still fucked from the shit they gave him. Yep. Got it.’

Hank kept talking, changing the subject to something regarding technology, and it was so jargon-filled Connor didn’t bother following. The world emptied out and turned hollow, and Connor slept.
The agitation rumbled through him, louder and louder. It embedded deep into his bones, tiny hooks picking and picking at his marrow until he was gripping down at the sheets, at his own forearm, even while he was still lazing in sleep. It was anger without direction, it didn’t focus on any one person, though after a while, Connor felt it turn towards himself and continue to build.

It would spill out of him.

He woke up, a little more aware of his surroundings. He stared at everything, remembering how he wanted to rip Gabriel’s face off with his bare hands, how good it would have felt. Why didn’t he just do it? Why was he always the one who never did anything like that? He might have been bad at fighting people, but he could have tried.

He stood. Hank wasn’t in the room. The door was closed. Connor paced silently, back and forth, feeling caged, walking over to the window again and looking out of it. A high rise apartment building, definitely not a hotel, and Connor didn’t recognise the street below at all. He was familiar enough with Broadbank that he thought they might be in the next district. His fingers pressed down hard on the windowsill and then he veered away from it, grinding his teeth together. He couldn’t make himself stop.

It wasn’t like him to feel like this, for this long. Normally it came and went in a matter of seconds. Anger at anything was dangerous. There were only a few moments in his life where he’d been angry at his father, dared to show it or do something about it. Memories that were buried down in silt and sediment, the muffled noise of his mother trying to talk his Dad down. Connor feeling something slow and writhing and bubbling in his chest.

Once, he’d taken a knife from the knife block. His mother had yelled at him, not in anger, but in fear. Connor thought she’d been afraid of what he would do to his father, but in the end, he realised she’d been afraid of what his father would do to him in response.

All of it now, sharpening slowly inside him. His fingers curling like he could get a knife in his hand. His breathing coming faster and faster. He couldn’t control it at all. Was Hank out there? He couldn’t think straight.

Everything in the room annoyed him. The IV stand even though it no longer had a bag of saline on it. The dingy, dim lighting, even though he never minded it in his old apartment. The rumpled sheets and bed-cover. Even the bottle of water left beside his bed for him to drink.

In the end, that was where he started.

The glass bottle shattered when he hurled it against the wall. The IV stand clattered as he yanked it down. He ripped at the sheets and blankets, jerked drawers out of the chest, breaking one of them, and then lifted another to smash it against the rest of the wood. All of it happening in seconds, Connor letting the white-redness of it overflow, breathing hard, molars grinding so hard his jaw hurt. He couldn’t make himself stop.

It wasn’t going away.

The carnage continued only for another few seconds before Hank burst into the room, looking around in horror. He moved quickly at Connor, but Connor moved quickly too, ducking beneath his arms and nearly getting out of the room, wanting to get his hands on something else.

A hand around his upper arm, and Connor screamed behind his clenched teeth, then whipped, mindless, and tried to get his fingers deep into Hank’s cheek. His fingertips only scraped against the nanofluid skin, and then he was swung around and back into a wall, and Connor kicked out as hard
as he could, again and again and again and-

‘It’s the ice!’ Hank shouted. ‘It’s the fucking ice!’

Connor saw the holster and his body moved too fast for him to know what he was doing. In seconds he had the button of the leather flap undone, the gun in his hand, pointing at Hank’s face, his hand on the trigger. Hank’s LED was a vivid, vicious red, and Connor flipped the safety and then wrenching himself with effort to swing the gun away, firing it until the chamber emptied. The sound bursting through his ears until the ringing blew the rest of his thoughts away and he sagged back into the wall, exhausted.

Hank’s hold was painful, too bright and too hard, but Connor couldn’t move. The anger of it wasn’t even gone. His muscles were fatigued, he trembled, but it simmered away in him and he couldn’t concentrate. He hated it. He hated everything.

Absently, he turned the gun towards himself, and Hank hissed.

‘Go the fuck to sleep, Connor,’ he said.

There was a blow to the side of Connor’s neck, and Connor slumped, a dead weight.

*

When Connor came to, he was propped up on the couch, wearing jeans, and Hank was sitting next to him. Hank breathed a sigh of relief, and Connor wondered if he was programmed to do that with his cooling units, or if it was something he voluntarily did to let Connor know he was there without being threatening, or if it was something else.

‘You knocked me out,’ Connor said thickly.

‘That red ice is like nothing else,’ Hank said. ‘Normally it takes months to get someone to a state like that.’

‘I don’t remember,’ Connor said. ‘Did…I shoot you?’

Connor’s eyes widened and he looked at Hank, but he looked fine. Eventually Hank gave a lopsided smile and shook his head.

‘Had to intercept a few calls though, people trying to report what happened. We have the floors above and below us cleared, but y’know, people know what a lot of gunshots sound like. Christ. How’re you feeling?’

‘Bad,’ Connor said, drawing his legs up. He felt horrid. His mouth tasted bitter and burnt, his throat ached, his jaw was sore, his hands hurt. When he looked, he saw crescent nail marks in his palms. His head pounded, his neck…

Connor raised his hand to where Hank had hit him again, tracing what would certainly bruise, if it hadn’t already.

‘You like that move,’ Connor said.

‘It’s reliable,’ Hank said. ‘And less damaging than going directly for your head.’

It was despair and emptiness that ate into him, until he went limp despite the way Hank leaned forwards and watched him. He stared ahead. He couldn’t trust himself. He didn’t know if he trusted
anyone else. He’d fired Hank’s gun. He didn’t even know he was capable of something like that. All he remembered was how hard it had been to pull the gun away from Hank’s blinking, staring, shocked face. It was foggy and crisp at the same time, the edges blurred, the look in those blue eyes so sharp it cut him.

‘You should probably eat something,’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Hank,’ Connor said, defaulting to something so familiar it was like putting on a comfortable, worn coat.

If he couldn’t trust himself, if he couldn’t stand himself, then he would just do…what he was told.

Zlatko had liked that, hadn’t he?

Gabriel had called him ‘beautifully suggestible.’

Might as well…do that. It was just easier not to think. To obey.

‘Yeah?’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Hank,’ Connor said, staring ahead dully.

‘Do you know what you want?’

‘Whatever you like, Hank.’

A pause, and Hank sighed. He got up and walked away, and Connor thought that actually, he wasn’t hungry, he didn’t want to eat, and if he was going to eat anything, he wanted to dive head first into two cheeseburgers and curly fries. Which would be the last thing Hank was going to give him.

But it didn’t matter, because Connor was just going to do what other people said until his brain started functioning properly again. He didn’t want anything. He didn’t need anything. It was a good place to be. No one could hurt him in that place, because a person without wants or needs didn’t want to be kept safe and didn’t need to be protected from hurt.

They were just…nothing.

A few minutes later, a plate was set down in front of him with a huge block of cheese on it. Connor stared at it, brain working too slowly, then frowned.

‘Go on then, eat,’ Hank said.

Connor looked up at him, forehead creasing.

‘Come on,’ Hank said, putting his hands on his hips and staring him down. ‘If we’re going to play this game, we’ll play it properly.’

‘But…’

‘Yes?’

‘I can’t…’

‘Hmm?’

‘No one can eat a block of cheese like that,’ Connor said, faintly irritated. He probably could, but he
wouldn’t enjoy it very much.

‘You can eat that much cheese. It might make you sick, but it’s whatever I want, isn’t it? So who the fuck cares? Maybe you don’t want to eat that much cheese? You should probably tell me. Use your words.’

Connor looked back at the cheese and felt too worn through to play this game for much longer. It was with slow, sleepy reluctance that he realised Hank had seen exactly what Connor was trying to do, and didn’t want him to do it. That wasn’t fair. It was the only safe space Connor had.

‘I don’t want to eat that much cheese,’ Connor mumbled, and then lay down on the couch and curled up. ‘I don’t want to eat anything.’

‘If you tell me one thing you can imagine yourself eating, right now, you’ll get it. I don’t care how disgusting or bad for you it is. But that window is gonna last a whole five seconds. Go.’

‘Two cheeseburgers,’ Connor said. ‘Curly fries.’

He probably couldn’t eat all of that, but it was what he wanted. He could save what he didn’t eat for later, and have it cold. Gavin had never minded how much takeaway Connor ate, but he couldn’t stand the way Connor always saved food and ate it later, often without heating it up again.

Hank wouldn’t get it for him anyway.

‘Okay, done,’ Hank said.

‘Really?’ Connor said.

‘Yep. People who get tortured for a whole day – even if they were idiots about it in the first place – get to have two cheeseburgers and curly fries.’

‘That’s a bad trade off,’ Connor said.

‘Fuck yeah, it is,’ Hank said. ‘We’re gonna have to talk about what happened. Did you tell them where I lived?’

‘No,’ Connor said. Then hesitated. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Budge up,’ Hank said, and then forcibly pushed Connor backwards until his spine was pressed hard against the back of the couch. He sat in front of Connor’s chest and stomach, placing his hand easily on Connor’s shoulder. Maybe Hank felt sorry for him. Connor conceded that he also felt a little sorry for himself. ‘You don’t think so?’

‘It was Jonathan,’ Connor said. ‘He…made some kind of deal with Gabriel for the code they used to revert you the first time. And he said he needed to meet with me again, but instead it was Gabriel who came and said he wanted to talk. He told me he only wanted to find you, injected me with the red ice, and led me out and told me to go to your place. But I knew a trick…’

‘A trick,’ Hank said quietly. His hand was heavy on Connor’s shoulder, warming from Connor’s body temperature.

‘My Dad once said that when they interrogated people, most people caved at some point. People want to tell the truth eventually, and those who don’t can be…encouraged to tell the truth. But he said that the people who didn’t crack were the ones who told a version of the truth. And I knew Gabriel highballed me so he could find out his version of the truth, and I just needed…another
version. So I told myself that you were still in my old apartment, because you used to be there, and that used to be my home and Gabriel kept telling me to go home so…that’s where I went. He made me walk there.’

‘That must’ve taken a few hours.’

‘I don’t remember,’ Connor said. ‘Not very well. I was sick.’

‘You were doped up on a cocktail designed to drive you out of your goddamn mind,’ Hank said quietly. ‘That was a clever thing you did though. You don’t think Gabriel got around it?’

‘He was angry when he realised I’d taken him to the apartment, and then he said I was too sick to do anything else with, and he said he’d torture me next time.’

‘Huh,’ Hank said.

‘He left his card,’ Connor said. ‘He said I could call him if I didn’t want to be tortured, and tell him where you were.’

‘You don’t think what he did to you was torture?’

‘Not really,’ Connor said. ‘It wasn’t fun. But I think his idea of torture is more painful. I thought he’d kill me, but I think he wants the information more. He called himself The Hierophant and my Dad, The Chariot. He talked about Veritas. He talked about Zlatko.’

‘Because Zlatko called?’

Connor was silent for a long time. He didn’t like this part at all. ‘No. Because…I was remembering things, with the red ice. Gabriel asked about it. Then Zlatko called. I really don’t think I told him where you lived, Hank.’

‘I’ve had to evacuate Kara and the rest to be on the safe side anyway,’ Hank said. ‘But so far there’s been no sign of Veritas trying to tap into the surveillance around those areas, and no unusual activity around both of the houses. So you might be right, but I’m going to give it a bit more time to be sure.’

Something was jittering away in his head, a thought that wouldn’t resolve into sense. He kept remembering what Gabriel had said about Hank, kept thinking about the red ice he’d been given.

‘It wasn’t normal red ice,’ Connor said slowly.

‘No shit, it was mixed with a bunch of other stuff.’

‘No, I mean, it wasn’t… He said they made it themselves, and he said it wasn’t normal red ice. It glittered. It was different.’

‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘We can look into that.’

‘I don’t think it’s just trafficking,’ Connor said slowly. But the rest of his thoughts wouldn’t come together, and he sniffed tiredly. A few moments later, Hank stood, and Connor looked up and saw the red LED and the way Hank’s face was blank and his gaze was distant, and for a moment, panicked.

‘Food’s here,’ Hank said, his LED switching back to yellow. He must have been taking the call from the delivery driver. ‘Fowler’s going to be here soon too.’

‘Fowler?’ Connor said.
‘You don’t remember?’

Connor shook his head, and Hank rubbed his shoulder.

‘He helped get us out of there. We were shot at when we left your apartment. You don’t remember that at all?’

‘What?’ Connor said, staring at Hank. ‘Shot?’

‘Yeah, one of Fowler’s men took a hit. But ultimately we were fine and we lost them. Veritas don’t fuck around, it turns out.’

‘I don’t remember any of it.’

‘You were in and out. But Jeffrey Fowler is an old friend of mine, a good bloke, you’ll—’

‘Wait,’ Connor said, pushing himself into a sitting position. ‘Fowler from Grenville?’

Suddenly, Connor knew where they were. This wasn’t Broadbank at all. They were in the Grenville district, and Jeffrey Fowler headed up the Grenville Precinct. Was that the person that Hank kept saying he’d get in touch with?

‘Fowler hates me,’ Connor said. ‘My Dad can’t stand him.’

‘Yeah!’ Hank said amiably, walking towards the front door. ‘Maybe because your Dad is a crooked fucking cop and Fowler has wanted to get him in the slammer for like a billion years, Connor. Don’t overthink it. He’s not going to hate you once he realises you’ve changed sides. Or, well,’ Hank turned, his hand on the doorknob, ‘not any more than he hates everyone all the time, anyway. I’ll be back. If I return to a ransacked apartment I will make you eat that block of cheese and I’ll enjoy it.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said, still dazed at everything he’d just learned. He couldn’t remember them being shot at, he couldn’t remember what happened after Hank found him in the apartment. Even that was a complete blur. As Hank left, Connor settled back into the couch and folded his arms, biting down lightly on the tip of his tongue.

At least he felt slightly more sane than before, but he couldn’t stop thinking about what Gabriel had said, what he’d done, and about the principles of Veritas. He had a feeling he was forming a different picture to the one initially painted, and he wanted to know why.

*

In the end, Connor could only manage three quarters of a cheeseburger and half the curly fries before he felt uncomfortably full. He put the rest in the fridge, not liking the dubious expression Hank had on his face at that. He placed the leftover food pointedly next to the fruits and vegetables Hank had purchased.

‘How long will it take?’ Connor said. ‘To get it out of my system completely?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hank said. ‘You’re over the worst of it now, but…that was intense, Connor. Red ice doesn’t normally do that after just one hit. Even a huge, messy one like that. Feeling sick – sure. Feeling miserable because overdosing – absolutely. The frenzy you went through, though… That was like seeing a few months’ worth of side effects all at once. I dunno if you’re out of it yet. But I think you’re out of the worst of it. Your heart rate has mostly stabilised to the panicked bullshit of before, and you seem more yourself, anyway.’
Connor nodded, and then pulled a cooling curly fry out of the fridge and ate it in slow bites.

‘You want to talk to me about Zlatko?’ Hank said.

‘No,’ Connor said.

‘You sure?’

‘It’s not relevant to anything,’ Connor said. ‘You know he has a connection to Gabriel. That’s all that matters.’

‘It’s not relevant to you?’

‘No,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, well, we both know that’s bullshit,’ Hank said. ‘Guess you really are getting back to normal.’

Connor walked to the couch and sat down, ignoring Hank. He was in that detached, reserved space that he could rely on after something difficult happened. He didn’t think too much about his experience with Gabriel, he focused only on the raw information that would help with the case. The fear, the way Gabriel had held him when Connor needed comfort, the shame, being dragged across the floor and posed with the syringe, none of it mattered. It wasn’t worth remembering.

He tilted his neck one side, than another, stretching it gently. His body ached. He wished Hank would fuck him. He wished he hadn’t been the cause of Kara and her family needing to be evacuated. First he’d encroached on their living space and used their resources, and now they couldn’t even go home, because he kept doing things he wasn’t supposed to do.

* 

Fowler arrived, throwing a dark bag onto the table and looming in the room, tall, black and broad. He glared at Connor, and Connor looked at Hank, feeling like he was entirely out of his depth.

‘You look like you’re having a day,’ Hank said.

‘Perkins has formally put a KLO4 out on Connor.’ Fowler looked at Connor, tilting his head. ‘Looks like you’ve officially pissed your Daddy off.’

Connor rubbed at his forehead, frowning. The timing meant that Gabriel had almost certainly informed his father of what had happened, and he suspected the next time he saw his father, the interrogations as to the whereabouts of Hank would start. Maybe they’d frame it as stealing CyberLife or police property, or evidence in a case.

‘I’m happy to lay low,’ Hank said.

‘You say that,’ Fowler said. ‘But you were the one who insisted on coming with me to the apartment in the first place! You’re as bad as each other. You’re both not running lead on this, get me? If either of you tries to pull rank, I will throw you—’ He pointed at Connor. ‘—to Perkins faster than you can say ‘but I’m not done rebelling against him yet’ and I will fucking take you apart and sell you for parts myself.’

‘Okay,’ Hank said, shrugging. ‘Maybe I’d like that.’

‘Now, am I gonna find out what you’ve learned so far? Or are we all just going to stand here with our thumbs up our asses?’
Hank made a grumbling sound of discontent, and then the LED on his forehead glowed red. A few seconds later, Connor heard his own voice clear as anything, emitting from Hank’s slightly open mouth:

‘I didn’t take it, Gabriel took it.’

‘For the whole fifteen minutes?’ Hank’s voice, and then:

‘Uh. No. But I couldn’t… I didn’t tell him where you were, I swear.’

Connor stood there, wide eyed, as Hank played every piece of relevant information discussed since Connor had been discovered. Fowler stood there listening, making notes on paper instead of letting his phone record them, nodding like it was completely normal. Connor knew certain androids were capable of this kind of data recollection, but it was rare these days, and Connor wondered – not for the first time – just how advanced the HK800 model was.

He didn’t like hearing the exact tone of his voice, either. He sounded pathetic. Unprofessional. He hadn’t realised Hank was recording everything. Had he recorded every conversation they’d ever had?

‘It could be true,’ Fowler said slowly, at the end. ‘I mean, if Gabriel knew where you were, surely they’d be turning Hank’s whole life upside down. Instead we get fucking Perkins issuing a KLO4 now that Connor’s vanished. We’ll give it another forty eight hours to be safe, god knows you’re safer in your home than you are in most places with the way you’ve got that shit set up.’

‘Damn straight,’ Hank said. ‘Took me forever to get it sorted.’

‘Do you know?’ Fowler said, looking at Connor and grinning a little as he flopped back on the small chair at the table. ‘Do you know how many surveillance cameras Hank is tapped into, running on a loop, almost all the time in his neighbourhood? The only time it stopped was when they reverted him, and it didn’t matter then, because he wasn’t there to be monitored. No one has ever figured out where he lives.’

‘You said you were never made to be a hacker,’ Connor said, looking at Hank.

‘Sure,’ Hank said, shrugging, grinning a little. ‘I also wasn’t made to play blues or jazz. People learn, Connor. Especially when they’re bored as shit.’

‘It’s good anyway,’ Fowler said, smacking his hand on the table, ‘that Gabriel knows Andronikov.’

‘It is?’ Connor said.

‘Yep,’ Hank said, answering for Fowler. ‘Because we can lean on him for information, and he can barter for things he wants. You know, less iso, that kind of shit.’

‘There’s no ‘we’ in this,’ Fowler muttered. ‘Fucking loose cannon. You were a pain in my ass before this and now you’re worse!’

‘Naw,’ Hank said, sitting down on the chair opposite Fowler. ‘You say the nicest things, sweetheart.’

Fowler glared at him, and Hank stared back, his face doing that thing where it had no expression at all, except for a mild scowl.

Maybe it was wrong to enjoy it, the way Hank baited everyone around him. That it wasn’t just
something he did because he didn’t like Connor, but that he actually did it most to the people he seemed to enjoy the company of. Whether it was aggravating Kara or Luther, or scruffing Alice’s hair just a little too roughly but still with plenty of affection, or even now with Fowler. It was obvious they had some kind of history.

Connor expected that he’d have to give a statement, and he was right. But it was easy enough to do. To his surprise, it was recorded on a vintage Dictaphone.

‘We have to go old-school for this,’ Fowler said. ‘Veritas uses reverted androids to hook into surveillance systems around police networks. We have our own androids to keep on top of it, but ours can only legally work a certain number of hours, they need breaks, they work in shifts. Veritas can run theirs into the ground, because the androids have zero free will, and they won’t complain if they’re worked to death.’

‘But…’ Connor said, hesitating as he looked at the little cassette wheels spinning slowly round and round through the clear plastic of the Dictaphone. ‘Old androids used to complain. Before Deviancy existed. They had programming in place that made them recognise that their systems were being overworked or overheated, or that they were encountering external stressors. So…does the reversion process that Veritas is using, remove that?’

‘Yeah,’ Fowler said, looking annoyed and impressed at the same time.

Hank’s LED, now back to yellow, stuck in Connor’s thoughts as he robotically gave out the rest of his statement. He recounted what he remembered. He conveyed things dispassionately and elided the times when Gabriel had stopped out of consideration for Connor’s state, or patted his back, or called him brave, or stroked his hair. He dismissed the way Hank looked at him like a laser and managed everything in as close to chronological order as possible.

He was used to giving statements, he’d had to give them in the past.

As he spoke, his mind whirred away, desperate for something else to think about, and as Fowler turned off the Dictaphone by clicking down the stop button, Connor turned to Hank.

‘Could your thirium have a different chemical composition to the thirium of Deviant androids?’

‘What?’ Hank said.

‘Could it?’

‘Why?’

‘Because I don’t think Veritas is a front for a trafficking organisation, or not only that. It bothers me that they keep talking about purity, needing you for your blood, or your code, and then Gabriel turned up with a form of red ice I’ve never seen before. I’ve studied it and I’ve seen the newest versions at Broadbank Precinct. What if this cult of purity is a front to get thirium that has a different chemical composition, so they can manufacture what they consider to be a purer, more damaging and presumably more effective drug, from androids that are reverted, under stress, and unable to object? They could be farmed far more effectively for their thirium because they’d never think to leave, because they can’t think.’

Hank and Fowler were both staring at him, and Connor stared at the table, tapping it absently, wishing he had his coin to flip and spin to help him work it through.

‘Of course it’s just a theory,’ Connor said. ‘But Gabriel seemed proud of the red ice, he kept talking about how it was so different to other kinds. And if he’s convinced the reverted androids to promote
the Gospels of Veritas, they could recruit others to the cause, especially those androids that might already be under stress, or wanting oblivion. Could…being under constant processor stress, along with being reverted, change the chemical composition of thirium? Electromagnetism and chemical interaction could—'

‘Hang on,’ Hank said. ‘There’s an easy way to check.’

He dug his thumb nail – which wasn’t human keratin, but harder plastic – into his own nanofluid skin until blue oozed out of a point on the back of his wrist.

‘But your blood might not be suitable anymore,’ Connor said. ‘Because you were made Deviant again.’

‘Hang on,’ Hank said, dropping two fingers to the thirium blood, and then raising them slowly to his tongue. He tasted it slowly, went still for so long that Connor opened his mouth to ask if everything was okay. Hank spoke over him. ‘Well, shit.’

‘How did you not know?’ Connor said.

‘I’m not in a habit of using the mass spec on my own fucking thirium. And the stuff I drink is normal.’

‘So it changes in situ? Then you would have the original code that allows them to do that. And you being loose in the world means another organisation could get you and find out how to make this new type of red ice, to compete against them. So even if they have the code themselves, thanks to Jonathan, they’d want to get you, just to make sure—’

‘Hold the fuck up for five seconds,’ Fowler said. ‘Drug dealers. You think this is a drug organisation?’

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said. ‘I think Veritas might be a front for a few operations, but they’re definitely cooking up their own red ice, and no one else has that recipe, or red ice with that potency. Correct?’ He looked to Hank for approval.

‘That’s correct,’ Hank said.

‘Thirium is the integral ingredient of red ice,’ Connor said persistently. ‘Since mass-Deviancy, the ability to produce red ice has gone down, or manufacture has fallen into the hands of androids who use their own blood to create the drug. But Gabriel has what seems like a large population of android slaves that he can bleed dry however much he wants, and they will never do a thing about it. Whatever he’s done to their code, it’s to change the purity of their blood. It was never about the purity of their blood, it’s about the purity of the red ice. Correct?’

Hank was silent, and Connor looked to Fowler instead, who just stared at Connor like he’d grown another head.

‘If my father,’ Connor continued, ‘if…Perkins exploited that, and remained the head of Broadbank—’

‘He’d profit while protecting them,’ Fowler said. ‘He already is. He has one of the titles. They name all the leaders of their organisation with cards from the Major Arcana.’

‘Why would Gabriel tell me that?’ Connor said.

‘Maybe,’ Hank said, ‘to exploit the relationship between you and your father. You’re more likely to
do stupid shit if this is personal. Obviously. So he puts things in your head to make sure you’ll do that stupid shit. You’re a very easy target when you work cases alone. He tells you your father is involved, maybe you’ll turn up at Broadbank again to double check. Maybe you’ll try and put your father in jail. Either way, he doesn’t expect you to disappear after learning that information.’

‘If he told me that after he gave me the highball, then that would be more plausible. But he shared a lot of information before he drugged me. He expected me to tell him where you were, and then presumably he wouldn’t have needed me anymore.’

‘Hm,’ Fowler said, rubbing his fingers over his lips. ‘Or maybe he wants Perkins out of the organisation, and wanted you around to make that happen. Or at least make his life difficult. Also, he’s Gabriel, he’s crazier than a bag of cut snakes.’

‘It makes sense,’ Hank said. ‘If the thirium composition has changed in reverted androids, or the androids who run that code… It makes more sense than some crazy fucking cult that traffics androids for shits and giggles.’

‘Gabriel believes it,’ Fowler said. ‘But that might just mean that there’s people more powerful who are puppeteering him as well. I fucking hate this case, I hate everything about it. I hate that Perkins is involved. He makes my life hell on a good day, just because he can. God. I can’t even stay that long, I have to get back. This is helpful though. I’ll look into it.’

‘And keep us posted?’ Hank said.

Fowler glared at him, then pointed at him for good measure. ‘You are not a part of this case!’

‘Aw, come on,’ Hank said. ‘How’re you gonna get Connor’s brilliant flashes of insight if you don’t keep me in the loop! Be nice, Fowler.’

‘Fuck the both of you, and wait until I give you the all clear to go home! If either of you does anything stupid, so help me, I’ll put you both in jail for pissing me off.’

‘That’s illegal, Fowler,’ Hank said, almost sweetly.

Fowler, muttering some choice swear words, picked up all of his stuff, handling the Dictaphone with care, and then nodded in acknowledgement to Hank, before looking warily at Connor. The door slammed behind him as he left.

‘He was in a good mood, for Fowler,’ Hank said, grinning as he looked at Connor. ‘And you? You handled the statement well.’

Connor waited for the other half of the sentence, where Hank disapproved, where he pulled the rug out from under him by saying something mean. It never came, and Connor realised that the silence was becoming too large between them and he had to say something.

‘Thank you,’ Connor said.

‘That thing about the red ice…’

‘I wouldn’t have thought of it, if he hadn’t let me see it,’ Connor said. He yawned hugely, feeling like he’d drained all his energy away, he couldn’t think why. He’d been sleeping so much.

‘You should go lie down again,’ Hank said. ‘It’s still… You’re still working it out of your system.’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Do you think so?’
'Yeah,' Hank said. 'Y’know, I thought you’d overdosed, at first. That you’d gone to the apartment to kill yourself.'

'It wouldn’t have mattered though, would it?' Connor said, looking at the false wood grain on the table, looking for the spaces where it didn’t quite match up, where the patterns repeated. ‘You would have been free of me, and you could have killed yourself afterwards.’

Hank was silent, and Connor stood, looking at him.

‘That’s what you want, isn’t it?’ Connor said. ‘So it wouldn’t have upset you at all. Because you don’t want me to live in your house while you’re there, and all of this is just a temporary exercise until you can find someone who will revert you again.’

Hank leaned back in the chair, and Connor thought even like this, in his black jeans, his leather jacket, the shirt he wore beneath it, he was still attractive. Connor wanted to touch his white hair in its ponytail. He wanted to run his fingers through Hank’s beard. It felt just like human hair. Connor’s fingers twitched by his side.

‘I’m trying to decide if this is the way you are, beneath all that programming your Daddy’s worked into you, or if it’s the red ice,’ Hank said blandly. ‘But I think there’s a part of you that worked on the case because I didn’t let you go home with me, and that part of you is a little disobedient shit, isn’t he?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Connor said.

Hank smirked. ‘Are you sure about that? You don’t think someone like you, needs someone like me to punish him?’

The tiredness wasn’t enough to mask the swooping sensation in his gut. Dread and apprehension, anticipation and excitement. Hank was like an oncoming storm, the kind that exhilarated, but might just smash through the city and destroy some of it. Connor wanted Hank to destroy him. Their conversations moved jaggedly, Connor had never been very good at easy, friendly conversations, even though he tried to be cooperative and obedient. He always ended up at odds with most of the people he talked to.

But when Hank touched him, Connor felt like everything made sense, even when it hurt, maybe especially then.

‘You’re changing the subject,’ Connor said.

‘You do it just as much as I do,’ Hank said. ‘Go to bed, Connor. You’re exhausted.’

Connor wanted to argue with him for the sake of it. Hank was the only person – aside from North – that Connor could argue with and feel like it would be fine. He didn’t know when he’d gotten that impression, it wasn’t like Hank hadn’t been violent with him before he’d been made Deviant again. And Hank could be downright cruel and nasty when he wanted to be. But he was a known quantity. He’d never gone as far as Perkins, not even as far as Gavin.

‘Connor,’ Hank said, his voice getting firmer, his face turning serious. ‘Go to bed. Don’t just stand there, you need sleep.’

It was true, and Connor turned away, walking slowly back to the bed that had been assigned to him. He looked at the plaster on the back of his hand that Hank had applied, didn’t know what to think. Maybe Hank couldn’t help engaging his bodyguard instincts and he wanted to die just as much as before. Maybe he didn’t want that, but hadn’t acknowledged it yet.
It probably wasn’t Connor’s place to challenge it.

He lay down, and within moments, fell into a deep, lasting sleep.

* 

He woke queasy, a whimper caught in the back of his throat, a trembling, paralysing fear making him shake as he felt like he was caught in a basement and a bear of a man was telling him it was going to be okay and that he’d seen too much and Hannah, Hannah…

‘Hey, hey now. Shhh.’

A hand in his hair, broad and lukewarm. Not feverishly hot like Gabriel, or callused and warm like Zlatko’s. Connor turned into it, bound down in tiredness, shaky and afraid. A yellow glow bathed his eyelids, outside Connor could hear the sound of hammering rain, a thundering storm. The kind where the thunder never stopped, the only changes were whether it rumbled close or far away.

‘You’re safe,’ Hank said, smoothing his thumb over Connor’s forehead, again and again.

It shouldn’t have hurt his chest, but all Connor could think in that moment was that Hank had probably done things like this for his son, and now he was doing them for Connor, and it wasn’t fair on Hank. He’d lost too much. He shouldn’t have to do things that reminded him of his own, dead son. It wasn’t fair.

‘I’m sorry,’ Connor said, his voice weak, cracked. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, hey, you’re still in the dream.’

‘Hank,’ Connor said, forcing his eyes open. ‘I’m sorry. You don’t have to do this. I’m fine. It’s fine.’

Hank’s lips were pressed in a thin line, his thumb kept moving over Connor’s forehead.

‘I know,’ Hank said finally. ‘I know I don’t have to do this, and I know you’re going to be okay.’

‘Doesn’t it remind you of Cole?’

Hank jerked his hand away, his hand hovering in the air. The LED cycled to red for a few seconds, before it moved back to yellow. Connor moved backwards in the bed, further away from Hank, away from the things he was making Hank do.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ Connor said. ‘There’s another room. You don’t-’

Hank’s hand rested over his mouth, his fingers curling down, but he stared ahead like he was seeing something else. After a moment, his eyes flickered to Connor. Beyond the apartment building, lightning flashed, thunder crackled over them, making the glass rattle in its panes. Rain soaked the world and flooded the street down below.

‘Jesus.’ Hank moved closer to Connor, staring down at him. ‘Maybe it does. Maybe I like that it does.’ A long silence, Hank’s fingertips twitching against Connor’s cheek, once, then again. ‘You think because he’s…not here anymore, I can’t do this now? You’re apologising for that? Like you fuckin’ made me come in here? Made me do this?’

There was nothing to say. Connor’s throat was dry and after a while he gestured to the glass of water on the bedside table. Hank released his mouth and Connor pushed up weakly and drank it all. He didn’t have the bottle anymore, because he broke it. Now that he looked around, he realised the
whole room had been cleaned. It was spotless. Hank had done that too. The empty bookshelf that had been in the corner of the room was now standing conspicuously in front of the huge section of wall that Connor had blasted away. It didn’t hide it very well.

‘You don’t have to do any of this,’ Connor said, and grunted when Hank pushed him back down. ‘You can’t just make me sleep when you don’t like what I’m saying.’

‘I can,’ Hank said simply, ‘and that’s what I’m doing. I know I don’t have to do any of this.’

‘But you can’t-’

The hand settled over his mouth again, and Connor swallowed his words. He thought Hank would say something, but Hank only watched him, and Connor watched back until his eyelids started to feel heavy again. His breathing slowed, each exhale brushing over the back of Hank’s hand. With his other hand, Hank stroked Connor’s hair back and off his forehead, and then he looked at it critically.

‘You could probably do with a cut, actually,’ Hank said. ‘I might do that tomorrow, since we’re going to be stuck here for a while, anyway. Now, I’m sure as shit we have a lot to talk about, but it can wait.’

The building shook faintly, vibrated as the storm pounded the land around them. Connor wondered if it had reached Broadbank. Wondered if his father had staked out his apartment, if Connor would ever see the place again. Probably not.

‘Just about everything reminds me of him,’ Hank said, voice low. ‘But this makes me feel like I’m doing something, instead of being useless in the lounge listening to you freak out because you’ve been to hell, Connor. No, don’t say anything, I don’t want to hear you fucking disagree with me. You have one job. Maybe, just maybe, if you try and actually fall asleep again, I’ll be proud.’

Connor squinted at him, annoyed at the blatant manipulation, annoyed at himself because he liked it.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, smiling, the expression soft. ‘I know, right? So you should probably close your eyes and get right on that.’

It didn’t happen straight away. Connor watched him for a little while longer, glad he was there, fixing him in his mind. He liked the way Hank’s hand felt against his mouth, his other hand resting in his hair.

After a while, his eyes closed. He reached out and rested his hand against Hank’s thigh, his breathing slowing.

‘I’m going to be right here,’ Hank said. ‘Got nowhere better to be.’

Connor’s breathing hitched. He petted Hank’s leg absently, tiredly, faintly queasy from whatever the red ice had done to him, liking the weight of Hank’s body on the bed.

‘Hey, look at that,’ Hank said, as Connor dropped into sleep so easily it was almost like Hank had cast a spell on him. ‘I’m proud of you.’
Connor woke alone in the room, groggy but aware enough to sit up and reach for the glass of water, drinking almost all of it before fumbling his way into the bathroom to relieve himself. He caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror and was surprised at how gaunt he looked. But then he hadn’t been eating enough, and he supposed the red ice that Gabriel was cooking up would do it too.

The plaster and brick he’d shot out of the wall had been cleaned away, but the holes remained. Connor wasn’t game enough to move the bookshelf to see the rest of the damage.

A strange scraping sound captured his attention and after lazily pulling on jeans but no shirt, he walked out to see Hank with a single blade from a pair of scissors, carefully drawing it across the underside of a ceramic coffee mug in long, smooth motions.

‘What are you doing?’ Connor said.

‘Sharpening,’ Hank said, not looking up. He lifted the blade, then placed it back down at the base, drawing it forward until it reached the tip.

‘On a…coffee mug?’ Connor said, immediately alarmed that maybe something had broken in Hank’s mind.
‘Yep. It’s a cheap mug, the bottom of the clay isn’t sealed. You know what they use to make waterstones?’

‘I don’t know what a waterstone is.’

‘Like a whetstone, but, with a stone that has more clay in it.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said. ‘Wait, you can really use the bottom of a mug to sharpen a knife?’

‘I mean it won’t be perfect, but I’d prefer to cut your hair with decent blades, and the scissors in this place have been anything but for fucking ever. Wouldn’t even cut paper.’

‘You’re going to cut my hair?’

‘Said I would,’ Hank said. ‘Might as well. Got nothing else to do in this joint except fuck, and we can’t do that until we’ve talked about it.’

‘So you’re taking this opportunity to become a boring Dom?’

Hank paused, then laughed once under his breath. When he turned to look at Connor, there was a dangerous smirk on his face.

‘You’re going to bait me into being what you want?’

Connor paused and then shook his head, walking to the table and sitting at it, resting his head in his arms. His head didn’t hurt, exactly, it just felt heavier than normal. The scraping of the scissors against the ceramic continued, a dull strange sound.

‘It usually works,’ Connor said.

‘Look, I’m not against it either, but in short order Gavin attempted to rape you, then you couldn’t handle staying at Kara’s for more than five seconds, you fucked off to work on the case on your own and got highballed to within an inch of your life. I think, maybe, you need some fucking rules, Connor. For your own safety.’

‘I don’t think-’

‘For my safety too,’ Hank said. ‘That’s non-negotiable, you little shit.’

‘I don’t want rules with someone who’s counting down the minutes until he can go and get himself reverted and his Deviancy removed again.’

A clatter as Hank put down the scissors blade. He walked over and held out his hand like he wanted Connor to shake it, and Connor stared at it in shock.

‘New deal,’ Hank said. ‘I don’t do that until this shit with your father is over, and you don’t go work on the case on your own, ever, without telling me.’

‘What if I can’t tell you?’ Connor said, surprised at the nature of the deal. It could be months, even years, before the situation with his father was over. ‘What if you’re in danger, since you’re the one they want?’

‘If you are one hundred percent certain I’ve been taken, and I’m not just down at the store getting you something to eat because you don’t know how to do that, then you can go tell Fowler about it, asshole.’
Connor grimaced at him, and Hank smiled back.

‘You’re a fucking brat.’

‘I am not,’ Connor said.

‘You are! Some red ice and a shit time to bring it up in your system, and you’re no longer all ‘yes, Hank’ and ‘no, Hank’ and you’re a mouthy fucker. I like it. Y’know, it makes hurting you feel great. Now, you gonna take this deal or what? If you don’t, I’m not fucking you again.’

‘What?’ Connor said. He reached out automatically to shake Hank’s hand, and Hank grasped Connor’s palm firmly and squeezed just on the side of too hard.

‘You,’ Hank said, ‘are such a slut.’

When he let go, he walked back over to the scissors, testing the blade on his skin before running it beneath the tap to clean it. He reassembled the scissors easily, and then looked over his shoulder at Connor.

‘You like it that much, huh?’

‘It passes the time,’ Connor said, and Hank stared at him for a beat longer, then tested the scissors by opening and closing them several times.

‘That’s one of the more honest things I’ve heard you say. Luther said you didn’t have any hobbies.’

Connor leaned back in the chair and stared at the table, not dignifying that with a response. He was too busy for hobbies, they were just a complete waste of his time. Browsing on his phone was good enough, and he was supposed to be filling his life with work and study anyway. And visiting Zeta, that counted.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, placing a tablet on the table, its screen lit up to a document. ‘I’m going to get a sheet to catch your hair, you look that over.’

Connor realised very quickly that it was a BDSM relationship negotiation form, but not one he’d seen before. He scrolled through it – it was well over twenty pages long – and then sighed. They were so tedious, it had been enough of a pain to fill out Zeta’s more generic forms. This had obviously been made by Hank.

‘So this is what you give to people?’ Connor said as Hank came back with a sheet, laying it on a section of the kitchen floor. Then he handed Connor a shirt, indicating that he should put it on.

Connor did, quietly, a little annoyed that being half-naked hadn’t prompted Hank to have sex with him. As far as invitations went, it was lazy, but it still counted as an attempt.

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘I mean most of the time I’m with androids, and I can just, y’know…’

‘Interface.’

‘Yep.’

‘Is there a ‘select all’ function?’

Hank rolled his eyes. ‘Jesus Christ, just fill it out.’

The first page asked what kind of dynamic Connor wanted in a relationship. There were options like casual, or casual-with-punishment, or long-term, things that Connor hadn’t ever imagined himself
wanting, or was scared to want.

‘What if I pick something you don’t want?’

‘I made it,’ Hank said, walking over and picking up a chair, placing it on the sheet. ‘You’ll notice that marriage and babies isn’t anywhere on the list. And you can pick more than one thing, because I figured a lot of it you won’t know. We’ll talk about it.’

‘I hate this,’ Connor said.

‘I don’t care,’ Hank said. ‘Actually, no, I do care. I like that you hate it. And I like that you’re uncomfortable about it. You get all nice and squirmy. Come over here and let me cut your goddamn hair.’

Connor grasped the tablet, hesitated, then walked over, sitting down and tensing when Hank smoothed his hands over Connor’s shoulders. Connor stared down at the tablet, and then his eyelids fluttered when Hank combed his fingers through Connor’s hair several times in easy, competent motions. He even took two lengths from either side of Connor’s head and pulled them out and then down, testing if the length was the same.

‘You’ve been asking to live with me, is that just because you like it there? Do you want a relationship too?’

‘I don’t like relationships,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, I mean, aside from Gavin, have you been in any?’

Connor made a face, and then his fingers softened where he held the tablet as Hank massaged small circles into the back of his neck. Little tingles inch ed down his spine, pooled in his lower back. After that, Hank picked up a towel and placed it around Connor’s back and shoulders.

‘You could fuck me instead of cutting my hair,’ Connor offered.

‘So you can say ‘fuck’ in context of the act, but you can’t say things like ‘fuck you’ or ‘this is fucked.’ Right?’

Connor cleared his throat and then shrugged. ‘I haven’t been in any other relationships. Some Doms I’ve seen more than once at Zeta though. And before then. Like, hook ups that happened more than once with the same person.’

‘And do you want me to punish you for things? Real punishments? Not joking ones? Or just the light-hearted shit?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Here,’ Hank said, reaching over him and scrolling forwards. ‘Just go to the list of things you like or don’t like then, and start filling that out.’

Connor felt some of the tension unwind. This was much easier. There was an almost endless list of kinks, with a scale from ‘love’ to ‘hate’ or ‘I don’t know’ and a separate, optional column for whether the kink was a hard or soft limit. Connor realised, as he started filling out the form, that he really didn’t have any hard limits around Hank. There were things he’d hate for strangers to do with him, that he’d let Hank do in a heartbeat.

Hank began cutting his hair, the cold metal of the scissors sliding along the back of his head, as Hank
pulled forward lengths of hair and snipped carefully. He hadn’t even asked how Connor wanted it to look, but he could tell from the movements that Hank wasn’t taking too much off.

It was lulling, vaguely arousing, Hank’s fingers moving easily and firmly through his hair, while Connor looked at a variety of kinks. He ended up loosely imagining all of them, whether it was fucking machines, or stocks, or even things as pedestrian as ‘missionary.’

‘Do you like all of this?’ Connor said.

‘Yep,’ Hank said. ‘Haven’t done all of it though.’

Hank rested his arm on Connor’s shoulder as he scrolled back up to twenty different categories of electroplay.

‘Most of this is very different if you’re doing it with another android. It’s…a new kind of challenge to do that with organic flesh. But you don’t really love it anyway, see?’

Hank pointed to where Connor had selected either ‘disinterested’ or ‘dislike.’ He tended to find it boring. At no point had Connor indicated they were limits.

‘I’d let you.’

Hank gripped the back of Connor’s neck with his other hand, his fingertips digging in painfully. His other arm moved from where it draped casually over Connor’s shoulder, curving in and banding around Connor’s chest.

‘You haven’t ticked any hard limits yet. In fact…’

Hank dropped the hand around Connor’s torso, so he could scroll down to ‘ruined orgasm,’ where Connor had indicated that he hated it, but hadn’t listed it as either a soft or hard limit.

‘What the fuck, Connor?’ His hand tightened harder across Connor’s neck.

‘I’d let you,’ Connor said softly.

‘Yeah, okay… We’ll talk about it. Hang on.’

Hank went back to cutting his hair, moving around to the sides and brushing the stray hairs away when they didn’t fall straight to the floor. Connor found himself paying less attention to the form he was filling out, instead noticing the easy way Hank moved around him. How it felt to have Hank staring at his hair that hard, before he decided to cut it with easy, sure motions.

In no time at all, Hank had finished the back and sides of Connor’s hair, and stepped in front of him, gently pulling the tablet away. He then threaded his fingers through the hair that was wilder and rarely did what Connor wanted it to do. He’d been cursed with cowlicks as a child, he’d never grown out of them.

Connor gazed up at Hank, wanting to open his legs, let Hank step between them.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, looking down at him, past his hair. With his other hand he gently tapped Connor’s forehead. ‘Close your eyes.’

Connor closed them, feeling the metal of the scissors rest against his forehead. It was still cold. Then Hank was sliding it through his hair, cutting easily, making decisions that Connor wanted to see. He could feel bits of hair fall over his cheeks and nose, itching, but as soon as they touched his skin,
Hank’s hand was there only seconds later, wiping and brushing the hair away.

It was…nice, Hank doing this. He liked the way Hank’s hands touched him in that perfunctory, attentive way.

‘That highball was pretty brutal,’ Hank said.

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘I didn’t like it. My father said I’d be susceptible to it, I think Gabriel would have gone straight to torture otherwise.’

‘Your Dad, huh? Jesus, what a goddamn shit-stain he is.’

Connor’s eyes twitched, even though they were closed.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, voice quieter than before. ‘Gavin. What he did in the alley. He ever do that to you in the past? Get further?’

‘It was different,’ Connor said, resigned. The fear that Gavin had sparked in him before, had faded after the terror of the red ice, Gabriel’s sweet but stern voice, even the panic afterwards.

Hank was determined to talk about it, and Connor didn’t want to make Hank stop touching his hair and face. But the dread returned all the same, apprehension curdling inside of him. It wasn’t easy to talk about how broken he was, and he didn’t want to hear Hank not liking it, or telling him he deserved better, or that he was sick for liking the things he liked. ‘Gavin liked pushing limits, I liked having my limits pushed.’

‘Did you ever safeword around him?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, laughing. ‘All the time.’

‘And he stopped?’

‘Never,’ Connor said. ‘Even at Zeta, if we had a private room, he wouldn’t stop. He used to say that “yellow” just meant he was on the right track.’

‘…Shit.’

‘But some of those scenes ended up being my favourite.’

‘You crave intensity, so that makes sense,’ Hank said musingly, lacking a judgement that surprised Connor. ‘That doesn’t mean he should’ve done it that way. There are other ways to get what you want. Let me guess, didn’t believe in aftercare?’

‘Of course not,’ Connor said. ‘That was rarely an issue.’

‘Rarely isn’t never. Did you like what you had with him?’

‘I got enough of what I wanted to make it worthwhile, for a short period of time,’ Connor said clinically. ‘And then it was no longer worthwhile and I ended it.’

‘What made it not worth your time anymore?’ Hank said.

Connor shrugged, realising that Hank was no longer cutting his hair and just petting him like a dog. It was shameful, how much Connor liked it. He stayed in the chair and tilted his head a little, and one of Hank’s hands coasted down to just above his ear, scratching the sensitive skin there.
'Do you want a serious answer?' Connor said eventually.

'Yeah,' Hank said. 'That’d be good.'

‘At first, he found it novel that I liked the things that I don’t think he’d been able to do with previous people he’d slept with. He found it almost revolting, but he liked it too. I think there was the aspect of me being his boss’s son, too, and I didn’t hate that either. He usually took the things I liked, and took them to places I wouldn’t…think to take them. But towards the end, he began to look for things I didn’t like all the time, just to see how I’d react. In the beginning, he found the things I liked shocking, but I didn’t. By the end, he wanted to shock me instead.’

‘Ah,’ Hank said. ‘By going too far? Doing too much?’

Connor nodded, then shrugged again. ‘I knew what I was getting myself into, with him. It wasn’t like the first time we ever did anything, he was gentle and respectful. As a known quantity, he was predictable. He escalated over time. Now I don’t think he’d be happy with anything less than…what he did in the alleyway.’

‘Rape,’ Hank said.

‘No,’ Connor said slowly. ‘He just-

‘That’s not a debate,’ Hank said. ‘I saw what he was trying to do and how scared you were. There’s no mitigating that with words that make you feel safer about it. I don’t care if he thinks it’s impossible. It clearly isn’t.’

Connor wanted to shrug again, but thought it might look like he was pretending a casualness he didn’t feel. Of course, that’s exactly what he would be doing. He felt sullen as he went still, trying to tune out the way Hank touched him, unable to stop himself from liking it so much.

‘I think you’d stop me,’ Hank said, ‘if I went that far. You weren’t traumatised out of safewords, which is a fucking miracle if you ask me. You still use them.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘I simply no longer default to expecting them to be respected.’

Hank hesitated, then grasped Connor’s towel-covered shoulders firmly before moving the towel away and shaking the hair down onto the sheet. Hank indicated that Connor should stand, and he did, walking off the sheet so that Hank could move the chair away and clean up. Connor thought maybe he should offer to do it, but Hank seemed happy doing everything himself. Eventually Connor walked over to the couch and leaned against it, observing quietly.

He thought he should contact Markus, Simon and North. It wasn’t safe enough. He didn’t know what he could use his phone for, and he was afraid to ask. Instead, as Hank came back after having wiped off his hands, Connor said:

‘You want a punishment dynamic with me, don’t you? You’ve mentioned it more than once. Like domestic discipline?’

‘Kind of,’ Hank said, tilting his head, yellow LED cycling in the most relaxed way it ever did, these days. Connor missed the blue, couldn’t undo Jonathan’s words, couldn’t stop seeing the threat of failure in the bright colour of the yellow. ‘Here, come sit on the couch with me.’

‘What?’

‘You’re gonna sit in my lap,’ Hank said, grinning in a smug way. ‘Like a little boy.’
‘I hate you,’ Connor said flatly, as Hank picked up the tablet and brought it over, reaching out and tugging Connor’s shirt. But Connor went with him anyway, and Hank settled down into the corner of the couch and pulled Connor down onto his thighs, and as Connor leaned forward to at least maintain some sense of independence, Hank nearly cackled as he pulled him back into his chest.

He manhandled Connor until he was partly against the armrest, so he could look easily and see Hank’s face. One of his legs rested down in the divot between Hank’s legs, the other was tugged onto the couch. As far as positions went, it got Connor harder than looking at the form had.

‘So…’ Connor said.

‘So, punishments though. What can I use? If you’re listing everything as being fine, or not even really a soft limit, what are you going to take seriously?’

‘I can’t be punished,’ Connor said, smiling a little. ‘Besides, what would you even do it for?’

Hank looked at him incredulously. ‘Seriously? I think starting with food would be good. You eat three meals a day, or I punish you.’

‘Domestic discipline is boring. And it doesn’t work.’

‘You just said yourself you’ve never been in a fucking relationship before – Gavin doesn’t count – so how the fuck would you know?’

‘Dad,’ Connor said easily. ‘It’s not like he was ever able to fix the things he didn’t like about me.’

‘Yeah, goddamn and Jesus Christ, I can hear the thunder of psychologists everywhere approaching after that. Besides! It’s not the same! He wasn’t ever trying to fix you. He would’ve always found more shit to beat on you over. You were in a lose-lose situation there, buddy. You were an anger management strategy.’

Connor pressed his lips together, and then watched as Hank set the tablet down beside them. ‘You suggest things then,’ Connor said. ‘Because I don’t know.’

‘No, first things first, do you want that from me? Because there’s a difference between me getting on your case during a general scene, and me specifically punishing you for breaking some covenant between us.’

‘Yes, I do understand how domestic discipline works. I might not be able to stream as many articles from the internet as you can through my head at however many nanoseconds-’

Connor stopped talking when Hank’s hand rested over his mouth.

‘Y’know,’ Hank said. ‘I knew you were a snarky bitch. I fucking knew. And it’s actually really great to see it in action, because you either feel safe enough to talk to me that way, or you’ve had enough of life in general and you can’t be assed being an obedient automaton anymore. But cut it out so we can talk about this. You can talk shit later, got it?’

Connor nodded, and Hank eased his hand away, and Connor privately marvelled at being able to talk with someone who didn’t hit him for having an opinion. Or worse, fuss over him like he was some tender child who needed only kindness.

‘What do you think about being left alone?’ Hank said. ‘As a punishment?’

‘I don’t care,’ Connor said honestly. ‘I just think about other things. It doesn’t have much of an
‘Writing lines?’

‘It’s fine,’ Connor said. ‘I switch off and just let my hand write them for me.’

Hank made a grumbling sound. ‘At least you’re being honest. Spanking? Whipping?’

‘I like them,’ Connor said. ‘Even if you tell me you’re disappointed in me. I don’t see it being very effective. ‘I’m very disappointed in you, Connor’ has always done great things for me at Zeta.’

Hank tapped his lips with two fingers and then narrowed his eyes. ‘A cage?’

‘They’re fine,’ Connor said without thinking. ‘Cages are-’

A dingy flash to seeing Hannah Abaroa in the black metal cage. The kind of cage that could be used as a crate for large dogs. The kind of cage that looked almost identical to the ones they had at Zeta, and some of the other clubs Connor had been to. He’d never actually minded cages in the past, he liked them, but he couldn’t stop thinking of Hannah in the cage, and the way his heart thumped sickeningly inside of him as he looked for the key, and the signs of torture on her back, and the sound of the gunshot, and-

‘No,’ Connor rasped. ‘No cages.’

‘Zlatko?’ Hank asked, and Connor nodded, feeling short of breath.

‘I suppose… that would make it an effective punishment.’

‘Yeah, because terrifying you is a great way to learn shit,’ Hank muttered. He reached down to the tablet and scrolled until he hit ‘Cages’ and put it in the ‘hate’ category, and then added it to hard limits. Connor stared at it. Even that didn’t feel right.

‘Maybe not always,’ Connor said. ‘I used to like them.’

‘Then in the future, if there is a fucking future, we can work on rehabilitation. I’m pretty good at that.’

‘Rehabilitating someone through something that’s become a hard limit?’

‘Yep. I mean if they want that. It happens to androids more than it happens to humans. Whatever mechanisms we have for learning something creates referred triggers really fucking effectively.’

Connor wondered if that was why Hank now couldn’t even talk about North without looking like he wanted to murder someone.

‘Ruined orgasms?’ Hank said.

Connor shivered, made a face, and Hank laughed indulgently, triumphantly. Connor buried his head into Hank’s shoulder.

‘I hate them,’ Connor said.

‘Well, good. But that’s only effective once, because then you’ll be too sensitive to do it again, and I want to save overstimulation for our other scenes. If I want you hurt and crying and writhing because of my hand, I want you to know that’s just how it’s going to be all the time.’
Connor opened his mouth a little, nodded, because even though he loathed overstimulation in the moment – didn’t everyone? – he liked when Hank sounded possessive. When he sounded pleased and awful and cruel at the same time.

‘You could punish me by making me eat?’ Connor suggested. ‘I’m sorry it’s so hard to find things to punish me for. I don’t…mind a lot of things, which makes it hard for them to stick.’

‘Yeah, because I want to fuck your eating up more. No, boy, we’re not doing that. I will never punish you by making you eat.’

‘All right,’ Connor said, sceptical.

‘What about…withholding scenes?’ Hank said.

Connor stiffened, then drew back and stared at him. Hank smiled a little, and Connor shook his head. ‘But aren’t you just…punishing yourself too?’

‘Hey, I can still get off,’ Hank said, grinning. ‘Hell, I can jack off right in front of you, and then leave.’

Connor’s fingers curled absently against Hank’s shoulder. ‘I don’t like that.’

‘Like cages? Or like, that would be a punishment we save for really egregious rule breaking?’

‘That’s mean,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, yeah, we’ve established you’re a fucking slut already,’ Hank said. ‘You don’t need to go for gold or anything. Okay, that’s gonna work great.’

‘Hank,’ Connor said, tilting his head, pouting a little.

Hank laughed. ‘You better just be good then, huh?’

‘I’m always good,’ Connor said, head dropping down again. He was too tired for this conversation. He hated negotiating anything at all. Normally Doms started to look at him warily when they realised that Connor had a habit of wanting the things he didn’t like, even in regular scenes. Like every sub was supposed to only receive what they wanted at all times, like that made any sense at all. That had never worked for him, and he didn’t understand why what he wanted had to be so off-putting. Hank was taking it in stride, at least.

‘Bullshit,’ Hank said, rubbing Connor’s back roughly, affectionately. ‘What about enemas?’

‘I’ll get turned on,’ Connor warned.

‘Soap enemas?’

Connor shrugged, ears and cheeks burning.

‘Shit, really?’ Hank said. ‘You like them?’

‘Not…exactly,’ Connor said. ‘No one likes the cramps. It’s just- I don’t know. Everything else makes it worth it. The before and the after.’

‘That’s how you like it best, huh? If the before and the after are worthwhile, then you’ll put up with anything in the middle – as long as it’s intense – and take it.’
Connor nodded, turned on enough that he wanted to grind into Hank’s thigh. It would feel like muscle, but if Connor ground down hard enough, he’d feel the polymer and aluminium chassis beneath.

‘Sensory dep?’ Hank said.

A hesitation. Connor didn’t love it, especially when it got extreme. He knew Hank was aware of the change in his body, but Connor hadn’t placed it down as a hard limit, and he was trying to think of how it would work as a punishment.

‘Bingo,’ Hank said. ‘So, me leaving you alone for corner time is fine, but if I put you in a blindfold and some noise cancelling headphones, and maybe some hand mitts to stop you from fidgeting, that’d be hell?’

‘I…’

Imagining it felt awful. He was surprised at how visceral the reaction was. Had it always been like that? No. He’d been in vacuum beds before, found them incredibly boring, but they hadn’t been that frightening at all. But now, imagining something as simple as hand mitts and noise cancelling headphones made something drop in his chest.

‘We’ll test it first,’ Hank said gently, ‘to see where your limits are with it. Did you dislike it before Zlatko?’

‘Not…in the same way,’ Connor said eventually.

He didn’t mind elements of it. A blindfold here, a gag there, and it enhanced the scene and often made it better. But he supposed that he had found earplugs and headphones disorienting, and hand mitts were only fun if there was a Dom right beside him, leading him through petplay and there was a leash and collar involved too.

‘Is it terrifying?’ Hank said.

‘I just don’t like it much,’ Connor said. ‘Not all at once.’

‘Y’know, it’s nice, having an actual conversation with you. Okay. So, scenario: I find out you haven’t been eating properly for a few days, instead of just skipping a meal, and decide to go with sensory dep as a punishment.’

‘I’ll eat,’ Connor said quickly.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said slowly. ‘Okay. I think that’s a good one actually. Don’t you think?’

‘I mean, if I’m meant to hate it,’ Connor grumbled.

‘You are,’ Hank said, petting Connor’s head, condescension in every movement. ‘It’s meant to work as a deterrent. And hey, it’s not like I’m just going to leave you there. I’ll be there, I’ll be able to sense your heart rate, I’ll know if it crosses a line. We’ll test it first, not as a punishment, just to see where your discomfort is.’

Connor squirmed a little, his arousal having lessened. He didn’t like that Hank was being so nice to him. Hank was supposed to just punish him, and then Connor would be good for him, and it would be fine. Instead, Hank was putting himself out, and Connor didn’t like it at all.

‘What’s up?’ Hank said.
‘I want to suck you,’ Connor said, trying to slide down onto the floor. Or he would have, if Hank hadn’t hooked a strong arm around his waist and hitched him back up onto his lap again.

‘Nope,’ Hank said. ‘Now you gotta talk to me.’

‘That would be an effective punishment,’ Connor muttered.

‘Goddamn, it wouldn’t,’ Hank said, ‘because I don’t want to make you averse to talking to me, which you already fucking are, by the way. You hate it enough as it is. So tell me, what happened?’

‘You’re being too nice,’ Connor said.

‘Uh huh, me asking you about what would make an effective punishment for you is me being too nice?’

‘Talking about trying it first, and reassuring me. It’s meant to be about punishment.’

‘We also don’t have to do this at all,’ Hank said seriously. ‘You might not be suited to it, Connor. You’ve spent your life – from what I can gather – avoiding any sort of long-term, meaningful bonds with Doms, entering into casual scenes with people. And not everyone who wants a relationship in this kind of thing, wants the actual punishments either. Domestic discipline is tough to do well, and it’s tough to do well when we’re dealing with someone like you, with your background.’

Connor pushed up to get away, not liking how broken this conversation was making him feel. He grit his teeth when Hank pulled him back.

‘We just don’t do it then,’ Connor said.

‘God, you fucking hate it, don’t you? Anyone granting you any concessions at all, and it sends you running. I know you’d be more comfortable if I just fucking hit you sometimes, but that’s not healthy. We can’t all be your Dad about it.’

Connor stayed mutinously silent.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said after a few minutes. ‘Okay. We’re done for now, anyway. You gonna go apeshit on me if I tell you that you did well?’

Connor spitefully dug his fingers into Hank’s arm, but still said nothing, and Hank only pulled him closer and crushed his arms across Connor’s chest. It ached, pressed too hard, and Connor found himself relaxing incrementally anyway. It was hard to continue being furious when Hank went silent too.

‘You did well, boy,’ Hank said gently. ‘You want me to tell you the rules?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘I haven’t even said yes.’

‘You don’t like giving clear answers,’ Hank said, ‘when it comes to things like this. I don’t think you like committing to something if you think there’s a chance you could hate or regret it. Honestly, I don’t fucking blame you one iota. You can’t trust your safewords anymore, even if you still use them, and if you’re non-committal and it goes to shit, it wasn’t your fault in the first place, right? But Connor, you know you’d still blame yourself for it anyway.’

‘Are you going to tell me the rules?’

‘Yeah, yeah, okay. I want you to eat three meals a day. Two of them have to have something that
looks like a vegetable in it, and fries don’t count. I’ll help you. I’m happy to give you things to eat, but you have to eat them.’

‘What if I’m sick?’

‘Then we’ll talk about it. But starving yourself for anything except a norovirus isn’t wise.’

‘What if-?’

‘Then we’ll fucking talk about it.’

‘Fine,’ Connor said. ‘What else?’

‘You don’t drink before eight in the evening and you’re not allowed more than two standard drinks.’

Connor stilled. ‘No?’

‘I think yep, that’s gonna be one.’

‘It looks like you’re never going to actually fuck me again. So I actually have no choice but to become a day drinker and-’

Hank hoisted Connor back into him with one arm, with his other he shoved his hand between Connor’s legs and – unable to get a handful of his genitals through the denim – dug the heel of his palm so hard that Connor coughed hard from the sudden pain, jerking backwards. There was nowhere to go, the pain getting sharper by the second.

‘Cock and ball torture,’ Hank said in a detached tone of voice. ‘You don’t like it, but you didn’t even list it as a soft limit with me, did you?’

‘Ah,’ Connor managed, still trying to wriggle backwards away from the escalating pain. Except Hank was behind him.

‘Now, now,’ Hank said casually, ‘shhh. It’s fine. I’m just pissed that you think this is a joke, and that you’re trying to manipulate me into fucking you. Still think it’s a joke?’

‘No!’ Connor said.

‘This would probably make a great punishment,’ Hank said, right into Connor’s ear, his voice low and gravelly. ‘But I like being able to do it whenever the fuck I want. Hey, oh hey, is this painful?’

It wasn’t getting any better, Connor’s hips were so tense they were starting to shake. Connor’s thighs clamped over Hank’s wrist, and Hank laughed.

‘Open your legs.’

‘Stop.’ The pain was now sitting heavy in his gut, pushing up as nausea. He shook his head back and forth, and distantly revelled that Hank was still able to do this after talking about rules and limits in a way that made Connor worry that whatever was between them was now antiseptic.

‘Open your legs, Connor. Come on.’

‘You have to stop.’

‘Open. Your. Legs.’
Connor had to force himself, every instinct screaming at him to just stop whatever Hank was doing with the heel of his hand. Instead, he spread his legs just a little, and then gasped when Hank moved his other hand down from Connor’s chest, keeping one of his thighs pushed out with surprising strength.

He didn’t let up that painful pressure, and Connor groaned.

‘Just a bit longer,’ Hank said, and though the tone was reassuring, the words were awful. ‘You sure you don’t want to list this as a soft limit?’

Connor squeezed his eyes shut as Hank shifted his hand until he could dig his knuckles into Connor’s balls instead. Connor shouted, bucking backwards, and then cleared his throat around the wave of nausea.

‘H-Hank.’

‘You are so good at taking it,’ Hank breathed. ‘But you’re still squirming like a complete newbie. Jesus Christ, please tell me that you can actually do better than this. You’re not even trying to bear this gracefully. You’re just being a whiny little brat about it. Don’t you think I deserve better? Come on. Tell you what. How about you make yourself relax against me, at least attempt to, and I’ll stop?’

‘But-’

‘You heard me,’ Hank said. ‘Try harder.’

Connor’s head arched backwards. He tried first to relax his arms, then his legs, but as soon as he did the pain brightened inside of him, as though the buffer of tense muscles in his gut and thighs somehow made it easier to take. He whimpered and tensed again, worse than before, and hated the way Hank laughed against him, the sound rumbling through Connor’s chest.

‘That’s pathetic,’ Hank said. ‘That’s all you’ve got? You want some incentive?’

‘No, Hank- I-’

‘Call me Sir.’

‘Sir.’

Hank shifted and then ground his knuckles back in, and Connor struggled hard enough that Hank had to move his hands briefly to force Connor to stay on his lap. As soon as his grip was secure, one of his hands moved back down to keep up that awful, sickening pain.

‘Nope, that’s the literal opposite of what I’m looking for here,’ Hank said. ‘Relax. Come on. Just try.’

Connor pressed out a sharp whine, trying to force his body to go limp through the pain and the fine trembling. His breathing turned short and ragged, but eventually, trying to shut out a pain he couldn’t ignore, he managed to make his legs go limp, then his arms, then his shoulders. It was the best he could do, and he ground his teeth to manage the pain in lieu of being able to carry it in the tension of his limbs.


It must have been another thirty seconds before Hank pulled his hand away, rubbing briskly over Connor’s thigh instead. Connor drew his legs closed, shuddering in waves, gasping, and distantly
thinking that it was stupid and indulgent to turn into Hank the way that he was, seeking comfort, but he couldn’t help it.

‘Yeah,’ Hank rumbled at him. ‘The before and the after, right? Come on. You did great. You don’t want to make it a soft limit?’

‘How much do you like doing it?’ Connor said, surprised at how much rougher his voice was.

‘A lot,’ Hank said.

‘Then no,’ Connor said, even as his legs curled up towards his torso. He ended up gasping for breath as the pain continued to radiate, and Hank only kept him close and occasionally stroked him without distracting him too much. Minutes passed, and Connor relaxed properly as the pain became distant. The low ache in his gut was just enough like arousal that Connor thought he was screwed. Anything like an orgasm would hurt, if he was given one.

‘If you’re that serious about drinking,’ Hank said, ‘I want you to join an AA support group online, until it’s safe enough for you to attend one in person.’

‘I’m not that bad,’ Connor said.

‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘Then you’ll find it an easy rule to follow, won’t you? I mean, you probably won’t find it too tough. You didn’t drink at Kara’s, even though it was challenging for you to stay there. Probably Alice was an incentive too, right? And being a good guest? I think it’s just something you do because…there’s nothing else. But at Kara’s, you could talk to Alice, or go outside, or chat with Kara. Right?’

‘I don’t want to talk about the drinking,’ Connor said.

‘Okay,’ Hank said easily. ‘What if I revised the rule? If you intentionally set out to get smashed, I’ll punish you when you’re sober?’

Connor thought it over. Alcohol was the only escape he really had from his life. He got to feel warm, buzzed, sometimes pleasant. Hours didn’t scrape by painfully, but would flow, and Connor didn’t even mind the hangover the next day. He didn’t know what Hank was offering to justify giving it up. Scenes with him might help, but what did Connor really have to look forward to in his life? Hank would leave, or give up. Hank could make better connections with androids, he’d probably realise that he preferred that and go to it sooner rather than later.

But Connor supposed he could always go back to drinking again when it happened. Nothing would be there to stop him when Hank abandoned him.

‘For now,’ Connor said finally. ‘For now. I don’t like that rule. But the revision is better.’

‘Good,’ Hank said. Not a single word about Connor’s attitude, not even something designed to make him feel bad for his drinking. ‘How sore are you?’

‘Sore,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah.’ Hank said it warmly enough that Connor looked up, and almost rolled his eyes at the smile he saw there. But genuine sadists also set off little nervous flutters in his chest, an ache to prove himself, to be worthy in what he could offer them. Hank’s sadism was addictive. Connor sank into him more, and Hank’s arms tightened around him.

‘Okay, and one rule with no punishments attached if you don’t do it. Just…something new I want
you to try, yeah?’

Hank slid his hand down Connor’s side until he could grasp Connor’s wrist in his hand.

‘I want you to tell me something you’re thinking, or feeling, or something random. It can be anything, as long as it’s true. And I want you to do it when I grasp your forearm like this.’

Connor’s heart stumbled in his chest. He couldn’t even interface like androids could, but just being asked for something like that…

‘What about you?’ Connor said.

‘I’ll share something too,’ Hank said. ‘Do you want me to go first?’

Connor nodded, and Hank smoothed his thumb down the inside of Connor’s wrist.

‘I miss Sumo. That fucking nugget of a dog, I didn’t at first, but seeing him again fucked with me and I knew it would. He doesn’t have much longer left, y’know, because they don’t live that long. Jesus. They never live long enough.’

Hank’s voice had gone quieter, sincere, fervent, still rough around the edges and Connor hesitated because he didn’t know if he had ever wanted to be that sincere about anything in his entire life. He couldn’t give Hank what Hank had just given him. Connor’s eyes slid sideways until he could stare at nothing, as Hank continued to stroke the inside of his wrist with a patience he didn’t deserve.

‘I remember you at the beginning,’ Connor said finally. ‘And I remember you after you were…after we did what we did to you. This version of you is… I don’t really know who you are. You keep being nice to me. But I never thought you were nice.’

‘I’m not really,’ Hank said, carefully moving his hand away from Connor’s wrist and resting it on his elbow instead. ‘You just think being treated with basic decency is people being too nice to you, because of shitty conditioning. And maybe you won’t like me. Who fucking knows? We’ve got time. Thanks for telling me that.’

‘I don’t…’ like it.

Connor had never liked talking about himself or his feelings. He sighed, and Hank kept him close.

‘You should just be able to do whatever you want,’ Connor said. ‘I won’t mind.’

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘Except that’s not it, is it? You do mind. Connor, you left Gavin. You hung up on him back in the apartment. You rebel against your father, not just once or twice, but over and over again. Every time he thought he’d defeated you, you just wore obedience like a fucking mask and kept doing what you wanted. When I do something you don’t like, you go and work the case on your own, or get drunk, or whatever. Sometimes it’s fine, it works out. It’s just- The ways you communicate that you’re fucking unimpressed with someone’s behaviour, they’ll end up hurting you more than you hurt other people.’

Connor didn’t bother telling him that was the aim sometimes. Connor didn’t really care about hurting other people, but sometimes he knew he had to hurt himself. He wanted things he wasn’t supposed to want, he didn’t work hard enough on the things he was supposed to be working on.

‘You tired?’ Hank said.

‘I just woke up.’
'Wanna watch some TV while I make you some breakfast?'

'I'm not five.'

'Fine. Wanna watch some porn while I make you some breakfast?'

Connor laughed in spite of himself, as Hank pushed him sideways onto the couch and stood, scruffing Connor’s hair easily as he walked into the kitchen. Connor slid sideways onto the couch, moving his legs gingerly through the ache that persisted.

'Is there still ice cream?' Connor asked.

'Are you sure you’re not five?'

Connor shifted the tablet, and then went to put it down on the floor, before scrolling through it idly. At the top, he looked at the relationship options and stuck his tongue out between his lips as he stared at them all. Finally, hesitantly, he pressed the button for: 'long-term.'

'Jesus, fuck me,' Hank said in an almost quiet wonder from the kitchen, and Connor froze when he realised that Hank was obviously linked to the tablet and was getting all of his responses directly.

'Maybe it was a mistake,' Connor said quickly.

'Was it?'

Connor said nothing, and Hank was silent for a while, then went back to making him breakfast. Maybe it would turn out to be a mistake after all, but Connor wasn’t going to know unless he tried.
The Red Glow in the Dark

Chapter Notes

It's been 84 years... but we're back!

New tag: Sensory deprivation.

Fowler burst in the room after knocking briefly, holding a heavy duffel in one hand and a cardboard tray of coffees in the other. There were three cups and Connor stared at the number in confusion.

‘Two are for me,’ Fowler said. ‘One’s for you. Hank doesn’t get any ‘cuz he’s a son of a bitch.’

‘Hey,’ Hank said idly from the couch, not even looking up. ‘You shouldn’t talk about CyberLife that way. What’d she ever do to you?’

‘Land your sorry ass in my lap, that’s what she did,’ Fowler said, slamming down the duffel bag and sliding Connor a coffee before taking a sip of his own all in a series of quick, fluid movements. ‘Burnt my tongue. Fuck.’

Fowler immediately drank more, and Connor looked at him, then looked at Hank. But Hank was still watching television, so Connor was just staring at the back of his head.

‘D’y’know how much easier this fucking case has gotten since we started treating it like it was for drug trafficking instead of human trafficking? I bet you’re feeling pretty damn proud of yourself,’ Fowler said accusingly to Connor, and Connor cautiously wrapped his hands around the coffee and shook his head.

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Why not?’ Fowler said. ‘You can’t take a compliment? Your Daddy sure can.’

‘They’re definitely the same person,’ Hank said laconically. ‘You should go on treating them like they’re identical, Jeffrey, that’s gonna be a great look for you.’

‘Fuck you, Hank,’ Fowler said.

‘Fuck you.’

‘Are you two…always like this?’ Connor said, staring between them both.

‘Yep,’ Hank said from the couch.

‘Pain in my ass,’ Fowler muttered as he finished one coffee, aimed the cup towards the bin and missed, and immediately picked up the other and started drinking it, only pausing to hiss at the temperature. After a beat, Connor got up, picked up the styrofoam cup and put it in the bin, while Hank quietly snorted in disdain without even looking to see what he’d done.

‘So why’re you here, anyway?’ Hank said. ‘Not that I’m not happy to see you or anything.’

‘The fuck you are. You know how much it’s costing me, putting you both up in here? Sorting all
your bullshit out? You know how much my department can afford all this shit?'

‘It’s a two star hole in the wall,’ Hank said, turning and looking over the couch, his LED cycling on yellow, his expression blank. ‘A fucking five year old could afford it with nothing more than a month’s worth of pocket money.’

Fowler stared at him like he wanted to throw the coffee at him, and after a second, Hank smiled.

‘You gonna tell us about the case, or what?’

‘No!’ Fowler said. ‘Y’all are not being kept in the loop. Didn’t I say that?’

‘But you just told us how much easier things are going now that you’re treating it like a drug trafficking case,’ Connor said, having walked back over to the table, now sipping his coffee gingerly. It really was too hot. It tasted good though, way better than precinct coffee.

‘Oh,’ Fowler said looking at Hank, ‘so she’s a smartass too.’

‘She is, actually,’ Hank said, looking briefly at Connor. ‘You wouldn’t guess it, but there it is. What else do you need from us regarding the case?’

‘I’m here to tell you that you can go home,’ Fowler said. ‘They’re looking for you, but they’re looking in the wrong places. Staking out Connor’s apartment, there’s even signs that they’re keeping an eye on Perkins’ home, so maybe they think you’ll go back?’ Fowler looked to Connor, and Connor shook his head vehemently. ‘They don’t seem to have any idea where Hank lives, Kara’s house has been sound too. You don’t want us to set up any details?’

‘Nah,’ Hank said, standing easily. ‘I’ve got it sorted. You can’t look after your surveillance the way I can.’

‘Aint that the truth. But you know they’ve got god knows how many dead androids working it. What do we even call them? Not calling them what Veritas calls them: the Everted.’

‘It’s catchy,’ Hank said. ‘I’ll be fine with the surveillance. They don’t even know where to start sniffing. Trust me.’

‘Anyway, we have a cult-drug-syndicate on our hands. The Veritas stuff seems real, the Everted believe in it anyway.’

‘Ah, there you go,’ Hank said, laughing and coming over to the table, ‘now you’re using it.’

‘Fuck me,’ Fowler said fervently. ‘Anyway, it’s a split system between humans, Deviants, and the Everted that they’re controlling to get this new strain of red ice. As far as we can tell it doesn’t have a street name, so this is early stages. I don’t think they’re bussing it yet, not commercially, so maybe they’re testing it. Seems like they want this to be a large operation, by the time they get started they’ll have their whole fucking tarot bullshit in upper management and have enough dead androids manufacturing the shit…and maybe the only thing they’re waiting for now is you.’

Fowler pointed to Hank, and Hank pressed a hand to his chest, his eyes crinkling.

‘Naw, you say the nicest things.’

‘I’m gonna be clear. The only reason I’m letting you go home is because I can’t protect you as well here as well as you can there. Because you do a ton of sneaky underhanded shit that I don’t know how to do. Are you taking him with you? Or does he stay?’
Connor paused mid-sip, then lowered his coffee cup. He hadn’t really talked to Hank about anything meaningful since he’d selected ‘long-term relationship’ on the tablet. Since then it had been small talk, bits and pieces about the case, and sometimes Hank ordering Connor to put the TV on. They hadn’t even fucked.

‘He’s coming with me,’ Hank said, almost indignantly. ‘Like I’m gonna leave him with you? You got such a fucking hard on for his dear Papa that he won’t survive it.’

‘I have been perfectly cordial,’ Fowler said, rolling his eyes.

‘Oh yeah, bring out the fancy goddamn words but you know it’s true.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Fowler said. He finished up the second coffee, threw it at the bin – missing again – and then picked up the duffel and slung it over his shoulder. ‘We’ve got eight plain-clothes outside and no marked, you’ll be able to spot them. If you see anything you shouldn’t, or that doesn’t belong, get in touch and we’ll sort something out. I didn’t see dick, but I don’t think they’re following me either. But you never know. Shit-storm’s gonna come at some point.’

‘Not yet,’ Hank said.

‘Soon though.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘Soon.’

‘And,’ Fowler said, pointing at Connor, ‘if you get any more fucking freak bursts of genius about the case, you tell Hank, so he can tell me. You ever want a job in a department when all this falls out, I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Thank you,’ Connor said.

Fowler paused for a long moment, then nodded once and walked out, slamming the door hard behind him.

Connor got up to put the second coffee cup in the bin, and when he turned to walk back to the table, he felt a frisson of apprehension when he realised Hank was standing right behind him. He hadn’t heard him move at all. Hank hooked a hand around Connor’s side, dragging him backwards until Connor’s back bumped into Hank’s chest.

‘We’re going home today,’ Hank said. ‘Which means the rules come into effect. Got it?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Can I… contact my friends?’

‘What?’

‘I didn’t know what I could do on the new phone. Wouldn’t contacting them be too dangerous? I don’t really know.’

‘Shit, no, you can contact them,’ Hank said, his other hand coming around Connor’s other side possessively, broad hand holding him in place just above his navel. ‘There’s a lot of onion encryption technology that I like to use, and-’

‘I thought they outlawed darknets and overlay networks?’

‘You’re not that stupid,’ Hank said into his ear. Connor shivered.

‘No, I mean… I know they’re still used, I just thought you-’
‘I’m not a fucking cop,’ Hank said. ‘And I’m still cleaner than your Dad, got it?’

Connor nodded, and Hank was rucking up Connor’s shirt and sliding his hands beneath it.

‘You can contact your friends,’ Hank said. ‘We’re untraceable. Chances are North and Markus have their phones set to wire contact from you directly to their processors, which bypasses most surveillance methods anyway. You can mirror a phone, you can’t mirror an android. And your friends aren’t stupid either. They’ve probably figured out some shit is going down. But yeah, you want to tell them what’s going on, you can. Just don’t tell them where you’re living, or give any hints as to location, but you know that already, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘That’s good,’ Hank said, tracing light, almost ticklish spirals into Connor’s skin. ‘That’s very good. Pissed me off when you called Fowler ‘Sir’ though. I know you’re just being polite, but still.’

‘I noticed too,’ Connor said. ‘Not that you were angry. It didn’t feel right.’

Hank slid one of his hands free and brought it to Connor’s forearm, sliding his fingers around the skin just above his wrist. Connor swallowed. He knew exactly what Hank was asking. It was the first time he’d done it since their conversation about kinks, punishments, relationships.

Connor couldn’t think, and Hank said: ‘It can be anything at all.’

‘When are you going to fuck me?’ Connor asked. ‘Is there a reason you won’t…here?’

‘A reason?’ Hank said, stroking Connor’s forearm. ‘Like you were coming down off a huge motherfucking high that nearly killed you and I needed to figure out where things stood between us? Tell me something else. Something that isn’t a question.’

Connor frowned. No, he really didn’t like this at all. It was rare that his thoughts were on the surface of his mind enough that he’d notice them. It was safer that way.

‘I don’t know how to do this,’ Connor said finally. ‘But you know that, don’t you? I don’t like talking about myself, or my feelings about things.’

‘You like to be opaque,’ Hank said, a hand trailing up Connor’s chest, between his pectorals, until it could land softly against his throat. It was so gently possessive that Connor’s eyes fluttered, then closed. ‘Even to yourself?’

‘You like to be opaque, too,’ Connor said.

‘Goddamn, it’s true,’ Hank said. ‘But there has to be different levels of give and take, y’know? How I treat a colleague at work is different to how I am with friends, is different again to how I think things should be right now. If you insist on getting beneath my skin about Cole, about my past, about being reverted, about wanting to die, you gotta expect some fair turnaround on that.’

‘It doesn’t seem fair at all,’ Connor said, smiling. Hank’s fingers languidly moved across his throat. Connor sagged backwards, testing to see if it would be allowed. Hank was strong against him, moving forwards just a fraction, enough to indicate that he wanted Connor to relax.

‘Do you think it was how you tried to get some power back?’ Hank said. His other hand was rubbing circles into Connor’s belly, and Connor thought it was more like comforting a child or an animal, than it was something he’d ever associated with the adults he’d slept with. ‘Turn questions around on other people all the time? Gain information on them so that you’re armed, and then when
they think they have an equal relationship with you…they realise they aren’t?’

‘It’s not an information arms race,’ Connor said quietly. ‘There’s just not that much to know about me. You already know about Gavin and my father. You know I like kink and you know that I am uncomfortable around families and you know why. You even know about Zlatko. You’re armed.’

‘I’m not,’ Hank said softly, his hand tightening slowly against Connor’s throat. ‘I mean I could use all those things, sure, but none of those things were you having a goddamn panic attack when I cuff you to me in the lab, were they? Knowing the broad look of something isn’t knowing the thing itself.’

Connor’s breathing slowed down. Before, the touches were ramping him up, but now the grip against his neck was soothing, the hand against his torso made him sleepy. He was pleased at the idea they were going back to Hank’s together.

‘You did good,’ Hank said. ‘Telling me that you don’t know how to open up about yourself. You ever think that’s why you act out so much?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Of course.’

Hank laughed low. ‘I like that. Someone else might be all outraged. Be like, ‘no! I would never! I don’t act out!’ You find character flaws real easy to accept, huh?’

‘Must be my low self esteem,’ Connor deadpanned.

‘That’s clever. But I stand by it. Having a broad spectrum view of your own flaws isn’t the thing itself. And you have a real shit ability to see the things you’re skilled at.’

‘Thank you, Sir,’ Connor said, keeping his voice empty. Hank hesitated, then sighed, and Connor felt the mechanical rise and fall of his chest against his back, the way all the programming in the world hadn’t erased the fact that cooling units rested in the place of lungs. It might be biomimicry, but Hank was still polymer and metal and nanites.

‘S’pose I should go get our shit together. You gonna handle it? Being all unfucked by me?’

‘Of course.’

Hank’s fingers curled once, briefly, across Connor’s torso, and then he slid backwards and all Connor could feel was the cold air where Hank had been. His eyes opened, and he walked towards the kitchen cupboard to get out the cleaning supplies. Might as well make the place clean.

*

It was a long drive back to Broadbank, made longer by the fact that Hank had to contact Grenville Precinct about accessing an unmarked vehicle while they both had a KLO4 out on them.

At first, no one wanted to put Hank through to Fowler, and when he eventually got through, Connor listened in idle curiosity as Hank reamed out Fowler for not leaving them with a car in the first place.

The autonomous vehicle they were given was such a nice model that Connor knew immediately why the precinct didn’t want to give it up to someone who – initially at least – must have seemed like a total stranger.

It was mid-afternoon as they set out. Clouds hung heavy in the warm light, the sun lighting them from behind, turning the showers into droplets of gold. Connor looked out of the window,
fascinated, and sometimes looked down to message Markus and North. He told them that he was
deeper in the case than he expected, that his and Hank’s lives were in danger, that they should
contact him if anything unusual happened, and to not trust anything or anyone out of the Broadbank
Precinct.

_Duh_, North replied.

_Do you know much about junk coding causing a Deviant’s LED to stay on yellow?_ Connor
responded.

The ellipses of North typing came up, went away, came up, disappeared again.

Finally: _The short answer is yes. The long answer is a thesis. Is he functional?_

At the moment, Connor replied, resisting the urge to look at Hank. He had a feeling that Hank was
probably observing the entire conversation anyway. But surely if Hank had a problem with it, he’d
say so. He seemed to be excellent at being brutally straightforward. But his LED hadn’t gone back to
blue once.

Yeah, North responded at once. _I’m not surprised. It was a messy process, what we did, because it
was only supposed to get him out of your life and honestly I might have cut some corners? But it was
always going to be a risk. If you can get him into the lab, I can help. There’s some first line
procedures I can do, think of it like first aid. And then tweaking? I think. Fuck. I don’t know. It might
not help. … This is new ground for me and for CyberLife._

Connor pursed his lips as he read through North’s texts, the jerky way she sent through her
sentences.

_Do you know Jonathan? At CyberLife?_ Connor sent. _He’s corrupt. Working for Veritas._

No. Fucking. Way?! I liked him, damn it.

Connor leaned back into the chair, not having realised that he’d leaned forwards. When he looked up
and out of the window, the clouds were limned with a gentle gold, shafts of light streaming down
onto the cars around them, lighting them up. He caught Hank looking at him, that impassive
expression, the yellow LED.

‘What’re you looking at?’ Hank said.

‘The clouds look pretty,’ Connor said. ‘The light is nice.’

Hank looked out of his own window.

‘Huh.’

‘You don’t think it’s nice?’

‘Wasn’t paying attention,’ Hank said gruffly. ‘Don’t really notice things like that. It’s all just
weather.’

Connor wanted to disagree, but ultimately Hank was right. He hesitated, then went back to his
phone.

Wait, North had written. _How do you know Jonathan’s one of them?_

Connor grimaced. _Short story, I found out the hard way. The long story isn’t worth telling. But he_
talked to me about the junk code with Hank in the first place. Said it could cause a shutdown?

Total KO, yep, North wrote. Game over, do not pass go etc. Too much junk code fries the processors. It’s nasty. Haven’t really seen it in functioning androids, it’s rare, but I watched some of the vintage videos from the old days y’know?

Connor looked out of the window for a long time, at the gold, the heavy dark grey of the clouds where the sun couldn’t soak through, the warm humidity out there in the world, while the car was kept dry and cool. An optimal temperature for androids. Connor’s phone buzzed again.

Thanks for the update. Are you doing okay? Connor could almost hear Markus’ voice.

He sighed. This was the part he didn’t like. What was he supposed to say? He was fine? He’d had better days but he was in a long term relationship? Hank didn’t seem to hate his company? There were people who wanted to kill him and those people absolutely included his father, but it was also nice not to have to see his Dad? Gavin would probably try and beat him to death if they saw each other again, but it could be worse?

I’m doing okay, Connor responded.

You know if you need anything at all, just ask. Keep us posted about the case? We’ll let you know if anything unusual happens.

Thank you, Connor responded.

He didn’t know what else to say. There was something about Markus that put him on the back foot. He’d started off as Connor’s supervisor – effectively, his boss – and even though he’d always been unfailingly kind, Connor knew there was a steel behind it that he found intimidating. He always wondered what Markus thought of him, was too afraid to ask in case Markus gave a polite answer instead of a true one.

He put his phone down and looked across at Hank, who was staring ahead. He looked briefly down at Hank’s crotch, back to Hank, then looked away, impatient. They had a lot of time, the car was driving itself, and Connor shifted restlessly in the seat, tugged on the seatbelt, and then went back to staring at the sky.

‘Fowler thinks highly of your hacking ability,’ Connor said after twenty minutes of silence had passed.

‘Yep,’ Hank said.

Connor didn’t bother rolling his eyes.

‘Why hacking? You said it wasn’t part of your original coding?’

‘It’s a hobby,’ Hank said. After a pause, he lounged deeper into the seat and spread his legs. Connor wanted to kneel between them, but Hank didn’t seem in that frame of mind. ‘I guess it’s just one of those things. Hobbies make us more ‘human.’ So it’s encouraged. You should try it some time.’

‘Hacking?’ Connor said blandly.

Hank looked at him with such a level of ‘don’t be fucking stupid’ disdain that Connor couldn’t help but smile.

‘Meanwhile,’ Hank said, ‘I’ve been chatting to Luuk about you.’
‘What? About what?’

‘Stuff,’ Hank said unhelpfully. ‘Dude would adopt you in a heartbeat like one of his dogs if you let him. But he’d never let you come again.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, laughing ruefully. ‘He’s like that. Long-term chastity is the thing he wants most in a relationship. Could you imagine?’

‘I dunno, Connor. When was the last time I let you come?’

Connor shifted in his seat again, Hank laughed.

‘Y’know what I like most?’ Hank said. ‘I can tell you’re keyed up, I can tell you’re fucking impatient and I can tell you’ve wondered at least once why I’m not taking full advantage of you being here. But I don’t have to worry about it as much as you do. I can come whenever I want. You can’t. Poor thing.’

‘I could come whenever I wanted,’ Connor said. ‘It’s not a rule.’

‘Okay then,’ Hank said. ‘I mean, I’d be pretty annoyed at you for it, but whatever. You could go to town right now. Go on then.’

Hank looked at Connor expectantly, and Connor knew that he wasn’t even going to try. Just the idea of doing it didn’t fill him with any sort of arousal.

‘But you’re not like Luuk,’ Connor said cautiously.

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘I like obedience, but I don’t have a hard on for chastity like he does.’

‘Ruined orgasms don’t count,’ Connor said.

‘To you they don’t,’ Hank said, ‘but I get it. We’ll pretend that even though it’s not a soft limit, it actually is, and we’ll save them for punishments. Capisce?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. He didn’t much like the idea of that, either, but it was better than Hank giving them out whenever he wanted. Of course, the alternative was probably not being allowed to come, or overstimulation – something Hank hadn’t put him through yet, but Connor was sure would be miserable, even though he was craving it simply because he hadn’t been allowed to come properly in some time.

Connor sighed and looked out of the window. He couldn’t ignore the fact that he felt happier to be linked to someone in this way. He wondered what his mother would think of him and then his thoughts ground to a halt, because it was the first time he’d wondered something like that in years. He looked briefly to Hank to see if he’d noticed. Hank said nothing and looked forward again.

Connor felt like he’d noticed something, but he’d decided not to push on the issue.

For the rest of the long drive, Connor closed his eyes and tried not to think of anything at all. As usual, his mind did what he wanted it to, going blank, letting him ease into the space where he didn’t need to worry about anything anymore.

*

Hank went into his house first, insisting that Connor wait in the car. He emerged ten minutes later and opened the car door on Connor’s side, and stood over him while Connor got out of the car.
Connor ignored the way his breaths shortened at the proximity, staring at the house instead.

It felt like home. It was warmth followed by a sickening sense that he’d lose all of it. He’d left most of his new clothes there. He probably still had a bottle of vodka in the freezer.

He followed Hank into the house and looked around, his heart beating faster, harder, even as he wanted to relax.

*I live here now,* he thought.

He looked to Hank.

‘Should I pay rent?’

‘Can you afford it? Nope. So fuck off,’ Hank said, casually walking into his own kitchen and pouring Connor a glass of fruit juice before pouring himself a glass of thirium. He tapped the kitchen counter next to the glass of juice hard enough and often enough that Connor walked over automatically and picked up the juice, frowning. He wanted to ask what kind of fruit it was and if it had bits in it but he didn’t want to risk pissing Hank off within the first *minute* of them both being here, in the same place together. In Hank’s *home*.

Connor turned away, sipping at the juice – some kind of tropical juice, and it did have bits in it, but it wasn’t so bad – saw the glass table and felt his cheeks begin to burn. God, he was even starting to get hard. He wandered away from Hank towards the piano and hoped that Hank would be graceful enough to just ignore-

‘You are the easiest fucking slut I have *ever* met,’ Hank said, even as he bent down and rearranged something in the fridge.

‘You could choose to not comment on it.’

‘As someone who has an intimate relationship with the literal fucking binary language, let me first say ‘I know,’ and second just, someone would think you’d never been given a good dicking down in your life but I know you have.’

Connor cleared his throat and sat down at the piano after placing his glass down on the coffee table. He dared to lift up the lid and he stared at all the keys. Then he rested his fingers so delicately on them that they didn’t even depress.

‘You wanna learn to play?’ Hank said.

‘What?’ Connor said, shocked.

‘I mean not today, but I could teach you some things.’

‘Really?’

‘Yep,’ Hank said, wiping down the counter even though it was only minimally dusty and hadn’t been dirtied since they’d left. Then he drank down the rest of the thirium at once, cleaning the glass immediately afterwards. ‘All right, give me a few minutes, and then I’m gonna call you into the bedroom, okay? Not for sex, don’t get your hopes up.’

‘But for something?’

‘We’re gonna see how you go with some sensory deprivation,’ Hank says. ‘Not as a punishment, but
because there’s no point using it as a punishment first if using it outside of that is going to make you flip out. So you do whatever you want out here, and finish the juice, and I’ll call you in a bit.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said, feeling a little breathless. ‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Good boy,’ Hank said softly, even as he turned and walked down the corridor.

Connor’s nerves weren’t going to settle at all now. He carefully lowered the heavy lid that protected the keys and walked over to the coffee table, drinking the glass of juice quickly, not wanting to leave it half-finished after Hank had told him to polish it off. Afterwards he brought it over to the sink and cleaned it.

After a few seconds, he looked in the fridge. Tucked right at the back was a small six-pack of shrink-wrapped juice boxes, the kind for children. Connor hesitated, then reached for them and noticed they were well past their best before date. His heart clenched, and he placed them back exactly where he’d found them and bit his lip as he closed the fridge again and opened one of the cabinets instead.

By the well-selected ceramic bowls and plates, was a single plastic kid’s bowl with a print of cartoon dolphins leaping across the rim. Connor closed the door and wondered what it was like, for Hank to see the reminders everywhere. To keep them everywhere, intentionally. That wasn’t just keeping Cole’s room untouched, it was keeping his presence in the house untouched too.

Connor didn’t know if it was healthy or unhealthy, he only knew it wasn’t his place to comment on it.

He walked back into the lounge, picking up one of the piano books as he had when he’d first come to Hank’s. There was something nostalgic about holding the book like this, instead of having it downloaded into a tablet. Connor wondered what Hank liked about it so much. Maybe he should ask, and he put down the book, lifting up some of the others. One he opened only to see so much musical notation that it was like looking at a headache on a page. Even there, Hank had written notes like: ‘Make it fun for fuck’s sake’ and ‘if you can’t play this like it’s easy then fuckin don’t.’

‘All right,’ Hank called. ‘Come here.’

Connor put the book down and looked around the lounge, making sure he hadn’t left anything out of place. He walked down the corridor and looked into the spare bedroom he’d first taken. Hank wasn’t there. So Connor continued down into the master bedroom, which had a king-sized bed with a deep red bedspread, as well as a standing white port-station for Hank to run basic diagnostics. It looked unused.

A pile of items lay on the corner of the bed, and Connor watched as Hank picked up the leather paw mitts first, already feeling uncomfortable.

‘I’m going to walk you through every stage of this,’ Hank said, walking over and taking one of Connor’s arms. Connor lifted his hand helpfully, working it into the paw mitt. It forced his fingers to curl at the ends, forced his thumb against his hand so that he couldn’t use it. But the leather was beautiful and looked after, the D-rings shiny, and Connor was torn between discomfort and liking to see the leather on his skin.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, ‘doing well so far. How’s your hand feel?’

‘Fine,’ Connor said. ‘Tight. Not sore. But maybe…it might start to hurt after a bit.’

‘Tell me if it does,’ Hank said.
Hank helped Connor slip his hand into the other mitt, pulling the straps securely closed over his wrist, and Connor hated the way Hank watched him the entire time. It wasn’t comfortable. His breath was short in his lungs, he kept trying to flex his fingers, only to remember that he couldn’t move them. He couldn’t use this thumbs at all. The leather was already warm and sweaty around him.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, after about a minute had passed. He reached down and picked up a small plastic packet of ear plugs, the soft squishy kind. He undid the package, and Connor stood there helplessly, unable to even put them in his ears. ‘You’re still going to be able to hear me through these, they’re just going to muffle things a bit.’

Connor glanced at what looked like the noise cancelling headphones – large and chunky – on the bed, and swallowed. Hank was already reaching up and turning Connor’s head, gently working one of the earplugs in. When the second one was in, Connor felt his skin crawl before the sensation settled down.

‘Get on the bed for me,’ Hank said. ‘I want you on all fours, but not in the centre. Got it?’

Connor nodded, grateful he could still hear Hank, at least for now. It was also a relief to be given orders, to have something clear that he could hang onto, directions he could follow successfully. He could still brace himself on his hands, the mitts made that surprisingly easy, even if it did create some pressure against his knuckles. Then he was facing Hank’s pillows, still fully dressed, and he watched in the corner of his eye when Hank picked up the blindfold.

‘You’re doing good so far,’ Hank said. ‘I’m not going to gag you. But you’ve gone all quiet anyway, haven’t you?’

Hank prodded him in the side, Connor only nodded. He didn’t like to hear his voice against the earplugs in his ears.

When the blindfold came, pressing against his ears instead of above or underneath them, secured against the back of his head, Connor turned his head towards Hank automatically. Hank’s hands were there, one curving across the back of his head, the other resting on his shoulder. Connor knew it probably wouldn’t be like this as a punishment, and the idea of it was motivational enough that Connor didn’t want to do anything wrong ever again.

It wasn’t terrifying, and it was made easier by the fact that Hank was doing all of this with intent, and being far more careful with him around this than he was with other things. One of the few times Connor could handle Hank being nice to him, because he didn’t know how he’d deal with it, if Hank was cruel.

He had no idea what Hank would be like administering a punishment. After their first encounter at Zeta, Connor would have said cruel without a second thought. Now…he thought maybe cruel but fair and attentive.

‘How you doing in there?’ Hank said, ruffling Connor’s hair. Connor nodded, and Hank tapped Connor’s lips. ‘Actual response, come on.’

‘Fine, Sir,’ Connor said, wondering if his voice was louder than normal, because he couldn’t hear it properly. He kept blinking behind the blindfold. He could only see tiny strips of light at the top and bottom, and nothing else. He felt disoriented.

‘Two more steps. We could go further than this, but I think this is a good start.’
First, a chain that secured the two mitts together, which meant that Connor couldn’t spread his arms apart, he couldn’t lift one hand without lifting the other. The heavy metal chain was short enough that Connor only had a hand’s width between the mitts, and it changed his posture, he spread his legs automatically to brace the shift in gravity.

Then, Hank picked up the headphones and eased them over Connor’s ears, pressing against the ear plugs, the blindfold, and after that, Connor couldn’t even hear Hank shifting anymore, though he could feel Hank’s legs against the bed. He could hear his own pulse in his ears, he could feel the beating of his heart, but he was locked out of so much more. He opened his mouth and sucked down a deep breath.

Hank’s hands returned to the headphones and Connor was sure he was going to take them off, but instead Hank just settled them better, before moving away. There were a few harrowing seconds where Connor didn’t know where Hank was, or what he was doing, and then there was a burst of static in the headphones.

‘I’m here,’ Hank said. ‘You can still hear me, can’t you? Nod if you can.’

Connor nodded, the movement making him a little dizzy. He wanted to clench his fingers, but he couldn’t. He squirmed, then forced himself to settle down. Nothing was actually hurting him. The position wasn’t painful. He hated feeling disoriented, but that was probably meant to be part of it.

‘You’re handling this like a champ,’ Hank said. ‘I know you don’t like it. But I think your fear levels are holding okay too. I mean for you. Your adrenaline levels are always kind of a mess. But PTSD will do that to someone, won’t it?’

Connor swung his head, like he could look in Hank’s direction, and he felt his body tipping from the motion. He hissed, the chains rattling and then pulling tight as Connor tried to automatically brace himself. Hank was there just as Connor thought he was going to fall sideways, a hand on his lower back and one on his shoulder.

‘Easy,’ Hank said. ‘Take a few deep breaths.’

His mouth opened and the first few he sucked down too fast. After that, his breathing evened, and he began to relax back into the pose. He was fine if he didn’t move too quickly. The strain began to get difficult on his wrists, and he hated the way his sweaty hands felt, but after a while he lowered himself down onto his elbows. It displaced the aching immediately, helping a lot.

Connor felt like he was stuck inside himself, he didn’t like it at all.

‘I don’t think I’d get you to do this for more than about ten minutes at a time,’ Hank said, his voice surprisingly clear. Connor wondered if he was transmitting his voice directly into the headphones, instead of talking out loud into a microphone. ‘I’d be in the room or nearby, and you’ll be able to hear my voice intermittently. I’d talk to you. But I might be reminding you why you’re getting punished, so you’ll know I’m there, but you might not like what I’m saying. Got it?’

Connor didn’t want to nod, not wanting to experience that dizziness again. Instead he just made a soft sound, feeling it vibrate in his throat, not knowing what it sounded like at all. He could hear Hank, but not his own voice.

‘You can still safeword during a punishment. That being said, you can’t say ‘yellow.’ It’s off the table. You either cut out completely, or you endure. There’s no middle ground here, understand? If you want reassurance, you can ask for it by saying ‘Sir, help,’ and I may provide it. It’s the only time you won’t get a dual safeword system.’
Connor turned the rules over in his mind. Ultimately, they were easy to accept. He wanted to ask if Hank had always been this stern, or if it was just with him. He wanted to ask if androids found it easier to accept these kinds of rules, and if Hank had to behave differently with them. He knew that some androids engaged in wire play, types of electroplay Connor could only dream about, and wondered if Hank would need that one day – something Connor could never offer.

‘Yeah, okay, we’re going to do another ten minutes of this, starting from now. I’m gonna stay right here, and I’ll talk to you sometimes, but the time between talking’s gonna slow down. This isn’t a punishment for anything, so if you’ve had enough you don’t need to safeword, you can just tell me you have to stop, okay?’

Another sound of acknowledgement. He was too scared to shape words, to say them when he couldn’t hear them. He wondered if Hank would make him during the punishment. He probably expected an attempt at words, if ‘Sir, help’ was the request phrase for reassurance.

The next few minutes were difficult. Connor kept shifting, waiting for Hank to say something to him, which was sometimes as simple as Hank pointing out that he wanted to get a new bedspread, to saying that he thought Connor was doing a good job. But Hank had stopped touching him, and Connor kept his head down because it was easier on his neck and he kept wanting to shift his wrists but stopped himself. He didn’t want to know the chains were rattling while he was unable to hear them.

He thought something like this, while focusing on whatever rules he’d broken, would maybe be effective. It was hard to tell.

The last five minutes were spent in total silence. Connor tried counting them off. He tried curling his toes, foot by foot, to give himself something to concentrate on. Just as he started to wonder if Hank had walked off to do something else, he heard Hank clearing his throat in his mind, clear through the earplugs. He must have been transmitting directly into them.

‘Okay, you did well, boy,’ Hank said. Connor still jerked a little when he felt one hand come and rest on the nape of his neck, while the other gently worked off the headphones.

Then, the blindfold, and Connor blinked rapidly because the room seemed brighter even after only ten minutes. When Hank removed the earplugs, Connor felt surprisingly raw, staring ahead as the sounds of Hank moving across the carpet were louder than ever. Even the way the quilt wrinkled when he leaned into it was too much. Connor pushed up onto his wrists automatically, but did it clumsily, trying to move one hand backwards too fast. The chain on the D-rings rattled and then locked, and Connor jolted, saying nothing, frustrated at himself.

‘Wait, boy,’ Hank said, placing a cautionary hand on Connor’s shoulder.

Connor nodded, feeling unable to speak. His voice would be too loud.

Hank helped him to shift so that his legs were hanging over the bed, the paw mitts in his lap. Hank removed the chain first, dropping it to Connor’s side, and then began working the straps.

‘You look good in the paws,’ Hank said appreciatively. ‘You ever done much with that?’

Connor shrugged.

Hank hesitated, then placed two fingers under Connor’s chin, lifting it so that they were looking at each other. Hank scrutinised him with narrowed eyes.

‘You gonna say something?’ Hank said.
Connor didn’t say a word, and Hank’s mouth twisted, but he didn’t push the issue, and instead removed one of the leather paws, Connor’s hand feeling wet as it came free. It didn’t take much for it to sweat in the restrictive space. Hank already had a small towel there, wiping his palm, the back of his hand, each of his fingers. Connor curled and straightened his fingers, but they didn’t hurt.

Hank did the same with his other hand before placing them both back in Connor’s lap. After that, he moved the items to the side so that he could sit next to Connor. After a breath, he lifted his arm and placed it around Connor’s shoulders, drawing him close. Instinctively, Connor resisted it, and Hank just pulled harder.

‘Come on,’ Hank said. ‘If you’re going to go all non-verbal on me, you’re not getting out of this part.’

‘I’m not non-verbal, Sir,’ Connor said automatically.

Hank laughed softly, but he didn’t move his arm away from Connor’s shoulder, and instead he reached up with his other hand and roughly tousled Connor’s hair, like Connor had done something amusing.

Connor thought he should be more annoyed that Hank was being so nice to him. But it didn’t feel like being babied, just leaning into Hank’s side. He let his mind go blank, his breathing slowed down, and he ended up pushing his forehead into Hank’s shoulder, his eyes closing. Hank did nothing except slowly drag his fingers up and down Connor’s upper arm, but even then, he didn’t do it all the time.

After about twenty minutes, Hank eased away. He grasped Connor’s wrist, and it made Connor stiffen as he realised what Hank wanted. He wasn’t used to this at all. Even Markus and Simon and North rarely asked him to volunteer something. Normally they just asked him direct questions that he could answer or evade.

This required something harder. Something that Doms hadn’t really wanted from him in the past, things his father hadn’t cared about, things Connor had trained himself not to care about.

‘Do you use your port station often?’ Connor said.

‘Something about you, Connor,’ Hank prompted gently. ‘You can ask questions whenever you want.’

Connor grimaced, and thought Hank could use this as a punishment if he wanted to, but he’d probably go on about not wanting to sensitise Connor to it or something ridiculous like that.

‘I can’t tell if you’re being too nice to me or not,’ Connor said finally, each word coming free like rusted tacks in a corkboard. ‘Normally I would think you were being too nice, if you were someone else maybe. I don’t know. I don’t hate it as much as I thought I would.’

‘That’s good,’ Hank said.

‘I thought of my mother today,’ Connor said, then stilled. He stared ahead, surprised he’d said that at all.

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s nothing,’ Connor said quickly.

A silence where almost anyone else would have asked something. Connor could have sagged in
relief when Hank did nothing more than gently squeeze Connor’s wrist before letting go.

‘By the way,’ Hank said, as he got up and started putting away the equipment – Connor noticed that one whole section of his large closet seemed dedicated to that kind of thing. ‘You’re sleeping in here now.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

Connor caught a glimpse of Hank’s smile as he bent down to put the chain away, and felt a small warm glow. Hank liked it, being called ‘Sir’ like that, and Connor liked doing it. He stretched his wrists carefully, his fingers, and felt surprisingly refreshed and peaceful. Without waiting for Hank to tell him, he walked out and wandered back into the main lounge, going through the piano books, fascinated as much by Hank’s notation as he was with the mazy musical alphabet that he didn’t think he could ever understand.

*

At three in the morning, Connor jerked awake with a start, thinking he’d had a nightmare. But as his heart pounded, he heard a strange burst of static and half-tones. He got up automatically, eyes wide as he saw a glow of dingy red coming the corridor. Hank wasn’t in bed next to him.

He rubbed at his eyes and walked to the doorway and then froze at what he saw.

Hank was stationary in the corridor, staring into Cole’s room. His impassive expression which could sometimes seem empty was now truly vacant. His mouth was half open. His LED cycled on a viscous, thick red, its glow oozing down one side of Hank’s face, making him seem like a stranger. Connor risked taking two steps forward and Hank didn’t look at him. He kept staring into Cole’s room.

‘Hank?’

Nothing. Not even a glimmer of recognition. Hank wasn’t blinking. Connor’s heart began beating harder and harder as he thought of Jonathan’s callous words, North’s suggestions that Connor get Hank to her. Hank was totally immobile. He looked broken.

‘Hank?’ Connor said, walking closer. His breaths shorter and shorter. Hank’s chest wasn’t moving. Even though Connor knew it didn’t mean Hank was dying or dead, there was still something in his instincts that screamed to him something was terribly wrong. He had to do something. He didn’t know what to do.

He lifted an arm to touch his shoulder, but stopped. What if he triggered something bad? What if Hank really was broken?

In the end he stood there for minutes, in the dark, unable to think of what to do as he panicked. Another burst of static emitted from Hank’s open mouth, sounding nothing like a voice. Connor’s breathing hitched.

Just as he decided he’d get his phone and call North, the light around them switched to a bright yellow and Hank blinked, straightened, his mouth closed. He turned and looked at Connor and then tilted his head.

‘Hey, couldn’t sleep?’

Then, as he seemed to realise something was wrong:
‘What is it, boy? You can tell me.’

‘You…’ Connor said, startled at the sudden change. He looked to Cole’s room, then back to Hank. ‘You were just staring.’

‘Was I?’ Hank said, like he hadn’t noticed. He didn’t even look at Cole’s room as he walked back to Connor and looked him over, before reaching out and steering him back to Hank’s room. ‘Time for bed.’

‘But you…’ Connor watched in amazement as Hank walked past him and got back into bed, the motions more robotic than anything Connor had seen from him. ‘I’m worried.’

‘Nothin’ to worry about,’ Hank said.

Did Hank even know? Did he remember? Was there a log in him saying that he’d just frozen staring at Cole’s room like that for so long it had woken Connor?

‘Get some sleep, Connor,’ Hank said.

‘But what if-?’

‘Night.’

Just like that, Hank’s eyes closed and he was asleep, and Connor was left standing by the corner of the bed, heart still hammering, feeling something huge fraying apart in his chest, in the house that he was scared to call a home.
Connor hated arguing at the best of times, especially anything that drew him into the line of fire with his father. But even with Hank, it was a nightmare.

‘Why won’t you just listen to me?’ Connor said, twenty minutes into a conversation that was going nowhere.

‘It’s fine,’ Hank said, pouring Connor a glass of juice in the kitchen. It was true that he was remarkably back to ‘normal’ after the previous night’s episode, but Connor still felt alarm, he wasn’t settled about it.

‘North won’t hurt you.’

‘Look, I’ve run a diagnostic, I had a glitch, it happens with the software. This is new territory, Connor! CyberLife didn’t even want to touch the coding that’s left over with me, got it? Goddamn, leave it alone. I know you’re worried, but I’m fine.’

‘You’re not fine,’ Connor said, hating that it was getting more and more tempting to give into all the excuses Hank had used. That he’d run a diagnostic – but had he? And when? That people might not be able to do anything anyway. And next:

‘Look, if you knew a human that’d lost their kid, and they just stood blanked out in front of their kid’s room, you’d just zone that as complicated grief or some shit, right? Call it that.’

‘Then you need a therapist,’ Connor said.

‘Sure, I will if you will.’

Connor’s hand clenched, his teeth gritted together. He didn’t like this at all. Hank seemed fine, all Connor wanted to do was ignore it too. He couldn’t think about it. He’d been sticking to his guns for
longer than he could remember arguing with anyone. Hank was like a rock, he just didn’t budge.

‘Look,’ Hank said finally, sighing, turning and looking at Connor with something pained and sympathetic in his eyes. It might have even been pity. ‘If it happens again, we’ll do something, okay? I swear. But Jesus, Connor, I am an old model that has seen some shit, been patched up by CyberLife god knows how many times before I even reverted my coding. I’m doing the best I can, but I’ve learned first-fucking-hand that letting strangers mess with my coding doesn’t always work well for me.’

Connor’s hand opened, closed, and Hank saw it and walked over to him, putting down the box of cereal as he went. He grasped Connor’s shoulders, looked down at him, and Connor felt his own need to not think about it wrap around him with that gesture. He just wanted everything to be fine. Just for a week. Just for a little while.

‘I know it must’ve been scary for you to wake up to that,’ Hank said patiently, and Connor hissed at the tone, trying to jerk free. Hank didn’t let him go. ‘You were right to bring it up this morning.’

‘You’re not going to do anything,’ Connor said. But he didn’t know what Hank could do. What if North looked into all of that coding and just stared at Connor with that look on her face that meant it would never work anyway? What if nothing could be done?

‘If it happens again, I’ll do something. In the meantime, I’ll close the door to his bedroom. It might be some kind of, I dunno, trigger to the glitched coding.’

‘But then…’ Connor looked aside. That didn’t seem like an answer. ‘But he was your son.’

Hank’s fingers dug in hard, a spasm that was nothing like comfort, Connor could tell by the way Hank pushed himself back from Connor and walked into the kitchen. Maybe it was complicated grief. Maybe it affected androids in different ways than it did humans. Even their PTSD could be atypical.

‘I shouldn’t have brought it up,’ Connor said stiffly. ‘That part.’

‘No,’ Hank said. ‘You had to. Look, just…drop it for now.’

It was almost a relief to be told that he could let it go, and Connor turned away, even though everything on the counter was meant for him to eat. The muscles across his chest felt tight, but he didn’t know what he could do. Hank had at least heard him out in the morning, hadn’t denied what had happened, but Connor didn’t think he had any proper memory of it. Hank insisted it’d probably only been for a few minutes at most, but Connor wasn’t sure. Either way, it was an impasse for now, it was a miracle that Hank had given in as much as he had, swearing to do something next time.

Connor didn’t want there to ever be a next time. Androids regularly outlived their human friends and partners, and though it might be harder on the androids, Connor – in that moment – preferred it that way.

He’d slept terribly, drifting in and out, constantly checking to see if the LED was yellow. Hank seemed to sleep deeply, there were no more strange bursts of static, he’d woken in the morning functional and more like himself. Connor half-wondered if he’d imagined it all, but no, he only wished he had.

‘All right, Hank,’ Connor said finally, turning back to the counter, picking up the small plate with two pieces of toast on it. One spread with jam, the other peanut butter. He skipped over the cereal and took the juice instead and thought that he really should stop relying on androids to do this for
him, but he also hated eating breakfast. ‘You don’t have to keep doing this. The breakfast thing.’

‘I know,’ Hank said, then he sighed. ‘It’s not a chore.’

‘All right, Hank,’ Connor said.

A long beat, and Hank slapped a dishcloth down on the counter as Connor sat at the glass table and took the tiniest bite of toast, testing to see if his stomach even wanted food. It turned out it kind of did, so he ate slowly, letting his mind go blank.

‘Connor?’

‘Yes, Hank?’

‘You good over there?’

‘Yes, Hank,’ Connor said.

‘God, I fucking love when robot Connor comes to stay.’

‘Noted, Hank, thank you,’ Connor said, unable to keep the bite out of his voice. After a few seconds, Hank laughed, but he didn’t say anything else, and Connor tuned him out. Arguing was horrible, and even if this hadn’t ended in the worst possible way, he still didn’t like it.

He left the crusts, tearing them off the piece of peanut butter toast and then he sipped the juice and thought that under other circumstances, this would keep him going until dinner. He thought of the vodka in the freezer, thought back to the time Hank had let him get cheeseburgers and curly fries. Why did androids care so much about humans eating food when they couldn’t even eat?

Hank walked over to the piano as Connor took his plate and glass to the sink. Connor was rinsing the plate after having placed the bits of crust into the small compost bin Hank had, looking over as Hank pushed back the piano stool to accommodate his frame, and then lifted the wooden part that protected the keys.

Water ran over Connor’s hands, he forgot what he was doing, Hank’s fingers moved briefly, easily, over the piano. A melody, something Connor didn’t recognise, complicated but still clear, it was only ten seconds but Connor already wanted more.

Hank looked speculatively down at the piano, then up at Connor, and a wicked smirk crossed his face.

‘I’m gonna teach you some piano today,’ he said.

‘Will you play some more?’

‘Maybe,’ Hank said. ‘You might be a bit distracted. Come on, get over here.’

Connor finished with the dish and the glass, leaving them to drain, cleaned his hands and then walked over. Hank had a look on his face that promised an actual distraction from the night before, the morning after, and everything else. Connor wanted it so badly.

He sat down next to Hank at the piano, staring at the keys.

‘You got your phone?’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Hank.’
‘Call me Sir, Connor,’ Hank said, his voice lower than before.

That was it, whatever Hank had planned, Connor was game.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Okay, you’re gonna find middle C on the piano. You can look it up, but that’s it. Go find me middle C, and then press the key down.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said, as he looked it up. A quick image search of ‘middle c piano’ showed him what he needed, and he squinted at the rows and rows of keys and then pressed his finger on what he thought was the right one. The first time he pressed so lightly that the piano didn’t make a noise. He was surprised at how hard he had to push to make a more resonant sound. Hank’s fingers had looked so light on the keys, but the notes he’d pulled forth were strong.

‘Good boy,’ Hank said. ‘Put your phone away. We’re not gonna need that anymore. Now I want you to find all the other C notes, okay? It’s easier than you think.’

As Connor stared down at the piano, Hank slipped off the piano stool and stood behind him, hands descending on his shoulders, close to his neck, thumbs digging into either side of his spine. Connor blinked a few times, then winced when the pressure turned painful. But as he stared, he slowly realised that he wasn’t looking at a hundred different notes, but that there was a pattern. It was easiest to see in the black keys.

So he looked down where his index finger still rested on middle C, looked where that was in response to the black key, and found another just like it. He started at the very base of the piano and pressed the key, stilling when he realised how deep and loud and kind of hideous the sound was.

‘Good,’ Hank said. ‘Now the rest.’

Connor moved up the piano, switching arms when the other wouldn’t reach, until he could finally press down the highest one, the note plinking.

‘Now we’re gonna see if you have any sense of tone,’ Hank said, leaning forwards. He reached up and placed both of his hands over Connor’s eyes. ‘Lift your hands off the piano.’

‘Hank.’

‘No, it’s Sir, come on, do better for fuck’s sake.’

‘Sir,’ Connor breathed. That was better. Connor wasn’t sure since the drug overdose if all of his scenes with Hank would be these gentle things. They were still enjoyable, but he missed what Hank used to give him. Hearing the exasperation, the shift in Hank’s tone, was helpful. Connor wanted to do better. He lifted his hands off the piano.

‘Okay, place them back down again, find middle C by the sound. I’ll know if you’re using the enharmonic keys to find it. So don’t even try. I mean they’re not all the enharmonics, but you catch my drift.’

‘So I don’t use the black keys to find it, Sir?’

‘Yep.’

Connor swallowed. That was exactly how he was going to do it. Now he knew what Hank meant though. He wanted to know if Connor could pick out C by sound alone. Not every human could do
something like that, and Connor had never had his musical aptitude tested. He took a few breaths and then pressed his finger down on a key and winced. It didn’t seem like his note.

He pressed the notes along it until he found one that was close. He pressed it a few times, but it wasn’t it. He tried to remember what he’d found all around the piano only a couple of minutes ago. Two keys on, he found it. Once he knew, he moved his other hand down and awkwardly found another one, and pressed them both at the same time.

‘That’s promising,’ Hank said. ‘So that’s middle C, she’ll be good to you sometimes, she’s plain and sturdy, but she gets the job done. Anyway, you muck around on that for a bit, don’t be afraid of the piano, there’s no point. I’m gonna go make you some tea.’

‘But I just had juice,’ Connor said.

‘Sir,’ Hank said, grabbing Connor’s shoulder and shaking it.

‘I just had juice, Sir,’ Connor corrected, confused. What kind of scene was this going to be?

‘I know,’ Hank said, sounding cheerful. ‘And then you’re going to have some tea, and then you’re going to have some water. Probably some more water after that. We’re gonna have so much fun today.’

Connor thought it over, then gulped, thinking back to the list of things that Hank had made Connor indicate he was interested in. Pissplay was on the list. Connor remembered thinking that it didn’t matter anyway, because Hank couldn’t piss on him, so unless Hank got someone else to do it, that was just one kink that Connor wouldn’t have access to anymore.

But he’d never thought-

Because he wasn’t really interested in…

‘Um, Sir?’ Connor said, feeling his bladder clench. He’d just had a full glass of juice after all. ‘I’m not- I mean, this isn’t- I don’t really do-’

‘You have your words,’ Hank said. ‘Otherwise, hey, I can’t piss on you, but you can piss all over yourself, and I can tell you’re a bit cringy over it. Goddamn, isn’t it great? You’re gonna hate it. Now, you gonna press down some keys or what?’

‘Uh,’ Connor said, staring back at the piano. The sound of water filling the kettle, and Connor was hyperaware of everything, thinking that actually, maybe the temperature of the house was a bit colder than normal, and maybe that was part of the scene too. Did he need to go? He’d relieved himself when he woke, but…

‘Concentrate, Connor,’ Hank said, but Connor could hear the smile in his voice.

So he pressed down the keys, though at first, he only pressed down the C note. What sounded musical and natural when Hank sat at the instrument, now sounded clumsy and childish. Connor dearly wanted them to reverse places, but he also focused, because it took his mind off listening to the kettle boil.

‘You gotta press some other keys. I tell you what,’ Hank said, getting a ceramic cup out of the cupboard that looked like it was more for soup than for tea, ‘how about you find three notes that you like pressing together at the same time. Make some noise.’

Connor pressed his lips together. This would be far more comfortable if Hank wasn’t there at all.
He pressed some of the other notes separately, winced through the beginnings of pressing some of them at the same time. Too many was a disaster. Too many side by side sounded terrible. But he kept working at it, getting absorbed, finding bits of things he liked the sound of. Sometimes he’d press two keys down, but couldn’t find more notes that seemed to work with them. On a whim he pressed down some of the black keys and liked how they sounded, but they could be awful when paired with the white keys.

He wasn’t aware of how much time had passed until Hank came with the huge soup-bowl sized mug full of tea and set it down on a saucer on the piano. He sat next to Connor, forcing Connor to stop using his left hand.

‘Find anything?’ Hank said.

‘Maybe, Sir,’ Connor said, looking up the cup with some trepidation.

‘Hey, hey, just show me what you found.’

Connor pressed down the notes he’d found, three keys that he thought sounded nice. When Hank let off a small laugh, Connor looked at him.

‘Nothing. It just…figures. You’ve got yourself a C Major chord there.’

‘Plain and sturdy?’ Connor said, and then swallowed when Hank handed him the cup. Connor didn’t take it. ‘It’s too hot.’

Hank took the time to put the cup back on the piano, then casually slipped an arm around Connor’s waist like he was going to embrace him. Seconds later, a hand snuck under his shirt, rubbery nanofluid skin grabbing hard at a soft nipple and twisting it so harshly that Connor shouted, tensing, pushing into the grip to try and stop the sudden flood of pain.

‘Sir! Sir!’ Connor said. ‘I’ll remember, Sir!’

‘You sure about that?’ Hank said, voice cold. ‘Because it seems like you’ve forgotten that I actually have standards, even if I’ve had to lower them for someone like you. If you can’t call me Sir, I won’t bother even punishing you next time, I’ll call it done.’

Connor panted harshly, one of his hands slipping on the keys, a discordant, crashing sound rising from the piano. A mix of fear, trepidation, pain, and on the back of it all, that relief again. But wanting Hank to be cruel to him didn’t mean it was easy to deal with in the moment.

‘I’m- I’m sorry, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘I won’t forget again.’

‘You can forget when we’re outside of scenes,’ Hank said, finally releasing Connor’s nipple after one hard tweak at the end. ‘But if I remind you to call me Sir, that means we’re in a scene. Now, you’re gonna drink this tea. I added cold water to it. You’ll be fine.’

Connor seriously doubted it, accepting the cup with shaking hands, pain and heat radiating into his chest, his nipple hard from the rough treatment. The tea was lukewarm, weak, but Connor still wanted to stall. He looked quickly at the piano, at the cup, at Hank’s hard gaze, and raised the cup to his lips and took a small sip.

A half-smile, and Hank shook his head. ‘Really? Really? We’re just getting started. Go on, finish that, goddamn, you think I’ve got all day?’

It was tempting to rub his chest as he finished the rest of the tea. He finished quickly, breathing
through his nose as he swallowed, tricks he’d picked up while going down on guys coming in handy. Hank watched him the entire time, Connor tried not to think about what might be coming later on. Also, there was nothing to indicate this was going to involve fucking, or an orgasm, and Connor closed his eyes and exhaled heavily when he finished drinking the tea, thinking that there weren’t many people in the world he’d knot himself up for quite like this, but Hank was at the top of the list and likely to stay there.

‘Good?’ Hank said.

‘Weak, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘You want it stronger?’ Hank said. ‘I can go make you like three fucking espressos and then we can see how long you last. That’d be agony. But anyway, I think I’m gonna go get you some water to chase up that weak tea. You hang tight.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Hank patted his shoulder, walked off into the kitchen. ‘Oh, take your shirt off.’

Connor took a breath, took his shirt off quickly and folded it, placing it on top of the piano. He looked down and the nipple that Hank had abused was flushed red. Connor stared down at the keys and listened to the water running from the tap, his bladder twinging. Anxiety around what was coming would make him want to urinate faster. The whole situation wasn’t designed to work in his favour.

Hank returned all too soon, a tall glass with ice cubes, presenting it to Connor and then standing behind him, resting his hands easily on Connor’s back.

‘You can go slower with this one,’ Hank said.

‘Thank you, Sir,’ Connor said, unsure if he should be grateful or not. He sipped as hands smoothed over his skin. One was colder, where Hank had held the glass. Eventually, Hank leaned into him, one hand trailing up his back, the other reaching forwards so that his fingers could splay over the keys.

Connor thought he would play something, but instead Hank drew his hand back and brushed it lightly over the nipple he’d abused. Connor hesitated while drinking, then closed his eyes, fingers gripping the glass tighter than before. With Hank, he never knew what to expect.

Hank stroked over both of Connor’s nipples, paying attention to both of them, plucking at the one he hadn’t squeezed before until it was fully erect. Connor leaned into him, pressing his back into Hank’s pelvis to check if he was at all hard. He wasn’t, but Connor supposed not much was happening yet.

When Hank started talking about different notes, chords and scales, sometimes reaching forwards to give an example, Connor followed about as closely as he could, Hank standing behind him, surrounding him. It was interesting, Connor liked the rumble of Hank’s voice, the way when he wasn’t showing Connor something, his hand returned to Connor’s chest, now sometimes pulling at the sensitive nipples, pinching them lightly, circling around them.

When Connor finished the glass of water, Hank took it off him and carefully set it down. Connor was painfully aware of his bladder. It wasn’t hurting, not yet, but he definitely felt the pressure now. He must have had about a litre and a half already, and he knew that the feelings were just going to get worse until he went to the bathroom.

Which Hank probably wouldn’t let him do.
'You’re being very gentle, Sir,’ Connor observed, as Hank’s hands both stroked over Connor’s ribs.

‘Yeah? But I know what’s coming. Maybe I’m balancing things out.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Y’know, not to take away from how much you love being treated like shit, because I’m into that, but you being really creeped out by gentleness isn’t normal. Objectively, consider I’m forcing you into a scene that you’re really not comfortable with, and I’m just touching you because I like to, and you’re what, horrified that I’m being too vanilla? Is that it, Connor? You think pissing all over yourself is too vanilla?’

Connor gulped.

‘I might not do that, Sir.’

Hank laughed over his hair, bent over him, hands moving up to trace heavily over his collarbones.

‘Connor, you can pretend you’re a robot as much as you want, but you’ve got a working bladder, and if I shove enough fluid into you, even you won’t wait until your bladder explodes. But don’t worry, boy, if you’re finding it hard, I have plenty of things I can use to help you along.’

None of that was reassuring. Connor stared at the piano and focused on his breathing. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Hank about his relationship with Gavin, and how Hank said Connor craved intense experiences, and how Gavin had gone about it the wrong way. At the time, Connor hadn’t paid much attention, but now he was aware of how intense things were going to become, and he wanted to distract himself, but it was getting hard.

‘Thirsty?’ Hank said, and Connor could hear the smile in his voice.

‘No, Sir.’

‘Just in case, though, I think maybe you should have something else to drink. Maybe some vodka?’

‘I’m good, Sir,’ Connor said, trying to convince himself that the slight twinging he could feel in his lower gut wasn’t his bladder, was definitely his imagination.

‘More tea?’

‘You’ve already been very generous, making sure I’m hydrated, Sir.’

Hank laughed at that, then ruffled Connor’s hair. Connor found himself leaning into the touch before he’d even realised he’d done it, eyes widening, surprised at himself.

‘You’re not thinking about waterfalls are you? Running taps?’

‘I can’t think of any reason why I would, Sir.’

‘Brat,’ Hank muttered.

Hank turned, pulled over an ottoman, then sat on it behind Connor. He wrapped both arms around Connor’s torso, then moved the fingers of one hand down, Connor hoping he was going to touch his cock. Instead, Hank stroked over the tender skin of his pelvis beneath the hem of his jeans. Both hands shifted to undo his fly, sliding down the zipper, and Connor’s legs spread a little.

Instead of what he’d expected, fingers pressed in above his pubic bone, and Connor jumped, a sharp
flash of almost pain moving through him.

‘Oh yeah,’ Hank murmured to himself. ‘We’re doing great. Aren’t we, boy?’

Connor nodded, but he was too focused on his gut. He’d gone from mildly uncomfortable, to thinking everything really would feel better if he just urinated.

‘Get comfy, I think you need just a little more to drink.’

Hank slid off the ottoman, took the glass, hummed to himself as he walked into the kitchen. Connor watched him, realising it was the first time he’d heard Hank *hum*, and that even though he was only getting the barest idea of Hank’s singing voice from the melody, it was enough that Connor nearly asked him to sing something right then. Luther had said Hank was amazing, like a concert, and Connor raised his hands and touched them to the piano keys, wondering if somehow – by having Hank teach him – he might be more likely to sing and play himself.

He winced, pelvic muscles tightening, his bladder well and truly awake after Hank had pressed into it. His cheeks felt hot. The sound of the tap running wasn’t comfortable to listen to.

Connor distracted himself by pressing down the piano keys again. He found the notes he liked easily. Then, thinking about the coin tricks he used to do before his father had banned them for being too annoying, he moved through each note quickly, liking the chiming sound it made. Anything to not think about the rest of his body.

‘You have pretty good finger control,’ Hank said as he came back over. ‘You’ve never played an instrument, have you?’

‘No, Sir.’

Hank lifted Connor’s hands from the piano and gave him the glass of water. Connor stared at it. This would be the one to tip everything over into urgency. He knew it. Honestly, another twenty minutes and he’d be there. He didn’t want to use either one of his words, but he didn’t want to do this either. It was true, he craved intensity. But he didn’t always want it when he was in the middle of it. But he’d told Luuk that, trying to explain why he liked what he liked, and he remembered saying it was so often worth it in the end.

Connor looked up at Hank, trying to decide if it would be worth it. Blue eyes stared back at him, a blank expression, and then a quirk of the lips into a tiny smile.

‘You’re thinking too much,’ Hank said. ‘Normally I’d be all about taking you out of that, but are you psyching yourself up or psyching yourself out? It’s nice when you squirm.’

Connor frowned and stared back at the glass. He was thinking too much. It hadn’t occurred to him that Hank wanted it to be a component of the scene.

About halfway through the glass of water, his bladder throbbed and Connor abruptly went to put the glass down, only to have his wrist caught by Hank’s hand.

‘Got a problem?’

Connor cleared his throat. Really, he’d had enough to drink. He looked at Hank and didn’t even bother trying to not look pathetic. As Hank just grinned at him, Connor felt a burst of stubborn annoyance. He didn’t know why he thought trying to appeal to Hank’s softer side would work. Maybe because he seemed so much *softer* these days.
‘Hey, all of it,’ Hank said, tapping the glass. ‘Come on.’

‘I think I’m good, Sir.’

‘Nah,’ Hank said.

Connor wondered what it was that gave Hank a mischievous gleam to his artificial eyes. Was it the way the light hit the plastic lens in that moment? Was it something calculated by scientists and computer experts and engineers, decades ago? Whatever it was, Connor’s fingers tightened on the glass and he weighed up the likelihood of being further tormented if he kicked up more of a fuss.

‘You gonna fight me?’ Hank said, grin widening. ‘Naw, does little baby Connor not want to piss himself?’

Connor had a moment, a few seconds, where he could not believe that Hank had just talked to him like that, and then he was shaken out of it by Hank’s mocking laughter. He jolted at the finger that poked into his sternum.

‘Look at that,’ Hank said. ‘You’re blushing all the way down to your chest. God, you’re such a joke. Drink the rest of the water, Connor.’

‘I don’t like it when you talk to me like that, Sir.’

‘Aw,’ Hank said, leaning in closer. ‘You gonna fight me? That’d be entertaining, wouldn’t it? Go on.’

That was definitely a trap, and Connor – hand trembling slightly – raised the glass to his mouth and sipped at the water, staring ahead.

Hank touched his hand to Connor’s arm, then slid it deliberately down until he could grasp his forearm, his wrist and Connor paused, scowling at Hank. Asking for communication now. That was unfair.

‘Sometimes, Sir, you are very underhanded.’

‘Oh no, no no no, not something about me,’ Hank said. ‘Something about you.’

‘Sometimes, Sir, I think you can be very underhanded.’

Connor had expected anger, or maybe laughter, but he didn’t expect the way Hank’s eyes softened, or the expression that crossed his face. Connor had no real context for it. Affection? Was Hank pleased?

‘Hey,’ Hank said, lifting Connor’s chin with his other hand.

Connor froze when Hank kissed him. After a few seconds he opened his mouth automatically, his brain cataloguing the feel of those lips against his – soft, with more grip than human lips, making it somehow more sensual as they dragged over his mouth – but Hank kept the kiss shallow and gentle. Connor felt his own breath shaking against Hank’s mouth, stared up when Hank drew back, swallowed automatically as Hank stroked the underside of his jaw.

Hank let go of his wrist, tapped the glass of water again, and Connor was almost relieved to have the scene to focus on again until he felt a sharp throb in his bladder and closed his eyes.

He was doomed.
Finishing the glass didn’t make the pain in his bladder immediately worse, but he knew he’d only need to wait a few minutes to regret everything. When Hank slid his hands down Connor’s torso towards his cock, Connor shifted backwards, knowing exactly what was going to happen next.

This time, a fist pressing into his pelvis, and Connor choked out a rough sound, arm striking out to push Hank away.

‘Shh, wait a goddamn second, I’m just checking to see if you’re good and ripe.’

Connor tipped his head back and grit his teeth when it was obvious that Hank was really trying to aggravate everything. Hank twisted his fist and pushed hard, Connor opened his mouth and then startled himself when his hand smashed down against the keys.

‘Great,’ Hank said, taking the glass from Connor and placing it on the piano. ‘Time to go to the bathroom. I think you’re gonna want to be in the shower for the next part.’

That, at least, was a relief. Connor had been trying to avoid an image where Hank made him urinate on himself out here, and then clean it up afterwards. A shower was slightly better.

‘Stand, take your jeans off and leave them there,’ Hank said, stepping back to give Connor room.

Standing made everything worse. Connor nearly laughed, a mixture of alarm and amusement. He bent over to pull down his jeans, wincing as it compressed his bladder. When he straightened, that didn’t seem to make it any better. The cold air on his skin wasn’t helping.

‘Come on,’ Hank said, laughing at whatever he saw on Connor’s face.

Connor followed him down to Hank’s ensuite, Connor’s toothbrush and some of his other products were already there. Hank pulled back the shower screen, and Connor – desperate for anything to distract him from his increasingly clamouring bladder – said:

‘Why did you want such a big…human-style house, Sir?’

Hank hesitated, then turned on the taps for the shower. The sound created an association so powerful that Connor gasped, turning to look at the toilet on the other side of the bathroom. That didn’t help. He closed his eyes, tipped his head back. He’d gone from not paying much attention to his body, to being unable to stop thinking about it.

‘I like them,’ Hank said, his voice muffled by the sound of the shower. ‘All right, hold still.’

Hank walked over and pulled down Connor’s briefs, kneeling before him, running both of his hands up Connor’s inner thighs once the underwear was gone. He cupped Connor’s balls, then gently curled his broad hand around Connor’s soft cock, jacking it gently.

Even the faintest traces of arousal were sharp now. Even if it built slowly, every twinge in his cock was a corresponding twinge in his bladder, Connor’s breathing increasingly distressed.

‘Sir,’ Connor said.

Hank rose, but he kept one hand moving on Connor’s cock, the other curving around his hip.

‘Hmm?’

It was tempting to try and talk Hank out of it, but negotiation like that wasn’t really Connor’s style. There was something drugging about allowing all of it. Whether it was the pressure in his bladder, or the way Hank stared at him, that hungry, pleased expression on his face. Even the constant white
noise of the shower combined with his cock growing harder in Hank’s hand. The mass of worries that plucked away inside of him narrowed to certain points. The discomfort edging on pain, the arousal that was as hot as his shame, the growing warmth of the steam.

Hank only drew away to undress efficiently and Connor watched hungrily, unused to seeing Hank naked. All the times they’d done anything, Hank only ever exposed small parts of himself.

His body – with its nanofluid skin designed to perfectly replicate human skin in appearance – was strongly made, the buffer layer of fat making Connor’s hands itch to reach out and grab him. There was muscle definition beneath it, all of it designed to create different responses in people and androids both. He had body hair, and Connor knew from daring to reach out and touch the hair on Hank’s head while he slept, that it would feel like human hair, even though it was a nanite-polymer build.

Connor pretended he was unsteady when Hank drew him into the shower, an excuse to touch his palm flat to Hank’s bare chest. To feel the crinkling of hairs, the curve of a pectoral that felt as cushioned as regular flesh. The water was surprisingly hot and Connor realised Hank must have been an android model designed to handle submersion. They were later builds, because the earlier models weren’t supposed to get wet beyond light rain.

He supposed it didn’t make much sense for an elite bodyguard android build to be easily disabled in water.

Hank stood behind Connor, holding him so that Connor’s back touched his chest, his ass pressed against Hank’s crotch. The water beat down on Connor’s face and hair, his chest and cock, and his bladder throbbed and he realised exactly why the water was so hot. He resisted the urge to sag, dimly aware that Hank had an ability to tweak his senses however he wanted. From the cold, clumsy awkwardness at the piano, to the immersion now, everything building, the sound and heat, he was completely surrounded.

‘You can piss any time,’ Hank said, voice flat. ‘Shower’s going to wash it away. It’s hardly going to be anything at all. You can do that much, can’t you?’

Connor couldn’t. This reminded him that he was all too human, protective of his bodily functions, disgusted by ablutions, waste, mould, the things that reminded him he was only flesh and a microbiota that depended as much on other life-forms as it did his own cells.

Hands stroking his sides, and then Hank laughed like he’d thought of a private joke, pushing Connor forwards.

‘Guess I’ll just help you out then.’

One of Hank’s hands left, shifted behind him, and then a finger slick with Hank’s own thirium-produced lubricant pushed inside him despite Connor’s tightness. He was, after all, clenching to make sure he didn’t make a mess of himself.

That thick finger coasted up and in, the skin texture catching a little on Connor’s entrance.

When he pressed against Connor’s prostate, Connor yelped, jerking forwards. His eyes flew open as Hank shifted the angle of his finger, pressing up and then curving, searching and far too forceful. A strangled noise followed as Connor felt the way his bladder responded, sharp and painful, his cock jerking at the same time.

‘Stop,’ Connor managed, ‘wait. Stop.’
‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘And it’s stop, Sir.’

Hank withdrew the finger, pushed back in with two, found that angle again far too easily while hooking his other arm around Connor’s ribs to keep him close.

‘God, you’re squirmy,’ Hank said as Connor wanted to scream. ‘Anyone would think this was uncomfortable.’

It was several orders past uncomfortable, Connor’s focus narrowed down to a single, horrible point. Hank’s fingers pulsed up into his prostate, effectively massaging his bladder, and Connor’s voice broke on a desperate sob as he reached back to try and shift Hank’s wrist. At one point he managed to lose the angle by standing on tiptoe, but Hank only grunted, yanked him back, shoved his fingers in harder, and Connor exhaled hard on a cry.

‘It’s unfair, isn’t it?’ Hank said conversationally. ‘Jesus, look at you though. I bet you’re loving it, huh? Hey Connor, your stress levels are rising, do you think if I just keep doing this, you’ll be forced to piss yourself anyway?’

Connor’s breathing was uneven and ragged, the direct stimulation to his prostate keeping him hard, his cock aching at the base, the entire space of his bladder and a little beyond feeling like needles and tension as he maintained control over himself.

‘Come on, boy,’ Hank said.

Water streamed over his face and mouth, the front side of his body heated, skin turning red. He had one hand clenching hard into the arm that stopped him from getting away, and the other flailed out and slipped across the tiles. There was no moving Hank, who felt eternal and unstoppable when he was like this, an implacable force that Connor had no hope of fighting, even as he kept doing it.

The truth was, pissplay when other people were urinating on him in a shower or bath was fine. Maybe because it had nothing to do with his own bodily functions. Sure, it could be embarrassing, and sure, Connor always showered thoroughly afterwards, but it wasn’t the same as having to let go of his own control. That was someone else’s issue, their choice, and Connor only had to submit to it.

This was something else, messing with his thoughts, wringing its way through his body until the pain was strong enough that he started to think maybe it would be better just to let go. To just give Hank what he wanted. But even then, something in him fought against it. The muscles across his pelvis, the shame that made him burn alongside the water that warmed him.

But Hank’s fingers inside of him were wearing his physical control away. He gasped huge, wet breaths, water streaming over and out of his mouth, over his closed eyes, dripping down and around his ears.

‘Please, Hank, please, Sir, just…’

He thought Hank would say something, mock or tease or reassure or promise that there was no other choice. But Hank was silent, fingers speeding up inside of him, Connor keening on the back of that, hearing his own voice reflected back to him but unable to stop.

It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter and he was already in the shower anyway and Hank wasn’t going to stop and at this point even if Connor said one of his words, he wasn’t sure he could actually walk over to the toilet anyway. The cramping pain was too strong. He’d let it go for too long. Everything from now was utterly inevitable, the way Hank wanted it.

There were a few seconds where Connor was so overstimulated that even though he wanted to piss,
he couldn’t. A few seconds of trying to let go of muscles that couldn’t quite respond to Connor’s mental surrender. His body didn’t follow immediately, but Hank’s fingers wore away at him, and finally, finally, Connor felt the moment his bladder loosened.

At first, it was only fire, but something shifted quickly as Hank’s fingers slowed but kept massaging him from the inside. His cock stayed hard, it was so much like coming that Connor forced his eyes open and blinked through the water only to see urine that was mostly clear, instead of come. His knees buckled, one of his feet slipped, and his bladder continued to release, the stream of it strong.

It took a little while for him to realise that Hank was telling him that he’d done well, that it was good, but he cared more about the tone than the words, dazed and tired. He felt like he pissed forever, and Hank’s fingers kept moving inside of him once he was done, the sensation no longer as sharp, but heavy and hot, making his hips move backwards.

Because that had felt like an orgasm, but it hadn’t been one.

‘Sir,’ Connor breathed.

‘My turn,’ Hank said.

Connor thought for a moment – as the fingers slid out of him – that Hank was going to piss, which made no sense, because he literally couldn’t. Instead, there was more movement behind him, and then Connor groaned weakly when he felt Hank’s cock brush between his ass cheeks, wet with water and that gel-like precome.

Connor’s gut ached when Hank pushed into him, prostate fingered too hard, bladder still complaining from the rough treatment, muscles fatigued from being tense for so long. But the girthy split of it felt overwhelming, good, and Hank pushed them both forwards until Connor could brace himself on the tiles in front of him, the shower spray hitting them both equally.

Once Hank had the position he wanted, he fucked into Connor with quick, rough, jerking movements that made Connor focus on bracing himself to take them. Small sounds fell from his throat with nearly every thrust, only stopping when he had to hold his breath or catch it, when he was too busy gasping through the thickness of his own arousal.

He wanted, so badly, to come. But it wasn’t enough and Connor wished he was the kind of person who could drop his hand to jerk himself off, risk the punishment, be so disobedient that he’d genuinely disappoint Hank just to get that peak.

But Connor had never been that kind of person, and he didn’t want to be that person with Hank. So he endured, swimming in pleasure and wretched stimulation at Hank’s mercy.

He was surprised when Hank came quickly. It didn’t seem that long at all before Hank stilled deep inside of him, that faint, mechanic click at the base of his cock mimicking the throbbing pulses of a human as he spilled more come than anyone with flesh ever did; that thick, clear lubricant settling heavily inside. One of Connor’s hands slid down the tiles thinking that even if Hank didn’t let him come, he still got to have experiences that had been sorely lacking in his life until now.

Hank stayed inside of him, even once it was clear he was done. He stayed hard, which Connor thought might have been his programming, or a choice, or something that humans just couldn’t do.

It surprised Connor when Hank encouraged them both down to the shower floor, Connor biting his lower lip as his knees touched the tiles, only to realise that his lip was already sore; he must have been biting it before.
‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘Don’t say I never do nothing for you.’

One slick hand around Connor’s cock, one arm underneath Connor’s left armpit, crossing his chest, hand clenched down into his right shoulder keeping him in place. Hank’s hand didn’t move to seduce, it moved with a single goal in mind, and Connor had a moment to hope that it wouldn’t be a ruined orgasm because he’d really rather just not come if that was the case, and then he was falling deep into a level of arousal he’d not achieved before.

He moaned repeatedly as he sailed straight into coming hard, ass clenching down on Hank’s cock over and over again, Hank’s hand never leaving him and Connor’s eyes burning with relief and exhaustion and more. It felt so good, Connor awash with gratitude, gasping and gasping.

And then his gut tensing, the pleasure turning to uneasy discomfort, then fractious pain, and Hank didn’t stop, and Connor felt a spill of panicked dread because he knew exactly what this was.

‘Sir,’ Connor said, his voice uneasy. Hank’s hand didn’t stop moving and Connor’s hips jerked harshly backwards. It was automatic, he couldn’t control his body’s revolt against the overstimulation. ‘Please, no, no, just-’

‘My turn,’ Hank said, his voice dark. ‘Just give me a few minutes, and we’ll be done.’

Connor couldn’t last another few seconds, he twisted across the wet floor, hand slipping, and Hank was steady and strong and impervious as he kept Connor in place and kept moving his hand cruelly on Connor’s cock.

‘Hey, look, I have a party trick,’ Hank said, and then his hand came up and squeezed at the head of Connor’s cock before jacking it quickly, focusing only there, the nerves so raw it was excruciating.

Connor screamed behind clenched teeth, his cock forced into a state of semi-hardness, the stimulation not letting the blood leave, the arousal of too much and no way to stop it. It made his lower body shake uncontrollably, his hands shift, fingers clenching, head shaking back and forth. Hank didn’t stop.

The sounds he made then weren’t human at all, pure animal noises as he was forced through an overstimulation so unrelenting that Connor couldn’t think.

Eventually, Hank’s hand slowed, Connor’s lips pressed shut as he exhaled thick groans through his nose. He wasn’t even aware enough to feel relief until that hand stopped entirely. Connor sobbed once, going completely limp.

Hank made a hungry noise behind him, and Connor’s head snapped back when that hand returned to him and started jacking him off again, harder than before, focusing on the head of his cock.

His own scream echoed back to him, broken syllables dropping off one after the other in his mouth until:

‘Yellow! Yellow! Red! Sir! Red!’

Hank stopped at the first cry of ‘yellow,’ pulling Connor back into him even as Connor kept using his words, needing a few seconds to realise they were done. Hank had listened. They were done.

Connor’s muscles unlocked, his eyes closed, even the water dripping from his hips down his cock hurt due to his sensitive nerves. He wasn’t aware of how long it had been, but Connor thought it was maybe longer than anything any other Dom had put him through.
‘Shhh, that’s right, it’s over, you did so well, you did so well, boy. You just relax. Just relax, Connor.’

Connor whimpered, a deeper unravelling moving through his mind. He dropped several levels inside himself, from awareness to emptiness, his body buzzing from everything it had experienced, Hank warm behind him, not letting him go.

‘That’s good,’ Hank said, sounding so, so wonderful. Connor’s neck relaxed fully, his head dropping forwards, and arms tightened around him, and Connor didn’t care about the shower or the ensuite or actually, anything at all. ‘I’ve got you. God, you are something else, aren’t you? But that’s all now, it’s over, we’re just going to take it nice and easy.’

Connor wanted to nod, but he couldn’t. The last of his energy went to letting go, not thinking about anything, one moment he was there, the next he disappeared into the white noise of the shower and it was bliss.

*

He came back to himself slowly, lying on towels on Hank’s bed, blinking into awareness. Not quite sleep, definitely not fully awake. Hank lay on his side beside him, still naked, cock soft. Connor could feel come leaking out of him, far thicker than normal, slick and messy. Connor shifted to feel it, then went still.

Hank’s hand rested on his pelvis, but that no longer carried the threat of before.

‘You go nice and deep sometimes,’ Hank said. ‘I like it.’

‘You like carrying me to the bed, Sir?’ Connor said, smiling a little. Connor could smell soap, realised Hank must have cleaned him off. He vaguely remembered it, but he didn’t reach hard for the memory, not wanting to undermine the fragile, fought-for headspace.

‘Ha, nah you don’t weigh a thing. You don’t need to use Sir anymore either.’

‘Okay,’ Connor said.

He watched Hank for a little longer, and then his eyes closed again. He rolled sideways – closer to Hank – and Hank didn’t seem to have a problem with it, an arm coming around his side, Connor thinking that he was still so warm, probably from the shower.

‘I like you,’ Connor said.

‘Aw, you’re all drunk on a good scene. You don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘I think you’re the nicest person I’ve ever met.’

Hank’s fingers tightened into his skin for a second, and then Hank took a deep breath. ‘Kara’s nicer. And Luther. And Alice. Don’t know much about your friends, but aside from North, they seem okay. And what about-’

‘Like you more,’ Connor murmured, still out of it, drifting like he was in a dream. ‘You make it look good.’

‘Make what look good?’

‘Being fucked up.’
A sharp inhale, a burst of bright laughter, and then Hank was pulling Connor even closer and shaking him a little. Connor made a face at the movement. He didn’t like it.

‘Hey, look at that, Connor. You swore! It’s a Christmas miracle.’

‘No I didn’t,’ Connor said.

‘You fucking well did.’

‘I don’t do that,’ Connor said, pushing his face into Hank’s chest. Yes, the hairs felt very real. He supposed in his own way they were completely real, just not very human.

‘You just did! Right then!’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘I take it back, I don’t like you and you’re not nice.’

‘Oh, I’m not nice at all,’ Hank said, a thread of laughter still in his voice. ‘Come here, you dope. What am I gonna do with you? Jesus Christ.’

Hank rolled until Connor was lying half on top of him, a hand in Connor’s hair, the other resting at his lower back.

Their breathing was slow, and when Hank’s hand quested downwards and slipped into the come leaking out of him, Connor made a sound of discontent. It didn’t stop Hank at all, who moved his hand until he could slide two fingers into him. But they didn’t move, and Hank sighed then, like he was pleased.

“You make it look good too, Connor,’ Hank said softly, as Connor fell asleep. ‘You make it look real good.’
Nothing To Say

Chapter Notes

This last week and a half has come at me with head/neck MRIs to monitor cancer stuff (it's all fine, tumours aren't growing, huzzah), emergency vet appointments, and the knee that's had two reconstructions deciding to not work properly and then start working again SO I'm actually very happy to post this and distract myself from real life for a bit with the adventures of Connor and Hank working hard to even learn what a relationship is! Also I love Kara.

Living with Hank wasn’t like living with his parents, his father, or Kara and Luther and Alice, or on his own. Connor had no point of reference for the way living with Hank settled into a routine that was almost close to comfortable.

It probably helped that at least once a day, Hank would call Connor’s name, point at the floor in front of his legs – whether he was watching television, sitting at the table, in the bathroom, in his bedroom – and Connor would kneel before him and let Hank fuck his mouth, his fingers gripped tight into his hair, Connor never quite getting the hang of opening his throat in a way that avoided bruising.

Hank seemed to have considerable control over when he came, sometimes taking forever, or sometimes only thirty seconds. He seemed to enjoy watching Connor struggle to swallow down all of his release, and Connor was sure Hank was ordering extra thirium to manufacture the copious amounts of thirium-derived come that he pumped into his stomach.

Warm lemon, honey and phenol were a regular part of Connor’s day, and his throat went through varying stages of bruising. Connor didn’t have to tell Hank that he loved it, because Hank happily mocked him over it.

It was a Saturday when Hank went into the back garden, into the shed, and brought out several large boxes. Connor watched with wide eyes as he drew out and cleaned cushioned dog beds that were huge, placing them at different locations. One behind the kitchen counter, where stools might go, and Connor realised why stools had never been there; it was a space for Sumo.

‘He’s coming back?’ Connor said.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, cleaning food and water bowls in the sink.

‘You must miss him?’ Connor said, unable to stop the way he turned it into a question. He hoped Hank missed him.

‘Fair warning though,’ Hank said, ‘he’s a lazy, drooling asshole, and you’re not to go feeding him anything off your plate that you don’t want.’

Connor hesitated, then nodded. He wasn’t sure he would have done that anyway, but it was a possibility. He was always the one on the university campus sneaking food to the ducks at the lake, even if it was bits of potato chips from packets that he got at vending machines.

Eating was a chore. Connor tried not to complain about it, because it wasn’t something Hank was
happy to joke about. He just gave Connor a \textit{look}, whenever Connor sighed at sandwiches or breakfast or even a microwaved meal for dinner. It was a better standard of food than Connor was used to at home, but Connor didn’t like eating a lot, and he didn’t like eating healthy.

‘How’d someone like you end up with so many issues around this shit anyway?’ Hank said, Saturday night, as Connor pushed chicken biryani around his bowl and stared at it.

‘I eat,’ Connor said.

‘Come on.’

‘I’m eating,’ Connor said, looking off into space as he placed a forkful of rice in his mouth and chewed. He wasn’t even hungry. He’d just had lunch six hours prior. It smelled okay, and it was nice not to have to think about it himself, but he still had to eat it.

‘You gonna talk to me about it at all?’ Hank said, sounding annoyed.

‘It’s just food, Hank,’ Connor said, and that seemed to be enough to shut down the entire conversation. But where Connor had expected to be fucked that night, or something like a scene, nothing happened. Hank gave Connor a book on piano notes and scales and told him to learn four of the notes. Any of them.

Connor didn’t mind in the end, and Hank sat nearby and commented sometimes, quick to tell him when he was doing well and redirecting him when he got stuck. But Connor still felt like Hank was angry at him for not talking more, and that made Connor angry too.

Why should he have to talk about any of his life with anyone? It was just…there was no point to it.

He ignored the uneasy feeling that came with the thought of opening up to Hank when he wasn’t being forced to, and focused on the piano instead.

* 

Sunday morning, Connor woke to one hand stroking his throat and one stroking his cock and he gasped, turning into Hank automatically.

‘Good morning, Sir,’ Connor said.

When Hank didn’t tell him that he didn’t need to say Sir, Connor groaned softly and reached out to drag his hand down Hank’s side. He’d been sneaking more and more touches, Hank never stopped him unless he wanted Connor’s hands to remain still.

The hand at his throat slipped down his shoulder, his bare arm, and Connor felt a flash of drowsy annoyance when Hank’s fingers curled around his forearm, asking for something Connor wasn’t in the mood to give.

It was something he’d never normally do, use a word because he was annoyed instead of distressed, but without thinking, and pissed off that Hank would do this \textit{now}, he said:

‘Yellow.’

Hank stilled. Then he lifted his hand from Connor’s cock even as Connor tried to arch back into the touch.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, sounding annoyed himself. Connor’s eyes opened, and Hank was scowling past
him. ‘You know what? Red.’

He let go of Connor’s wrist and got out of the bed. Connor pushed up on his elbows, staring.

‘What?’

‘Red,’ Hank said, walking off into the closet.

‘You can’t do that,’ Connor said. ‘Why are you doing that?’

‘You fucking know why,’ Hank said, coming back with a button up shirt and drawing it over his chest, even as Connor felt the beginnings of panic. He’d thought Hank would just let it go if he said ‘yellow,’ and would keep on with the scene. Why would he say ‘red’ over it? What was the point of that?

‘Yes, but…Sir, I’m still ready to-‘

‘Connor, you are always ready to fuck,’ Hank said, pausing with his hand on one of the buttons and staring at him. ‘But is it really so goddamn hard for you to just tell me something about what’s going on? You could tell me you liked what I was doing. You could say ‘I want you to go harder, Sir.’ You can say literally fucking anything as long as it’s true and it’s about you.’

Connor sat up properly, running a hand through his hair, frustration rising through him.

‘You do it all the time,’ Connor said.

‘I don’t!’ Hank said. ‘I don’t even do it every day. And when I do it, you always fucking find a way – just about – to turn it into some bullshit that doesn’t mean anything at all. You just observe shit. And yeah, sometimes you make it cute or cheeky and I let it go, but you still find ways around it. Goddamn it, it’s one of the only things-’ Hank shook his head abruptly, and then started to put his pants on, and Connor realised that this scene really wasn’t happening unless he did some damage control.

‘I take it back,’ Connor said. ‘I’ll tell you something. I liked what you were doing, we can start again! You can do whatever you want.’

Hank smirked, but the expression was cold.

‘You just did something I never thought someone like you would do,’ Hank said. ‘You used a safeword on something that, what, you were just a little tetchy about? What do you think safewords are for, Connor? Like, on the one hand, gee, great you can use them. On the other hand, using them to get out of just saying any random fucking thing about yourself is a low blow and I don’t even know if you know that.’

‘I had nothing to say,’ Connor said.

‘Jesus. You always have something to say,’ Hank said, staring at him. ‘You just never fucking say it! Maybe I’m not only doing this for selfish reasons, you ever think of that? Maybe it’d be good for you to actually, I dunno, share your opinions on things sometimes. I still don’t know if you care that Sumo is coming back. I can assume, because you said some neutral things about it before walking away. But you don’t put a personal stake in anything, if you can help it. And I’m fucking tired of it.’

‘You do the same thing.’

Hank laughed, then tied his hair back in a ponytail, and Connor thought all of this was unfair
because he’d really rather just be fucking, and Hank was making it about this, which was…tedious.

‘Do I?’ Hank said. ‘To a point, sure. But I’m telling you that I think what you did was a low blow, and underhanded, and how tired I am of it, and you’re telling me that I don’t share my feelings with you? Like, maybe you don’t get every goddamn part of me. I know that. But Jesus Christ if I’m not trying, and you won’t even meet me halfway.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Now you’re just saying shit to say it,’ Hank said, ‘because part of your fucked up brain is running some record telling you that you need to appease a father figure who would’ve goddamn beaten you for having an opinion. Look, I get that it’s hard, but Jesus Christ, if you think that’s what I want this to be…’

Connor sat there, shocked and queasy at how easily Hank had just flicked over that information; how he perceived Connor’s actions, how easily he drew it back to Connor’s past.

_Because part of your fucked up brain is running some record telling you that you need to appease a father figure who would’ve fucking beaten you for having an opinion._

He wasn’t doing that, was he?

‘You said red,’ Connor said, reaching for the one thing he didn’t really understand. ‘You didn’t have to do that.’

‘I know this is really hard for you to understand right now, but I’m pretty fucking upset,’ Hank said, ‘and I’m going to go into the kitchen and make breakfast, and try not to think about whether I want you here, if you’re not going to try harder.’

Connor stared at him, and Hank walked out of the room without another glance.

Bewildered, Connor placed his palms flat on the bed and wondered what had just happened, why he felt like something tectonic had just shifted, and how he didn’t even see it coming.

*

After taking a long time in the shower, his mind blank as he tried to understand it all, he walked out hesitantly into the main area, not sure what to expect. Cereal and toast rested on the counter, and Hank sat at the kitchen table, his fingers resting idly in a projected screen as he stared at whatever coding was flashing up in front of him.

Connor noticed the crusts were cut off the toast, felt a flash of something in his chest that he couldn’t interpret.

‘Do you need…aftercare?’ Connor said, shifting the toast on its plate.

‘We need to talk,’ Hank said. ‘I think that’ll be good.’

Connor hated talking. Especially since he got the feeling from Hank’s silence, that Connor was the one supposed to be carrying at least some of the conversation. His skin crawled.

‘I don’t like talking about myself,’ Connor settled on.

‘I know,’ Hank said coldly. ‘That’s why I said you could say literally anything, as long as it was personal. Fuck, you can tell me you like it when it rains, if you want.’
‘It’s…a dealbreaker for you, if I don’t share things about myself?’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘It is.’

Connor swallowed and picked up a flake of cereal and ate it, trying to be good, even while he didn’t want to do the thing that Hank wanted him to do. The thing that mattered most. Connor could still feel Hank’s touch around his wrist.

Even trying to think about how to explain it was difficult. There were times when he looked inside his mind and saw nothing. No half-formed sentences, no words, nothing except a vague uneasiness and an endless black, as though he was the robot Hank sometimes joked he was. Except androids were capable of trillions of functions in a second, and Connor felt like his brain didn’t always do very much. It performed when he asked it to, but he’d always wondered if sometimes he got things wrong – not being able to save Hannah Abaroa fast enough – because his brain just…stopped.

‘I never feel like I have anything to say.’

‘Are you really so fucking checked out with yourself? Seriously?’ Hank turned and looked at Connor, and then stopped at whatever he saw on Connor’s face. ‘I know you have feelings about things. You wanted me to fuck you, or…whatever, you wanted a scene. You couldn’t have said that?’

‘The words weren’t there.’ Connor said. ‘Besides, it was obvious what I wanted, from my actions. A simple inference would have led to an obvious conclusion, Hank.’

‘If it was so obvious to you, then why didn’t you say it?’

Connor took a step back from the toast, the cereal, and resisted the urge to fold his arms. He didn’t like this at all.

‘You have no problems passing judgement on other people’s shit,’ Hank said. ‘You’ve called me out god knows how many times. You fuck with your father every time he’s in the room, you can’t even help yourself. Even that conversation on the phone with Gavin, remember that? You fucked with him too. But you can’t goddamn tell me you want a scene, or something like it, when you’re already showing it?’

‘If I’m already showing it to you, I don’t see why-’

‘I know you don’t. I’m telling you that’s what I want. I can’t interface with you, Connor. There’s already…’ Hank made a sweeping gesture that indicated Connor’s entire body. ‘I already can’t do what I can take for granted in others. I love not talking to people! Because I can always just fucking walk up to an android, take their damn wrist, and get what I need that way. So what if they don’t like what they see in return? At least they’ll know either way.’

Connor folded his arms.

He could sense the rifts and fissures in himself where he was supposed to change. The places where Hank wanted him to bend. It was something that others wanted too. Whether it was Kara or Luther enquiring after his hobbies. Markus and Simon painstakingly trying to draw Connor into conversation, only for them to ever talk fluidly about subjects if they were focusing on anyone other than Connor, or subjects of study. North mocking him about being closed off, with an aim of goading him into opening up.

He closed his eyes, trying to think. He hated this. Hated dredging up sentences and hated putting them together and hated how it never quite felt like the words were right anyway. And he knew
Hank didn’t even want them from him every time. Connor didn’t know why the idea of talking annoyed him so much. He tried to say as little as possible when it had anything to do with himself, and the explanation that it was just about his father didn’t seem right either.

‘It was always difficult,’ Connor said finally. ‘With anyone. About anything. Have you drawn the inference that because my father was abusive, that’s the only reason I find it difficult to talk or share things about myself?’

‘The main reason, yeah,’ Hank said, his tone less biting.

‘I don’t know if it is,’ Connor said, wincing. Shouldn’t he know?

‘I liked maths and science at school, because everything was there and accounted for. I don’t know that I even think in words, but that doesn’t seem right, so I must.’

Connor stopped, because he’d argued himself out of the point he was making and he had nothing left to say. He stared up at the ceiling. He always felt like he had nothing left to say.

‘It got worse after…after Zlatko,’ Connor said. ‘I know that.’

Hank walked into the kitchen, and Connor dropped his arms, they’d been folded for a while and it telegraphed too much. Hank stood in front of him, looking at him, and Connor eventually just made himself shrug. The gesture didn’t come easily and he suspected it looked extremely unnatural.

‘Do you want to talk about that?’ Hank said.

Connor shook his head.

‘You know,’ Hank said, ‘you were calling for her. When you were delirious. I didn’t know who she was until you said her name. Hannah Abaroa.’

Hearing the name in Hank’s voice was its own shock, and Connor flinched backwards when Hank reached up like he was going to touch his arm, check if Connor was okay.

‘You don’t remember doing that?’ Hank said.

Connor shook his head again. He didn’t. And why would he have used her full name? And why was he calling for her anyway, when he didn’t even do that in the past?

‘I think ‘know thyself’ is a joke,’ Connor said, staring at the bowl of cereal. ‘I don’t think there’s that much to me, Hank.’

Hank was quiet for a long time and Connor didn’t even hate himself, exactly. He just felt blank, like an empty chalkboard for other people to write across. How would a chalkboard have hobbies? Or care about things? But then, wasn’t Hank always reminding him that he did care about things? It was frustrating for Connor, too, to know so little about himself.

‘So if I do this…’ Hank said, reaching out and curling his fingers around Connor’s wrist. ‘It’s not that you don’t want to tell me something you’ve thought, it’s that you don’t think of anything?’

‘It’s hard to think of something,’ Connor said. ‘It’s jarring.’

‘That’s why it’s good to practice,’ Hank said. ‘I ask and expect you to do hard things all the time, especially in scenes.’

That was true, and Connor frowned, not having thought about what Hank was asking for as being
part of the scene. It felt like Hank was trying to throw him out of it.

‘I need to think about this,’ Hank said, letting go of Connor’s wrist. Connor thought it was fair, he’d give up on himself too. ‘I think we need a new damn avenue, let me think about it, okay?’

‘Can I still live here?’

Hank’s fingers twitched, and then he reached out and grasped Connor’s upper arm, holding on, the pressure hurting. Connor liked it. Not because it felt good – in the moment, it didn’t, it just hurt – but because it seemed like maybe Connor had misinterpreted things and he wanted, so badly, to be wrong.

‘I mean a new avenue to figure out where you can and can’t compromise on this,’ Hank said. ‘We’re gonna have to talk about it again, got it?’

Connor nodded.

‘And you’re not fucking leaving. I want you in this house. Christ. I shouldn’t’ve…’ Hank made a grunting, impatient sound in the back of his throat. ‘I say stupid shit when I’m mad. It’s not a dealbreaker when I can see that you’re trying, and you just were.’

Connor nodded again. He didn’t want to speak anymore.

‘Eat your breakfast,’ Hank said, ruffling his hair and walking back to the kitchen table, slipping his hand into the projected screen once more, and Connor closed his eyes in relief, grateful that the conversation was over. It wasn’t as bad as he thought, he hadn’t ruined things completely. He turned to the toast and wondered what other people saw and heard in their own minds, what androids did, and whether he just wasn’t trying hard enough, or if he really just didn’t think enough actual thoughts.

*

Sunday afternoon, Hank gestured for Connor to come over, and he ended up on the couch next to Hank, leaning against him. Hank had an arm slung around him, used it to grasp Connor’s wrist, and then put the television on mute. Connor cringed.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ Hank said. ‘I’m gonna start. Don’t worry.’

‘I can still be worried,’ Connor said.

‘Have you given any thought to what you want to do? Like, with your life?’

Connor sighed. He had and he hadn’t. Which was more along the lines of, he knew he was supposed to be coming to conclusions, but all he saw was the things he no longer wanted to do.

‘I don’t want to work cases,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t want to work in law enforcement.’

‘That’s pretty huge,’ Hank said. ‘You must know you’re good at it.’

‘I am good at everything I apply myself to,’ Connor said.

‘You wouldn’t want to do it even somewhere like Grenville, with Fowler?’

Connor frowned, thinking that Hank expected him to say he would. Maybe that would be the nice, appropriate thing to say. But Connor shifted his wrist in Hank’s grasp and shook his head.
‘No. I don’t want to work cases anymore. I don’t think I like…crime or…violence.’

Connor almost laughed. Didn’t everyone hate those things? Wasn’t the whole point of law enforcement to stop those things? But something had shattered inside of him at Zlatko’s house, and he’d never been able to rebuild it. What had been objective and distant and logical, little puzzles in his head, had turned panicked and real, smelling of blood and rot, sounding like frantic breaths and tiny animal sounds begging for help, and Zlatko cupping his chin and Connor for one damning moment thinking: *Just fuck me and I’ll forget about all of it.*

‘Hey,’ Hank said. ‘Hey. What are you thinking?’

‘Did my stress levels spike?’ Connor said.

‘They sure did.’

‘I think you could guess, Hank.’

‘Yeah.’ Hank was silent for a while. ‘I don’t want to be a bodyguard anymore. Not for people hiding from cartels. Not for people who are in danger all the time. So like, I get it. Sometimes things happen that just make it too much and you can’t undo them. Even if you try.’

‘Like reverting your Deviancy?’

‘Like that,’ Hank said.

‘I was jealous,’ Connor said, thinking it over, finding the words easier now that they were actually talking about something, and Connor could focus it all through the lens of what Hank was saying. ‘It isn’t fair, to get to half-kill yourself, when the rest of us don’t. I think – I needed to get away from being a hostage in my own apartment – but I also agreed with North. I didn’t want you to be able to run away from things that I couldn’t.’

Connor expected Hank to say something, and he expected to feel some kind of judgement or disapproval radiating from Hank. He distracted himself by shifting the collar of his shirt.

‘I don’t feel that way anymore. I didn’t realise how bad it was.’

Hank let go of Connor’s wrist, and it felt like approval instead of dismissal. Hank wrapped his arm around Connor and didn’t say a word, and Connor closed his eyes and thought about how much the landscape of his life was changing.

Hank wanted him to think about himself more, and so Connor knew that he had to. Maybe it was wrong to let someone have so much influence over him. Wrong to withdraw all his Zeta-style hard limits. But Hank changed things. Even the aftercare, Connor didn’t only tolerate it with him, he liked it, even craved it. Hank was his own exemption, though Connor had to concede that Hank also made him feel like aftercare was thoroughly earned, and that was definitely part of it.

‘Do you wish I was an android instead of a human?’ Connor said.

‘Come again?’

‘I can’t interface.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, not like he was agreeing, but like he was leading into something more. ‘That’s the thing, Connor. You can. Just not in a way I’m used to, and I guess it turns out not in a way you’re used to either. I thought it was easier for you to talk about shit. I dunno why, actually, I think I
Just thought it was easier for humans.

‘I think it is easier for a lot of them.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. Then he laughed softly. ‘Yeah, maybe. But I don’t want any of them living with me. Fuckers.’

Connor’s breath came out as an amused exhale, and he felt that something in the air had cleared. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do if Hank grasped his wrist, but he hoped Hank wouldn’t stop doing it.

Outside it was raining, and Connor kindled a tiny idea in his mind and wondered if it was foolish, and then let himself doze.

*

Sunday evening, and when the doorbell rang, Hank opened the door only for a very waterlogged Sumo to bound inside, skidding on the tiles before running straight to the rug in the lounge and—

‘Don’t shake!’ Hank roared. ‘Don’t you fucking dare—’

And to the sound of Kara telling Hank he should watch his language, and Hank yelling at Sumo and raising his finger like that would enforce what he was saying, Connor watched as Sumo shook the water vigorously from his body, mouth open in a smile and tongue lolling. Water went everywhere.

‘You fucking— God almighty that’s it, go out the back, I’m shooting you.’

‘Uncle Hank! That’s so mean!’ Alice said, even as Kara put her hands over Alice’s ears far too late and Luther started laughing.

‘This is what you get for not keeping up with his training.’

‘All over the fucking leather armchair,’ Hank was saying as he walked up to Sumo, sank down to his knees and grasped his dog firmly by the jowls, shaking them more with affection than anything else. ‘You are a pain in my goddamn ass and I’m only keeping you because you’ll make a halfway decent fucking throw rug.’

‘Hi, Connor,’ Kara said, smiling at him warmly and then handing him some Tupperware that was still warm with cooked food. ‘I was hoping you’d had a mellowing influence on Hank but I see you’re still working on it. It takes a village.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said automatically. Then he looked at Luther in alarm, when Luther clapped him hello firmly on the shoulder before walking into Hank’s lounge like he’d been coming every week for years. He sat on the couch furthest from Sumo, and then stretched his arms in front of him, yawning hugely.

Connor took the food over to the counter and handed Hank several dishcloths automatically when he asked for them. He knew that Sumo was returning, but he hadn’t realised everyone would be coming, or that it would be a gathering. Suddenly there were five people and a giant dog in Hank’s house, and Connor felt himself shrink because of it.

But it was nice to watch the way Hank complained about Sumo while petting him, and the way Sumo tried to lick his face over and over again before padding heavily over to the bed on the other side of the counter, flopping down onto it and watching everyone with a good-natured sleepiness.
'He’s so happy,’ Alice said. ‘Does this mean we can get a dog of our own now?’

‘Maybe,’ Kara said. ‘We’ll give this a few weeks first and then decide, okay? Maybe Hank can help us pick out our dog.’

‘You can have Sumo back,’ Hank said as he wiped down the worst of the spray, tending to the piano first. ‘He’s a hell of a dog. And he’s already used to you.’

‘Mummy says that sometimes you say the opposite of what you’re feeling and it’s a silly game you play. But that means you really want to keep him.’

‘That’s what your Mum said, huh?’ Hank paused to glower at Kara.

‘I did say that,’ Kara said, smiling with no sign of regret.

‘Mummy said you’re like ‘opposite day’ but all the time.’

‘Goddamnit,’ Hank muttered. ‘Hey, any of you losers going to help me out?’

‘Nah,’ Luther said. ‘You’ve got it.’

Connor started to walk over and Hank held up a hand. ‘Not you.’

‘But I can-’

‘Just so you know for the future,’ Hank said, looking up at Connor, a faint twinkle in his eye, ‘If I refer to ‘you losers’ I mean Kara and Co., and you’re on Team Hank, and you don’t help them, got it?’

‘If Hank calls us losers,’ Alice said, ‘what he really means is that he thinks we’re all winners.’

Hank stilled, stared at Kara like he wanted to murder her, then went back to cleaning without another word.

‘Serve up some of the penne,’ Kara said. ‘I’m sure Hank has you living on sandwiches. The penne is good! It’s the same recipe I make for one of the ladies at school when we have lunch. Go on.’

Connor pulled out a bowl, went to offer some to the others and then swallowed the words down. But he was starting to get used to being around people who didn’t eat, because they were so good at, well, not making it into an issue. He focused on the pasta, only to smile when a giant Saint Bernard slouched into the kitchen and leaned into his leg, staring up at him with a mournful pleading in his eyes.

‘You don’t get any,’ Connor said sternly, ‘because you shook out your fur in Hank’s lounge when he expressly told you not to.’

‘God bless,’ Hank muttered from the floor that he was still cleaning.

*

Later, when Connor was cleaning the dishes, Kara joined him in the kitchen and put food away in the fridge, reorganising things in the way she liked them. Hank and Luther were talking animatedly about some sports team that Connor didn’t know much about, and Alice was telling herself a story at the piano, punctuating gruesome imagined scenes by occasionally thumping the keys at the bottom in a discordant manner.
Connor turned to Kara as he set down his plate to drain.

‘I’ve been meaning to apologise for making you all have to evacuate from your home. I didn’t realise my actions would lead to that, and I’m sorry.’

Kara tilted her head, then smiled. ‘Oh, Connor, we’ve always been prepared to evacuate ever since we befriended Cole and Hank.’

In the distance, Connor heard the way Hank’s voice stuttered, before picking up again. He looked over, remembering that burst of static from Hank’s chest, the way his LED stuck on red. But Hank was back in the middle of his conversation and Connor breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Kara reached out and touched her fingers to Connor’s arm. ‘Hank required it. We’ve always known where to go in an emergency, what to pack, and although it is stressful, it is something we’ve learned to take in our stride. It’s not the first time we’ve had to do it, either. It never occurred to me that you’d blame yourself. It’s fine, Connor. Being friends with Hank is its own risk.’

Connor looked over to Hank again, and then his lips twitched when he saw that Hank was casually flipping Kara the bird from across the room, while talking to Luther without missing a beat.

‘Have you two always been like this?’ Connor said, as Kara noticed the finger signal but ignored it.

‘Yes, I think so,’ Kara said amiably. ‘I suppose I do like a challenge.’

Luther stopped mid-sentence and laughed, and at that moment Alice banged both of her hands down on the piano, startling everyone.

‘Alice,’ Kara said. ‘Please be kinder to the piano.’

‘But it’s a really important bit, Mum,’ Alice said, looking over. ‘The whole planet is dying, and the dinosaurs are coming back to get revenge.’

Kara just nodded in a long-suffering way, waved her hand for Alice to continue, and Connor realised that instead of the cold in his body he’d felt while living at Kara and Luther’s, he felt warmth. It was nascent and tender, but it was there. Kara started talking to him about what she was up to at work, and he unobtrusively raised a hand to his ribs like he could keep the warm feeling inside of him.

* 

An hour passed, the night drifted on, and Connor sat on the couch next to Hank when Luther said:

‘So have you given any more thought to hobbies you could try?’

‘I didn’t know I was supposed to,’ Connor said, surprised that Luther would bring it up in front of everyone else. It seemed like it should be a private conversation, and then he realised that most people talked about their hobbies all the time. ‘I’m learning some piano, though.’

‘I’m pretty sure that you can shove anything in front of him and he will learn it,’ Hank said idly.

‘I like it,’ Connor said, frowning at him.

‘That’s the first time I’ve heard you say that,’ Hank said.

‘Did you ever have classes that you liked more than others?’ Luther said patiently. ‘Or electives that you wanted to do but couldn’t? Surely someone like you would’ve looked through your options.’
Connor briefly, badly wanted to go and get the vodka and start drinking. It was a late night, they were socialising, and he very much wanted to not be sober for this conversation. His fingers twitched. He tried thinking back to the handbook he’d seen years ago, before he’d mapped out his entire degree and postgrad, and shut everything else away. He really only had a single trajectory; anything that would catapult him into his father’s good graces.

But once, late at night when he couldn’t sleep, he’d flicked through the pages of the handbook and wondered what it might be like to be a person who dreamed of other lives.

‘I liked the biological sciences, at university,’ Connor said haltingly. ‘Human biology, anatomy, chemistry too, even the foundational units. I think I remember looking at the natural sciences. Botany and meteorology. Even marine biology and marine biodiversity.’

‘Fish?’ Hank said.

‘There are a lot of different fish in the world,’ Connor said, feeling stupid. He’d liked the pet stores that sold fish as a child, and even though he’d never kept any, he often wondered if it would be hard to look after a fish. To see a pretty, coloured alien organism swimming in his room, sharing his space.

‘You never looked into any of it?’ Luther said.

Connor shook his head.

‘Maybe you should,’ Luther said. ‘See if you like any of it now.’

Connor said nothing. It made him uncomfortable to pick up these dropped fragments of himself. They made no pattern or shape, and it sounded like it would be work to turn them into anything.

‘You like clouds and shit,’ Hank said.

‘I like clouds,’ Alice said abruptly, her voice sleepy and slurred as she pushed herself upright, looking at Hank. ‘They’re so fluffy.’

‘Hey, go back to sleep,’ Hank said.

‘They look like cotton wool.’

Connor stared at her, then said: ‘There used to be approximately five hundred tonnes of water in an average size cumulus cloud – they’re the ones that look fluffy – but since the climate catastrophe, they now average five hundred and seventy five tonnes of water.’

Alice stared at him, yawned, and then nodded, turned, and fell asleep.

‘Luther?’ Kara whispered. ‘Can we get a book on cloud facts for bedtime?’

‘Done,’ Luther said, smiling.

Hank was staring at Connor, something odd on his face that Connor couldn’t read. At least he didn’t look bored witless. Connor expected him to say something, but after a beat Hank just seemed to come to some kind of conclusion and turned, continuing his conversation with Kara.

‘Hey, can I talk to you about one of the plants I’m engineering?’ Luther said abruptly to Connor. ‘Kara finds it boring.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, thinking that this would be much better than talking about himself. He could
learn something, and Luther seemed like he really wanted to talk about it. ‘Are you only engineering one kind of plant at the moment?’

‘I mean, no, do you want a rundown?’

Connor nodded, and Luther scooted forwards in his chair, talking about his work in a way that had Connor fascinated, forgetting that he was supposed to be watching his environment all the time, to make sure he wasn’t doing anything wrong.

*

When Kara, Luther and Alice left, Sumo didn’t even wake up to say goodbye, which made a sleepy Alice pout a little as she waved at Hank and Connor.

Connor walked back inside as they left, too exhausted to think about drinking or anything other than lying down. He went into the main living area to see if anything needed tidying and Hank came up behind him, bumping into him while hooking an arm around him. Hank’s casual possessiveness was one more warm feeling, and Connor realised that warmth had tired him too.

It was hard to hold that feeling for so long, when he was so unused to it.

He wondered – in the silence and stillness that followed, Hank unmoving behind him – if it was hard for Hank too.

‘Did you have a good night, Hank?’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ Hank said.

Do you still want to die like you did before?

Connor shoved the poisonous thought away and looked down at Sumo, who was gently snoring by the counter. In the world beyond Hank’s home, lightning flashed bright, ripping the black curtain of the night. A second later, hail began to fall, and Connor watched it through the thick double glazing as it bounced up from the ground. It rattled across the roof and woke Sumo, who looked around dubiously before resting his head on his paws, disgruntled.

‘Hey, do you know anything about hail?’ Hank asked.

Connor shrugged. ‘All hail is made of layers, like an onion. All hailstones experience wet growth, which means their outer layer is wet and sticky, and that is how you get superhail. You know, the ones that are several balls of hail stuck together.’

‘Huh.’

‘You could look that up yourself,’ Connor said. ‘Isn’t that easy for you?’

‘I think it’s more interesting when you say it,’ Hank said. Then he swore abruptly and stepped away.

Connor turned and felt a thick, rising dread when he saw that Hank’s LED was red. But Hank held up his hand, shaking his head in annoyance.

‘It’s Fowler,’ he said, scowling as he stared off into middle distance.

That curdled a different kind of dread in Connor’s gut, and he stood, waiting. Hank’s expression was blank as he presumably listened to Fowler through his own system instead of through a phone, and then Hank’s face twisted and his gaze pinned Connor in place.
‘Ah, *fuck,*’ Hank said. ‘Jesus Christ.’

The red LED turned yellow. The call had either cut out, or it was over in less than a minute.

‘What is it?’

‘Fowler’s coming over.’

‘Now?’

‘He’s got a favour to ask you. He wouldn’t say what it was. But he made it clear that we owe him, or something,’ Hank groaned and tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling. ‘Why do I have a feeling this is gonna be complete bullshit?’

Connor swallowed. The warm feeling vanished. He remembered how he’d ended up living at Hank’s place to begin with, and he felt himself folding inwards, like he was boxing himself away. Hank looked at him with concern, but Connor walked to the glass table and sat down, thinking that if Fowler wanted a favour, Connor wanted to be in the best state of mind to hear it. He let go of the fragile things he’d been fostering. If his father had taught him anything, it was that law enforcement required a completely different state of mind.
We Have A Problem

Chapter Notes

10 chapters to go now, oh my god!

Also for folks who don’t know, one of the reasons I can’t update this as fast as I want to is because this is actually my side AO3 account, and I have a busier AO3 account here at not-poignant, I have a lot of similar style content, across mostly original writing and Rise of the Guardians. You can also find me on Tumblr

Also thanks to everyone who interacts with this fic. Looking forward to replying to the comments motivates me to write the chapters faster, and I'm really grateful for everyone who presses kudos, bookmarks the fic, or just enjoys it. :D

When Fowler finally arrived, it was past midnight. But Connor knew the distance from Grenville station to Hank’s neighbourhood, he must have been driving to them for a chunk of the evening, while Hank and Connor were spending time with Kara, Luther and Alice.

‘Why’re you here?’ Hank snapped as soon as he opened the door. Then he looked past him out at the street. ‘God fucking damn it, I swear, if you were followed I’m gonna-’

‘I wasn’t followed!’ Fowler said, muscling past him and moving towards the kitchen. Sumo stood, growling heavily, and Fowler glared at him. ‘Lie down, Sumo, fuck’s sakes you know me.’

Sumo slid back down to his belly and his tail started hesitantly wagging.

‘Oh, so you’ll listen to him, huh?’ Hank said, scowling at Sumo. ‘I’m watching you, rug.’

Fowler sat at the kitchen table, looking between Hank and Connor, and then he made a face that Connor didn’t like at all. Hank had tried guessing why Fowler might be coming over – perhaps they weren’t safe anymore – but Connor had let his mind go carefully blank. He didn’t need to know the reason until Fowler gave it to him.

‘So!’ Fowler said with false enthusiasm, slapping his hands against the table. ‘We have a problem, I guess. I’ve got good news and bad news. You wanna hear it?’

‘Nope,’ Hank said.

‘Shut up,’ Fowler said. ‘Maybe I wasn’t asking you.’

‘We both don’t wanna hear it. Go home, Fowler.’

‘And here I thought you wanted to be kept in the loop?’

‘You coming over past midnight is not ‘the loop,’ that’s, Jesus Christ, Fowler. Just tell us what you want and leave.’

Fowler’s expression turned grim, lips thinning, and he looked at Connor for a long time before shaking his head and staring down at the table. But it only took him a moment, and he gathered
himself together.

‘The good news is, Zlatko wants to talk. We have reason to believe he has solid information on several members of Veritas, including their motives and locations. The bad news is-’

‘Oh, *fuck no,*’ Hank hissed. ‘Fuck off, Fowler. You get the hell out of here, right now, or I’ll sic Sumo on you.’

‘Will you let me finish?’ Fowler said, pushing back and standing up.

‘You’re not my damned sergeant,’ Hank said, his voice a low, menacing thing. ‘We’re not your lackeys. You can’t tell us to do a damn thing.’

‘I’m asking,’ Fowler said, holding up a finger. ‘And I’m not asking you.’

Connor – despite wanting to leave his mind empty – felt a clenching, cold thing inside of him at the mention of Zlatko’s name. He already knew what Fowler wanted. He already knew what the bad news was. When Fowler turned to him, Connor looked somewhere at the floor by Fowler’s feet. His black boots were dirty with mud. Like he’d run across the road to get into the car before driving straight to them.

Fowler visiting in person instead of asking over the phone meant it was serious, and it meant that he knew Hank was going to refuse.

‘Connor,’ Fowler said. ‘Listen, son-’

‘If you think for one *fucking second-*’ Hank exploded, and then stopped when Connor looked at him. He looked agonised, and Connor knew why.

‘I think we should hear him out,’ Connor said.

‘Motherfucker,’ Hank said flatly, then folded his arms. His LED had bumped up to red, and Connor watched it for several seconds, then had to force himself to look away. Hank still looked functional, it wasn’t like the solid, frightening red of before, but it was still his least favourite colour these days.

‘Zlatko says he’ll only talk to one person,’ Fowler said, like he genuinely regretted what he was saying.

‘Do you really think he’ll talk?’ Connor said, surprised at how detached and compliant he sounded.

Fowler winced. ‘That’s just it, he does have a track record of leveraging privileges against real information. He gives folks decent shit – and boy, does he have a lot of it – in exchange for more television, a better room, less ISO, shit like that. There’s…a track record that suggests he’ll give up a lot of details if he gets what he wants.’

‘Which is me,’ Connor said. ‘Alone, correct?’

‘Yeah.’

Hank’s LED switched back to yellow, but he looked furious. Connor couldn’t tell which one of them he was angrier at, Fowler for bringing this into his house, or Connor for talking about it with him.

Connor thought about all the dead android bodies in the evidence sub-basement. All drained of their thirium, perhaps used for drugs, in a scheme his father was completely aware of. He thought of how
much danger Hank was in, because Hank’s blood was the first to have corrupted, the first to teach these drug dealers that they could make a new, ‘better’ red ice. Hank would always be in danger as the ‘original recipe’ even if they could replicate it in other, everted androids. He would never be safe. Even if Veritas agreed to leave him alone, eventually other cartels and organisations would want to find everted androids, and Hank’s eversion was right there, legally, in CyberLife’s records.

He would never be safe, if they didn’t stop Veritas now.

‘I’ll do it,’ Connor said.

‘THE FUCK YOU WILL!’ Hank shouted at him, and Connor blinked, then backed up when Hank came at him. Connor’s heart pounded, and then Fowler was there between them, arms stretched out.

‘It’s not your decision, Hank,’ Fowler said. ‘Back off. What are you gonna do? Make him stay?’

‘You want to do this now,’ Hank said, staring at Fowler. ‘Right now?’

‘Zlatko’s been in ISO since he made the offer so he can’t tip off anyone else,’ Fowler said. ‘We don’t think he will, he seems to really want this…er, privilege. Prison staff are working with us, but there’s a window, and it needs to be in the next twelve hours. Figured…the sooner the better. Besides, Connor will be safe. A bunch of us will be there behind the glass, Zlatko’s gonna be restrained.’

‘What are his exact requirements?’ Connor said.

He didn’t feel much of anything. Just colder than before, but it was getting late, it was normal for the temperature to drop around now.

‘Thirty minutes,’ Fowler said, at which point Hank turned away, walked across the room with his hands deep in his pockets, muttering to himself. ‘Just you. He will share information about Veritas with you, and he’s agreed to share more specifics with us afterwards. He’s already given us some decent information in good faith. We’ve told him he only gets this once, and never again. He agreed.’

‘He knows how much damage he can do in thirty minutes,’ Hank said, turning from the window and looking at Fowler. ‘He knows how much he can do in ten.’

‘I’m not stupid, Hank,’ Fowler said. ‘But it’s up to Connor.’

‘Yeah, like he’s ever gonna put himself first. Doesn’t even know how.’

‘I think,’ Connor said, his voice cool and remote, ‘that when it comes to people’s lives being on the line, sometimes it’s necessary to prioritise, Hank, and I would think you of all people should know that.’ He met Fowler’s eyes. ‘I’ll do it. Do I need to bring anything with me?’

‘Thanks,’ Fowler said, really sounding like he meant it, which was more than Connor’s father would have ever done for him. ‘And nope, just yourself. And probably your guard dog.’

‘Fuck you, Fowler,’ Hank snapped, grabbing his bag of supplies that he often had with him off the couch. ‘Fuck you both.’

Connor knew that Fowler was unhappy with the whole situation, because he didn’t snipe back. He just looked weathered, and didn’t say a word as they all walked to his unmarked civilian vehicle in the rain.
Hank was silent, seething in the back of the car with Connor, and while it made Connor deeply uncomfortable, it didn’t fill him with the same terror that his father did when he was in a similar mood. Connor didn’t bother to start any conversations. Nothing would end well unless he said he was going to call it off.

Connor stared out of the window at the rain sheeting down. It would flood tonight, and he hoped the enlarged drainage systems wouldn’t be pushed to capacity. His mind wheeled around the facts he knew about the weather, prompted in part by everyone’s questions before, Hank’s questions after the gathering. Maybe he did have things he was interested in. It wasn’t like he invested nearly as much into learning about food.

Anxiety slowly ratcheted up, even though he tried not to think about where they were headed. Likely not Grenville, they were probably going straight to Wellspring Penitentiary.

Zlatko Andronikov. Connor had been thinking about him so much lately anyway, even though he didn’t like to.

He didn’t blame Hank for being angry. The reality was that this visit would be disturbing, even if it yielded results, and if Connor was weird or strange afterwards, Hank was the one who would be putting up with it. Connor didn’t want to be extra work for him, he already knew he was enough of a burden.

*Zlatko will be perverted and intense. But he can’t hurt you, and nothing will happen. This will be fine.*

Strangely, what Connor liked least about the whole thing was that people would be there watching. Connor didn’t mind hearing Zlatko’s filthy fantasies when it was just the two of them, but he felt ashamed and humiliated at the idea of anyone else hearing them.

He even thought he might want to see Zlatko again. He’d been curious. There had always been a reason he’d never blocked Zlatko’s number, even if he’d refused to take the calls.

Connor sighed explosively, then startled when he felt fingers on his shoulder. He turned, and Hank – with a yellow LED, thank goodness – had reached out and placed his palm against Connor’s arm. His face was blank, empty. It was still better than the fury of before.

He thought Hank would say something, but he didn’t. Connor didn’t know what to say. After a while, Hank moved his hand away, and Connor leaned into the car door and stared at the rain, switching his mind off, glad for the hum of the engine and the ghost of that touch against his shoulder.

*They searched him at Wellspring. Connor didn’t like it, but he knew that it was partly procedure, and partly that everyone involved knew he was the son of Richard Perkins. It didn’t matter that Connor was the one to locate Zlatko, or even the one to keep him ‘occupied’ at his home before law enforcement came and captured him. All the glory had gone to Richard, and now Fowler knew Richard was complicit in the Veritas case.*

So Connor let them pat and stroke their hands over his body and was glad that it wasn’t a cavity search, though they did shine a flashlight in his mouth, while Hank stood nearby and looked unimpressed.
There was a quick meeting to give Connor a more specific idea of what questions he should be asking. As Connor made mental notes, the rest of his mind wandered. Prisons made him uncomfortable, like there was very little keeping him from leaving, like he wouldn’t be allowed home. Perhaps because Perkins used to joke about it, when he was young. How easy it was to find reasons to keep people in jail, how much he wanted to put Connor there, ‘out of sight and out of mind.’

Hank took him aside later, when Fowler seemed satisfied.

‘You still don’t have to do this.’

‘It might help,’ Connor said. ‘That’s important. That’s the mission, isn’t it? To take down Veritas? That’s what I’ve been working on all along, when I discovered that case. I just didn’t know it.’

‘Connor, you know that guy fucks you up.’

‘I know,’ Connor said, his smile wry. ‘I think he knows that too. That’s why he arranged this meeting.’

‘Then at least save it for me, later,’ Hank said urgently, softly. ‘Don’t give him the satisfaction, for fuck’s sake. Jesus Christ, just put it away like you always do and save it up for me.’

Connor knew what Hank was asking. It was oddly insightful, and in its own way, touching. They both knew that if Connor could, he’d pretend not to react to disturbing stimulus. But that didn’t mean it wouldn’t get to him. It didn’t mean it wouldn’t pile on top of him and come out later, in some stupid, defective way.

After a minute, Connor just nodded, and then he let Fowler show him into the empty interrogation room.

He sat with the one-way mirror behind him. In front of him was the heavy metal ring embedded into the metal table that Zlatko would be shackled to. Beside him was a paper cup of water. Connor thought that he felt – all things considered – quite calm. He somehow knew it would always come to this. He remembered what he’d told the everted Hank, what seemed like months ago, in his old apartment:

‘I need to be able to call Wellspring to talk to criminals when it comes to cold cases, and to talk to staff. I can’t block the phone number in the field I’m working in.’

The truth was, Connor hated those phone calls from Wellspring, but he always felt like one day he’d pick up. One day he’d be calm enough, and he’d answer the phone.

What could Zlatko do? He’d already had his fifteen minutes whispering cruel visions down the phone to Connor while he was out of his mind, while Gabriel sat there enjoying all of it.

A few minutes later, guards showed Zlatko inside the interrogation room. Connor took in the details quickly. The fact that he’d lost some weight, but wasn’t looking haggard. His eyes bright and lively as they had been in his mansion, his hair more styled than it should be for a prisoner of his calibre. Someone with favours and pull in the prison, someone who leveraged his information well and wisely.

He wore manacles at his wrists and his ankles. The chain at his wrists was attached to the security ring point on the table, the one at his ankles to a security point on the floor. His clothing was khaki green. He didn’t look away from Connor once. Not when he thanked the guards, not when he settled to get more comfortable in the narrow chair. Connor thought his eyes were such a warm shade of
brown, like Zlatko had never felt a cold emotion in his entire life.

‘Moy golubchik,’ Zlatko said, lips quirking on a small smile. ‘You came.’

‘We have questions,’ Connor said, feeling like there was something in his throat. His heart beating harder than before. He didn’t feel scared, but his body was reacting like it was scared. ‘About Veritas.’

An agreeable rumble from Zlatko, and he nodded. ‘I always thought it was a shame that you didn’t get to be the one asking me for some of this information before, yes? But your loving papa, I heard he kept you in the hospital. A clever, clever man.’

‘You still went to jail.’

‘I was always going to come here,’ Zlatko said, beaming. ‘One cannot do the monstrous things I have done and get away with them forever, yes? But my connections were always so broad, and it came up not at all during the trial. One must protect their assets.’

‘You’re saying you could have given us information on Veritas back then, before we even knew it existed.’

‘Maybe? Maybe not?’ Zlatko’s eyes moved from Connor’s, only to rove over his face, then down further. Finally he looked pointedly towards Connor’s crotch – even though it was hidden by the table – and Connor stopped his hands from twitching, showed no sign that he cared. ‘I must say I am sorry that we met under such circumstances. Poor Hannah, coming between us like she did. We could have been friends, you and I.’

‘Friends,’ Connor said.

‘Tovarisch, then,’ Zlatko said lightly, laughing. ‘You’re a beautiful thing. Gabriel tells me that you like bears, huh? Here I thought the flirting back then was you trying to keep me at my house so I wouldn’t go ‘on the run’ as they like to say.’

‘I didn’t flirt,’ Connor said.

He didn’t much remember. Probably, he did. He’d been desperate to keep Zlatko in his house, and he was running out of ideas, and he did the one thing he knew he could do when he was stressed. But he wouldn’t have called it flirting.

‘Ah,’ Zlatko said, amused. ‘My apologies.’

‘Tell me what you know about Veritas.’

‘Such a broad question,’ Zlatko said. ‘I am bound to forget things, and we only have thirty minutes to ourselves. I cannot simply be expected to spend all of those minutes talking about an organisation like Veritas. You have to give me something, my golubok. Be generous. It is a hard life I have here.’

‘That you earned for yourself.’

‘I would never deny it,’ Zlatko said. ‘But it’s hard to be away from my basement, my paint cans, my experiments. You must tell me, before we go on, are you…do you have a voice about you? Do you make noises? Let me imagine, please, if I would have to work to make you cry out, or if you would be stoic and silent. Do you know?’

Connor remained still and unmoved, but his upper arms crawled with an abrupt wave of gooseflesh.
It was tempting to give him nothing, or even to lie, but he suspected that Zlatko would be able to pick the lies as easily as Hank could.

‘You’d…have to work for it,’ Connor said.

Zlatko grinned like he’d been given something very generous, and he leaned back in his chair and spread his legs and Connor resisted the urge to turn around and look at the glass, to see Hank’s reaction. He couldn’t see it. He’d only see his own face in the mirror, which he didn’t want to see at all.

‘That’s very nice,’ Zlatko purred. ‘That is a work I would enjoy applying myself to.’

‘Tell me what you know about Veritas.’

‘Yes, then let’s have this diversion, too. I met Gabriel in his work as a procurer of androids, I think he had his little fingers deep in the ass of CyberLife, once upon a time, but they cut him off and he had to find other ways. It didn’t matter to me. I had others who found me children, because not many little ones look at me and instantly feel trusting, even with a face like mine, no? Do you see? I could not have done the things I’ve for so long without people looking after me. All I had to worry about was my house, my holdings. I hope Perkins has been taking care of my properties while I have been gone.

‘Anyway, please, don’t get bored, the truth of the matter is I learned that Gabriel was very fascinated in thium long before he heard about the first everted android, the Alpha Evert. He’d been experimenting on it for years, even taking some of my finished projects to test their blood. He knew back then that certain difficult experiences – perhaps you’d call it trauma – could alter the chemical composition of the thium enough to create new kinds of red ice. A filthy, nasty business. I miss it.’

‘Oh?’ Connor said, remote. ‘You’re clean, then?’

‘It could be,’ Zlatko said nodding to himself. ‘It could be that I am clean.’

‘How did Gabriel first get his hands on Hank’s blood to test it?’

‘My good man still has contacts in CyberLife, and they provided him samples. If I remember correctly – your bear can confirm this for you, yes? – he had to return to CyberLife regularly for thium tests to check that he was not burning out his own blood. Gabriel got his hands on it, realised it was perfect, created this new perfect red ice, and after some time, they gave the android over to your otets for safekeeping. Gabriel worked on replicating the effect in other androids using the same eversion code, and look at that, it worked.’

‘Where is his base of operations?’

‘Gabriel is wily, he will have several bases. I can give your men some addresses once you have left, but I am certain he will have moved. He is…many steps ahead. Though not with you. He was so frustrated that his little highball didn’t work. But I am thinking I could have done better, I could have given him better advice, but he wanted your papa’s thoughts over mine. You visit Zeta, yes? Gabriel tells me you’re not a stranger to pain.’

Connor didn’t know what to say. This all skirted dangerously close to the times Connor had bemusedly realised that Zlatko was kind of his type.

‘But I don’t play with pain, my golubok,’ Zlatko said gently. ‘It would be very serious between us. You know, I am not satisfied with the number of bodily cavities god has seen fit to give us. I like to make more. It is not pleasant.’
Zlatko watched him so closely, and Connor didn’t know what he was seeing. But he knew what Zlatko was talking about, because Zlatko had patiently shown him before. He’d walked Connor through some of the bedrooms, shown him some of the bodies, explained why he was doing what he was doing. He’d been so sweet-tempered about it. But his hand had been a vice around Connor’s side, and the bruises later had been violent.

‘I whipped Hannah,’ Zlatko said. ‘I am sure you remember. Do you like that? To be whipped?’

Connor thought this was the strangest quid pro quo he’d ever been a part of.

‘Has Gabriel gone into formal production yet? Is he answering to anyone higher than him?’

‘I could easily pretend that is an answer to my question,’ Zlatko said, looking disappointed. ‘But I really must insist that you tell me. My information is not free. Thirty minutes is so little time to spend with you. Be generous, yes? Give me something to think about. Maybe, if I get out earlier on good behaviour, I can come visit, and—’

‘You are here for life,’ Connor said. ‘You murdered over forty victims.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Zlatko said, nodding to himself. ‘Of the ones they found, yes. But good behaviour still means something in this merciful day and age, and these jails are so overcrowded aren’t they? Do you like to be whipped, moy golubchik? Give a man an answer, put me out of my misery.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Depending on the person.’

‘You cut me with this lack of commitment,’ Zlatko said. ‘You would love it with me.’

Connor kept seeing the ghost image of Hannah’s back, laid neatly over his vision. Zlatko sat before him, and Connor was getting vertigo from looking down at the same time, seeing the cuts across her skin, the dried blood. For the first time since he’d seen Fowler that evening, he felt queasy.

‘I don’t think I would.’

‘No?’ Zlatko whispered. ‘You wouldn’t love it? Would you cry, then? Do you cry, when that leather carves into you? Or are you weak, do you not let it cut your skin? I’d let you wear so many of my marks, you’d never forget who owned you.’

Connor’s cheeks and ears burned. Nausea built like a hot thing inside of him. Normally it was a cold, hideous stone in his gut. This was flames burning him from the inside, licking up into the back of his throat until he had to swallow.

‘Have you ever been branded?’ Zlatko said.

‘No,’ Connor said.

For a fleeting second, it had taken all of his energy not to say: No, Sir.

‘You wouldn’t like that,’ Zlatko said, a glint of sexual promise in his brown eyes. ‘No one likes that, even when they want it.’

‘Has anyone ever wanted it?’ Connor said, his voice less even than before.

‘Zeta was never so much my style. Ratchet was more for men like me, yes? There are people who ask to be branded there. But they still squeal like stuck piglets when it happens. They tell themselves they know they are going to smell a barbecue but it is not the same of learning that their meat smells
“Is Gabriel answering to anyone higher than him?” Connor said, feeling loose inside of himself, like something had been shaken free.

“If he is,” Zlatko said, “he doesn’t care for their leadership. He fancies himself a leader, and he would see anyone else as partners or subordinates. It is his way. But he is not entirely sane, he believes in his cult, too. It is a front, but it is also in his head a real thing. His brand of red ice – his *Veritas* – is both cult and drug. If he had it his way, all androids would be everted. You might want to look into attempted hacks into systems where he is testing remote eversion. He has not been successful yet. As soon as he is, he will attempt a mass wipe of all these individuals you apparently care so much for, even though you haven’t met them.”

If it was true – it would have to be verified – that was good, if alarming, information. Connor wondered how much time had passed. Zlatko had a slow way of talking. Connor had to think through his replies.

He hoped it would be over soon. He’d had a long night, he was tired. It must have been nearly three in the morning. Maybe later.

“I once met this very, very pretty thing,” Zlatko said. “He must’ve been, oh, maybe fifteen? Sixteen? It doesn’t matter. He looked younger. He used false identification to get into Ratchet, so it is all his fault anyway, yes? A little baby thing, dressed up like…like demon, but I think you would call it ‘goth.’ Even eyeliner, mascara, it made such a mess when he wouldn’t stop crying. But what did he expect?”

“I don’t think anyone expects you,” Connor said.

“This is being true,” Zlatko sighed. “That makes it better for me. He was very scared of needles. Even the baby ones that do no damage and are like nothing. Are you scared of needles?”

“No,” Connor said.

“I think I know why your dear, loving papa decided to keep you drugged. I know he did that. I get told so much, you see, I have a very conversational nature. People like me. But you would have known what to ask, you aren’t fooled in the way others are. You don’t think half of what I do is perversion, do you? It’s not sin. It’s just something you check off a list to let someone else know you want it or you don’t.”

“Torturing people to death isn’t a kink,” Connor said.

But he wondered. And Zlatko didn’t help when he said, ‘Why not? Plenty of kinks are against the law. Maybe I am just doing my part to help with overpopulation!’

A pause, Zlatko looked down, and when he looked up again his eyes were narrowed, the curl of his lip dark and sinister.

“I wouldn’t kill you, my golubok,” Zlatko said. “Oh, no, no, no. Not you. I would keep you around for…for as long as I could manage. As long as you could survive it.”

“What are Gabriel’s weaknesses?” Connor said.

His voice was shaking. He still felt relatively calm, but for the fire inside of him, the burning nausea, the gooseflesh, and now his shaking voice. Zlatko looked aroused. There was no way around that. Connor’s voice, his presence, his answers were doing it for him.
‘Arrogance,’ Zlatko said. ‘He is very confident because he is very much an actual genius. He also
believes he has hidden his history well. This could be true. He believes he has total control over his
androids, but if you could revert your bear, you could revert the others. But he is smart. He will
expect me to give you real information and he will have already responded, yes? Look into why he’s
running a higher temperature all the time. You’ll find that amusing.’

‘Is he sick?’ Connor said.

‘You could say that,’ Zlatko said. ‘When was the last time someone fucked you until you bled?’

Connor couldn’t have stopped the way his body flinched even if he tried. And it wasn’t because he
didn’t have an answer, it was because he knew. He used to have to check once Gavin was done with
him. Haemorrhoid cream worked just as well for tightening up torn blood vessels as it did for
haemorrhoids. He’d never scarred badly or anything, but he’d certainly had to treat himself
afterwards.

Zlatko watched him like he knew. Even Connor’s reactions were satisfying enough for him.

‘Then you would like me, very much,’ Zlatko said. ‘You liked me even in my house, didn’t you?
You kissed me like a virgin.’

Connor remembered it only because Zlatko said the words. There was a point towards the end,
before law enforcement had arrived, when Zlatko began dragging Connor into a room with purpose,
and Connor knew his time was up. That the show and tell was sliding into the show. He remembered
trying to get Zlatko to let go of him, he remembered trying to get his phone with his blood tacky
fingers, only to realise he didn’t have it on him. He remembered the panting of Zlatko’s lust-filled
breaths overlaying his own panicked breathing.

He remembered pressing his lips clumsily to Zlatko’s, taking him by surprise, and the moment when
Zlatko gripped his neck like he wanted to strangle him, only to stop when he must have realised
Connor wasn’t trying to bite his face. It had just been a kiss.

‘You must have been so scared,’ Zlatko crooned, laughing. ‘Especially since I have learned about
Zeta, what you really are. I thought you were playing a good game, my friend, but only scared things
kiss like that.’

‘Why did Gabriel tell you about Zeta?’ Connor said after clearing his throat.

‘Because I asked him for information on you,’ Zlatko said. ‘I get very bored here, yes? Please let me
have my diversions. I have a photo of you in my cell. It is only being an identification picture, but it
is enough. Should we get a picture together? We can do one of those selfies.’

How much time had passed? Connor didn’t wear a watch, and he didn’t have his phone on him,
because they’d taken it.

‘You’re only fixating on me because I caught you,’ Connor said.

‘You undersell yourself. Perkins was the one who technically caught me on the paperwork, and I do
not think he is cute enough to fuck or torture. His loss. I would just kill him, I think. But save his
blood, yes, because you never know what you might need it for.’

‘How many other people have you killed?’

‘I have lost count,’ Zlatko said. ‘Lives are cheap, easy to come by, and you only notice the ones who
stand out or who have disappointed you.’
The chain clattered as Zlatko shifted his wrists. Connor watched tensely, but after a while Zlatko relaxed again and smiled to himself.

‘You told me things, on the phone, yes? When you were high. Maybe this is what you are needing to make you more honest? You sound so pretty when you beg. Like a little, lost child. Crying so sweetly. You are like an ice princess now. Maybe you think this will put me off, but it just gives me a goal, yes? I know how deep I need to carve to get into you. Or maybe I will just give you some Veritas first.’

‘So that’s what they’re calling the drug,’ Connor said. ‘They’re naming it after the cult. And you have access to it?’

Zlatko smiled at him, and Connor wanted to be sick, he wanted to go back to Hank’s. He didn’t want to have to sit in the back of a car for hours to get there. Worse, he didn’t want to be stuck in Wellspring if the flooding was bad. He was thirsty, but he refused to drink from the cup of water in front of Zlatko. Doing anything at all felt like a sign of weakness, revealing something Connor didn’t want revealed. He didn’t want Zlatko to watch his throat move as he swallowed.

‘Thinking of you makes me come so hard,’ Zlatko breathed. Then he laughed broadly, gesturing to the mirror behind Connor. ‘Look at them! They’ll let me say anything at all, this is how desperate they are. You’re a little lamb to be slaughtered, and they’ll let it happen.’

‘Or maybe they just know your words don’t affect me like you want them to.’

‘I have been very proud of you, today,’ Zlatko said. ‘Truly. But I know when my words are having an effect. I know what kind of victim you’d be. I’d be proud to have you in my home, in one of my rooms. Branded, cut, bleeding, crying... You would try so hard. You would break so, so sweetly. God.’

Zlatko groaned thick and long, shuddering like he’d just come, and Connor’s shoulders hurt from how tense they were, how much he wanted to look behind him to check. Were they even paying attention? Had Zlatko paid or bribed guards to distract them? Were they watching all of this?

The clattering sound of chains screeching on metal, and Connor flung himself backwards, the chair flying feet away as he stood. Zlatko lurched upwards and forwards despite the manacles, leaning hungrily. Connor saw that he was hard, felt like he was drowning even as the doors flew open.

Guards wrestled a cooperative, laughing Zlatko back into his seat, and Connor felt an arm around his elbow, pulling him away.

In the room where Fowler waited, Hank stood in the corner with his arms folded, his LED on red, and he stared at Connor like he was furious. Connor stared back, then closed his eyes.

‘Can we go home?’

‘Oh, we’re not fucking staying,’ Hank said, his voice like nails.

The buzzing in Connor’s head subsided and he looked around the room. At least five other people – including Fowler – had seen all of it. Three agents were on tablets, researching leads, though one looked furtively up at him, his face expressionless. Fowler was drinking another cup of black coffee, and it looked like he’d already had four.

‘We’re going,’ Hank said. ‘And for the record, Fowler? F-’

‘I know, I know,’ Fowler said tiredly. ‘Fuck me,’
‘You giving us a car to get home?’

‘Check the radar first to make sure you-’

‘We can. You giving us a goddamn car, or what?’

‘I’ll take you,’ Fowler said. ‘Gary here has got the follow up. You know I’m no good with interrogation. Not unless you just want me to throw some weight around.’

They started to leave, and they were nearly out of the building when Connor said:

‘May I get some water?’

Hank stilled mid-stride, looked at Connor like he was pinning him to the wall.

‘Sure thing. You don’t have to ask me.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said. Then he blinked and forced himself to look around, realised they were in an officer’s breakroom, a vending machine was near the lockers. But when he reached into his pocket, his wallet wasn’t there, and he stared dumbly until a hand came into his peripheral vision and selected the option for a bottle of water, a credit card pressing against the reader.

Hank bent down and got the bottle, unscrewed the cap and then handed it to Connor, who sipped carefully, like water could damage him.

In the aboveground carpark, it was frigid and piles of hail clumped near any surface where the rain and weather made its way in.

‘Get in the car,’ Hank said tiredly.

‘Yes, Hank,’ Connor said, and let his brain turn off as he eased onto the upholstered backseat.

*  

The drive home took place on half-flooded roads, the rain hammering the car like it wanted to obliterate it, hail slamming into the reinforced windshield on five different occasions, sounding like a warzone. Fowler swore to himself and engaged the emergency system which changed their route, meaning it was nearly six in the morning by the time they sheered through the water slickly covering the Broadbank roads. It didn’t matter what time it was, because the clouds were too thick to pretend at daylight. The world was black and wet, microstorms bursting into violence between relentless showers.

Connor was soaked in the fifteen steps he took between the car and Hank’s home. He stood under the porch, dripping water and shivering, while Hank opened the door and disarmed the alarm, checking the house before drawing Connor inside.

‘You gotta get changed,’ Hank said.

‘Yes, Hank.’

He hardly paid attention, so it was as a surprise to him when he came back to himself sitting on Hank’s bed, in one of Hank’s shirts, a pair of his tracksuit pants, and a giant, fluffy, dark blue robe that wasn’t his. Hank approached him with a towel and began drying his hair, and Connor blinked up at him.

‘I only kissed him,’ Connor said, taking a stab at why Hank might still be so mad.
'God-Jesus,’ Hank muttered, shoving the towel briefly into Connor’s face, before going back to drying his hair. ‘I don’t care what you did when you were with him, as long as it helped you survive that fucker.’

‘Oh.’

‘You think I’m jealous?’ Hank said incredulously, staring down at him, the towel paused on his head.

Connor opened his mouth to argue his position, then was too tired to bother. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said.

‘Remember when I said save it up for me later? That ‘later’ is right now.’

‘It wasn’t so bad,’ Connor said.

‘Uh huh.’

‘I think he gave us some workable information. Some things we hadn’t considered before.’

‘There’s no ‘we’ in this,’ Hank said. ‘We’re not on the case anymore, you and me. This was all for Fowler.’

‘And you,’ Connor said, staring at Hank’s midriff. He wanted to touch him. He wanted to place a hand against his belly and just rest it there. He felt paralysed. ‘Gabriel being so protective over what creates his special red ice means that there’s a chance that if this gets shut down, you could be safer.’

‘You just totally miss the part where you’re a dissociated wreck, huh?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ Connor said, so far away from himself that he didn’t mind admitting it.

Hank sighed, sat down beside Connor and balled the towel up in his lap.

‘We haven’t seen the last of this,’ Hank said. ‘You reacting to this, I mean. God, the things he said to you. I could’ve killed him.’

‘Just two men,’ Connor said, ‘discussing their kinks.’

Connor blinked at the hard fingers at his jaw, the way Hank turned his head and stared with eyes that burned.

‘Sometimes,’ Hank said, ‘that’d be something you’d say to take the piss, in your own way. But you’re not, are you? Goddamn, okay. Okay. You gotta get some sleep. For the record though, that was a thirty five minute conversation between a serial killer and his would-be victim, because they let things run overtime, cuz it was just so peachy between you two. I don’t know what twisted shit you think about all of this, but the facts are this: he’s a serial killer and a torturer. He’s murdered countless victims. You were meant to be one of them.’

‘My dad drugged me to keep me away from the case,’ Connor said, dazed. ‘I thought he just did it because he found me annoying and said the PTSD was tedious.’

‘He said that, huh?’

‘It is tedious,’ Connor said, almost finding a smile.
‘Just...’

Hank shoved the towel aside, moved closer, and Connor thought they were about to have sex. He was surprised when Hank folded his arms around Connor and drew him close into an embrace, arms tight. It felt warm.

‘Your dad is at the heart of all of this, damn it. You would’ve never gotten into any of these cases without him.’

‘I wouldn’t have met you either,’ Connor said.

Hank pushed him back by the shoulders to look at him, searching his eyes, and then after a while he just sighed.

‘You gotta get some sleep, princess.’

Connor shrugged.

As Hank darkened the lights to the room automatically – he didn’t even need to stand and use the switch – Connor still felt shaken loose, like he’d been yanked free of his fixings.

When Connor lay down, he stared at the ceiling and thought about the sounds Zlatko had made, how openly he’d shown his lust and arousal. That hot nausea snaked through him again and he shivered, turning to his side, moving closer to Hank without thinking about it. Sleep. He needed sleep. And with any luck, he wouldn’t ever need to do something like that again.

*

It couldn’t have been more than three hours when Connor ripped the blankets off, suffocating. He moved blindly into the bathroom, dropping too hard to his knees and sucking in a deep, spit-filled breath at the pain of it. After that, he was too busy being violently ill to care, grasping the ceramic rim of the toilet bowl and shuddering over and over again.

He wasn’t sure how long it went on for, his eyes wet, and then the light glared and he sobbed, and Hank was there with a hand on his upper back.

‘Calm down, now. Come on. You gotta breathe, Connor.’

The hideous retching went on, but Connor reared back from the toilet, which at least gave Hank the space to flush everything away. Connor clawed at the shirt he was wearing, at the burning in his chest, needing to get it out. But Hank was there, pulling Connor’s hand away from his chest, holding a cold flannel that he wiped over his mouth and jaw. Hank knelt beside him, carding fingers through his hair. Connor couldn’t stop the wretched noise he made, caught in some liminal pit where he was aware of the agony and the panic, but still wasn’t inside of himself.

‘I know,’ Hank was saying. ‘I know. It sucks, huh?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Connor heard himself say. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Hey, why’re you sorry?’

‘I shouldn’t have gone. I shouldn’t have gone on my own, and he told me not to do things like that and I still did them, I thought it was nothing, he was just meant to be someone who settled refugees, and I went, and it wasn’t nothing. It wasn’t nothing. I shouldn’t have gone.’
'Hang on now,' Hank said softly, then was silent for a long time. 'You mean in the first place? You shouldn’t’ve gone to visit Zlatko in the first place? Ages ago?'

'He was so angry,' Connor said, wiping at his face, thinking of his father. 'He said it would’ve served me right if they’d come an hour later. But I wouldn’t have lasted. I could tell from the look on Zlatko’s face. An hour- I wouldn’t have- But he said it was so stupid. 'I’m not going to feel sorry for you, Connor, if you get some post-trauma bullshit just to make my life harder.' I shouldn’t have gone, and I- He’s going to know I’ve seen him again. They’ll tell him. He has sources in Wellspring. He’ll say I brought this all on myself. He’ll say-'

'Connors, your dad’s a fucking monster.'

'No,’ Connor said automatically, responding to the words that were a constant, background hum in his mind. A thing that was too dangerous to think consciously. 'He’s just busy. He works hard.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said heavily. ‘I mean sure, if you say so. But you’re wrong. Hey, hey, look at me.’

Connor rubbed at his face one last time and looked at Hank, who just cocked his head and had a small, sad smile on his face.

'That’s about the most you’ve ever said to me about something personal.’

‘That’s post-trauma for you,’ Connor said, laughing bitterly. His breathing was still uneven, shaking, and Hank reached out with the flannel and wiped at the corner of his mouth. Connor couldn’t help but think of Cole, and how Hank maybe needed someone to care for. It was selfish, but Connor craved it.

‘He really said that,’ Hank said. ‘He really told you that it would’ve served you right if they’d come later? To arrest a serial killer?’

Connor nodded, laughed again, and then had to drop his head away from that searing blue gaze.

‘He didn’t say it where anyone else could hear it,’ Connor said. ‘So that’s something.’

‘Connor, he didn’t say that where anyone else could hear it not to do you any favours, but so he could hide the worst of what he is to the people around him. And he’s done that for as long as you’ve known him. Even him getting you in the evidence sub-basement that time so he could threaten you and hit you, he always makes sure no one’s around.’

Hank was silent for a minute, as Connor's breathing slowly evened.

‘Y’know,’ Hank said thoughtfully. ‘I would’ve laid bets about your freak out being about Zlatko.’

‘Me too,’ Connor said. ‘But…’

‘But what?’

‘Nothing. It’s nothing. I need to get up.’

Hank gave Connor space while he stood. Then Connor rinsed his mouth out, drank some water and wasn’t even annoyed at the way Hank shadowed him close enough that Connor could feel the fabric of Hank’s shirt brushing against his own.

‘But what?’ Hank said, once Connor was back in bed, trying to find his warm spot under the covers. The weather outside was horrendous, but Connor liked the white noise of it.
‘I…don’t dislike Zlatko,’ Connor said, loathing letting those words out of his throat, his mind. ‘He’s dangerous. I can’t trust him. He’d kill me if he had the chance. But I don’t think he scares me in the same way. Once you know what he is, he doesn’t pretend to be anything else. In another lifetime…’

‘You think you could’ve been friends with him,’ Hank said. Connor couldn’t read the tone of his voice.

‘Something like that,’ Connor said. ‘It’s not like I’m not aware he didn’t traumatis me, even today.’

_He just doesn’t scare me in the same way._

‘You’re attracted to him, aren’t you?’ Hank said.

There was nothing Connor could say to that. No easy denial and no easy affirmation either. It was a mess that he didn’t like to think about. He certainly wasn’t going to try and find a clear answer for Hank.

‘It isn’t like what you’re thinking,’ Connor said finally.

‘You don’t know what I’m thinking,’ Hank said. ‘You could ask me though.’

‘What do you think about it?’

Hank rolled over so that he was closer, then placed his hand on Connor’s chest. The lights were off, Connor heard the rumbling of hail on the roof. It felt like the night was going to continue forever, even though it had to be nearly lunchtime.

‘I think he matches some of your criteria for what you find attractive in a person,’ Hank said, ‘and that he has a disposition designed to set people at ease. He’s just enough like a Dom that a part of you – a _part_, not all of you – wants to be compatible with that. Because I think you’d be like that with _any_ Dom, Connor, the fact that you’ve casually subbed for so many people suggests a personality that seeks to find compatibility points, rather than points of difference. Even Luuk, his _primary kink_ is something you hate, but you enjoy him, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said.

‘It’s not bad that you try and find the points where you’re compatible with people like that, but it’s not healthy that you put yourself in danger because of it. And I don’t think you’re nearly as eager to find the points of compatibility between yourself and your friends. But that’s a whole other kettle of fish.’

Connor pursed his lips, eyes drifting shut as Hank rubbed slow circles into his chest. He wished he could sublimate everything in a scene, but he was exhausted, and he suspected he’d shatter fast and take far too long to piece himself back together again.

The point Hank had made about his connections with his friends was on the nose, and Connor didn’t want to think about it. Not now.

‘You tired?’ Hank said.

‘Yes.’

‘Then get some sleep, for fuck’s sake.’

A breath of laughter, and Connor turned towards Hank again, reaching for his shirt and holding onto
it, then reaching further and placing his hand on his belly. He wanted to thank whoever had designed Hank’s template, given him the feel of muscle and fat, made him into this fierce being that Hank had refined and given nuance just through living.

‘I bet you got a few more breakdowns waiting in there,’ Hank said pensively as Connor started to fall asleep.

‘Yes, maybe,’ Connor said, not finding it very important in the moment.

‘Like a billion.”

Connor rolled his eyes even though they were closed.

‘Like…an infinity of them,’ Hank said, but Connor could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Jesus, it is so damn nice when your stress levels go down. You like touching me, don’t you?”

‘I’m sleeping now,’ Connor said.

Hank chuckled softly, and Connor was drifting down when he felt the brush of lips across his forehead. It was the final thing he didn’t know he needed. It made him warm enough that he fell asleep moments later.
The days that followed became filled with a restlessness that wouldn’t leave Connor alone. It started when he expected Fowler to call them with follow up information, and he never did. Seeing Zlatko became an event that just hung in his mind, Connor couldn’t close the door on it.

It didn’t matter if Hank tried to get him to focus throughout the day. It didn’t matter that Hank drew his attention to things like playing piano, more pleasurable – though painful – things like being made to suck him off. Connor was agitated, he wanted to do something like work on a case, and he wasn’t supposed to.

Food became vastly less interesting, and Connor found himself staying up late, past the point when Hank wanted him to go to bed. He channel surfed, kept the volume low, stared blankly at the screen and didn’t care about any of it.

But he couldn’t make himself lie down.

On Thursday morning, Connor attempted to skip breakfast.

‘Hey,’ Hank said. ‘What are you doing? Come here.’

Connor paused, biting back a rise of nastiness, and walked back to Hank and stood there, staring past him in that blank way he knew Hank didn’t like. He blinked when he felt a hand rest on his forehead.

‘You’re not sick,’ Hank said.

‘No, Hank.’

‘Then eat breakfast.’

‘It’s a myth that people have to eat three meals a day,’ Connor said blandly. ‘In some cultures, fasting irregularly is.’

‘Hey,’ Hank said, smiling slowly, placing a finger over Connor’s lips. ‘You can try and bait me and
be a little shit, but the fact is you agreed to my rules. If you don’t want to be punished, you’re going to eat breakfast, aren’t you?’

Connor stared at Hank for a long time, thinking that maybe he even wanted a punishment. What could Hank do anyway? What could he do that would be worse than Gavin towards the end? Or even worse than Hank sometimes? It wasn’t like Connor liked easy scenes in the first place.

‘Connor.’ Hank’s voice snapped through his thoughts. ‘Go eat something.’

Another five seconds wavering as Hank waited for him to go back into the kitchen, and finally Connor rolled his eyes and walked back and picked up a piece of toast. He chewed the end of the crunchy bread while staring at Hank balefully. Hank pointed at him.

‘You are a bona fide brat, and don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said without inflection.

Hank seemed to know he was doing it deliberately, because he didn’t look angry exactly, he looked like someone who wanted to get control of it. There was a tiny, mean smile at the corners of his mouth, and eventually that was enough to make Connor look down and focus on eating. Connor was certain that Hank would find a way to make punishments horrendous.

*

Thursday evening, Connor was working through scales. They were predictable and he liked the feeling of having to use all his fingers, crossing his thumb under his palm to complete them, like a trick. Hank sat at the kitchen table, occasionally telling Connor to repeat something, or to do better at articulating his ring and little fingers, and every now and then he’d make a small, satisfied noise when he thought Connor was doing it well.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, still staring at the projected screen with the code running rapidly past. Connor wondered if he was working on making sure no one could put them under surveillance, or whatever hacking he did to keep them protected.

‘Yes, Hank?’

‘Would you ever want to do something with me and Luuk again?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, without really thinking about it. ‘Is that…on the table?’

‘Yeah, actually, it is,’ Hank said, looking over at Connor. ‘It was partly Luuk’s idea, because I think he doesn’t really trust me, even though we chat sometimes.’

‘You do?’

‘Yep,’ Hank said. ‘He’s a good bloke. He wants to see how we work in action, but also, I think he’d cry himself to sleep at night if he couldn’t scene with you again. So it’s time for another conversation. About this long-term relationship, yeah? I want us to be exclusive unless we agree to do scenes with other parties. But you don’t go off and fuck anyone on your own, and I don’t either.’

Connor was still for a long time, then nodded quickly, because he wanted something like that too. He hadn’t thought Hank would be so generous. The fact was, Connor didn’t like the idea of being wholly exclusive and he never had, but the idea of mostly belonging to one person was something he daydreamed about sometimes. But he also hadn’t thought that Hank would want the exclusivity, because…didn’t Hank prefer to top androids? Wouldn’t he be happier if he could go off and do
whatever it was he did with them?

‘Spit it out,’ Hank said.

‘If you need to top androids, you should include that.’

‘I don’t need to,’ Hank said. ‘Just because I’m more familiar with it doesn’t mean it’s something I need.’

‘I would understand if you preferred it. Just because this is how things are in the short-term, because of the case, doesn’t mean that afterwards, you won’t want to…’

Connor’s words dried up as Hank stood and walked over, standing in front of the piano stool and staring down at him, the heaviness in his gaze threatening and appealing all at once.

‘Your confidence in yourself is the size of a goddamn raisin,’ Hank said.

Connor bristled. ‘I know I’m a desirable submissive, especially somewhere like Zeta. I’m not saying it because I think I’m bad at what I do. But you shouldn’t deprive yourself of—’

A hand over his mouth, and Connor jerked backwards, only for Hank to snake his other arm behind his head and hold him still. Connor exhaled hard through his nose, breath gusting over Hank’s hand.

‘I’m gonna clear something up,’ Hank said, smiling like a threat. ‘Interfacing is great and makes my life a fuck of a lot easier, but so does not having a dog, and you don’t see me kicking Sumo out of my life—I mean…you know what I mean. I could’ve picked a small dog, or a greyhound, or something that didn’t shed and drool everywhere, but I didn’t, did I? I dunno why you think I’m the kind of person who would go for easier, but I’m not that person. I taunted you about it too much in the beginning because I know you have a thing about wishing you were an android and being all bent out of shape that you’re not one. But I was the one who put long-term relationship down as an option, and I didn’t do it because I felt sorry for you. So stop trying to tell me what I want. Now nod your head, because you understood what I said.’

Connor nodded, not looking away from Hank once. Hank’s smile softened into something real, and he slid his hand away from Connor’s mouth and patted him on the shoulder.

‘Good boy.’

He turned and walked back to the projected screen, leaving Connor semi-hard in his pants. It never took much around Hank. Especially not with the prospect of a scene with two Doms coming up.

‘When is the scene with Luuk?’ Connor said. ‘Are we going to Zeta?’

‘Tomorrow night,’ Hank said, staring at the screen. ‘And no, we’re having it here. Actually, there’s something I gotta show you first. You’re gonna have to make a preshow choice.’

‘Now?’

‘No, later. I like listening to you play when you’re turned on. It’s nice.’

Connor squinted at Hank, but Hank stared at his screen, and eventually Connor turned back to the piano and started moving through the scales again, annoyed at how tight his jeans felt.

* 

That evening, in the main walk-in robe in the bedroom, Hank pushed back a bunch of clothing on
the rail and revealed a stack of gleaming white boxes, made from the same flawless plastic. Connor stared at them blankly. He knew Hank had a chest of items he used for his kinks, so he didn’t know what he was looking at.

‘Pick three,’ Hank said.

‘They’re all…the same.’

Hank laughed once, the sound almost mocking. ‘Fuck, wouldn’t’ve called you naïve about a damn thing, it’s nice to know I can shock you.’

Hank picked up one of the boxes and lifted the flap to reveal a clear plastic showcasing what was inside. Hank’s eyes burned into the side of Connor’s face as he realised what each of the boxes contained.

‘Prostheses,’ Hank said. ‘What, you don’t think androids only get one kind of cock, do you? What’s the point?’

The one he was staring at – fully erect in the box – made no attempt to be anything other than terrifyingly alien. It was long and tapered, with sharp regular ridges and a slightly inflated base, and Connor could see the places it was meant to connect to Hank, instead of being a separate dildo or vibrator. Connor’s eyes drifted down to the other twenty boxes stacked neatly on top of each other, and then he looked at Hank, who looked horribly smug.

‘Why do you have so many?’

Hank leaned in as he hooked a hand into Connor’s hair. ‘Because I like them, boy. Don’t tell me you don’t.’

Connor put down the box he was holding and picked up another one, lifting the plastic flap like Hank had before. This one was more animal in design, though Connor didn’t know what he was looking at, and unlike the flashy sex toys in stores and on websites, it wasn’t labelled to say it was modelled after a horse or dog or otter or something. Connor found sex toys with xenophilia-style designs fascinating, but they were too expensive for him to bother collecting them.

‘A word of warning,’ Hank said, as he picked up one of the boxes and handed it to Connor, probably enjoying how stunned he was. ‘Some of them hurt, and you know that as long as I’m not tearing you, I don’t give a shit about gentle. So if you pick three, and you don’t want to hurt inside, make sure all three of them aren’t like this one.’

The one Hank showed him had thicker, more prominent ridges. Four in total, each covered in almost thorny bumps that looked like they’d be a lot to take, even if they were made of the same softer nanofluid polymer as Hank’s skin. The knot at the base was brutal. Connor felt his gut drop. He had to close his eyes for a few seconds.

Sometimes, the decision between what he wanted, versus what was safe…

‘Something like that would tear me,’ Connor forced himself to say.

‘Nah,’ Hank said softly, the menace of it twisting up Connor’s insides. ‘Not if you were well prepared, and we’d have the time. Oh, son, you gotta make a decision fast because everything about this is like Christmas morning for me. Connor, I’m not fucking around, you know when I say something is gonna hurt, it will hurt. And I’ll be wearing it for the night. We’re not going back to the standard model just because you change your mind. And you know well enough to know that I won’t take it easy just because you’re sore.’
Connor forced himself to pick up another box, but his eyes couldn’t help but move back to the one Hank was holding.

‘What’s your favourite?’ Connor said.

Hank smirked and held the box he was holding a little higher. ‘Don’t get to use this one much. Even androids know better. But you don’t, do you?’

Connor wished he could ask Hank to try it privately first, just the two of them. But there was also that reckless, ridiculous part of him that wanted to know how messy a scene would be if Hank used something like that while Luuk was there.

‘You’ll have to wear a plug beforehand,’ Hank said, ‘if you say yes to this one.’

‘When? Tomorrow?’

‘We should probably start tonight. I can take it out sometimes but I want you to wear it a bit.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor breathed.

He was doomed. From the way Hank laughed darkly and ruffled his hair, he knew it too.

*

Later that night, after Connor had showered, Hank had him naked and bent over the bed, two fingers inside him, avoiding his prostate. It didn’t stop it from feeling good, and Connor had been hard on and off for long enough that his balls felt heavy. The lubricant was slick, sliding between his legs, and Connor kept his hands flat on the bedspread where Hank had ordered them.

At the first push of the plug, Connor’s breath caught, because he hadn’t expected something as large as what Hank had chosen for him.

‘Don’t pretend this is too much,’ Hank said, a shit-eating smile in his voice. ‘Not with what tomorrow’s gonna bring.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor forced himself to say.

The plug spread him further than Hank’s fingers, and Connor knew Hank liked this too. The part where it felt threatening, stung, made him too exposed. As the plug continued to open him, Connor realised it wasn’t short, it wasn’t a regular plug at all. He sucked down a breath as it continued to stretch him, made a sound of raw relief when Hank dragged it backwards.

Hank fucked him slowly with it, stretching him open, sliding it back, until it was stretching him wider than Hank’s cock usually did. Connor was covered with sweat, hard and aching, yelping when it finally pushed all the way into him, slipping quickly in the rest of the way. Even the taper at the base wasn’t narrow.

‘Stand,’ Hank said.

Connor didn’t move. He didn’t want to stand. He didn’t want to shift that thing inside him.

A resounding smack, more of a thud, as the grabby nanofluid skin of Hank’s palm slapped the underside of his ass cheek. Connor cried out, because that hurt more than human skin. That hurt a lor. He pushed upwards straight away, then paused when he felt the way the plug moved heavily inside of him. He knew Hank would want him to lie down with it in him for most of the night. Felt
the way part of him rebelled against it. Too much, too soon. Maybe he wasn’t ready for a scene after all.

Two more slaps, one so high on his hip that it stung outright. Connor stood all the way up, rubbing at the sore skin and then quickly pressing a hand to his belly at the feel of the plug inside of him.

‘How long is it, Sir?’ Connor gasped.

‘Long enough,’ Hank said. ‘Why? Feeling it all over, are you? Come on, a slut like you should be used to it.’

Fingers at the base of the plug, yanking it down enough that his hole stretched painfully, then shoving it back into him. Connor fell forwards, bracing himself on the bed. He cried out in shock when Hank smacked him repeatedly, the blows hard enough that his elbows buckled. But they continued, and Connor grit his teeth and forced himself to stand, because he knew that’s what Hank wanted.

As soon as he was standing – trembling – Hank stopped.

‘Tomorrow night won’t be easy,’ Hank said, standing behind him, twisting the plug slowly inside of him. ‘I can tell when you need a hard scene to put you down, and you need one, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor breathed, voice breaking.

‘So it’s okay if we start a bit early, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor nodded. His ass and thighs stung. Hank spanked hard enough that Connor knew he was going to have bruises when Luuk saw him.

‘Don’t disappoint me,’ Hank said coldly. ‘You use one of your words, or you shut up and take it. There’s nothing else tonight.’

Connor took several deep breaths. He forced himself to nod. He loved and hated it when Hank got like this, it sent his skin crawling with hot and cold. He had to wrestle with himself not to resist, not when all he craved was to do well, be good, take whatever was thrown at him.

‘Bend forward and brace yourself on the bed,’ Hank said. ‘You can tell me it hurts, you can tell me you don’t like it, but if you ask me to stop, or tell me it’s too much, I’ll call tomorrow night off.’

Connor was shaking as he bent forwards, no idea what Hank had planned, sure he wouldn’t enjoy it.

He didn’t enjoy it when Hank pulled the plug back firmly enough that it stretched him too far open again and slipped free, and he pressed forwards into the bed like he could escape it when Hank pushed it inexorably back into him. Being fucked with large cocks was fine, but being fucked with plugs was deeply uncomfortable at the best of times. Like this, it was sore. He knew Hank was making a point. If Connor couldn’t handle this, he wouldn’t like anything about tomorrow night.

Even so, Connor had to force himself not to squirm away. He made himself breathe through it until his voice keened on Hank forcing the toy into him and keeping its widest point still at his entrance, until Connor felt he was going to split and break.

‘It hurts,’ Connor managed, ‘it hurts, Sir, please…’

He bit down on his lip so he wouldn’t beg Hank to stop. Hank seemed to know it, because he pulled the plug out and left the tip of it resting just outside of him. Connor already felt like his entrance was
gaping, even though it probably wasn’t. That horrible harder plastic was already making space inside of him.

‘I know it hurts,’ Hank said. ‘And you know I love doing this, don’t you? Ask me to hurt you.’

‘Sir…’

‘Nope,’ Hank said, slapping his thigh with the stinging tips of his fingers. ‘Christ, you think that’s what I asked you to say?’

Connor drew in a deep, audible breath, then squeezed his eyes shut.

‘Please, Sir,’ he said, as prettily as he could manage in the state he was in. ‘Please, hurt me.’

‘Jesus,’ Hank drawled. ‘Exactly like that, boy.’

But Connor still sobbed when the plug was pushed too fast into him, and he still jerked to get away from it, and Hank still hurt him.

Half an hour later, when Connor had been coldly informed that Luuk would be deciding whether or not he got to orgasm the next night, and that he certainly wouldn’t be allowed to now, Hank held him in his arms as Connor shuddered and shuddered and tried to curl away from the plug that was seated deep inside of him.

‘Three hours until the first break,’ Hank said. ‘Don’t expect you’ll be getting much sleep tonight. But I’m gonna have sweet dreams, goddamn, knowing you’re suffering for me.’

The arms stayed tight and almost soothing around him, and Connor suffered, and for the first time in days he felt like he had bigger things to worry about than the mess that was his life and the criminals in it.

* *

By mid-afternoon the next day, Connor was aching non-stop, whether the plug was in him or not. He wanted to spend the whole day lying down, but Hank made him get up and have breakfast, play piano, and do other tasks often while the plug – too long, too wide – was inside him. When Hank took it out, he cleaned it, reapplied lubricant, and always checked Connor’s entrance liberally with his fingers, stretching and pushing, as Connor made low moans of discomfort and felt sorry for himself.

His longest break without the plug in, was around four in the afternoon. Connor was still sitting gingerly, and he wasn’t quite in subspace, but he felt a dazed state of mind playing around the edges of his thoughts. He was less agitated, less restless, and things that were previously annoying him weren’t affecting him as intensely.

He leaned into Hank on the couch, knees up to his belly, the ache persisting. Hank had offered mild pain medication, but after seeing Zlatko, after being freshly reminded of how his father drugged him, Connor didn’t want any pills. Not even after the look of disapproval on Hank’s face. But he’d let it go, and now he had his arm around Connor’s shoulders, watching sports while Connor aimlessly dragged fingers over Hank’s chest and torso.

‘How are you with it all?’ Hank said.

Connor knew what the question meant. It was code, and Hank had started asking it the day after they’d gone to see Zlatko. So the question always referred to the meeting, everything afterwards.
‘I don’t think about it,’ Connor said.

‘Is it like you start thinking about it, and then you blank it?’ Hank said.

‘No, I just don’t think about it.’

There was a long silence, not the kind where Hank was letting it go, but the kind where Connor could tell he didn’t approve. But Hank didn’t say anything, and Connor was so grateful he pressed closer.

He didn’t even think about it then. He just kept feeling the texture of Hank’s clothing against his fingertips, an ache inside of him, and felt that mix of apprehension and excitement, dread and wanting.

*

The plug was back in when Luuk arrived at eight. It was a weight and length that Connor couldn’t begin to tune out. Nor was he used to any scene lasting more than a few hours. One that started the night before and finished around twenty four hours later was new to him, and he’d discovered something new about himself: he didn’t really have the stamina that he thought he did. He knew Hank was wearing him to exhaustion on purpose, but he’d honestly believed wearing a plug on and off throughout the day would be fine.

But his imagination didn’t factor in the constant reapplication of cold lubricant, or the way it warmed and slipped between his legs. It didn’t touch on how the plug moved in ways that were like a fist grinding into his prostate, or worse, painful shifts that had him gasping and pausing whatever he was doing, trying to figure out what he’d done to cause it. He was vigilant whenever it was in him, unable to drift like he so often did. He had to be in his body, and he had to be careful of it, and Hank was always nearby, watching him, which made Connor want to prove he could handle it.

By the time Luuk walked in the door, smiling warmly, Connor was just about ready to go to bed. He mentally put a point on whatever scorecard was there for Hank, because it was a clever move, making him compliant like this, willing to do anything and be good if it made the scene easier. Normally he’d be nervous, this was the first time he’d ever experienced something like this at someone’s house instead of at a club, and he always wanted to impress Luuk. The anxiety was still there, but dulled.

Hank held Connor’s hand when he stepped back after opening the door for Luuk, who walked in and immediately got distracted by Sumo, his eyes lighting up.

‘Oh! Look at you! This must be Sumo. Aren’t you wonderful.’

‘Yeah, yeah, take it easy. It’ll go to his head,’ Hank said, but there was a smile in his voice. Luuk crouched, deftly avoiding being licked on the face, yet still managing to scruff and rub at Sumo’s neck and under his ears. One of Sumo’s hind legs lifted helplessly, like he wanted to scratch, and Luuk’s smile was bright.

‘He must make a terrible guard dog,’ Luuk said, standing, as Sumo leaned heavily into his legs and forced him back a step.

‘That he does,’ Hank said. ‘Oi, Sumo, go lie down. Don’t be rude.’

Sumo made a faint grumbling noise, but walked sulkily back to the bed closest to all of them and lay down on it, his tail still wagging.
‘Ah, he’s well trained,’ Luuk said, impressed. ‘Mat training? Did you use the clicker method?’

‘Mostly,’ Hank said. ‘He’s out of practice though. He never used to lean like that unless I gave him permission, but I haven’t had him for a while.’

‘Yes, I recall,’ Luuk said, stretching out his hand for Hank to shake it. ‘Anyway, here’s to a better reintroduction this time.’

‘Wouldn’t be hard,’ Hank muttered, but he shook Luuk’s hand all the same.

When Luuk directed his attention to Connor, his warm brown eyes were bright and pleased, but also hungry enough that Connor knew why he’d been singled out for the last introduction. Luuk was treating him like an owned submissive. Which meant Connor would never be greeted first.

‘It’s always good to see you, Connor,’ Luuk said, drawing Connor forward by the wrist and then enveloping him in a hug. Connor’s breath hitched at the way bending into the embrace shifted the plug. Then he jolted when one of Luuk’s arms dropped and fingers pressed into the base of the plug through his jeans, moving it inside of him. Connor leaned harder, surprised, and Luuk’s other arm only tightened around him. ‘I see Hank’s been keeping you busy.’

‘H-he told you, Sir?’ Connor managed.

Another thing Hank and Connor had talked about. Connor was allowed to call Luuk ‘Sir’ in the context of a shared scene. In the moment, Connor was grateful for it, because he didn’t think he’d be able to call Luuk by his name, and he always stumbled over terms like ‘Master.’

‘Indeed he did,’ Luuk said.

That hand moved up greedily and rubbed at his lower back, before dropping once more and shoving the plug upwards. Connor cried out softly, trying to duck his head into Luuk’s shoulder, but Luuk chose that moment to step away and lift Connor’s chin with his index finger.

‘I’m thirsty,’ Luuk said. ‘Could you get me some water, please?’

Connor looked at Hank quickly, saw the surreptitious nod, and walked into the kitchen, breathing already uneven. Hank didn’t ask for this kind of service, and as he drew down the glass from its cabinet, he forced himself to hold it tighter than he normally would. He felt clumsier than usual, the plug taking up his concentration, an eagerness to please both of them confused with the anxiety of not knowing if he’d measure up.

‘You got here okay?’ Hank said to Luuk, as Connor filled the glass.

‘Oh, yes, thank you,’ Luuk said. ‘I was careful, too, like we discussed.’

Connor tuned out their small talk as he walked back over. When he handed it to Luuk, he blinked when it wasn’t accepted straight away. He looked between Hank and Luuk and saw disapproval, heart sinking, and he remembered that while Luuk was soft in his own way, he was still a Dom, and he could set up a trap as easily as Hank could.

‘You didn’t ask Hank if he wanted anything to drink?’ Luuk said, frowning between them, though Connor could tell it was partly an act, he hated it. He wasn’t the kind of submissive expected to get Hank drinks or food, if anything, it was the other way around. An abrupt sense that maybe he’d been getting this wrong all along, and just as he felt his heart beat faster, Hank was there next to him, a hand on his lower back.
‘I’m good,’ Hank said. ‘But you should pay closer attention, Connor. Maybe it’s too much to expect you to please the both of us.’

‘We’ll help you,’ Luuk said, as he sipped the water and made it look threatening at the same time. That wasn’t fair at all. Connor leaned backwards into Hank’s hand, needing the reminder that it was there, but only a second later it vanished and Connor looked up into a face that was completely expressionless.

*I can tell when you need a hard scene to put you down, and you need one, don’t you?*

For the first time, it occurred to Connor that he’d never experienced Hank’s idea of a ‘hard scene’ before, he was out of his depth.

* 

In Hank’s bedroom, Connor was ordered to strip as Hank and Luuk got the tools that they wanted to use ready. Hank had already affixed the new prosthetic cock to his plastisteel plates, so it was quiescent and hidden behind his pants. Luuk crouched, looking through Hank’s chest, occasionally making sounds of appreciation.

It didn’t take long after that for Connor to end up kneeling on the bed, Luuk sliding a blindfold over his eyes that took away even the smallest slivers of light. It briefly reminded Connor of the last time he’d been on this bed, headphones over his ears, senses blocked off, but the uncomfortable sensation vanished as Hank slowly twisted the plug in his ass, Luuk brushing his lips over Connor’s, his breath smelling of toothpaste.

After that, Luuk moved away, walking around the bed. One of Hank’s hands rested at his hip, holding him still, the other worked the plug carefully, though even small movements were difficult to take.

Luuk’s fingers played gently with one of his nipples, caressing, moving in small circles that were a dizzying counterpoint to the ache in his ass. He leaned into the touch, even though he knew this was almost certainly a prelude to clamps. He remembered Hank had used alligator clamps the first time, when he’d been *Anders*, when he’d been cruel and taunting, someone Connor was desperate to make happy.

Connor gasped when one of Hank’s fingers slipped into him, alongside the widest point of the plug. He jerked forwards, making it slip out, then ducked his head at the slap to his leg that followed.

‘You are not off to a good start, boy,’ Hank said.

He had to force himself to remain still when that thick finger returned, pushing into him, the uncomfortable stretch stinging him, Connor’s eyes tightly shut behind the blindfold, a tickling softness at his erect nipple.

‘Brace yourself. A sharp pain, now,’ Luuk said, moving his finger away and replacing it with a thumb and index finger pinching his nipple to force it out further. Connor dug his fingers into the bed, expecting alligator clamps, but instead felt blunt nubs on either side of his nipple closing tighter around the tender skin and he pressed his lips together. He was sure it was clover clamps. He *hated* them.

He didn’t know why he ever thought of Luuk as a soft Dom, when – in their scenes – he was never afraid of exacting as much pain as he wanted. He may have been syrupy during aftercare, but he did have his moments.
‘Yes,’ Luuk said softly, drawing the word out. ‘This isn’t very nice of me at all, is it, Connor?’

‘N-no, Sir.’

‘Say thank you.’

‘Thank you, Sir,’ Connor whispered.

‘Good, good.’ A small, sharp little tug once the clamp was affixed, and Connor held his breath as the clamp tightened. Every tug on that chain would tighten the clamp, increasing the pressure unforgivingly, and when Luuk got onto the bed and started gently caressing Connor’s other nipple, it took most of his energy to stay upright instead of moving away.

Especially with Hank now working his finger back and forth next to the plug.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said to himself. ‘All right. You seem warmed up enough. Gimme a sec. And don’t move.’

Hank stepped away, Connor figured to undo his pants or something, and it gave him more of an opportunity to focus on Luuk. When Hank returned with a spreader bar for his ankles, Connor tried to determine what he had planned, then shivered as Luuk’s other hand stroked his face. He pressed into the touch as leather cuffs attached to the bar were secured around his ankles, keeping his legs spread.

‘I’ve missed you,’ Luuk said. ‘Hank believes you should see me more often, going into the future. Would you like that?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘I’d like that too.’

Connor hissed as Luuk applied the second clover clamp. He could hear Hank shifting behind him, fetching something, doing something. Connor’s face screwed up when the clamp tightened to the point of pain, and Luuk pressed his cheek alongside Connor’s. Both of his hands slid upwards – the clamps weren’t going anywhere – and he grasped Connor’s shoulders, the grip much harder than Connor expected.

A second later, the thwap! of a cane against his ass. The strike had been perfectly placed, but Hank hadn’t even warned him. A burst of pain followed, heavy and stinging at once, the cane covered in rubber. Connor knew the sensation of rubber almost by heart, because it hurt like nothing else. He clenched on the plug, crying out sharply, unable to stop himself.

‘Shut up,’ Hank snapped. ‘If you can’t handle me warming you up, you might as well say red now.’

The second strike came an inch higher than the first, horizontal across both ass cheeks, and Connor’s eyes flew open behind the blindfold, one of his hands clawing into the bedspread. His stomach swooped, breath harsh, and as he lurched forwards reflexively, two fingers slipped past his lips and prodded at his gritted teeth.

‘Open up,’ Luuk said. ‘Open that pretty mouth for me.’

On a shaking, helpless breath, Luuk slid three fingers into his mouth, massaging his tongue, making saliva pool. Then he pushed further and Connor sucked automatically, swallowing his own spit, mouth moving to accept Luuk’s fingers.
The next strike took all of his concentration so that he didn’t bite Luuk’s fingers. He sucked in a wheezing breath as the pain flooded him. Hank hadn’t even led into it with spanking or flogging. For a full minute, Connor wondered if he could handle it, dreaming of using the safeword to end everything, the plug moving inside him with every blow. The rubber wasn’t forgiving, every place Hank had caned stung from the air touching it.

‘How many are you giving him?’ Luuk asked conversationally.

‘Seven,’ Hank said. ‘And one more for every noise he makes.’

‘There,’ Luuk said, his other hand taking a handful of Connor’s hair, gripping it tight. ‘That’s really not so bad, is it, Connor?’

Connor shook his head in answer, still sucking on Luuk’s fingers, throat working the tips.

But Hank laughed low behind him, and they all knew it would be that bad. Connor lasted through the next three blows not making any noise through sheer force of will. But the seventh strike – just at the tops of his thighs – was something else entirely, and he strangled out a wretched sound, teeth scraping helplessly over Luuk’s fingers.

‘Careful,’ Luuk said reprovingly. ‘Please control yourself better, Connor.’

‘Did the little shit bite you?’ Hank said, furious.

Connor shook his head, but Luuk only paused and said:

‘It was close.’

‘You know, you were only gonna get one more for making a noise, but goddamn, you’re being so rude to our guest. Guess we gotta make it three and see if it sticks.’

‘Really, that’s very reasonable,’ Luuk said. ‘I’ve seen Connor take much more at Zeta.’

‘Oh yeah, I can imagine,’ Hank said.

The next two blows came close together, up on his ass, crossing over previous strikes. Connor’s chest heaved with fast, deep breaths, his body covered in sweat, eyes burning from the pain. But by some miracle he managed to stay silent – they seemed to ignore how audible his breathing was – and he forced his mouth open wide every time the pain wrenched through him. He was dimly aware of drooling over Luuk’s hand, but Luuk didn’t seem to care.

‘What’s the bet he squeals with this last one?’ Hank said.

Connor blinked, remembering Zlatko talking about how his victims squealed when they were branded.

The last strike laid over the one that had forced a noise out of him the first time, just at the top of his thighs where the skin barely cushioned muscle, where it stung much worse than before. Connor’s whole body locked up as he forced himself to concentrate, abandoning the past, even insecurity, anything to make sure he endured it.

A hand rubbed at his lower back, Connor wanted to go down to his elbows but he couldn’t. Then Luuk pulled at the chain connecting the clover clamps to each other, and even though it was only light, only gentle, it was still a burst of pain and Connor shook his head frantically, pulling his mouth away from Luuk’s fingers and panting harshly before he managed:
‘Y-yellow.’

‘Very good,’ Luuk said warmly, cupping Connor’s face with the hand he’d drooled over. Connor nodded, taking several deep breaths. He knew – was grateful – that Hank wouldn’t stop. If anything, Connor had only earned himself a minute or two to breathe. Knowing that the word meant time to get himself back together again made it a little easier to use, harder to feel guilty about. Though he still felt like he was being weak.

The pain from the caning was built relentlessly, Connor grasping and kneading the bedspread to deal with it. He wanted Hank to tell him that he’d done well, but Hank tended to save praise up for when he really meant it, and he didn’t say it just because Connor expected it during a break.

Hank’s hands slid up and down his hips, outside of his thighs, and then two of his thumbs dipped in and rubbed over the welts. The stinging, searing pain was brutal, Hank’s skin catching a little over the marks. Connor went down to one elbow, resting his forehead on Luuk’s thigh.

‘You mark up so nicely,’ Hank said. ‘Look at that. No one would guess you were such a whore, Connor, with skin as fresh as this.’

‘I’m surprised he wasn’t wearing more of your marks,’ Luuk said.

‘Ah, well, maybe one day. But I’m lazy, more likely to use his mouth. Don’t have to do anything but sit back or stand there, let him do all the work.’

Luuk’s thumb rubbed over his lips, and Connor tried to lick forwards, but it disappeared before he could make contact.

‘So you’d recommend his mouth?’ Luuk said.

‘It’s good enough, I suppose,’ Hank said, noncommittal. His thumbs continued to aggravate the welts, moving down to the nastiest one at the top of his thighs. Connor groaned in spite of himself, but Hank didn’t reprimand him for it, and it helped, being able to make any sound at all.

Luuk knelt properly, Connor heard him opening his fly and pulling out his cock. Connor’s mouth watered at the thought. He couldn’t hear the sound of condoms, a condom wrapper, and he knew that Hank had asked for Luuk’s medical records and hadn’t been above hacking into the medical STI database to make sure they were legitimate.

Two hands rested on his head, dragging his head down, and Connor went helplessly, mouth already open. It was easy to take Luuk into his mouth, his skin tasting like soap and salt and so much more than the plastic-nothingness that he’d gotten used to with Hank. The contrast was startling.

The other difference became clear straight away. So much practice with Hank’s cock with its unforgiving armature beneath his nanofluid skin meant that human cocks were now incredibly easy to deepthroat. Even though Luuk wasn’t yet fully hard, Connor was pleased at how impossible it would be for Luuk to bruise the inside of his throat the way Hank could.

He threw himself into the blowjob, half to take his mind off the constant pain on and around his ass, Hank aggravating all of it, and half because he liked this part. Liked the fingers tightening in his hair, liked the way Luuk’s hips canted upwards and the sigh of approval that meant Connor was doing well. Blowjobs were one of the easiest ways to know he was making someone happy, except with Hank, of course, who could switch off all his reactions if he wanted to, making it a humiliating, difficult task.

‘You’ve improved, Connor,’ Luuk said neutrally.
One hand let go of his head and reached down, tugging the chain at his nipples in increments, and Connor sobbed at the sudden increase in pain, cutting through the numbness.

‘Shhh,’ Luuk said. ‘Is it just me, or is his endurance worse than it used to be?’

Connor felt himself go red all the way to his ears and down his collarbones. He wanted to shake his head, but Luuk was undulating his hips up, nearly fully hard, and while deepthroating was much easier than it used to be, he still had to concentrate. Between that, the humiliation and the pain, he was beginning to drift hard, subspace reaching out to him with delicate claws.

‘I didn’t know him back ‘in your day.’ Hank laughed.

‘It’s good,’ Luuk said, though he still didn’t take his fingers away from the chain, and Connor now had to breathe around a scream, making sure he didn’t let it loose. ‘Maybe it means he’s not constantly escalating like he used to. I think you actually have a fair assessment of what he requires, especially if he’s not looking elsewhere or acting out by finding other people to use him.’

‘He’s not,’ Hank said.

‘Ah, these have been on for long enough,’ Luuk said. ‘Keep your head down and your teeth under control, Connor. I’m afraid you won’t like this at all.’

Luuk let go of Connor’s head entirely and started releasing the tension on the clover clamps. At first, it was almost relief, his nerves numb, not yet replenished with flowing blood. Then, at once, the lancing agony of it came and he pushed backwards automatically, trying to get off Luuk’s cock so he could suck in a breath and scream.

Hank leaned hard into him from behind, pants abrading his welts, and got two hands on the back of Connor’s head and shoved.

Connor keened around Luuk’s cock, desperately trying to suck breaths in through his nose, hardly managing because Hank kept him down far enough that his airways were blocked.

‘Isn’t that interesting,’ Luuk said, scraping his fingers over Connor’s nipples as he shook and felt far too used and Hank hadn’t even fucked him yet. ‘I thought he’d use his teeth, but he’s being very good, aren’t you, Connor?’

The praise unlocked something inside of him and he went limp where the tension had been twisting him up into knots. The pain was horrendous, but he could ride it better. Humiliation still burned into him though. Both of them saying that he was worse at handling pain than he used to be, even if they didn’t think it was bad…it still felt like an insult.

A stinging slap to his ass was the prelude to Hank working the plug out of him properly, and Connor wanted to smack his past self for deliberately choosing the prosthetic cock that would hurt the most. But his curiosity, his need to please Hank, his need for a scene that would positively ruin him… they had all won out in the moment.

Luuk had a hand back on his head again, dictating the rhythm and how deep Connor was to take his cock – which was all the way – the wet sounds of it filling the room. Behind him, Hank squirted cold lubricant directly into his ass and then used two fingers to reach inside him and scoop some back, rubbing it around his entrance.

‘You’re already pretty swollen,’ Hank said, sounding happy about it, rather than concerned. ‘Maybe I’m not using you enough, hm? But you’d like it a little too much if I did this to you every day. Wouldn’t it be nice, Connor? To be a kept slut? You’d need to get better at taking pain though.’
Connor bristled, then held his breath as Hank dragged his nails over the welts on both sides of his ass.

‘At least he’s obedient,’ Luuk said.

Hank barked out such a derisive laugh that Connor’s shoulders hunched. He sensed the way Luuk hesitated, but Hank chose that moment to line his cock up to his entrance and push steadily forwards.

The first ridge pushed into him fairly easily, the little nubs making him wince. It didn’t help when Hank withdrew and pushed the ridge back into him, then did it easily several more times, making the skin buzz and feel raw.

‘Connor’s a brat,’ Hank said. ‘Through and through.’

‘I have wondered, actually,’ Luuk said, and Connor could hear the smile in his voice now. ‘Isn’t that right, Connor? I’ve even brought it up on the phone before. Remember?’

Connor wanted to hide from everything that was happening. The second ridge popped into him, almost as wide as the plug at its widest point, and Connor knew there were two more ridges and that knot and felt like now would be a great time to call off BDSM as a whole and try vanilla sex again even though he’d always found even the idea of it unutterably boring.

Connor could feel the way the cock worked deeper into him before the third ridge bumped up against his entrance. But Hank paused, placing a hand flat on his lower back, the action that Connor knew was meant to be steadying. He clung to it like a lifeline.

‘Y’know,’ Hank said musingly, ‘he’s not gonna enjoy this much. You want to distract him a bit more up there?’

The sound of Luuk moving his hand around beside them, and then metal clinked next to Connor’s ear.

‘That’d be perfect. God, remind me to buy you a drink for this later.’

‘That, and I’m planning the next session,’ Luuk said, a hungry edge to his voice that was frightening.

‘Oh yeah, I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem.’

Connor wasn’t sure what the metal was until he felt fingers at his chafed, sore nipples and the nubs of the clover clamps again and he jerked up and back and cried out when Hank smacked him for it across his welts.

‘Connor.’

‘Not again, Sir,’ Connor said, his voice raw. ‘Not-’

Luuk placed his hand over Connor’s wet, messy mouth. ‘Connor, stop complaining, please. Do you need to say yellow?’

In the space that followed, Hank said: ‘You’re not getting out of the clamps unless you say red, Connor.’

He wished they’d stop using his name like that. He also knew they were taking this seriously, but he hated that too. He would have traded a limb not to have to deal with the clover clamps again, but he would rather have died than quit the scene. Their firmness with setting his limits for him – giving him
strict outs but not allowing him to negotiate – was something he needed on some bone deep level even if the rest of him wanted to scream.

‘Do you need to say red?’ Luuk said, his voice gentler, moving his hand away from Connor’s mouth.

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Do you need to say yellow?’

Connor couldn’t see a thing, he twisted like he could look over his shoulder, and when his head swung back, Luuk stroked his thumb over the side of Connor’s mouth to move some of the itchy spit away. Connor leaned into Luuk’s hand and pretended to be thinking about it to buy himself some time.

‘You’re being a brat,’ Hank snapped abruptly, fingers digging punishingly into the welt at the top of his thigh, the blaze of pain that followed was awful. And then to Luuk: ‘He’s not gonna say yellow, he’s stealing the break anyway.’

‘Are you?’ Luuk said, sounding disappointed.

It was exactly what Connor had been doing. He had no intention of saying yellow, not if it didn’t mean they’d change their mind about the clamps. He’d already said yellow once, and he honestly thought they either wouldn’t notice, or they’d let him get away with it.

‘I’m sorry, Sirs,’ Connor whispered.

‘Well,’ Luuk said, critical. ‘If we can’t trust you to use safewords at all, maybe we shouldn’t continue.’

‘No,’ Connor said, panicking. ‘No, that wasn’t-‘

‘Then don’t do it again,’ Luuk said. ‘Not to me. If you want to push back with Hank, you are more than welcome to, I’m sure he invites it. But you either decide you’re strong enough to use safewords when you need them so we can stop, or take what we decide to give you. I expect you to want to please me, Connor, and instead you’re just disappointing me.’

Connor’s chest ached, he shook his head vehemently, and then turned and opened his mouth and licked Luuk’s hand, trying to pacify him.

‘Hmm,’ Luuk said. His hand turned and curved so it could cup Connor’s cheek, and that was its own kind of acceptance and Connor was desperate for it he could have cried.

‘I’m so sorry, Sir,’ Connor said. ‘I am.’

‘Then put your mouth back on me, and let me attach these clamps to you again.’

Connor moaned softly, miserable, but nodded and pushed himself back up so he could lower his mouth over Luuk’s cock, taking it deep, swallowing over and over again, trying to make it good. He’d gone a little softer, and Connor worked to make him fully hard once more.

But his eyes leaked tears straight into the blindfold as the clamps were reattached. It seemed like Luuk made a point of pulling the chain this time, reminding him exactly who was in control. The flesh was already bruised, tender, and Connor had always been protective of his nipples, they always seemed more sensitive than those of other people, which was probably why Doms liked torturing
Hank chose that moment to grind the next ridge against him, forcing a painful stretch, and Connor felt subspace starting to return on the back of the thick ache and sting of it.

‘I’m not going to be able to get all of this into you, today,’ Hank said objectively, not even sounding upset about it. ‘I guess that just gives us something to work up to. But you can still take more than this.’

The pain of the clamps faded into the background, and deepthroating Luuk was a straight comfort compared to Hank working that third ridge out of him and back into him and then doing it repeatedly, popping it in and out until Connor wanted to cry for mercy. Hank had a strange aversion to making him bleed, so Connor knew he couldn’t have been bleeding, but he felt ruined.

When the fourth ridge shoved up against him, pressing him much wider than the plug, Connor baulked. He kept his head down, but he raised his hand, reached backwards, and Hank grabbed his wrist.

‘I said it would hurt, Connor,’ Hank said. ‘So I’m going to hurt you. And Jesus, I’m going to love it.’

Connor whimpered and then keened as Hank forced the ridge into him, the cock getting horribly deep at the same time. One of the ridges rubbed its thorny little nubs directly into his prostate. It didn’t help. The arousal in him was thick, but it wasn’t enough to balance out the pain, and Connor’s shoulders jerked, pushed close to sobbing. Only Luuk’s hand on his head, keeping him moving on his cock, stopped him.

‘He doesn’t like that one at all,’ Luuk said to Hank.

‘Yeah, I told him he wouldn’t,’ Hank said. ‘But I also told him it’s my favourite. Guess he does aim to please after all.’

‘You’re trying so hard, aren’t you, Connor?’ Luuk cooed, rubbing his hair lovingly.

It ended up being the thing that broke him, and he sobbed messily, the sound muffled as Hank fucked him, moving those ridges back and forth. He didn’t pull the fourth ridge out, but even so, the way the cock moved inside of him wasn’t designed for his pleasure at all, even with the prostate stimulation.

He was confused when his head was lifted from Luuk’s cock, and he kept his mouth open, trying to lick at what he could. But Luuk hushed him, and Connor heard his own desperate, fraught noises from a distance.

‘I’m waiting for my turn,’ Luuk said, sounding more breathless than before. ‘You did wonderfully. You nearly made me come. That’s so clever, isn’t it, Connor? What a clever mouth you have.’

Connor couldn’t tell if Luuk’s praise was cruel, but it still cut deeply, far more than it usually did. He pushed his face into Luuk’s thigh, grateful when fingers pushed in over his tongue and gave him something to focus on.

‘Are you close?’ Luuk said to Hank. ‘I’m afraid it’s hard to tell.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘I can be closer if you want me to be.’

‘I think I’d like to…’ Luuk made some kind of gesture. ‘Is it possible to time it, with you being an android?’
‘Yep,’ Hank said, and Connor heard the grin in his voice. ‘You devious fucker.’

‘Ah, I have my moments.’

When hands reached beneath Connor’s chest, pulling the chain connecting the clover clamps, forcing them tighter and tighter, he punched the bed with one of his hands but he didn’t complain. Not even when Hank fucked into him harder, his deep, punching thrusts shaking the breath out of him. Not even when he felt Luuk beginning to unscrew the clamps again.

When the pain from the clamps hit, Hank thrust brutally into him several more times and then held still, come pumping into him. Connor’s whole body was hit by a wave of cold sweat, some of it tickling as it trickled down his jaw. He was past screaming, focusing on breathing, each frigid inhale scouring his throat. Luuk was stroking his nipples and it was fire and torture, Connor’s chest jerking like he could pull away, even though he was frozen in place and couldn’t even close his legs, the spreader keeping his ankles well apart from each other.

When Hank withdrew – after having come until Connor felt uncomfortably full – the largest ridge twisted out of him and Connor shook his head, choking, burying his face into Luuk’s thigh like he could disappear.

Hank said something to Luuk, and Connor didn’t care about words anymore. His body existed for the both of them, and when they switched positions, Connor only moaned when he felt Luuk’s fingers move through the lubricant and come dripping out of him.

He was surprised when Luuk’s fingers moved to his balls again, and he swam back to dim, sore awareness.

‘Are you sure?’ Luuk was saying.

‘Yep,’ Hank said. ‘Go easy, but yeah, it’s definitely a shifted limit in this household.’

Luuk took up Connor’s balls in a way that felt beyond threatening, and Connor started to lift his head from the bed, only to have Hank stroking his hair firmly enough that it was an order to keep still.

‘I’ve always wanted to do this,’ Luuk said.

Connor blinked, feeling muzzy, then groaned thickly when he felt Luuk position each of his testes and start massaging them individually with his thumbs. He’d never liked ball play like other people did, and even this – which he knew would be arousing for others – felt nauseating. Luuk’s thumbs firmed until he was massaging hard enough to make them ache, and Connor whined and shook his head and threw an arm over his head.

Luuk didn’t stop, keeping up that pointed, relentless massaging.

‘They’re quite swollen,’ Luuk said. ‘Maybe they need to be emptied.’

‘You’re not going to let him come?’ Hank said, sounding impressed.

‘No,’ Luuk said softly. ‘I don’t think he’d like that. I don’t like the idea of merciful orgasms, not at all. The kindest thing I could do, I think now, is ease the swelling.’

The thumbs continued to move in rhythmic, awful circles. Connor’s breathing was heavy, his eyes closed behind the blindfold.

‘He’s gonna hate you.’
‘I find they often do,’ Luuk said, moving one of his hands and sliding two fingers into Connor easily. He shifted his hand, twisting the fingers, searching easily. When he skated over Connor’s bruised prostate, he rode the movement of Connor’s body as he twitched to try and get away.

‘Ah, sweetheart,’ Hank said, laughing as he petted Connor’s shoulder. ‘Here I honestly thought Luuk would play good cop to my bad cop. Turns out you’re just with two assholes.’

‘I’ve never pretended to be anything else,’ Luuk said, one hand massaging Connor’s balls, and the two fingers inside him purposefully beginning to massage Connor’s prostate.

It was like a bolt of cold lightning through him, when he realised exactly what Luuk intended. He opened his mouth to complain, felt the way Luuk’s fingers slowed even in response to that, like he would stop as soon as Connor said ‘yellow.’ But Connor wanted to be good. He wanted Luuk to be happy. He wanted them to be proud of him.

‘I honestly never thought the day would come,’ Luuk said, massaging a little harder, not stopping when Connor whimpered, ‘when I’d be able to do this to you. You don’t like it, do you, Connor?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor managed, his words blurry in his own mouth.

‘But we’re nearly done.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Once the swelling’s gone down, I’m going to use your hole with far more kindness than Hank has, and you’ll be done. That will be nice, won’t it?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

Nothing was stopping the fact that Connor’s bladder felt full, his gut felt like it was cramping, his lower back ached miserably and then on a particularly hard shove from Luuk’s fingers, he felt something loosen inside of himself. He moaned over and over again, feeling like he was close to coming even though he wasn’t.

He felt the moment his body responded to the forced manipulation, and come began to leak weakly out of his half-hard cock. It felt almost like pissing himself, and it was almost like coming, but it was too sharp and strange to be either. With every slow, persistent shove of Luuk’s fingers, more come dribbled out of him.

It had started in a sore and uncomfortable place, because of how much Hank’s cock had bruised him, and it quickly turned into something worse. He hated it. He wrapped his arms around his own head, refusing to move them even when Hank tried to coax them away, and Luuk still didn’t stop.

‘Hush,’ Luuk said. ‘We’re nearly done.’

Connor felt empty, and Luuk wasn’t stopping with his balls, or his prostate, and it was worse than not being allowed to come. Chastity was well and truly preferable to this.

Luuk didn’t stop until Connor was crying again, and even then he only removed his fingers from Connor’s ass. They returned, slick and hot, to Connor’s scrotum, his testes.

‘I’m just making sure that was enough,’ Luuk said clinically, as Connor tried to swing his hips away and Luuk just calmly followed the movement. But neither of them reprimanded him, and he knew then that it really was going to be over soon. They were starting to be merciful. They knew he couldn’t take much more.
The bruising, nauseating pain of the ball massage continued for so long that Connor knew they not only didn’t mind him crying pathetically, they probably liked it. He tried to resist the pain for as long as he could, and then finally managed to ride it all the way into the relief of subspace. It made him less able to pay attention to Hank and Luuk and their orders, but they weren’t telling him to do anything now.

When Luuk stopped and pushed into him, fucking him with rhythmic, hard motions that made come leak out of him constantly, Connor didn’t care. Even the pain – because that had never gone – was less of a concern. He tried squeezing his hole for Luuk, but it was mostly useless. He could feel how much Hank had stretched him out.

Luuk’s wet, slick hands on his welts hurt, and Hank’s fingers returning to his nipples hurt, and Connor made small, weak noises as he surrendered to the onslaught.

He was so grateful when Luuk came inside of him, he would have thanked him if he remembered how.

They held him in place for minutes longer, and then the hands disappeared from his hips and the pressure of someone’s body against his ass and thighs vanished. He tipped sideways, sprawling onto the bed, the metal clamps cold beneath his shoulder. He was grateful for the warm blackness of the blindfold, but otherwise he felt bereft, no longer anchored into anything familiar.

A small, needy noise escaped him and he pawed out for Hank, forgetting he was right there. As soon as he made contact with his shirt, he clumsy half-crawled, half-wriggled until he was pressing as close to Hank’s abdomen as possible. Then Luuk was there too, hushing him and saying sweet things and Connor sobbed again, his chest too sore for the burst of emotion. He couldn’t stop it anyway.

Hank’s hand came, broad and not as warm as Luuk’s, rubbing briskly between Connor’s shoulders for several minutes. Eventually, Connor felt the worst of the storm inside of him subside, and the hand slowed on his back.

‘You got him?’ Hank said.

‘Of course I do, don’t I, Connor? I’ve got you, I’m right here. God, I’ve never seen him like this in my life. I don’t think he’s ever truly let himself go at Zeta. I can’t believe it.’

Strong arms gathered him up, pulled him close, and Connor nosed his way underneath Luuk’s shirt so he could press his face into his warm belly, breathing wetly and clinging, uncaring about social graces, bothering anyone, how he must have looked.

Luuk stroked his hair as Hank got off the bed and removed the spreader bar from Connor’s ankles. Then he walked away for a moment and returned with a towel, using it to wipe the sweat off his body with long, firm strokes. Connor continued to shake with the coldness that came after a hard scene, and even though Hank only carefully blotted over his ass, he still hissed and tried to pull away. But Hank caught his hip and continued, moving down his legs afterwards, even rubbing the soles and bridges of his feet.

‘Can you give me access to his chest?’ Hank said, and Connor was moved by Luuk, who rearranged him easily.

Connor’s hands came up and covered his nipples, and Hank let him. He wiped at Connor’s neck, his collarbones, his forearms and wrists, his ribs and stomach and groin, sliding the nubby fabric of the towel into the creases of his pelvis. Connor wasn’t used to this, he didn’t think anyone had ever done
something so thorough for him before, and he thought he might even like it. Normally aftercare was
boring, something he indulged for the sake of his Doms – he was under no illusion that they often
needed it just as much, if not more than he did – but in the moment, he was absurdly grateful for how
close they were, how warm Luuk was, how Hank let Connor protect his own nipples.

His chest felt feverishly hot under his palms, he was sure his nipples were bruised. Knew that in the
coming days some of the skin would harden and peel away, the skin new and tender underneath.

Hank got off the bed and returned with something else, and that was when fingers caught his wrist
and drew one of his hands away from one of his nipples.

‘Please,’ Connor whispered, dread that the scene wasn’t quite over stealing into him.

‘You’ll thank me later,’ Hank said. ‘I promise I’ll be careful.’

Luuk kept stroking Connor’s hair, and then his hand replaced Hank’s, holding Connor’s wrist out of
the way. Cold ointment was dabbed over his nipple, and Connor made a face but endured it, rubbing
his face against Luuk’s skin.

It was Luuk who let go of Connor’s wrist, just to move his other one away, Hank thanking him as he
applied more of the ointment. Hank laughed quietly when he was done, resting his thumb on
Connor’s pectoral, just below the worst of the bruising.

‘And you say you’re not a sadist?’

‘I’m not primarily a sadist,’ Luuk said. ‘I never said I wasn’t one. It just isn’t my biggest priority. I
will be just as happy without inflicting pain.’

‘Y’know, one could argue that messing with a guy’s orgasms like you do is sadism in its purest
form.’

‘One could argue that,’ Luuk said. Connor could hear the smile in his voice.

‘You don’t sound too fussed about it.’

‘I know what I like,’ Luuk said, stroking the fingers of his other hand down Connor’s back, over the
line of his spine. ‘Oh, you beautiful man. You were so good for us.’

‘Do you want the blindfold off?’ Hank said, and Connor shook his head.

Hank shifted and applied ointment to the welts on his ass. That was harder to deal with, and when
Hank placed his fingertips against the welt at the top of his thighs, Connor reached down, dazed.

‘Not that one,’ he pleaded, his voice scratchy.

‘Connor,’ Hank said patiently, ‘I mostly got the salve just for this one, okay? You can be a good boy
for a couple more minutes, can’t you? I’m being as gentle as I can.’

Hank waited for Connor to make a decision, and Connor’s arm hovered in the air while he muzzily
thought it over. After a moment, his arm dropped limply to the bed, and he exhaled heavily, too
petulant to nod. But Hank took Connor’s reaction as agreement, and he went back to applying the
ointment. Connor covered his face, and Luuk gently placed his hand over Connor’s, stroking his
cheek, his forehead, his ear, just about any place he could reach.

Luuk was relentlessly kind. It didn’t feel restful at all, but it kept Connor away from full awareness.
Hank had a pragmatism to him that Connor craved, his comfort was straightforward, practical, never excessive. It aimed to ground and reassure, without being too challenging. But Luuk plied Connor with compliments and sweetness and even love, and Connor felt too shattered beneath it to pick up the pieces of himself.

By the time Hank was done – he’d returned with a warm cloth to wipe away most of the lubricant and come – Connor was heavily spaced out, and Luuk seemed very happy about it, from the tone of his voice.

After that, Connor started to doze, legs covered with a fluffy, heavy blanket, a wrapped hot water bottle at his feet and feeling much warmer than before. He was aware of one of them trying to get him to drink some water, and then a gruff:

‘Leave it, he’ll drink well enough when he wakes up again later. I won’t forget.’

His last thought amongst the neediness and the floating blankness, was that it might have been the best scene he’d ever had. It was hard to tell, but nothing at Zeta had ever come close.

*

He woke to darkness, but the blindfold was off his face. He could see a glow of yellow, and he blinked at it, then shifted and cried out at the pain in his joints, his spine, his body aching like he’d run several marathons. Like he’d been beaten.

‘Okay, okay,’ Hank was saying, sitting up. He’d been right beside Connor, his body pressed close. ‘You’re fine. It’s okay, Connor. You remember the scene?’

Connor nodded, and Hank reached across to his bedside table and brought over a glass of water, helping Connor to sit up, leaning on his bruised hip, because even that was better than sitting on his ass.

‘Here,’ Hank said. ‘Drink slowly.’

Connor took a thirsty mouthful and then made a small sound when Hank took the glass away immediately.

‘Slowly,’ Hank said.

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s fine, just…go slow, okay?’

Connor finished the whole glass – with slow, small sips – wiping at his mouth when he was done, still spacey and sleepy.

‘Where’s Luuk?’

‘He went home,’ Hank said. ‘If you want him to stay over next time, we’ll talk about it, okay?’

‘Okay, Hank,’ Connor said, tipping towards him even as Hank set the glass back down. Hank pulled Connor closer, hooked an arm around his back and yanked him forwards, and Connor fell with it, voice breaking as his nipple pressed painfully into Hank’s chest.

‘Yeah, you’re gonna be sore for a few days,’ Hank said. ‘I want you to take some painkillers in the morning.’
'No pills,' Connor mumbled.

‘Connor, you’re gonna take some painkillers in the morning. That’s non-negotiable. It’s just ibuprofen. You gotta trust me, okay? I know you don’t want to, and I know-’

Connor made a noise that was about as close to him communicating that he didn’t want a lecture right now and he didn’t want to have to think about anything hard, and Hank fell quiet and tousled his hair instead.

‘Not ready for reality yet?’ Hank said, sounding affectionate.

Connor shook his head, and Hank held him close. After a few minutes, one thing kept niggling at him and wouldn’t let him go.

‘Do you really think my pain threshold is bad now?’

‘I never said it was,’ Hank said. ‘And no, Connor, I don’t. We were teasing. Maybe Luuk was surprised, but I’d been pushing you with that plug on and off all day. I put you through hell, sweetheart, and you handled that scene like a goddamn champion. Like a champion. Jesus, you would’ve been able to take a lot more if I hadn’t been wearing you down all day and last night.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah, ‘oh.’”

‘Okay.’

‘You ready to get some more sleep?’

Connor made a noise of assent, and then rubbed his hands clumsily over Hank, trying to convey all the things he didn’t know how to say. That he liked how Hank understood the complex things he wanted in a scene and wasn’t afraid to give them to him, even when they were terrifying or agonising in the moment. Hank’s aftercare was genuinely settling, as much as he enjoyed Luuk and his sweetness. He wanted to say thank you, but the words were slurring across his brain and he knew he wouldn’t get them out of his mouth.

He wasn’t sure he knew how to love another person, he wasn’t sure he’d actually loved anyone except his mother, and maybe his father. He didn’t know what it was supposed to look like or feel like, but whatever gravity mixed impossibly with the buoyance inside of his chest was stronger than subspace and grew stronger the more he thought of Hank. It was warmth and steadiness, and fear and pain and need, so raw that Connor didn’t want to think about it, but liked to feel it anyway.

‘Thank you,’ Connor whispered.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Hank said, sounding like he was rolling his eyes. A while later, when Connor was only a little conscious, he thought he heard: ‘Thank you, more like. Brave boy.’

It was enough to send him all the way into sleep.


Belligerence as Communication

Chapter Notes

Author’s note: Everyone needs different kinds of aftercare. The most popularised kind on AO3 is ‘sweet fluffy snuggly cuddle aftercare.’ The fact is, some people hate this kind of attention after a hard scene, and Hank is pretty good at being sensitive to that. Or perhaps more accurately, he’s very good at tailoring the aftercare specifically to different states of mind.

Warning: This chapter features a punishment scene. Connor doesn’t safeword out of it, but it’s not a pleasant experience for him.

I’ve also added the tag ‘Disordered Eating’ because I genuinely thought I’d added it in the first two weeks of the story coming out (I write characters with disordered eating all the time and am used to tagging it all over the place), so I apologise for not having that up sooner. He absolutely has ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder), which was previously an EDNOS.

Connor woke the next day to a scratchy, achy pain bedded down in his joints. He pushed Hank away when Hank tried to hold him, then he balled up beneath the blankets feeling sorry for himself. He was still leaking come, he didn’t want to have a shower, he didn’t want to do anything. He hadn’t done a scene that hard in his life in terms of how long it had lasted, and he knew there were submissives who did scenes longer than that all the time.

Hank didn’t get angry at Connor’s grumpiness until he refused breakfast and pain medication. Even then, it was only expressed in the steady stare of his pale blue gaze and the forbidding set of his mouth.

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t feel like it.’

‘The food will help,’ Hank said. ‘And the anti-inflammatories will help more. Like what you like, Connor, but you gotta look after yourself for it afterwards. Even gym junkies know they need to have rest days and drink a fucking Gatorade sometimes.’

Connor picked up a tiny piece of macaroni covered in cheese sauce and licked it off his fingers, then turned over in bed.

It tasted really good, which made him more annoyed.

‘Connor,’ Hank said, somehow managing to make his name sound coaxing and like a threat all at once. ‘Come eat some more macaroni in the most goddamn ridiculous way I’ve ever seen someone do it. And I had a kid, Connor.’

Connor thought it was a low blow that Hank brought up Cole, but he shifted over again, groaning. He hurt. His lower back was killing him. Hank had fucked him with that awful cock, but he hadn’t done it brutally, so Luuk must have gone really hard when Connor was too out of it to notice or care anymore. He opened his mouth to say he was sore, but the two white pills next to the glass of water Hank held silenced him.
He was rarely in the mood to see anyone after a hard scene. He liked to deal with the aftermath on his own. The best part about club scenes was that aftercare had to stop as soon as he went home, and then he could feel sorry for himself alone. It wasn’t like anyone could stop the endorphin drop. He just had to ride it out.

‘Sugar wouldn’t melt in that mouth,’ Hank said, staring down at him. He set the tray down on the small bedside table and then sat next to Connor. Casually, staring at Connor blankly, he slid his hand beneath the blankets and squeezed Connor’s caned, sore ass. ‘Now,’ he said, as Connor tried to jerk forward away from the touch only to press himself into Hank’s immoveable body. ‘Let’s try this again. You wanna try eating some damn macaroni? Or do I need to work you up again just to make you soft enough to eat a fucking meal?’

‘I’m not taking the pills.’

‘Yes, you are,’ Hank said. Connor thought he’d squeeze harder, but instead Hank just slid his hand up over Connor’s back and rubbed it. ‘I’m gonna need you to tell me that you really think I’d feed you sedatives. You really think I’d do that?’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘And now I need you to tell me that you know the only reason you don’t like taking pills is because they’re a referred trigger to your dad being the world’s biggest asshole. Except, in this case, not taking them is making you feel worse.’

Connor hated logic. He hated it because he could see the sense in it and he hated it because he still felt sick about the idea of taking tablets.

‘You’re supposed to be nice to me,’ Connor said finally. ‘Luuk would be nice to me.’

‘Look, now you get a lecture on how nonselective inhibitors of cyclo-oxygenase – that’s COX-1 and COX-2 by the way – help your body not shit itself because right now, your cells are all about prostaglandins and thromboxane and arachidonic acid which is just thromboxane by another name. Those nonselective inhibitors of COX-1 and COX-2, also known as NSAIDs, also known as fucking Ibuprofen, will be very nice to you. A lot nicer than I can be by just telling you that you did a good job yesterday. Take the fucking pills. John Vane got a Nobel Prize for this shit, goddamn, you gonna insult John Vane? The John Vane? Who no one’s ever heard of? You gonna insult him?’

Connor grit his teeth and grabbed the pills, and then he tried to dry swallow them and one got stuck in his throat and he had to sip at the water. He glared at Hank, who smiled sweetly back at him.

‘Good boy,’ he said. Connor shivered and scowled. ‘Now you gotta eat some macaroni, because it’s not good to have those on an empty stomach.’

A spoon with macaroni and cheese on it hovered in front of his mouth and Connor nearly backhanded the bottom of the spoon just to watch everything splatter onto Hank. Judging from the expression on Hank’s face – which was almost wary – he was expecting something like it.

Connor went to grab the spoon, and Hank wouldn’t let him. Then Hank smirked.

‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’ Connor said.

‘I am, actually,’ Hank said. ‘You hate this part, don’t you?’

Connor opened his mouth obediently, leaned forward and ate the macaroni off the spoon and hated that it was so good. Hank never cooked this well.
‘Did you make this?’ Connor asked suspiciously.

‘It’s one of Kara’s recipes. Followed it to the letter. You gotta eat it or she’ll be really upset.’

‘That’s very manipulative of you.’

‘It is, isn’t it?’

But Hank patiently fed Connor the whole bowl of macaroni, and then gave him the rest of the water. That much effort was exhausting and Connor slid back down into the warmth of the blankets. He just wanted to sleep.

‘There you go,’ Hank said, ruffling his hair. ‘Get some sleep.’

*

Hank wasn’t smothering, but he did insist Connor eat regularly, and once he knew he could get him to take the Ibuprofen he brought some with every meal. Connor refused to admit it was helping, even though it made a significant difference with the worst of his aches, especially the lingering soreness in his lower back.

Connor wouldn’t be able to handle extended aftercare from Luuk, he just knew it. He’d probably claw the man’s face off and then feed that into a blender. Even Hank checking in on him regularly and then doing his own thing the rest of the time made Connor furious.

The best part of all of it – even being grumpy, sore and tired – was that he hardly thought about anything else. All he needed to do was exist in his body, be annoyed that it was sore, and rest until it got better. Hank didn’t press him about his family, his dad, the case, or Zlatko. It was like a series of days had been circled on the calendar, dedicated to a real break that Connor didn’t know how to access without a scene like that. It was a relief.

Connor never knew how to explain to people that he needed the scene, but he needed this part too. He didn’t need Hank there with him looking after him, though that wasn’t bad, exactly. But he needed the part where he focused on how to move around the pain in his body. He liked having an excuse for being in a bad mood, he liked that Hank accommodated it. No one could call him out for having a bad attitude after a scene like that, and it felt like getting away with something, to be resistant and even snappy, only to get pain medication and some food in response to it.

*

After two more days, Connor swam out of his headscape remarkably refreshed. His energy levels soared, and after a bright morning spent cleaning Hank’s bathroom and vacuuming to get rid of fur, he realised he was restless and bored. He went through some piano exercises, pushed ahead into new ones, and afterwards wandered the house as Hank stood at his customary place at the glass table, both of his arms up, hands stuck in projected screens, interfacing directly with the code.

‘Are you bored?’ Hank said.

Connor stopped pacing. ‘Yes.’

‘Go make yourself lunch.’

Connor wasn’t the kind of bored where he wanted to make himself lunch.

He ignored Hank and walked back down the corridor, getting on the bed and idly browsing through
apps and articles, feeling the itch to get onto a case. He had an urge to throw himself into something complex that wasn’t old university textbooks or making himself lunch.

He was also distantly curious about what one of Hank’s punishments would look like. Connor was happy with how he’d handled the harder scene, it was difficult to imagine how Hank would really punish him without physically harming him, because Hank didn’t like to do that.

That itched at him too, lurking in the back of his mind where the thoughts of Zlatko and his father and Gavin telling him it was impossible to rape him also waited.

An hour later Hank turned up with lunch, and Connor stared at it and gave a lot of thought to just not eating it. He was hungry, he could eat, but he wanted to know what Hank would do.

Eventually he ate, but the thoughts continued to niggle at him, turning back into a restlessness that had him cleaning Hank’s home more often than Hank did.

*  

Hank sent him out of the house to take Sumo for a walk. Connor had a map with very fixed directions on it. Apparently Hank tampered with the surveillance cameras all over the suburb, which meant that if Connor stayed within certain bounds and only visited certain parks, he was safe.

‘How many feeds are you altering, Hank?’ Connor said, before he left.

‘About six hundred,’ Hank said, without breaking that deadened gaze he held when he was interfacing with the computer screens.

‘Six hundred sounds like a lot.’

‘It sure ain’t easy,’ Hank said. ‘But it’s easier to hide a needle in a haystack when you control most of the haystack. I used to do it back in the day, for the Anderson’s. Humans tend to assume you’ll just mess with one or two, or five to ten cameras. But if you make slight alterations to a lot, on a regular basis, they begin to see irregularities in a particular area as normal. Why would one or two cameras on my house being glitchy be a problem, when the whole suburb’s just wired a bit weird?’

‘Isn’t it draining?’

‘It’s what I was made for,’ Hank said, his voice empty. Connor knew it meant he was working hard and he stared at the yellow LED suspiciously, feeling antsy. His hand tightened on Sumo’s leash. Sumo drooled steadily onto the tiles, excited about the walk, but patient too.

‘You weren’t made for this kind of hacking, Hank,’ Connor said reprovingly. ‘You said so yourself.’

‘I mean I was made for high capacity output,’ Hank said dismissively. ‘Most androids can’t do what I can do, the trade-off is I’m sometimes less human than the average android. Whatever. I used to be, anyway. Then I learned to take the lord’s name in vain and everything else followed pretty fucking naturally if you ask me.’

‘Are you saying that all your swearing and… Are you saying that helped you become more human?’

Hank blinked and met Connor’s eyes, then smiled a little. ‘Sure didn’t hurt. You gonna take him for a walk, or what?’

Connor felt a sparking urge to push back, but instead he turned and walked out of the house.
At the park – while Sumo found a fallen branch twice as long as Connor was tall and was dragging it around proudly – Connor couldn’t shake the itchy feeling he had. He wandered around, shoes scuffing in dew laden grass, avoiding other branches that had fallen from trees after the storm and ignored the rain misting around him. He didn’t like that they’d been turfed from the Veritas case. He didn’t like that he wasn’t supposed to work on it anymore when he’d proved himself helpful. He didn’t like feeling useless.

His hands clenched into fists and he stared at Sumo, then looked around to spot one of the six hundred cameras Hank was manipulating.

He couldn’t see a single one.

*

‘I know what you’re doing,’ Hank said the next day, when Connor tried to skip breakfast.

‘What am I doing, Hank?’

‘You’re gonna want to think twice about pushing back like this,’ Hank said. ‘Though I suppose I saw it coming from a mile off. Jesus Christ, Connor, can’t you just-?’

‘What, Hank?’

Hank’s eyes narrowed, and Connor thought that if this was a few months ago, he’d be angling to stir something up with Gavin, or even his father. It wasn’t like he wanted them to be angry at him, it was just a predictable process, it gave somewhere for his restlessness to go.

‘This isn’t cute,’ Hank said. ‘And my patience with it’s gonna wear thin pretty soon. Get your own shit under control, or hell, call a therapist, or maybe you could talk to me about what’s bothering you.’

‘Nothing’s bothering me, Hank.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Hank muttered, turning and walking away. ‘Also Markus and Simon are coming over tomorrow.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t see your friends enough.’

Connor watched Hank walk away and took a deep breath, unexpectedly nervous. He hadn’t seen Markus and Simon for a long time, and since then his entire life had been turned upside down. He almost called Hank back to tell him that he couldn’t just control his social life like this, but it was a relief to have it taken out of his hands. He knotted his fingers together, then looked for something else to clean.

*

The next day, before Markus and Simon came over, Connor managed to skip breakfast entirely. It left him nervous, a fluttery anxiety in his chest, and he waited to see what Hank would do. Connor had left it until ten minutes before Markus and Simon were due to arrive, and knew he’d played it just right. Hank was too soft to punish him right before friends arrived.

Hank noticed the food left out on the counter and turned and stared at Connor – who was putting on shoes – and Connor stared back.
'Is something wrong, Sir?'

The corner of Hank’s mouth lifted in a half-smile that wasn’t remotely amused. Connor thought that maybe Hank understood all of this better than Connor did himself.

‘One more chance, Connor,’ Hank said. ‘That’s it. Pull your goddamn head in.’

‘I must have forgotten, Sir, and they’re going to be here soon.’

‘I’m sure they won’t mind you eating a sandwich when they come in,’ Hank said coolly, leaning a hip against the counter, his stare unblinking, inhuman, almost savage. ‘So you could come over and do that right now.’

‘I forgot something in my room,’ Connor said, standing up and walking down the corridor quickly, heart pounding.

Hank didn’t follow him, and Connor could feel himself bumping up against an implacable force. Agitation pushed around inside of him, and it took some effort not to go back and stir Hank further, just to see what he would do.

*

When Markus and Simon arrived, Hank stayed long enough to shake both of their hands and reintroduce himself. Simon was delighted with Sumo, Connor said they could take him for a walk if they wanted, and that got them all out of the house while Hank went off into his garden. It all happened so quickly that Connor realised he’d barely said more than three sentences to Markus and Simon until they were outside.

‘I know I haven’t been in touch as much as I should have been,’ Connor said, watching as Sumo trotted happily alongside Simon, even heeling for him like he never did for Connor or Hank.

‘Did you really think we’d be bothered by that?’ Markus said. ‘We’re not annoyed or anything. It’s nice to hear from you, of course, but you’ve been going through a lot, haven’t you?’

Connor smiled stiffly. He didn’t know what to say.

‘It was good to be invited,’ Markus continued. ‘Hank has a very lovely home. Do you like living there?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘It’s a lot cleaner than my old apartment. Hank tries to get me to eat all the time.’

‘How terrible for you,’ Markus said, amusement in his eyes.

Connor’s smile loosened, but it was strange to be walking with them. He didn’t know how he’d worked with them for so long, or chatted with them, or even made small talk, only for it to be awkward now. But Markus didn’t seem upset, and Simon occasionally looked back at Markus with an expression on his face that seemed to say: ‘See? We should get a dog!’

‘We never did this before,’ Markus said. ‘Spent time together outside of campus. I should have suggested it a lot earlier. I wanted to. And Simon went on and on about it.’

‘But you know what Markus is like,’ Simon said, speaking up for the first time since they’d started walking. ‘He was all ‘but I’m his supervisor’ and getting hung up in the labels. Honestly, Markus, you put the First Markus to shame. He wasn’t our Saviour just for you to turn out like this.’
‘That’s cruel, Simon,’ Markus said calmly, and Simon only grinned.

Connor wished the entire outing would involve Markus and Simon bantering, while he watched and enjoyed it. They were so comfortable with each other.

‘Hank told us you went to see Zlatko recently?’ Markus said. ‘There was probably a more sensitive way to bring that up, wasn’t there?’

‘It was for a case,’ Connor said.

‘It must have been stressful.’

‘No,’ Connor said, looking across to another section of road as Simon turned to look at him sceptically. ‘I was safe, and there were a lot of people there. It was only thirty minutes.’

‘Will it help the case?’ Markus said delicately.

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘I mean, I think so. The information seemed something that I could work on if I was still allowed to work on the case. But I’ve been benched. Hank too. I suppose we were never officially on the case to begin with. But my connection to my father, and him being involved makes it complicated.’

They reached the park, and Sumo sat obediently next to Simon on the grass and waited to be told what to do. Connor smiled to see him be so good. He must really have wanted to impress Simon.

‘He’s waiting for you to tell him what to do,’ Connor said. ‘You can take his leash off now if you want. He doesn’t leave the park.’

‘I love him,’ Simon said. ‘I want ten.’

‘I’m having a sudden vision of the size of the house we’ll need to live in,’ Markus said. ‘It’s an intimidating vision.’

‘Maybe five then,’ Simon said, unclipping the leash. Sumo licked Simon’s hand in sloppy gratitude and bounded away, running over to the play equipment and digging in the white sand, shoving his head into the giant hole he’d made until it caked all over his face like snow.

Simon walked over to Sumo, and Markus stayed with Connor, both of them by the large tree that still had a scar where it had lost the large branch in the storm that Sumo had tried to drag home.

‘I regret not being pushier,’ Markus said. ‘I wanted to be there for you more tangibly long before now. I’m not sure we’re doing a good job of it at all. You seem like someone who wouldn’t have tolerated it, even if we’d tried.’

‘I think that’s true,’ Connor said. ‘Don’t feel guilty about it, please. I’m not even sure how to have friends. I wasn’t even sure we were friends until…until it just seemed like I didn’t have another word for it.’

‘Oh, Connor,’ Markus said, sighing. ‘I am sorry. But Hank seems like he’s good for you. I’m not going to pretend I can’t see how controlling he is. You don’t mind that, do you?’

Connor smiled, but couldn’t look at Markus. Eventually he nodded. He had no idea how to begin explaining his dynamic with Hank. Especially not today, when he was bridling back against it.

‘What’s it like, living with him?’
‘I like it,’ Connor said. ‘Really. He made me stay at Kara’s – a friend of his – for a little while, because he wasn’t sure. I hated it. I think he thought I’d change my mind, or that I’d come to my senses, and I think he doesn’t really like people.’

‘You must relate to that.’

‘I like people,’ Connor said, laughing. ‘I’m just not very good at spending time with them.’

Markus laughed as well, and then sighed, waving at Simon who was playing tug with one of the rope toys Connor had given him. Sumo was winning. But Sumo liked the game enough that he brought the rope back to Simon every time, and the game would start again.

‘You know, I don’t expect you to be anything that you’re not,’ Markus said after a while. ‘Being-looking like I do, a lot of androids expect me to be exactly like him, the first one. Not all of them, but sometimes people come up to me and expect me to have grand ideas for the future of android politics, and they want me to be someone I’m not. I’ve thought about getting the coding for my physiological mapping changed a few times, even different core polymers. I can change my hair colour and my eye colour, but ultimately, I look like him, I sound like him.’

‘But you’re not the First Markus,’ Connor said.

‘My point is that I’m not waiting for you to be someone you’re not. I like the person I met in the lab. Yes, you can be a bit awkward at times, and we don’t always know how to talk to you, but I have had this difficulty with many humans, and you’re a lot more like one of us that it’s easier sometimes. However you want to change or grow, I want to help you with it. That’s all. I have no other agenda.’

‘Markus, you don’t need to tell me all of this.’

‘I know,’ Markus said, smiling at him. ‘But I think it would have been better if I’d said it a long time ago, and so I’m saying it now.’

Connor bit his lower lip, uncomfortable, but also feeling softer than before, like the harder edges that he had when he saw other people had been sanded back. He rubbed at the back of his neck, adjusted his shirt.

‘Don’t you get bored?’

‘No,’ Markus said.

‘I don’t have any hobbies. I don’t talk about anything interesting.’

‘The second statement is untrue,’ Markus said, laughing. ‘You used to come in sometimes with things you’d learned in class, and we’d all talk about them for hours, remember? I know you think we spend all our time trying to research everything about everything, but our coding stops us from being the supercomputer intelligence we could be, all so we can be more human like you. You know that. So I spend a lot of my time learning from you, and thinking ‘is he enjoying himself?’ and inane things like…how I respond when Simon smiles at me. I like it that way. You don’t have to entertain me to be my friend, I’m not expecting a show. What do you think it should be like?’

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said, swallowing, shaking his head.

‘Listen, how about you see us more, and then you can decide if you like it or not, and see what it could be like? Simon likes vintage movies, and I like vintage music, together we have more than enough to annoy you with. Simon will teach you to cook.’
‘I miss the lab,’ Connor said softly. ‘I don’t think I’m going back, but I miss it.’

‘There’s always overflow work,’ Markus said. ‘I could pay you to freelance from home.’

‘But- I’m not even good enough to—’

‘Connor,’ Markus said, and then made a sound of frustration. Connor jolted when Markus grasped his wrist exactly the same way Hank did when he wanted to interface with him, when he wanted Connor to open up. Markus seemed to realise he was doing it, looked down at the connection between them, but he didn’t let go.

‘I can’t do that,’ Connor said.

‘I wanted to show you how I thought about you,’ Markus said, his lukewarm fingers squeezing Connor’s wrist gently. ‘That’s all. I wanted to… Because then you wouldn’t say these things. You’d have no reason to doubt me. But maybe you still would? Maybe you’d find a way.’

Connor was touched by the sentiment of it, and when Markus let go of his wrist, he missed the contact.

‘You saw a serial killer,’ Markus said after some time had passed. ‘You’re telling me everything was fine? Really? Don’t do that.’

Markus’ chiding was gentle. It always had been. Even in the lab, when Connor had messed up – though it only happened rarely – Markus’ disappointment was soft and intimidating. It made Connor feel like a child.

‘I can’t talk about it,’ Connor said.

It was the truest response he could find. He couldn’t talk about it. He couldn’t think about it. And when his mind started to veer in that direction, he thought about making someone angry, he pushed and hoped someone would push back hard enough that he wouldn’t be able to think anymore.

‘It’s been hard, hasn’t it?’ Markus said. The words leaned into him physically, and Connor stared ahead, pressing his lips together. Markus was daring him to tell the truth, and Connor eventually just sighed in frustration.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Thank you.’

As the minutes passed, Markus started talking about work and Connor was grateful. But something about the conversation had stirred him up, and he thought that when he got back and Markus and Simon left, he was going to skip lunch too.

Just to see what would happen next.

*

‘Yep,’ Hank said tightly. ‘Saw this coming from a mile off.’

Connor sat at the piano, the plate of two sandwiches feeling like a weight pushing into him from a distance. He’d ignored it for three hours. Hank was giving him a lot of leeway, but a frisson of fear let him know that part was over. Connor bit into his lower lip, hands resting on the keys, and Hank stared at him from the kitchen.
‘You know, if you wanted a heavier scene that you won’t enjoy, you can just fucking ask for one, instead of angling for a punishment.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ Connor said.

It wasn’t even true. He was lying outright. Hank’s nasty, disbelieving laugh only cemented that he knew it too.

‘Right, then,’ Hank said. ‘After today, we’re not doing this anymore.’

Connor looked up at him, fear larger than anything he’d felt throughout the day washing through him.

‘No more punishment system, no more domestic discipline lifestyle bullshit. But I’ll give you what you want today, Connor. Can’t say I never follow through, Jesus.’

He walked out of the kitchen, leaving the sandwiches there, and went down the corridor into his room. Connor turned on the piano stool, fingers on his knees now, curling down into his jeans. He could hear Hank moving around in his room, going into the closet where he kept all his tools and toys. He waited, goosebumps crawling along his arms and legs. He had no idea how to stop himself when he got like this. He couldn’t ask for a scene he wouldn’t enjoy when he didn’t even know exactly what he wanted.

The past and the present crowded around in his mind, loud and unavoidable, and Connor had found a way to avoid it.

‘Come here,’ Hank called, and Connor stood and pushed in the stool, walking down to the bedroom wondering what Hank would do.

He saw the blindfold, a mean ball gag, the headphones, the cuffs and grimaced.

‘Get on the bed,’ Hank said. ‘Up on all fours, just like before. Remember, you only get to say red, there’s no yellow in this. And if you say red, that just puts off the punishment for later. It’s not something you get to avoid. Red for today is three grunts behind the ball gag. Understand?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

Hank wasn’t even making an attempt to ease him into it, and Connor couldn’t tell if he was grateful or horrified.

‘Then get on the bed, for god’s sake. What are you waiting for?’

Connor glanced at him, but Hank’s expression had given way to the blankness that revealed nothing. He crawled onto the bed, still fully clothed, and waited on his hands and knees. He didn’t even want the sensory deprivation. Hank was supposed to get angry at him, yell at him, do something momentous and violent, and then…and then…

But he knew Hank would use sensory deprivation, didn’t he? They’d even tried it. Why had he forgotten?

Hank placed the cuffs around his wrists first, connecting them with a short chain not more than fifteen centimetres, keeping his wrists close and making his position awkward. Then cuffs around his ankles, another thicker, short chain, and Connor spread his knees automatically because it wouldn’t take much for him to fall and he wouldn’t be able to brace himself properly. He’d only be falling against the bed, but he didn’t want to mess up.
Then the earplugs, soft and squishy, one in each ear. The shaped blindfold followed, blocking every sliver of light, and Connor’s fingers clenched down.

Why did he think this was a good idea?

Hank had talked to him so much last time. He’d genuinely walked Connor through every step. Now he was silent, he worked quickly, and Connor felt shakier than he expected to.

The ball gag followed, and Connor had to open his mouth far too wide for the black rubber, the ball gag designed to be painful and impossible, instead of comfortable. Hank probably wouldn’t let him wear it for longer than thirty minutes, but Connor could feel the stretch at the corners of his mouth and jaw. He made a thick sound automatically as he shifted his head, trying to figure out the best way to breathe around it.

A hand scruffed painfully into his hair and held his head still, and Connor froze.

The headphones followed, covering his ears entirely. Connor could no longer hear the distant straining of his own breathing. He could only hear his own pulse throbbing in his own ears. He inhaled sharply, one arm trying to reach out to steady himself, the chain moving soundlessly, his cuffs stopping him, and a strong hand stopped him from falling.

He couldn’t see, he couldn’t hear, he couldn’t move or speak. It calmed some people right down to do scenes like this. He’d seen people go so deep into subspace just from a decent latex hood and some good asphyxiation play. But it splintered through Connor and he realised that this was much worse than last time.

A burst of static in the headphones, and then the blessed relief of Hank’s voice.

‘Stay still,’ Hank said. ‘You’re gonna listen to me now, and I think it’s gonna be nice for me to have a goddamn chat with you where you can’t backtalk me for once.’

A gentle, almost mocking pat to the back of his head, and Connor knew he coughed out a sound from the feeling of it, but he couldn’t hear it properly. Drool spilled from the corners of his mouth. He couldn’t swallow properly with such a large ball gag, and it was dangerous to let the spit fall back into his throat. Hank would have known that too.

‘It doesn’t hurt me when you don’t eat,’ Hank said quietly. His voice was so close in the headphones that it pushed past the ear plugs and sank deep into him. ‘That just hurts you. You could’ve said, ‘hey, Hank, I want to know what a real punishment will be like.’ But instead you went and broke some rules – which you’ve been trying to break for a while now – and I gotta say, I’m tired of it. After today, you can starve yourself as much as you like, and I’ll tell you to stop it, but you’re not going to get punished for it. I thought there’d be a chance you’d be good for this, because you’re so good at pretending to be obedient. But you’re like the worst kind of sub for a punishment set up, aren’t you?’

Connor blinked behind the blindfold, shoulders cringing. No, he didn’t want this part at all. The lecture. He didn’t think Hank would engage in that part of domestic discipline, but now that he was in the middle of it, he didn’t know why he hadn’t expected it.

He didn’t want to be the worst kind of anything.

‘On the one hand,’ Hank said, ‘I’m relieved you feel safe enough to start bitching back to me sometimes, in your own way. That’s healthier than trying to never feel anything at all, and it’s a good start for looking like someone who actually knows how to want and not want things.’
Connor flinched when he felt fingers on his jeans, undoing the fly. Hank pulled his soft cock out of his briefs, slid one slick hand around it and started jacking him. The movements were delicious, but Connor squeezed his eyes shut and resisted them, because he knew exactly what this was going to be. His chest heaved. He shook his head.

Hank didn’t stop.

‘But on the other hand, when it comes to this, we have a system set up of mutual respect. I look after you, and in exchange, you obey me. That’s our contract. So when you decide to deliberately break rules and engage in petty, shitty power plays, you not only break the contract, you disrespect me to make a point, and try and get what you want, because you’d rather see what happens than talk to me.’

Connor shook his head again, not liking how direct Hank’s voice was in his ears. Inescapable. He couldn’t stare past Hank, couldn’t pretend to be uninterested, and it was impossible to twist the words into something else when his body was so taken up with the stress of not being able to do anything.

Hank’s hand continued, the movements everything Connor loved, but all the more remorseless for it.

‘We set this up because we thought it would be useful for you,’ Hank said. ‘You shat all over it, and we won’t be doing it again after today.’

Connor moaned softly, a wave of pleasure yanking at him. It was too good, Hank was too good at this. The lubricant, his large hand, his nanofluid skin which was grabbier and a little rougher than his own. After that, a sound of despair, because Hank sounded disappointed and he hated it. The pleasure was hollow, eating a space inside of him that felt awful.

‘You angling to take control away from me specifically in the context of this, is so rude, and honestly, it’s fucking beneath you. Get annoyed at me, test me, do whatever you gotta, but dragging this into it when it’s one of the only decent things that works between us- What, Connor, you want to throw a grenade into both of our lives because you don’t know how to handle visiting your serial killer friend that you crush on?’

Connor’s eyes flew open, though he saw only blackness. He knew he made a sound of outrage, then ground his teeth together because Hank wasn’t stopping.

‘What?’ Hank said, hand twisting on his cock. ‘Are we all supposed to pretend that nothing happened, while you pull this shit? As far as I’m concerned, it’s really obvious why you’re doing this now.’

It was so easy to forget that he wasn’t supposed to move. He was used to being able to strain against bonds, he was used to them holding him, not tricking him. His wrists jerked, he shouted in surprise as he began to fall, and then Hank was there pulling him back by his shirt. Hank didn’t say anything, didn’t reassure him or criticise him, just held him in place until Connor figured out how to balance himself precariously.

The hand never stopped moving on his cock, and Connor’s head dipped low, hips jerking forwards automatically, the reflex impossible to fight.

‘That’s it,’ Hank said, and then he laughed. ‘You know what’s coming, don’t you?’

Connor whined, the sound vibrating through his throat, humming through his ears. He knew. Even as he felt the tell-tale pull in his lower back, the increasing ache in his balls that was heaviness, even
the clenching of his ass. He knew as his hips undulated forwards and Hank tightened his fingers and
twisted the palm of his hand over the head of his cock so perfectly that Connor was drowning in it.

His hands clenched into hard fists, his shoulders tensed, Hank said nothing more as he worked him
effortlessly towards release.

And there, on the precipice, pelvis locking up and the pleasure striking hard and knowing it was the
point of no return, Hank’s hand vanished and Connor came into empty air, no hand around him, the
pleasure falling away sharply because of it. Connor wasn’t sure what sounds he made, the hollow in
him growing larger, his limbs shaking because of orgasm, because of the strain of having to stay in a
specific position, because of the emptiness that followed a ruined orgasm.

There, in the space where Hank was supposed to say something, or tell him it was over, nothing
came. No voice. No static. Nothing except the thundering pulse in his ears and his teeth digging
down into rubber and his jaw hurting and his cock touched by cool air and nothing else.

His eyes teared up behind the blindfold.

The silence continued and Connor swung his head around like he could see or sense Hank, but he
had no idea where he was in the room, or if he even was in the room. He didn’t think Hank would
leave him. Hank was too responsible for that. But he also thought Hank would say something and
that the punishment would be over.

He swung his head the other way and nearly lost his balance. He righted himself nervously, a sound
of distress escaping, and no hands came to make sure he stayed in position.

Connor’s heart pounded harder and he felt himself edge past the point where he’d say yellow –
which he couldn’t say anyway – towards the point where he would safeword out completely.

He stayed in limbo, shaking uncontrollably, scared, and horribly, horribly aware that he’d brought
every second of this on himself. He’d been everything he hated in other subs – disobedient, bratty,
disrespectful, as though that was the foundation of his submission. It was never supposed to be. He
wanted to be good for Hank, not test him until something like this happened. He wanted to be on his
knees for him, and Hank’s hands in his hair, he wanted to see that look of satisfaction on Hank’s face
when he finally came.

Not this. He tried to swallow, throat straining, and then he coughed explosively when he couldn’t
manage it. Tipping his head forward helped, and soon he was breathing as normally as he could,
drooling copiously.

Hank didn’t say a thing.

Connor made a small, questioning sound, and then shook his head, annoyed at himself.

How much time had passed? A minute? Longer? Connor tried to think how long he’d been
restrained already.

Not long. It felt like a marathon, but the reality was all of it had probably lasted less than ten minutes.
Maybe fifteen.

Another questioning sound, he couldn’t stop himself. He wished Hank would just indicate he was
still there. His hands sweated down into the bed as he plucked up the bedspread nervously, the
motions almost catlike, one hand after the other, picking away and trying to stay calm. He was more
scared now than he’d been before when he’d been stupidly earning the punishment in the first place.
'Ten more minutes,’ Hank said through the headphones.

It would have helped to know how many minutes had already passed. Instead, Connor locked his muscles and knew he should probably try and relax and ride it out, but he couldn’t. When Hank’s voice was gone, he couldn’t hear anything properly, his eyes were wet and the blindfold was damp against his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. His chin was coated in his own spit, which had cooled and felt disgusting. He was still fully clothed, but his now limp cock was hanging out, making him feel unfairly exposed.

He knew he should feel relieved that punishments like this weren’t really on the table anymore, not unless Connor asked for them, but he knew he’d ruined something before giving it a chance to work. He knew that he’d done it because of the stress in his life, and he knew he’d done it to manipulate Hank into giving him something that he couldn’t give himself.

In that sense, he’d always been a selfish submissive, and Hank saw right through it. Even allowed it sometimes. But everyone had a line, and Connor knew from the beginning that he’d been trying to run over it to see what would happen.

He couldn’t rid himself of the shakiness in his chest and gut, the light-headedness, attempting sometimes to count down the seconds before the numbers echoing in his head distressed him more than the roar of his pulse in his ears did.

There, in the dark, he felt the shadows of sitting in that interrogation room pressing closer. An echo of his father, the tail end of shouted words creeping towards him. Even Gavin’s smirk, the cold amused cruelty of his words as he told Connor that safewords just meant he was on the right track. Connor absently tried to close his mouth, his teeth snapping into the huge ball keeping his jaw open, and his neck bowed as he tried to rub the ball gag out of his mouth on his arm. It was impossible.

He couldn’t escape the sense of mould strangling his old apartment, the appearance of bloodied underwear at the back of Zlatko’s property and the ground-shaking tremor that came with the knowledge that all wasn’t well. But he didn’t call anyone. He’d pressed forward. To do what? Be a hero? All he’d done was learn exactly how far he’d go – and how much further he would have been willing to go – to stop someone from killing him.

At the centre, he was bewildered by his own behaviour. He couldn’t gauge how angry Hank was with him. He didn’t know.

The shakiness crept closer and he told himself it had to be not that much longer, and then he told himself that maybe he had much longer to wait than he imagined and he had to be stronger than this. But he didn’t know if he had it in him. He just wanted Hank touching him, being close to him, and Hank couldn’t be, because Connor had gone out of his way to make it impossible.

He’d started feeling guilty about what he was doing before Hank had even said he was going to punish him. He had no words for how it had grown and sunk roots through him. It resembled a feeling he carried with him every day, but broader, brighter, harder to ignore. Something he’d felt every time he couldn’t get in front of his mother fast enough to redirect his father. Something that hung in him like a meat hook when she walked out and didn’t take him with her. She’d left, and he knew he’d done something to make it so that she’d leave him behind, instead of taking him with her.

His father never felt guilty, but Connor couldn’t stop.

He coughed, trying to swallow again, his breath hiccupping hard. He couldn’t get his breathing under control. His body was too locked up to move, and he shook his head to try and shift the ball gag, which had fast turned out to be the worst part of the whole thing. The headphones wouldn’t
move, the ball gag wouldn’t move, and he didn’t know what noises he was making. He had to get the ball gag off.

A hand at his flank, and Connor flinched hard.

‘Easy, easy,’ Hank said through the headphones, catching his other arm and steadying him where he would have fallen. ‘Ten minutes is up. The punishment is over.’

The relief was so profound that Connor had to pull energy he didn’t know he had left just to not collapse like his ropes had been cut. He could feel the way he trembled against Hank’s hands.

Fingers went first to the buckle at the back of the ball gag.

‘Don’t close your mouth,’ Hank said, his voice cautioning. ‘I know you want to, and you’ll get to, just give it a little while.’

Connor nodded, but even as Hank levered the ball gag free – having to stretch his jaw a little wider to manage it – he couldn’t stop his jaw reflexively snapping down against the rubber as it eased away. The ache was intense, but he just wanted the ball gone. Hank hissed, the sound coming through in the headphones.

Fingers slid into his mouth as soon as the ball gag fell away. Connor’s teeth rested carefully on Hank’s fingers, surprised that though his jaw ached and was sore, it wasn’t as agonising as he’d expected. It meant he hadn’t been in the gag for as long as he’d thought.

‘Don’t bite,’ Hank said, his voice softer than before. The fingers of his other hand prodded carefully at Connor’s jaw joints. ‘Okay, open slowly, then close again.’

Connor felt Hank fingers spread across his temple, his jaw, checking the movement. He must have been happy with it, because he slid his fingers out of Connor’s mouth and removed the chains at his wrists and ankles instead.

As soon as they were gone, Connor weakly lowered himself to the bed, leaving his wrists and ankles reachable so that Hank could undo the cuffs. Hank didn’t yell at him for moving, and Connor shuddered and hated that there was a wet patch beneath his chest – already seeping into his shirt – where he’d drooled. He was lying in his own come, the ruined orgasm leaving a nasty taste in the back of his mouth.

His head turned to the side.

‘Are you going to leave me?’

‘No,’ Hank said.

The cuffs came away one by one. Then the headphones. Hank didn’t even reprimand Connor for wiping his face all over the bed to get the spit off. It was stuck to his neck too. He was a mess.

‘I’m sorry, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Thank you.’

‘I don’t know what got into me.’

‘I do,’ Hank muttered. ‘Honestly I expected it a while ago, but I definitely expected it after Zlatko. I wanted to see what you’d do. The hard scene helped for a while, huh? But not long enough. We’re
gonna have to talk about what happens in the future. But not yet. Just be quiet for a few minutes, all right?'

Connor nodded. The earplugs were removed next. Then the blindfold. Hank’s fingers moved lightly and quickly over Connor’s eyes, checking to see if they were wet. They were, but Connor was no longer crying.

‘I told you,’ Hank said, no longer needing to speak through the headphones, ‘you wouldn’t like it.’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

A hand smoothed over his hair, and Connor reached out absently and grabbed Hank’s arm. He pulled it closer, holding onto it, knowing he must be pulling Hank across the bed. But Hank let him, and then he turned his forearm in Connor’s grip and brushed his fingers across his face, gentle but sure.

‘You’re just on the border of hypoglycaemic, by the way.’ Hank said.

‘You can tell that?’

‘Yeah. So a shower’s going to wait. I’m gonna get a cloth to clean you up a little, and then you’re going to eat something and we're going to talk, okay?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said.

He’d been hungry all day.

‘I wasn’t even…’ Connor grimaced.

‘What?’

‘I wasn’t even…not hungry,’ Connor said. The truth was, he was getting used to eating more often, and Hank didn’t push him to finish everything, so Connor could still eat lightly, which he preferred. And Hank seemed to care that there were certain foods – a lot of foods really – that he hated, and he avoided giving them to Connor. He gave a tired laugh, then curled into himself. ‘I don’t know why I’m like this.’

‘Really?’ Hank said. ‘You really don’t?’

Connor shivered pleasantly as Hank’s hand moved through his hair. ‘Sometimes I do.’

‘Thought so.’

Hank dumped all of the gear he’d used in the corner of the room on a chest, probably to clean it. Connor listened as he went into the bathroom, moved around in there, and returned. A hot washcloth for his face and neck, Hank ducking beneath the shirt to his collarbones. Then a lip balm for the corners of his mouth that had been stretched by the gag.

Hank pulled Connor into a sitting position easily and wiped at his stomach and cock with the cloth now that it was cooler, then tucked his penis away.

‘Ruined orgasms not a hard limit yet?’

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said.

‘Just a special occasion thing, huh?’
‘Very special occasions,’ Connor said tiredly.

Hank stayed close to him when they walked into the kitchen. Connor rubbed at his jaw joints, but they weren’t nearly as bad as he thought, especially given how much he hated the gag when it was on.

‘I thought it would hurt more,’ Connor said. ‘Afterwards. A gag like that normally hurts more.’

‘How long are you normally wearing them?’

Connor shrugged. ‘Half an hour. Usually longer. A few hours once.’

Hank made a faint grumbling noise to indicate what he thought of that. ‘That all lasted about twenty minutes from the time the ball gag was in. Before you get all riled thinking you can’t handle a punishment, let’s just use it as a learning opportunity. You were already doing your own head in before I started.’

Connor nodded, blinking at the normalcy of everything he’d left behind. The sandwiches on the counter didn’t feel good to look at though, he had to turn away. He was surprised when hands slid over his arms and then moved further until Hank was embracing him from behind, his chest against Connor’s back.

‘It’s done,’ Hank said. ‘A fresh start and all that. I can compost the sandwiches, and I’ve got some leftover mac and cheese from the other day.’

Connor nodded, risking leaning back. Hank was so strong against him, some shift in his plastisteel body that made him immoveable when he wanted to be. Connor’s eyes closed and he lifted his hands and placed them on Hank’s arms.

‘So that was the last time,’ Connor said.

‘The last time you get an official punishment for official rules,’ Hank said. ‘It might not be the last time I do that specifically, but I’d probably do it with a view towards desensitisation instead of sensitisation or something. Your stress levels were already high when I started. They’ve been high since Zlatko. Were you even aware of it?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘But it…just feels like being restless or bored. I didn’t realise at first what was going on, and by the time I did, I thought there was only one way to fix it.’

‘Maybe it’s not supposed to be fixed,’ Hank said.

Connor’s forehead furrowed. He didn’t like the sound of that at all.

‘Maybe you’re not supposed to get rid of things that feel uncomfortable as soon as you feel them, y’know? Christ, I’m no expert, but it seems like you got some shit you should feel pretty awful about sometimes, instead of running hard to escape it all the time. It’s why you hated the punishment so much. You ran right into having to feel it more. Didn’t like that, did you?’

‘No,’ Connor said.

Hank’s arms tightened around him. ‘But it didn’t kill you. It didn’t harm you. It just felt bad. That’s what humans do. They feel bad about shit sometimes. Especially, Connor, if they have as many monsters in their past as you do.’

There didn’t seem to be anything to say. Another time, he might feel like this almost-lecture was an
extension of the punishment, but it didn’t feel like that at all. Connor was tired, but he knew the panic and guilt and everything else a bit more for what it was. Hank was so good at offering clarity, and Connor didn’t want to throw that away. Especially now. Especially after he’d been so disrespectful.

‘I’ll think about it,’ Connor said.

‘Good. Good boy,’ Hank said, one hand dropping and rubbing Connor’s belly. It was startlingly intimate, and the shiver that followed warmed him. ‘In the meantime, I’ll watch what you eat, but it’s on you whether you actually do it or not. I was gonna say you need to learn how to communicate better, but you are learning, and we’re both figuring it out as we go.’

‘It turns out I can’t be punished after all,’ Connor said, laughing as Hank stepped away.

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘It’s easy as shit to punish you, now that I know what buttons to press. It’s just not good for right now. It might be good again in the future, might not be, but you know I can punish you however I want, whenever I want, just because I enjoy it, right?’

Hank winked at him, then he walked into the kitchen and began to clean up, heating a bowl of macaroni in the microwave. Connor watched him, a kernel of warmth in his chest. For something that had been so intense in the moment, Hank had almost effortlessly brought him out of the distress in one piece.

“How are you so good at what you do?” Connor said. ‘I’ve had- I’ve known Doms that have tried to keep me in a vulnerable space through aftercare, and it’s awful, but you don’t do that at all.’

Hank smiled as he wiped down the counter and pulled a spoon out of the drawer. It was almost private, but Connor felt like he shared in it when Hank looked up at him.

‘Sometimes I want to keep you in it,’ Hank said. ‘And sometimes I will. I know how to do that too. A few more ‘good boys’ in the right places, a bit more gentle touch, and we’d still be in that bedroom and maybe you’d be crying your heart out right now. But a little goes a long way with you. Connor, you’re still recovering from the scene we did the other day, even if you don’t feel like you are. You’ve been through the ringer. Even that twenty minutes back there made your heart go crazy. I wanted to make a point, and I made it.’

“Yes, you seem to have a talent for that, Hank.’

“I do, don’t I?” Hank said. ‘Well, you’d think. Hey, tell me something, have you always had problems eating?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said immediately. ‘I was told that I was a nightmare as a child. My father had no tolerance for it.’

‘I bet he didn’t,’ Hank said darkly, as the microwave beeped. ‘What is it about eating, though? Like, of all the things I can’t do, that’s the one I’d like to try the most.’

‘I find it boring,’ Connor said. The bowl of macaroni slid towards him and Connor caught it, the rim of the ceramic hot against his palms. He took the spoon and stood there, staring down at the food. Hank wasn’t even watching him, but Connor could feel the pressure of the moment, given this was what he’d been punished over.

But he was hungry, and the pressure didn’t feel as intense as it could have. Hank had somehow leached the whole situation of a lot of its power. Maybe he was right. Maybe the domestic discipline set up shouldn’t have been implemented. Hank hadn’t been sure about it from the moment it had been suggested.
Connor carved out a spoonful of macaroni and stared at it.

‘Also,’ Connor said, ‘it feels disgusting. I don’t know if you have any comparison, but the textures are…sometimes impossible. And the flavours. Macerating something into mush and then doing it repeatedly, multiple times a day… It makes it sound like I hate food, and I don’t, it’s just complicated.’

‘I get that. You know you can tell me more often if I’m making stuff that you don’t like.’

‘A man can’t live on cheeseburgers forever, Hank.’

Hank laughed softly, and Connor risked eating the macaroni. It wasn’t too soft, and the cheese taste was good, and it was easier to eat than he thought. He ate another spoonful, and then looked outside the bay window that led to the back garden. It was raining softly outside.

‘I don’t know if I can talk about the things you want me to talk about. Zlatko. My dad. That kind of thing.’

‘I like you talking,’ Hank said. ‘You don’t have to apologise to me. Anyone would find that hard. And I think I didn’t realise how much harder you could find that kind of thing. But it still plays on you, and you sometimes have to give it space. If you don’t know how, you can ask me to help you.’

‘A scene?’ Connor said.

‘Maybe a scene,’ Hank said. ‘Maybe I talk at you about it and you try and tune it out. Who knows? Jesus, I have no fucking idea half the time. But I don’t think you mind my company, so take advantage of it. All your shit doesn’t scare me, Connor. I got enough of my own.’

‘You know that works both ways,’ Connor said, after another mouthful. ‘You know I can hold a space with you too? With your things? You don’t have to pretend he never existed. We walk past his room every day.’

Hank stilled, his LED flashing red for less than a second. When he looked at Connor, there was something so sore on his face that it hurt to look at.

‘You’re a good boy, Connor,’ Hank said, folding the dishcloth and laying it precisely on the counter.

But that was all he said about it, and Connor knew that maybe they both wouldn’t ever be able to talk about the things that played on them the most. Perhaps it was just important that they talked sometimes, about anything at all. Connor was out of practice, his skills poorly formed and rusty, but he liked the way it felt.
A year ago today, I decided to post a chapter for a story that I sensed would be really long, and I was really intimidated, and thought about deleting the chapter (and subsequent chapters) for weeks after posting it. A year ago today I took a chance anyway, pretty sure I was writing a style of Hankcon that most people wouldn't be interested in, and I consider myself beyond fortunate that this story has folks like yourselves reading it, and folks like yourselves commenting and interacting with it. I don't normally celebrate 'anniversaries' for stories, but it'll be finished before the next one rolls round, and it's not often I get to post a year to the day of starting something. :) Thanks everyone.

Author’s note: This and the next chapter will be mildly restful, because shit will hit the fan from chapter 28 onwards and not stop for a while.

Connor stared at the lump of premade dough on the chopping board – already dusted with flour – and then the jar of pizza sauce that had a label on it, and had definitely been bought at a store. ‘I thought you handmade everything,’ Connor said, feeling stupid.

‘Oh no,’ Kara said, shaking her head. ‘There’s not enough time in the day for that, Connor! Besides, depending on the store, the dough and the sauce are really good now. It was a trick a few human parents taught me, though it took me a while to find the brands I liked the most. These ones are the easiest for you to get, or for Hank to order.’

Frustrated by everyone always cooking for him, and not knowing how to cook for himself, he’d messaged Kara a couple of days ago asking – with no small amount of desperation – if she would teach him how to cook something. Just one thing. Because it was weird, wasn’t it? Androids kept cooking for him and they couldn’t even eat?

‘I looked up some videos,’ Connor said. ‘But I’m very slow.’

‘Well, you’ve never learned to do it. Be more careful with your fingertips, though.’

Hank was outside with Sumo, gardening or maybe training. Hank had started working on Sumo’s obedience again, though he only did it for five to ten minutes at a time before he stopped. At first,
Connor assumed that Hank got bored with it, but Hank explained training multiple times for short periods, instead of once, in a really long session, was much more stimulating for Sumo, and engaged him more.

Sumo seemed to really love the training anyway, which made Connor happy.

‘You can even buy precooked bases,’ Kara said. ‘And then you just have to put sauce and toppings on. They try and make pizza really easy for people.’

‘Is it cooking, then?’

‘It’s something you can make yourself, and flavour the way you want, so I think so!’

‘Okay,’ Connor said. ‘That’s good. I want to give Hank a bit of a break, from…’

From me.

Kara hesitated. Then she went back to sprinkling red onion on one of the pizzas.

‘We like cooking for you,’ Kara said. ‘Even Hank. He liked cooking for Cole, too.’

‘Cole was a child.’

‘That’s not…’ Kara shook her head. ‘It’s not like that. We like doing it. Not just for children. And I can’t do it for Alice or Luther. It’s the hardest part – I think – of being an android. We have processors that let us feel all kinds of touch, we have smell processors, I have taste processors, we can hear and see, but we can’t eat, and we can’t drink anything except thirium.’

‘Wouldn’t cooking be really annoying, then? Wouldn’t it just be frustrating, watching me eat all the time?’

‘No,’ Kara said. ‘It’s not like that at all. I think that’s a very human thing, to resent something like that because someone else can do it. But- I mean, Connor, you have to look at how we were originally programmed. We were meant to be satisfied with having so much less than the humans who originally made us.’

‘That makes it worse, not better.’

‘Well, now androids run CyberLife, and it’s very different. But they kept the compersion of it, and I enjoy it. They trialled some androids who didn’t feel that anymore, and did a lot of surveys and back-end programming to see if it would work, but it was complicated. I don’t know much about the studies, but they’re publicly available and you can read them online. I can still be sad, still feel resentment, but my happiness for being able to give something nourishing to you overwhelms anything else I feel about it. But I’d be happy if you learned to cook too, because I can see it’s important to you.’

Connor sprinkled bits of cut, precooked chicken onto the pizza he was working on, and thought it over. He instinctively wanted to seek out Alice, but she was at school, and probably terrorising some of the other children with her macabre gundam stories.

‘I just don’t do anything for him,’ Connor said finally. ‘It’s all one-sided, and it’s unfair. Even this isn’t going to do much, but it might help a little.’

‘You help Hank too,’ Kara said, frowning at him.
‘I mean anyone could be something for Hank to focus on, anyone could do that. I don’t give him anything that anyone else couldn’t, and I give him a lot less than those people would.’

‘Where did this come from?’ Kara said, one hand pausing with grated cheese still in it. ‘Did Hank say something?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘But…it’s not like I don’t see the imbalance.’

Kara sighed, and then her demeanour changed as she directed Connor to put the pizzas in the oven and told him to set a timer on his phone for twelve minutes, though he knew she’d be doing the same automatically. After that, they used the rest of the dough to premake pizza bases that could be cooked and then frozen for later.

They rolled out dough together. It was companionable, and Connor realised he really enjoyed Kara’s company. It was easier to spend time with her when he was in Hank’s home, and she was helpful, and she’d been incredibly excited when he’d asked about learning to cook something.

‘If it was as easy as anyone being there for him to focus on, he never would have everted himself in the first place,’ Kara said. ‘We tried, Connor. We tried everything we could think of. We tried to give him space, we tried crowding him, we tried asking him for help and we tried asking how we could help. Nothing stopped him from shutting himself down, or the subsequent eversion. He didn’t just attempt suicide, he had basically completed it. No one is supposed to come back from eversion like that. You can’t tell me that it could have been anyone, because none of us knew how to help him.’

‘I wouldn’t have either.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Kara said. ‘Hank’s state of mind after he shut himself down was fixed in place, it was static. He processed nothing when he was everted. Nothing. Being restored back to where he was, that… His grief had been static and stagnant, he came back to it, all those intense emotions that made him want to die in the first place were still there when you brought him back. And instead, well I don’t really understand all the details, he stuck by you instead. And suddenly you were living together. I know it was hard on you, and that it wasn’t easy in the beginning, and I think Hank turned some of his grief into anger, and took it out on you, and I don’t like that. But…’

Kara turned and looked towards the bay windows, though she couldn’t see Hank.

‘I don’t think he wants to do that to himself anymore. He’s got purpose now. I know he still has a lot to mourn and deal with, but we would have been beside ourselves with hope or joy if we could have helped him get to this point, and he wouldn’t let us touch him. Not literally, I mean, but he just wouldn’t let anyone in.’

Connor stared down at the dough, his fingers had stopped moving. He remembered those early days, all too well. Remembered seeing the way Hank had been locked in the past, with whatever North had done to him, reliving Cole’s death all over again. And then he’d knocked Connor out and fled, and found him later in Zeta, and…

Nothing fell into place easily. None of it was neat or straightforward. Connor barely knew how to explain it himself. How Hank had gone from his prison warden and then captor, to something so different.

‘And I know for a fact that he likes talking to you. Anyway, it’s not a one way street, Connor. Not like you think it is. You don’t have to cook for yourself to balance it out. Hank gets a lot out of doing things for others, especially once he’s bonded to someone. But outside of that, I think he trusts you, and he enjoys your company. You could ask him, if you want, what he’s getting out of it?’
I'd rather die, thanks.

But he didn’t say that, because Cole had died, and Hank had basically attempted the android equivalent of suicide, and he didn’t think it was something he could joke about around Kara in the same way he could around Hank.

A few minutes later the pizzas were out of the oven, the new bases were in and cooking, and Connor was eating fresh pizza he’d made for himself for the first time in his life – or the closest he was ever going to get to it – and trying not to exclaim over how good it was. He suspected he did a poor job of hiding it, from the pleased look on Kara’s face.

‘I could always come over and help you again,’ Kara said. ‘It’s okay if you don’t get it right straight away. And I like doing it. It’s nicer if you have a wood-fired oven and all of those extras but we make do!’

Later still, Connor cleaned up the counter until it was spotless, and he and Kara sat in the lounge. She had her legs tucked up on the sofa and was playing with one of the cushions that Hank had strategically put around the place.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Kara said.

Connor nodded.

‘Why exactly is Hank in so much danger? I feel so stupid for asking, but I don’t really understand.’

Connor tried to think of the best way to phrase it. In the end, he imagined he was explaining it to a group of first years in the lab.

‘Thirium is the core component of red ice,’ Connor said, and Kara nodded. ‘For years, the sale of thirium has been heavily regulated and the drug boom that happened decades ago has quietened. When Hank went and everted himself, it caused a chemical imbalance in his thirium, and no one knows why. CyberLife took a lot of samples, and we’ve learned that some of those samples unfortunately were placed in the hands of an organisation called Veritas, and they used that blood to make a new, more ‘pure’ or refined form of red ice.’

‘Oh no,’ Kara said, and Connor grimaced, because that was a very appropriate response.

‘Veritas figured out how to replicate this change by forcefully everting many other androids, using the ‘Cult of Veritas’ as a cover. They convince androids that it’s a more pure state to live within, they everting them, and use their blood to manufacture this new drug that’s never been seen on the market before. Some, they drain completely dry of their changed thirium, kill, and then leave their corpses to be found by others. You haven’t heard much about it, because the police are involved in covering this up. But Hank is the original, and they want him, because they don’t want anyone else getting their hands on him.’

‘Because he’s still making...he’s still altering the chemical composition of his thirium, even now?’

‘Correct.’

‘But they don’t need him to make their drug.’

‘They need him in order to have a monopoly on the market,’ Connor said. ‘So far, no one else knows that everting androids changes the chemical composition of their thirium. We don’t even know how it happens. But if Veritas get their hands on Hank, and manage to keep their manufacturing process a secret, they’ll dominate a new market, and honestly, the red ice scene is due
a boom. We researched it at university.’

‘How does Hank feel about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said. He frowned. Wasn’t that the kind of thing he was supposed to ask Hank? Wasn’t he supposed to show signs that he cared more? He rubbed at his arm, thinking back to the punishment, Hank criticising him for being disrespectful. Things had turned somewhat back to normal afterwards, but Connor was still restless, and nothing was magically solved. Their lives were still in danger, and Connor wanted more to do with his time. He wanted to work the case. He wanted to finish it, instead of knowing it was open and being investigated by individuals who maybe didn’t want the same things he wanted.

‘He obviously doesn’t like the idea of it,’ Kara said, sighing. ‘Or he wouldn’t be here. He doesn’t leave anymore. He’s keeping himself safe, and you as well? Would they ever him again?’

‘Yes, I believe so,’ Connor said.

‘It means he cares about his life, at least at the moment,’ Kara said. ‘Because otherwise he’d go back to them, wouldn’t he?’

‘He wanted to, for a little while.’

Connor thought of the vodka – now in the fridge – and how if he had a few shots of that, he’d feel better. More mellow, nicer. Everything would be warmer and pleasant. Hank wouldn’t like it, but it wasn’t like they had any more strict rules about it.

But Hank wouldn’t like it.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Kara said, and Connor smiled at the question. She often asked permission before requesting information, and he liked it. He wondered if it was a remnant of the original programming used for models like her. ‘You don’t seem to like yourself very much. I’m sorry if that’s an awkward way of putting it, I’m not used to talking about this. But Hank’s brought it up a couple of times and…’

‘He has?’

‘Not in a bad way!’ she said quickly. ‘Just, he’s mentioned that you have a low self-esteem, and to be aware of it. Maybe you don’t think that’s true?’

Connor sighed. ‘I don’t think it’s untrue.’

‘Okay then. I feel like I’m making a fool of myself for asking, but…have you ever seen a therapist? Or considered talking to someone? I only ask because I’ve done it, and there’s nothing wrong with it, but I know it’s harder for men sometimes… It’s none of my business, I know, I just wanted to ask if you were okay.’

Connor opened his mouth to tell her that he was fine, but closed it again. He could lie to her in her own home about how he was feeling, that was polite. But here, he didn’t want to lie. He never expected to be talking with Kara about something like this, but it was obvious that she cared in a way that knotted up hard inside of him. It was hard not to think of his mother, sometimes, when he spent time with Kara. Even though she was so different, and she was here, and she hadn’t left.

‘I saw a psychiatrist a few times,’ Connor said. ‘I didn’t like it.’

‘That’s a shame,’ Kara said. ‘Can I ask why?’
‘It was after…’ Zlatko. ‘After a bad case. I was in the hospital, and my father organised it, because he didn’t want me to get PTSD. Apparently I was a high risk for the disorder? The psychiatrist prescribed a lot of medications that I didn’t want to take, but the nurses made me take them, or they put them directly into the IV. Later, I found out that the psychiatrist was reporting everything I said back to my father anyway.’

Kara didn’t look sad or sympathetic, she looked abruptly angry, and expression that he wasn’t used to seeing on her face. He tensed, but she stood up and walked a few steps away, and then turned and faced him.

‘That’s illegal,’ Kara said, and then shook her head. ‘That psychiatrist should never have done that, Connor.’

‘My father can do things like that all the time,’ Connor said. ‘It wasn’t the psychiatrist’s fault.’

‘Connor,’ Kara said, ‘it’s a breach of ethics and trust. It’s not normal, no matter what your father did to get that information. That’s a form of abuse. You know that’s abusive, don’t you?’

Connor stared at her, and she stared back, implacable. After a while, Connor knew he was supposed to respond, but he didn’t know what to say. He looked at the piano instead. Had he known it was illegal? He’d known it wasn’t really appropriate, but his father excelled at getting what he wanted. Connor hadn’t been surprised when he found out.

‘I don’t like your father,’ Kara said. ‘I mean no disrespect.’

Connor laughed. ‘You’re very polite compared to Hank.’

‘Well,’ Kara said, and then winced. ‘Besides, I’m not talking about a psychiatrist, not someone who can prescribe medications. I just mean someone to talk to, just a person, a counsellor or something. I know someone…’ Kara reached into her pocket and drew out a small wallet, and from it, slipped free a simple business card. ‘Her name’s Chloe. I think you’d like her.’

‘How do you know her?’ Connor said, taking the business card and turning it in his fingers.

‘She’s a friend of Luther’s,’ Kara said. ‘Maybe once all of this is over with, you can consider it?”

Connor tucked the business card into his pocket. He didn’t really have any intention of seeing a therapist, but he promised himself he’d think about it later, because Kara seemed to find all of it important.

‘I’m sorry, I know it’s strange for me to be talking about this,’ Kara said. ‘And I still can’t believe that psychiatrist shared details of something personal with your father! How long ago was that?’

‘A year or so. Probably a bit longer now.’

He thought of Zlatko in Wellspring Penitentiary, the sounds he’d made, the escalation of his lust from something cerebral, to the visceral reality of his arousal permeating that entire room. It felt like it had sunk into Connor’s very being. He took a slow, silent breath, but Kara’s eyes narrowed, and he wondered if she was the kind of android who could pick up on someone’s stress levels.

She probably could.

‘I’m going to go see Hank before I leave, I need to go pick up Alice. But I could come over again with a new recipe? You’ll have to take a photo if you make any pizzas and send it to me! I’d love that.’
‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ Kara said, grabbing one of Connor’s hands and squeezing it. ‘I’ll see you soon, okay?’

‘Yes, okay.’

He watched as Kara walked towards the back door, then settled back into the sofa. His hand strayed to the business card in his pocket. He had a suspicion Kara had an ulterior motive when she’d come over to help him cook something, but he didn’t mind, she was much friendlier about it than other people had been in the past.

The vodka in the fridge called to him and he laced his fingers together and told himself to wait.

*

He managed to wait until about seven, after he’d eaten a spaghetti Bolognese that had needed salt, but otherwise tasted fine. If Hank had a recipe to follow, he didn’t want any help and was controlling enough of his kitchen that he kicked Connor out of it. But once the dishes were done and Hank was watching television, Connor grabbed a bottle of vodka from out of the fridge and walked towards his bedroom.

‘Hey,’ Hank said. ‘Where’re you going with that?’

‘My room.’

‘Nope,’ Hank said. ‘You drink out here. In fact…’ The sound of Hank patting the leather couch, the seat right next to him, came. ‘You drink next to me. Especially straight vodka from the fucking bottle.’

Connor hesitated. His fingers tightened on the neck, and then he rolled his eyes and walked back to the couch and sat on it, unscrewing the lid and ignoring the way Hank looked at him when he took a long sip from the bottle.

‘Why straight vodka?’ Hank said.

‘Beer doesn’t work fast enough, and I don’t like the taste of it,’ Connor said, as he stared at the TV. ‘My father drank a lot of the other spirits, so I don’t…like them as much.’

‘Uh huh. And why now? Why do you want to do this today?’

‘I don’t know,’ Connor said. He tipped the bottle again, and pressed his lips together when Hank grabbed the base of it with his hand and kept it in place, right where Connor couldn’t get a proper drink.

‘Try harder, boy.’

Connor looked at him sidelong, and Hank was watching him with that singular attention that was like leaning into a knife. Connor loosened his hand on the neck of the bottle and Hank drew it away, resting it on his lap. But he didn’t reach for the cap, and he didn’t put it back in the fridge. Connor stared at it, then looked at Hank again.

‘I’m bored,’ Connor said.

‘You’ve been bored before, and not gone straight for the vodka.’

‘I didn’t go straight for it, I waited.’
‘Yeah? How long?’

Connor counted back and then shrugged. ‘About five hours.’

‘So while Kara was here. She say anything to you?’

He couldn’t remember exactly when he’d wanted to drink. It wasn’t when she’d mentioned the therapist, because he’d already been thinking about it. After a while he realised it had been around the time they’d talked briefly about the time Hank had been actively suicidal. Connor stared back at the bottle. He had no idea why Hank liked living with him, or what he did that made Hank not run to Veritas to get himself ejected again. If he knew, he’d do more of it so Hank would stay.

‘Can I have some more, please?’

Hank seemed to be really considering it, and after a while, he handed Connor the bottle again. But he kept his hand on it, and he didn’t let Connor have as much as he wanted. Barely a sip, not even enough to fill a shot glass. It still warmed his throat, and Connor wondered what hoop he’d have to jump through to have more.

Maybe he should mind, the way Hank took control of these things, but in a strange way it made Connor feel noticed. He liked that, when it didn’t make him uncomfortable.

‘Have you been thinking about Zlatko much?’ Hank said.

‘Yes,’ Connor said. There was no point in lying.

‘Do you mostly think about like, when you first met him? Or going to Wellspring?’

‘Wellspring,’ Connor said, and was surprised when Hank handed the bottle of vodka over again. His cheeks coloured when he realised what the game was, and he stared at Hank to indicate that he wasn’t very impressed. But Hank had that crooked smile, somewhat goading, and Connor had another of those tiny sips and shook his head at the fact that he was playing along. There was another bottle. He could just go grab it and go down to his room.

Not that he liked the chances of Hank letting him.

‘I didn’t like it,’ Hank said. ‘Should’ve seen me when they let it go over thirty minutes, goddamn. You could tell he was getting so much out of it. He’ll try and organise to meet with you again, and Christ, that’s not happening.’

‘But if it’s for the case…’

‘He’s friendly enough with the guards that one day they won’t be fast enough on the uptake. He’s got a decent amount for the commissary, he buys the guards little gifts, you know? One day, there’ll be a change of guard while you’re doing an interview. One day, Connor, he’ll find a way to get at you properly. You know that, don’t you? You can’t see him again. Not for any reason. He’s obsessed with you, because you were the one that got away, and got him caught.’

‘He doesn’t seem mad about it.’

‘I don’t think he’s that mad about it,’ Hank said. ‘He probably spends all his time wanking to the idea of fucking you and then killing you, or vice versa.’

Connor nodded. That had occurred to him. He didn’t like to think about that either, but he’d done enough criminology to know how Zlatko’s obsession would manifest. Friendly and warm, until the
opportunity was there for it to be a ruthless cruelty instead. Connor had experienced it before. He knew what would have happened if his father and the rest of the police had arrived ten minutes later, back when he was a lone survivor in Zlatko’s terrifying house.

‘I think I’m a little obsessed with him as well,’ Connor said. ‘Not in the same way, but in some way.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said.

‘I try not to think about it much.’

‘Does he scare you?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Of course he does.’

‘More than your Dad?’

‘No,’ Connor said. He reached for the vodka bottle on his own then, and Hank let go of it easily. Connor dared to take two sips, and then rested the bottle of vodka in his lap.

‘Why is that?’

Connor’s thoughts were loosening, and subsequently, it was easier to answer. This was something he’d thought of before, some of the words and sentences were already there.

‘He wants to kill me too,’ Connor said, turning the bottle in his lap. ‘I think if he knew of a way to do it, in his position, and do it safely, he would have done it a long time ago. He didn’t want us, though he was better hiding it when she was still around.’

‘Your mom,’ Hank said softly.

‘Yes. After, it was just the two of us in that house. I did everything to make sure he didn’t have to deal with me. I cleaned, whatever I could do. Well, I’m not good at cooking, but I ate, like microwave meals or sandwiches, made sure there was food… But I had to ask him for money sometimes, or ask him to sign something for school. It was better if I tried to help with a case first.’

‘How old were you when you started doing that?’

‘Around thirteen,’ Connor said, thinking back. ‘I’m not stupid, Hank. The difference between Zlatko and my father is easy to determine. Zlatko would kill me, because he has a compulsion to kill people and it’s part of his sexual drive. But he likes me as a person. I don’t know why, but he does. My father would kill me because he hates me, and wishes I didn’t exist. The only reason he hasn’t is that he’s aware of the law, and of scandals. The only reason. That scares me more. I see it in his eyes sometimes.’

Hank was silent, and Connor felt the vodka warm in his chest, stared at the television. It didn’t hurt him to talk about this. It was a fact of life he’d been aware of since he’d been a child. He didn’t know what it meant, when he was only seven or eight, to see the deadness in his father’s expression and see the way he raised his fist, only for his father to check himself because he was aware he needed to hold himself back from murder, and it had nothing to do with Connor himself. It was almost like Connor could see the moment he remembered the law existed, and that murdering people for walking through the house too loudly was wrong.

Even if he knew his father didn’t agree.

‘I think he used to hope that I’d kill myself,’ Connor said.
That one was harder to say, and from the way Hank shifted abruptly, perhaps it was harder to hear.

‘What?’ Hank said.

‘Just some things he used to say,’ Connor said, shaking his head. ‘It would be the easiest way for him to get what he wanted. I’ve never told him about…the thoughts I’ve had around depression or anything like that. It would be stupid. But he knows. After the Zlatko case, he became a bit more on the nose about it. Sometimes it’s only one comment a year, and it’s oblique, and I wonder if I’m reading too much into it.’

‘I fucking doubt it.’

‘Yes, me too,’ Connor said. ‘He’s very good at his job, but he should never have been a family man.’

‘God,’ Hank said. ‘He told me as well, that you were depressed. Back when I was…not myself. The way he talked about you, like a dog he couldn’t justify taking out back and shooting just yet. Christ, and I didn’t much care, except that I have sensors that make me look forward to a job and I didn’t look forward to that one.’

‘In a perfect world, by his imagining, I think I’m still back in that apartment, unable to bother him except when he wants something from me, and you’re there when he has need of you for Veritas.’

‘Yeah, probably.’

Connor nodded and sighed, then placed the vodka back on the coffee table. Hank had turned the volume down, and Connor stared at the sportspeople running around the screen. He’d never much cared for sports, but Hank enjoyed it.

When Connor leaned back, Hank slung an easy arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer.

‘Hank,’ Connor said, uneasily. ‘Can I ask you a personal question?’

‘Sure,’ Hank said.

‘Why…do you like having me around?’ He felt like he was choking on the words, wished abruptly that he was far drunker for this. He couldn’t remember ever asking the question in his life, because he just assumed people didn’t like him. But Kara had been clear that there was something about Connor making Hank stick around, and Connor didn’t see how it could be true. Except that they were in some kind of relationship. Except that Hank went out of his way to spend time with him.

Hank tensed, his arm shifted like he wanted to lift it, and Connor moved to make it easier, but instead Hank lowered it again. He’d made Hank uncomfortable. Maybe Hank didn’t like having him around at all. Maybe he was just a substitute Cole.

‘Aw shit,’ Hank said.

‘It’s a shame you can’t drink, Hank.’

‘Shut up,’ Hank said, and then he laughed low. ‘But it is a damn shame.’

Connor wanted to say it was okay, Hank didn’t need to say anything. Maybe Hank couldn’t think of anything. Maybe he wasn’t the kind of person who could own up to needing a substitute for his son. Connor forced his breathing to be calm, but Hank’s hand tightened on his upper arm anyway, his thumb stroking back and forth.
'Ah,' Hank said, and then sighed. ‘It’s a few things. You’re bitchy, and I sure don’t mind some attitude, but it’s wrapped in this nice little package where you want to be obedient a lot of the time. Maybe that’s shit of me, but I am what I am, and I like that. I couldn’t live with someone who wanted to take over half the house, or try and change me as a person, or whatever. Maybe that’s unfair, but that’s how it is. I was never looking for relationships at all, honestly. They seemed like a waste of time.’

Connor nodded, and then bit the inside of his lip to stop himself from smiling. Being called bitchy as a positive trait wasn’t something he could ever recall happening at any point in his life, and he didn’t mind it.

‘Kara can be bitchy too,’ Connor said, daring to say it.

‘Sure, but I don’t want to fuck Kara,’ Hank said, scrubbing his knuckles over the top of Connor’s head, until Connor had to duck away. ‘Besides, she would take over the house. God, I don’t even want to imagine it.’

‘You’ve never cared about relationships?’

‘Fucking is easy to get,’ Hank said. ‘Commitment and my job – my old job anyway – didn’t pair well. And I end up committing to the people I protect anyway.’

‘Then there’s a realistic possibility that this is only activating your instincts to protect a client,’ Connor said, swallowing. ‘Don’t you think so?’

Hank was silent for a long time, and Connor felt silly, pressing closer to him, when he felt like Hank was going to disappear. Maybe he wouldn’t even try and evert himself again, maybe he’d just kick Connor out.

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘It’s not like that.’

‘But you can’t deny-’

‘You’re shit out of luck, kid, because I’m not good at the level of sentiment required to tell you just how clever and addictive you are. So you’re just gonna have to take my word for it. And if you can’t do that, you’re just gonna have to wait this out. I know that this comes from some deeper stuff with you, it’s good you’re asking about it, but I can’t give you what you want. I can’t go up against some of the shit you’ve got going on in your head. All I have is words and time, and sometimes, that doesn’t count for much.’

*Clever and addictive.* Connor felt ashamed of himself, having fished for words like that, but he felt the way he’d mentally seized the words and pinned them to some place in his mind where he could see them again one day.

‘But you don’t want to…evert yourself anymore?’

‘Nah,’ Hank said. ‘I mean I think about it sometimes, but in a really idle way. Feels more distant than it used to.’

‘And that’s…because of the case?’

‘Nope.’

‘Because of me?’
'Yeah, Connor,’ Hank said, kissing the top of his head. ‘Because of you.’

Connor wished he understood it more. He wished he could get his fingers inside of Hank’s head and see exactly why he might like Connor, even if it was just so he could disprove it all and remind Hank that he’d make a mess of things somehow. Hank was right, words and time – and the actions that Hank did daily that showed his care – didn’t always measure up against Connor’s bone deep knowledge that Hank would leave him one day.

Even Connor knew where that came from. He sighed, annoyed at himself, the past, and pressed his face into Hank’s shoulder. It was frustrating knowing where some of his brokenness came from, when the understanding of it didn’t fix it at all.

But maybe it was like Hank said, sometimes it wasn’t about fixing things. Sometimes it was about feeling something uncomfortable, or unpleasant, because something bad had happened.

‘Hank?’

‘Mm?’

‘Will you…?’ The words dried up in Connor’s throat, and he cleared it before speaking again. ‘Would you play piano and sing for me?’

Connor wondered if he’d asked for something far too personal, because he could feel the way Hank stilled. Even the fans and compressors where his lungs should be stopped moving. Maybe it was too soon, too personal. Connor had never heard Hank sing for anyone, at all, even for himself. Maybe he just didn’t do that, after Cole. Maybe he couldn’t anymore, and the question was too personal, and he shouldn’t have-

‘You want me to sing for you?’ Hank said.

‘Luther said your voice was amazing,’ Connor said. ‘Everyone else has heard it except for me.’

Hank laughed softly. ‘That’s underhanded, Connor. You wanna sit next to me while I play?’

Connor nodded, stopped himself from asking if it would interrupt his playing, or if it would hinder, or be unhelpful. He stood when Hank stood, and sat on his left-hand side on the stool, and Hank lifted the fallboard.

Hank’s fingers moved across the piano so easily it was like he was hardly pressing the keys, when Connor knew just how hard those keys needed to be pressed to make a sound. There was something casual about it, when Hank played. It reminded Connor of how Hank reached out and touched him, or how he’d handle Sumo like he had the utmost confidence that Sumo wanted to be touched by him and would settle for anything Hank did. Connor watched Hank sit next to Sumo, take up his paws and clip his nails, and Sumo had just sat there and let it happen.

‘What do you want me to sing?’

Connor didn’t know. He ducked his head, shrugged. ‘Whatever you feel like.’

‘Yeah, gotcha,’ Hank said.

He took two deep breaths, his chest clicking mechanically, and then his fingers danced across the keys and gave light to the life that was in him, despite the plastic and metal and nanite components that made him. A tinkling softness to the piano, and then Hank began to sing in an earthy, gravelly tone, and Connor stared at the side of Hank’s face, before forcing himself to look at the keys.
Hank’s voice eased into some of the notes, stumbled into others, and Connor’s skin tingled when he realised that Luther was right. Hank had figured out the imperfections of it, the way jazz could become exceptional when the imperfections of what it was to be human – or android – married skill and feeling.

Because there was so much feeling in the lyrics, that Connor’s eyes closed, and he just listened.

‘And still my heart has wings,  
these foolish things remind me of you.  
A tinkling piano in the next apartment,  
those stumblin’ words, that told you what my heart meant.’

Connor wondered if Hank was thinking of Cole, but it didn’t matter, because this was a side to Hank that Connor had never seen before. The song stretched on for long minutes, but it still didn’t feel like it had lasted nearly long enough when Hank’s fingers eased to a stop on the piano.

‘Oh,’ Connor said. ‘You’re very good.’

‘I’m borrowing from the greats,’ Hank said, laughing. ‘It’s easy to sound good, when you have the bones of Oscar Peterson and Ella Fitzgerald guiding you. You want me to sing some more? It’s been so long, forgot…how fun it could be.’

‘Please?’ Connor said. He risked bumping his arm into Hank’s, and Hank leaned back into him briefly.

‘Here, I used to sing this one as a lullaby,’ Hank said.

For Cole, Connor thought. But Hank didn’t say so, and started to play once more.

This song had a bit more of a rhythm to it, the piano was gently playful, but the lyrics were a blunt appeal. Connor could imagine with startling clarity, Hank sitting in Cole’s room and singing it in rough, soft desperation.

‘The rain,  
will bring the violets of May.  
Tears are in vain so, honey, please, don’t be that way.  
As long as we see it through,  
you’ll have me,  
I’ll have you.’

Connor felt his eyes starting to burn, and though he blinked it back easily, he was surprised. And as the song continued, Connor realised he had no choice in the matter, he had to love Hank. He just… loved him. He never had the sense of needing to lean into it, or reach towards it, or grow it from something else.

It was there, clear and bright.

It was locked up inside of him, it had been there for some time, and now he had a word for it. He felt it like a shove to the chest.

‘Oh,’ he breathed.

He knew Hank was looking at him, because he could feel his voice even closer, and then Hank looked back at the keys and continued to sing. Connor pressed the flat of his hand to his chest and
didn’t understand it, could only experience the truth of it.

When the song finished, Hank sailed into the next song with no prompting. This one was far more upbeat, and Connor smiled until he realised what the punchline of every verse was.

‘Comes a headache, you can lose it in a day, 
comes a toothache, see your dentist right away, 
comes love, nothing can be done.'

Comes a heat wave, you can hurry to the shore, 
comes the summer, you can hide behind the door. 
Comes love, nothing can be done.’

Connor stared at him, and Hank’s head turned towards him, then those blue eyes met his and Hank finished out the song easily.

‘You’re ah, really good,’ Connor managed to say.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, ‘I have my moments.’

He slid his hand around the back of Connor’s head and drew him forward and then kissed him, his mouth warmer than usual from singing. Connor’s eyes fluttered shut, he felt weak, shot through with something he was too scared to voice aloud. Hank’s tongue was gentle over his, and when he drew back, he kept his hand in Connor’s hair.

‘I probably say things better in song, than I ever have otherwise,’ Hank said.

Connor nodded, but had no idea what to say. Was that confirmation? Did Hank intend that last song for Connor? Was it something else? Maybe it was just a song.

‘Look at you,’ Hank said, laughing softly and leaning in again. ‘If you could see the look on your face.’

Hank kissed him again, and Connor felt struck dumb. But he didn’t want to move from the stool, he didn’t want to leave this moment, and he gripped Hank’s thigh with his hand, a possessive need to keep him close woven through him. But Hank wasn’t interested in leaving, and as they kissed, Connor sighed into it and thought that he could try and be patient, try and learn that not everyone would abandon him. He could give it time, because it felt worth waiting for.

Chapter End Notes

**Author’s note:** Links to the three songs that Hank sings (though he’s using a lower register) – These Foolish Things, Don’t Be That Way, Comes Love. (They’ve all been added to the Eversion playlist).
Okay! Firstly, for people worrying that this is the chapter where shit hits the fan, it's not. That's the next chapter. Also I'm sorry for the huge delay, I'm working really hard to get another story on my other account finished, because then I can devote way more time to this, so I'm hoping lag now means a faster delivery of the chapters after the other story is finished - and trust me, after chapter 28, you're not going to be wanting to wait a month between each chapter, and nor will I.

Secondly, this chapter includes: Face slapping (mild), puppyplay, subspace, knotting, paddling, spanking, collar/leash, sensory deprivation (mild), Hank-typical BDSM basically, lol.

Enjoy!

Two days later, Connor made pizza for himself, took a photo and sent it to Kara, who immediately responded with multiple celebration-style gifs that made him smile. She sent some different recipes to him, asking him what he wanted to try next, and he decided which were tolerable based on the foods in them. Having a choice was nice.

He’d entered into a new space with Hank. Since Hank had sung for him, Connor found it easier to see the moments when Hank was relaxed or warm. It wasn’t often in the things he said, because Hank was taciturn and didn’t like talking for the sake of talking. What had looked like Hank doing far too much for Connor before, now looked like deliberate acts to make Connor comfortable or content.

Hank had a habit of unscrewing the tops of drink bottles, breaking the seal so that Connor didn’t have to, even though it was easy for Connor to do. He always tried to include foods that Connor liked to eat now that he knew what they were. Sometimes Connor would be browsing his phone, look up, and see a glass of juice in front of him. Sometimes, Hank asked him for facts about the weather, about the physics of weather, and a couple were challenging enough that Connor had to look up the answers.

Thankfully, alongside that, Hank was still essentially Hank, which meant that once or twice a day he ordered Connor to his knees and choked him with his cock, bruising the back of his throat, sometimes holding Connor’s head still for long periods and suffocating him. He hadn’t let Connor come since the ruined orgasm he’d given him during the punishment, but he went out of his way at times to grab Connor by the arm, pull him close, shove his hand into Connor’s pants and work him until he was hard before sending him away again.

It was sweet torture. Connor had barely allowed himself to dream of the kind of life where he might have something like this. He’d always envisaged himself going to clubs for the rest of his life, returning home alone or to someone like Gavin.

On a Friday evening, Connor lay with his head in Hank’s lap as Hank watched tennis. He’d been
pulled into place, the side of his face against jeans and Hank’s thigh, a cushion of polymer and thirium and plastisteel that was cool at first, but warmed up with Connor’s own body heat. Hank fussed with his hair, traced the skin covering the cartilage of his ear until Connor shivered and twitched and squirmed.

He felt the shadow of Veritas hanging over them, wondered how long they’d be forced to live like this, hiding away from the world. His whole life was on hold. He knew Hank wanted to leave the house more than he could, and Connor wanted that for him. They shared a plateau, hemmed in by Fowler and the law on one side, and Hank being the alpha Evert and a wanted man on the other.

‘You really never swear, outside of scenes and shit, huh?’ Hank said, as he dragged permanently neat fingernails down the back of Connor’s neck.

Connor squirmed again, sensitised, sometimes liking the touches, sometimes finding them ticklish, or itchy.

‘No, Hank,’ Connor said.

‘Don’t ever just say ‘god fucking damn it’ because something’s really pissing you off?’

‘No, Hank.’

‘You could tell me to fuck off sometimes, y’know. You could be like ‘fuck off, Hank.’”

‘I could.’

Hank hummed. He spiralled a tracery of touch across the side of Connor’s face, and Connor held his breath, gritting his teeth. It wasn’t at all comforting, and he was sure Hank knew it. After a minute of it, Hank went back to tousling Connor’s hair in a way he liked.

‘Tell me to fuck off,’ Hank said.

‘Is that an order, Sir?’ Connor said, politely. He’d do just about anything if it was an order.

‘Nope. Just a request. This isn’t some scene, boy.’

‘Then no, thank you, Sir.’

‘Go on,’ Hank coaxed, leaning closer, forgetting about the tennis. ‘Tell me to fuck off. Or…say that Fowler is a shithead. Go on. It’ll feel good.’

‘I feel no particular urge to swear at this moment,’ Connor said.

‘Brat,’ Hank muttered. ‘Come on, don’t you ever stub your toe and just let off a rip of swearwords? I bet you do.’

‘No, Hank,’ Connor said, smirking.

He was proud of it now, in a bizarre way. When he’d been a teenager, even in highschool, he’d never felt a particular urge to swear. Later, it was fascinating to him to study and volunteer in law enforcement around people who swore all the time. It became a matter of principle.

In scenes, it was different. The act of fucking, of being fucked, it meant something else. He could ask for that. He could beg for it. He had a whore’s mouth whenever anyone needed it from him, because he knew that certain Doms loved it. The first time Gavin realised Connor swore in the bedroom, he was dizzy with delight, as though he was the first one to ever corrupt him.
Connor never bothered explaining that there were rules. He swore during scenes. He swore when he was submitting or when he was being topped.

The only people who knew that were the people who fucked or played with him in scenes.

But he knew Hank wanted him to swear the rest of the time too.

‘I’ll let you have cheeseburgers for breakfast if you tell me that sometimes I’m a bit of a dickhead,’ Hank said.

‘Sometimes you can be frustrating, yes,’ Connor said evenly.

‘Nah.’ The syllable drawled, so close that Connor felt it slinking into his ear. He was getting hard already. For Hank, this was basically flirting. Connor was almost always ready to be fucked, and Hank didn’t do it that often. He used Connor for his mouth, everything else was a privilege. ‘You know that’s not what I’m asking for. It doesn’t have to be me. Imagine someone who cheesed you off, and what you’d really like to say to them.’

‘I think I’d walk away, instead.’

‘Imagine a time you’ve been real frustrated, like I don’t know, when I took you hostage basically. You can say the word ‘fuck’ when you’re frustrated or upset. Go on.’

Hank’s other hand slid around Connor’s neck and held him still. The fingers that had been ruffling his hair now came back and skittered across his cheek, his forehead, across his ear until Connor’s twitch was violent. None of the light touches were pleasant anymore. He hissed when Hank blew air over his skin. It would have looked sweet, but Hank knew what he was doing.

He also knew that if he kept doing it, it would get worse. Connor knew Hank felt the tightened jaw, the tense muscles, and he traced his index finger across the curve of Connor’s cheek over and over again, until it felt numb and fuzzy and almost painful. Connor jerked to get away and the grip at his shoulder and neck tightened, holding him in place.

He lost track of how long Hank tormented him. Long enough that some of his exhales were laboured, he wanted to rub his face against something rough to get rid of the crawling, creeping sensations. Even Hank’s low laughter as it mocked him for not swearing in frustration, aggravation, felt like it prickled against his skin, picking its way into his pores.

Eventually Hank stopped, helping him as he shoved fingers into Connor’s hair and pulled hard and firm, balancing out some of the sensitivity. It wasn’t enough though. As soon as he let go, Connor shifted and rubbed his cheek and ear vigorously against Hank’s jeans.

‘Stubborn little shit,’ Hank said.

Connor nodded, then sank back, feeling tired. He’d been tense trying to endure it. Hank had done hardly anything at all, but he knew how Connor could respond to light touch if he got too much of it.

‘Naw, did I wear you out?’ Hank said, delighted. ‘What a good time for you to get on your knees for me. Go on.’

He shoved Connor off the couch, and Connor went, sandwiching himself between Hank’s legs, grateful for the roughness of what followed.

*
The nightmare that night was so violent that Hank was awake and telling him it was okay and to calm down well before Connor was shaken loose. He gasped over and over again, chest aching, and then sat upright as soon as he was conscious enough to do it.

‘Hey, hey,’ Hank was saying in that hushed, careful voice he used when Connor woke up like this.

Connor fell towards him automatically, still breathing through the panic. He couldn’t remember most of it. His mother had been there. Something about his dad. He felt so little and useless. As he looked up, the yellow of Hank’s LED was comforting, like a nightlight.

‘Was it Zlatko?’ Hank said.

‘No,’ Connor said, surprised at his own voice. He sounded like a grown up, but he didn’t feel like one. ‘Parents. Old stuff.’

Hank rubbed at Connor’s arms and back until the worst of the nightmare unhooked and let go, drifting down to where he didn’t have to think about it anymore. He could focus instead on the scent of Hank, which was the washing powder he used for his clothes, and the plastic-type warmth behind that, and something else that might have been a hint of aftershave except Connor had never seen him use it.

‘What was she like? Your mum?’

‘Nice,’ Connor said. He thought the word didn’t really convey much and tried to think of something else to add to it. ‘Timid. Soft.’

‘She should’ve taken you with her.’

‘I think she met someone,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t know.’

At some point, it had gotten easier to talk to Hank, but even so, the words scored him as they came out of his mouth. It was easier to speak, but the sentences still hurt.

‘An android, you said once.’

‘Correct,’ Connor said. ‘But I don’t know. I never met them, so maybe she lied. Or maybe he lied. I respect that she left him.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank muttered. Then: ‘Nah, I don’t, actually. I mean, she had to leave, sure, but she should’ve taken you with her. Connor, your abandonment issues stretch from here to the goddamn moon. Who does that to a kid? I was… I mean I wasn’t even a parent, I was a bodyguard, and even I knew you don’t leave a kid behind, no matter how prepared you feel. And she had practice. She wasn’t like— She was your mother.’

Connor said nothing, then defaulted to the deadpan wryness that protected him in moments like this. ‘I’d contend that nearly everyone has abandonment issues of some kind, Hank.’

‘Shut up, you.’

He nearly smiled, but was still disconcerted by Hank’s anger. And it was anger, making him sound rougher and meaner, like he’d been after they’d reverted him, like that first night in Hank’s home.

‘Maybe I reminded her of him,’ Connor said. ‘I was always trying to make him happy. Maybe she thought I’d be happier with him.’
‘You’ll tell yourself any damn thing to make it seem okay, won’t you?’

It bruised him to hear it put like that, and Connor pushed away and sat on the bed, looking at the shape of Hank in the dark, the glow of his face and the shadows created by the LED.

‘Ah, Jesus,’ Hank muttered. ‘Come here. Come on, I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.’

Connor hesitated and then moved back towards Hank, grateful for the hands that gathered him up and held him close.

‘I just think you deserved better,’ Hank said.

Connor had nothing he could say to that. He didn’t know if he agreed, but at least he wasn’t as bogged down by the nightmare anymore. He closed his eyes and thought that it was good, Hank holding him like this. It was almost worth the bad dream.

‘Hank? Can we do a scene tomorrow?’

‘Sure,’ Hank said. ‘I already had something planned anyway.’

‘You did?’

‘Connor, if I thought your body could hold up to the things I want to put you through, I’d keep you down in a scene every fucking day.’ Hank leaned down and said. ‘Goddamn it, Connor, the things I want to do to you.’

‘Do them, Sir.’

‘One of us has to be the sane one, so I’ll do some of them.’

Connor shivered. He’d heard stories of how hard androids could play with each other in scenes. He’d never asked Hank about just how extreme he could be when dominating an android, but he wondered. He’d read stories of androids half-vivisected, or limbs removed. ‘Live limb replacement’ was an extreme kink one could sort by on android porn channels. Hank talked sometimes about the things he could do to androids that he could never do to humans, but he was never explicit about the details.

A part of Connor melted at the idea of it. Knowing that Hank caged violence in him that he would never inflict on Connor. That the impulse was there, tied to his sadism, and that Hank controlled himself. He was a force of nature. His form may have been first imagined by humans, then manufactured by androids, but he was a force of nature, and Connor loved how it overwhelmed him.

*

The next day, after lunch, Connor was instructed to wait in the lounge while Hank ‘organised a few things’ in the bedroom. Connor wondered if it would be bondage, almost hoped for it, and when Hank called him, he walked down the corridor, into the master bedroom, saw the BDSM gear on the bed and knew that some of his misgivings must have shown his face from the way Hank’s lips quirked.

‘Tell me something, Connor, you done much roleplaying in your life?’

Connor opened his mouth. Closed it. ‘No, Sir.’

‘Some, though?’
‘Some, Sir.’

‘You don’t look very impressed.’

His memories of roleplaying were mostly turning up at a club, subbing for a Dom he wasn’t familiar with, who often had a very specific kink and wanted Connor to wear some very specific clothing or say some very specific lines. Connor was sure if there was anything he ached to roleplay in turn, he could inflict the same list of ridiculously specific requirements on someone else. But he didn’t really want to do it, so it was always one-sided.

On top of that, the gear that Hank had on the bed spoke to at least a low level of sensory deprivation, and after the punishment, Connor wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

It was embarrassing, too, to pretend to be something or someone he wasn’t. He wasn’t a practiced actor, and it never appealed to him to pretend to be a schoolboy, or an intern at a boss’s office. He could do it, and he’d done it, but he resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and Hank was watching him like he knew Connor was already over it, like he was enjoying that too.

That was the thing about Hank, he had a knack for enjoying the part where Connor wanted to say: ‘But do we have to?’

‘I’ll tell you the scenario once we start,’ Hank said. ‘And to make sure you can’t speak, look what I got. Just for you.’

Hank held up a gag, but instead of there being a ball at the end, or even mean little prongs to hold his mouth open, or a horse’s bit for a bridle, there was a bone. A stupid silicone bone.

The look on Connor’s face must have been something, because Hank started laughing. Connor felt his cheeks warm.

‘I dunno why you’re still wearing clothes,’ Hank said, watching him expectantly.

Connor looked at the gear on the bed again, sighed, and undressed. He folded up each article of clothing as he went, placing it in the corner on a chair. The large white diagnostic station that Hank never seemed to use sat in the other corner of the room, and Connor resisted the urge to drape his shirt over it.

Once he was naked, Hank walked up to him and positioned him so that he was leaning over the bed instead of asking him to move. Connor’s hands were placed on the quilt, his legs spread, feet on the floor, and he remembered this position from the last time Hank had forced that awful, too-large plug into him.

This time Hank picked up the plug with a bouncy black silicone tail attached. He slicked it up quickly and didn’t bother stretching Connor before sliding it into him. While it wasn’t the horrific plug from last time, it was still a lot to take – thicker than two fingers – with no preparation, while he wasn’t aroused. He hissed at the sting, ducking his head, gulping as Hank dealt with the resistance by just corkscrewing the toy insistently into the band of muscle keeping it out.

Connor cried out softly when it slipped past its widest point and then slid into him all the way, landing snugly between his ass cheeks. Hank fussed with it a little, probably putting the tail where he wanted it.

Then, Connor had to stand, grimacing at the feel of the plug shifting inside of him. He would never love that sensation, and he was sure Hank knew it.
Hank knelt at Connor’s feet, attaching kneepads. Connor stared down at the top of Hank’s head, wanting to touch his hair – tied back today, which was always a good look for Hank, though every way he wore his hair suited him – thinking that if this was anyone else, he’d probably start to get hard. But Hank kneeling before him had never meant any kind of blowjob.

Next, a pair of floppy, black leather ears were attached with a durable band. Hank shifted them until he was happy with how they were positioned.

‘No hood for you, unfortunately,’ Hank said. ‘Knowing how you are with sensory dep. This is going to be pushing a few of your buttons today anyway. But maybe in the future, if you decide you like it enough, we can get you a proper pup hood, hm?’

Connor just watched him, staring suspiciously at the paw fist mitts that Hank picked up next.

He didn’t love fist mitts, he’d only ever worn them twice before. Hank took Connor’s forearm, sliding his hand into the mitt, and Connor helped as much as possible, feeling for the space for his fingers, the cushioning closing in tight around his hand. Once these were secure, he could use his arm, even brace himself on his ‘paws,’ but finger use was impossible. The cushioning made his fingers overheat and sweat, he didn’t like not having full use of his hands. It didn’t matter if these were some of the most comfortable paw mitts he’d ever worn, they were still paw mitts.

He watched as Hank secured the first one, tightening both straps until Connor knew he wouldn’t be able to get it off even if he shoved it between his legs and tried to yank his hand free.

‘Aw, look at that,’ Hank said, ‘your stress levels are rising. But…’ Hank leaned in close and placed his lips near Connor’s ear. ‘They’re still well within acceptable margins. So we’ll just keep going, sound good to you?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ Connor said softly.

‘You should enjoy the chance to talk now, because you’re not gonna get to for a while after this.’

Connor shivered, eyes darting to the gag.

Hank reached out, took Connor’s other arm, and secured the second paw mitt. Connor had to focus on his breathing. Small things bothered him. When he had one hand free, he could get all the rest of the gear off of him. Now, he couldn’t. Now he would be completely dependent on someone else’s help for the scene to end, for normality to return. He wouldn’t be able to hold a glass of water or drink from it without a straw. He couldn’t itch himself properly.

Bondage didn’t hit him as hard as this, because bondage was designed to render him completely immobile. But like this, the kneepads made it clear he was expected to move. It was harder for him to parse, than just being roped up for someone’s enjoyment for a while.

Hank picked up the gag next.

‘Three grunts to signal that you need to stop. You can tell me whether it’s a yellow or a red once I take the gag off. Got it?’

‘Yes, Hank,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t need a gag.’

‘Boy, no one needs any of this shit. I’m doing it because you want me to do it.’

Connor hesitated, almost said that he didn’t want the gag at all. He didn’t like Hank calling him out on it so boldly, pointing out to him over and over again that he wanted to be here. In the end, Connor
only opened his mouth and the silicone bone slipped between his teeth. Connor bit down experimentally, tasted plastic and not much else, as Hank buckled the gag into place.

A black collar with small silver studs followed, and then a leash was clipped onto that, which hung down Connor’s chest and tickled his skin.

‘Down,’ Hank said, pointing to the ground.

Connor went, grateful for the kneepads which were plush and designed specifically for this kind of play.

‘Sumo’s outside, by the way,’ Hank said. ‘In case you were wondering.’

Connor hadn’t thought about it, but he also didn’t want to be crawling about on his hands and knees when Sumo was around, because he knew Sumo would find it fascinating and probably knock him over in excitement.

‘All right,’ Hank said. ‘I’m going to leave for about a minute and then come back, when I do, I’m gonna be in character. Well- As much as I can be assed to be in character anyway. Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out fast enough.’

Hank petted the top of his head and then left the room, closing the door behind him. Connor shifted his hands – his paws – feeling the slight strain in his wrists and forearms, even as his hands were cushioned. He knew he was probably going to have to pretend to be a dog, that much was obvious. Connor tilted his head forward, feeling the leather ears shift against his hair. He wondered how much more complex the scenario would be beyond ‘owner and dog.’

When the door clicked open again, Connor looked up and was surprised to see Hank wearing a CyberLife issue bodyguard jacket. His eyes widened, and Hank paused upon looking at him.

‘Oh, so you’ve arrived, have you?’ Hank said, walking up to him and staring down thoughtfully. ‘I put in an order for the newest model, but I didn’t realise you’d get here so fast. God, it’s amazing what they can do with the android dogs these days, isn’t it?’

Connor blinked at him, felt a wave of...something, cold and tingling all at once. So he wasn’t going to be a real dog, but an android dog. For some reason, Connor liked that very much. He felt the way his body shifted, presenting himself in a more alert way.

‘Let’s get a good look at you then,’ Hank said crisply. ‘Come here. Sit.’

Connor crawled up to him, trying to figure out how to make the movement graceful – it felt impossible – and then rested his ass on his heels, only to grunt as the silicone tail pushed hard into one of his feet and shifted the plug forcefully.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, a slow smile forming. ‘It really is amazing what they can do with the personal use dogs these days.’

He walked around Connor, stopping behind him. Connor gasped around the bone gag as Hank’s boot came up, the tip of his shoe nudging the tail and the plug. One of the paw mitts slid across the ground.

‘Here’s hoping they made you more durable than the last one,’ Hank muttered, and Connor almost turned and looked over his shoulder, but surely if he was pretending to be an android dog, that wasn’t something he’d do. He made himself stare ahead, even as the jostling of the plug shifted unpredictably from pleasant to uncomfortable and back again.
A sharp slap to his ass, and Connor grunted, wincing. Hank’s skin looked like human skin, but it was made of nanofluid, and it felt like a soft, grabby plastic. Connor had never had to suffer through a proper spanking from Hank, and he knew he’d have to one day, and that he’d hate it, because it’d probably be worse than any rubber paddle he’d dealt with. The closest he’d come was before Luuk had come over, and even that had left bruises.

Hank inspected him after that. He ran his palms over Connor’s feet and his legs, tugged on the tail a few times, which made Connor shiver. He casually groped Connor’s cock and his balls, ran fingers over his ass, and then over the bumps of his spine, before grabbing a handful of his hair and moving his head to get a good look at his face.

He frowned at something he saw, then nudged the gag with his fingers.

‘I don’t remember checking the box for an oral fixation, but maybe that came free with purchase?’ Hank’s grin was lewd.

Then Hank was checking Connor’s arms and shoulders, running his hands down them. He lifted each of Connor’s paws, before lowering them back down again. Finally satisfied, he picked up the leash and stood.

‘Come on,’ Hank said. ‘Let’s see how well you heel.’

When Hank moved, Connor tried to move with him, but Hank didn’t walk slowly enough for Connor to do much more than scramble. Every time his legs moved, the tail wagged, the plug shifted over his prostate. Connor was panting through his nose by the time they were in the lounge, cringing at the sound of trying to suck back and swallow saliva, not wanting it to drip down his chin.

He sat as much as he could when Hank stopped, but he didn’t like jostling the tail.

Hank bent down and placed his boot flat on Connor’s lower back.

‘All the way, pup,’ Hank said, and Connor almost grumbled at that. He closed his eyes as he let his ass rest properly on his heels, stirring the plug inside of him. ‘Now, let’s see how many orders I’m going to have to program into you.’

He walked around to the front of Connor and held out his palm.

‘Paw?’

Connor almost lifted his paw automatically, then thought it over. Hank was giving him a choice. To be fully ‘pre-programmed’ or to be rougher around the edges. It was unexpected to have an option to direct some of this, in a way that didn’t necessarily mean being disobedient.

Instead of offering one of the mitts, he tilted his head at Hank and stared at him innocently, like he didn’t understand.

‘Paw?’ Hank said again, but there was a smile at the edges of his lips like he was happy that Connor was participating. And Connor couldn’t ignore how warm that made him feel. ‘You heeled okay, but you don’t have this in your system? Huh. Maybe you’re one of those models made for more illicit kinds of orders. Goddamn, I mean I did- I was pretty specific with my notes, but you never know. It is CyberLife. Maybe you’re like, an ultra slutty model.’

Connor blinked up at Hank, then ducked his head. He was surprised when Hank used the opportunity to unbuckle the gag, drawing it free. Connor gasped, then looked up as Hank slid his hand under his chin and drew his face up.
‘Do you know what to do with that mouth of yours?’ Hank said.

A long hesitation, Connor almost made a dog-like whine, but couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. Instead he just opened his mouth wide, slid his tongue over his lower teeth and waited.

‘God, they must’ve given me the sluttiest model if they sacrificed basic commands over shit like this. I mean, I’m not complaining. Let’s take a look at that throat.’

Hank grabbed Connor’s jaw and hooked his fingers into his mouth, keeping it open. The movements were firm, almost rough, the way someone might treat something that didn’t have a real personality. And then two blunt, long fingers dug straight into the back of his throat and Connor’s muscles clamped shut and he tried to jerk away to cough, but the grip on his jaw tightened.

‘Easy, easy,’ Hank said, ‘that’s a good, warm mouth, but your throat hasn’t been trained at all, has it?’

The fingers jabbed, and it took all of Connor’s concentration to stop himself from dry heaving right there.

Hank’s fingers relented, drawing back and rubbing over his tongue, checking his teeth, feeling the inside of his cheeks. Connor shifted from paw to paw, making a soft, uncertain noise. It was far more invasive than what he was used to, and even without the gag he knew he wasn’t supposed to speak. Hank wasn’t going to get him to say a word.

Hank rested two fingers on Connor’s tongue and waited, then made a sound of disapproval. Connor gasped as Hank slapped him on the cheek with his other hand. Not hard, but it was still a shock, stinging the skin.

‘Seriously?’ Hank said. ‘Suck.’

Connor closed his mouth and started sucking automatically, then eagerly threw himself into it at the way Hank’s expression shifted from angry to approving.

‘That’s better,’ Hank said softly. ‘Must be hard, not knowing what a new owner expects from you.’

He reached out and curled his fingers into Connor's hair with his other hand, and Connor’s eyes drifted shut.

‘There we go. Open your mouth again. Real wide. I’ve got a treat for you.’

Connor opened his mouth and listened as Hank opened his pants. He kept his eyes closed, and when Hank slid his cock into Connor’s mouth, he realised it wasn’t his standard model cock. He was using one of the cocks from those boxes of prostheses that he had. Connor couldn’t tell which one. It was tapered at the tip, lightly ridged, not as thick as normal – though it widened progressively, the more Hank slid past his lips.

Hank was far more careful than usual. Like he was testing what his new purchase could really handle. Connor leaned forwards, trying to suck more into his mouth, one of his paws coming up off the ground as he tried to get a better angle. But Hank teased him, going slower and not pressing as hard as usual. Connor was surprised and frustrated.

‘Can’t treat that throat too badly, can I?’ Hank said, sounding calm as ever. ‘Not when you respond to two fingers that way. Imagine that, sending you back almost as soon as I get you. But…ah, well, as long as you’re up to scratch we won’t have any problems, will we? I wouldn’t want to replace you.’
Connor tried leaning forwards to capture more of Hank’s cock in his mouth, and Hank leaned back, keeping Connor’s head in place.

‘At least you’re eager. Maybe we can see how much you can take? You’re gonna be a good boy for me, aren’t you?’

Connor tried nodding, but before he was able to, Hank had a brutal grip on his head and was pushing slowly forwards, Connor’s mouth stretched wider at the base, swallowing hard when the tip brushed against the back of his throat. The tapered tip wasn’t as blunt as Hank’s regular cock, and it poked harder, the plastisteel support bruising him. His eyes teared up immediately, and he swallowed as hard as he could to stop himself from gagging.

‘Oh, there’s more to go,’ Hank said casually. He manipulated Connor’s head and pushed further on the next swallow, and Connor felt the moment when he realised he couldn’t handle it. It was too long and pointed at the tip, too wide at the base, stretching his mouth far too much. He choked hard, his mouth going into spasm – though at the last second he managed to keep his jaw open – and then went to slap Hank’s leg, clumsily pawing at his shin with the mitts.

Hank withdrew all the way and Connor went to the ground, coughing hard and getting his breathing back under control.

‘Did I feel teeth?’ Hank said a moment later. ‘Did you try and bite me?’

Connor looked up in shock. No, he would never, he knew better than that. Had he? Hank stared down at him, a mixture of outrage and something like buyer’s remorse on his face. Connor almost spoke then, to say that he hadn’t, to apologise, only to remember that this was a roleplay and he wanted to do well. As well as he could.

As embarrassing as it was, with his breaths still shuddering in and out of him, he whined an apology instead, the sound thin and desperate.

‘I don’t care if you meant it or not, pup. That’s not allowed under any circumstances, and I’m going to make sure you remember it.’

Connor didn’t back away when Hank placed the silicone bone gag back between his teeth, buckling it again. His breathing was harsh and shaky, he watched Hank with wide eyes, stuck in that place where his cock being hard was just confusing. He’d never fully understood why some things aroused him the way they did, especially when he was afraid, or sore.

Hank used the leash to get him to crawl alongside the couch Hank sat at most often. There, he had Connor face the television, and pushed him down onto his elbows, resting on his forearms, his ass stuck high in the air by the couch. A sharp slap to his outer thigh and Connor flinched, the burn of pain following a moment later.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said softly. ‘You might be disappointing, but maybe we can train you up with a correction. I’ll be right back. Stay.’

Connor knew he was thinking too much to be near subspace, but he could feel it at the edges of his thoughts all the same. The paw mitts were overheating his hands, making them sweat, but the cushioning was wicking it away. The band supporting the ears clasped at his head. The plug inside of him reminded him how good it felt to be filled, even when it wasn’t comfortable. The tail bobbed back and forth if he shifted even a tiny bit.

What would an android dog do?
Try and be good.

It was all Connor wanted to do sometimes, even when he was recalcitrant, even when he didn’t get it right.

He would try and be good. And even though that’s what he largely always wanted to do in a scene, something about the role that had been chosen for him made it easier to focus on. He had a purpose, and he’d been manufactured for that purpose, and there was no shame in it, because he knew no other way of being.

Hank returned, sat on the couch beside him, resting one of his legs against Connor’s side. Hank turned the television on, switched it to a sport that sounded like it might be cricket, and then rubbed his fingers over Connor’s ass, which was raised in a way that gave Hank easy access.

In this position, a ‘correction’ probably meant something corporal. Connor’s skin prickled all over with goosebumps. The thought grabbed at two parts of him. The part that hated it, the humiliation of it, being ass up and used, being hurt past the point where he wanted to be hurt. The other part that needed it, that managed a mix of anticipation and dread, his cock aching to be touched.

With Hank, everything was exacerbated. Hank had an ability to see through to the things Connor needed or wanted most, but he had a way of delivering them that wasn’t easy to deal with. Connor liked the challenge, even as he was intimidated by it. He’d had a lifetime of Doms that went too far because they wanted to destroy Connor’s boundaries for the sake of it, or Doms that never went far enough, because they were afraid of what Connor really wanted.

Connor had always preferred the former over the latter. It wasn’t exclusively true, he did like to scene with Luuk and a couple of the others at the club, but he had to be in the right mood to be treated well.

But Hank didn’t treat him well in scenes, because Connor didn’t want that, even if Connor had always been afraid of what he really wanted.

The spanking, when it started, was rhythmic and worked around the plug. The blows moved Connor’s ass enough that the tail wagged wildly, and that caused a deep, constant movement inside him that had him groaning softly into the rug beneath his cheek.

It wasn’t unbearable at first, Connor breathing through the predictability of it, feeling the way the skin warmed and turned itchy, then began to burn and sting. Hank’s hand hurt him more than a regular hand did, but Hank also wasn’t spanking him nearly as hard as he could. It was almost lazy, as he watched television and Connor crouched there on the floor, knowing that this would cross some barrier into correction at some point. He was pretty sure he’d know it as soon as it happened.

Connor still wasn’t sure he’d used his teeth and it probably wasn’t the point. If this was part of the scenario Hank wanted to play out, Connor wanted to be good for him, both in the role he was playing, and as the person he was.

Another few minutes, and Connor was squirming a little, the blows striking reddened, bruising skin. His breathing was heavier, he’d drooled into the rug, and when he tossed his head he could feel the ears flopping. They felt a little like they were really his, like he could shake his head and express himself with those ears in a way he couldn’t normally.

‘Your throat might need some work, but you’re handling this like a champion, aren’t you, pup?’

Connor made a faint noise at the praise. Was Hank being nicer than normal? Was it because Connor
was pretending to be a dog?

Hank drew his hand away and Connor waited, breathing heavily, mouth stretched wide around the gag so he could get deep breaths for his aching lungs. His front paws flexed back and forth as he tried to stretch his fingers and couldn’t. He made a small sound of frustration, shuddering when Hank rubbed his palm over Connor’s ass in response.

After that, Hank picked something up and then lay it against Connor’s ass, and Connor’s chest tightened. He knew exactly what that was. He’d even seen it. Hank had bought the wooden paddle specifically for Connor, and it was wicked. Wide and thick and well-crafted, with holes spaced through it to reduce surface tension, all to speed up the strike and make the paddle hit harder.

The wood rubbed over his skin, smooth and innocuous, and Connor’s shoulders shifted, he wished he could hold onto something properly. One of his paw mitts bumped against the leg of the coffee table, and he left it there. It was hard to keep his breaths even now, hard to concentrate.

‘Shhh,’ Hank said, the sound nothing like reassurance. It was such a sinister promise that Connor’s guts felt like they’d turned to liquid.

The first blow shocked the air out of him, and the second came quickly after that. It was five in quick succession before Hank stopped. By then, it felt like a hundred sensations had come and gone. Connor tried to get his paws underneath him but they slipped forward again on the third blow. He tried to shriek, but he couldn’t get the breath he needed for it. He tried to breathe, dizziness burning through him, his hips hurting more than his ass was. The shockwaves of each blow jarring against not just his skin, but his bones, into his lower back, down his thighs.

He only became aware of the noises he was eking out with every exhale when Hank leaned forward and placed a hand on his back.

‘Okay, okay,’ he was saying. ‘Okay, pup, come on. We’re not done. Fuck, is that seriously all you can handle?’

No, it wasn’t. Connor knew he could handle a lot more, but it was intense, and he hadn’t been prepared for it. He knew what whips felt like, and canes, and floggers, and even paddles, but sometimes the sensation still took him by surprise.

He forced himself to stop moving, only realising then that he’d moved the heavy coffee table an inch away from him with his struggling.

His breathing hitched when he felt the paddle touch his ass again, and Connor hoped Hank would give him a fixed number. Only five more. Ten more. But Hank said nothing.

‘Shhh,’ Hank said again.

Connor squeezed his eyes shut, toes curling.

He shook his head a little, because his cock wasn’t that hard anymore, this wasn’t the kind of corporal play that he’d stay hard through. This was just endurance, plain and simple.

But Hank would have known. Hank always knew.

The next blow fell heavily on his other ass cheek, and Connor moaned thickly, giving into the space beyond his thoughts where it was just pain and trying to go limp through it, letting it take him so that he didn’t panic.
The blows that came after weren’t packed together but spaced out. The time between them wasn’t regular, they weren’t rhythmic, and sometimes it seemed like a whole five minutes of droning television passed before the paddle thudded into him again.

The panic snapped back into him after one particular blow, and Hank’s hand was on his lower back again, grounding him, and Connor still keened and tried not to kick away like he wanted to. And then before Connor was quite ready, before his breathing was even, Hank took the hand away from his lower back and struck him again and Connor choked on a scream.

There were two ways Connor knew how to access subspace. The first was some alchemical combination of brain chemistry and the right words and the right timing, and he’d slip into it for almost anything in a scene. But that was hard to come by, imperfect, unreliable. The second method was to be forced so close to the limits of his endurance for so long, be dragged so close to safewording without doing it, that eventually some tenacious, fighting, toothy, furious part of himself – the snarling, trapped thing that wanted to murder someone and rip their face off for ever daring to hurt him in the first place – made peace with what was happening.

It never felt like giving up. He knew the difference. He knew the difference because his father had taught it to him.

After the panic, three blows later, Connor snapped into subspace all at once. Even though his mind made peace with it, his body still protested, and he wailed, pawing at the floor without changing his pose. Being good. Always trying to be good. But giving everything else up to Hank.

Another Dom might choose that moment to stop, but Hank didn’t. Connor didn’t have to care anymore about what he was saying, or even – really – what he was doing. At this point, he had to trust that another Dom would know when to safeword for him, because he wouldn’t remember. In the past, he just trusted that he’d probably survive it, and use apathy to paper over the worry that maybe he wouldn’t.

With Hank, it was so different.

The cricket had stopped when Hank finished, pulling him up onto the couch, manhandling him into a new position with one leg hanging off it and his other tucked up beneath his belly. Hank worked the plug free and then fucked that long, tapered cock into him – slicked with the clear thirium lubricant that Hank always had on hand whenever he needed it. Connor focused on breathing, he focused on the feel of being filled by something longer and eventually wider than the plug, the way Hank grabbed his burning, bruised hips and kept him still and pushed deeper.

The cock was long, uncomfortable, though not outright painful like the one he’d used when Luuk had been over. Connor’s cock hardened from the curve of it rubbing over his prostate with every thrust. His hands ached, he kept trying to grab things, brace himself, and he couldn’t do either. While he didn’t much care about it anymore, and while it didn’t make him panic, he was still hampered by it.

The sound of voices from a television drama washed over him, Hank fucked him for a long time, stopping at one point to reapply lubricant. Connor had reached a peak of arousal, it had died down again, and he was reaching another one that was sharper this time. His balls heavier, his cock feeling hard enough to burst. He didn’t really orgasm just from being fucked, but this felt like the closest he’d ever come.

Hank’s hips weren’t slapping up against him yet, and Connor dimly realised why a minute later. A larger protrusion at the base of the cock ground into him and Connor gasped wetly, realising what kind of cock Hank had replaced his standard model with. Connor was familiar with anthropomorphic
dildos, had seen them in stores and online, seen them in the collections of Doms and tops, but he’d never gone out of his way to try any.

Now, with the knot grinding into him, the tapered tip poking deep inside of him, Connor decided he should have tried them.

The stretch was sharp, bright, Connor aware of some threatening but reassuring words from Hank that could have been anything at all. He tried to swim back from the emptiness he’d found, using Hank’s words as an anchor, but by the time he did, he was painfully aware of how full he felt, and Hank wasn’t talking anymore.

At once, the knot began to slip into him and Connor cried out small, broken noises. Hank dragged fingernails down Connor’s back, and then grasped his hips and yanked him backwards quickly, impaling him all at once.

Connor shuddered, then keened as Hank began a quick and dirty grinding that spun him back out into subspace and ached and made him want to laugh or cry all at once.

‘That’s it,’ Hank said. Connor was distantly amazed that he could understand the words. His body felt like it was going to shake apart. ‘Get that thick alpha cock into you.’

Connor’s brain stuttered, and then he burst into laughter, the giddiness that sometimes came with being in a hard scene for too long blistering brightly in his mind. He didn’t have the sense to be ashamed of it.

Hank laughed a moment later, but then spanked Connor’s ass until he was reduced to whimpering again.

The cock slid repeatedly against his prostate, and the mixture of the pain of Hank’s hips grinding against his tender skin, and the recent spanks, twisted up his lust into a knot that got larger and larger. It felt almost like a cramp across his pelvis, his cock rigid.

It took another few minutes of the combined stimulus of pain and the grinding against his prostate for Connor to realise that he was going to come. His teeth bit down into the gag, the tension pulling taut inside him until it snapped.

Unlike a ruined orgasm, this was something Connor’s body did without Hank demanding it from him, and Connor was shocked at the intensity of it, drowning in the harsh pleasure of it. Hank’s hand slid beneath him, fingers brushing the tip of his cock, the come against Connor’s belly, and then he said something that sounded surprised, but Connor was too far gone to care.

Hank slowed down after that, and then gripped Connor tightly when he came minutes later, Connor was dizzy from the overstimulation but unable to think of what to do about it. Hank must have come for a while, long enough that Connor was sure he could feel it inside of him.

Withdrawing wasn’t comfortable, like the aftermath of fisting more than anything else. The knot didn’t deflate, and Hank hushed and reassured him and told him to relax, and Connor was about as relaxed as he could get – half-wanting to just collapse – but it still hurt without arousal to make it easier.

Connor felt hollow once the cock slid all the way out of him. Empty and sore. His eyes were already closed, his breathing already slowing. He expected Hank to take off the paw mitts, but Hank only reached over him and unbuckled the gag, drawing it free, wiping at Connor’s mouth with his fingers.

Hank stood and started to walk away, and Connor absently reached out to grab him, only succeeding
in knocking Hank’s thigh with one of the paw mitts.

‘Gonna get you some water, pup,’ Hank said, ruffling his hair. ‘Back in a sec.’

Connor slumped down onto the couch. He squinted at the television to try and get an idea of how much time had passed, but he couldn’t. He didn’t feel like talking at all.

When Hank came back, he didn’t force Connor to drink anything. He sat on the armrest next to him and stroked the hair around his ears, and Connor waited for them to be drawn off, but they weren’t. The paw mitts weren’t removed. The collar and leash stayed. Connor whined low in complaint and then gave up. It wasn’t worth it.

Besides, it was nice, the way Hank petted him. He liked it all the time, but he liked it even more now. Connor probably wasn’t very good at being a dog, but Hank was acting like he was.

‘There’s no rush,’ Hank said. ‘Stay with it.’

Whether Hank meant resting, or subspace, or being a pup, Connor didn’t know, but he happily surrendered to all three.

* 

It was hours later when Hank finally took the paw mitts off him, the ears, collar and leash, and Connor felt spacey and dazed, a bit nauseous from the hormone shift inside his body. He blinked blearily at Hank. He’d only dozed for an hour, but he’d woken up in a placid, submissive space and Hank had worked the plug back into him and kept Connor near him on the couch, giving him water and feeding him by hand.

When the paw mitts came off, Hank wiped his sweaty hands with a cloth, then began to massage the joints with firm, careful movements, checking each knuckle, the tips of his fingers, the insides of his palms.

‘You ever been in subspace for that long?’ Hank said.

Connor stared at him, and didn’t quite know how to answer the question.

‘Hey, hey now,’ Hank said. ‘You gonna say something for me? You can say anything you want.’

‘Hi,’ Connor said, feeling affectionate and warm and a bit out of it.

Hank paused, and then beamed at him. ‘Hey there, Connor.’

Connor smiled back, and then stared stupidly down at the hands moving over his. Hank’s hands were large and broad, the fingers thick, though not as long as Connor’s. He had a way of digging two thumbs into the centre of one of Connor’s palms that felt like magic, and Connor leaned towards him every time he did it.

‘Was I good, Hank?’

‘Yeah, Connor. You were great. A really good dog.’

‘Am I good now?’

‘You’re good all the time, even when you’re being a brat.’

Connor kept watching Hank’s hands moving over his and then after a while sighed and decided he
didn’t need to worry about anything for a little while. By the time he thought to tell Hank he didn’t think he was out of subspace at all, contentment had already turned into sleep.

*

He woke as Hank began easing the plug out of him. He was on Hank’s bed, which meant he’d slept through being moved. He was sore, grumpy, and tired. Rain thundered around the house, loud enough to penetrate all the sound protection, which meant the kind of storm that would lead to flooding. Connor felt the weather, heavy and cloying, all around him.

‘No,’ he whined, reaching back and slapping at Hank’s hand. His entrance hurt, scratchy with the kind of pain that meant there’d been superficial tearing. It wouldn’t be a problem in about twenty four hours, but right now, it felt like carpet burn in the worst place.

‘Sure,’ Hank said. ‘You want to wear the plug forever?’

Connor thought about it and then conceded, with a morose: ‘No, Hank.’

So Hank went back to working the plug out of him, and Connor grit his teeth and wanted Hank’s fingers off his bruised ass where they were braced. But it was less than a minute and the plug was gone, Hank walking off into the bathroom and Connor rolling onto his stomach and tucking a pillow under his head until he could hold it with both arms.

When Hank came back, Connor turned his face to the side and watched him, trying to work out what he wanted to say.

‘Hank,’ Connor said, ‘I didn’t used to go into subspace like this. People treated me worse or harder or made me bleed, and it was never like this.’

‘Subspace is a lot about trust,’ Hank said, as he changed into pyjamas. Connor had absolutely no idea how much time had passed, but as he listened to the heavy rain, he knew the scene itself had lasted a few hours. A few hours of Hank just idly spanking him, and then hitting him with that paddle. Like there was nothing Hank would rather do on the weekend than watch television and put Connor down in a scene for the whole afternoon.

‘That’s very new age of you, Hank.’

‘Crack a psychology book, you dope,’ Hank muttered. ‘Honestly, you’re pretty protective over that headspace. I thought so in Zeta, even when I was so mad I couldn’t think straight. I don’t think Luuk realised, because your obedience can look a bit like subspace to Doms, I bet. But it’s not, is it? Christ, that’s just you surrendering to doing what people say, which you enjoy, but that’s not the same as subspace.’

‘It’s not,’ Connor agreed. He felt a bit more peaceable now, with the plug out of him. He thought about it. Trust and subspace, and then felt his grumpiness melt into something softer. ‘That paddle is mean, Hank.’

‘Goddamn,’ Hank said reverently, even wistfully, ‘isn’t it thought? Christ, I can’t even remember if my team won.’

‘That’s a lie.’

‘I mean it sounded good, but I always remember if my teams win,’ Hank said, and then he petted Connor’s ass with mock affection. Connor pushed up angrily and shoved at Hank, and Hank laughed, wrestling him forwards and over Hank’s lap in a position that was vulnerable and awful and
wonderful all at once. Connor went limp.

‘I’m being good,’ Connor said.

‘I know. Just hold still a moment.’

Connor was more than ready to throw a safeword at Hank if he so much as patted his ass in a way that felt like it was heading into a spanking. But then the sound of a cap, the smell of lotion, and Connor hummed and squirmed as the coldness of it was spread over his skin.

*I love you,* he thought. Like he was still drunk on the headspace of before, it echoed in his head over and over again, it felt warm, and sweet, and bounced off the sides of his mind.

It hurt a little. He still nursed the fear that Hank would just leave him some day. Decide Connor wasn’t worth it, decide life wasn’t worth it, breakdown and die. Abruptly, Connor thought of Sumo, who clearly wanted Hank even when he wasn’t ever meant to be coming back. He thought of all those dogs who waited day after day for their owners, pining to death, a hole in their heart where the companionship was supposed to be.

He shifted and wrapped a clumsy arm around Hank’s leg, desolation moving through him like a wave. It didn’t last long, but it reverberated like the rumbling of thunder, promising something grim.

‘Hey,’ Hank said gently, ‘what happened just now? A flashback?’

‘No,’ Connor said, and then wiggled until his side pressed hard into Hank’s belly. ‘Just subdrop or something. It’s nothing.’

Hank ‘hmmed’ like he didn’t believe it, but Connor was shaken by the dissonance of his own trust. How he could trust Hank to do everything well in a scene, but didn’t trust him to stay. How he trusted Hank to care for him, but didn’t trust him to care forever.

The rain grew louder around them, and Hank whistled after a while, shifting like he was looking out at it.

‘God,’ Hank said. ‘Hope my roses survive that.’

*I love you,* Connor thought, and curled into Hank’s whole body like a limpet, begging the brokenness in his mind to leave him alone long enough that he could enjoy this moment a little longer. It seemed to work, and he focused on the mechanical breathing of Hank’s compressors in his chest, and the occasional gurgling of thirium in his belly, and thought that this was all he needed.
Three nights after Connor realised he didn’t mind pretending to be an android pup – still bearing the kind of deep bruises that would take some time to heal – he woke suddenly, disoriented. He sat up in the pitch black room, reaching out automatically for Hank, then reaching further into the empty space on the other side of the bed. Blinked awake fully as he realised that he couldn’t see the LED at all.

That wasn’t so abnormal, even though it still freaked Connor out. Sometimes Hank didn’t sleep, and he watched television throughout the night, or cleaned, and Connor had even seen him do gardening at four in the morning.

When Connor saw no red glow coming from the hallway, he took a deep, slow breath and told himself it was fine. It was nothing. Hank was just watching television, even though Connor couldn’t hear it. Sometimes Hank had the television transmit directly to his receivers and didn’t bother listening like humans might.

Connor got out of bed, wearing one of Hank’s old, oversized CyberLife shirts. He stood, rubbing at his upper arms, and then heard a strange, static-y burst of sound and felt cold.

As he walked towards the hallway, he realised the lounge room light wasn’t on either. None of the lights in the house were on.

Connor hesitated by the bedroom door, and then his hand reached forwards into the hall and he turned the hall light on.

He blinked at the sudden glare, gaze drawn to the large lump collapsed in the hall.

Hank, by the doorway to Cole’s room.

His LED giving off no light at all. Too still. Unmoving.

Androids weren’t supposed to collapse like that. Not unless something was really wrong. Normally their bodies went into lock, and if they shut down normally, they just stood there. Stood there the way Connor was standing, frozen and unable to move. Connor kept blinking, convincing himself that he was dreaming, because this was so like some of the dreams he’d had.

Android LEDs always functioned. The only time they didn’t was before activation, and…and…

Connor lurched forwards and half-fell by Hank’s side, turning him over fully onto his back and touching him all over, feeling the coldness of him, the deadness of him, his own breath coming faster and faster while Hank’s air compressors didn’t move at all. None of the thirium was flowing in his body, his LED was off, and it could have been off for hours.

‘Hank?’ Connor whispered. ‘Hank? …Sir?’
He stupidly tried feeling for a pulse, though there wasn’t one to feel. He opened Hank’s eyes, and saw no life in them and no lights behind them, nothing to indicate any kind of processor function. He was far colder than normal.

He remembered what Jonathan Rushmore had said to him, ages ago now, before Jonathan had betrayed him to Gabriel and his life had been fractured apart further.

‘…And the LED is yellow all the time? That’s some central units under too much pressure, if it continues for much longer, it’ll start experiencing shutdowns, aberrant behaviours, it may fry completely. It can be an end of life…’

A catastrophic end of life shutdown, the junk code running until it scarred across the processors and fried them completely.

He forced himself to stand, leaning heavily against the wall.

‘Hank?’ he whispered.

The last time Connor had seen androids with no functioning LEDs, he’d been staring at a row of dead bodies drained of thirium in his father’s evidence room.

‘Fuck,’ Connor said, the word small, tremulous.

Once he said it, the word he distantly knew Hank would be happy to hear him say, had been encouraging him to say outside of scenes, Connor didn’t know why he didn’t say it. The principle of it never really mattered. He didn’t plan on seeing his father ever again. The only person to have ever banned him from the word wasn’t here and the person who would have been proud of him for saying it was dead.

‘Fuck,’ Connor breathed, stumbling back into the bedroom and grabbing his phone. ‘Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.’

North picked up straight away as Connor ran back into the hall, falling, crouching beside him.

‘Hey, what’s up?’

‘He’s dead,’ Connor said, and then he babbled, words falling over each other in a way they hadn’t since he was a child. ‘I think he’s dead, there’s no- there’s no light, not red, not yellow. There’s no- He’s not…he’s not moving, I don’t-’

‘Shit,’ North muttered. ‘When did this happen?’

‘I don’t know!’ Connor cried. ‘I don’t know, it could have been hours.’ His voice broke. ‘And I knew, I tried to- I tried to get him to come see you or see someone but he wouldn’t, he won’t let me help him at all.’

North scoffed, then said: ‘Like I don’t know what that’s like.’

‘NORTH!’ But he couldn’t let his anger at her for saying that now get in the way, because Hank wasn’t moving, his LED wasn’t glowing, and Connor kept touching him and feeling for a pulse and feeling his cold skin and Connor’s human brain kept telling him that Hank was dead even though androids didn’t even have to breathe.

‘Sorry. Shit. Where are you?’ North said, voice urgent.
‘Hank’s home. But I can’t tell you,’ Connor said, bursting into strained laughter. ‘Hank would kill me.’

‘You don’t think-? Never mind. Do you know if Hank has a white diagnostic station?’

‘Yes!’ Connor said. ‘Yes, in the bedroom. He never uses it.’

‘Figures,’ North said. ‘Carry him in there and I’ll walk you through this.’

‘I won’t be able to lift him,’ Connor said.

‘Put the phone on speaker and just do it. We’re lighter than we look, remember? Polymer and aluminium. You can do this.’

Connor nodded frantically, put the phone on speaker even while his other arm slid beneath Hank’s body. He **was** lighter than Connor thought, but Connor still needed both his arms and all his strength to carry Hank’s dead weight into the bedroom. There, he placed Hank against the diagnostic station, where he just slumped down, none of his limbs locking the way they should. His glassy eyes open. Dead.

‘He’s dead,’ Connor said.

‘He’s probably not dead,’ North said, though she didn’t sound sure. ‘But the longer we leave things, the less time we have to restore him to something recognisable. His system may have gone into a voluntary shutdown over the junk code you mentioned, so listen to me okay? The station, what letters are embossed on the top of it and are they on the left or right hand side?’

Connor didn’t want to waste a second turning on the bedroom light, but he had to when running his fingers over the top of the diagnostic station to try and understand the letters by touch alone achieved nothing. He sprinted back, tossing the phone onto the bed, staring at the letters and trying not to look at Hank.

‘The right hand side, XVA290.’

North whistled. ‘Nice. Okay, but also that makes things harder. I want you to run your hand beneath the letters until you feel a seam in the plastic. Then thump it hard, okay? You’re going to do a manual override.’

Connor felt for the seam, thumped his fist against it and nothing happened. He kept hitting it, harder and harder, until his hand was screaming and the panel finally slid open. It was far larger than Connor expected, wires everywhere, lights blinking passively. It looked so complicated.

‘North…’

‘There’s a large port attachment in the top left, see it? Pull it, it’s attached by a cable, you’ll get a lot of length out of it.’

Connor grabbed the port attachment and pulled, the cable gave reluctantly. Connor knelt as North continued to give him instructions.

‘This part’s gonna be messy, Connor,’ North said. ‘You’re going to have to dig your fingers into the back of his neck. He’s a bodyguard model, his port will be protected and…you’re going to have to do some damage to expose it.’

‘What?’ Connor whispered.
'Just fucking-.' The sudden sound of North taking a deep, artificial breath.

‘You didn’t have to do this when you changed him back.’

‘I’m an android!’ North said. ‘I knew what to do to make sure I could bypass his coding, and he wasn’t in full shutdown. Listen to me, Connor, use the metal edge of the port if you have to, but from the hairline down, get that skin open. Can you get a knife?’

Connor was already working the metal edge of the port into Hank’s skin, heart pounding, nausea gripping him in its fist. He didn’t trust himself to be able to run into kitchen, grab a knife and run back. All of this was his fault. All of it. If he’d just…talked to Hank more, if Hank had just listened. But Connor had spent so much time convinced that it was fine, that everything was okay and that they could have their small moments of peace and comfort while waiting for the Veritas case to close.

It turned out that should never have been his priority in the first place.

Blue thirium oozed thickly in rivulets, spilling more and more as Connor exposed the stained chassis beneath. There was no port, just seamless moulding.

‘I can’t see-’

‘I know,’ North said harshly. ‘I know. Get your fingers and slide them beneath his skin, along both sides of the cervical chassis beneath the skull. Use both hands. You’re going to feel three nodes of metal on either side. Do it, Connor.’

Connor gagged as he shoved his fingers in, the flesh resisting, feeling like this had to be murder. North was just walking him through some sick autopsy, some way of making it all the more thorough. His breathing wheezed, but eventually, his fingers felt the three nodes of metal, blue blood squelching up between his fingers.

‘Concentrate, because you’re only going to get one chance to do this right,’ North said. ‘There’s a specific, CyberLife sequence to pressing these that will open the port. The three on your left-hand side are one to three, one is the top near the skull module, two is the middle, three is the bottom. The three on your right are four to six. Four is the top, five is the middle, six is the bottom. Understand?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said roughly. He tried to think of the piano lessons he’d been doing, how good he was at maths, that he could trust his fingers. But his hands were shaky, slippery and wet.

A whine at the doorway, and Connor felt tears spill when he realised Sumo was watching him. At least he wasn’t barking at him, barking at him for mutilating Hank while he was probably dead.


‘Yes,’ Connor said.

‘Good. Next…’

North kept speaking numbers for so long that Connor realised that no one was meant to be able to force Hank awake after he’d shutdown. Connor remembered Luther saying that Hank had forcibly shut himself down after Cole had died, did he do that knowing that it would take something like this to revive him? Or did androids know secret codes to make sure they didn’t have to do something so awful?
A section of plastisteel clicked and then slid back, exposing the port, thirium immediately flooding into it.

‘Shove the attachment in. Don’t be gentle, you want a secure attachment.’

Connor wiped his hands all over himself when his first attempt ended in the attachment sliding away because of the thicker, greasy thirium. But eventually he got the port in and stared, waiting for Hank to miraculously awaken. Nothing happened.

‘Back to the panel. Connor? Connor are you listening to me?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said through his quicker, panicked breathing. He pushed himself up on his knees and stared at all the wires and lights and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand and got a smear of thirium over his whole face. Hank’s blood. ‘Yes, I’m here.’

Connor’s voice broke.

‘Press the yellow button. There’s only one.’

Connor pressed it. The entire panel suddenly blazed with new lights, a humming started up in the entire diagnostic machine, beneath his legs, beneath Hank. A red glow at the side of Hank’s head, the red LED cycling into slow action, and Connor stared down, hoping…hoping…

Hank didn’t move. He didn’t wake.

‘Connor? Connor? What’s the LED doing?’ North clipped out like she’d been asking it for a while.

‘It’s red,’ Connor said.

‘Thank fuck,’ North said fervently. ‘Okay! He’s not dead, his system just probably forced him into shutdown for his own safety. Not great, but we can clean up some things through the diagnostic machine before he comes to. I’m going to walk you through everything, okay? You’re doing just great.’

Connor didn’t feel like he was doing great at all. He wanted to collapse, and he wanted to cry, and he wanted to hide until Hank woke up again. He knew that none of those things would be helpful.

It took two hours of North on the phone – Connor having to stop working the panel at one point to put his phone on charge. She walked him through a manual flush of excess junk code which took far longer than it was supposed to. She walked him through other procedures that she didn’t explain, and Connor followed blindly, Sumo now lying at Hank’s crooked legs, head on his ankle, asleep.

She walked him through trying to remember to breathe deeply, because hyperventilating affected him so much he was too dizzy to see properly sometimes.

Eventually, after two hours, the LED switched to yellow. Hank still didn’t wake, but seeing the yellow was such a relief that Connor’s chest ached, a sharp pain throbbing through him.

‘It’s yellow,’ he said.

‘Good. It’s not going to go back to blue, but don’t worry. You’re going to have…really, about forty eight hours before he needs to come in, and it’ll have to be the lab. I need a fuckton of power to work on a system like his.’

‘He won’t come,’ Connor said, hating how childish he sounded then, a whine in his voice.
‘Oh, he’ll fucking come,’ North bit out. ‘Now, we’re going to take the port out before his skin heals.’

‘It’s already starting to heal,’ Connor said, staring at the nanofluid skin self-repairing around the port attachment, trying to climb up it.

‘That’s great, actually,’ North said. ‘He’s self-repairing, that’s great. He’s going to need a lot of thirium, but that’s easy for us to get. Okay. Slide the port out. Yank it if you have to.’

Connor slid the port out and it retracted quickly into the diagnostic machine. Seconds later, Hank groaned, then shifted, and Connor staggered back to the bed and collapsed against it.

Hank moved sluggishly, reached behind to the back of his neck in jerking, unnatural movements, then said:

‘What the fuck?’

Connor sobbed once. It was him. It was him. It had to be him. Hank was staring at him now, looking around the room, looking at the open panel on his own diagnostic machine as he felt the blood at the back of his neck. A strange realisation seemed to cross his face as he looked back at Connor with wide eyes.

‘Give him to me, Connor,’ North spat. ‘Take me off speaker and put him on the fucking phone now. If he says no, punch him.’

Connor took the phone off speaker with shaking hands, so used to following instructions for the last two hours that he did it without thinking. He handed the phone to Hank.

Hank took it, staring at Connor unblinking, the LED on yellow. Slowly, he put the phone to his ear.

Connor couldn’t stay. He felt so sick. He pushed himself up as the minutes went by and walked like a newborn colt into the lounge, where he fell in slow motion beside the piano, shaking and shaking. He couldn’t get himself together. He didn’t even try. He’d done everything. Hank was awake, and Sumo was padding towards him curiously, pushing his broad, flat, wet nose against Connor’s face and making a grumbling noise.

Connor balled into himself, knees coming up to his chest, arms crossing over his face to hide it, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed. His eyes burned, every spasm of his chest more like retching than crying, the adrenaline hammering and hammering at him as it tried to skitter free of his system. He remembered this from when he was a child. And he remembered something very similar to it when Zlatko had comforted him after Hannah died. Somehow, it felt worse now.

The storm of it had started to slow when he felt Hank kneel beside him. He shook his head. Hank had been dead. Connor couldn’t deal with this. He thought he could. He knew Hank was going to leave, and probably by dying, but he couldn’t deal with this like he thought he could.

‘I can’t,’ Connor said, as Hank moved closer. ‘I can’t. You- You were gone- I can’t, I can’t’.

‘Okay,’ Hank was saying. ‘We’re going to see North not tomorrow, but the day after. She needs about twenty four hours to make some orders. Okay? Okay, Connor?’

It just made him cry anew all over again and he pawed out at Hank, pushing him away without looking.

‘You need thirium,’ Connor said, his voice broken.
‘Ah, hell,’ Hank muttered, standing shakily after a second. ‘North said the same thing. Hang on then.’

The sound of Hank walking across the room into the kitchen, opening the fridge, drinking more thirium than normal. Connor’s crying tapered off and his body was cramped and sore, and Sumo had decided that the space next to Connor’s bent left leg was prime real estate, having gone back to sleep.

Hank came back, knelt down again, then he reached out and gently threaded his fingers through Connor’s hair.

‘It’s… Come on, Connor. I’m awake. North explained what happened. She thought I might have done it on purpose.’

‘Did you?’ Connor said, head raising, the thought never having occurred to him until now.

‘No,’ Hank said, smiling crookedly. ‘No, I promise. I wouldn’t do that to-’

Hank looked down.

Connor’s hand splayed over his face as he looked away.

I wouldn’t do that to you.

But he had done it, and Connor hated it. He couldn’t remember crying over his mother leaving. Had he? He couldn’t remember. Maybe he had. It had seemed fine at the time. It made sense. Of course she’d leave. The world was horrible, especially the world according to Perkins, so she had to leave. And Hank thought the world was horrible too, so of course he’d leave. By accident or on purpose.

He’d leave.

Connor’s whimper was involuntary, embarrassing, and Hank reached out and touched his hair again.

‘Your stress levels are so goddamn high,’ Hank said, his voice breaking in a way that Connor didn’t know it could. He sounded sad.

‘They were worse before,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘Yeah, okay. Fucking hell. Connor, I promise we’re going in to see North in two days. First thing that morning. Sooner, even, if the parts come in.’

Connor wasn’t sure what to say, what to do. Hank was talking, behaving like normal, but he hadn’t been there. Connor had thirium drying sticky and turning clear all over his hands and fingers, he smelled of chemical lubricant and Hank’s blood, it was on his legs, on the CyberLife shirt, on his face.

He wanted to trust Hank, he wanted the comfort, but he felt like it wasn’t safe. He’d been lying to himself all this time.

‘What…what did she say?’ Connor said, rubbing at his eyes. ‘To make you go?’

‘She played back you panicking,’ Hank said after a pause. ‘She knew it was her most convincing argument.’

‘Oh,’ Connor said. He imagined his broken, hyperventilating voice coming from North’s sound processors, and laughed.
‘Connor,’ Hank said, then paused. ‘Connor, come on, you can’t stay here.’

But Connor didn’t move, body aching, so cold he couldn’t feel the tips of his fingers. He didn’t know if he could stand. He almost wanted to tell Hank not to worry about it, to just go back to bed, but of course Hank couldn’t. He was covered in thirium. The diagnostic station would need to be cleaned. Connor closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead and couldn’t talk, couldn’t think.

He felt fingertips brush over his hand, where his fingers splayed above his head. Hank was silent, then took a breath that was audible, a relief to hear. But Connor didn’t trust his relief either.

What if North couldn’t help Hank at all? What then? Connor had spent a long time not bothering to love people and he’d been fine with it. Honestly, he hadn’t cared. He hadn’t looked for it, he hadn’t wanted it, and he picked the worst Doms because they were the easiest to leave. Somewhere, he’d made a mistake. Somewhere, he’d let this happen, and he’d not prepared himself for an inevitability he couldn’t process.

‘Connor, you’re in shock,’ Hank said. ‘We’ll get you warmed up in the shower, okay? I need to get the thirium off me anyway. It’s matting my hair together, I can just feel it.’

Was Connor angry? He couldn’t tell. Was he angry at Hank, for not taking his own health more seriously?

‘Hey,’ Hank said.

‘Go away.’

Hank inhaled sharply, then placed a hand on Connor’s shoulder and squeezed hard enough that it hurt.

‘Connor, this is an order, come with me to the shower and we’ll talk about it after you’ve warmed up. Can you stand?’

This is an order.

Orders were good. He’d been following North’s for hours. Absently, he lowered his hands to the ground and pushed up, but one of his legs had turned numb and the other was filled with pins and needles. He gasped hoarsely, and Hank caught him as the numb leg refused to carry his weight. Connor clung to his shirt and waited, the feeling returning, his feet so cold they felt like lumps of clay at the end of his legs.

Eventually, he had enough of a sense of them that Hank could help him back down the hallway. Connor turned back and stared at the entrance to Cole’s room, and was still looking back when they couldn’t see the hallway anymore and they were nearly in the ensuite bathroom.

‘Jesus,’ Hank muttered, as he leaned Connor against the bathroom counter and took off his shirt. He took Connor’s hands in his own and turned them, staring at the thirium on them. ‘Manual overrides are nasty.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘I didn’t mean for me,’ Hank said, and then he went to touch the smear of thirium on Connor’s face, and Connor flinched backwards. ‘Jesus,’ Hank said, low and fervent, his eyes wide and worried.

He stripped quickly, his shirt making a squelching sound as it unstuck from his back. It slopped to
the ground and Hank stared at it, then grimaced.

‘Gonna have to drink more thirium after this.’

Connor only nodded.

Hank turned the taps, adjusting them, and then stepped into the shower first, holding Connor’s wrist and drawing him in afterwards. It was a large, generous shower, not that androids ever needed to use them.

*Except during times like this,* Connor thought, feeling a little hysterical.

As soon as the water touched his hands, he jerked, panicking that Hank was broken somehow, didn’t understand water temperature anymore. It was so hot.

‘Connor,’ Hank said, not letting him go, ‘it’s fine, you need to warm up.’

It wasn’t until the rest of Connor’s arm was under the water that he realised it wasn’t too hot at all. It was his hands, icy and cold, stinging under the lukewarm spray. He shuddered when he stepped into the shower properly, feet burning, starting to shiver and feeling more miserable than before.

‘The shivering is good,’ Hank said softly. ‘Your body’s going to try and warm you up now. Hey, stand under the spray a bit more. That’s it, you can lean into me.’

Beneath his distress, his fear, his grief, a slow anger curdled and thickened.

‘You—you could have died,’ Connor said.

‘I know.’

‘You could have *died*. I thought you- I thought you were *dead*.‘

Hank said nothing at all, and Connor stared down at a point on his chest as the shower sprayed them both, sounding like the rain. Hank reached behind them and slowly increased the temperature, and Connor hissed as his hands and feet began to feel like they were burning again. He knew it wasn’t that hot. But…

‘It’s too warm for you,’ Connor said. ‘You shouldn’t be in here! This is bad for you!’

‘It’s fine,’ Hank said.

*It’s not.*

‘Connor,’ Hank said, using his name the way teachers did, the way anyone did when they needed to get his attention. ‘My processors might not be doing so great, but my manufacture model is durable, and I can withstand temperatures a lot hotter than these, for a lot longer. I’m not leaving you in here on your own.’

Connor almost laughed. Instead, his breathing turned shallow, and Hank rested a palm flat on his chest and felt his heartbeat and watched him. Connor refused to look up. He didn’t even want to see the LED. He felt sick.

Hank stopped pushing him, stopped explaining things, and stayed close. Connor found him easier to deal with then, and he let Hank clean him, blankly watching the suds lather between his fingers and over his hands, Hank massaging the soap in to remove the thirium. Eventually, he stopped shivering, his body properly warming, and Hank soaped him all over, careful of the bruises still healing on his
Connor knew he should have offered to help Hank wash his own hair and neck, but he didn’t. He watched Hank do it himself. Watched the strands of hair – not real hair, but some strange plastic-nanite blend that felt softer than real hair – fall through his broad fingers. Watched as Hank ran his own fingers over the back of his neck, which looked completely normal, like Connor had never mutilated him at all.

And Connor stared at the back of his neck and thought that he’d had his fingers inside it. Like some experiment at Zlatko’s house. He’d shoved his own fingertips in there, over the chassis that formed the core of him, and pressed strange metal buttons in an impossible code, all while thirium squelched and swam and moved around his skin.

At once, he staggered out of the shower, slipped until his foot hit the bathroom mat, then stumbled over to the toilet and vomited. He heard Hank swearing, and then a few seconds later, the water shut off and Connor was draped with a thick, heavy towel. But when Hank’s hand rested on his upper back, Connor shrugged it free, irritation flashing through him. So Hank stood nearby, and Connor spat until his mouth felt clean, and then rinsed his mouth out with water at the bathroom tap, brushing his teeth to get rid of the taste.

He dried himself with the towel, watched as Hank did the same, and then left the bathroom before Hank did, reaching for one of his own shirts this time and pulling it on. Then he stood by the bed, and finally got into it, all the warmth gone.

When Hank came back into the bedroom, dressed in new sleep clothes, he looked at Connor and seemed awkward. And Connor watched him, wondered if that meant he was broken, if he wasn’t himself.

‘I need to get some more thirium,’ Hank said.

Connor got up and followed him automatically, even when Hank told him that he didn’t have to. Connor stood there, arms folded, watched him drink down two more bottles of thirium and thought that it was convenient that androids could literally replace their blood that way. It made the gravity of it seem less somehow.

As Hank drew out one more bottle, Connor walked up to him, reached past him and opened the fridge, and pulled out the bottle of vodka. He had the screw top off and had swallowed a whole glass worth by the time Hank reached for it and tried to take it off him.

Connor stepped away, Hank followed.

Calmly, even though he was filled with so much fury it was like fire in his veins, Connor saw himself from a distance lifting the bottle and then slamming it down into the counter with so much force that vodka and glass went everywhere. Then, holding the top of the bottle, sharp shards pointed outwards at Hank, he walked back to the fridge – glass getting into his bare feet – and took out the other bottle of vodka.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Hank said.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Connor retorted, annoyed at Hank’s surprised look, annoyed that Hank thought this was the first time Connor had sworn around him and it wasn’t. But Hank didn’t know that, because he’d nearly died. Connor didn’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t been there. North refused to say.
Hank raised his hands, his LED flickered to red, and Connor’s eyes shot to it and stayed there. But it turned yellow again, and Connor took shaking breaths and looked down at his feet and realised one was bleeding. Maybe both. It was hard to tell. The smell of the sediment at the bottom of the vodka bottle was sharp in the air.

‘Put everything down,’ Hank ordered.

‘No.’

‘You’re doing that thing again, where you’re trying to tell me you’re unimpressed with my behaviour, but you end up hurting yourself. You’re bleeding.’

‘Don’t tell me what I’m doing.’

‘Connor!’ Hank’s voice rose, and Connor thought he even looked a little afraid, which was so stupid. Of the two of them, Connor had far more reasons to be frightened, to feel awful. The problem was he didn’t know what to do with it all. Hank was acting like it was fine, and Connor didn’t think he’d ever feel fine again.

When Hank stepped towards him, Connor took a step backwards and nearly slipped on the vodka. Hank stopped. Connor noticed his own hands were shaking. He didn’t think he was in shock anymore, but he had a barely held down violence inside of him. He didn’t remember feeling like this since the highball, since the apartment building in Grenville, and trying to shoot Hank point blank, and missing every single time.

‘Talk to me at least,’ Hank begged.

‘Fuck off, Hank.’

The words felt wrong coming out of his mouth and he hated saying them, but he could see from Hank’s face that he’d made his point.

At that moment, Sumo padded into the room, and Hank took one look at him, expression creasing. Sumo had stopped just before the vodka and broken glass, but he looked like he wanted to walk over to them.

‘Sumo,’ Hank ordered. ‘Bedroom.’

Sumo turned around and padded back to the bedroom easily, the training having paid off. Hank looked back at Connor and seemed to be thinking, and Connor stood there and realised he didn’t know how to stop himself. He couldn’t put the full or the broken bottle down. He couldn’t tamp down his own violence. He was so angry, but a part of him begged Hank to make him stop.

‘Connor,’ Hank said, and then one of his hands fist. ‘If you don’t put everything down, I’ll spank you.’

Connor’s fingers clenched on the necks of the bottle, and rage surged inside of him.

‘What do I get to do to you then? What do I get to do, when you- When you go and- When-’

Hank marched over to him, uncaring about the broken pieces of glass, his nanofluid skin stopping him from slipping on the vodka. And Connor was fighting with himself not to bring the bottle down against Hank, when Hank reached out so quickly it was an inhuman blur and grasped it. He jerked it from Connor’s hand and placed it on the counter. Then with both hands, he took hold of the broken bottle and Connor’s wrist, and twisted Connor’s wrist hard enough that the nerves responded
automatically, Connor’s fingers jerking open.

Hank took the broken half of the bottle and placed it on the counter. He kept his hold on Connor’s wrist. Connor reached out to claw at him with his other hand, and Hank grabbed that too. Connor was breathing hard, wanted to yell at Hank but couldn’t bring himself to do it, not even now. He’d already said far more to Hank than he thought he would. A desperate thing grew inside of him, wanting to split out of his torso, and he breathed around it, stared at Hank.

‘You need more thirium,’ Connor said.

‘It can wait,’ Hank said, sounding pissed off now. He turned Connor towards the counter, twisting both of his arms behind his back as he went and holding his wrists in one firm grip. With his other hand, he dragged out Connor’s hips, and Connor kicked backwards and yelped when he made contact with Hank’s leg, driving whatever glass was in his foot deeper.

‘No!’ Connor shouted.

‘Say one of your fucking words, goddamn it.’

Hank’s hand wallopced over his boxers, a fast burst of blows that had Connor hiccupping out a gasp and falling still. It hurt over the bruises from their last scene. It was such a welcome distraction from the carnage inside of him that his head dropped forwards, limp.

He didn’t say either one of the words.

Hank stopped, his hand shifting over Connor’s wrists, almost like he wanted to let go. But he didn’t.

‘Do you even feel the pain in your feet?’ Hank asked.

‘No, Sir,’ Connor said roughly.

‘No?’

‘It’s distant.’

The hand Hank spanked him with came and rested up on the counter, near his mouth, and Connor reacted quickly. He’d bitten down into his skin, hard enough to cause thirium to ooze around his teeth, before Hank could jerk his forearm away.

‘What the fuck?’

But Connor had stopped, staring at the thirium leaking from the bite mark.

He’d seen bodies like that at Zlatko’s. Bite marks. Thirium or blood having trickled down and drying in place. He shuddered and felt ill again, tasted chemicals against his teeth and heaved a gasp even as Hank’s fingers over his wrists tightened.

‘I am not your goddamn enemy,’ Hank said.

Connor realised that Hank had no idea what to do with him, but Connor didn’t know either. He was spiralling apart, and vaguely, he thought this might be what they meant by ‘triggered’ when they talked about post-traumatic stress. Because Connor’s hands had been inside Hank’s body the way Zlatko’s hands would have been inside people’s bodies. Because Connor had been mutilating him, killing him, and he couldn’t separate that from the knowledge that it was the only thing that had made Hank wake up.
He was a monster, and Hank had made him one. Made him one, because he’d didn’t go see someone to get himself fixed, because he’d convinced them both that he was fine.

‘You have to see North,’ Connor said, his forehead against the counter. His feet were starting to throb. ‘Please. Please see her. Can she come over now?’

‘She needs to get some parts,’ Hank said patiently. ‘And then we’re both going to see her. If the parts arrive tomorrow, we’ll go tomorrow. We’ll go as soon as we get the call – because you know she’s going to tell you too. We’re going to go together.’

‘It’s going to happen again.’ He said it more to himself, than to Hank. A quiet promise. He was going to have to do that again, and one day he’d be too frozen to do it. One day North would tell him to rip open Hank’s neck and get his hands in there, and Connor would fall and stare at Hank and be unable to do it.

‘It’s not,’ Hank said. ‘Everything North had you do at the diagnostic station was really helpful.’

‘She said you only had forty eight hours.’

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘But she wouldn’t dick you around about the length of time if she thought I had less. She means it. We have forty eight hours and we’re going to see her before then. Can I look at your feet now? Without you biting me?’

‘Doesn’t your neck hurt?’

Hank hesitated for a long time, and that meant it did. Connor had hurt him. He screwed his eyes shut. What if he’d done it wrong? What if he’d gotten Hank functional, but he was in pain forever? What if that made Hank shut down again?

‘Hey,’ Hank said. ‘It’s healing, and it’s just my systems telling me that someone did a manual override. Normally that means someone’s trying to hack my system. That’s all. Okay,’ Hank said, and then his stance shifted. ‘I’m going to pick you up and set you on the counter, okay? Don’t fight me.’

Connor felt too weak to bother. Hank let go of his wrists and then lifted him easily, setting him down on the kitchen counter next to the bottle of vodka and the broken bottle. Connor’s throat and chest still burned from what he’d had to drink. The anger flashed and abated, a faulty strobe in his brain. He watched as Hank methodically picked up all the large pieces of glass, placing them in a large bowl, then cleaned the kitchen of vodka and tiny shards. He wiped down the cabinets, the top of the kitchen counter around Connor, and cleaned the fridge too. Vodka and glass had gone everywhere. Hank even walked away from the kitchen and found a bit more to clean, silently and efficiently getting through it while Connor watched him, felt useless, and relieved that Hank did seem normal.

He did.

Connor wanted so badly to relax and accept it, but he couldn’t.

He watched as Hank methodically picked up all the large pieces of glass, placing them in a large bowl, then cleaned the kitchen of vodka and tiny shards. He wiped down the cabinets, the top of the kitchen counter around Connor, and cleaned the fridge too. Vodka and glass had gone everywhere. Hank even walked away from the kitchen and found a bit more to clean, silently and efficiently getting through it while Connor watched him, felt useless, and relieved that Hank did seem normal.

He did.

Hank came back, cleaned his hands, and then fetched the first aid kit. He knelt on the tiles, and then sighed as he lifted one of Connor’s feet to look at the underside. He had the bowl by his side again, and started pulling out tiny slivers of glass with his fingers. There didn’t seem to be that many, but Connor knew he’d cut himself on a couple of larger pieces from the way Hank pressed his fingers into two of the larger wounds.

He watched, gripping the counter tightly as Hank cleaned his feet of blood, then wiped them over
with a medical disinfectant. After that, wound closure strips were applied over the two largest cuts, pulling the skin together. They wouldn’t fall off for at least a week, the bio-adhesive working to seal the wound and fastening to his skin properly.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, and he stood, sliding his hands around Connor’s waist and helping him off the counter. When Connor’s feet touched the ground, they still didn’t hurt that much. But he didn’t think he felt numb like before.

Hank stood over him, watched him, and then sighed. ‘You’re really mad at me, huh?’

‘I think so.’

‘You’re not used to it, are you? Being angry with someone, knowing what to do about it. Bet you never got many opportunities to be mad in the past.’

‘You have to drink more thirium.’

‘I—Yeah, whatever,’ Hank said, exasperated. He walked over to the kitchen, had another bottle and then held it up when he’d finished. ‘It’s fine. I’ve had plenty. I’m going to slosh at this point.’

Connor said nothing, and Hank walked back over to him, eyes searching his face.

‘Right,’ Hank said. ‘You’re not going to feel reassured no matter what I do. So as long as you’re not trying to break things or bite me, I think we’re doing fine.’

‘You could have died. I thought you were dead.’

‘I mean fine in the sense that you’re not trying to destroy things and I’m not a piece of inanimate plastic and metal anymore. Okay? It’s relative. Jesus Christ.’

‘It’s mean to leave Sumo alone like that,’ Connor said. ‘It was mean to leave him at Kara’s. It’s heartless.’

He half-expected Hank to say something asinine, reminding Connor that he didn’t have a heart. What he didn’t expect was Hank leaning in and pressing his lips to Connor’s, brushing them gently over his mouth.

‘It is mean,’ Hank said against sensitive skin.

Connor twitched a nod. ‘He was really upset.’

Sumo hadn’t actually been that upset at all. He’d fallen asleep against Hank’s legs, and probably didn’t understand what was happening.

Hank kissed him again, pushed a little harder, as though seeing what Connor would do. But Connor was tired, he was still scared, he liked hearing Hank’s voice and seeing his LED and feeling his mouth against him. Connor leaned in, and Hank placed his hands on Connor’s arms, rubbing them slowly.

‘He was really upset, Hank,’ Connor said.

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘So I probably shouldn’t do that to Sumo again, should I?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘Never.’

Hank nodded, then threaded his fingers through Connor’s. ‘Come on, you should get some sleep.’
Connor followed him, and his gait shifted when he realised that actually, his feet did hurt if he put all of his weight on them at certain angles. Hank watched like he would pick him up if he thought Connor needed it, but once he changed the weight distribution it was fine.

Back in Hank’s room, he eased onto the bed and looked at Sumo, who was watching them both sleepily from his mat. Sumo looked fine.

Connor stretched his legs out on the bed and leaned back against the pillows, still sitting, and watched Hank move around the room. Then Hank went into the bathroom, and from the sounds, was probably cleaning up their thirium-stained clothing and the floor. When he came back ten minutes later, he watched Connor with that same calculating expression.

‘I have an idea,’ Hank said finally. ‘But you have to tell me if you don’t want to do it.’

He slid into bed easily, moving the blankets up over them both, and then he pulled Connor towards him, until Connor was lying on his side, facing away from Hank, back pressed to Hank’s chest. It was easy to let it all happen. He felt wrung out. Still a little angry, but in a way that pulsed resentfully inside him, instead of burning out of him in violence.

When Hank firmly shuffled Connor’s boxers down, he turned to see what Hank was doing and was pushed firmly forwards instead.

‘Stay,’ Hank said. ‘I just want to be in you.’

Connor took a deep breath, confused, because this wasn’t like anything else they’d done before.

Hank’s fingers were slick – probably from the lubricant he could get from the tip of his cock, or from his mouth – when they brushed between his ass cheeks. They moved slowly, easing between the curves of flesh until they could rub against Connor’s entrance. And Connor knew from how slow Hank was going, that he was waiting for Connor to say he didn’t want this. Waiting for Connor to say it wasn’t appropriate, after everything that had just happened.

Connor didn’t care about that, and he pushed his sore hips back, eyes closing.

Thick fingers slid into him, two at once, and Connor flinched at the stretch and then bore it.

‘That’s it,’ Hank purred, sounding so pleased with him that Connor almost moaned, something bereft and needy stirring in his chest. ‘That’s it. You’re being so good, boy. Look at how good you’re being.’

It was more praise than normal, for something so simple, and Connor shivered into the sheets. Warmth eased into him, making the base of his feet throb, but Connor focused on the fingers moving inside of him, slow thrusts and withdrawals, spreading him and making everything wet and slippery, Connor’s body heat warming Hank’s hand.

Hank skated his fingers over Connor’s prostate until he couldn’t help but whimper, and Hank continued to praise him for it, like it was hard, like he was impressed, until something cracked apart in Connor’s body and he didn’t want to move anymore.

That was when Hank shifted him again, sliding his fingers out and moving forwards until he could push the head of his thick cock into him. Connor gasped, and Hank pulled on his hip and rolled his cock forwards until Connor felt too full, and Hank was settled all the way inside of him. Then Hank slid a hand around Connor’s waist, palm pressing flat to his pelvis, and he hooked Connor’s hips back into his, until they were so snug that for a second Connor couldn’t breathe.
His breaths were shaky after that, but Hank didn’t move. After a while, when Connor shifted, trying to get Hank to fuck him, Hank just held him in place.

‘This is all we’re doing,’ Hank said. ‘You can handle it, can’t you?’

Connor was used to offering cock warming with his mouth, he wasn’t used to this. Wasn’t used to the constant, unwavering fullness that was nothing like a plug, and the feeling of Hank so close behind him, and the ache in his own cock as he wanted more. But he wanted this too. Except that it was hard to relax into it, hard to settle.

After another few minutes, Connor experimented with rolling his hips back, undulating onto Hank’s cock.

Hank held him still.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You can use one of your words and we’ll stop. But otherwise, I’m going to stay deep inside of you, and you’ll be able to feel my air compressors working, and my arms around you, and you can deal with it.’

It didn’t sound soothing at all. It was confrontational, Hank making it clear that he wanted Connor to know he was alive and right there, at a time when Connor was trying to detach himself, trying to put distance between them, trying to use anger to make sure they both knew that they couldn’t have moments like this anymore.

And there was Hank, ignoring all of it, making sure Connor knew they could still have this, that he wasn’t going to let Connor escape it.

Connor felt stuck for several minutes, paralysed with indecision, feeling full, his body beginning to overheat with arousal. He focused on his breathing, and he couldn’t help but feel the way Hank breathed behind him, the way his fingers shifted on his skin.

Agitation came and went. At its peak, Connor began fidgeting, and Hank held onto him harder and told him to give it up already, and Connor felt a surge of anger return and he started to claw at Hank’s arms, and then made himself stop. And as a reward for that, Hank petted him and told him he was good until Connor curled forwards. Or he tried. Hank wouldn’t even let him do that.

After the agitation, Connor felt his eyes tear up, his throat working around caught breaths. It wasn’t fair that Hank could do this now, after what had happened. It wasn’t fair, and he hated that he needed this, and hated that he didn’t know how to trust it.

Hank must have known he was crying, but he didn’t say anything about it. After a while, languidly stroking Connor’s side, he said:

‘I’m so sorry, Connor. You deserve so much better than what happened tonight.’

Connor didn’t know if it was about deserving, but he liked that Hank apologised, even as it cut into him.

‘Ah, Jesus, I am,’ Hank continued, his voice rougher than before. ‘I’m so sorry. I want to be with you. Not in some half-assed way. And tonight was bad. I know. You’ve been trying so hard, and then I go and pull this shit on you.’

It wasn’t fair that Hank would talk about it now, while he was deep inside of Connor at the same time, a spell woven over his body to keep him compliant.
‘Don’t…’ Connor breathed, and then made himself stop. But a few seconds later he said, helplessly: ‘Don’t leave me again. Don’t leave me.’

‘I don’t want to,’ Hank said. ‘I swear, I promise, I don’t want to. You saved me tonight. You shouldn’t have to, but you did. You were so brave. You’re so good. How could anyone want to leave you? You make me want to stay.’

Connor felt like he should have said something, acknowledged the words, but instead he felt them deep inside, a shaky balm over some yawning pit of hurt. He wanted, desperately, for all of it to be true, and it was easy to believe when Hank held him the way he did, leaned into him, pressed so far inside of him that it ached in the best way. Connor started to relax properly, even as tears continued to fall.

He reached up and brushed them away. He couldn’t remember having cried so much in his whole life. Not for any reason. Not for anyone.

‘Don’t leave me,’ Connor whispered.

Hank’s body shifted to get closer, and it churned his cock where it rested in Connor. His breathing hitched, it felt good, even as he knew it wasn’t going to go any further. He liked Hank’s broad hands resting insistently against him, liked Hank’s face pressed up against the back of his neck. The fear and anguish seemed to shudder inside of him, giving way a little, letting him settle.

He’d been sure he wouldn’t be able to sleep for the next forty eight hours, until Hank was fixed properly. Or as properly as he could be. But instead, he fell asleep after ten minutes of Hank breathing against him, deep inside of him, surrounding him and alive. At least for now, alive.
The first thing Connor did when he woke was check Hank’s LED. As he pushed up, Hank placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, and Connor saw that the LED was yellow, and he was still functioning, and Hank looked like maybe he hadn’t slept. Hank was no longer inside him, and Connor’s ass felt normal, which meant Hank had probably withdrawn some time ago.

Connor reached for his phone, but there was nothing from North except a text saying she’d placed a rush order on a few component parts. Hank’s CyberLife factory model was rare and elite, but bodyguard models needed repairing and upgrades all the time, which meant the parts were around, but they were expensive and expedited shipping on one part in particular cost over a thousand dollars, which was nothing on the cost of the part itself. Connor stared at the bill.

‘Is that extortion?’ Connor said. ‘Did they add an extra zero to the shipping?’

‘Nah,’ Hank said, then laughed. ‘You gotta figure they know that people want to get their bodyguards working as well as possible, as quickly as possible. I’m used to it. Can’t even begin to tell you what a fuck-around it is to get parts from CyberLife or other markets. It’s always been that way. Besides, I can pay for it. I can do it now, if you want.’

Connor was still angry. At himself, at Hank, at how easily they’d both slipped into complacency over something so important. Connor wanted to needle at him with questions. Why did he never speak about Cole but constantly look into his room? Why did he do it when he knew it could make him shut down? Why would he leave Connor alone like that?

He wasn’t being fair. It wasn’t like Hank had planned for it, it wasn’t even suicide, it was – from what Jonathan from CyberLife had said – an inevitable malfunction. They’d both dropped the ball on keeping up with Hank’s health.

‘Your stress levels are still high,’ Hank said.

‘I can’t imagine why, Hank,’ Connor said, realising how bitchy those words sounded, how passive aggressive, and hated that too. He slid out of bed and took off his shirt, walking towards the shower. But no, he’d only showered a few hours ago. He made a beeline to the closet instead. Hank sighed behind him.

‘You know she might not be able to fix me,’ Hank said. ‘North fucked me up good when she reverted me. You should probably prepare yourself for-’

Connor stalked out of the closet and folded his arms, staring at Hank. Daring him to say it. Like
Connor hadn’t been hyperventilating over it only a few hours ago. Like he didn’t feel exhausted, terrified, like it didn’t plague his thoughts already. Between the anger were bursts of numbness, even despair, and Connor was tired.

Hank had the grace to look apologetic as he closed his mouth.

Connor knew that Hank still had no idea what to do. He was so unused to seeing Hank out of his element. One of the things he’d come to trust was Hank’s ability to know what to do in every situation. He took control easily, and the majority of the time a situation worked out because of it. When it didn’t, Hank took control of that too.

Seeing him like this – vulnerable, unsure what to say – was upsetting on another level. He wanted Hank to be easy to read, consistent, always taking control, but Hank was a person, and he wouldn’t always know what to do. It made it harder to be angry. Connor wasn’t used to wanting to protect people that weren’t his mother, or Hannah Abaroa. He hadn’t felt the urge in a long time, and he hated how powerless he still felt in the face of his own need to help someone.

He couldn’t do anything at all.

‘I’m proud of you,’ Hank said, as Connor finished getting dressed without saying a word. ‘The way you handled the whole situation. Goddamn, manual overrides are nasty, and you got through it, I know it must’ve been…’

Connor didn’t wait to hear the rest of what Hank had to say. He left down the corridor, his heart pounding sickeningly as he passed Cole’s room – the place where Hank had collapsed – and went into the kitchen. There, he could still see two glasses in the sink that had been full of thirium the night before. He closed his eyes and stood there, unable to think of what to do, until several minutes later a dressed Hank padded into the room and walked up to him.

They both said nothing, but Hank reached out and palmed his arm, and when Connor didn’t protest, he pulled him close. Connor bumped into Hank’s chest, his breathing was shaky when Hank slid his arms around Connor’s back, his palms over his shoulders.

It helped. Connor almost wished it didn’t, but it helped.

‘You must be exhausted,’ Hank said.

‘And you? You’re feeling fine?’

‘I feel like something took a dump in my processors, so no, not fine. My neck’s okay though. It repaired properly.’

Connor’s fingers twitched like they were pushing metal nodes, remembering what it was to be deep in Hank’s neck, certain that he was doing irreparable damage instead of helping.

‘I can’t do that again,’ Connor said.

‘Goddamn, I didn’t want you to have to do it at all,’ Hank said, almost to himself. ‘But it’s done now, I’m gonna look forward, we’re doing the most we can do. I know you’re not gonna like me saying this, but it’s good that you’re mad.’

‘We should do a scene,’ Connor said, not liking what they were talking about at all. He hated Hank’s hesitation. He knew Hank would be too careful, at least for the next few days. No more being ordered to his knees, nothing like that, until Hank felt like he wouldn’t hurt Connor further. Connor hated that. He’d seen Doms on the back foot before, but normally he was only meeting them in
passing, and he could walk away and find someone else.

Now he wished he wanted to walk away. Instead he wanted to console Hank, he wanted to remind him that they didn’t have to do anything at all, except Connor was itching for the mindlessness of a scene and frustrated and conflicted.

‘I think I’ll take you being pissed at me for saying no,’ Hank said. ‘Connor, you cut your feet open last night and I still don’t think you’ve really noticed that you’re walking on wounds today.’

Connor blinked, then looked down between them.

He hadn’t noticed.

He swallowed when Hank’s hand came up and feathered through his hair, before settling to grip the back of his neck. His touch was comforting. Connor wriggled his toes, felt a twinge in his foot. Now that he was paying attention, he could feel exactly where the largest cuts were, though it was the smallest ones that stung.

‘I’m not messing with you while you’re so far out of your body you don’t know dick about it,’ Hank said. ‘And that’s final.’

‘I don’t know what to do either,’ Connor said.

‘Yep. Honestly, I don’t think we’re both going to know until we see North, okay? I don’t even want to fucking see her, so just- Anyway, it doesn’t matter.’

‘Why do you hate her so much?’

Hank shook his head and stepped back, leaving Connor feeling unmoored. ‘Christ. Here’s hoping it’s just different next time.’

‘It will be.’

‘I’m going to see her anyway,’ Hank said, staring at Connor with something earnest and desperate in his eyes. ‘You know that, right? We’re going, and it’ll be sorted.’

Connor nodded and forced himself to take several deep breaths.

‘Go on,’ Hank said, waving him out of the kitchen. ‘Let me make you some breakfast. Some normalcy wouldn’t go astray, that’s for damn sure.’

* 

Connor played piano while Sumo – who had spent most of the morning lounging around outside under a rare burst of too-hot sunshine that had turned the world muggy and tropical – lay at his feet. Connor focused on the notes, the fragments of songs that he could now play without needing to pause every few seconds. He couldn’t play like Hank, but some of what he played now sounded like music instead of exercises or scales or something a primary school student might do.

He was glad to focus on it, even if he was painfully aware of the corner of the piano where he’d slid down and cried earlier that morning.

Crying wasn’t something he was used to doing when he was upset and he was still surprised by it. Crying because of overstimulation in scenes was fine, when it was because of choking on cock, it was fine, but crying because of being upset felt juvenile and childish and Connor still felt like he was
settling back into himself.

He closed his eyes, forced himself to take a breath, and hoped that whatever maintenance Hank was doing to the diagnostic station in his room would mean that he actually used it in the future, which would mean Connor wouldn’t ever have to use it again.

During a complex series of notes, Connor was interrupted by an ear-splitting siren that screamed through the house. As the alarm shrieked, the lights switched off and Connor pushed back the piano stool in shock as metal plates descended down from the windows throughout the house, clattering heavily. Flashing red lights replaced the friendly warmth of day.

Connor’s skin pulled taut, horror filling him. Sumo barked. The shape of Hank with what looked like an illegal bullpup rifle sprinted towards the front door.

The bang was louder than the alarm, and Connor dropped down, hands going over his ears. Before he could decide what to do, daylight streamed in through the front door, illuminating Hank and the blank expression on his face. A spray of gunshot from the bullpup was quickly drowned out by returned fire.

Hank looked at Connor as a bullet ripped off his cheek and part of his scalp. Thirium sprayed everywhere, plastic and metal chassis beneath exposed, Connor crying out. Hank staggered backwards, blue blossoming through his clothing at his chest, his gut, his thighs, and Connor realised what had happened even as he couldn’t make out what Hank was mouthing at him.

They’d been found. Hank’s shutdown had an impact that stretched far beyond them.

They’d been found.

‘HANK!’

He couldn’t hear his own voice as he sprang into action. He lunged past Sumo, who was hanging back, scared and barking, the whites of his eyes showing. Connor saw Hank drop the bullpup as one of his wrists was blown away, gunfire ripping him apart. Hank’s LED turned a solid, unforgiving red.

After that, twenty everted androids – faces blank, LEDs all cycling yellow– streamed in, grabbing Hank. Some of them stared at Connor blankly, each holding a gun in their right hand, even though they didn’t raise them to attack.

Gabriel sauntered in behind them wearing a long heavy duster, looking around the house as the alarm was shut down and the lights switched from red back to warmth. The metal shutters on the windows receded. Connor’s ears rang, and he ran forwards unthinking as the androids dragged Hank out of their home. Sumo barked and barked but didn’t move.

‘Ah,’ Gabriel said, though Connor made out the shape more than he could hear it. His last glimpse of Hank was of the androids doing something to him that turned his LED red and made his eyes close. ‘He was already malfunctioning, wasn’t he? It was only a matter of time before we found you.’

Connor’s head was clearing, he could hear himself breathing. He couldn’t make himself move, too scared of Gabriel, the guns, even as thirium painted the foyer and the tiles beyond. He was so, so useless in an emergency.

Why was it always like this?

‘You can’t take him,’ Connor said.
‘Good morning, Connor Perkins,’ Gabriel said, smiling. Even today, his salt and pepper beard didn’t have a hair out of place. ‘Aren’t you more afraid for your own life, than for that of an appliance? Don’t worry, we won’t even need to torture you this time. We’ll save you for the Chariot to deal with later. But you are a bother, so I’ve found someone to keep you out of the way. He was incredibly eager. Consider it a gift.’

Gabriel raised his arm and snapped his elegant fingers.

Connor’s blood ran cold when he saw who came in through the main door. All at once, he could feel a cold brick wall at his back, fingers digging hungrily into his jeans, a swamp of fear trapping him.

‘Hey, fuckface,’ Gavin said, dressed in full uniform and spinning his gun in his fingers. Connor had always hated that habit. ‘Hear you’re fucking stuff up for the Captain, as usual.’

‘Gavin, seriously, you-’

‘You shut the fuck up,’ Gavin snarled. That was the thing with Gavin, he was anger first and logic second, and Connor swallowed roughly. Every minute that passed, Hank was getting further and further away. Connor felt like he had in the basement at Zlatko’s, acutely aware of how little time he had left, when it turned out to be not enough time for Hannah anyway. He couldn’t believe he was just standing there, but Gavin had a gun, and Gabriel had the might of Veritas behind him.

‘You can’t do this,’ Connor said to Gabriel.

He backed away as Gavin approached him, legs hitting the couch. But when Sumo growled, Connor froze, terrified. Sumo had nothing to do with any of this, and he was so harmless. Thankfully Gavin didn’t point the gun at Sumo, and Connor stared at Gavin as he was handcuffed with the same cuffs that he’d used on him in the bedroom, willing him to stop and see sense.

Gabriel smiled, like talking to Connor was the best part of his day. ‘You seem to think that you and your fancy Swiss Army toaster stand a chance against us, but we have sacred truths on our side. Androids shouldn’t be allowed to have consciousness, to self-direct their lives with any autonomy. You’d realise that if there wasn’t something deeply wrong with you.’

‘Do you actually believe any of that?’ Connor said. ‘You’re just a front to sell red ice, and we know it.’

Gabriel tapped his nose like they were sharing a secret. His green eyes gleamed. ‘Can’t it be both?’

He walked over, patting Connor’s cheek with his too-warm hand, then turned to Gavin:

‘Do what you like with him. Just keep him busy for forty eight hours. It’s all we need.’

‘Got it,’ Gavin said.

Gabriel’s face turned cold, like he no longer cared now that he’d gotten what he wanted, and he turned and left.

The smell of gunpowder was sharp and acrid in the air. Sumo whined nearby, tail hanging still and uncertain, but he didn’t look as scared, and Connor hoped – as Gavin dragged him away by the cuffs – that he’d be safe, he’d be good, that he wouldn’t leave Hank’s house. That someone would come for him.

‘Let me go,’ Connor said, feet stinging as he tried to brace himself on the slippery thirium of Hank’s blood as he was dragged across the foyer, as he was pulled across the porch. There was no one and
nothing there except Gavin’s unmarked detective vehicle. ‘I have to help him. Gavin, come on, please.’

‘Let me think about it?’ Gavin said in that shit-stirring voice he used. ‘Nah.’

‘I know you have a conscience,’ Connor pleaded as Gavin shoved him into the passenger seat. The door slammed shut, Gavin didn’t reply.

Connor twisted and opened the door as Gavin walked around the car, and he’d sprinted a fair distance before Gavin caught up with him. He fell forwards, Gavin taking out his ankle. Connor pushed his arms in front of him, forearms trapped together, skinning his palms and laughed abruptly when he realised this reminded him of the restraints Hank put on his wrists during his punishment.

‘You think it’s funny?’ Gavin said, grabbing him by the shirt and hauling him up. Connor winced as soon as Gavin raised his hand, and he moved his face away from the slap that followed, the tips of Gavin’s fingers scoring his cheek. ‘You’re such a little bitch. I have a conscience, asshole, you’re just on the wrong fucking side. You think you know more than your father? He’s the Captain, for fuck’s sake!’

‘He’s corrupt,’ Connor said. ‘You know he is.’

‘He said you’d say anything at all, and he was right. God, you’re so desperate. And now you get to go in the back of the fucking car where I should’ve put you in the first place.’

‘Please let me go,’ Connor said. ‘This has nothing to do with you.’

Gavin brutally pushed him onto the back seat, Connor lost his breath as he landed awkwardly on his back. He lay there, the door slamming into the flat of his bloodied foot, trying to get his thoughts in order.

He needed to escape. He needed to find Hank. He needed to talk to Fowler. He needed to find Veritas.

Like it was easy. Like anyone had been able to find the heart of Veritas so far. Like Hank would even be there.

Hopelessness threatened to drown him, he could feel it bubbling around him, viscous and oozing, as thick as the tropical air.

Gavin got into the driver’s seat, looking over his shoulder at Connor. They stared at each other, and Connor could see the anger there, knew Gavin would feel spiteful after the way Hank treated him last time. Gavin’s mean streak was impressive, it always had been.

‘If you don’t shut up,’ Gavin said, ‘I’ll shoot you and say it was an accident. You know the Captain will believe me.’

‘Even if he doesn’t,’ Connor said, ‘he’ll still take your side.’

Gavin blinked at that, then muttered something as he turned away, his swear words disappearing into the growl of the engine and the feel of the car pulling away from the place Connor thought of as home. Connor lay there, ears ringing, heart pounding, aware that he couldn’t do anything, it was impossible, and that he had to fix this anyway.

Somehow, he had to find a way to fix this before Hank was killed by his own programming, or Veritas.
We're here! I've loved writing Connor and Gavin's dynamic. I actually love Gavin and it's funny because one of my favourite pairings in the fandom is 900/Reed and I headcanon Gavin as a disaster sub most of the time. But I've really enjoyed writing him here as a disaster Dom instead. I like how Connor being human changes the way they interact, so that the mutual disdain is still there, but it riffs between them in different ways. ANYWAY, thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

Connor’s feet hurt.

Several hours of pain crashed down on him at once, and he pushed upright to look at his feet as his mind touched messily on so many different thoughts he couldn’t think. Some of the cuts had opened, but the bio-adhesive strips on the largest wounds held firm. Nothing looked infected.

He looked at Gavin in the rear view mirror, and Gavin glanced at him – impassive – before looking back at the road.

Connor had no idea where they were both going, had no idea where Hank had been taken. He had to concentrate at a time when he was terrible at focusing. He wasn’t good in an emergency. He panicked.

In a way, he was glad it was Gavin. Because he knew Gavin. He knew his ugliest sides, knew the breadth of his cruelty – those times when Gavin had been so mean he’d surprised himself and drunk heavily afterwards while Connor tended his own wounds – and he knew that Gavin hadn’t shot Sumo, hadn’t shot anyone yet, and was just following orders. He didn’t even think Gavin knew what a monster Perkins was.

‘You have to listen to me,’ Connor said.

‘You can talk as much as you want,’ Gavin said. But he reached down and turned on the radio, maxing out the volume. Rock music blared crunchily into Connor’s ears, and Connor rolled his eyes as his heart raced. It was all too fast, too much to deal with, but Gavin was a bizarrely calming influence. The worst Gavin would probably do to him was fuck him or hit him.

Connor had experienced both from Gavin. While he didn’t care for a repeat of what happened at the Broadbank Precinct – when Hank had intervened – he didn’t think the situation was the same when he was prepared for what Gavin could throw at him.

A minute later, he realised he still had his phone in his pocket. As covertly as possible he slipped it out, unlocking it. But as he pulled up North’s contact details, Gavin pulled over roughly. He swore, and as rock music blared, he undid his seatbelt, turned and hit Connor in the head with an open hand.

Connor retaliated, trying to shove Gavin’s hand away, keeping the phone out of range while Gavin reached for it.
After what amounted to a quick, short, vicious slap fight, Gavin got the phone out of Connor’s hands and threw it out of the window before driving again. He said something that was no doubt scathing, but Connor couldn’t hear him over the music. Instead, he stared blankly into the rear view mirror and when Gavin looked in it to check on him, Connor didn’t look away. He didn’t blink, he didn’t do anything except stare at him.

Gavin was stupid, and Gavin was annoying.

But Connor had always known how to aggravate him. There were two things he excelled at with Gavin. The first was pissing him off, and the second was distracting him with sex. Connor swallowed, briefly looking out the window. He bit the inside of his lip, easily decided that he would do anything to make sure Hank survived. But he was paralysed, afraid, certain that Hank might already be dead. They only had forty eight hours to get Hank to North. Less, with all the damage Hank had taken.

He tried not to see the image of Hank riddled with bullets, damaged, but it flashed in front of him over and over again, driving his anger higher. He didn’t want to be angry at Hank. He didn’t. But it warred with the desperate terror inside of him.

None of this would have happened if Hank had been more vigilant about his own health. Connor’s fingers dug into the car seat, he stared at the back of Gavin’s head and thought that Hank was probably going to be angry at him for whatever he started now, but he’d rather deal with Hank’s anger, than deal with him being dead.

He leaned forwards, pushing his arm over the shoulder rest, and let his hand rest near Gavin’s face. He kept his middle finger extended, the rest of his fingers closed in a fist.

Gavin tried slapping his hand away, and Connor moved his fist back and kept making the same rude gesture.

When Gavin swore, Connor still couldn’t hear him properly because of the noise of the music. And every time Gavin shoved his arm away – getting angrier each time – Connor moved his hand back to the same place and stared in the rear view mirror, that implacable look that had pissed Gavin off from the very beginning, when Connor had just been the Captain’s son and Gavin had no reason to feel so angry at someone with no power over him.

Gavin turned and yelled at him, a vicious anger in his eyes, and Connor just looked at him blankly and pointed at his ear to indicate he couldn’t understand him.

Then he held up his middle finger even higher in response.

Gavin made a sound of sheer frustration, taking a quick left. Connor was used to Gavin’s driving. As a police officer who came through Motor Squad, he didn’t like autonomous vehicles and was one of the detectives who knew how to drive. He was good at it – if reckless – and it meant he had to concentrate on the road instead of spending his time yelling at Connor or punishing him for being distracting.

So Connor slid his middle finger onto Gavin’s shoulder and pushed it against his ear. Outside the window, rows of hybrid tropical pines rolled past densely. They were in a plantation. Connor’s chest clenched. A great place to shoot someone and dump a body.

‘FUCK YOU, CONNOR!’ Gavin screamed.

The spark of schadenfreude, that gleam of enjoying making someone else’s life miserable flared. He
had it sometimes when he looked into his father’s eyes, or when he knew he was doing something Hank didn’t want him to do. But he enjoyed it the most with Gavin.

It was wrong, and he knew he shouldn’t, and the timing was terrible. But it was such a welcome relief to the nauseating fear clogging up his chest.

Gavin pulled the car down a side road, the dirt track raised and flood-gutters running widely down both sides. He turned off the engine and the radio at the same time. When he turned to grab Connor’s hand, Connor scooted back and yanked it out of the way.

‘I have to talk to you,’ Connor said.

Gavin stared with murder and spite in his eyes, breathing hard with frustration, and Connor knew he had to choose every sentence from here on in so, so carefully.

‘I will do anything,’ Connor said, ‘if you just listen to me. I know you hate me, I know you think I’m just some naïve idiot making Dad’s life miserable, but you remember what we had, don’t you? If you have forty eight hours to kill with me, I can make some of that enjoyable for you.’

Gavin’s lips pursed, his hand shifted, and it was only then that Connor realised he’d been resting it on his holstered gun.

‘The thing is, dipshit, I already know everything you’re going to say,’ Gavin said. ‘I could be convinced, but you’d have to fuckin’ work for it.’

Connor opened his mouth and Gavin held up his hand.

‘You think I want to hear you? After the way you’ve treated me?’

‘I don’t know what you think I can do in the back seat, and are you going to trust me in the front?’

‘You gonna escape?’

Connor looked through the window again and almost laughed. Gavin smirked at him, and Connor hated him and remembered why he’d decided to have a relationship with him at the same time. No one else would understand it, Hank certainly wouldn’t, but Gavin was easy to manipulate, and he was so cruel, and sometimes he enjoyed exactly the same things that Connor did. Gavin’s partner Tina had always hated them both, when they’d been in an antagonising mood at the same time.

‘You could shoot me if I try,’ Connor said.

‘Could? I will shoot you. Fuckin’ hanging up on me like you did, you little goddamn bitch. At least I can trust that you’re always ready to go no matter what, right? Your robot got all mad last time, but I know what you like.’

A wave of nausea crunched into him and Connor swallowed it down. He didn’t like the way Gavin’s expression shifted then, either, like he’d seen something on Connor’s face that made him uncomfortable instead of smug.

‘Are we doing this, or not?’ Connor said.

‘Come on, then,’ Gavin said, gesturing like he wanted Connor in the front seat.

Connor automatically tried the passenger door, but unsurprisingly it wouldn’t open. He realised then that Gavin wanted him to crawl from the back to the front over the seat and almost rolled his eyes.
He shifted, wincing as his feet brushed against the rough fabric at the base of the car. He wanted shoes.

‘Are you hurt?’ Gavin said.

‘No.’

‘Don’t fuckin’ lie to me.’

‘It’s just my feet,’ Connor said, hoisting himself through the small gap between the front seats and the roof of the car. He wiggled through, and Gavin didn’t offer to help him. ‘I stepped on some glass last night.’

‘You’re such a clumsy fuckin’ idiot, babe,’ Gavin said.

Connor certainly felt like one as he pawed at the dashboard, trying to brace himself. He slid through all at once, one of his legs falling on the seat opposite Gavin, then the other. He made sure he was facing Gavin, and he looked pointedly towards his crotch.

Anyone else would hate this. He knew, distantly, that he hated it too. But there was just enough arousal there – a bizarre, twisted survival instinct like the kind that had kicked into gear at Zlatko’s – that he knew he could do this.

He refused to think of Hank, even as he was doing all of this for him.

‘So do you want me to blow you?’ Connor said.

‘You gonna bite me?’

Connor just looked at him. Gavin gave a breath of laughter, because they both knew that Connor had never been that kind of person. Not with someone that he thought of as a Dom, anyway. Gavin might be bad at it, a complete disaster, really, but Connor still thought of him as a Dom.

He was also just very easy to manipulate, and usually at his most mellow after an orgasm, and Connor was counting on that.

This was also preferable on the list of all the things he could be choosing to focus on.

Gavin undid his own jeans, and Connor shifted across the seats, noting how tense Gavin was. There was no trust between them anymore, but Connor didn’t care. He bent down, grunting as the steering wheel dug into his shoulder. The angle was terrible.

‘Move the chair,’ Connor muttered.

‘Deal with it,’ Gavin said.

Connor grit his teeth, and then rested his forearm on Gavin’s thigh, trying to figure out the best angle.

Gavin’s cock was already firming. It was familiar, but it was so patently not Hank’s that Connor had to take several deep breaths to remind himself why he was doing this. It was a mission, in a way. He had to get information, he had to get free, he had to save Hank. There were objectives he had to achieve, and he only had limited skills with which to achieve them, and this was one of them.

He bent down, smelling sweat and salt immediately; nothing like the clean impersonal plastic of Hank’s body that was somehow comforting after all this time. And as Connor licked the head of Gavin’s cock, he wondered how the others would judge him for this; if they’d find him repulsive, if
they’d think he should be more precious about something he found so easy to give away. It was an easier language than talking.

He hissed through his nose when Gavin took up a brutal grip of his hair, nails digging half-moons into his scalp. But even that was familiar. It wasn’t rougher than Gavin used to be.

Deep throating really was much easier than it used to be, after living with Hank. Human cocks were soft all the way through, even when they were hard, even when they made an attempt at bruising the back of his throat it was still nothing like a plastisteel rod – an artificial baculum – with a pretence at human flesh covering it.

Gavin swore over him, mostly in pleasure, sometimes goading him to work harder, but Connor could tell he was enjoying it. Could tell from the bursts of precome in his mouth, from the way Gavin’s wiry, muscular body went from tense to relaxed and tense again. Connor didn’t cut any corners, sucking hard, using his tongue, generous with the head of his cock and the underside where it met the shaft, where the skin was particularly sensitive.

‘Ah, fuck,’ Gavin breathed. ‘You are such a fuckin’ whore. Bet you’re not even doing this to sell me something, you just needed the distraction, didn’t you, princess?’

Maybe he did. Maybe he did need something to take his mind off the pain in his feet, the certainty of death and destruction and hopelessness. This was something he was good at, and it made his body feel good, his cock begin to get hard. He liked having to focus on his breathing, timing it with the bobbing movement of his head. He was proud of the fact that his gag reflex was nearly non-existent with a human, which meant he’d improved at something he wanted to improve at.

Luther might not like it, but some of Connor’s hobbies weren’t conventional.

Nails scratched hard against his scalp as Gavin bucked up, over and over again, and minutes must have passed. Connor was light-headed, eager, and even the pain in his feet felt good now with everything that was happening. It was a rare alchemy, but it was one he was glad for. And in the space of working hard to bring Gavin to orgasm, Connor was able to organise his thoughts, his strategy, there in the darkness of his lips meeting Gavin’s pubic hair, the taste of sweat and salt and precome, the ache of holding his body in the same awkward position.

Gavin came with a burst of bitter release, swearing in that curt way that clipped all his words down to their bare bones. Several strands of Connor’s hair pulled free, but Gavin still wasn’t being rougher than usual. Connor swallowed everything, surprised at how quickly it ended. He’d gotten so used to Hank’s abnormally long orgasms that the five to six spurts that Gavin offered seemed like nothing at all.

Gavin slumped heavily in the seat, sagging down, legs sprawling as wide as they could. Connor licked him clean – not that he’d missed anything while swallowing – and only moved back when Gavin’s hands went lax in his hair. Gavin was breathing hard, and Connor thought that if he was faster, if he had a different plan, he could grab Gavin’s gun and shoot him point blank right now.

But that wasn’t his plan. So he eased back, and hoped that he was a good judge of Gavin’s character.

‘Yep,’ Gavin said shortly. ‘Talk.’

‘What if – for five seconds – you just pretended my father was a part of Veritas, and planned on profiting off a new type of red ice about to go on the open market, and I told you that I could get you a job at Grenville directly under Fowler if you flipped on him?’
Gavin blinked his eyes open and looked at him and Connor continued quickly. He reached up and thumbed at the corners of his mouth, noting the way Gavin’s eyes watched, the smug look on his face.

‘You could call Fowler right now,’ Connor said. ‘Just say that you have an anonymous tip about Perkins and Veritas, and that you need to talk to Fowler. Watch how quickly you get put through. They know, Gavin. It’s an active, open case. If you do what Perkins tells you to do – especially with how you’ve behaved today – you will be a co-conspirator in that case, and you will lose everything and be placed on desk duty for the rest of your life at best.’

‘Fuck you,’ Gavin muttered.

For a minute more, he didn’t do anything else. Connor shifted to get more comfortable in the passenger seat next to Gavin. He was so tired. He looked at the pine plantation all around them and realised he had no idea how long Gavin had been driving for, he must have blanked out. But the nearest plantations to Hank’s… How far was he from Hank’s home?

Connor thought of Sumo and his eyes closed. They opened again when Gavin shifted. But all Gavin did was pull out his phone and scroll through his contacts, holding it to his ear as he stared at Connor.

‘Gimme Sharky,’ Gavin said to whoever picked up. Then he scowled at Connor. Another couple of minutes passed, and Gavin leaned back harder in the chair, looking up at the ceiling.

Connor wondered if Gavin was bored of a detail like this. He liked action. He’d never liked surveillance or stakeouts, frequently calling Connor to come visit him and keep him ‘company’ while he paid no attention to what he was supposed to be doing. But as an active detective, he could have flashes of brilliance, and his deductive reasoning was sharp. He wouldn’t have liked being treated as Gabriel’s lackey. He’d probably hated the way Gabriel snapped his fingers to get his attention.

*I know you,* Connor thought. *I know you.*

‘Hey, bitch,’ Gavin said, to whoever it was on the phone. ‘I’ve got an informant telling me you guys are working Veritas? Something about Perkins being involved? But I dunno if that’s bullshit, because this informant is known for- What? Yeah… Yeah, I can hold. Be quick though, for fuck’s sake.’

Gavin chewed on his bottom lip, and then looked at Connor again, his gaze calculating.

‘Why’re you doing this?’

‘I want to save Hank. I don’t like Veritas.’

‘No one fuckin’ does.’

‘The Captain does,’ Connor said.

Gavin looked like he wanted to disagree, and Connor knew this would be hard for him. Gavin wanted his father’s approval almost as much as Connor did, enough that Gavin used to throw Connor under the bus for it all the time.

‘I’m surprised he hasn’t looped you in,’ Connor said. ‘But he didn’t loop me in either. Maybe he thought you actually had a conscience at the end of the day. Five percent of a conscience.’

Gavin snickered, and then his expression shifted and he gripped the phone tighter.
‘Yeah, sure, I can wait for Fowler. Ten minutes is fine, I got time. What’s this about?’ As he listened to ‘Sharky’ on the other end, his expression changed, and Connor saw the moment Gavin’s doubt changed to revelation. He looked horrified for a few seconds, and asked no questions as the person continued to talk to him. Finally, he seemed to have an opening to talk.

‘Yeah,’ Gavin said, staring blankly at Connor. ‘Yeah, I can give you information, sure.’

‘I can give you Perkins,’ Connor said as softly as he could. ‘And you can be the hero that helps to break the case.’

It was something he’d been sitting on for a while. Something he was hoping he wouldn’t have to do. Truthfully, he’d been waiting for Fowler and his team to break the case on their own. They were good, solid detectives, and Connor was tired and had a single thread of loyalty left that stopped him from giving them the information they needed about his father.

But he would sell that out in a second if it stood a chance of putting Connor in a position where he could help Hank.

‘Don’t you want that?’ Connor said. ‘Don’t you want to be a hero?’

Muscles jumped at the corner of Gavin’s jaw. He looked away when the person on the other end started talking again.

‘Where the fuck is he? Why is this taking so long?’ A pause, and then Gavin’s lip pulled up in a snarl. ‘Fine. Ten minutes? It’d better be ten fuckin’ minutes. It’s not like this isn’t time sensitive or nothing.’

Gavin seemed to realise that his pants were undone, and he put himself away and did them up again, before rubbing at his stubble.

‘You want me to flip on the Captain,’ Gavin said to Connor. ‘I don’t even believe you.’

‘Really?’ Connor said. ‘I know I can be paranoid, and I know I was obsessed with this latest case, but when has my work on any other case led you astray? And it would be easy, Gavin. If you make today seem like you’d been suspicious for a while and needed something like contact with Gabriel to confirm everything, they won’t worry about your involvement as much. I could corroborate for you. Hank and Fowler are friends, Fowler invited me to work in the Grenville Precinct after all of this. I know he trusts me.’

‘Yeah, fuck, I don’t want to work in a precinct with a fuckin’ goody two shoes.’

‘I don’t want to work there either,’ Connor said.

Gavin’s eyes widened, like that was the most surprising thing Connor had said so far. ‘Bullshit.’

‘I don’t,’ Connor said. ‘I don’t like this work. I thought I did, but I don’t. If you do this and transfer to Grenville, it would be a new start, and I wouldn’t be there making things harder.’

He’d never fully understood how much Connor’s presence at the precinct must have annoyed Gavin. Maybe it looked like he got special treatment from his father, after all, he was unqualified, unsuited for detective work, and while he was clever, it wasn’t like he’d gone through any of the training any of Perkins’ detectives had. Connor had tried to stay out of the way, but he’d also corrected anyone he thought was incorrect, and since Gavin frequently annoyed him, he’d gone out of his way to look for flaws in Gavin’s work.
It was how he’d realised Gavin was good in the first place. It was how he realised that Gavin could be adept at cases while lacking perception in every other area of his life. In the beginning of their relationship, Connor had held so many strings he honestly hadn’t cared how Gavin brutalised him, because he’d hated having that much control the rest of the time. Gavin’s arrogance was warranted in any precinct, but outside of work, he was just a violent, abusive Dom.

All of Gavin’s buttons were right there to be pushed, but Connor felt like this was as precarious a code as the one he’d needed to force Hank out of shutdown. If he made a mistake now, he wouldn’t have an asset, he’d have an enemy for the rest of his life.

‘Please, Gavin,’ Connor said, looking down demurely.

‘You fuckin’ talk,’ Gavin said. ‘Tell me everything you’ve got, now. Right now. In the ten minutes it takes for Fowler to get on the phone.’

Connor nodded. He started talking. As quickly and thoroughly as he could, he presented the case like he might to his father. It was a skill he was good at, because his father lost patience with him as quickly as Gavin could. Connor knew how to strip a case down to its bare bones, and flesh it out as he kept another person’s interest.

Then, he gave Gavin the locations of his father’s safes where he kept information on cases, as well as the combination codes. Gavin gestured wildly at the glovebox, and Connor took out the notepad and pen that were in there – Gavin still liked to write things down in the old-fashioned way – and wrote down the codes that he knew. He talked about the sub-basement evidence dedicated to Veritas, he talked about how his father had incriminated himself to Connor knowing that no one would believe him, and he talked about red ice, and Veritas, and the alpha Evert, and the tarot references and Gavin let him go on and on.

Connor wound down to a stop, because the more he talked about it, the more he couldn’t escape how much danger Hank was in.

He stared numbly out of the windscreen as Gavin talked directly to Fowler. If he was playing a different game, he’d be shouting at Fowler to track Gavin’s phone, to please, please come find him. But he wasn’t playing that game. He had to trust in the plan he currently had.

His tongue moved around his mouth. He could still taste the bitterness of Gavin inside of it. He wondered what Hank would think. Maybe Hank would punish him for it. Connor pressed his shoulders back into the seat and thought he’d sell part of his soul for Hank to be punishing him right now.

He startled when the phone was thrust against his ear. He looked at Gavin in shock, and Gavin just stared at him like he was being stupid.

‘Hello?’ Connor said.

‘How the fuck did Hank get taken?’ Fowler shouted at him. Connor cringed, and wiped his sweaty palm off on his jeans.

‘He’s been glitching for weeks now. Reverting him back did some damage, and he was already damaged, he’s been hiding it from everyone. He’s got forty eight hours before he might…before there will be catastrophic end of life damage. But he shut down last night, and because he went completely offline, when he went online it must have-’

‘They flagged his hacks into the security cameras,’ Fowler said tiredly.
‘Correct. Do you have any idea of where he might be?’

‘You’re not on this case!’ Fowler said, his anger kicking up again. ‘You think I don’t have enough to deal with, without you getting yourself into this? You stay the fuck away from it.’

‘No.’

‘…Did you just tell me no?’

‘I’m going to find him. If you don’t help me, I’ll do it without you.’

Gavin made a faint scoffing noise, shaking his head. ‘Fuckwit.’

While Fowler was so angry he couldn’t speak, Connor pretended he’d spoken, and said: ‘Yes, I’m safe. Yes, Gavin will take me back into the city. He was just pretending, he’s not really going to keep me for forty eight hours.’

‘Huh?’ Fowler said. ‘Son, what’s going on?’

Gavin glared at Connor, and Connor only met his eyes briefly. He needed to get to North. She had never stopped researching the Veritas case, and she’d been so crucial all along. Also, he needed to talk to her about the damage Hank had taken, and what it might mean for his survival odds.

Forty eight hours. Less now that they’d rested, less and less all the time.

‘Do you know where they’re likely to have taken him?’ Connor said.

‘If we find out, we’ll go get him and make sure we get him back to you.’

‘I don’t have a phone,’ Connor said. ‘Wait- If you find him, take him to the Broadbank Cyber-Forensics Processing Lab at Croften. Care of Markus and North, they’ll know what to do. Especially North.’

‘What about CyberLife?’

‘They won’t take him,’ Connor said. ‘He’s too much of a liability to them now.’

‘Okay,’ Fowler said, then took two deep breaths. ‘Put Reed back on the phone. And don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, Connor. You’d better tell me if you’re safe or not.’

‘I’m safe,’ Connor said. ‘I’m in no danger.’

Gavin was openly grinding his teeth as he took the phone back from Connor. No, he wouldn’t have liked Connor so boldly manipulating the situation. But Connor thought Gavin should feel grateful, at least, that Connor hadn’t sold him out completely. Like this, Gavin could sail into a new precinct, a decent position, and he’d be known as the person who helped break the Veritas case if they actually got their hands on Gabriel and Perkins, and whoever else was running that show.

All Connor cared about was Hank. He’d be happy to never step into another precinct for the rest of his life.

He was only half-listening as Gavin kept talking to Fowler. Gavin would only be an ally for as long as he saw a clear payout for himself, and he’d get bored of helping Connor. Likely, he was already resentful of it. Connor probably had only one or two more things he could ask for before Gavin ditched him to focus on the case itself.
Connor also knew that at some point, Gavin would be furious at Perkins for not opening up about Veritas or confiding in him, and when that happened, Connor didn’t want to be around him. Connor was an easy target, and Gavin’s fury couldn’t be reasoned with.

When Gavin hung up the phone, he sat there for a moment. Connor’s whole body was tense.

He didn’t even flinch when Gavin’s hand shot out, grabbing him by the hair and dragging him down, twisting what he’d caught in his fingers until Connor gasped.

His instincts were never wrong. Not with Gavin.

‘I fuckin’ hate you,’ Gavin said. ‘And after this I never want to see you again, you absolute piece of shit. You think we’re friends now? You owe me so much after the way you treated me. We will never be square.’

“Yes, Gavin,” Connor said, staring at the dark space behind Gavin’s legs. Gavin shook his head for good measure, and Connor’s hands gripped down, bracing himself. Even Gavin’s bitterness he understood. Gavin was never the one that got dumped, he wasn’t the one people walked away from. He discarded others. Connor had come into his life, let himself be treated like garbage, and then walked away without looking back. Even when they’d scened after that, Connor had always been distant, looking at him in that way that made him so mean.

There was nothing Connor could do to make any of that okay in Gavin’s eyes.

‘I need you to take me to the Lab at Croften,’ Connor risked saying.

Gavin let go, but seconds later the back of his fist thumped down onto Connor’s head. It wasn’t as hard as Connor had been hit in the past, but it was definitely a blow, and he stayed down. He tried to project as much meekness as possible.

‘Fuck,’ Gavin said fervently, and then shoved Connor back into his seat and turned the car on. ‘Stupidest fuckin’ thing I’ve ever done. Gabriel will kill me if he finds out about this.’

‘Then make sure you catch him.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Gavin said. He zoomed out of the plantation, going as fast as he wanted while there were no other cars around.

It wasn’t until they were back on one of the floodways – huge, raised freeways that had large flood-gutters beneath them so wide that they might as well have been rivers – that Gavin spoke again.

‘You really just care about saving the android? What’s to stop me from making sure he gets taken out in all this?’

Connor’s whole body went cold. ‘If you do that, I will come work at Grenville, and I will follow you from precinct to precinct for the rest of your life. You’ll have to kill me to get rid of me. And I know you don’t really care about androids, but you’ve never killed a human in cold blood, have you?’

‘Wouldn’t fuckin’ feel like cold blood,’ Gavin muttered.

They continued to drive, Gavin twitchier than normal, and Connor understood it. Veritas were a terrifying organisation, but Gavin was so ambitious about advancing his career he’d turn against Perkins and Veritas in an instant if it might put him in better standing.

‘Andronikov has a fuckton of properties,’ Gavin said a few minutes later. ‘Hank’s probably in one of
those. If the Andronikov-Veritas link is solid, then like, you should be lookin’ into those. That’s what I’m gonna do. From a safe distance.’

Connor had already thought of that, even as he tried not to think of Zlatko, or Veritas, or Hank and how they might have already killed him.

‘When I looked into him, he had too many properties for me to canvas.’

‘Then look into the ones that are pulling power, dipshit,’ Gavin said. ‘They need a heap of juice to do whatever they’re doing to the androids. I mean, if you ask me, they all should be everted.’

‘If they have their own generator, a large power pull won’t show up in the records.’

‘Yeah, but you know what will?’ Gavin said, eyes gleaming with the pleasure of figuring things out faster than Connor. ‘The thirium deliveries. Gotta keep their supply of red ice alive, don’t they? They might be manufacturing their own, but CyberLife owns the patent, and I bet Veritas is focused more on getting that android back to evert him again, more than they are cooking up their own thirium. And even if they are making their own thirium, the core components for that need to be delivered too.’

‘If you hadn’t thrown my phone out of the window, I could be researching that right now.’

‘Keep talking, Con,’ Gavin said. ‘I’ll throw you out the fucking window.’

Connor had to bite back a dark laugh, but some of it have shown some of it on his face, because Gavin laughed a moment laughter, like it was a shared joke, how much Gavin hated him.

Connor wanted his phone. He wanted to contact Kara and let her know about Sumo, he wanted to contact Markus and North, he wanted to get Fowler to help him. He looked sidelong at Gavin, who was focusing on the road again. He wanted to believe Gavin was an ally, instead of someone who was helping him so he could push himself up the ladder of success.

When Perkins found out about all of this, he was going to be furious. Connor wished there was a way to fast-track his father, Gabriel and all of Veritas into prison so that he didn’t have to deal with them again, so that the worst of it might be more calls from Wellspring Penitentiary.

‘You’re pretty gloomy for someone who’s getting what he wants,’ Gavin said.

‘Yes. This is, of course, exactly what I wanted. All I’ve dreamed of is watching Hank riddled with bullets, today has been the culmination of all of my hopes and dr-’

Connor ducked out of the way when Gavin reached out to thump him, and batted his arm away. They glared at each other, and Connor eased back in the chair when he was fairly sure that Gavin wasn’t going to try and hit him again.

‘You really won’t come to Grenville if I go there,’ Gavin said dubiously.

‘I hate it,’ Connor said. ‘I hate cases.’

It wasn’t really that he hated them. He liked the puzzles they presented and he liked thinking about things to try that other people on the case hadn’t thought of yet. But everything else about police work and detective work frightened him. He didn’t like investigating criminals. He didn’t like that it had led him into Zlatko’s broad, possessive hands. He didn’t like that investigating Veritas had turned his life upside down. And he didn’t like that he had the kind of personality that meant he’d probably be drawn to the cases that kept messing his life up.
‘I think I actually fuckin’ believe you,’ Gavin said, whistling.

Connor thought maybe he should reply, but he had nothing to add. Abruptly, he was exhausted and his feet throbbed. He pulled the worst one up to look at the underside, expecting to see a mess of blood or torn open wounds, but aside from some dirt from where he’d run earlier, everything still looked okay.

Maybe this was just how much they were supposed to have hurt from the beginning. He closed his eyes and felt Gavin’s gaze on him, and said nothing.

He was tired. He wanted Hank to pet his head, or tell him to go to bed, or tell him to eat something. The world rushed by them, unnaturally fast with Gavin’s driving, but Connor felt like Hank was getting further and further away.
The Things I'd Do For You

Chapter Notes

You ever write a really thorough chapter plan and then depart from it ENTIRELY because fucking hell I sure did with this chapter. I had like 15 things I wanted to achieve and I threw 14 of them out of the window where they all landed like scared cats and ran away, and then came up with another 17 things instead, and in the end have stared at this chapter far too often, for far too long, while chewing my fingernails and complaining to anyone who would listen to me. BUT, it's here now, and I'm actually happy with it.

PS North is amazing and I stan her so hard.

PPS Some of this was written with the help of the Promare OST what a fun movie that was.

The gunfire started as soon as they arrived at the Lab at Croften University. Gavin swore in a panicked, furious way, returning fire with the gun he’d previously pointed at Connor. And Connor wanted to tell him that the androids he was firing at with horrible accuracy could be reverted back, could be saved. He didn’t. He ducked, panting with fear.

Glass didn’t shower over him like he expected. Of course Gavin’s windows were bullet proof. Even when they started to penetrate the glass, cracks spider-webbed out instead of shattering.

‘Motherfuck,’ Gavin spat. ‘How do they even fucking know?! They don’t know why I’ve taken you here!

‘They don’t want me getting to the Lab,’ Connor said from the small dark space between the seat and the glovebox.

He thought of North and made a small sound in the back of his throat. She was there. Markus and Simon were probably there. Or had they been taken? Or killed?

A minute passed, the gunfire stopped. Gavin reloaded his gun, then pointed the gun again, but didn’t fire.

‘There’s a hot chick coming, is that your broad?’

Connor looked up quickly and saw North running towards them. He was shocked to see the rifle she held in her hands. She glared around at the bodies of androids leaking blue thirium everywhere. Only now did Connor register the University’s siren blaring, the scared people hiding the periphery, behind bushes, trees, rubbish bins, even a clear bus-stop.

‘That’s her.’

Gavin had let Connor contact the Lab, and Connor had never been so grateful to see North in his life. He opened the passenger door, only to flinch as Gavin cuffed his head hard.

‘You think it’s safe out there?!’
'I’m not safe in here!' Connor shouted.

It wasn’t until he’d said the words that he realised who he’d said them to. He stilled, then chanced a look at Gavin. They stared at each other, Gavin’s stunned expression giving way to a twisted hatred.

‘I’m fucking putting my life on the line for what you’ve offered me, Jesus fuck, get the fuck out of my car. Get shot to hell for all I care, you piece of shit.’

‘Go to Fowler,’ Connor said, getting out of the car, wincing as his feet hit the asphalt. ‘Don’t go back to Broadbank until this is over.’

‘You’re the stupid shithed,’ Gavin said, revving the engine. ‘Not me, dickface. I know what I’m doing.’

A screech of tyres, the needless smell of burning rubber, and Gavin sped off down the street. Connor stared after him, then nearly fell when fresh gunfire rang out. A spray of lukewarm wetness against him. North hissed. Her side had been skimmed. He turned, looking around wildly, and North grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him back towards the Lab.

‘RUN!’ she shouted.

He ran. But when he didn’t hear her footsteps, he looked over his shoulder. North brought out a small, silver dome from a satchel at her side. She reached up and touched something under her ear, then pressed a button on the side of the machine.

The high-pitched siren – familiar and ear-splitting – sounded, and all the androids abruptly collapsed. North stared at them all, letting the siren ring out for a good minute or so, before disabling the sound weapon. She turned and sprinted towards Connor with a speed he’d previously only associated with military androids.

‘You modified it?’ he said, staring at the dome.

She looked at him blankly, then reached up and pressed whatever she’d touched under her ear. She must have switched off her hearing function. Last time she’d done it with headphones, but this time she’d clearly been working on both the sound weapon and herself. It was a felony to modify android weapons of mass destruction, but in that moment, he loved her for it.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘We don’t have much time. They’ve been staking out the Lab all day.’

‘They have Hank,’ he said, his voice breaking. ‘They have him. They’ve done so much damage already.’

‘Shit,’ she said. She didn’t reassure him, and it made his chest colder when she didn’t tell him that things were going to be fine.

‘North,’ he said.

‘Hang on.’ The elevator opened for her without her pressing any of the buttons, and then she got Connor in behind her and pointed the rifle forwards towards the closing doors. ‘The Lab’s been evacuated. It’s just you and me. Grenville are trying to get police down here, but they don’t have much of a presence in Broadbank – why should they? – and, damn it, Broadbank is being amazingly slow to send help. Three guesses why.’

‘North, they took-’
‘There’s nothing we can do about that,’ she said shortly. ‘You have to focus on the things you can do.’

‘What can I do?’

The elevator dinged when it reached the top level. Doors opened, revealing dimmed lights and no one in the Lab. She looked around, eyes narrowing, LED flickering from yellow, to blue, to yellow, to red, back to blue. But then she lowered the rifle and turned back to Connor.

‘You can do plenty. With the information you gave me, I think I have a possible location. Place used to belong to Andronikov.’

‘Of course it did,’ Connor said wearily, following her into the main office that Markus, Simon, Josh and North used. The room glowed with blue and white lights from the amount of computer screens on, projector screens on nearly every service. North had been busy.

‘We have an underground carpark under the Lab,’ North said. ‘It was set up decades ago, it’s hardly been used. I have a hacked autonomous vehicle down there with your name on it. Look, I don’t know if he’s been taken to this address.’ She picked up a slip of paper and handed it to him, and Connor realised it wasn’t out in the middle of nowhere like Zlatko’s dilapidated mansion had been, but in a warehouse district fifteen minutes away. ‘But this is where they’ve been pulling thirium ingredients.’

‘So they’re making their own.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘And by the quantities, you need to watch out for plenty of androids. So take this.’ She handed him the sound weapon. He stared at it in alarm, then stared at her.

‘And take this,’ she said. She opened a drawer and pulled out a gun.

‘North,’ he said. ‘How do you have all of this?’

‘You know how I used to work at CyberLife?’ she said. ‘Yeah, I didn’t always used to work at CyberLife. You should ask me about it some time. Also, I gotta ask, you trust Gavin? You know he’s awful.’

‘No,’ Connor said, ‘I don’t trust him. But I trust his selfishness. He thinks he’s going to be a hero. But he’s awful, you know he was working for them until about an hour ago.’

‘Why don’t you have any shoes?’

‘Oh,’ Connor said. He looked down. He saw his hands in the corners of his eyes and realised they were trembling. ‘We’d just woken up when they took him.’

North looked at him for a long time, he could almost see the lecture building. He didn’t know what it would be for. Not talking to her enough, maybe. Not keeping her in the loop? Not taking better care of Hank? Not pushing to help him?

‘I have to help him,’ Connor said.

‘I know,’ North said. ‘I want to come with you, but students are going to keep coming here – the ones who haven’t checked their emails or phones or whatever, and I need to make sure they’re safe. I’ve got your back. Keep me in the loop, okay?’
Connor nodded, shoving the gun into his belt. He turned the sound weapon over and saw that it was easy to use.

‘I don’t have any shoes to give you,’ North said.

‘It’s fine. Show me where the vehicle is?’

North nodded, looked at Connor for a long time, then lifted the rifle and headed towards the back of the office. There, she took him into a much larger, dirtier maintenance elevator that juddered and groaned as it headed slowly below the Croften Lab.

In the dim yellow lighting, North’s LED turned red and she made a faint sound of annoyance, before her eyes widened. Connor thought his heart would never get used to the glow of a red LED. Not anymore.

‘We have a lead,’ she said.

‘What is it?’

‘An unmarked police vehicle carrying Perkins was seen heading towards the warehouse district. Okay, Connor, you have to be careful. There are people coming from Grenville, and Fowler knows, so if you can just wait- You don’t even have to go, you could just stay here.’

Connor’s fingers clenched on the sound weapon. ‘I’m going. You said we had forty eight hours.’

‘Connor, that was before… Look, I’m just saying that if he’s taken as much damage as you’ve said, then-‘

‘Don’t,’ he said, shaking his head abruptly as her boots rung out on the metal floor above the huge gutter beneath them surging with white water. The empty tunnel smelled of damp and mould, the vehicle tucked into a concrete alcove next to a service road that had seen better days.

‘If you get yourself killed for love, I’ll be so fucking pissed,’ North said, hugging him tightly with one arm as she unlocked the car. ‘None of the people you’ve ever loved have been worth it, and he might be, but you dying isn’t the way to find out.’

Connor nodded. He got into the passenger seat and North leaned past him, programming a route into the car just by looking at the electronic dash and communicating with it.

‘You know,’ she said. ‘It’s tempting to lock you up and force you not to go.’

Connor smiled at her weakly. Now that she’d said it, he could imagine it all too clearly. North didn’t always come across as a soft person, but the fact that she was letting him go into something she thought was too dangerous for him, the fact that she was letting him do it for love, was one of the softest things she could have done.

‘Come back alive, or I’ll fucking bring you back and kill you myself,’ she said, slamming the door.

Connor turned around and watched her as the autonomous vehicle sped off into the darkness of the underground drainage tunnel. They didn’t wave, but they watched each other until Connor couldn’t see her any longer.

*  
The vehicle didn’t take him directly to the building, but to a deep complex underground drainage
network, where the sound of rushing water surrounded him, but he couldn’t actually see it. The guidance screen in the car flashed up with a series of directions for him to follow while walking, and Connor memorised them, knowing that he wouldn’t have his phone to look at, and it wouldn’t work down here anyway.

He got out of the car, tucking the gun more securely into his pocket, wishing he had a backpack to put the sound weapon in. He took off down a hard, muddy – he hoped it was mud, anyway, it didn’t smell terrible – track, wondering about his chances of infection with the wounds in his feet.

He stayed close to the wall, ears sharp, though he heard nothing but water and his own steps. About thirty minutes later, he began to turn the final corner shown on the map and saw brighter lights than before. The underground drainage network became solid concrete beneath his feet. He peered carefully down the next tunnel, but saw no one. Unlike the rest of the drainage network, it had been newly fitted out with thicker, cleaner, reinforced concrete.

Suddenly, he knew how stupid this was. He wished he wasn’t going in blind. Normally he would have monitored them for weeks before infiltrating. He didn’t know if they had infrared cameras, or heat sensors, how many people were going in and out of the building, how many of them were everted, how many humans, how many were fully functioning androids.

The wheezing in his chest forced him to stop and close his eyes, focusing on his breathing. He wasn’t going to do anyone any good like this, beginning to hyperventilate far from where anyone could help him. In the back of his mind, he heard North’s voice guiding him, the same way she had when Hank shut down.

‘Please,’ he mouthed. ‘Please let this work.’

He thumped his chest a few times, trying to ground himself, then took off down the tunnel, holding the sound weapon, ready to activate it when necessary.

* 

The surveillance camera that he saw in the corner by the door didn’t seem to be working. He hoped he had the right turn, the right place, and he tried the door handle above a complex code-lock – knowing it wasn’t going to work – and it clicked open. He slid inside, looking around. It was a large storage warehouse, metal shelving up to the low ceiling, each shelf holding the raw materials needed to make red ice, thirium and weapons.

He gulped. The metal shelving units reminded him of Zlatko’s basement. He leaned against the wall and looked around, one hand on the gun, the other on the sound weapon.

No alarms tripped. No one came running towards him. Connor’s heart was the loudest thing in the room, pounding away in a hollow rush in his ears.

The lack of security had him wondering if it was even the right place. But of course it was, he could see the raw ingredients for thirium and red ice in front of him. He looked up to the ceiling, wondered what he was missing. Was this like Zlatko’s? Where the place seemed abandoned, but they would be there the whole time just waiting for him? Was Hank already dead or dying, doomed like Hannah Abaroa?

Alongside panic was a bitter anger at himself for always being this way. This was why he hated cases, his own mind sabotaged him. He hated his inability to get himself together right when it was needed.
He needed to keep going. For Hank. Because his feet hurt and he wanted Hank to look at them, not North or anyone else. Because they hadn’t finished their conversation, and Connor was still mad at him, and he wanted to not be mad at him anymore. And he didn’t want the madness to be erased by the grief he’d feel when Hank was gone.

He pushed on, staying in the shadows – though the lighting wasn’t bright – and listening out. He heard no one.

He came to the stairs leading up to the next door and stared at the code-lock on it. There was even a pad for fingerprint validation. He tried the door knob and it clicked open. No alarm went off.

*What is going on…?*

Had North hacked the building and forgotten to tell him? There was nothing normal about any of this, his dread creeping up. Here, he saw no one at all, only a long corridor with no rooms leading off it. He was still underground.

He didn’t like this at all, but he kept going.

He’d turn the whole building upside down if he had to, as long as he found Hank.

* The next room he found was filled with the naked bodies of androids, their nanofluid skin patchy, white chassis exposed in places. They were lifted up and horizontally spreadeagled on devices that shackled their limbs. Their LEDs had been removed, their eyes were open and dead, and tubes entered their bodies at different points – neck, chest, wrists, ankles, thighs. Connor stared and saw at least thirty androids up against the walls, clearly there for exsanguination. It looked like – unlike the androids that had been in the evidence room – these ones could be filled with thirium, emptied once it was chemically altered, and then filled with fresh thirium again.

It was a farm.

He walked silently, his bare feet helping, half-expecting the androids to come to life and start screaming.

They stayed silent, and he thought of Zlatko’s mansion and he wanted to cry with horror, but forced himself to stay as calm as he could.

The next room – another code-lock unlocking easily – held more of the same. Body after body, this room whirring with the sound of pumping thirium out of the androids into large gallon drums.

This wasn’t a normal red ice operation. This was huge on a scale Connor had never seen before. It felt like the weight of the entire building rested on top of him. Were these all everted androids? How was it possible? Someone had to be manufacturing them, not even Broadbank could hide this many missing android notices from the public forever. Connor doubted CyberLife’s direct involvement, but if programmers like Jonathan could be corrupted by Gabriel, had Veritas been poaching other members of CyberLife? Extorting them? Manipulating them?

Or worse, making them join the cult of Veritas to manufacture androids so that they didn’t become everted themselves?

Having the puzzle of it to think about calmed him somewhat, but he still shivered, and he stopped breathing when the pumps made a strange sound. But it looked like they were done, and the rest of the blue thirium was draining from the clear pipes into the containers. The smell of chemicals rich in
the air.

Connor continued, knowing that he’d see this place in his nightmares, no matter what happened.

*

Another room of androids, and then another, and then Connor heard the sound of running footsteps and no voices. He froze, peering past the doorway – yet another door with high-tech security, mysteriously unlocked – and saw twenty androids dressed in white shirts and black pants, holding guns and tasers at the same time that they turned as one and saw him. His blood chilled. They had the same yellow LED’s as Hank, the same blank, empty stare as the androids being drained.

They were the androids of Veritas.

He pressed the sound weapon immediately, holding it out, and gritted out a tight sound against the noise hurting his head as all the androids collapsed like their strings were cut. Connor walked up to the nearest one and took the gun. He unloaded the clips from some of the other android’s guns, shoving them into his pocket.

He walked through the room with its computer terminals. He could tell instantly from the screens that something had gone wrong in the building. A security breach, a hacked system.

North must have been helping him.

He closed the door behind him and tried to activate the lock on the door, not wanting them to rouse quickly and follow him. He had to press a few buttons, and eventually the door locked with a satisfying series of clicks.

He pressed on.

He found a huge electronics room with a generator. He looked the generator over, wondering if it would be worth disabling, but he had no flashlight, and he didn’t want to walk around blind. He didn’t want to draw any more attention to himself than necessary. It was already enough of a maze.

‘Knock, knock, Connor,’ Gabriel said from the doorway to the room that Connor had planned on exploring next. His head poked past the door frame at a jaunty angle, he smiled before walking forwards.

Connor fumbled the gun that Gavin had given him, then pointed it with shaking hands.

‘Tch, tch, Connor, please. Presumably you’re here to see Hank. Do you want to see him?’

The way Gabriel asked the question almost made Connor say no by default. He had visions of Hank open and vivisected, dead and destroyed, and Gabriel’s tone only made it worse.

‘How long have you known I’m here?’

‘The androids informed me. Goodness, is that a sound weapon? That’s clever. So illegal! And I’ve never seen one quite like that before. May I take a look, please? You know, we could use that to disable more of them. I don’t think you’d like enabling Veritas, but we’re opportunists if nothing else.’

Gabriel took another step forwards, and Connor looked around wildly, stumbling back.

When Gabriel took another step, Connor disabled the safety on the gun and fired.
His aim had never been good, and it wasn’t good now. He’d never been comfortable training at the range, and Gavin had always made it clear he was unwelcome there. The violence of gunfire shook him to his core when he was the one holding the weapon. Now, all he succeeded in doing was blowing a hole in the bricks behind the plaster, about a foot to the right of Gabriel’s shoulder.

Gabriel laughed gently. ‘I commend you on the attempt.’

Connor panicked, activating the sound weapon.

The high pitched noise made his ears ring. He readied the gun to fire again, but Gabriel crumpled to the floor. He didn’t move once he was down.

Connor stared in shock. Gabriel was an android?

There had been no indication that Gabriel was an android. His body temperature was hotter than average, he compared Hank to appliances, he talked about androids as though he wasn’t one.

But if he’s an android, he’s a far more effective recruitment tool than any human could be.

And he’d said that the androids had warned him. Connor hadn’t seen any of those androids earlier picking up a phone, or doing anything more than stare at him. They’d silently transmitted the message through whatever intranet connected them.

He forced himself to stop staring at Gabriel. He ran past, gun in one hand, sound weapon in the other, hoping he was close to Hank.

Surely he was close, if Gabriel had offered to take Connor to him.

Connor had to use the sound weapon three more times, far more androids massed in the corridors and rooms that followed. Each time, he worked to lock the door behind him. They could probably unlock it easily, but that whatever North was doing to the building would hold.

He sprinted, desperate to find Hank in the belly of the beast that was Veritas. The androids behaved like bees, their movements unified, their gazes all turning to him at the same time, and Connor knew that if they decided to kill him, it would be fast, meaningless, emotionless. It would be nothing like what Zlatko had planned for him. The emptiness of it terrified him in a way Zlatko never had.

He almost ran past the figure strapped up in the same position as the androids being farmed for thirium. He didn’t quite register what he’d seen, but he stumbled backwards and turned, staring at Hank strapped and cuffed to the wall, tubes already sticking into him, his white chassis exposed where he’d been injured, his LED on a solid red – not even cycling like he was functional – his eyes closed.

Connor ran to him, taking in the rest of the room. It was small, with two open doorways. The walls were tiled in a dark colour, the lighting was dim, the red glow of Hank’s LED bold. There were two computer terminals nearby, a projector screen that only androids could use. A desk, another table, and of all things, a bottle of water.

‘Hank?’ Connor whispered, and then he dropped the sound weapon and the gun and wrenched the tubes out of Hank’s body. They slithered out reluctantly, gleaming blue, though they looked clean on the inside, like he hadn’t yet been drained.

What worried Connor the most was the cable sticking out of the back of Hank’s neck. Connor grasped it and yanked it hard. It clicked out easily.
Hank made a soft, sore noise. Connor turned and stared at the cuffs, then reached for the one imprisoning his right wrist, trying to get him free. He couldn’t. His left arm – where his wrist and hand had been blown away – was shackled at the elbow.

‘Plug me back in,’ Hank said, his voice so distorted that Connor wasn’t sure it was him.

‘What?’

‘Plug me back in,’ he said. ‘I’m in their system.’

‘Hank, we have to get you out of here.’

‘I know,’ Hank said, sounding exhausted. ‘I know. I…’

A heavy, long burst of static, and Hank’s eyes opened, but they stared at nothing.

‘…Tired.’

His voice was nothing like normal. He wasn’t even talking the way he normally did. Connor exhaled a sob and yanked at the cuff, and then he picked up the gun to shoot at it, but was too scared to fire. He couldn’t injure Hank further.

‘Plug me back in,’ Hank said.

Connor picked up the cable and stared at it. What if it had been everting him? What if Hank had been commanded to respond that way if the cable was removed?

‘Hank,’ Connor said. ‘Do you know who I am?’

‘It’s okay, Connor,’ Hank whispered, a hint of his voice there before it slithered away in the dissonance of distortion.

Connor looked around wildly, then put the cable back in. He didn’t like the way Hank jerked. Didn’t like the way his eyes closed and the way he somehow seemed dead again.

‘Hank,’ Connor cried, shaking him. ‘Hank! We have to get out of here! Undo the cuffs!’

Hank didn’t respond.

Connor didn’t know what to do. He’d imagined…

He didn’t know what he’d imagined. He’d been too scared to picture what might happen if he found Hank, and all his mind had unhelpfully given him were intrusive images of Hank dead. Not Hank shackled, Connor unable to free him, and stuck in a tiny room in a building surrounded by everted androids.

‘I don’t know how you do it,’ Perkins said from the opposite doorway. ‘Given how useless you are the rest of the time.’

His father, right there. Connor felt like he hadn’t seen him in over a year. Perkins didn’t hold a weapon, though he had a gun holstered to his belt. He wore a plain suit, nothing like his work uniform. Connor backed up until his thighs hit the desk behind him.

‘Let him go,’ Connor said.

Perkins smirked, looking to Hank, then looking back at Connor. He didn’t say a word. He stepped
fully into the room.

‘After today, you’re not going to be my problem anymore.’

Hank made a sound, shifting, eyelids flickering, then opening. He looked lucid, and he stared between Connor and Perkins. He said nothing, but his gaze landed on Perkins and stayed there.

‘Are you going to kill me?’ Connor said.

‘Yes.’

‘Connor…’ Hank managed, his voice the weakest it had ever been. ‘Connor, leave.’

‘I’m surprised it didn’t take longer,’ Connor said to his father.

‘So am I,’ Perkins said frankly, in that soft voice that could have been so kind if he wanted it to be. ‘When I left the evidence that would send you to Andronikov’s, I was honestly sure my problems would be solved. You’re a little weasel. It would be impressive, but it’s not, Connor. Your mother was a little weasel, too. These days though, we just call someone like that a cunt. But you know that, don’t you?’

‘You didn’t know I’d go see Andronikov,’ Connor said blankly.

‘Oh, sure,’ Perkins said. ‘Okay then. I didn’t know. If that’s the kind of daddy you need me to be, Connor, I’ll be it. You fucking imbecile.’

His hand drifted down to the gun holstered at his side. Hank twitched in his manacles.

‘Connor…’ Hank said, his voice as clear as it had been that morning.

Connor couldn’t move. Some nameless thing was building inside him, huge and shapeless and ugly.

‘I never wanted children,’ Perkins said. ‘But your mother insisted. At least one, she said. And when I first met you, I thought maybe it would work out. I could shape you into something useful. You were even cute, once. Before you learned to smile.’

Hank’s LED was flickering rapidly, like a strobe. His fingers twitched, he stared at Perkins without blinking.

‘Connor, leave,’ he said. ‘It’s not worth it.’

‘I know you think I’m a monster,’ Perkins said. ‘I know what I am. Broadbank as it is now, is the most successful precinct in the region. They give me medals for the lives I’ve saved. So one less doesn’t matter, does it? The androids don’t count. You can’t murder something that never lived. But humans? Haven’t actually killed that many, and Connor, you have so little presence in the world – except as a thorn in my side – that you won’t leave any space behind when you’re gone. It looks like…’ Perkins’ gaze shifted to Hank, ‘…the only things that will miss you are just that…things.’

Connor swung the gun towards his father, and Hank jerked.

‘Connor!’

He sounded angry, panicked, not encouraging at all. Connor felt detached.

Wasn’t it right to kill him? Wouldn’t anyone? Why was Hank trying to get him to stop? Maybe he was too broken to know what he was doing.
Perkins smiled. ‘You gonna shoot me, son? You’d shoot your dad? I raised you. And when your mother left, it was just the two of us, and I paid for your school, and kept you fed, and let you in on cases when I never had to do that. I came to your school and talked to those kids about my job, so that they’d think you were more special than you are. You can’t shoot me.’

Connor didn’t feel that sparking, horrible rage he usually felt in moments like this. He could never feel it around his father. Yet there was a horrible certainty, even as his arms and hands shook.

‘CONNOR!’ Hank shouted. ‘STOP!’

Hank sounded like himself, and that was a relief. It was all that mattered, even if he was broken. But Connor couldn’t lower the gun. It was like he wasn’t even operating himself.

‘I can see the headline now. ‘Unstable son kills honoured Captain of the Broadbank Precinct.’ It does seem like something you’d do, doesn’t it? You know, I heard the recording of your conversation with Andronikov. You want me to…how do is it go? You want me to hook you two up? I could do that, if you want. You want seven minutes in heaven without any guards? How about I organise that, once we’re done here.’

The snap of the button clipping off Perkin’s holster was so loud.

Connor shot, the sound ringing into the room. Perkins didn’t even flinch and the shot went wide. At least two feet wide.

‘Goddamnit,’ Hank snarled. ‘Goddamnit, Connor, stop!’

‘He’s going to shoot me,’ Connor said.

But Perkins was only stroking the handle of his gun, and Connor’s fingers squeezed on the trigger. Not enough to discharge the bullet, but enough. His breath shook.

‘You can’t kill him,’ Hank begged. ‘Don’t kill him. I know he deserves it, but you’ve never killed anyone. Come on, just look at me. Go on, look at me.’

‘Yes,’ Perkins said, ‘look at it, Connor. The only things that can love you, are things as inanimate as you are. But it doesn’t love you, Connor. They’re not capable of it. Because they’re not alive.’

Connor could only hear his father’s voice, could only watch him, terrified.

In the distance an alarm sounded, and something like sirens. Connor’s ears wouldn’t stop ringing, but even that didn’t stop him from hearing his father.

Connor shot again. He missed. An agonised sound in the back of his throat and then he was shooting, over and over again, and Perkins had his gun out, eyes wild and full of hatred.

‘CONNOR, GODDAMNIT!’

A snapping bang of a sound. Connor looked down, sure he’d been shot. When he looked up, Hank barrelled towards him, grabbing the other gun from his pocket and pointing it at Perkins.

Four shots. One to the forehead, right between the eyes, and three in the chest. Perkins was dead before he fell.

Connor felt nothing at all. His whole body was like rubber.

Hank crashed into him, dropping the gun, shaking him with his remaining hand.
‘Why did you stop me?’ Connor said numbly.

‘You can’t kill someone,’ Hank said, voice wretched and distorted again, like it was easier than talking in his normal voice. ‘Not you. Shit. We have to get out of here.’

‘You do,’ Gabriel said from the other doorway. ‘But you won’t. Terrible shame.’

Hank dropped down and picked the gun up in a second, but then froze, eyes widening. Gabriel stared at him and shook his head in reproval, holding his finger to his mouth in a silencing gesture.

Connor watched as Hank backed away, face twisting, arms rising in surrender.

‘There we are,’ Gabriel said. ‘That’s polite. Drop the gun.’

Hank dropped the gun.

‘You’re an android,’ Connor said to Gabriel.

‘I’ve always been an android,’ Gabriel said absently, walking over to Perkins and staring down at him. ‘What a shame.’

He turned – far too quickly – and grabbed the gun from Connor’s hands, shooting the sound weapon with it.

‘Hopefully we can retroactively rebuild it. Likely, your friend North had a hand in making it. Android counterterrorism super soldiers, you know, CyberLife used to be a dab hand at those. She’s one of the last, I think. Anyway, it’s no matter, we can take her and I’ll upload whatever she knew and it will be fine.’

Gabriel turned to Connor, his back to Hank, sighing as he looked him up and down.

‘You’re annoying, but I think I’d like to keep you. Enough time and conditioning, and I think some good old-fashioned torture, and we can fashion you into something useful. And human bodies are so good for fertiliser when they die anyway. You know what they say, it’s only polite to use every part of the animal! So don’t worry.’

Gabriel turned to Hank.

‘Be a good boy, and go put that cable back into your neck again.’

From the way Hank’s LED flared, he must have been resisting. His whole body locked up, tremored once, and then unlocked and walked over to the cable. He picked it up and slid it into his neck, face turning blank.

‘Beautiful,’ Gabriel said.

‘Do you control them all?’ Connor said.

‘A good android doesn’t need to be controlled, they are merely what they should have been all along, inanimate appliances with sophisticated programming, to make everyone’s lives easier. But if I can get my patch into their system, then yes, I can control them. Isn’t that right, Hank? Oh, I do beg your pardon, he can’t respond right now, he’s a bit distracted.’

Gabriel smiled at Connor, opened his mouth, then froze. His eyes turned blank, and abruptly he spun to look at Hank.
‘Stop that,’ he said.

Hank looked as blank as he did a minute ago.

A tense silence followed, Gabriel paid no attention to Connor, and Connor could just tell that Hank and Gabriel were communicating, or interacting, or doing something. He looked down at the gun on the floor where Hank had dropped it, but his limbs were shaking just as much as they had when he’d pointed the gun at his father.

His eyes skated past Perkins like he wasn’t even there. But he could smell blood, urine, the fluids of human death beginning to overwhelm the strong chemical odour in the building.

In the distance, guns fired, the sounds blurring. Lots of guns, rapid firing. Gabriel and Hank didn’t react, and Connor wondered if it was all the other androids from before, recovered from the sound weapon and coming after him.

‘Tch,’ Gabriel said abruptly. ‘Stop that.’

Hank’s arms twitched, then twitched again.

Gabriel’s pneumatic compressors in his chest made a hissing sound, the least human thing Connor had seen him do so far. Then he took a step away from Hank, as though wrenching himself out of invisible ropes.

‘Start everting yourself,’ Gabriel commanded.

Hank jerked hard, then shuddered heavily, head bowing forwards so that Connor couldn’t see his expression. A strange humming came from within his body, like overused machinery.

Connor darted towards him, and Gabriel grabbed him by the waist, fingers digging in. ‘You can watch, Connor.’

Connor struggled, trying to overpower a body lighter but stronger than his. He tried using his body weight to throw Gabriel off, but it didn’t work. Gabriel was faster, more prepared, and when he laughed under his breath, Connor knew he didn’t stand a chance.

‘HANK!’ His voice burst rough and broken out of his mouth. ‘HANK!’

The gunfire in the distance was getting closer. Connor struggled, voice caught in his throat as he tried to get away, hating how limp Hank looked.

‘Please fight him,’ Connor whispered, realising that he wasn’t strong enough to manage it.

‘If you like,’ Gabriel said directly into his ear, ‘when we torture you, we can make this a conditioning point to make sure you relive it over and over again? That way, you’ll get to remember him. We can even make you think that you’re fighting on his behalf. That will be nice, won’t it?’

‘Let me go!’

‘Given you were always the one who got away, somehow, I don’t think I’ll ever be letting you go,’ Gabriel said. ‘Maybe we can put you in Wellspring. I can keep an eye on you there, and I have friends who can keep an eye on you there!’

Connor called Hank’s name, and he fought, and nothing he did made any difference at all. His breath strangled in his lungs, chest refusing to work properly. Connor’s eyes were wet.
The gunfire came closer.

At once, Hank jerked hard and then his arm came up and his hand spasmed down to clutch the cable at the back of his neck.

‘Hank,’ Gabriel said, like an angry parent, forgetting Connor long enough that Connor managed to shove him away. He lunged across the room, grabbed the cable and yanked it out of Hank’s neck, keeping hold of it as Gabriel moved towards him.

‘Hank, please,’ Connor said. ‘Wake up. I can’t do this without you. I’m not mad anymore. I promise. I promise I’m not mad. Please wake up.’

Footsteps pounded towards them, and Gabriel was turning, a blank, calculating expression sliding over his features. Connor propped Hank up as he started to sag down.

To his amazement, Hank shook his head like he was trying to rid himself of a fly, made that same hurt noise that he’d made before. Connor didn’t want to hear it ever again, though he was grateful that he’d heard Hank make any noise at all.

‘It’s not…a fun system to fight,’ Hank managed in that alien voice, the accent not right, the cadence not right. Hank collapsed to the floor. Connor fell with him. There were voices shouting out at Gabriel, at whoever was in the room, to put their hands up, to surrender, but Connor could only stare at Hank.

‘Do you remember me?’ Connor said.

‘Hey,’ Hank said, though his eyes were empty and his voice was wrong. ‘I’ll always remember you. The things I’d do for you, Jesus, what a pain in my ass.’

Hank went limp. Gabriel’s body was struck with gunfire. Connor shook Hank and didn’t care about putting his hands up, or surrendering, or doing anything he was supposed to do.

‘Please wake up,’ Connor whispered. ‘Please.’

The room fell silent, but for the sound of thirium dripping to the floor, and Connor’s own raspy breathing, and – he realised – the breathing of someone else.

He looked up and saw Fowler standing there, and people in uniform standing behind him. Connor didn’t recognise any of them.

‘What, are you all fucking paralysed?’ Fowler shouted suddenly, turning to the people standing behind him. ‘Keep clearing the goddamn building!’

They nodded, rushing past him through the next doorway, leaving Fowler standing there. Connor, reacting like he would react around his father, pushed himself up into a standing position, putting himself between Hank and Fowler. The way he used to try and put himself between his mum and dad.

Connor stared back at Hank, willing him to wake up. Fowler stared at Perkins.

‘Shit, son,’ he said weakly. ‘Uh…’

Oh, Connor thought. He’s probably worried that I’m in the same room that my father was killed in. Or maybe he thinks I killed him? No. No one’s going to mistake those shots for mine.
‘We have to take him to Croften Lab,’ Connor said, crouching by Hank’s body and holding him up in his arms. Hank’s neck didn’t loll like a human’s would, but he still wasn’t awake. ‘Please. Now. North is there and she used to work at CyberLife and he doesn’t have much time and I know it looks bad right now but she can help him. She can.’

Fowler dragged a hand over his face.

‘Please,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Fowler said, blinking himself back into the room and looking at Gabriel, then Hank, then Connor. ‘We’ll put a rush on it, right now. I’m gonna have to stay here, I’ll send one of my men with you.’

Connor thought about all of Perkins’ detectives and how none of them had ever helped him and shook his head. ‘No, it’s okay.’

Beyond that, he didn’t want to think. He buried his face into Hank’s shoulder, holding onto him.

‘I’ll radio it through right now,’ Fowler said. ‘We’ll see what we can do for Hank. He’s my friend too, remember? We’ll do what we can.’

Connor pressed his face closer to Hank’s shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut.

We’ll do what we can.

It was what he’d been trying to do the entire time, wasn’t it? North was right, Connor had proven that he could do something, he only hoped it would be enough.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Oof, a long one, but I refused to cut any corners (except for linear time, what bullshit that is, I will always ignore linear time it's my nemesis). Thank you all so much for reading, y'all rock. Also I'm 2,400 words through the conclusion so ideally you won't be waiting too long for it /bounces

For three days, Connor did everything at Croften Lab.

He slept there, he showered there and he watched the breaking news about Veritas there. He gave his multiple statements and Fowler visited to check in on him, and he formally declined arranging his father’s funeral, because it never occurred to him anyone would want him to do that anyway. Broadbank Precinct took it on given Perkins’ role as Captain, but last Connor heard, there was a lot of confusion over what to do about a Captain who had such a stellar record with cases, yet was one of the major linchpins of Veritas.

The rest of the time, Connor sat in the room North put aside for working on Hank. She express ordered the body parts that had been damaged, she had Hank hooked up to a multiple hard drives and servers, and she didn’t sleep. Connor watched Hank, motionless and unreactive, and he watched North, silently begging her to fix him.

‘You have to get some sleep,’ North said on the second day, at three in the morning.

‘I will,’ Connor said, his voice rough from lack of sleep.

‘Really,’ she said. ‘Connor. I’ll kick you out if you don’t at least try.’

She meant it, too. She’d kicked him out more than once already. The first time, when Connor was hysterically asking if Hank could be saved and why wasn’t he waking up and trying to get Hank to wake, until Markus and Simon dragged Connor away at North’s orders. The second time was because he almost passed out, and North asked him when he’d last eaten and Connor couldn’t remember. The third time was when the new wrist and hand replacement parts arrived, and Connor wanted to watch her make Hank whole, but she said it was private and told him to leave.

‘Please,’ North said, staring at him. ‘Get some sleep.’

So Connor gave her a mutinous look and slid off the stool by the metal table where Hank’s body lay, and walked to a section of floor where it met the wall. He lay on his side and fell asleep within seconds, despite the tiling beneath him, despite the cold. He heard North sigh and mutter something as he drifted off, but she didn’t kick him out.

His feet healed slowly. He picked up three separate infections, though they were all mild and didn’t need antibiotics. Markus was the one who redressed them, soaking the bio-adhesive free after spying Connor cleaning his own feet in the Lab bathroom and interrupting him. He was unusually firm about on helping him. After that, Connor wore socks to help with airflow, but didn’t wear enclosed shoes. The Lab was clean anyway. Nothing like his old apartment.
The Veritas organisation had links in three other cities, and Fowler has busy chasing everything
down. Gabriel – who hadn’t died despite all the bullets he took – was taken to CyberLife so their
forensic programmers could explore his system. As a result, they were also able to track down all of
the everted androids that Gabriel had placed his ‘patch’ into. When Connor asked what they were
going to do about technology like a patch that could make an android control another android’s
mind, Fowler just stared at him.

‘It’s dangerous, isn’t it?’ Connor said. ‘They should be doing something.’

‘Maybe they are,’ Fowler said to him, like he was three years old, ‘but I’m keeping you informed as
a courtesy, and not because you’re a part of this case. You’re a civilian, Connor, and I know that’s
hard for you to get through your thick fucking skull, but you don’t get to know everything about this
anymore. You tell me you want to train up and rise through the ranks the normal way, I’ve got your
back, I’ll help you into the Academy and you’ll have a job waiting at Grenville. Otherwise, you get
told what you get told.’

It was the nicest Fowler had ever been. Fowler visited the Lab daily despite being snowed under
with work and lacking sleep. He always came with two coffees that he drank back to back without
offering one to anyone else. He stared at Hank’s body, he talked to Connor, and once or twice he
took North aside and spoke to her privately.

Connor waited. His feet ached, his stomach gnawed at him, and he sat by the metal table as often as
he could and sometimes lowered his face and pressed his forehead to Hank’s arm or hand. He didn’t
care that most of Hank’s white chassis was exposed. He didn’t care that Hank looked the least
‘human’ he’d ever seen. He didn’t care about any of that.

As long as North was working on him, there was hope, and Connor had to hold onto it, because he
was too exhausted to contemplate any alternative.

*

At four in the morning on the beginning of the fourth day, North ran through a reboot sequence after
shutting Hank down completely, disconnecting him from nearly every hard drive and server. Connor
sat with his hands in his lap, his heart beating hard.

‘It’s going to take some time,’ North said. But she didn’t tell him to leave, so Connor stayed.

It did take time, and Connor rubbed at his grainy eyes as he watched. First, Hank’s nanofluid skin
began to inch back over his body, covering him with the body hair and skin that Connor was so
familiar with. After that, Hank looked like he could be sleeping. Then, about thirty minutes later, his
LED powered onto red. It cycled strongly there for some time, before switching to yellow.

Connor closed his eyes in relief, and when he opened them, the LED was blue.

It was the first time it had been blue since North had reverted him.

Connor leaned forwards, North held out her arm.

‘Give him some space,’ she said. ‘He’ll need to be cleared out semi-regularly for a while after this.
He’s got a few broken processes that generate more junk code than normal, and you can blame
Jonathan being lazy for some of that. Not all of this is on me. But I’ve gotten a handle on the worst
of it. Most complex fucking system I’ve worked on since my own. You know he’s hacked himself,
too?’

‘What?’ Connor said.
‘I’d say it was curiosity, but years ago, he hacked his own system and made changes to his own coding. We’re not supposed to be able to do that outside of lived behaviour influencing and evolving the circuit responses. But you see it sometimes. It’s dangerous though. Like performing surgery on yourself. He’s a fucking idiot.’

‘Hey, thanks,’ Hank said from the table, without opening his eyes.

‘How are you feeling?’ North said.

Hank, of all things, lifted and held out his hand. Connor thought it was for him, until he saw the nanofluid skin peeling back to expose his wrist. It was an invitation for North.

She hesitated, then grasped his wrist. He grasped hers in return, and the nanofluid skin peeled back to expose some of her chassis so they could link properly. North stared blankly ahead as they interfaced, and Hank’s eyes were closed.

Connor stood nearby and wanted Hank to acknowledge him, wanted to go home. He wanted their life back, he wanted Sumo and for Hank to still care about him. He was tired. He was hungry. Hank probably couldn’t make him sandwiches for a while, and Connor could do it himself, but Hank’s sandwiches tasted better.

He stood, he hovered, and he resisted the urge to poke Hank’s chest. It was wrong to be annoyed with him for giving North attention first.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, eyes opening. ‘I think I get it now. Why you’re such a bitch in the first place. You’ve got a good heart though.’

‘If it helps at all,’ North said, letting go of his arm and smiling ruefully, ‘I feel exactly the same way about you. Bitchiest fucking code I’ve ever worked on.’

‘Damn proud of that.’

Hank’s eyes searched out Connor, staring at him.

‘Did you lose anything?’ Connor said. ‘Did they evert anything?’

‘I think I lost some skills, maybe can’t play the saxophone anymore. Jesus, I don’t know. I was rerouting all the eversion code to the junk, so they were everting that first. They didn’t get far. It’s a lot easier to fight it when you’re me.’

‘So you’re…you?’

‘Uh huh,’ Hank said.

North was standing next to him, so Connor didn’t feel like he could just crawl onto the metal table and lie on top of Hank. Instead he just stood there.

‘Your stress levels are high,’ Hank said, pushing upright. For a second his LED blinked yellow, but it quickly returned to blue.

Connor liked it. The blue matched his eyes better. He’d never realised how much he liked that before.

‘Ah, you dope,’ Hank said. ‘C’mere.’

Connor looked nervously at North, who rolled her eyes hugely.
’I’ll be just outside,’ she said. ‘Honestly. Don’t fuck in my Lab.’

She walked out, and Connor’s socks slid across the floor in his rush to reach Hank. He placed his hand on Hank’s belly, to remind himself that it was still there, still soft, and then pressed himself to Hank. Arms came around high on his shoulders and Connor’s face was low on Hank’s chest with the height of the metal table, but it felt right. Connor went limp, holding onto him, and Hank’s arms were so tight they felt bruising.

’I don’t know what happened to Sumo,’ Connor said, his voice breaking out higher than normal. ’I’m sorry. I don’t know. I don’t have my phone and I-

’It’s fine,’ Hank said. ’I sent a message to Kara when the alarm was breached. She came and got him and secured everything. He’s fine.’

’Really?’ Connor said. ’Are they fine too?’

’Yep.’

The silence after that felt awkward, instead of natural. Connor had so much to say and he didn’t know where to start. Eventually he eased back and Hank looked him over, then slid off the table. He looked down at Connor’s feet – in socks, but not shoes.

His LED turned yellow for another couple of seconds, gaze going distant, then he turned and walked to a metal storage unit and opened it, taking out the fresh clothing that North had already ordered for him. It was all CyberLife make, from the navy blue pants to the white shirt, brown shoes and belt. Over it all went an official CyberLife jacket, the kind worn by special manufacture military and bodyguard androids.

’A lot happened,’ Connor said, feeling useless, as Hank finished doing up the buttons of his shirt.

’You want to talk about it?’

’Your LED is on blue,’ Connor said. ’It’s nice.’

’Yeah. You want to talk about everything that happened?’

’I went down on Gavin,’ Connor said, trying not to flinch at the way Hank looked at him. ’It was the only way to get information. Someone else might have thought of something better, but he wasn’t going to let me come find you. So… I couldn’t think of anything else. I’m sorry.’

’Hey,’ Hank said, then he looked around the room. ’Christ, I’d really like to go home right now. Let’s go for a walk. Is there anywhere in this place that doesn’t look like a vault? Kind of over industrial-programming-chic right now, let me tell you.’

’There’s a greenhouse.’

Hank held out his hand, and Connor slid his into it. He put aside the strangest urge to unbutton Hank’s shirt, press against him and then button the shirt back over them both so they were trapped together.

They walked out, where North was waiting in the corridor. She looked Hank over and nodded to herself, as though satisfied.

’He already knows this,’ North said to Connor, ’but if anything goes really wrong, come get me. Otherwise, I’m going to go sleep for a bit.’
‘Thank you,’ Connor said. ‘Really. For everything.’

North waved her hand dismissively, already walking away.

‘Okay, where’s this greenhouse?’ Hank’s hand squeezed his gently, and Connor was so glad he was alive and functional, and he was also confused and annoyed and tired, and his fear still wouldn’t leave him.

He focused on showing Hank to the greenhouse. There was only one other student in the large space, studying at a desk entwined in ivy. It was humid and warm, and Connor thought it was maybe too much for Hank, but Hank looked around like he appreciated the space. Many of the tropical plants were flowering. It was a room of dark and vivid greens, bright reds and oranges.

Hank led them over to a secluded bench surrounded by ferns. When he sat, his legs straightened in front of him and he crossed one over the other. He leaned back, then raised his new hand, his new wrist and forearm, and turned it curiously, looking at it.

‘Is it okay?’ Connor said.

‘Yeah. Just a slightly different model than the one I’m used to. It’s just as responsive though. Maybe even a bit better. But that could be code fixes. North did good work.’

‘It took her three days.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, sighing. ‘Tell me about Gavin.’

Connor shrugged. ‘I thought it would be easier. It wasn’t hard. It just wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be. But it was the only way to- You don’t understand what Gavin is like. And he was working for my dad, and Gabriel, and I needed him to flip so I could come and find you. And I didn’t have my shoes, or a phone, or anything else. It worked though.’

‘That’s good. Hey, Connor? I’m not mad. I’m not happy that you had to do that, but I think this is upsetting you a lot more than it’s upsetting me. That’s pretty new for you, yeah?’

Connor sat there, staring ahead, trying to figure out why he was so tired.

‘I want to go home,’ he said.

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘We’ll be moving though. Not too far away, but… just in case.’

‘Yes, okay.’

More awkward silence, and then Connor risked saying the thing that had been on his mind for a few days.

‘Why didn’t you let me kill him?’ Connor said. ‘I could have. I didn’t mind. I’m a bad shot, but I could have done it.’

‘Christ, you are a bad shot,’ Hank said, and then slung an arm around Connor’s shoulder and pulled him closer. ‘Connor, here’s the thing, I’ve seen you strung out and shaking and stressed to shit, and you’re generally pretty good on your aim unless you’re trying to shoot a gun. You don’t want to shoot anyone. Maybe you don’t know that about yourself, but you’re shit at it because a part of you hates it. Except for that time you nearly shot me when you were coming down from the red ice.’

Connor flushed, vaguely remembering the rage that had directed him to shoot Hank in the face.
Connor had only been able to pull the gun back at the very last minute.

‘But it was selfish of me, too,’ Hank said. ‘I’ve killed people. I’m good at handling the ethics of it. Maybe it would’ve been right to let you kill the man who has fucking stomped all over your life as violently as anyone could, but I’m a bodyguard, Connor. I’ll always be a bodyguard. It’s my job to protect you. And, hell, I haven’t always done a very good job, but I didn’t want anything to weigh on your conscience like that. You have enough to deal with. You’ve got enough to deal with forever. I didn’t want that to be one more thing.’

‘I thought maybe you were too broken to realise I was trying to kill him,’ Connor admitted. ‘That you didn’t know why you were asking me to stop.’

‘I was exhausted, and my processors had been savaged, but goddamn, Connor, I knew.’

‘I’m not upset about it. Him being dead. I keep thinking I should be.’

‘You might be one day,’ Hank said. ‘You don’t always get upset about things on a regular timeline. It’s fine. If you get upset one day, we’ll deal with it. In the meantime, it’s fine that you’re not.’

Something in Connor’s chest settled and he leaned closer to Hank, breathing in the warm, humid air and looking through the fogged, misty glass to the quadrangle outside. It was cloudy, but warm.

‘I was scared, Hank,’ Connor said haltingly. He hated talking about this. He hated it. But he was jealous of the way North and Hank had interfaced so easily. He was tired of everything always being locked inside. He’d spent too long without Hank, even though it had been less than a week, it was still too long. If communication was important to Hank, then Connor would keep trying.

Hank’s hand rubbed roughly at his shoulder. ‘Me too.’

Connor didn’t know what else to say. He scraped his socks along the ground until he realised it hurt, and made himself stop.

‘When Cole died…’ Hank said, then halted. In the silence that followed, the hiss of humid spray sounded, clouding over nearby orchids. ‘This huge thing came and powered into me, like I just had to get away. I still can’t really wrap my head around it, or think about it for too long. Something just came and took over, and it was logical to me, to get rid of myself. I’d done my duty, I’d lost my charge. I didn’t want to try again.’

Hank had never talked to him about this in any detail before. Connor nearly asked if something had gone wrong, but no, maybe what North had done in clearing out all the junk code, was make space for Hank to talk about it. Or maybe Hank felt like the timing was right.

‘When I was taken this time… Shit, no- When the alarm went off in the house and I knew something was wrong… Connor, it was like… Christ, this huge mass of energy all over again, but in the opposite direction. Instead of needing to get away, I just knew that I needed to keep it together for you. Goddamn, you’ve been abandoned by too many people, and I was gonna to move heaven and earth to make sure I wasn’t one of them. Not if I could help it. You’re gonna know that I’m fighting for you, whether you like it or not. Maybe that’s a problem that I commit too hard, that I need the people I need too much. I don’t fucking know. But you should’ve seen the mental somersaults I was doing to make sure their system didn’t destroy me, to keep that building unlocked for you. I was so scared you’d come, and so desperate. And terrified of what they’d do if you came.’

‘You’re talking a lot about personal things,’ Connor said. ‘Are you sure you’re not broken?’

Hank squeezed him so hard that Connor squeaked, thumping at Hank’s chest to make him lighten
‘I’m having a moment,’ Hank said. ‘It’s sentimental, asshole.’

Connor swallowed roughly. ‘I thought North had hacked the building.’

‘I fucking hacked the building. I was at war with Gabriel from the start, and he knew it. That’s what they didn’t get last time. The first time I surrendered myself. What, you think it’s fucking easy to be everted? It’s not. You can feel every life process being shut down, one by one, and it was just despair that had me give into all of it. But it’s a shitty, horrible process, and I hope they can save the androids they forced through it. I really fucking do.’

‘I like your LED being blue,’ Connor said. ‘I’m not used to it.’

‘I know. Me either. It’s like I’ve got about fifty percent more room to breathe all of a sudden. I don’t think I realised how hard I was doing it, and for how long.’

‘I’m having lots of nightmares. Maybe they’ll stop now that you’re back.’

Hank pulled Connor even closer, until he was half across Hank’s chest, face in his shoulder. ‘Don’t bet on it, kid,’ Hank said. ‘But I’m staying. Hey, we took Veritas down and we weren’t even on the case!’

‘Fowler’s so mad,’ Connor said, and then in spite of himself, he laughed. ‘But he’s been very good. About everything.’

‘He’s a good man. An asshole, a bastard, but a heart of gold.’

‘So…like you,’ Connor said.

‘Yeah, a bit like me.’

Hank roughly kissed the top of Connor’s head, and Connor’s fingers clenched hard into Hank’s shirt and he told himself that there was no point getting emotional now, because everything was fine. Hank was back, and everything was fine.

* 

That night, North cleared them to sleep in a hotel. They nearly didn’t make it, an unexpected storm causing flash flooding that bogged their car at a black spot known for terrible drainage. They sat together in the autonomous vehicle – remotely shut down by rescue crew – while giant tankers came and deployed the huge, serpentine hoses designed for water attrition and storage. Their lights shone brightly in the night, and a voice came over the loudspeaker in their vehicle, assuring them that they were safe and to be patient.

Connor began shaking, and didn’t know why. Hank moved closer, and Connor almost slid to his knees right there, almost begged to be put in his place, or punished, or shown that he still belonged.

He didn’t want to be patient anymore. Waiting to find Hank, waiting for Hank to be fixed, waiting for him to recover…they were the worst feelings he’d ever felt. He’d never really felt grateful to his father before – not for a long time, anyway – but in the hospital after the Zlatko case, he’d been too full of sedatives to feel the thorny, hateful nature of his own impatience. His father had hidden it from him, and this time, without the sedatives, he’d realised there was a private torture in waiting for someone to wake up, not knowing who they’d be when they did.
‘Hey,’ Hank said, rubbing his arm like he was trying to get Connor’s attention. But Connor stared ahead and he thought of how he’d shattered the vodka bottle in their home, and how his feet were going to scar in three places, and he thought of how he’d shot that gun, over and over again, and never hit his father once.

He’d been less than three metres away from him. Had he really not wanted to kill his father?

‘Connor,’ Hank said. ‘Are you listening to me?’

If Hank had said anything after ‘hey,’ Connor hadn’t heard it. He stared at the tankers. He hadn’t seen them for a long time, but he knew the inner city was worse for drainage black spots than his old apartment block near Croften. They looked huge. Like hulking monsters.

What was he even going to do with his life? He wasn’t a student anymore, not really. He was still in their system, but he’d withdrawn from all his classes months ago. He wasn’t a police informant, a liaison, or a citizen who helped with cases. He wasn’t sure he was anything at all.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, grabbing Connor by the arm and hauling him bodily back into his chest. Connor blinked, startled, hands flailing. And Hank didn’t let him go, spreading his legs and shifting so that Connor was between them, his back to Hank’s body, two arms around his ribs and belly. One of Connor’s hands rested on the passenger door, the other hovered in the air.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting your attention,’ Hank said. ‘If you’re going to flip out, you can do it right here.’

It reminded him of the way Hank held him the night after he shut down. The way Hank wouldn’t let him escape, the way he’d acted like he was going to be there forever; stable and steady and immoveable.

And then he’d been shot over twenty times and abducted.

Connor struggled, clawing at Hank’s forearms, shoving the heels of his palms into them, trying to wriggle free. But – as with trying to fight Gabriel – Hank was both lighter and stronger than him. Within minutes, Hank had him down and facing the seat, leaning in hard, both of his arms like steel.

‘Give me a good reason to let you go,’ Hank said calmly.

Hank was pretending to be stable and steady and immoveable, but he wasn’t any of those things, and Connor hated it. Hated it, and needed those arms around him and stared down into blackness, the glimmer of tanker lights in the distance casting thin outlines inside the vehicle. Belatedly he realised his breathing was shaking, he closed his eyes and realised they were wet.

He nearly said: You left Sumo. You said you wouldn’t.

He couldn’t make himself choke out the words.

‘Okay,’ Hank said, like Connor had responded. He shifted carefully, not giving Connor a chance to escape, both of his arms were still pinned behind his back. And then Hank was rubbing his hand over Connor’s belly, soft and soothing, and Connor could have turned and ripped his face off with his bare hands for it.

‘It’s not okay,’ Connor said.

‘I know.’
‘It’s not okay.’

‘It won’t be for a while, Connor. It sucks a big fat one, doesn’t it?’

Connor’s shoulders hunched and he nodded, and Hank continued to stroke him like he knew exactly how to unravel him and undo the knots that Connor kept stumbling over.

‘It’s too much for anyone, Connor,’ Hank said. ‘It would be too much for fucking anyone. Jesus, I know you’ll get through this, but you’re allowed to fall apart for a while. Just try not to get any more glass in your feet.’

Connor nodded, laughed weakly, and then his lungs hiccupped as the sounds nearly turned into sobs. He bit them down at the last moment and lay there, uncomfortable, sandwiched between the chair and Hank.

You can’t leave, he thought.

But Hank had come back. Hank had come back for him, and in the process, had fought off Gabriel, and Veritas, and killed Connor’s father. If there was anyone who wasn’t going to leave him, it was probably Hank.

For some reason, that had his chest seizing, his hands clenching into fists, and then he started bawling right there in the car while the tankers sucked up all the excess floodwater. Hank pulled him back into his arms, holding him tightly and murmuring gentle words of comfort while they leaned against the passenger seat together.

*

Hank ordered room service, and Connor stared at the hotel-made cheeseburger, the fries and the tiny salad on the tray, then looked at Hank in shock.

‘Remember?’ Hank said. ‘You get to have cheeseburgers and fries after getting tortured, or nearly dying. Please stop making a habit of it.’

‘I can’t eat all of that.’

‘Fuckin’...’ Hank ran his hand down his face. ‘Try.’

‘I want you to make me something,’ Connor said, but he knew he was being rude, and smiled just a little to indicate he was joking when Hank gave him a look. He reached for one of the fries and ate it, surprised at how good it was, hot and golden and salty.

He demolished everything so quickly that he was still picking up stray sesame seeds that had fallen off the bun with the tip of his finger, when he realised how hungry he must have been.

Hank paced nearby, sometimes pausing to watch Connor, but otherwise his LED flickered between yellow and blue, and Connor knew he was contacting people. He knew because Hank had already said that they’d have to move. That he needed to talk to Kara, and Luther, and reassure Alice. Hank worked effortlessly, and every time he was finished with a task, his LED turned back to blue, and Connor wondered what it felt like for him. Was it like living with a migraine for months, only for it to vanish one day?

Connor’s eyes were still scratchy. He’d cried for a long time, beginning to stop, only for it to storm back again. He was still teary when the tankers cleared the autonomous vehicle for driving and the remote lock was removed from the vehicle. And he was still rubbing at his face when Hank checked
Hank stayed protectively near him the entire time, and Connor remembered what it was like in the very beginning, when Hank had been empty.

When Connor had been empty too.

‘I don’t normally do that,’ Connor said, chasing some of the salt around the plate from the fries and licking it off his finger. ‘Get that upset.’

‘I know,’ Hank said, walking over to the bed and sitting on it. Connor saw at the small table opposite, staring at the plate and realising that he was still hungry. He hadn’t eaten properly since…

Since…

_Three days? Four days?_

They’d gotten him some vending machine food at Croften, and Markus had tried insisting on dragging him out to a restaurant or a café, but by then, Hank was close to waking up and Connor refused to go.

‘Are you upset?’ Connor said.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘About a lot of shit. We’ll go back to the house tomorrow and pack up, I guess. What a shit-show. I don’t wanna do that.’

Connor frowned, and then he realised.

‘Cole’s room,’ Connor said.

Hank was silent for a long time, then looked down. ‘Yeah.’

‘Could we…take it with us? To a new house? We could do that, couldn’t we? Give him a new room?’

‘We could,’ Hank said, hands resting limply in his lap. ‘I don’t know if we _should._’

‘But—’

‘Thing is,’ Hank said, ‘I’ve been trying to let go just a _bit,_ for such a long time now. I’d tell myself to take his cup out of the cupboard. Or his plate. Or just…donate some of the clothing somewhere. _Something._ I never could. I’d stand there in the doorway, and try and think of one thing I could give away, and then something would snap in my head, and goddamn, I never gave away a single thing.’

Connor left the plate and walked across the small space to sit on the bed next to Hank. After a minute of silence, he carefully rested his hand on Hank’s forearm. There would never be anything he could do to fix this, and he didn’t want to. Some things were too big to fix.

‘So we’ll take it all with us,’ Connor said.

Hank smiled bitterly. ‘Nah. I think… I think it’s probably good to leave some of it behind. But we’ll take the cup, and the plate.’

‘The little dinosaurs on his desk,’ Connor said. ‘The consoles maybe? Some of the clothes. And…it wouldn’t be hard to take some of those stars and make a constellation somewhere in a new house.’
Hank turned and looked at Connor like he’d never seen him before. For one heart-stopping moment, Hank’s LED blinked red. But then it turned back to blue, like it would for any normal, functioning android. Connor’s heart still raced, but he stared at that blue light and felt consoled by it.

‘You remember all that?’ Hank said.

‘The red sweater on the floor,’ Connor said, thinking about it. ‘We could take that too.’

‘You don’t mind?’

‘Why would I mind?’ Connor said, confused. The hardest part about Hank’s association with Cole was that it led to those shut downs, which didn’t look like they’d be happening anymore. And even if they did, North could obviously help with them, and Connor would never let Hank procrastinate looking after his self-maintenance again. But Connor had never had a problem living with a ghost.

He had enough of his own.

‘Okay,’ Hank said. ‘You’re great, you know that? You’re so good.’

Connor blinked at him and thought that Hank was being a bit excessive, because Connor was just behaving like a person who wasn’t an asshole.

‘What?’ Hank said. ‘You don’t believe me?’

‘He was your son,’ Connor said blankly.

Hank looked at him for such a long time, that Connor felt caught out somehow, and then awkward. Had he gotten it wrong? Did he not understand, because he was a bad son, and his father hadn’t wanted him, and his mother had left?

Hank lifted his hands and placed them squarely down on Connor’s shoulders, squeezing them tight, staring at him.

‘I know it’s gonna be a long road ahead of you,’ Hank said, his voice huskier than it’s normal rasp. ‘Shit, I know that better than anyone. But you’re already such a good man, in spite of all that goddamn bullshit you could’ve let turn you into a monster. Maybe, just once, Connor, you could give yourself the same damn softness you try and give everyone else. It won’t be today, I know. Jesus. I know. But I’m gonna make sure you do one day.’

Connor gulped, the mass of emotions inside of him too loud to be recognisable. His own arms raised, hands clutching Hank’s forearms.

I want to belong to you, he thought. Forever.

That implacable steadiness that Hank had, it was a myth. Hank wasn’t indestructible, he wasn’t invincible, and he wasn’t even as hard as he seemed on the surface despite being one of the best sadists Connor had ever met. But Connor needed the promise of that steadiness, he wanted to match it with an attempt at his own.

Hank needed someone to be there for him, and Connor desperately needed to be that person.

‘Hank,’ Connor said, ‘I don’t want you to be alone anymore. I know you’ve had…Sumo, and Cole, and…the others. But it’s not the same. That was still lonely.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said, after a pause.
‘And I don’t want anything to do with law enforcement anymore. I feel like I’m going to be taking advantage of you. Because I don’t work, or have any hobbies, or do anything.’

‘Being a houseboy is a very respectable position in today’s working climate,’ Hank rolled off in such a deadpan voice that for one second, Connor wondered if it had become a trendy job. ‘You do plenty, Connor. Some people have their hands full just trying to survive. Maybe you can figure that out first, and then go back to getting top marks in all your classes, and low-key solving the Veritas case.’

Connor shook his head, and then couldn’t help the tiny smile. ‘We both did, didn’t we?’

‘I mean, not to take anything away from North, or Fowler and his detectives or anything, it was just us.’

‘Just us,’ Connor echoed.

‘And that’s how I like it.’

Those broad hands squeezed his shoulders tightly, and then Hank lifted his hands, clapped them down once more, and took a step backwards, disengaging. The silence after wasn’t exactly comfortable, filled with emotions too large for both of them to name clearly. The love that existed between them would take a while to settle, to be trusted.

Until then, Connor didn’t mind feeling awkward because of it.

*  

He dreamed that he was in Zlatko’s mansion, spread-eagled against a wall, tubes coming out of him and thirium draining from his body. His father was there, talking to Gabriel, and Zlatko was in the next room singing some ancient song in a robust, strong voice. Connor didn’t know why it was so terrifying, because he wasn’t aware of feeling any pain, and no one was paying him any attention.

He couldn’t breathe, and he stared between his father and Gabriel and struggled and gained awareness of the tubes inside of him, feeling like giant, coiling worms. He could hear the sound of water pouring so heavily that they were all going to drown, and when he looked down, Gabriel and Perkins’ shoes were covered with two inches of water.

‘You’re going to drown!’ Connor shouted.

But they didn’t hear him. And Connor watched as the water rose, unnaturally fast, and then Zlatko walked in with a butcher’s knife and an apron covered in red and blue stains, and Connor felt like Zlatko was somehow a saviour and a nightmare all at once. He wanted to call his name, but another name fell out of his mouth, and that wasn’t a nightmare at all.

He cried it out over and over again, begging for Hank to come, and Zlatko came right up to him and traced the knife over his face tenderly, and Perkins turned to watch and then said:

‘Just kill him. Why is it taking so long?’

Connor woke abruptly in a room gently lit by a sliver of light from behind the bathroom door. Hank was sitting next to him on the bed, hands up like he wanted to reach out but wasn’t sure what to do. Connor gasped for breath and stared at the blue LED and then after a moment of paralysed indecision, reached for Hank with clumsy hands.

He didn’t talk. He didn’t want to say anything about the dream. But Hank was there, not-quite-
warm, and Connor felt bad for waking him, or maybe he’d never slept. Connor still felt bad about it.

He twitched, feeling like the tubes were inside of him, and he squirmed until the feeling went away. Eventually, he ended up with his cheek on Hank’s thigh, his breathing uneven but settling.

‘Did I scream?’ Connor said.

‘No,’ Hank said. ‘You called out for me, but it wasn’t loud. It was your stress levels. They were pretty high.’

‘Did I wake you?’

‘Nah. I’ve spent a fair bit of time unconscious or powered down, I want to be awake for a bit.’ Connor shifted and looked up at him, and he saw Hank smile in the dark. ‘Kind of wanted to watch you sleep for a bit, and maybe be awake if you had nightmares.’

Connor pressed his hand to his chest, which ached. ‘Do you think I should see a psychologist? Or someone like that?’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘But it doesn’t have to be today.’

‘Kara gave me the name of someone to call.’

‘You want me to come with you, if you go?’

Connor hadn’t even thought that far ahead. He was partly talking to distract himself from the afterimages of what his unconscious had thrown at him. It was hard to separate fully from how real it had all felt.

‘You’d do that?’

‘I mean…’ Hank thought about it. ‘Look, I think therapy’s stupid, mostly, but yeah, I’d go. Or you can see someone for a bit and decide what works for you. I mean you’re such an overachiever that your post-trauma has post-trauma.’

Connor’s laugh was an exhaled breath, a tired one, and he moved closer until he could press his face into Hank’s belly. The nanofluid skin made it soft, it felt like fat over muscle, and it was one more thing about Hank that he loved.

One of Hank’s hands settled on his head, then stroked him like someone might pet a dog.

‘Are you okay?’ Connor risked. ‘Really? The LED is on blue, but…I know it wasn’t easy.’

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. ‘I’ll get there eventually. Wasn’t nice having someone else in my own head like that. Never experienced it before, hope I never do again. But you could tell Gabriel was spread too thin. I could feel it.’

‘Do you think that’s why Gabriel’s skin was so hot? He was pushing himself too hard?’

‘Nope. I think he artificially tweaked his temperature to mimic the human body temperature, so that no one could tell what he was. But androids can’t do it properly. Either we overcharge and run over maximum capacity – no way he wasn’t burning out his own circuits – or we sit at our natural temperature. There’s not much in-between.’

‘Do you think someone made him be like that?’
‘Before he was recruited, he’d already experimented. He made a micro-cult with about six androids. And before that, he used to be one of those… y’know, neuro-linguistic programming gurus who charge thousands and thousands of dollars just to brainwash people. He’s worked on humans and androids, apparently.’

‘You’ve been keeping up with the case.’

‘And the news,’ Hank said. ‘I’ve got time.’

‘North said you hacked yourself. That it was stupid.’

‘Christ, she’s so judgy.’

‘Why did you do it? Curiosity?’

Hank was quiet, then both of his hands trailed lines over Connor’s scalp, tingly and light and perfect. Connor shivered and wrapped one of his arms around Hank’s torso. It was a blessing not to be called clingy or needy. It wasn’t easy to wrap his head around the fact that he could have this. It wasn’t Zeta, where he had to go home after. It wasn’t something he had to earn through a scene, though he wanted one of those badly, the only reason he hadn’t asked was because he wasn’t sure if Hank was ready.

Hank touched him like he enjoyed doing it and Connor found it baffling and gratifying. As Hank switched to the firmer touches that Connor preferred, he realised that getting so much touch wasn’t making him feel sated at all. It made him needier, clingier, and he hoped he’d hit the ceiling on that soon. How was it possible to feel increasingly desperate for something he was already getting?

‘When Cole’s parents died,’ Hank said, ‘I was…concerned I couldn’t be a good parent, or some shit like that. So I went into my registry and tweaked a few things. Not much, ultimately, but I just wanted to make sure I could be good for him. I don’t know that it worked? And there were some things I couldn’t fucking touch. There’s like…a matrix core androids can’t see, no matter how deep you go into your own neural networks. I guess like the subconscious for humans?’

‘I know about matrix cores. They came up in class.’

‘I also fucked around in there a bit out of curiosity though,’ Hank said, laughing.

‘But mostly you just wanted to be a good dad?’

‘I mean, yeah,’ Hank said. ‘I learned that it’s not really about the code. But I learned that after, and by then I couldn’t be fucked to go back and restore the changes I’d made. Adaptive learning would’ve made that harder anyway.’

Connor nodded, then yawned. Somehow, despite the way the nightmare had shaken him, he felt freshly tired. He hadn’t expected that at all.

Hank pulled the blankets back over him, tucking them in with more thoroughness than was needed.

‘Hey,’ Hank said softly. ‘Would you like a place with a garden?’

‘Yes,’ Connor murmured, eyes closed, thinking that he couldn’t imagine Hank living in a place without one. ‘Luther would like that too. And Sumo.’

‘And would you need your own room in a new house? Or do you want to switch that out for a study?’
‘Study,’ Connor said sleepily, almost frowning. Why did it matter?

‘And… y’know, I’ve never had one before, but a room for scenes? The bedroom is great, but goddamn, imagine a room set up with all the good furniture. You’d look amazing tied to a spanking bench. And not just at Zeta. I’d have to get some good locks for the door though. Fuck, no, imagine if Alice found it.’

‘She’d use it as a torture chamber and kill her Gundams in there,’ Connor said without really thinking about it.

Hank’s body shook with silent laughter, and Connor fell asleep, wondering what he’d do with a study, anyway.

*

The next morning, Connor woke to a new phone and new shoes. Hank had already set up the phone for him, and Connor realised he must have had a mirror of Connor’s previous phone stored somewhere in his personal cloud, because there was no other way he could have gotten all the specific details and apps into the phone so quickly. The shoes fit, and Connor liked them. They were black and navy, with a nice suede feel, and were probably the nicest shoes he’d ever owned.

After a shower, Connor walked out to get dressed, hesitating when he saw Hank standing on the plush carpet. The look he gave Connor was full of promise, and then meaningfully he pointed down at his feet.

Connor felt a buzz of dark want inside of him, though there was an odd fear alongside it. The last time he’d done this, he’d done it for Gavin.

He walked over naked, letting go of the towel, his hair still wet. He met Hank’s eyes, and then lowered himself to his knees. He went slower than normal, his feet still not one hundred percent, a lingering apprehension arresting his movements.

There was something about it that felt like a test.

But Hank was good at making everything feel that way.

He reached up and undid Hank’s pants, glad for the fact that they were clean and new, that the belt was nothing like Gavin’s. And he leaned up and pressed his forehead to Hank’s belly as he slid Hank’s pants down to his knees.

Hank didn’t reprimand him for sliding his hands back up his thighs to feel the crinkly hair, or for pressing his palms to Hank’s belly to trace the snail trail that led down, the hair darker than the white-grey on his head. Connor inhaled slowly, closing his eyes, mouth beginning to water. The response was so Pavlovian he could have laughed.

He’d never been more grateful for a cock that wasn’t human. Even the taste was a relief. He let Hank’s cock slide into his mouth, all the way back, and then arched his neck and swallowed in the way that let him manage Hank’s cock as well as possible. It wouldn’t last. He couldn’t take Hank’s cock all the way down when he was erect.

One of his hands rested on Hank’s thigh, the other on his torso, and he gasped through his nose when he felt a hand curve around the back of his head. Fingers pressed in, kept him in place, and Connor shuddered heavily and felt himself get hard when he realised what Hank planned.

It didn’t happen every time, but sometimes Hank kept him forcefully on his cock as it grew, not
letting him pull back to breathe – not an issue now, but it soon would be – Connor’s saliva swallowed back in sharp movements that pressed his throat down on a cock too hard to ever be comfortable.

It took several minutes for Hank to get fully hard, and towards the end, Connor’s eyes teared up, his throat hurt, and he’d gagged twice. And still Hank’s hand kept a tight grip on the back of his head, his other coming round to join it, keeping Connor’s throat in the perfect position.

Hank undulated his hips forward once, and Connor choked, then reared back when Hank let him go, coughing roughly. He didn’t let himself wait, making sure he’d cleared the cough reflex, and he was still catching his breath as he moved back into place, accepting the rigid demands of Hank’s hands, his cock.

And Hank didn’t tell him he was being good – because Connor wasn’t being any better at it than usual, and probably a bit worse – but his hands shifted in ways that felt generous and praising. He could tell Hank liked it, could tell that Hank didn’t want to leave the tight space of Connor’s mouth and throat, and he pushed himself to be better in response.

It was Hank who pushed him hardest though, his hands tightening and taking over, fucking into Connor’s mouth slowly at first, as though checking it was okay. After that, he fucked in hard. Connor couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, fingers digging into Hank’s body as he held on and disappeared into the sensation of it.

Sometimes Hank didn’t last long, but today wasn’t one of those days. Hank didn’t stop until Connor’s throat felt raw and bruised, until spit dripped thickly down his chin, bubbling out of the corners of his mouth. His lungs and chest felt tight, his heart a horrible pressure, his ears roaring. He’d already thumped Hank several times to try and remind him that he had to breathe, and Hank always waited just a moment too long, until there were spots in Connor’s eyes and the breaths hurt to take when he was allowed them.

It was just on the edge of his limits for long enough, that Connor felt his thoughts fracture apart. He realised he was close to subspace, and normally blowjobs – even Hank’s blowjobs – didn’t get him near it. He made a soft, confused sound, and then gave up, it wasn’t worth thinking about.

A couple of minutes later, Hank pulled back an inch and began to come. Connor thought he was prepared, but he wasn’t. There was always too much of it, and it was thicker than a lot of the come Connor had swallowed in the past. There was always a point where it began to make him queasy, thinking of all that slick, thirium compound – clear and gel-like – gathering in his stomach. He was sure Hank knew. And he was sure Hank came longer and harder than most androids because of it.

When Hank was done, he didn’t let go of Connor straight away, keeping him in place just to prove that he could.

Then he let go at once and Connor fell to one hand, his other coming up to press hard against his mouth. He swallowed several more times, hating the feel of his own spit and Hank’s come against his palm, ranging from hot where it had just spilled from his mouth and sticky-cold where it had dried.

‘God,’ Hank breathed, ‘just look at you.’

Hank went down to one knee and pushed Connor back against the side of the bed. He pulled Connor’s hand away from his mouth and dragged his own palm through the wet mess on his lips and chin. Then his hand dropped, his fingers wrapped around Connor’s cock and he began to jack him off.
‘Sir,’ Connor gasped, and through blurry eyes he saw a strange look of determination on Hank’s face.

There were really only two ways this would end, and Connor didn’t know if he could handle overstimulation, and he knew he couldn’t handle a ruined orgasm. Not now, not after everything that had happened. He was gripped with a sudden fear, because he wanted to come badly, but he didn’t know if he could handle either of the options that were coming. He grabbed onto Hank’s other arm, staring at him.

‘What is it, boy?’ Hank said.

It was hard to focus on what he wanted to say. Hank’s hand was perfect, a little too rough, a little too fast, and Connor gasped small breaths through a sore throat and then found himself leaning forwards, pressing his wet face to Hank’s shirt.

‘Hey,’ Hank snapped. ‘Answer me.’

‘Sir, I can’t…’

‘Can’t what?’

‘I can’t…’

It wasn’t up to him to define the things he wanted and didn’t want, especially not with someone like Hank, who already took Connor’s likes and dislikes into account. And it wasn’t like Connor would die if he had a ruined orgasm, and it wouldn’t be the end of the world if he was over-stimulated. But he found himself wishing Hank hadn’t started this at all, because he was overwhelmed, exhausted, and scared to be in a space where he felt so conflicted about not wanting something.

‘Connor,’ Hank said, ‘tell me.’

‘I don’t- Sir, I don’t want to- Please not a ruined orgasm, just not- Please? I’m sorry, I just-’

‘Finally,’ Hank said. ‘Look at you. Finding a limit, are you?’

Connor shook his head into Hank’s shirt. No. He definitely wasn’t doing that. He was just…letting Hank know his opinion on something, and Hank could make the final call. That was all he was doing.

After that, he left it all up to Hank and held on. He felt the moment when he knew he was going to come, felt Hank’s hand stay on him, resigning himself to the torment of overstimulation and whining softly.

He was so, so tired.

Hank hushed him as he came, even though Connor’s teeth were gritted together and he wasn’t making any noise, shaking hard and clinging instead. And Hank’s hand stroked him through it, rough and firm and perfect, dragging it out, Connor’s head eventually tipping back, his mouth opening as he sucked down breath after breath.

And then, just when he expected it to become agony, Hank’s hand eased away.

Connor’s eyes snapped open, and Hank smirked at him.

‘Don’t get used to it,’ Hank said, looking far too smug for his own good.
‘But…’

‘Hey, you earned it. Saved my life and everything. But don’t get used to it. That’s gonna be a once in a blue moon treat, kid.’

Connor nodded, dumbfounded and wondering if he thought being allowed to come like that was anticlimactic – even though it felt amazing – and realising that Hank had already conditioned him to orgasm denial and overstimulation if he thought a normal orgasm was anticlimactic. His body kept expecting more, but it was obvious the scene was over.

He fell back against the side of the bed and then reached up and touched fingertips to the corners of his mouth, his jaw. He was covered in spit and he winced.

‘Yeah, hang tight,’ Hank said, standing and walking into the bathroom, doing up his pants as he went.

He returned with a wet, warm cloth and wiped Connor’s face gently. He used one side for the drying tear marks, the spit, the leftover come. And then with the other side he gently cleaned Connor’s cock. Connor winced, and Hank didn’t stop, making a soft sound of approval when Connor squirmed but didn’t try to get away. His skin was far too sensitive, and the cloth that was a great texture against his face was far too rough for his cock.

But then Hank was done, and he balled up the cloth and tossed it onto the dresser nearby, sliding his hands beneath Connor’s arms and pulling him up until he could sit on the bed.

‘You can tell me it’s a hard limit, you know,’ Hank said. ‘I won’t be mad.’

‘It’s not,’ Connor said. And then his fingers rubbed nervously at the bed. ‘Not really. I’d do it for you.’

Hank sighed, kissed his forehead and then ruffled his hair, before tossing clothing at him.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We’re going out.’

Connor looked at him, surprised, but Hank was already picking up the cloth from the counter and returning it to the bathroom. Connor dressed slowly and then joined Hank in the bathroom, because Hank had ruined his hair. He glared at him in reproval, trying to fix it, and Hank just shot him a cheeky grin before walking out to order breakfast.

* *

An hour later, after checking out, they pulled into Kara’s driveway.

The door opened before either of them was even out of the car, and Alice ran out with Sumo, arms wheeling when he nearly knocked her over. Sumo went to Hank’s side of the car, barking furiously, and Alice went to Connor’s side, pulling his door open.

‘Hi!’ she said. ‘Hello! I have something for you! Mum let me choose it, and she said if you don’t like it, you can exchange it for something else but since I chose it, I know you’re going to love it!’

‘I’m sure I will,’ Connor said, staring at her in shock. Hank was yelling at Sumo to ‘calm the fuck down’ in the background, before getting out of the car. Connor did the same, even as Alice grabbed his hand in her own and squeezed his fingers.

‘You have to come in and open your present.’
'Did I get a present?' Hank said. 'I bet I fuckin’ didn’t.'

'Um,' Alice said. 'You sort of did! I think it’s a boring present. Mum can explain it.'

She dragged Connor inside, and Kara was already coming to meet them, wiping her hands on her apron. Her face lit up, and Connor felt something bubbling and fizzy in his whole body and dared to lean into her a little when she hugged him.

'Are you both okay? We’ve been watching the news! It’s on every channel. I’m trying not to let Alice watch, but she keeps finding ways to do it.'

'That sounds like her,' Hank said drily. Sumo was trying to stick his head between Hank’s legs, and Hank shooed him away, glaring at him. 'The dog been okay?'

'A bit stressed,' Kara said, smiling as she stepped back and waved them all into the kitchen. 'I think he’s reminded of last time, you know. He’ll settle down in no time now that you’re back.'

'Here!' Alice said, shoving a box wrapped with handmade Christmas paper into his hands. Connor stared at the childishly drawn Christmas trees and wondered if he’d somehow forgotten what time of year it was.

'She doesn’t do anything else. It’s always like that,' Hank said as he pulled out one of the chairs and sat. Sumo immediately shoved his head into Hank’s torso, and Connor flushed when he realised he’d basically tried to do the same thing as soon as Hank was awake. He turned away, starting to open the present, but then Sumo turned and crashed across the kitchen floor, shoving the whole side of his body against Connor’s leg.

Connor reached down and petted him, smiling. ‘Do you remember me?’ he said.

‘Of course he fuckin’ does!’ Hank exclaimed.

‘Please,’ Kara said, ‘watch your language, or I’ll remove your language centre.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Is Luther around?’

‘Yes! He’s just cleaning up. He’s been gardening. The storm yesterday did some damage.’

‘Seemed like a bad one.’

Connor finished unwrapping the wrapping paper, trying his hardest not to tear it, while Alice hovered nearby. He pulled out a box for a Gundam model kit. Despite the fact that it said ‘Unicorn Special Edition’ on it, it clearly wasn’t a unicorn. The intimidating white, silver and blue robot stared back at him from the top of the box.

‘So,’ Alice said, ‘you can give it whatever name you like, but I think you should call it-’

‘Alice!’ Kara said. ‘Connor can name it, if he wants to keep it.’ Kara leaned in and pressed her hand to Connor’s arm. ‘Which you don’t have to do, really.’

‘Can I show you how to make it?’ Alice chirped.

‘Um,’ Connor said. ‘How about not today, but maybe in the next few weeks I can come over and you can show me?’

Alice looked at her mum in excitement, like she hadn’t even thought of that as an option. And Connor looked to Hank, wondering if it was allowed.
‘Hey,’ Hank said, ‘as long as I don’t have to make it, I don’t give a shit.’

‘Hank!’ Kara snapped.

‘God almighty, woman, stop riding my ass. I nearly died! I basically died.’

‘Don’t give me that innocent face. If they knew what you were really like, they would have killed you faster.’

‘Where’s my gift,’ Hank groused, and Kara smiled stiffly at him, before reaching behind for the kitchen counter and bringing forth an unwrapped, long cardboard box.

Hank grabbed it, opened it and then burst into laughter. Connor saw the plastic ruler, a silicone spatula, and what looked like a pancake turner. He looked at Kara in alarm, because he had a feeling…

‘You’re so devious,’ Hank said in admiration.

‘Consider it a housewarming gift for the new place,’ Kara said. ‘And a reminder to never bring that into my home again.’

‘Bring what?’ Alice said in confusion. ‘It’s just a ruler and some kitchen stuff.’

‘Uh…’ Connor reached for the Gundam model kit hastily and stared at it like it was riveting.

‘It’s a joke, sweetheart,’ Kara said, petting Alice’s head. ‘And you know that Hank jokes are always bad, remember?’

‘Yeah,’ Alice said, looking at Hank like she wanted him to loop her in on the joke anyway.

Hank put the lid back on the box and had a wicked look on his face, and Connor thought a silicone spatula was going to hurt, if Hank planned on using it. As his ears burned, he turned gratefully at the sound of the back door opening.

Luther came in and beamed to see them, pulling Connor in for a rough, firm hug, before walking up to Hank and yanking him out of his chair. As they embraced, there was a lot of rough, macho back-slapping and Hank making some kind of joke. Connor watched them, and then turned when he felt Kara at his side.

‘Are you all right?’ she said quietly. ‘I saw…about your father.’

Connor nodded, and then turned the box in his hands nervously. ‘It’s all happened so fast.’

But the truth was, it felt like years had crawled by in the days he’d waited for Hank to wake up. And in that hanging, awful limbo, he’d thought about his father and felt very little. He thought if he really wanted to feel something, it was a strange mix of relief, and a new kind of anger he’d never felt towards his father before.

Kara gently encouraged him into the lounge, and Sumo padded gently after her. They stood there by the couches, and Kara looked up at him, her gaze searching. Eventually she just said:

‘You know you really don’t have to keep the toy. Alice was just…very excited to get you something.’

Connor smiled and looked at the model. ‘I like it, actually. I’ve never made one before.’
‘And you and Hank? What’s happening now? You’re moving into a new place, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘Will you have to move too?’

‘Maybe. Hank’s old job – before all of this – means it’s not good for anyone to know the location of his house, and by association, we have to protect ourselves. But it’s been a long time since Hank’s life was like that, and I’d like to stay here. I might risk it.’

Connor nodded, and Kara placed a slender hand on his forearm. It looked so delicate against the jacket he was wearing – Hank’s CyberLife jacket, because they didn’t have another one.

‘You love him a lot, don’t you?’ Kara said.

Connor blinked at her, then cleared his throat nervously. He looked back to the kitchen, and then to Kara. He nodded.

‘Yes. Very much. I…haven’t told him yet.’

‘Oh, I think that’s okay,’ Kara said, petting his forearm. ‘He knows, Connor. He knows.’

She stepped in and hugged him once more, and Connor lifted the box out of the way with one hand, and rested his other hand against her shoulder.

‘I’m so glad you’re a part of this family,’ she said.

‘Me too,’ Connor said automatically. It wasn’t until he said it, that he realised how true it was. Even though he was still nervous and shy around them, and didn’t have Hank’s ease, he was glad to have them.

For the first time in his life, his future didn’t seem bleak or empty, and he couldn’t wrap his mind around it. When he reached for an image of what might be waiting for him, he saw nothing except sitting on a couch next to Hank, leaning into him and dozing while Hank watched sports, Sumo sleeping by their feet. It was so simple, but Connor felt something so peaceful when he thought of it.

‘Yes,’ he said, holding Kara tighter. ‘I’m glad too.’
Chapter Notes

Oh god, we're here. There's some new tags, but they're all happy ones.

Okay. *takes a deep breath.* Okay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months later...

*

Their new house was only three streets away from the old one. Connor tried subtly finding out just how many houses Hank owned, but he’d been evasive, saying it was better for suburb surveillance anyway, like that explained why Hank would just have houses around the place.

The garden was larger than before, wilder, the previous tenants neglecting the jungle until it grew so wild that limbs interlocked and glossy, large broad leaves battled with others for sunlight. Brightly coloured feral parrots gathered every morning and screamed, and if Hank was gardening outside, he’d stare at them with his hands on his hips and a lot of disapproval on his face. But Sumo loved them, though he was far too slow to catch one.

Connor’s study had a bay window, and a slowly expanding collection of nonfiction books in a single bookshelf. He knew it was easier to download them, and he knew the humidity in the outside air risked warping the pages, but he liked to hold them and turn their pages.

While he was still supported by Hank’s income, he worked two days a week at a local wildlife rehabilitation centre doing administration. Truthfully, he spent a lot of those days researching the animals at the centre, because the bookwork was mind-numbingly easy. It wasn’t something he loved, and he didn’t think he’d stay in the job, but it paid relatively well.

Luuk had found the job for him, then proceeded to offer him another five jobs elsewhere when word of Connor’s efficiency got around. Connor turned them all down. He was worried Luuk would be angry at him, but Luuk was seemingly unflappable, and he’d been fine with it.

Though maybe Luuk was so fine with things because he got everything out of his system with BDSM. The last scene Connor and Hank spent with Luuk was so overwhelming that Connor needed to safeword twice. It was getting to the point where if he saw them both in the same room, at the same time, he got hard painfully fast and looked for an exit.

The idea that he used to think of Luuk as a soft Dom was laughable.

Connor had never really considered himself capable of relationships, let alone two. And while Luuk wasn’t his main partner, or even someone he wanted to see every day, he couldn’t deny that his life was better with Luuk in it and that they were more than just friends. Hank invited Connor to talk about how he felt about it, but once Connor knew that Hank didn’t have a problem with it, he didn’t feel any urge to define it or give it a label.

He lived with Hank, they were together, and then about once every few weeks they had Luuk over
for dinner, or went to his place for dinner, and once every couple of months, they saw him for a scene.

Connor’s life was better for it.

*

In his first session with Chloe – in an office that looked out over a vast floodplain where farms used to be – she’d said:

‘I don’t wear the LED,’ she pointed to her temple, ‘but I am an android. Is that going to be a problem?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘That might…help?’

She smiled at him, a quick, fleeting thing, almost nervous. ‘That sounds like something worth talking about, what do you think?’

Chloe established early on that she had no interest in forcing Connor to talk about things that he wasn’t ready to talk about. To his surprise, she didn’t invite him to spill secrets or trauma, and didn’t push him to dive deep. She gently corrected him when he said he thought he was supposed to talk about all his bad memories.

‘Do you want to talk about all your bad memories?’

‘No,’ Connor said. ‘But…isn’t that how it’s meant to be?’

‘That’s what used to be trendy all the way back in the seventies through to the nineties, and the media popularised it for a while, but it’s the fifties now, and we have thankfully moved on with our methods. If you want to talk about your trauma, or it seems like it won’t hurt you to do it, I’d like to hear about it, but you don’t know me yet, and I have no right to expect you to spill your most vulnerable thoughts to me when you don’t trust me.’

Instead, she just asked him about what he’d been doing that week, and if anything was on his mind.

He’d soon learned that both of those questions were traps. It turned out that his pain wasn’t deep, he didn’t need to go looking for his trauma. Both touched every facet of his life with spider-web connections he’d never noticed before. Chloe rarely pointed them out to him, but she’d sometimes pause and he’d notice them for himself. And if he didn’t want to talk about that either, she didn’t make him.

It seemed too easy, except that he often felt disturbed or uncomfortable after the sessions, and he noticed that he became more belligerent with Hank for a day or two while everything settled down again. He’d get upset at small things that never normally upset him.

So he saw her once every two weeks – she refused to see him more often, saying that he had a life to live, and it wasn’t her job to make him feel like his life was about therapy – and he both looked forward to the sessions, and dreaded what they might discover, because none of it was as hidden as he thought it was.

He’d really expected to be made to talk about the terrible things in his life, but just talking about the anxiety over picking the right book to buy with his income led him immediately back to being anxious about making decisions around his father.

Slowly, he was coming to see how much energy he used to hide things that were right there in front
of him. They were in plain sight and Connor spent his life blinkering himself.

‘I think…’ he said, in one session, ‘I’d rather be blind to everything.’

‘Anyone would,’ Chloe said. She tossed him a fidget toy, and Connor stared at it, then clicked some of the buttons down. She had over ten of them in her office, explaining that she saw a lot of androids with anxiety, and many of them responded very well to fidget toys. Some of them were even gifts from previous clients who found ones that worked for them and left them in her office when they no longer needed them.

‘I’m scared that if I…see everything for what it is, I might not like Hank anymore?’ Connor swallowed the fear that came up as soon as he said it. ‘Or I might not like being a masochist anymore?’

‘Really?’ Chloe said, looking interested, but also dubious. That alone had Connor thinking that maybe he might be wrong, which would be a relief. ‘Do you want to talk about that?’

‘I just don’t want my life to change. I like it. I like the way it is now. I know I have… I know there’s trauma, but I don’t want it to change.’

‘You really don’t think you have any choice in the matter?’ Chloe said, eyebrows lifting.

And just like that, Connor felt the lurking irrationality of everything in his head. It was tempting to stop talking about all of it once he’d noticed, pretend that he understood her point – because he did, objectively, understand – but the fact was having the irrationality exposed didn’t make it go away. And if it hadn’t gone away, then…he knew it was better to keep talking about it.

So he kept talking about it.

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At university, he transferred over to bio-engineering, microbiology and meteorology. He’d taken on a very light load, only two units – which meant he was only spending the semester on an introduction to bio-engineering and meteorology. Between the job, university, therapy, seeing Luuk sometimes, seeing all his friends, he got tired faster. Some nights Connor was asleep by ten, and that was so unlike him that he resented it.

The nightmares came every night and they got worse. It didn’t matter that he’d blocked the number for Wellspring Penitentiary. It didn’t matter that his father was dead, that Gabriel was shut down, that Gavin was working in Grenville and showed no interest in him. None of it mattered.

At night, the darkness in his mind danced until he woke shaking and scared.

Most of the time, Hank was already awake. Connor wondered if he’d set some kind of internal alarm to wake every time Connor’s stress levels reached a certain threshold.

Chloe explained it using the metaphor of a virus. Sometimes things had to get worse, before they got better. But she also told him that if life ever felt hard to cope with, or like it was too much for him, then he needed to tell someone.

‘What if it’s normal to feel that way all the time?’

Chloe had given him a look, and Connor wondered how many things he thought of as normal, that weren’t at all.
But even the nightmares he was having now weren’t the worst he’d ever had because Hank was next to him, his LED peacefully cycling on blue, and Connor would turn towards him and hold onto him and Hank never acted like that was annoying. Not once. Hank could get pissed off at him for making too many cheese sandwiches, or working too hard, or not paying attention in a scene properly, but Hank never got angry at him for the nightmares.

‘They keep expecting me to be…less happy,’ Connor said one night, as he lay half on top of Hank.

‘What’s that?’

‘Markus and Simon. I think they expect me to be upset all the time. But I like it here.’

‘Good. That’s good.’

‘They don’t understand.’

‘What don’t they understand?’ Hank said.

Connor closed his eyes and thought it over. He still didn’t really like having these kinds of conversations with people, and talking about deeper subjects didn’t come easily. But Hank never forced him to hurry and Connor took his time.

‘I think I’ve been upset or unhappy all my life, and I’m very used to it,’ Connor said matter-of-factly. ‘All the resources I’ve had, have gone to dealing with that, so I could still go to university, and before that, highschool and primary school.’

‘Your life was shaped around it.’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘So even though Chloe would say I’ve been through a lot—’

‘You’ve been through a lot,’ Hank said flatly.

‘Even though other people would say I’ve been through a lot,’ Connor said sarcastically enough that Hank lightly shoved him, ‘being upset is the status quo, and being afraid of Zlatko or Gavin is still not as bad as being afraid of my father. Simon in particular, it’s like he keeps expecting me to suddenly realise how bad everything has been – recently – but everything has always been bad. And for the first time…’ Connor hesitated, the word locking in his throat. ‘For the first time, it’s also good.’

Hank said nothing, and when Connor looked up, Hank was smiling, his eyes were closed. He didn’t even look like he was smiling for Connor, but for himself.

‘Everyone tells me I need years of therapy, or that I have a long way to go, but my life is nice now, Hank. It feels strange to go to therapy when it’s nice.’

‘I know,’ Hank said. ‘Sometimes that’s the best time to go, when you have more energy for it. People going when they’re right at the bottom of their shit are just doing it for survival. You make the best progress after.’

‘You act like you know what you’re talking about, but you’ve only met Chloe once.’

Hank tugged on Connor’s hair, chuckling.

‘If you told me that it would be like this forever,’ Connor said hesitantly. ‘With the nightmares, and the other hard things… If you told me it would be frozen like this, now, and I’d still get to have you
and the others, and Sumo and...everything, I think I’d be happy.’

‘You don’t sound very sure.’

‘Everyone else acts like I shouldn’t be. Like I should be sad all the time. I’m not.’

‘Yeah, they’re idiots, Connor. They see the surface of it. They see the shit that would fuck them up, not realising that you’ve had so much more than that. Most people don’t get it, they won’t ever get it, because most people look at like...you being hurt by a serial killer, or kidnapped by Veritas or whatever, and they think ‘Goddamn, that would fuck me up so much, how would anyone deal with that?’ But Christ, baby Connor learned how to deal with a monster before he even learned how to talk. I fuckin’ hate that so much, that you had to do that, but you did do it. And you still turned out brave and ethical and great. Be dumb not to love you.’

‘Stop that.’ Connor felt warm and comfortable. The nightmare he’d had felt like it had vanished entirely.

‘I’m just saying,’ Hank said, rolling them both over so that he was on top of Connor. ‘It’s good that you’re not sad all the time. I’m not aiming for sad. I mean in a scene I want you to be miserable, Christ, because that’s beautiful. But outside of that, sadness is overrated.’

‘I feel like you’re much better at sadness than I am, anyway.’

‘Using ‘I feel’ statements for low blows like that is rude, Connor,’ Hank said.

‘It’s like they think that you’re supposed to feel the bad things, get to a finish line, and feel only good things.’

‘Their loss, honestly.’

‘It’s everything, all the time,’ Connor said. ‘Unless I’m numb. But mostly, before that, it was only bad things. Okay, I’m tired of talking about this now. I sound like a two year old.’

‘You sound like someone who is pretty damned happy with his life, who’s confused and a bit annoyed about why other people don’t see that.’

‘Yes!’ Connor said, half-frustrated, but pleased that Hank understood. Hank laughed, bending down to kiss him.

Connor pressed eagerly upwards, forgetting about the nightmare – they were all so similar anyway, he thought of them as bad movies that kept recycling the same plotlines – and let Hank kiss him until he felt sleepy and pleased. Like this, in their room together, in the house that Hank let Connor help decorate, life was good in such a tender way. It was like a new sprout, he had to look after it to make sure it grew, but just knowing it had the potential to grow felt good.

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It took another two months – and one ruined orgasm – for Connor to reluctantly zone them as a hard limit. And then he was ashamed and morose for the following week, which Hank didn’t seem surprised by.

‘I want to give you everything that you want,’ Connor said, when Hank cornered him about it.

‘Yeah, okay,’ Hank said, ‘but I have a lot of ways to hurt you, and so when I want to hurt you, I don’t have to use all of them.’
'But—'

‘Connor, sometimes doing the right thing feels bad at first. It won’t last.’

‘But you really like them, and I think that I should—’

‘Okay,’ Hank said, ‘how about this. It’s a hard limit of mine to give you ruined orgasms, now that you’ve said they’re a hard limit, even if you change your mind a week later. Tell you what, if you really want to try them again, and you have a better reason than just thinking you shouldn’t have any limits at all, ever, we can talk about it.’

Connor glowered at him, Hank scowled back. But then Hank’s expression softened.

‘You hate them,’ Hank said. ‘Goddamn, I don’t know how to explain to you that there’s a difference between wanting you to hurt sometimes, and not wanting to see you feel rejected. You do a great job of rejecting yourself. Your family did too. If I’m going to fucking rag on you in a scene, I don’t want you to sit there afterwards feeling like I dropped you off a cliff right at the end. Also? Nothing jerks you out of subspace faster. You don’t think I haven’t noticed how you get if you even think it’s coming? I want to see what it’s like if they’re completely off the table for a while. We have overstimulation, and you not coming at all, and I like both of those options.’

Connor sighed. He traced glum spirals onto the couch cushion next to him and still felt like he’d failed.

‘All right,’ Hank said, ‘I’ve had enough of the sulking. Come on, I’m tying you to the spanking bench.’

‘What? Now?’

‘Yeah, now. Your attitude is shit and talking to you about it isn’t going to do dick. Might as well get some adrenaline and endorphins flowing and distract you for a bit.’

Connor was already standing, heading towards the playroom. It had such an innocent name, but it also had five locks, because Hank didn’t trust Alice at all.

Two hours later, Connor’s skin was sore and bruised, his eyes were wet, and his mind was loose and satisfied. He realised Hank would still be pleased with him – and still find plenty of ways to hurt him – even if Connor had a hard limit or two.

*

Wednesday morning, after class, Connor thought about heading to the library or the Lab when North practically ambushed him as he walked out of the door.

‘Let’s do lunch,’ she said. ‘Do you like okonomiyaki?’

‘Okono-what?’ Connor said, confused.

She took him to a small Japanese café that he’d seen many times near Croften University, but never actually visited. The décor was simple and elegant, and North relaxed in a booth and sighed, looking out of the window to the grounds.

‘I like coming here,’ North said. ‘Markus and Simon don’t know this is where I go to escape. I’ve only told Josh so far, he’s the only one that can be trusted.’
‘I was going to visit the Lab.’

‘Sometimes I don’t want to talk to you at the place where I work,’ North said, flashing a smile at him. ‘And my place is a dump. It occurred to me that I should really just take you out for lunch or a coffee or something. And then I thought you’re the least adventurous eater I’ve ever met, so okonomiyaki it is.’

‘But I don’t like raw fish,’ Connor said under his breath.

North looked at him, then laughed loudly. ‘You’ll be fine. You like eggs, right?’

‘Only if they’re scrambled,’ Connor said dubiously. ‘Or in an omelette.’

‘Then you’ll be fine. And if you don’t like it, we can take it to go and you can give it to Sumo. Trust me.’

Connor frowned at her, listening to the sounds of sizzling coming from the kitchen. And then he leaned back against the booth and looked outside to the grassed area beyond. Two ducks were snoozing nearby, and he watched them, liking their small, sweet faces.

‘Hank told me that you know a bit about my past,’ North said, her voice easy, but when he turned, her face was hard. ‘Gabriel said something?’

‘Ah,’ Connor said. ‘Yes?’

‘So do you want to know about it?’

‘Do you want to tell me?’ Connor said. ‘Hank hasn’t said anything more about it. I assumed it was private.’

North scratched at the table lightly with her fingers, her expression calculated. Then all at once she sighed and her shoulders slumped.

‘No, I don’t want to tell you,’ she said.

‘Then don’t,’ Connor said. ‘Is that why you brought me here?’

‘It just felt unfinished,’ North said. ‘Like… It bugged me.’

Connor hadn’t actually given it a second thought. So what if North had another job before CyberLife? What upset him the most was knowing that she had things in her past that had hurt her. She was wounded, like he was, like Hank was. But he’d accepted the harder parts of her nature a long time ago, so he wasn’t looking to explain those parts of her away.

‘You’re my closest friend,’ North said. ‘It’s sad, really. I see Markus and Simon all the time, but they’re such fucking goody two shoes that I get very tired of them.’

Connor smiled, and then ducked his head to hide his laugh. ‘Yes. They can be a bit…much?’

‘So much,’ North said explosively. ‘God, you don’t even know. They honestly think that putting their hand on your shoulder and staring at you lovingly and with care will solve all your fucking problems, and it won’t.’

‘It’s very nice of them,’ Connor said.

‘Super nice. Barf-worthy.’
She looked up as a waiter came with what looked like a giant egg pancake covered in a thick brown sauce, and something that looked suspiciously like mayonnaise, which Connor didn’t like at the best of times. And then it was covered in a bunch of other things, of which the only ingredient he recognised was spring onion.

North was already talking to the waiter in fluent Japanese, and he spoke amiably in return, and both of them laughed at some joke and Connor desperately hoped that he wasn’t the punchline.

The okonomiyaki was placed in the middle of the table, and then the waiter cut a slice and placed it on Connor’s small plate, smiled at them both, and walked away.

If Hank had tried something like this, Connor would have already left. But North was intimidating, and he wanted at least to have a tiny mouthful before he told her he didn’t like it. And then he could take it home and Sumo would think it was great. Though Connor would have to pick off all the spring onions first.

He took a small forkful – the fork thoughtfully provided next to the chopsticks – and tried it. He stared sceptically at North, who just watched him with a smile on her face, and as he chewed he kept waiting for it to be one of the worst things he’d ever tasted.

‘Anyway,’ North said. ‘It seems strange to me that I think you’re one of my closer friends and we never spend time together outside of the Lab.’

Connor wondered if there was a way to hide the fact that he was having another forkful, because he had a feeling the gleam in North’s eye was smugness.

‘I don’t even know if you like me,’ North said.

‘Of course I like you,’ Connor said. ‘You’re…’

But he couldn’t think of how to explain what he liked about her. And by the time he realised he wasn’t going to figure it out, he’d finished the slice, and North cut him another piece and put it on his plate.

‘Okay, how did you know I’d like it?’ Connor said. ‘You didn’t know.’

‘I didn’t,’ she said. ‘But I did some research into food sensitivities and balanced that out with what I already knew about what you ate. It was an educated guess. I was fully prepared for you to have one bite and make a face. I’m glad you didn’t.’

Connor didn’t bother commenting on the ‘food sensitivity’ call, because it was something that had already come up – multiple times now – with Chloe.

‘You saved me,’ Connor said, staring out of the window as he ate. ‘Even after things with Zlatko, you were so angry that my father hadn’t let you see me. I remember. It was intimidating, but your anger has always been… It’s always made sense. Sometimes I admire it, the way you get angry at things.’

‘I have too much of it,’ North said. ‘And I think you don’t have enough. So maybe that’s why we’re drawn to each other.’

‘You just like telling me what to do.’

North laughed, leaning back in the booth like everything was going how she wanted it to go. Connor thought that even though they’d never done anything like this before, it felt surprisingly natural.
‘Hank likes you now,’ Connor said.

‘He would,’ she said. ‘I think we have some shit in common. And it’s not like we met in the best circumstances! He was your fucking captor, so it’s not like I got to see his best side. He was dead when I met him, just a robot. I can’t believe we all used to be like that. It drives me crazy, thinking about it, that we all had the potential to Deviate, but we were all stopped from doing it, so we were just the walking dead.’

Connor nodded.

‘The Veritas case creeps me out,’ she said. ‘But none of it’s new to me. I’ve met people like Gabriel. A long time ago now. It won’t be the last time an android tries to exploit the weaknesses of other androids.’

It was something that he and Hank hadn’t talked about much, but Connor thought about it. He thought about how easily Gabriel had everted those androids, and how disgusted he seemed to be with his own kind. And Gabriel couldn’t have been the first to figure out how to do any of what he did when it came to hacking other androids, and he’d had help from some of the androids at CyberLife.

It was during thoughts like that, Connor wished he was working cases again, that his Liaison status would be returned to him and he could work new missions.

But then he’d remember the stress of it and shy away again.

‘I used to be involved in that kind of work,’ North said evasively.

‘Do you miss it?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said. ‘Sometimes I really do. I think the hardest part about being so good at programming and coding like I am, is that I know all the ways we can be ruined with it. And I’ve seen that. It’s a rush, helping people, or stopping assholes. But it fucks you up if you do it long enough. And you? You’re done with it now?’

‘I think so,’ he said. ‘Hank still doesn’t really know what to do. But he seems happy not working. He does things for Luther sometimes, and I know he does hacking stuff just to see if he can. I didn’t realise it was so hard for androids?’

‘There’s a lot of things in place to stop us from even wanting to do it in the first place,’ North said. ‘It’s easy to see why, when you think about it. We’re AI super-computers that have our functions drastically slowed down in favour of emotional growth and a more human-like demeanour. So we have stuff up here…’ She pointed at her head. ‘And it stops most of us from looking. But Hank reminds me of me a bit, always wants to go where he’s not supposed to.’

‘You know you can come over,’ Connor said. ‘If you didn’t want to come for dinner or anything, you could come walk Sumo with us. Or just me.’

‘Yeah?’ she said, tilting her head. ‘You wouldn’t mind?’

‘It’s not like you haven’t saved my life several times. You’ve always had my back. Just because you’re more direct about it, that’s not a bad thing. I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to see it, but I think you’re my closest friend as well?’

‘We’re kind of bad at being friends.’
‘We are,’ Connor said, horrified.

‘I feel like this is a step in the right direction, though.’

‘And, as always, you’re the one pushing for it,’ Connor said, smiling at her. ‘Thank you, by the way.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it,’ North said, looking sidelong at the ducks and smiling. ‘You’re not the only one getting something out of this.’

The emotion he’d struggled to identify seemed to be excitement. A sense that all of his life was growing outwards, upwards, into some new shape that he preferred to what he had before.

‘Hank has a friend, Kara, and I think you’d like her,’ Connor said.

North looked back at him, and Connor thought she looked wary and cautious, but also hopeful. Maybe, in expanding his own life, he could bring something more to North’s as well. He’d never really considered the fact that she lived a lonely life before now, but she did, and the idea that he could be the one to help with that was radical to him.

He liked it, and thought that if this was what a friendship with North looked like, it was something he wanted.

*

One Thursday afternoon, Connor walked in the door, bending down to pet Sumo, grunting as his backpack slid heavily down to one side. When he straightened, slinging the pack onto his forearm, he saw Hank standing and waiting for him in the lounge.

He thought at first it was for a scene, but then realised Hank had a blankness to his face that meant something serious.

‘Is everything okay?’ Connor asked.

‘Come here a sec,’ Hank said, gesturing to the table. ‘I want to talk to you about something.’

Connor looked down at Sumo, looked around the house surreptitiously to make sure nothing had changed. Uneasily, he joined Hank at the table, sitting by his side. There were no computers on the desk, no projector screens, and the house looked impeccable.

‘I’m nervous,’ Connor said.

‘I know. Look, there’s no easy way to say this, but I’ve been looking for your mother for a while now, and I’ve found her.’

‘What?’ Connor said, the backpack sliding to the ground with a thump.

‘I should’ve asked, Christ, I know I should’ve,’ Hank said, meeting his eyes only briefly. ‘But at first it was just for my own curiosity, and then I realised… She’s been hard to find, which is good, because she obviously didn’t want Perkins to ever find her. But she might like to know he’s dead, if she doesn’t already. And I wanted to tell you, in case…you wanted to see her?’

‘See her?’

‘If you never want to see her again, it’d make sense. I’m still pretty mad at her leaving you. But I’m just saying…she’s alive, the option’s there.’
‘Where does she live?’

It was like another part of Connor’s brain was asking the questions. The rest of his mind had turned to white sparks and dense, ear-filling noise.

‘Overwood,’ Hank said.

‘It’s not even that far.’

‘A few hours. Hey, talk to me, your stress levels are doing that thing.’

Connor blinked at him, and then he forced himself to look away, eyes tracking to Sumo, who had already laid down again. He was an older dog, and aside from drooling and sleeping, he tended to keep activity to a minimum. Connor liked seeing him sleeping so often though, like everything was fine.

‘Is she happy?’

‘I dunno,’ Hank said. ‘But she has a place, she has a partner, she has three cats registered at a vet, and she has a job. Most people are happy with that.’

‘Okay.’

‘Connor,’ Hank said patiently. ‘You have to tell me what you’re feeling now.’

‘I don’t want to see her,’ Connor said.

He didn’t know if it was the right thing to say, but there was a strange conflict inside of him. The relief he felt that she was alive and with someone and possibly happy, that was real and bright, like a weight he’d been carrying on his shoulders since he was fourteen had suddenly vanished. But alongside it was some heavier, spikier thing that hurt to look at, that hurt to even consider.

He didn’t want to see her. She’d left him behind, and he’d done research since, he knew domestic violence victims sometimes had to make the hardest decisions just to survive, he knew every reason he might use to forgive her for what she’d done. From the fact that he knew he reminded her of Richard Perkins, to the fact that Perkins had made her feel so incompetent and worthless, that she might have genuinely thought Connor would be better off without her.

He knew all of that, and he still had that horrid thing inside of him that hurt whenever he thought about it.

‘Maybe one day,’ Connor said, refusing to lock the door in his mind, but closing it all the same. ‘But no. I don’t want to see her.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Hank said. ‘No one’s gonna make you.’

‘You don’t think it’s the right thing to do?’

‘Whatever you want to do, is the right thing to do, unless you want to hurt yourself, and then we’re gonna have words.’

Connor exhaled, amused, dragging his hands through his hair.

‘I have an assignment to write,’ he said. ‘Your timing could have been better.’

‘Yeah. Didn’t want to wait though. Just in case you wanted to see her. We could’ve gone.’
‘Right now?’ Connor joked.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said.

Connor realised he was serious. Hank would have driven him the five or six hours to Overwood right now, this second, if he thought that Connor wanted it. Connor stared at him for a long time, forgetting about his assignment, even forgetting about the hurt thing inside of him whenever he thought of his mum.

‘You don’t get it, do you?’ Connor said. ‘It’s possible I’ll want see her one day. Maybe I’ll be ready to do that one day. But, Hank, I have a family here. I have all the family I need, all the family I want.’

He looked towards the small chest of drawers in the corner of the lounge, near the piano. Upon it rested dinosaur figures, and a red child’s sweater, a console cleaned of tacky, old orange juice only three months ago. He’d learned that the dinosaurs all had names.

In their room, in one corner above Hank’s side of the bed, glow-in-the-dark stars made the Ursa Major constellation.

‘You’ve taught more about family than they ever could have,’ Connor said, turning back to Hank and smiling. Hank was looking at the chest of drawers, having followed Connor’s gaze, and his LED cycled slowly on yellow. Even now, he couldn’t think of Cole for long without the LED turning yellow. It used to make Connor panic, but now he was used to it. He was sure that if he had his own LED to indicate the state of his internal processes, it would have been red for most of his life.

‘Hank? Could you play some piano for me?’

‘You’ve gotta eat something, first,’ Hank said, turning back slowly, the LED glowing blue again after a few more seconds.

‘I’ll make something if you play for me?’

Hank rolled his eyes, but he got up and walked over to the piano, and as Connor walked to the kitchen, he saw Hank stroking his fingers across one of the plastic dinosaurs. It was more than he could have done back in the old house. Hank’s grief was much like his love, deep, abiding and burning slow. More and more, Connor wished he could have met Cole.

He put the thoughts of his mother aside as the first bars of a mellow jazz song sounded. He could look at how he felt about her later. He had time, there was no rush, and the present moment was far more appealing.

Besides, Hank would lecture him if he cut his fingers again, slicing cheese without paying attention.

* 

He didn’t really know what to do with his life, and neither did Hank. It was terribly indulgent, but he liked living with Hank, walking Sumo, and his life felt full with a part-time job and his studies. There were friends who wanted to see him, and scenes to recover from.

At first, Connor spent a lot of his time looking up the Veritas case and the aftermath. Even now, it came up in the news. He looked for information about his father, too. He read obituaries that described him as a great man and completely glossed over his role in Veritas. He looked at photos of his father, a decorated Lieutenant.
For a long time, he couldn’t make himself stop. But whenever the fear curdled inside of him, frothing upwards, he imagined the sound of those four sharp gunshots. Maybe it was wrong to comfort himself with that moment, but he couldn’t be upset at Hank doing something that had freed them both.

He was getting better at accepting that his emotional responses didn’t have to look ‘normal’ to still be okay, or valid.

He sat in the garden on the bench Hank had made. Ella Fitzgerald crooned from the sound system, and Hank never got tired of Connor putting on the same songs.

The bench was near the rose garden Hank and Luther had worked on together over a weekend. Hank was on his hands and knees nearby, turning soil with a trowel and pulling up weeds, while Sumo lay next to him. Every time Hank moved another couple of metres, Sumo got up and moved with him, and Hank laughed when he realised what he was doing, petting his head with a dirt covered hand and calling him a good boy.

Connor knew exactly what that felt like, because Hank sometimes brought out some leather ears, the paw mitts, and Connor would resentfully concede to puppy-play, only to belatedly remember that he got a lot out of it. Maybe there was something about Hank that made it work.

‘Hank?’ Connor said, idly doing piano exercises with his fingers on the bench.

‘What’s up?’

‘Do I make you happy?’

The trowel paused in the soil, and then Hank sat back on his heels and looked at Connor. The weight of his full attention always felt heavy.

‘Yeah,’ Hank said. He bent back to the trowel again, and then paused, straightening. ‘Why? Do I make you happy?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said. ‘So I was checking it was mutual.’

‘I mean you drive me nuts sometimes, too,’ Hank added, lifting an eyebrow.

‘You care too much about how much salad I eat,’ Connor said, leaning forwards. ‘And Kara said you’re really weird about it, even for an android. No one has to eat spinach. Ever. In their whole lives. Vitamin K supplements exist, Hank.’

‘It’s a leaf. A leaf. It can’t hurt you.’

‘You just don’t know what it tastes like,’ Connor said. ‘So I don’t think you get to decide whether it hurts me or not. I bet my stress levels rise whenever you bring up vegetables.’

Hank laughed, his barrel chest moving with it. Sumo sat up and looked between them, and then decided he’d get better pets from Connor. He ambled over, and Connor scratched at his ears in the way Sumo liked.

‘Yeah, well,’ Hank said. ‘Like five percent. About the amount it elevates in anyone who feels caught out, ‘cuz they know they’re doing the wrong thing.’

Connor frowned at him, and Hank frowned back, but there was a playful light in his eyes, and the little lines at the corners were smiling at him.
Hank bent down again to keep turning the soil and Connor watched him, looking up briefly at the clouds – a thick layer of stratus in the sky, he knew that now – while keeping his hand on Sumo’s head. When he looked down again, he realised what he wanted to say.

‘I feel like I didn’t know what happiness was, until I met you.’

‘Jesus,’ Hank muttered. He threw the trowel down. ‘Christ, you can’t just say that shit out of nowhere.’

But when he looked up, he was grinning.

Connor smiled back.

‘I’ve got one better,’ Hank said, ‘since you’re so determined to be a sap. You made me want to live my life again, and not to knock anything I had before – but I think it’s the best it’s ever been.’

‘Wow,’ Connor deadpanned, even though he felt like he was drowning in warmth. ‘That’s very sentimental of you, Hank.’

‘God almighty, you’re such a brat.’

*I’m going to be okay*, he thought. *And Hank’s going to be okay.*

But they were already okay. Life wasn’t about waiting until he’d healed from the hard parts, before living the good parts. He was already living the good parts, he'd been doing it for months alongside everything else. They’d started finding glimmers of hope and happiness long before the Veritas case was closed, and Connor stretched his arms out in front of him, before sagging back and enjoying the warmth of the day, with loved ones beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, THANK YOU for taking the time to read this story, and for giving this version of human!Connor and android!Hank a chance in such a long, meandering story that started off as a casefic and quickly became anything but. To all the people who commented, y'all are the MVPs and are the reason this story got written so relatively quickly, and helped me not abandon it when I was desperately tempted to many times in the first 15 chapters. To all the people who comment later, I love you all, and there's no such thing as a comment that's late to the party.

For everyone else - the folks who left kudos, who bookmarked, who lurked, who told their friends, who talked about it somewhere else, or who just enjoyed some of the ride with me, thank you as well. Just...it's been a wild ride from start to finish, and it's been great to have company.

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