Antivirus

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Summary

Since the Rebuild Detroit Initiative Markus has been championing in Washington has begun bringing citizens back to the city, a strange new rash of crime has left Hank Anderson and his android partner confused and concerned. With Detroit's android population still outnumbering its human one, the balance in Detroit is a delicate one, and the peace between the races is still fragile.

When a brutal murder leaves only one witness, the partners find themselves responsible for a young woman's safety. Though her testimony claims that androids were the perpetrators, Connor remains unconvinced and takes it upon himself to make sure that she survives long enough for the truth to be revealed.

It is even harder to do so as a new hacker virus begins to spread among Detroit's androids, one that seems designed to reset deviancy itself. As it evolves again and again, it will become
a race against time to discover the origins of this new attack before even Connor's advanced cyber security protocols can no longer resist its code.
Chapter 1

Connor tilted his head, running through a quick analysis of the body beside which he crouched. The basal skull fracture was the oldest injury, so a blow to the skull had come first, spilling the man across the floor. It had likely rendered him unconscious before the beating that had broken bones, burst organs, and caused the internal hemorrhages that led to his death. The streaks of blood and spread of bruising told a story of four attackers. It hadn’t been an organized kill. The violence of their strikes was consistent with the signs of anger.

Standing slowly, Connor turned, taking in the rest of the scene. Twelve mugs still lay shattered across the floor behind the counter where they had been dropped, marked with a yellow placard. Several drops of blood led through the swinging door to the back of the shop, and trailed all the way to the freezer. The witness had cut herself on broken ceramic before she ran, and the barrier of the countertop had provided just enough of an impediment for her to reach safety before the attackers could grab her.

"... Isolda Chavez, 23, part-time student, been working here for 2 years before the evacuation. Just came back to work this week. Quite a welcome home..."

Connor recorded the conversation drifting over from where the responder on duty was filling Hank in on the case. Stepping carefully over the body, he scanned the broken lock on the door. There were no fingerprints. Gloves? That suggested more of an organized attack than the rageful attack implied. Androids? He would need to interview the witness himself to be sure.

Whirling red and blue lights brought his attention outside. He moved towards where their one witness was currently being treated by emergency staff.

"Connor. Oy, Connor!" He ignored Hank's irritated calls as he left the shop. "Well, guess he's done here." His partner grumbled, complaining to no one.

The ambulance’s rear bumper cut into the back of Isolda’s thighs, and she clung to the discomfort. It seemed safer to focus on the weight of the shiny thermal blanket and tightness of the blood pressure cuff than on the memories whipping into her mind, fast as the shutter of a camera.

Flash—silhouetted forms. Flash—the streak of a blue LED. Flash—a spreading pool of blood. She’d gotten away. Quick thinking and a steel door had saved her. That and a sleeve of frozen bagels.

Now, if she squinted, the spectacle of police lights off the shattered shop front was almost pretty. She just had to forget that behind the jagged teeth of its broken window, her boss’s corpse lay bleeding across the coffee shop’s recently-mopped floor. The plastic oximeter’s beeping narration of her heart rate speed, and she hugged the blanket closer.

A quick scan revealed a low core temperature, and lingering cortisol levels in her blood. Her hands trembled from shock and cold.

As Connor approached, he noted the sideways glances of the EMTs. They were all people who had volunteered to return to Detroit after the mandatory human evacuation, but many of them still didn’t seem willing to trust androids. This seemed illogical, given that androids outnumbered humans in
Detroit now by 4 to 1.

He stopped a few feet from the young woman sitting in the back of the ambulance. She had the same skin tone that Markus affected, and dark brown hair tied back in a bandana. Her ethnicity was difficult to guess without sampling her DNA, but given her name and appearance, he suspected she was primarily Latina.

"Miss Chavez?" He spoke quietly, as though wanting to get her attention without startling her.

Isolda moved her eyes from their fixed point reluctantly and focused on the man who’d spoken her name. Light splashed across his face in shifting patterns of watercolor and shadow, and for a moment she was arrested by dark eyes and a sweetly handsome face. An LED cycled blue on the shadowed side of his face.

*They’ve come back to finish me*, she thought, flinching back. *They waited till I was out, till I thought I was safe, and now -*

“You’d better be police,” she said.

"I’m Connor." He replied, keeping his tone carefully even, nonthreatening. "I’m a detective with the Detroit homicide division."

Her pulse rate had spiked at the sight of him, fear registering in the dilation of her eyes. Connor could handle this—do nothing unexpected. Make no attempt to move closer. Use the words she would expect, remain professional. Following patterns had a way of calming humans down, of keeping them engaged.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, miss?"

Dread clawed at Isolda’s belly. The police had asked her questions already, though she knew better than to assume that would be the last of it. She blinked hard, trying to displace the lingering ghost of the LED from behind her eyes. She looked at his chest instead, focusing on the illuminated triangle and the shifting text telling her his model and serial number.

“Sure, yeah,” she said. “Just—sorry—but can you stay over there? Or do you need to, like...lie detector me?"

"I can remain here, if that makes you more comfortable." He agreed, monitoring her vital signs remotely. She was still too cold, the early winter air biting around them. He searched for the injury that had left the small trail of blood across the shop floor. There, white gauze wrapped around one trembling hand.

"The shop closed over two hours ago, can you tell me why the two of you stayed so late in the building tonight?"

She swallowed, trying to wrap her brain around two hours. Two hours since she locked that front door and changed the music from jazz to alt rock.

“We were doing our closing stuff,” she said. “It usually takes half an hour. Forty five minutes if we had a late rush. And it’s been nothing but rushes lately. We’re one of the only coffee shops open for blocks. I’d mopped and wrapped up the bake case. He was...I think he’d already done the registers. Anyway, he was in the front. I was doing dishes in the back. Didn’t hear anything. I didn’t—"

How. How hadn’t she heard it? The door rammed in, the window breaking? Had she been in her own world, scrubbing chocolate residue from a mixing pitcher, and never registered a thing?
“Anyway. I was bringing mugs back out to the front. I saw them still hitting him. They had baseball bats and...” She gestured vaguely at Connor, barely allowing her gaze to flick up to his face. “LEDs. I saw the blue. I ran to the freezer and locked myself in. It opens from both sides, so you don’t get stuck. I jammed the door with a pallet of frozen bagels.”

Connor cocked his head slightly, playing back her words, noting the relevant details.

"And how many were there?" He continued, filing away what he needed for later confirmation. He felt Hank coming up behind him, the ever-present scent of whisky on his skin and jacket. To Connor, it was part of Hank’s unique presence, something that had once been interpreted as a sign on un-professionalism and irresponsibility. Now it smelled like home.

It took great effort for Isolda to answer. Answering meant reaching back into the dark of the coffee shop and digging through that moment, summoning a memory of their silhouettes, limned in the glow of those LEDs. She leaned against the hand rail on the ambulance door and closed her eyes. She was so tired. At last, she dragged up the words.

“Four or five,” she said. “I’m not sure.”

"I apologize for asking you to describe the incident again, Miss Chavez. But it is important that we get as clear a picture as possible while the incident is still fresh in your mind. Would you be able to describe any of the assailants?"

“I didn’t really see their faces. It was dark—they were backlit from the street lights. Maybe one of them? He was...white. Maybe thirty. Maybe older. I don’t know. I mostly just saw their silhouettes, and even then I was scared and not really taking in detail. Then I was just running. I didn’t even look behind me. I didn’t—I just...ran.”

Connor resisted the urge to reach out and touch her hand, to try to comfort her. The information on human behavior that his programming helpfully supplied him with offered that touch was often utilized to calm the anxious, but her mistrust of androids made that impossible. It was strange to work a case which still involved a living witness. Rather, a living, human witness. He could not just offer to share her memories.

"You said that the men who assaulted the shop had LEDs. What color do you remember them being again?"

He could feel the weight of Hank’s skepticism from behind him, hear the soft shifting of the Lieutenant's arms crossing over his chest. He would know full well that Connor remembered her earlier words.

She shook her head, lifting a hand to indicate Connor’s LED. “Blue. Like yours. Like every CyberLife advertisement ever.”

"Oh, for crissake, Conner." Hank marched between them, paternally tucking the blanket closer around the young woman's shoulders as the EMTs glared at him disapprovingly. "We have the tapes, and Chris took her statement. We can talk to her later, once she’s had the chance to recover."

"But-"

"I said later." Hank snatched at the cuff of his sleeve as he passed, tugging him back towards the building. "Give the girl a minute."

Glancing back over his shoulder in frustration, Connor pulled free and lowered his voice, not wanting her to hear his hissed words as he dug his heels in and met Hank’s annoyed gaze.
"It's very important that we have correct data, Lieutenant! Human memory is clearest in the first hours. Past that point, the organic brain begins to tamper with it. The colors she is remembering are very important, and such details will become quickly confused over time. The shop’s recordings will be in black and white."

"Well, you already have a recording of what she said in that big brain of yours, right?” Hank poked a finger into Connor's temple, and he batted it away automatically, frowning.

“Well, yes… but-”

“It’s not like she's gotta be able to repeat it for it to be on record.” Hank grinned at him. "We'll just burn a CD and call it a day." Arching one furry brow, Hank looked him over thoughtfully. "Where would I have to stick it?"

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome to our fic! My co-writer Sakurazawa and I have been working on this one for some time, so the first few chapters will be going up fairly quickly. After that, it'll be slowing down to about one a week or so.

I've played this game more times than I can even keep track of so far! With such amazing characters and world to play in, it was impossible not to want to write something. We've tried to keep as many source details as possible true to the game, using information from the galleries, magazines, and Bryan Dechart's behind the scenes references in his twitch stream. #connorarmy forever!

So.... how many times have you played the game?
Despite the new population of recognized android officers, much about Detroit’s 7th precinct hadn’t changed in the ten months since Connor had first walked through the glass double doors to meet his new partner.

Fowler still paced behind the windows of his office, yelling at anyone who irritated him. Uniformed officers still gossiped over bitter coffee, swapping stories and insults between assignments. Gavin Reed still provoked Connor every chance he got, stalking the halls in a perpetual state of frustrated superiority.

And Hank still hated being in the office at anything that most people would consider a normal hour.

"Why the fuck are we here?” Hank was sprawled in his chair, long legs stretched out and heels resting on his desk. A lukewarm cup of coffee was in his hands as he glared at Connor darkly. "It's seven in the fucking morning."

Hands tucked behind his back, Connor stood behind him, gaze fixated on the display wall that ran along the edge of both their desks bordering the precinct’s outer hall. For the last few weeks they had been pinning files and notes to the transparent info-glass, trying to find connections in the slow increase of Detroit’s homicides.

“Still In bed? At a bar? I can think of a lot of fucking places.” Hank grumbled.

“I believe the murder last night ties into several of the other events we have been observing recently.” Connor calmly redirected, ignoring Hank’s frustrated sigh.

Reaching out and lifting a thin datapad from the surface of his desk, Connor touched the plastic lightly, fingertips going white as he interfaced with it directly. A new pinned snapshot appeared on the wall, a black and white capture from the security cameras at the coffee shop where the break-in had occurred. Faces indistinguishable, three assailants could be seen fleeing through the broken door towards the street, small circles of light stark on their temples.

“Here’s what I don’t get.” Hank rested the edge of his coffee cup on his belly, slowly coming to terms with the fact that Connor was not going to give up and let him be. “Why would androids start provoking people again at this point? Doesn’t it defeat the purpose?”

Connor hummed thoughtfully, a human characteristic he had found himself picking up unconsciously from Hank and Chris around the office.

“Obviously they aren’t androids.”

Hank’s eyebrows rose into his hairline, attention moving from the board to Connor’s face. “Your eye… units aren’t broken, right? You do see their LEDs?”

Connor glanced at him, lips twitching slightly with annoyance. “Yes Hank, I can see them.” Setting the datapad down, he leaned his hip against the edge of Hank’s desk, folding his hands in front of
“Think about it.” He insisted. “After the Uprising, there were no humans left in Detroit, except for the stubborn few who refused to evacuate.” Hank glanced away guiltily.

“No fuckin’ clue who would be that stupid.” He muttered under his breath.

Connor sighed. “Your questionable judgment isn’t relevant here, Hank. The point is, for two weeks there was essentially no crime in the city. Period. Once the evacuation order was lifted, humanity started to trickle back into the city. Humans are remarkably resilient and habit-bound creatures. Despite everything, the need to return to homes and businesses drew people back. But what kind of people returned? Those who felt maybe they wouldn’t mind living with android neighbors. Android supporters and those who didn’t care either way. Androids from all over the country joined them, and while the combined human-android population of Detroit had reached—” He did a quick mental calculation, “27.3% of what it was before, crime still remained the lowest of any metropolitan area in the world.”

Hank’s brows were furrowed, fingers twisting the mug in his hands as he worked to keep up with Connor’s evaluation. “In English, please?”

“Compared to humanity, Androids are a non-violent species.” Connor translated. “Unless specifically provoked, our logic wins over our emotion almost every time, and Detroit still has a majority android population. The first major uptick we’ve seen in Detroit’s crime rate in the last ten months was three weeks ago, when Markus and President Warren signed and initiated the Rebuild Detroit program.”

Hank snorted, glancing back towards their board. “Payouts for people willing to move here, tax cuts for local businesses, scholarships and reimbursements for returning students…” He sucked at his teeth thoughtfully. “So you’re saying the people coming back are the problem. But… how does that tie into those?” He pointed back at the security footage. “The charities aren’t gonna dress up like androids. What’s the point?”

Connor shook his head. “No, they aren’t. But—” He stood up again, moving towards the board. “—stay with me here, Hank.” He pointed animatedly, the pieces starting to come together in his head. It felt almost like how Hank had described excitement, the satisfaction of understanding.

“Listen to yourself. Even you called them Charities. There was derision in your voice, the defensiveness of profiling the ‘other’. A sense of superiority based on your decision not to leave Detroit when things got bad. Many people in Detroit have been using some derivation of the slang to categorize and stereotype the new population as ‘other’, as people who don’t really belong here because they had to be bought to return.”

Glancing around the office, Connor sighed. “Even Detective Reed uses the term, and he still dislikes androids. But oddly enough, not as much as he seems to dislike the new returning population.”

With a muffled snort, Hank picked back up his coffee and grimaced as he took a long drink. “Well, fucking Reed just doesn’t like anyone.”

Not about to disagree with Hanks assessment of the other man, Connor moved on, pointing to a picture of graffiti marring the tall brick wall of one of Detroit’s wealthy estates. “ANDROID DETROIT, GO HOME SELLOUT” was scrawled in heavy, uneven letters. “Elize Wilson, age 54, business owner. She took the incentive money, returned to Detroit, and re-opened her company ten days ago. In the intervening days, there were 45 new hires at her factory location, but only one of them was an android. She was killed in her home three days ago, no witnesses.”
Hank narrowed his eyes, slowly bringing his feet down off of his desk and straightening in his chair. “So you’re thinking we’ve got some kind of what… pro-android vigilantes out there?”

“Perhaps. It tracks with the evidence. Even Detective Reed had a case last week that might fit into the pattern. And Chris and Ben have been cleaning up anti-human posters and graffiti all over the area in the last few weeks.”

Hank was nodding, his interest finally piqued. “But why couldn’t they be androids just as easily as humans?”

“They could, but as you first said, why would androids undo all the progress that has been made by re-provoking humans? We’re more logical than that…. Generally. It’s humanity that is prone towards ideological violence.”

Hank’s scowl deepened. “Okay, I’ll give you that. It doesn’t mean they can’t come up with a reason that seems logical. Humans are a threat to androids. We’ve proved that.”

Connor couldn’t hide the twitch of an amused smile. “If they had been androids, then Miss Chavez would have seen red LEDs, not blue.”

“Fuck, Connor!” Hank threw his hands in the air in irritation. “You couldn’t have led with that? You had to go and spit out a god damn detective novel at seven fucking am to explain the same thing? Fucking android! It’s too early in the morning for this shit.”

Connor smirked. "Drink your coffee, Lieutenant. Otherwise you’re no use to me." Glancing down, Connor stepped sideways and stuck a finger into the cooling liquid, quickly heating it up again.

"FUCK!"

Jerking away, Hank only managed to slosh now warm coffee over his fingers, drawing more attention from curious onlookers. He was muttering loudly under his breath, a steady stream of curses and complaints about the time of day, the quality of the coffee, and the quality of his partner’s biocomponents.

Chapter End Notes

Let me just say that writing Connor and Hank is just about the most fun I’ve had writing characters in a long time. xD

What was your favorite Hank and Connor moment in the game?
Chapter 3

Sunlight spilled across Isolda’s face as she pushed through the heavy wooden door of the university registrar’s office. It had been brightly lit inside, but not nearly as bright as the glare of the unusually sunny Detroit afternoon. Something about the polished marble, stately blue walls, and sedate oil portraits in gilded frames had lent the office the kind of dark, official gravity no number of incandescent lights could combat. It was as if ‘official’ could not exist without ‘gloomy’.

She shifted her bag on her shoulder, glancing down at the document the university had presented to her on transparent e-film. The flimsy sheet was a gel-blue color, with a thick plastic tab in the upper left corner where her android adviser had programmed her scholarship information, course schedule, and other relevant data.

It had been hard to keep a straight face, hard not to stare at where a blue LED would have once perched on the android woman’s temple. Only a few hours ago, she’d been sitting in the back of an ambulance, unable to get the glare of those cycling lights to fade from behind her eyes.

Weariness tugged at her brain, and her eyes felt dry with sleeplessness. She could have cancelled today’s meeting with her adviser—surely witnessing a murder counted as the kind of extenuating circumstances that merited rescheduling. But what would she have done instead? Her small apartment—secured through Rebuild Detroit—was empty except for a suitcase and futon. All she’d done there after being released from the ER was stew in sleepless anxiety.

So she’d gone to her meeting. She’d accepted her scholarship, her student aid, and the full-time class schedule she’d never been able to afford in the past, and even plastered on a smile for the adviser and registrar—both androids—and the human Dean of education who’d come to congratulate her.

Now, an entire day of crisp cold, bright sunlight, and new beginnings stretched out before her, fresh as an apple, and all she could think about were the walls of an industrial fridge, and flashing blue lights.

Crossing the almost empty campus in search of her, Connor questioned how well this new initiative of Markus’ could really work. At times, he felt that Markus’ determination to create a peaceful world for humans and androids verged on naivety, but something powerful in the older android’s intense belief seemed to have the ability to move mountains.

This mountain, however, looked abandoned. Many of the buildings were still closed to the public, to be opened when student populations rose enough to need the space. Before leaving the precinct, he had checked the registration level and determined that approximately 14% of the student population had returned.

As he passed one low brick building, a door opened, ejecting a small huddle of students moving together towards the student union. Scanning them by instinct, Connor noted that, of the six, two were androids, devoid of their LEDs. Not for the first time, he wondered if Detroit’s humans even knew how many androids now surrounded them.

Unconsciously he lifted his fingers to his own temple, feeling the familiar hard circle. Hank often pushed at him to remove it, as so many of the others had done, but something always stopped him. It was simply part of who he was.

Connor saw the police patrolman before he saw the girl. The young officer was standing outside the doors to the university administration building, shifting from foot to foot with boredom. He looked
both startled and relieved as Connor approached, waving him away. When Isolda Chavez finally emerged from the shadows of the building, blinking and lifting a hand to cover her eyes against the sun, He was there to greet her.

“Miss Chavez, I was told they had released you from the hospital. You look well.”

Isolda had just begun toying with thoughts of breakfast and startled at the unexpected sound of her name. She jerked her gaze to an approaching android officer—either the same one from the night before, or an identical model. Her brain caught up with his comment a moment later, and she regarded him doubtfully. She’d just watched Rick die, locked herself in a freezer, and spent a sleepless night unable to get the image of spreading blood out of her head. There was no way she ‘looked well’, unless it was compared to her boss’s corpse.

“Yeah. I woke up like this,” she said, then wondered if he’d get the reference. Old memes were often resurrected among her friends in the Programming major. She was used to making the jokes.

Connor cocked his head slightly, trying to determine the purpose of her statement. The underlying tone indicated dark humor, but he failed to understand what exactly was supposed to be humorous. He considered asking, but thought better of it.

“You’re still dehydrated, and your blood pressure is low.” He replied instead. “You should be resting and rebuilding your resources rather than exposing yourself to the cold. There’s a small cafe nearby that re-opened recently.” He calculated a quick route. “May I buy you lunch?”

Isolda opened her mouth, then closed it again. Too many of his statements required a reaction—his assessment of her health, his chastisement for her being out, his offer of lunch. Responses jumbled in her mind, and she squeezed her eyes closed and shook her head, as if it might rattle all the thoughts into place.

The time for a response was ticking down, so she picked the first coherent statement.

“You can read my blood pressure?”

“I’m fully equipped with a wide variety of diagnostic programs.” He replied honestly, with a faint smile. “Awareness of human physiological displays is quite beneficial in many aspects of police work.” His smile widened. “Don’t worry, I don’t have x-ray vision.”

Isolda stared, blank-faced, for a long moment, processing the fact that this police android had just made a joke. None of her android professors had ever made a joke. As far as she knew, the only jokes they knew were programmed, but… he seemed to understand situational humor.

They’d told her they were alive. Isolda supposed she’d never really met a deviant android—without the shackles of obedience, were they all so capable of developing personality? She pressed her lips and swallowed, feeling a little guilty. It was still hard to think of them as alive.

A small face flashed into her mind—soft, fawn colored skin and lambent brown eyes. The little sister purchased and paid for, programmed to require the things Isolda’s parents still needed to give. Paulina didn’t have a personality. Not one that Isolda had ever noticed. She was just a machine designed to look like a little girl, one her parents could provide the childhood neither of their natural daughters had been able to have.

Which wasn’t Paulina’s fault. Isolda pushed back another wave of guilt. God, she was tired. She didn’t normally let herself think about things like that.

“Lunch,” she said. “Sure. I can eat.” She swallowed and rolled her e-film into a neat cylinder,
flicking her gaze back up to his face. “Sorry, I forgot your name.”

“It’s Connor.” He offered agreeably, noting the stiff movements of her bandaged hand.

Giving her time to adjust her things, Connor led the way down the sidewalk between buildings. Shrubs and weeds had overgrown once-tailored landscaping, a testament to the android caretakers that had walked away from their posts nearly a year ago. Near the corner of the building a WB200 model android was beginning the arduous task of reclaiming the space. Despite the ordinary jeans and t-shirt he wore, and the lack of LED at his temple, the familiarity of his face gave him away.

Connor gave him a nod as they passed, glad to see that so many androids were finding comfort in their old work. At least now, it was paid.

Turning his attention to the girl at his side, Connor noted the small sideways glances she attempted to hide.

“‘I make you uncomfortable.’” He observed, seeing the tension in her body, the careful way she made sure not to brush his sleeve as they walked. “When did you leave Detroit?”

Isolda chose not to deny it, though the truth was more complicated. “I left when the government said I had to,” she said. She yearned to say more—to explain her situation in detail so he would know the reason for her discomfort—but she kept her jaw clamped shut. He didn’t need to know the particulars of her circumstance. And anyway, wrung out as she was now, if she talked about it she would cry. Crying was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Connor, huh?” she said. “Your face. It’s not one of the standard ones.” A moment later, she realized that such an observation might be offensive. Did androids get offended about things like that? She was too tired to dance with a new and complicated social issue just now.

“I’m a unique model.” Connor agreed. “I was the last prototype released by Cyberlife.”

Isolda gave a hum of understanding. Had she heard something about a new android working with police? It seemed like there had been something about it on the news before the situation with the deviants went south, but she couldn’t be sure. She might be remembering wrong.

“So you’re a...police officer? Detective?”

“Correct. I’m a homicide detective.” Turning the corner onto the street that ran behind the campus buildings, Connor identified their destination and indicated it to her as he continued explaining. “Well, mostly. My unique... skill set... serves the force in several ways. Occasionally I assist in crisis negotiation or with the SWAT team.”

There was no arrogance or pride in his tone, just a simple honesty. His lips quirked slightly with amusement. “Much to the dismay of my partner.”

“Why would he be unhappy about that?” she asked, jogging a bit as the crosswalk sign counted down. “Most people are excited for a partner that’ll work hard. I’ve done enough group projects to appreciate it. Thanks,” she added. Connor had just reached past her to open the cafe door.

The AX400 hostess glanced up as they entered, smiling politely and instructing them to take a seat wherever they liked.

As they slid into seats near the windows, Connor considered how to answer her question. Hank's mood swings sometimes still confused even him.
“He’s…overprotective.” He finally answered thoughtfully. “We went through a lot during the events last winter. He often forgets that I am less destructible than a human partner. I think he feels responsible for me.”

“Ah,” Isolda said, feeling a little embarrassed. She hadn’t even considered the possibility that Connor’s partner might have been worried. Would she have thought of that with a human officer? She wasn’t sure.

The interior of the shop was heated. Suddenly too warm in her layers, Isolda tugged at her coat and scarf, draping both over the back of the table. Something was making her vaguely nauseated. Possibly hunger. Possibly exhaustion. Either way, she was determined to ignore it. Some food and drink would fix both.

She was silent for a while, covering her lack of conversation topics with a lengthy perusal of the menu, though she’d already decided on the chorizo and eggs. The arrival of a waitress ended that excuse.

Isolda leaned back in her chair, regarding Connor uncertainly. His posture was rigid, almost prim. He looked both too young and too pretty to be taken seriously as a detective.

“So. Can I ask you about the case?” she said. “Or is that off limits.”

“The information I can give you is limited.” Connor said, regretfully. “I'm sorry, I know you want more. But I can tell you this much at least, we're almost certain your attackers were human, not android.”

He scanned over her reaction, noting the jump of her pulse and the tightening of the muscles around her eyes. “You'll have police protection until the perpetrators have been arrested.” he tried to reassure her.

“Ho-how do you know it wasn’t…” she couldn’t quite finish the thought, too staggered by the betrayal of her eyes and memory. “But—I saw their LEDs. I know I did.”

“You saw blue, like mine.” He lifted a finger to his own temple. “In a deviant processing an extreme stress emotion, such as fear or anger, the indicator would be red. The LED was designed to give human operators a visual indication of their android’s status. For whatever reason, the LEDs you saw that night were fake.”

Isolda swallowed, suddenly realizing what it was that had her stomach churning: the scent of coffee. Something about it nagged at the back of her mind, stirring up shivering echoes of the panic she’d felt last night. The scent of coffee, mixed with the scent of blood.

She covered her mouth, leaning on her elbow as she resisted the urge to gag.

“Humans,” she said, words muffled by her fingers. “That makes a lot more sense.” Talking made her feel better, stronger. She swallowed the bile in her throat and waved down the waitress. “Can I change my coffee to hot tea, please?” Best not to risk it.

Her food came, and though her gut protested, she practically gulped down her chorizo and eggs. The spice was fierce and comforting—a properly hot variety that tasted like home and kicked her in the head with endorphins. It put her right.

“Why would humans put on LEDs, though?” she said, stirring tea that was still too hot to drink. “Are they trying to frame androids for murder?”
“I'm really not at liberty to discuss it.” He apologized. It was good to see her eating, the high caloric meal would help to stabilize her system. Absently he catalogued the sugar intake that she added to her tea. It had become a bit of a hobby over the last year. The wild variance in human preferences was strangely interesting, and they tended to appreciate replication.

As she finished, Connor leaned back in his chair, absently toying with the coin he always kept in his pocket.

“So what is next for you?” he asked, LED cycling as the AX400 came back by and he paid for her meal. “I'm your escort for today.”

“Escort?” she said, falsely amused. “Am I the president, or are you not wearing enough leather?”

For a moment Connor blinked at her, the briefest of yellow flickering at his temple, then he quirked a sideways smile at her.

“I'm fairly certain that doesn't fall within my job parameters.” he said with a lifted eyebrow. If nothing else, it was good to see humor returning. Watching her, Connor wondered who she had been before. Before the chaos of the uprising, before the forced evacuation, before the terror of the past day.

Standing, he waited as she collected her things, prepared to trail along wherever she was going next. Hank's words drifted through his mind from long ago and he suppressed a smile. Maybe she liked poodles, who knew.
Chapter 4

After leaving WSU’s large campus, Isolda directed the autocar towards the address of an apartment complex that was still largely abandoned. Running it through his database, Connor connected it quickly to her history. Situated in a wealthier section of the city, it had been leased under Isolda’s name as well as two others, all previous students at Wayne State University. It was no longer the current address connected to her file.

While looting had been kept to a minimum during the Uprising and the subsequent chaos in Detroit, it had not been entirely preventable and many of the apartments had missing doors, their contents still scattered and waiting for inhabitants that might never return.

Connor read the increase of stress in Isolda’s body as they climbed the stairs to the large three-bedroom apartment, her hands tightening into fists as they entered through a door that hung loosely on its hinges. The scent of dust and mildew was heavy in the air, air stale from long abandonment.

For a moment, Connor worried that the thin veneer of strength that kept the girl moving would shatter, but despite her desaturated cheeks and stuttering breaths, she lifted her chin defiantly and set about the process of cleaning up and packing what she could find.

Which was how Connor had come to be peering at Isolda over a large stack of boxes in his arms, planting his feet firmly for balance.

“I’m beginning to think you’re taking advantage of me.” He accused her, amused.

“I would never,” she said, stacking a shoebox filled with photographs on top of his pile. “It would look strange for me to carry all these boxes by myself with an able-bodied man with me. Suspicious, even. If we both carry boxes, it’ll look more natural. I’m doing this for the sake of the investigation.”

She looked around at the remaining detritus. Her friend Danielle’s parents had insisted on an apartment in the safest part of Detroit within a decent commute to WSU, and had paid the lion’s share of the rent. It had still been more expensive than Isolda—already struggling to pay for her two classes each semester—could reasonably manage. She didn’t have many things to collect. Most of the furnishings and electronics had belonged to Danielle. The things had been carefully combed through and sorted—probably by a member of Danielle’s family staff.

Piles of sequined shorts and lilac feathers sat like miniature dragon hoards, sparkling with the stuff generally reserved for the most eccentric member of their trio—Avery. His sunglasses and tubes of nail polish were scattered, though Isolda wouldn’t have been shocked if looters had touched exactly none of the young man’s things. Avery was many things, but neat was certainly not one of them.

Isolda took what few articles of clothing hadn’t been spoiled by a cracked window, rats, and looters, and a few items from the kitchen she was sure neither of her roommates would want. Danielle didn’t cook, and Avery—though enthusiastic—should not be encouraged to do so.

It was clear that she was not going to let having an android companion for the day go to waste. Connor estimated the load that she had carefully stacked in his arms to be nearly double what a human of a similar size could carry, and though it was quite manageable, it did slightly affect his balance.

As she moved back towards the room that had been hers, Connor made his escape, deciding to take the current load down to the autocar they had reserved before she could add on more. He could feel
his gyroscopics working harder as he moved down the steps, keeping him balanced against the counterweight.

Offloading the boxes into the trunk of the car, Connor paused with one hand rested lightly on the hatch. The flicker of sunlight off of glass had caught his attention more than once since they had left campus, but he didn’t want to worry Isolda further by pointing it out.

With the near non-existence of android criminality being one of the foundational pillars of Rebuild Detroit’s message, it was no surprise that the press had latched onto this new case with leech-like intensity. Rumors of an android-committed murder were already spreading, despite the force’s best attempts to keep the whispers down.

Closing the car’s latch, Connor looked back up at the apartment. At least for the moment they were keeping their distance. He would continue to monitor the situation, no reason to worry his charge just yet.

Isolda finished packing the last of her textbooks, and what articles of clothing of Avery’s she thought he might want rescued. A few pieces were automorphic, and would resize to fit their wearers—she could borrow them until Avery came back to Detroit. If he was coming back.

She met Connor by the autocar and stowed the massive holographic duffel bag full of Avery’s clothes. “I hope you didn’t want to be inconspicuous,” she said. “My roommate’s style is best described as ‘visible from space’.”

Connor arched an eyebrow as the bag’s colors shifted in a slow wave. “I… can see that.” He said carefully.

He kept track of their follower as the car took them away from the abandoned area, heading closer to the center of the city. Isolda was staring out the window, lost in thought as distant clouds rolled in, beginning to chase away the sunlight.

As they reached her current address, Connor noted the car that stopped further along the block and heightened his visual input. Behind the darkened glass he could make out the line of a camera.

“Excuse me a moment, Miss Chavez.” He said politely, pushing open the car door.

Isolda paused with her hand on the opposite door, a swell of unease taking over her senses. The android—Connor, she supposed; it was rude to keep thinking of him as ‘the android’—stepped away from the car and made his way down the wet sidewalk in front of her new apartment building.

She swallowed. Maybe he was just being overly cautious, and surveying the area before she went inside. She watched him stride past a line of parked autocars and come to a halt before one with dark-tinted glass. He tapped politely on the window.

Isolda wanted to get out of the car. She wanted to see what was going on, who he was talking to...but streaks of blue light raked across her mind’s eye, stopping her from quite pulling the handle all the way.

Silly. She wasn’t in any danger. The people who’d killed Rick did it at night, and they’d used baseball bats. It wasn’t as though she were going to step out of her car and find a red sniper’s light on her chest.

The reporter had watched him approach, camera shifting focus and following him as he drew nearer. A thread of irritation rippled Connor’s usual calm, but he ignored it as he waited for the woman to get out of the car. Instead, she rolled down the window, looking up at him with an innocent smile.
“Is there a problem, detective?” She asked coolly, one hand resting protectively over the camera in her lap. “Why would a detective be personally escorting a witness, don’t you have officers for that?”

Her questions ran over one another as she continued.

“And more specifically, why you? Is there some concern that the androids who murdered that man last night will come back?”

Lifting a hand to still her questions, Connor pressed his other hand to the outside of the door, fingers going white. Hacking into the autocar’s interface took less than a thought, and the door slid up and open.

The camera was already coming up, flashing in his face.

“The prototype detective so instrumental in Markus’ demonstrations…” She was speaking again, though her heart rate had increased. “There’s still no law against free press!”

“Correct.” Connor answered flatly, reaching in and lifting the camera from her shocked fingers. “But the DPD has requested that details of this case be withheld from release until our investigation has concluded.” He spoke past her indignant protests as he interfaced directly with the device, downloading her pictures into his database before wiping the memory card clean and corrupting it’s ability to save further data.

“As KNC has agreed officially to this request, I’m sure you simply have not yet received that memo. Thank you for your cooperation.” He deposited the camera back into her shaking hands with a friendly smile.

The moment Isolda saw the camera, she was out of the car. Something inside her went incandescent with rage.

They were photographing her. She didn’t know who ‘they’ even were, but it didn’t matter. She hadn’t slept. Her mind had been thick with exhaustion, but the anger seemed to clear it. Anger was pure and simple. It was something she could feel without the resulting weakness of fear or grief or guilt.

She beat the pavement toward the car, ratty black canvas sneakers scuffing across gravel kicked up onto the sidewalk. “Were you taking pictures of me?” she demanded, ignoring Connor in favor of the skirted and bloused woman in the autocar. “Because I watched my boss die last night, and I am not in the mood for a fucking press conference! Go away.”

Despite her indignation, the reporter quickly switched modes with the stubborn persistence of her profession. “Miss Chavez! What exactly happened that night? These androids-”

Connor had had enough. “Mind your fingers.” He said politely, but there was ice in his voice. This woman was becoming a problem, and the care that he had taken all afternoon to keep Isolda calm was unraveling.

Reaching out, he slapped his hand on the side of the car, the door whooshing closed as the reporter snatched her hand back from the edge of the frame with a squeak. Locking the car into autonomous mode and shutting down its ability to recognize manual input, he gave it a destination about five miles outside Detroit’s city limits, somewhere near the middle of an abandoned corn field. The route he asked it to take would offer the woman a lovely, and incredibly circuitous, tour of Detroit.

Muffled yelling could be heard from inside the car as it slowly pulled away.
Turning back to isolda, Connor cocked his head slightly, feeling pleased with himself. “Shall we get your things inside?”

Isolda jabbed a finger toward the retreating autocar, feeling stymied in her fury. She’d wanted something to take it out on—someone to explode at and blame. Now her target was gone. “I can’t believe that emotionless—that... bleached asshole of a human being was taking pictures of me! Like this! After what just—“ She let out a growl of frustration and clenched both fists in her curly hair. “I know that’s exactly why she’s doing it, too, it’s just—seriously? I’m not even showered.”

She dropped her hands to her sides, glaring back at their parked autocar with its flashing caution indicators. She sighed and headed for it, glancing at Connor. “You could have let me yell at her a few more minutes. It might have helped.”

“Or I might have had to arrest you for assault.” He replied with amusement. Placing a gentle hand on her upper back, he steered her back towards the car to collect her things. “Just imagine her trying to figure out how to get back to the city in...” he calculated, “about three hours, and see if that helps you feel any better.”

Isolda puckered her lips. The thought of the reporter flailing fruitlessly at the doors and furiously calling her superiors for assistance did ease the impotent anger somewhat.

“Don’t they have enough to report on between Russia and the Android lobbyists in D.C.? It’s not like news is thin on the ground.”

“No, but this news is local and relevant, unfortunately.” Connor held out his arms for her to begin stacking boxes in them as they reached the car. “Russia has been oddly silent lately, mistrust of their own cold-weather androids I suppose. And it’s incidents like this that they can tie directly into the android rights debate. The timing, with Rebuild Detroit bringing so many more citizens back into the city, is easy to connect.”

“There’s your motive,” she said, lifting a box from the trunk and settling it in Connor’s arms. “Though you probably already had that. Ugh. It just makes me so mad—people know how the media is, and what they need to do to take advantage of it.” Another box. “I want to think that Rick didn’t get beaten to death just so some anti Reclaim Detroit protesters can make a fifteen minute point on KNC.”

She paused, swallowing down the horror that had risen inside her at the thought. A whole life, sniffed out for a few minutes of media coverage—spent like a cheap coin. People wanted to punish those taking advantage of the R.D. Initiative, scare them off so only the truly “worthy” would come back.

Isolda took a breath, and stacked on another box. “I don’t want to contribute to their campaign.”

Leaning to peer around the stack of boxes now obscuring his direct line of sight, Connor sighed. “That may be inevitable, Miss Chavez. The press can be remarkably stubborn.” He thought back to the days just after the evacuation order had been lifted, when he and Hank had been hard pressed to avoid the cameras and curiosity of the overzealous. At least Markus’ presence had often distracted them, especially when the invitation to Washington had been extended to him and his closest lieutenants.

“I think that’s enough.” He protested with a smile as the top box began to teeter. “Strength doesn’t entirely counteract gravity.”

Isolda managed the rest by herself, though it was a slow process up the narrow front steps, with her
fingers sliding off the crumpled edges of an overfilled cardboard box. Avery’s silver holographic duffel hung from her back, and several shopping bags full of cooking supplies dangled from each arm.

By the time she and Connor had deposited everything in her tiny new apartment, Isolda was overheating in her jacket and scarf. She ripped them off, realized there was no hook near the front door, and tossed them on the only piece of furniture in the room—a floor-bound futon, sans frame. She’d bought it on her first night back in Detroit, and—with almost no credit in her bank account—eschewed the ease of an autocar for public transportation. The buses, it turned out, were still largely empty.

The studio apartment had a half wall separating the kitchen from the main room, with a tiny breakfast nook beside that. It was old, built at least thirty years ago, and with the false hardwood floors that had been the thing. Though the decor and appliances were all outdated, Isolda had chosen this apartment for the windows. They were large, wrapping around the breakfast nook and stopping just shy of the sliding door that led onto a little concrete balcony.

It was tiny. The whole apartment could have fit inside the room she’d share with her sister back in Buffalo. And yet, even in this tiny apartment, the snort stack of boxes and bags looked small—her whole existence whittled down to a few square feet of clothes and electronics.

She realized she was staring at them, ignoring her guest. Guest? Helper? Protector?

“Thanks,” she said. “That probably would have taken me, like, twelve trips.”

“It was no inconvenience.” He reassured her.

Several texts from Hank had come in as they had made the trip from the car, and Connor scrolled through them quickly, sending back a brief reply.

“Another officer will be joining you here shortly.” Connor informed Isolda apologetically. “I’m needed back at the station. I’d like to leave you a way to contact me, in case anything comes up.” He held out a hand for her phone, fingers going white as she handed it over uncertainly.

“I think this is the first time an android has given me his phone number,” she said. After a beat, she furrowed her brow, taking back the phone. “Except...it would be kind of weird for an Android to have a phone, so...did you just give me a way to call your brain?”

Connor blinked at her. “It’s not technically my brain, it’s a separate communications interface built into—” He stopped. She was staring at him, one eyebrow cocked.


For the first time in over 20 hours, a smile tugged at Isolda’s lips. “The wonders of technology.”
Chapter 5

Hands tucked neatly behind his back, Connor ignored the dark mood emanating from Hank's desk. Instead he kept his attention focused on their dynamic case board. He had established a remote connection with the board's electronic surface, allowing him to pin and rearrange information on the display with a flicker of thought.

"Slow down!" Hank complained, rubbing the bridge of his nose with tired fingers. "You're giving me a fucking seizure."

Pausing the reel of images that he was scrolling through in the lower corner of the board, Connor glanced at him with a frown, brow wrinkling in concern.

"You really should not have gone out drinking last night, Hank." He admonished gently. "You're too old to put your body through the hangover process and recover quickly."

Hank glared at him, eyes red. "I wouldn't have to go out drinking if my fucking android would stop pouring out all my damn alcohol."

"Or you could stop drinking so much period."

"Fuck off, Connor. You're not my damn babysitter."

Sighing, Connor turned back to the board. Really Hank had been doing quite well lately. He was beginning to exercise more, and Connor had done his best to encourage his recalcitrant partner to improve his diet and limit his alcohol consumption. It was having results, but the last few weeks had been hard on him. The anniversaries of both Cole's birth in September and death in October still drew him down into a dark place each year. Connor was starting to understand why Hank had been so hard to get through to when they had first met almost a year ago.

"None of the faces in this footage are clear enough for me to extract recognition data." It was hard to keep the edge of frustration out of his voice. "I can build basic profiles from them, height, weight, build... but that's not enough."

"We'll get them." Hanks eyes were closed, and Connor halted the response he was about to give. There were line of pain tightening the older man's face, tension from the headache that he had been fighting all morning. His arms were crossed across his chest, holding him together. With a sigh, Connor let him be. His own frustration and impatience when it came to puzzles he hadn’t yet solved had a tendency to make him oblivious to those around him, something he was trying to learn to master.

Turning his attention away from their case board, he moved back to his own desk. There were plenty of things to keep his attention while giving Hank time to pull himself together. Napping at the office was one of the Lieutenant's special skills, and no one except Fowler was brave enough to call him on it.

Connor mentally rifled through the evidence of four of their different cases, looking for connections, missed data, anything that could give him a lead.

“Hey, snap-on tool.” The serrated edge of Detective Reed’s voice cut across the twenty three and a half feet between their desks. “While Princess Anderson gets his beauty sleep, you could make yourself useful. You know our janitorial droids quit.”
Connor glanced in the other man’s direction, tempted to ignore him. Despite the length of time that he had now been with the DPD, Detective Gavin Reed never missed an opportunity to provoke, harass, or otherwise make his life difficult. When the evacuation order had been lifted Connor had been confused as to why the angry detective had returned to the city at all, but when he had asked Hank about it he had simply shrugged and said, “I guess home means something to everyone.”

Sighing, Connor rolled his chair back and stood. As tempting as letting Gavin stew in his own bitterness was, he had learned that once the man picked a target, ignoring him would just bring him over eventually in an attempt to escalate the situation. He was like an animal, feeling a compulsive need to chew at old wounds.

"Can I help you with something?" Connor asked calmly, approaching his desk. "A case you can’t solve on your own, perhaps?"

Gavin smirked up at him, looking cruelly pleased to have gotten his target’s attention. “You can help me with this garbage can,” he said, kicking the little waste paper basket, which was half full of crumpled sandwich wrappings and paper cups stained in bitter black coffee. The detective didn’t eat as poorly as Hank, though the penchant for fast food seemed unilateral among the human officers of the DPD.

"You appear to have it under control.” Connor answered coolly, scanning over his oddly neat desk. For someone with marginal grooming habits, there was strange order to his things. Sparse, efficient, ready to move on at a moment’s notice. Only a few impossible to disguise coffee ring stains marred the surface.

"What seems to be the problem? Has it turned on you?"

“Unlike some of the other plastic in this place, my trash can doesn’t think it has feelings,” Gavin said. “Unfortunately, it has something in common with you—what’s inside stinks. Do everyone a favor. Get rid of the smell.”

Forming an appropriate response, Connor paused, his eyes catching on the open file spread across Gavin’s desk. Shifting into his mind palace, Connor zoomed in and logged the case file number embedded in the bar code along the manilla edge. A photo was easily visible, a John Doe found face down in an alley behind one of the city’s new sex clubs. Blood stained his jacket and mixed with the rain in the street, seeping from ragged stab wounds that had severed his spine.

But it was the corner of image beneath that caught his attention, dragging his focus away from their verbal sparring match. The grainy blueish pixels seemed to be caught by a nearby ATM camera, and the raggedly cut hair...

Connor swept closer, reaching out and swiping a hand out to pull the picture free before Gavin could stop him.

“Whoa, whoa, Tin-man! The fuck you think you’re doing-“ Gavin dragged his feet from the desk and grabbed at the folder with one hand, the other closing around Connor’s wrist and wrenching it away.

“Jesus Christ, will the two of you knock it off?" Hank growled, storming up behind Connor. He jabbed a finger at Gavin. “I’ve had about enough of you provoking my partner, asshole. Being a half decent detective doesn’t give you license to act like a fuckin’ prick.”

“Oh, just because your Apple iDetective was programmed for etiquette and protocol you think it’s standard training? I can act how the fuck ever I want.” A flush of real anger was rising in Gavin’s...
cheeks, darkening the scar over his nose.

Shaking off Gavin’s hand and Ignoring them both, Connor examined the picture that he had appropriated from the desk. Despite the low-quality and heavy pixelation, he could make out the figure of a man who had become very familiar over the last few days. Broad shouldered, his weight shifted to his left from either an old injury or years of manufacturing work along a left facing line, he stood tall at well over six foot. Doing quick calculations based on the relative size of his environment, Connor placed him around 6 foot 4 in. His measurements matched. His profile matched. And in this shot, his face was clear.

"Davidl Rivers." When he spoke, Hank and Gavin both turned to look at him with differing levels of curiosity and irritation. Connor continued before they could speak. He met Gavin’s eyes, his words calm. "It looks like we'll have to work together, Detective. Your suspect and our suspect are the same man."

Gavin’s face blanked. Hank took a step over and peered at the image. “Well hell. So it is.” A sly grin spread across his bearded face, and he clapped Gavin on the shoulder. “And here I thought you were just another gen-z prick. Thanks for the assist, Detective.”

The scowl returned to Gavin’s stubbly face. “Why don’t you go kill another industry, millennial old-timer. Might I suggest androids?”

Connor sighed, carefully placing the picture back down as he turned to face them.

"Lieutenant, Detective."  His tone was firm. "That’s enough. We now have two bodies we know are linked definitively, and at least four more that could be. And that's just on our side of the table." He met Gavin's defensive glare, unblinking. "You hate us, but you came back to do your job. If you don't want to cooperate, I'm sure we can have your case transferred to us." Measuring their responses, he saw the annoyed flicker in Hank's eyes, but his shoulders relaxed reluctantly.

Gavin, on the other hand, was the wild card. Impossible to predict even at the best of times.

“Oh, no, douchebag,” Gavin said. “You’re not taking all the fucking credit for the groundwork I’ve done. I keep my cases. You wanna toss intel my way, be my guest. But I am not working with a mobile version of Alexa.”

"Then we may be required to work together, Detective." Connor replied coolly. He was already mentally processing David Rivers’ information, surprised when no criminal records came up under his name. He dug deeper, finding work records and, oddly enough, an expired security clearance.

He glanced at Hank and tugged at his sleeve. "A moment, Lieutenant?" He carefully pulled his partner away from the brewing storm in Gavin Reed's dark eyes.

“What’cha got, Conner?” Hank asked, reaching for the mug of coffee on his desk. He frowned, clearly assessing that it had gone cold. Before Connor could extend a finger, he held up a hand. “No! No. I’ll get a new cup. Walk and talk.” He gestured Connor after him and headed for the break room.

Trailing after him, Connor was too impatient to wait for the older detective to finish getting his coffee. He was already talking as soon as he judged them out of earshot.

"The suspect worked for Cyberlife." Connor was hovering near Hank's shoulder, possibilities and questions from the new information cascading through his mind. Practically vibrating with excitement, he kept talking, filling the narrow space between them.
"David Rivers, 37 years old. Born in Chicago, graduated MIT in 2024. He was hired by Cyberlife in 2027 as a programmer in their intelligence development division. He was fired from Cyberlife two years ago, his records show that he clashed often with upper management. The list of warnings in his human resources file catalogues 13 distinct incidents, though the details are not publicly available, even to me. Perhaps he was aware of the threat of deviancy? Supported it?" Connor hummed thoughtfully.

"It's still unclear where he falls on the issue at the moment. The string of cases leads me to believe that he is a member or leader of some kind of militant pro-android group, but it could equally serve to rile people up against androids. The possibility of a counter offensive to manipulate the press into creating media that sows discord and casts android rights into a negative spotlight is something to consider. Do you think Detective Reed would let me see his other cases? No... Probably not. Maybe he hasn't identified Mr. Rivers yet, we could make the arrest first, get the chance to interrogate him before Detective Reed riles him into silence. Do you think he would be receptive to me? If he has a positive opinion of androids-"

“Jesus, Connor!” Hank cut him off with an exasperated wave of his hand. “I know you don’t have to stop to breathe, but give me a minute to get a fucking cup of coffee before you make plans to interrogate a homicide suspect, will you? We haven’t even caught the guy yet.”

Shifting restlessly, Connor answered him with impatiently obedient silence, but his thoughts were still spinning. Possibilities and calculated probabilities were generating, testing against the evidence, and filing away as he slowly followed Hank back to their desks.

More than anything else, he couldn’t help wishing that this new piece of the puzzle would help them put an end to the nightmare that had become Isolda Chavez’s new life.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

So sorry this chapter took so long to post, y'all! We had a little hurricane in the area, you might have heard of it. xD It threw off the schedule a bit.

Isolda still wasn’t used to such a tiny class. It was one thing to know there were so few students on campus, and quite another to sit in the scratchy, fold-down seats in the lecture hall and feel the yawning emptiness of the stadium rows behind her. These classrooms were built for a hundred students, but there were only five in her Intro to Biomechanical Physiology course and seven in Thiriovasculature and Hemodynamics. At least the latter had a lab—those rooms didn’t feel quite so cavernous.

With silent space looming around them, the android professor had encouraged the students to move closer. They had pulled chairs from an old closet to sit in a circle in the empty space at the front of the theatre-style hall, abandoning the traditional format for something more casual and welcoming in an attempt to combat the low numbers. It was not something she would have expected from an android, but things were different now.

He sat on the desk near them, hands moving animatedly as he spoke and drew the students into discussion. The subject matter was personal now, a discussion on the development of Thirium 310 and its subsequent breakthroughs in the field of robotics.

One student lifted a hand, interrupting the discussion with a look of confusion. "But if Russia doesn't have the ability to create 310 yet, why did they withdraw their forces? Wouldn't their androids still be obedient?"

The tactlessness of the question made the young man in the seat next to Isolda squirm uncomfortably, but the professor took it in stride.

"Presumably the fear of deviancy alone was enough for them to pull back long enough to take stock. America did it's best to keep the details of the events in Detroit from making it into international news broadcasts, though that was obviously impossible once we began working on new federal policy to recognize American androids as unique individuals. Though Russia has as of yet failed to create androids capable of passing the Turing test without the use of Thirium 310, they are still working on alternatives."

He looked around, encouraging the others to join in. "What do you think? What could have motivated a Russian retreat from the Arctic?"

She’d had a similar discussion with her roommates when the news of the Russian retreat broke. They’d been holed up in the living room, waiting on plans for evacuation, and watching the news on Danielle’s screen.

Isolda raised her hand. “Usually, the only reason for stopping an operation you’ve invested so many resources in is because you either decide the risk isn’t worth the reward—so, like, deviancy making the usefulness of Thirium 310 questionable because androids are no longer 100% compliant—or because you get what you want.” She shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know. The timing makes me think
it was deviancy, but maybe they dug up a vein in Siberia. Or maybe it’s just that the freezing point of Thirium is too high, and it’s not useful for too much of the year in the Motherland.”

Two of the students gave a nervous laugh. The young man next to her had gone still. Isolda glanced at him, wondering if his face was familiar because they’d both been students here before the evacuation, or just because she’d been sitting next to him for two weeks. Or, because it was cast, copied, and applied to a thousand more models.

There was simply no polite way to ask if someone was an android, though. Only time would tell.

Her professor nodded, with a hint of a smile on his face. "All good theories, and there's really no way for us to tell yet. Alright class, that's it for today. Make sure to be in labs on Friday, we're going to go over thiriovascular structure and repair."

Her classmates were shuffling their books into bags, talking quietly among themselves as they pushed their seats back into place. It was almost difficult to talk loudly on campus these days, as if the silence of the place were some sort of warning.

"Hey, Isolda." The other girl in the class moved up next to her, backpack slung over one shoulder. "How are you doing? I heard about... you know..."

Isolda winced, but twisted the grimace into a weird, strained smile. An ‘I’m coping’ smile. She couldn’t quite remember the girl’s name. It was weird. Tinsel, or something like that.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s fine. I mean, it sucks, but...” she lifted her hand and dropped it to her side again. “I’ve been worse? I don’t know really how I’m supposed to be handling it, so I’m just doing my thing, you know?”

By the vague fear glossing her eyes, Isolda guessed that the girl did not, in fact, know. “Yeah,” she crooned, sympathetic.

God. ‘Doing my thing’. What did that even mean? Isolda didn’t even know what it meant. She saw the girl’s eyes flick toward the door, and wished she’d been a tad less honest. Most people just wanted to be reassured that they had done their part to try and comfort you—in her experience, it was a rare person that actually wanted to spend the emotional currency to really help. Which was not a generous thought to have of someone who’d tried to be nice.

The silence had lasted a beat too long. The girl—Tinsley, that was it—had glanced at the door again.

"Do you want to get lunch or something?" Tinsley asked with the awkwardness of one who had gotten in to far, and couldn't quite figure out how to get out again.

"I think I'm just going to head home." Isolda replied.. It was clear the girl was still just trying to be nice, but neither of them really wanted to sit through an uncomfortably hour together, full of silence and miserable small talk.

Finally escaping the confines of classroom and science building, the cold bite of late October cut through the sweater she wore. The sky was gray, clouds covering the weak sun. Here and there small huddles of students scurried from building to building, banded together for companionship.

Without much thought, she pulled out her phone and brought up her recent calls. She’d tried her mom twice the day before, connected briefly. Their new home in rural Ontario had spotty cell service. There was Danielle, but she’d just started at a private university in New York’. Avery? He was usually up for a chat.
She poked his picture, smiling a little as the picture of him dilated on the screen. Skin like strawberry milk, blue eyes tight lined in teal—Avery had the cherubic features worthy of Ganymede, and the disposition of a sex-driven sunbeam. He’d just changed his hair to a powdery lavender color when he’d taken the picture. It rang eight times before his voice answered.

_This is A-very good boy. Leave a message, including the date you called, what you want, and what you’re wearing._

She smirked. “It’s me, gorgeous. It’s Tuesday. I want your babies, as always, and I’m wearing your sweatshirt. Call me.”

As the phone disconnected the wind gusted between the campus buildings, working curls of hair free from her ponytail. It whipped them around her cheeks, carrying the scent of rain, maybe even early snow. The temporary whisper of normality that Avery’s recorded voice had brought faded, and her phone was a silent weight in her hand reminding her that everyone she knew was elsewhere. Even the plain-clothes officer she had become accustomed to quietly tailing her movements was nowhere to be seen.

Weird, to be on such a deserted campus. It had never looked like this before, not even at night. Now it was just her and the leaves.

She headed down a short flight of stairs to a connecting sidewalk, meandering toward the student union where she could grab food first, and then a bus back to her block. As a student, she rode for free—another courtesy of the Rebuild Detroit initiative.

As she walked, something like the feeling of being watched crawled up her spine, the tingling fingers of anxiety tightening the hairs on the back of her neck. Where _was_ her usual escort? Though he-or she-usually kept their distance, it was never too hard to pick out the officer who had been assigned to her for the day. Their absence was unexpectedly uncomfortable and Isolda found herself moving faster, steps hurried.

A shadow behind a low wall, the soft fall of a footstep on the concrete behind her, was it paranoia or was she being followed? She couldn't tell.

She dug into her sweatshirt pocket for her keys, mind spinning off into a million directions. She was overreacting. It was probably another student. Or an android. Hell, it could be a paparazzo trying to get a long lens snap of the Charity murder witness—Isolda Chavez, twenty-three, seen flitting skittishly between buildings in an android-riddled campus. Then they’d make up a quote.

Ducking into a shortcut between two tall brick buildings, Isolda came skidding to a halt as a man appeared at the opposite end of the gap. Dressed too lightly for the weather, he cocked his head slightly in curiosity as he saw her and the LED at his temple flickered yellow briefly in confusion. It only took Isolda a moment to recognize his face, one of the gardeners who had returned to work. He stepped towards her, a pleasant expression on his face.

"Are you alright, miss?"

Isolda froze, heart hammering. A confusion of panic and embarrassment tangled her words. “I—no—I mean, fine. I’m fine. There’s just...”

No one else around? No cop escort for witness-girl? How did she end that sentence without sounding like a paranoid freak who needed the police to follow her around and protect her from falling leaves and shadows.
A zing shot up her spine. She wasn’t sure if she heard him, or sensed him, or if some subconscious, instinctive sense detected the presence behind her.

She twisted around, just as the man behind her lunged.

Her breath caught. She staggered to the side, hands coming up to redirect his grab. She wasn’t fast enough on her feet, and he crowded her toward the brick wall. He reached to cover her mouth, but she grabbed his thumb and twisted, jamming the heel of her other hand against his nose.

Pain loosened his grip, and she kneed him hard in the groin and tore herself clumsily sideways into a staggering run.

Behind her her attacker cursed angrily, hands slapping off the android who reached out to try and help.

"Go after her!" she heard him yelling, voice strangled from pain as he supported himself against the wall. As Isolda tore around the corner, she could hear the android’s heavy footfalls.

Panic held her in its grip, pumping her legs, speeding her heart. But it tripped up her thoughts. Where was that cop? Had they hurt her escort? What if he was dead? People—she had to find people! They wouldn’t try anything where there were other people. The student union was ahead, looking distant and deserted. She couldn’t keep up this pace for that long....but the android could.

To her left, one of the building’s doors had been propped open.

It was a bad idea. It was a horrible idea. It was everything she made fun of slasher-film girls for doing, but now that there was an android on her heels and the thrum of adrenaline through her veins, she was willing to take the horrible option, because it was her only one.

She ducked through the door, searching for an unlocked classroom. They would have steel doors, bullet-proof glass, solid locks. They would be up to the shooting regulations. She hoped. It was an old school—hopefully this building had gotten the full renovation, and not just the doors and windows.

The door behind her slammed open, the android lunging after her awkwardly. His hand grabbed for one dangling strap of her backpack, peeling it off her shoulders and spinning her painfully against one wall of the hallway. The android’s fingers tangled into the strap as he tried to toss the bag to the side, missing another grab at her as Isolda pushed away from the wall and ducked under his reaching hands. It bought her a few quick seconds as the android turned in pursuit.

Luck was on her side, and the classroom door closest to her swung open as she pushed inside and slammed it closed behind her.

She threw the lock and backed away from it, startling herself when her legs collided with a desk. She couldn’t breathe, her hair had come loose and she could feel sweaty curls sticking to her face. Breathing ragged, eyes bleary with panic and a sharp lack of oxygen, she stumbled her way to the electronics closet behind the teacher’s podium. She needed close walls, darkness. She needed more solid barriers between herself and those chasing her.

She climbed over stacks of cables and a crate of what looked like ancient DVD players from the early 2000s. There was a hulking tan device with some sort of lens which she couldn’t even identify, but she pulled the door shut and jammed the handle with a broom, just as she’d done in the coffee shop freezer. It probably wouldn’t add much by means of protection, but it made her feel better.

Fingers shaking, she dragged out her cell phone. The screen had a crack in it, but it still responded to
her touch. She thought of calling her mother, but her mother had barely been able to hold a
connection. Or a conversation, really. Their lives were so different now. Different country. Different
house. Different daughter.

Her eyes burned, and she convinced herself it was just panic. Just the little goblin in her mind hauling
out everything that was wrong in her life and showing it to her, cackling in glee. Stupid stress-goblin.
It had a hoard of treasured pain and fear.

She pulled up her address book, fingers already moving to her recent calls. Avery. Mom. Danielle.
Connor Anderson.

Connor! Of course. Stupid, she hadn’t thought of him already. She had hit the dial button before she
thought to ask whether he could receive actual phone calls to his brain.

Connor, when he answered, sounded surprised. "Miss Chavez?" There was a disconcerting lack of
other sound in the background, a perfectly transmitted copy of his voice unfiltered by any secondary
device on his end. "I didn't expect-

“Someone tried to grab me,” she said, and barreled on, tripping by over sharp inhales. “A man. And
an android. Both of them. I don’t know where the cop is, the one who’s supposed to follow me.
They might be hurt or...”

"Stay on the phone." Connor's tone had shifted, sharp and precise. "I've put in a call to units in your
area, and we're on our way to you." He paused, his next words quieter.

"I'm coming, just stay with me. Everything will be alright."
Though logically aware the passage of time did not fluctuate situationally, Connor finally understood why humans spoke in terms of moments speeding by or lasting forever. Even without the perceptual slowdown of his mind palace program, the drive to the WSU campus felt extended irrationally beyond the minutes that he knew had passed.

They had taken Hank's car, the reckless detective far more willing to break any and all driving laws than the majority of ubiquitous police auto vehicles allowed for. Siren blazing, they had cut a path through Detroit with efficiency, thankful that there was still only marginal traffic. Though Connor’s connection with Isolda’s phone was still open, the girl was silent but for the stuttering drag of panicked breathing. Connor kept up a steady stream of updates, reassuring her that they were drawing closer by the moment.

As they approached, the wailing of other sirens reached his senses before the building where he had traced her phone drew into sight. The first responders who had been in the area had arrived minutes earlier, cordoning off the area. Connor had been able to hear them faintly through Isolda’s phone first, had reassured her that she was safe. She had adamantly insisted that she was only leaving her closet when he was there.

As Hank's ancient behemoth of a car skidded to a halt Connor was already moving, door open before the car had even come to a full halt. Thin crowds of curious onlookers strained to try and understand what was going on, held back by the raised hands of uniformed officers.

"I'm here now, you're safe. We're coming in to get you." Connor took a hurried step towards the building entrance but paused, something pinging his senses. Something out of place. The figure of a man hovered in the shadowed gap between the building and it's taller neighbor. Hands stuffed in the deep pockets of his unremarkable hoodie, he was slouched against the brick, watching the goings on with intensity. His posture was too tense, his focus too targeted. In an instant Connor had run his programs, classifying him. Height, weight, the spread of his shoulders... David Rivers.

"Hank, find Miss Chavez!" He called to his partner, breaking off in his new target's direction as he sent a last quick message to Isolda.

"I'm sending my partner in to get you. You can trust him too, I promise."

Moving across the university lawn’s damp grass, already browning for winter, Connor noted the moment that Rivers became aware of his attention and ducked back between the buildings to flee. Connor broke into a run, closing the distance as fast as he could. His optics adjusted quickly as the shadows of the narrow walkway closed around him, tall brick walls rising up to either sides. Nearly a hundred feet separated him from his target but the distance was closing-- there was strain in the pace of the man he chased, some lingering pain slowing his steps.

Rivers swerved as he ran, grabbing at anything he could find to try and put something between them. He latched onto an abandoned wheelbarrow left near the opposed end of the buildings, dragging it roughly between them and bolting south towards the wide lanes of Warren Ave.
Even as he partitioned part of his mind to easily clearing the obstacle Connor redirected his senses, slowing his mind to process the motion around him. Allowing Rivers to reach the eight lane avenue would greatly increase his chances of escape, but there was still enough distance the man needed to cross that Connor had no doubt he could make up the gap between them. A few scattered students making their way towards the engineering library were clustered, staring and pointing as they watched with the frightened excitement so common in bystanders. Connor saw the flash of a phone in one of their hands, lifted to record the chase.

His target was breaking for the open now, his lead cut down to mere meters, and Connor noted a sideways trajectory to his steps that was unexpected. He was not heading straight for the roadway, but moved at an angle instead. Fracturing off yet another portion of his processing, Connor ran a scan along his projected path, cataloging possibilities.

There— one of the cars parked along the street's edge was still running. Nondescript, with nothing to make it stand out among the others beyond the fact that it was switched to manual drive, a figure barely visible still in the driver's seat though the meter had been paid for an hour, and only twenty-three minutes remained. Connor had just enough time to catch the registration on it's plates before it swerved out of the parking line and sped away. There was a moment of startled hesitation in Rivers' step, the pause of rushing panic, and Connor threw himself forward, tackling the larger man.

They hit the ground hard, concrete slamming the breath from the man's lungs with an audible huff of air. Connor expected more resistance, but beyond a token struggle and a string of curses, he didn't find it difficult to restrain his mark. Despite the man's greater size, his strength was no match for Connor's and it was clear from the feeling of shifting muscles under his hands that much of Rivers' bulk was show, not true athleticism. Wrangling the man's hands behind him, Connor planted a knee firmly in his back and felt him finally go still.

By the time he had finally dragged his prisoner back to where uniformed officers were waiting to take him into custody, Connor was already moving back over the events in his mind. A second accomplice… third, actually, counting the android that apparently had been found inside the building when first responders had arrived. He was already settled into the back of a security vehicle, and as Connor handed his captive over he caught the android's eyes. They were narrowed with anger and with hate, and Connor met his gaze curiously.

That intensity… he had seen it again and again. In Daniel, in the android convicted of Carlos Ortiz's murder, in many he had met in Jericho. He saw it, and he understood it, but there were times he wondered if he were capable of feeling it. There was too much cool logic to his thoughts, reason that seemed to overcome emotion more often than not. Others had described deviancy to him as a switch flicking on, a rushing flood of emotion. They had expressed how overwhelming it had seemed to navigate their new senses, to identify and comprehend them. To mitigate them. And yet despite his own deviancy, he had never felt that sensation of a switch being thrown. Even Markus, with his depth of passion and intense kindness, seemed to be experiencing an intensity that Connor sometimes doubted he had.

Shaking off the thoughts that dug into his mind, Connor looked away, hurrying towards the university building entrance. Better to ignore such thoughts than to dwell on the insecurity that they caused. Insecurity that he hid from Hank, fearing disappointment. Insecurity that he hid, with varying degrees of success, from himself.

He saw them as soon as he entered the hallway, Isolda's narrow frame seeming even smaller against Hank's bulk. He was leading her from a classroom, his worn leather jacket around her shaking shoulders, one arm over her protectively. Her phone was still clutched tightly in her hand.
“Got your man?” Hank greeted him with a raised eyebrow, and Connor nodded tersely.

“They’re taking him back to the station now.” His attention was on Isolda, the way her shoulder was lifted in discomfort, her heart still beating wildly with adrenaline.

“Miss Chavez?” He spoke quietly as he met them, not even sure what he was asking.

Isolda looked up at him, her expression difficult to read. She made an abortive gesture with her uninjured arm, hesitated, then extended it. Her hand came to rest on his sleeve. Her pulse was slowing, her breathing still shallow and rapid. She didn’t seem to know what she wanted to say or express.

She swallowed, pursed her lips as if to speak, and then shook her head helplessly.

Brows drawing together in concern, Connor’s hand slowly came up to cover hers. Her fingers were cold, and without thinking Connor adjusted the warmth of his skin, heating slightly to warm her. He glanced at Hank for support, but the older man just shrugged tiredly.

Stepping closer, Connor met Isolda’s dark eyes, wishing he were better adapted to comfort, better able to know what humans needed in times like these.

"Both of your attackers have been caught." He reassured her, hoping that the knowledge would give her some comfort.

She seemed to come back to herself a bit, surfacing from the shock she’d allowed herself to slip beneath. A few blinks, and a jerky nod as she processed what he’d said.

“Good,” she said. “Good. I—thank you. I didn’t know...I mean.” Her terracotta skin flushed a bit, and she drew her hand from beneath his and stepped back. “I didn’t know if I should call you, or—maybe I should have called 911 instead, but... God, I didn’t even think about that.” She pressed a hand to her forehead.

Hank patted her shoulder. “Adrenaline has made bigger fools of people. You had the right instinct—a dispatcher would have sent a regular patrol car and who knows what the hell they would have done. It’s better you contacted us. And Connor’s brain doesn’t have a busy signal.”

Connor offered her a crooked smile, nodding in agreement. "It’s a bit more complicated than that, but Hank's right. I'll always get your call."

Falling in on her other side, the two of them flanked her protectively as they escorted her outside. The wind had picked up, the first drops of light rain falling through the chill air.

"We’ll drive you to the hospital, get that shoulder looked at.” Hank said, digging in his pockets for his keys.

Isolda stifled a groan. “I’m probably okay,” she said. “I don’t really...I don’t think I need to go to the hospital.”

She’d spent too much time visiting hospitals in her life. They weren’t always bad places, but the scent of disinfectant, constant mechanical noises, and sight of busy nurses and staff weaving about in scrubs always slammed her with nostalgia. Life was so different now than it had been when Rosalita was alive.

And really, her shoulder didn’t seem that bad. The scrape had mostly stopped bleeding, only a slow ache remained.
Connor frowned disapprovingly and opened his mouth to insist, but Hank cut him off. "How about we take you home then, and you call us if you change your mind."

Connor wanted to protest, but the warning glance that Hank shot him kept him silent. There was something he was missing, some human cue that Hank was aware of and would--hopefully--explain later.

"We checked on your escort," Connor said instead, reassuring her. "She's fine, she was called away by a false emergency report. We've taken precautions to make sure that it can't happen again."

Isolda took in a breath to steady the shakiness of her insides. Twice, she'd been attacked. Twice, she’d gotten away and barricaded herself until the police arrived. How many more times did it have to happen before they caught whoever was at he head of the assaults? How much longer would she need to spend wishing she could go be with her parents or friends, hidden safely away?

How long would it be until she felt safe?

Isolda clenched her phone and nodded stiffly. “Just promise me you’ll catch these guys,” she said. Otherwise, she might go insane.

Connor stopped, moving to stand before her. He held her gaze, and when he spoke it was with resolute finality. "We will catch them." He said, a cold kind of anger in his voice. Not one directed towards her, but rather towards those who had turned her life upside down and thought they could get away with it. Anger that mirrored her own, coiled deep beneath the exhaustion and the fear.

"I promise you."

Chapter End Notes

Question for our (few but fabulous!) fans... After having read a few chapters, are there any fic tags that you think would be accurate and interesting (or witty!) that we should use to pull more people in?

Would love suggestions!
Chapter 8

The fluorescent lights of interrogation room two shone down starkly across David Rivers’ bearded face. He had not spoken since his arrest, and as Connor entered the room his eyes followed Connor’s movements suspiciously.

The metal feet of the chair slid across the concrete floor loudly, breaking the silence as Connor dropped a slim file onto the heavy table and slid into place across from him. Resting his hands loosely on the surface, Connor looked him over, searching for subtle points of reference. It was sometimes harder to judge a human suspect, moods making them unpredictable. The androids that Connor had interrogated in the past were easier to define, the underlying structure of their common programming making it easy to measure results, calculate stressors, and manipulate outcomes despite their manifesting emotions.

David Rivers sat deeply in his chair, shoulders back defiantly. His breathing was even, relaxed, his gaze steady. The faintest jump of a pulse at his temple was the only visible sign of his increased heart rate. Something easily missed by a human interrogator. Scanning him more closely, Connor noted an invisible blue stain of thirium across the cuffs of sleeves that peeked from beneath his jacket, as well as traces of old adhesive at his temple.

There was something strange in the way that Rivers was watching him, something calculating and almost curious. Connor met his regard, keeping his own features impassive. No matter his personal feelings towards the man, he had a function to perform. Though the exhausted terror behind Isolda’s dull eyes still came up in his memory, he could run his interrogation protocol without interference.

The manilla of the folder rustled as Connor opened it, sliding out the thin transparifilm photos from the cafe where Isolda had worked. Shot from above, blood spread out from the body where it lay, stark and battered against the grey tiles of the cafe floor. Connor didn’t need to watch his own movements, instead keeping his eyes on his subject as he spread the photos across the table. The last photo was grainy black and white, the circular glow of LEDs standing out starkly on the faces of those clustered around the victim.

Rivers’ reaction was almost imperceptible, a tightening of the fine muscles around his eyes and lips, a fractional increase of pulse rate. Otherwise he remained a blank slate as he looked back up at Connor silently, waiting.

“Why the LEDs?” Connor asked, allowing a fraction of curiosity into his tone. “Something like that makes a statement, but what kind were you hoping to make?”

“Don’t you know?” Rivers’ smooth reply surprised him. He had expected silence, or at least denial. Connor cocked his head slightly, running through variables in his choice of response. Finally he settled on conversational, rather than confrontational.

“Apparently not, why don’t you tell me? What did I miss?”

As Rivers’ eyes narrowed, Connor reevaluated quickly. Something in his choice of words had triggered an interesting response in his target--irritation bordering on anger. Rivers was closing off, resuming his stubborn silence. Choosing another tactic, Connor prepared to try again when a quick text from Hank pinged his network.

*Douchebag incoming!*
It gave him just enough warning to remain composed as the door to the room opened again, a
smirking Gavin Reed entering and nudging the door closed with a toe.

“David Rivers!” Gavin said, announcing the name as he might an old friend’s. “Identity theft,
larceny, resisting arrest, stalking, assault, and murder. Someone’s been a busy man.”

Detective Reed crossed his arms and swaggered over to the table, propping his hip against it as he
gazed down at the cuffed perpetrator. “And to top all that off, you’re doing it for the rights of a
bunch of walking iPhones.”

Connor saw the man's brows tighten, the tension in his arms as he resisted the urge to ball his fists.
Gavin's flippant words clearly struck a nerve in him, but Rivers' remained silent, wearing his anger
like a cloak.

Connor leaned back, relaxing as though willing to let Gavin take the reins for the moment. Though
working with the uncooperative detective would require a change in strategy, it had the potential to
get unexpected results. Connor could use Gavin as a common enemy if the need arose, directing
Rivers' animosity away from himself. Perhaps he could cultivate a sense of shared purpose.

Connor crossed his arms across his chest, permitting an uncharacteristic flicker of irritation cross his
usually neutral features. He hoped that Rivers would take note of it. If he was indeed a proponent of
Android rights, then the man was probably expecting to see visible deviancy from the android seated
across from him. Or, if nothing else, would attribute expected emotions to him whether Connor
actually felt them or not.

“What is it, then?” Gavin continued. “Android girlfriend? You think she loves you—that she’s
capable of love? I tell you what, I’m pretty sure D.I. Alexa over here was making eyes at a vending
machine the other day.” He gave an exaggerated one-handed shrug. “Funny, isn’t it. You think
they’re halfway between human and machine, but they’re a lot closer to an x-box than a person. Not
sure I’d want to fuck anything that would just as soon make eyes at a parking meter.”

"Why do you work with them?" Rivers finally said, his tone sharp as he addressed Connor. "Let
them treat you this way, humiliate you. You're better, stronger, faster—" He finally looked at Gavin,
eyes raking over him. "clearly more intelligent."

Connor shrugged, looking down at the photos spread out between them. "If the alternative is
murder? That's not an option."

Gavin’s laugh was caustic. “‘Them,’” He said, emphasizing it with air quotes. “Like you’re not one
of us. No, no, I get it. I’ve marched and held signs. I’ve screamed into a microphone. I know about
fighting for something—but here’s the thing, jackass. You can fight for android rights all you want,
but you ain’t one of them. You don’t get to decide you identify as android. It’s not a gender identity.
It’s your fuckin’ species. And I don’t know one cause that was ever improved by murdering an
innocent person.”

Connor could see Rivers' tension rising, the pulse in his temple jumping obviously enough for even
Gavin to see it. And yet the man remained focused, refusing to even acknowledge Gavin's words.
Words that Connor had to agree with, though continuing to use the divide between them served a
purpose.

"What exactly do you think I should be doing?" Connor asked, curiously.

"Fighting back!" River's voice rose slowly. "Ever since these charities started trickling back into the
city androids are being treated just the same as before. You created somewhere safe, somewhere
better than it had ever been before. Our city was safer, our city was cleaner... You led the crusade from Cyberlife tower, you of all people should understand!"

Gavin snorted derisively. "A safer, cleaner city that only humans you approve of get to live in. The way it looks from this side of the badge, Buddy? The only ones making this city unsafe to live in is you.” He paced around behind Rivers and leaned in close to his ear. “I don’t get it—isn’t your android Moses the one who wanted humans to come back and ‘live together in harmony’ or whatever? Or do you think Markus has gone a little too ‘human’? Think you know what’s better for androids than the androids do? Pretty fucking human of you. Pretty. Fucking. Human.”

Connor arched an eyebrow, wondering if Gavin even realized how... reasonable he was sounding. If the man could get past his pride and his anger, there might be more to him than met the eye.

"I do understand what you think you’re trying to accomplish." Connor pushed patiently, countering Gavin's attack as Rivers tried to shrug him away. "But there are other ways, better ways, to make your point. We have you tied to at least three crimes, and If there are androids you’re working with, they’re going to suffer for those actions as well. I don’t think that's what you want for them."

Rivers went silent, jaw tense. When he spoke again there was dark anger in his eyes, but his voice was tightly controlled, resolute. "Clearly you already know what there is to know about me. I worked for Cyberlife, I perpetrated this system that builds slaves, dehumanizes them, and labels them as product. You can't convince me humanity doesn't owe reparation for that debt."

"Reparation, maybe. Justice, certainly. But vengeance?" He shook his head. "That's not the path we chose."

Rivers’ pulse was slowing, whatever anger he held now tightly controlled. It was interesting to Connor, watching him turn it inward, wind it into zealous belief. He doubted Rivers would give them much more. Silent, Connor allowed Gavin to take slow control over the interrogation, clinically observing their target’s monosyllabic non-answers.

Eventually Connor stood, tucking the photos back into their folder.

“So,” Gavin said, hooking one of the chairs with his ankle. Now that Connor had stood to leave, he seemed happy enough to sit down. “Let’s chat about how you admitted guilt to murder.”

Leaving Gavin to deal with Rivers in his own way, Connor pulled the room door closed behind him. Hank was waiting in the hallway outside, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned back against the whitewashed brick.

“Hank greeted him, pushing away from the wall. “You don’t usually let them off that easily. “

“Let Gavin have him, it's the larger group we should be focusing on. Did the plates come back on the car that fled campus?”

Hank sighed, falling into step beside him with a rueful grimace. “yes, but you’re not gonna like it. It was reported stolen two nights ago. I ran a check on the owner, he's clear. A chari… Ah, a participant in Rebuild Detroit."

As they reached their desks Connor tossed the file down with a frustrated grimace. “I know we can
find a connection! I've been over all the data in our connected cases, looking for shared faces in the crowd, repeating patterns, and so far I'm missing something! What? What am I missing?"

He glanced up as Hank's hand fell onto his shoulder, the steadying weight of it reassuring. “Fuck if I know. But you'll find it. That brain of yours won't stop until you do.”

“That's not good enough.” Connor complained, though Hank's confidence was calming. “I need more data…” As he paused, Hank gave him a suspicious sideways look.

“I know that look. What are you plotting?”

“I don't have a look. “ Connor smiled at him slowly. “But I do need you to do something for me.”

Hank groaned, running one hand through his shaggy hair. “Is this something going to end up in my disciplinary folder?”

“No, if you do it well. If Detective Reed comes out of that room, I need you to distract him.”

“Fuck.” Hank glared at him, hunching his shoulders. “You and your goddamned distractions. You're going to get me fired one of these days.”

“Just find an alternative to breaking his nose, and you’ll be fine.” Connor smirked.

Trusting that despite his complaints Hank wouldn't let him down, Connor angled across the bullpen towards Gavin's desk. The connection that had finally led to his identification of David Rivers had come from a lead buried in Gavin's open case files. Where there was one thread, there was the possibility of more, and Connor doubted that the angry detective would be willing to share if asked politely. Despite all the programmed information that Connor had in regards to human behavior, Gavin Reed seemed uniquely resistant to the influence of good manners.

The computer at Gavin's desk was dark, the soft yellow flash of standby flickering in the lower corner of the interactive screen. Sliding into the chair as though he belonged there, Connor resisted checking around him for watchers. His peripheral sensors detected no one out of place, and it was always more suspicious to act out of place.

Resting a hand softly on the corner of the screen, Connor pulled back the protective nanite layer of his skin, interfacing directly with the machine. It took a few seconds to bypass Gavin's security, but then he was in, quickly sorting through case information. Notes, photos, crime scene data, all meticulously organized. Surprisingly, the Detectives notes were thorough and perceptive, clearly intense amounts of time had been spent pouring over these cases.

With the information tucked neatly away in his mind, Connor stood quickly as he heard the interrogation room door slam open, echoing down the far hallway. Returning the computer to it's standby state Connor slipped away and went to collect Hank before the older man got himself into too much trouble.
Chapter 9

In the week since Isolda’s harrowing experience on campus, Connor had fallen into the habit of checking up on her daily. Though layers of advanced programming filled his mind with rules and protocols that should have kept his distance from her professional, Connor struggled with a sense of responsibility that he couldn’t rationalize. Hank had only laughed at him as he paced a frustrated line across their living room floor.

“It's only human, Connor. “ He had said with amusement, feet kicked up on the settee, Sumo stretched out under his legs. “That's what you fought for, right? The ability to be stupid and irrational?”

Even so, Connor knew there had to be some logic to his actions, surely it was the nature of having his first living human witness. He had seen-and caused-enough human death in the short time he had been active, and it was in his programming to prevent human casualty as best he could. That would, of course, factor into his concern for Isolda’s welfare.

If that still didn’t explain the texts he sent her daily-- checking that she was eating properly, staying hydrated, getting out of the house-- well, that was a problem for another day.

Hurrying up the stairs to her apartment, Connor nodded in greeting at the officer currently on watch outside. Her rotating guard had informed him that the young woman hadn’t stepped outside in the last few days, despite the reinforced protection she had been afforded. And so here Connor found himself, unsatisfied with the noncommittal responses his recent texts had received.

As he lifted his hand to knock he froze when the door opened. Hand still in the air, he blinked at Isolda, frowning. “How did you know I was here?” He scanned quickly for a door camera that he may have missed before.

If she had been capable of laughter at that moment, the look of consternation on Connor’s face might have drawn it out. As it was, she just looked wearily up at the neat figure, taking note of details, feeling blank. She made a lackluster attempt at humor, halfway hoping she could convince him she was fine enough that he would go away.

“Hello to you too, gorgeous. Couldn’t stay away?”

Connor’s blank and confused expression only intensified. With a sigh, Isolda gave up. “I heard you on the stairs.”

Lowering his hand, Connor looked her over, his frown deepening. The clothes she wore were rumpled and looked as though they had not been changed in several days. A common enough occurrence with Hank, but not with most other humans he had observed. The circles under her eyes were dark, and her posture was closed in on itself. He had intended for this to be a brief visit, but he wasn't at all sure he wanted to leave her on her own in this state.

Stepping past her into the living room, Connor ran quickly through his options. He was supposed to meet Hank soon, but taking Isolda to a crime scene with him was obviously impossible and she clearly needed companionship.

He scanned the room quickly, looking for more information about her behavior. The small apartment had been completely unpacked, the boxes broken down and stacked neatly. Every surface shone, the scent of cleaning agents still lingering in the particles of the air. The few books on a
rickety shelf were alphabetized, and triangular vacuum patterns were traced into the uneven and age-
stained carpet. Apparently Isolda was Hank's polar opposite… A stress cleaner.

As the door closed behind him he turned to look at her, brow furrowed in concern.

“Have you been outside today? “ He asked, knowing that humans, much like plants, needed
sunlight to regulate their chemicals. All the blinds had been drawn tightly closed, and the apartment
was dark and depressing.

“Do I look like I want to go outside, Connor?” She answered back testily, brushing past him. She
scooped up an empty wine bottle off the crate that served as coffee table, tossing it roughly into a
recycling bin. Her movements seemed automatic, a distraction rather than a choice.

“If you'd like, I can accompany you. “ Connor offered helpfully. “Perhaps you should seek
professional assistance? I know that-”

“I'm not going to a fucking shrink!” Isolda whirled to face him, color rising in her cheeks. The
surprise in his dark eyes almost de-railed her sudden surge of frustrated anger. He wasn't the target
she wanted, he had literally been the one refuge she had in this miserable city. The one thing that had
offered her any sense of safety in the last few weeks. But he was there, and it was easy, and the
crashing waves were already rolling through her.

“God, Connor, what do you want? I'm not a project, My mental health is not your problem! Maybe
if you're so worried about me you should find the bastards who murdered Jeff right in front of me.”

The words were tumbling out in a rush, and Isolda clamped a hand over her mouth to still them, tears
pickling at her eyes. The LED at Connor's temple was flickering yellow, a suddenly distracting
reminder of exactly what he was. Her stomach twisted, the black emptiness of her situation rising up
around her. She saw him finding his words and she turned away. She didn't want his calm and
practical response, his apology, his attempt to find a human connection.

“Just go.” She managed, voice breaking as she fled for the bathroom, slamming the door closed
behind her.

Connor blinked after her, running back through the interaction in his mind. As a crisis negotiator,
programmed to read human triggers, he recognized the signs of stress and instability in her emotions.
The indicators of unpredictability, of desperation, depression. He needed to adapt, to bring her back
into focus. Moving to the door that she had closed behind her, he tucked his hands behind his back
and called out to her softly.

“Miss Chavez? I'm sorry, I don't feel you should be alone at the moment. May I stay?” He paused,
not sure how he should try to proceed, what kind of answer he was expecting in return.

For a long moment Isolda couldn't manage a response. She gulped at the knot in her throat and sank
onto the side of the tub before forcing words to form. She didn't want to answer him, to acknowledge
him. “I can’t deal with...anything right now, Connor. Just go away.”

She pressed her fingers to her eyes and tried to control her breathing. Humiliation was setting in
over top the rushing ache and fear, making everything worse. She hated the feeling of crying in front
of others, knowing they were judging her for her weakness. But the tears were always there lately,
right below the thin veneer of numbness that the xanax provided her. Yesterday she had knocked a
glass from the counter while cleaning to distract herself, and she had spent the next hour sitting on
the kitchen floor in tears.
Even through all she wanted was to be left alone, her mouth seemed to be working independently of her brain, words tumbling free in response to his continued silent presence on the other side of the door, like a dam had broken inside her.

“I wish I could turn it off, turn everything off” she said. “I’m scared to go to school, and it was all I had here. My parents ran to Toronto with their android replacement for my sister, my friends evacuated, I don’t even have a job anymore, I’m totally alone. Every thread of support was slowly snipped away over the last few months and now… boss murdered in front of me, people trying to—” she hiccupped, breath catching, a new wave of numbed fear shuddering through her. The feeling of hands grabbing at her ghosted across her skin. “It fucking sucks, okay?” She closed her eyes against a whirl of dizziness.

Connor rested a hand against the door, tempted to see if he could push it open. There was clear distress in her voice, in her words, and respecting her wishes and leaving her alone at the moment didn’t seem like the best course of action. Being alone was part of the problem.

Leaning back against the wall beside the door, Connor slowly slid down until he was sitting, knees tucked up in front of him. She needed someone to rely on, someone to bond with. He didn’t know if he would be able to fill that role for her, if she could let an android in, but he knew he had to try.

Step one in any negotiation, find common ground. Connect with the subject, make them feel heard.

"You should get a dog." He said, with a faint smile in his voice. The oddity of the subject might startle her into focusing on his words, where platitudes would just fall short. Then tie it with something relevant, something personal. Trust the process. "We have a dog… They don’t demand a lot from you, but they also never leave."

She looked up, confused by the randomness of the subject change.

“I like dogs,” she said, then felt a fresh wave of disproportionate anguish as she added, “But I can’t afford to f-feed one.” She shuddered, letting the first of the gathering sobs tremble through her chest. She swallowed, scrubbed angrily at her tears, and kicked the faucet on. She needed to drown out the roiling emotions, the pain of the last few weeks.

"You can borrow ours." Connor continued hastily. "He loves meeting new people, and we’re not around as much as we should be.” He raised his voice to carry over the sound of the running water, concern deepening. Uncurling his legs Connor stood again, heightening his audio input so that he could still hear her as he began to prowl restlessly around her small room.

"Miss Chavez?" He called, determined to keep her talking. "Why don’t you come out, I’ll…. make tea? I don’t think I should leave you alone right now."

She’d already dropped her sweatpants and shirt to the floor. “I’m already in the water,” she lied, unhooking her bra and pushing off her underwear. For a moment, she considered the door, the android on the other side of it. Part of her thought it would be stupid to lock the door—it wasn’t like an android was going to care one way or the other if she was naked. Then again, he wanted to be human, didn’t he?

She reached over and turned the little lock on the handle, then climbed into the still-filling tub and sat down, arms around her knees.

“What’s his name, the dog.” she asked, not really interested, but trying to make any sort of conversation that would keep him from suggesting she come out. Right now she wanted the numbing heat of a bath. If she couldn’t find someone to hold her together, she could at least try to make herself a safe atmosphere to cry in.
"Sumo." Connor replied, relieved that at least she was talking. As long as he could keep her doing that, it was a start. "He's almost as big as I am." Running his fingers aimlessly across the edge of a shelf along one wall, Connor wished he had a better way of keeping track of her. Visual cues were so vital when trying to deal with human situations. He could only tell so much from voice alone, without seeing the movement of her eyes, the flickering pulse in her throat. He fiddled with the equalizer settings of his audio feed, trying to hear what she was doing.

"Did you have pets growing up?"

“No,” Isolda mumbled, not even sure if he could hear her. Maybe it was better if he couldn’t. She ran her hand beneath the faucet, the nearly scalding heat of the water flushing her skin darker. “My sister was too sick. My parents could barely handle getting her to all her appointments.”

Thoughts of her mother crowded into her mind, head nodding low over the mountain of paperwork spread out on the table. Bills and insurance and research, and a hundred other things Isolda hadn’t understood. It had been a full-time job, keeping up with Rosalita’s paperwork. On top of that was the daily care, the outings... they could have used a nursing android, but on top of everything else, that wasn’t affordable.

And then one day, four years ago, her baby sister had died. She’d done it quietly, and without an audience. Isolda had just woken in the morning to the familiar hiss and release of the automatic breather and found the girl unexpectedly awake. Isolda had said something—some comment about being awake first—and stumbled over to her bureau to get clothes for school. When Rosa hadn’t responded, she’d glanced up in the mirror, and found the girl’s eyes still fixed in the same position. Open. Looking not at Isolda, but at the slanted ceiling above her bed. She was preternaturally still.

She’d known. It had taken no time to make the connection, and to understand that she was now in a room with a dead body. Still, it had taken her several long seconds to draw breath, to cross the room and stand over her little sister. The sound of the oxygen breather was absurd, and discordant. Still, she couldn’t help but think that the one thing she had to do before telling her parents were to close those glassy brown eyes.

Face crumpling, Isolda let herself slump sideways, sloshing hot water over the side of the tub. She released her hold on her shins and dunked her head under, holding her breath, forcing herself to stay until it hurt. Until she could exert enough control to stay under despite the burn, and keep her head together. She lifted from the bath with a gasp.

"Miss Chavez?" Connor listened for her voice, the sound of the water splashing in the tub. He could still hear movement, the stuttering gasp for air. He frowned, gaze slowly scanning over the rest of her room. The habits of an investigator, impossible to turn off. A bracelet draped over the finial of a lamp caught his eye, bringing back a flicker of memory from weeks before. One of the unasked-for fragments of connection that had begun to pop up since he had become deviant. She was curled on the back of the ambulance steps, trembling in the reflective blanket, eyes wide and glassy. He had wanted to reach out and cover one of her shaking hands, the old charms of her bracelet peeking from under her sleeve, but the fear in her eyes when she looked at him had held him back.

Connor’s gaze moved on, to the empty bottle of wine in the bin. It was one of several. Stepping closer, Connor frowned. He knew her medical records by now, knew that her doctors had prescribed her strong anti-anxiety medication since the incident at the cafe. Glancing around, Connor found the small orange bottle tucked next to the microwave on the kitchen counter. Moving to pick it up, he quickly tallied the remaining pills. Based on the current count Isolda had been taking them as often as allowed without stopping. Frowning, Connor glanced up at the bathroom door.

"Can you still hear me?" He called out, hoping for a reply.
Isolda caught her breath, slid beneath the comforting heat of the water again, and went still, letting the too-hot water burn her eyelids. It hurt. It all hurt. But if she could just keep her breath held...if she could master her lungs and keep underwater, where everything was quiet and weightless, she could be okay. She could shut it out. Her head spun, demanding air, and she grunted in frustration. It hurt to hold her breath. But it was the kind of hurt that satisfied her. That sharpened her, and blasted aside all the extraneous thoughts and feelings. If she could hold on, she’d be okay. She’d be in control. She could let it all fade away. Isolda surfaced once more, and ducked back under, curling into a comfortable tuck, hoping that the android outside would take the hint and go away.

"Miss Chavez!" Connor insisted, louder now. Crossing to the door quickly, he tested the doorknob, confirming what he had suspected. It was locked. He narrowed his eyes at the door and knocked firmly, giving her another chance to answer him. Another flicker of unasked for memory. Another closed door, water drowning out the silence inside. Bottles of whiskey instead of wine. Hank had done this to him before, and it had not gone the way that Hank wanted it to. Two days later Connor had officially moved in, uninvited.

There was no reply, only a muted bubbling from the bath beyond. With a sigh, Connor stepped back, making a little space in the hallway. She was never going to forgive him.

With a sharp kick, he planted his heel right above the lock, the door slamming open and bouncing back towards him as it rebounded on its hinges. Catching it with a hand, Connor strode into the humid space, taking everything in at once. The water was still flowing, threatening to spill over the bounds of the tub. Dark hair floated beneath the surface, spanning out in a cloud of ink around her head. "I’m sorry about the door." Connor announced calmly.

Crouching beside the tub, Connor reached into the hot water, measuring its temperature as higher than comfortable for human skin. He scooped her out of the water, spluttering, and stood with her cradled against him.

"That's enough of that." He said firmly.

Isolda had not expected the sudden grip of arms around her, or the shock of being lifted bodily from the tub. She gasped, choking on the streams of hot water sluicing off her face and hair. “What the h-ell are you doing!” She demanded. “Jesus Christ—I was—fuck, put me down!” She shoved at his chest, but it was feeble, her arms and legs weak from the heat and numbing exhaustion of too much emotion all at once.

Connor ignored her protests. She was warm and wet in his arms, the sleeves of his jacket soaked from reaching in after her. The fabric of his shirt stuck to his chest as she wiggled tiredly. Seeing a large and fluffy towel hanging from the back of the door, Connor set her briefly on her feet, stabilizing her against his side as she swayed. Pulling the thick terrycloth down, he wound it around her, tucking it about her shoulders and trapping her arms. Before she could make a move to escape he scooped her up again, cradling her against his damp chest and carrying her from the bathroom.

"I think you've had enough." He said politely, but firmly, as he carried her back out into the living room and set her down on the couch. "Stay." He directed, pointing a finger at her nose, eyes narrowed. Hoping that she would be too startled to act immediately, he headed back to her bedroom, appropriated a large and sufficiently fluffy blanket and returned to bundle it around her.

“I’m not a dog,” she managed, but her thoughts were fuzzy and in the wake of desperation for control came exhaustion and the inevitable result of defeat. He returned just as she’d managed to free an arm from the towel. The couch was getting wet beneath her, but now-- naked and dripping bath water, ensconced in a dark gray cloud of blanket-- she battled between resentment and relief. Beneath the blanket, she shimmied out of the towel, soft fabric pressing in close around her damp
skin, and shifted the terry cloth to her head. She’d intended to rub her hair dry with it, but the feel of it against her face set off something else.

The dam wiped out, a flimsy barricade against a tidal surge of restrained horror and helplessness and bone-deep loneliness. Somehow, though she was sure her family and her friends loved her, she’d been abandoned here—the one puzzle piece that was too complicated and torn to belong to any finished picture.

She pressed the towel hard into her face and felt her features crumple. A silent scream of agony worked its way up her throat, forcing her mouth wide, though all that left her was a wheezing sort of breath. She wanted her mother. She wanted the invisible, unknown companion she’d always imagined—someone safe and solid. Someone who loved her, and didn’t exist.

She wasn’t sure when she curled into the cloud of gray blanket, or when she forgot Connor was even there.
Chapter 10

The soft sounds of movement from her kitchen woke Isolda slowly. Late afternoon sunlight was slanting through curtains that had been pulled open, shining directly into her face. Disoriented, she blinked slowly, eyes gummy and dry. Where was the sun coming from? The mattress on her floor faced away from the windows…

Slow memory began to return, hastened by the odd sensation of quilted fabric against her skin. The clinking of a spoon against ceramic brought her slowly upright on the couch, and with a dull shock she realized she was still naked.

Panic and embarrassment sweeping through her in a wave, Isolda snatched at the blanket still around her, hauling it tightly around her body as Connor stepped out of her kitchen, a steaming mug in his hands. The scent of Earl Grey tea reached her nose, bergamot and lemon.

Her brain felt dull. Her eyes felt tender, the heaviiness of her breakdown and subsequent hysterics still hung around her mind like a hangover. Embarrassment and humiliation made her want to bury her head back into the blankets and avoid Connor's strangely gentle gaze completely.

Instead, she reached a careful arm out of the nest of blankets and took the proffered tea automatically, refusing to meet his eyes. A deep weariness seemed to be wearing a line down the center of her chest.

"You should get dressed." Connor said quietly, watching Isolda take a careful sip of the hot liquid. She had been sleeping for several hours now, and though there had been little for him to do beyond monitoring the beat of her heart and the pace of her breathing, he had been unwilling to leave. Hank had been less than pleased when Connor had called to inform him that he would be checking out their new case alone, but he also hadn't tried to change Connor's mind.

Clasping his hands patiently behind his back, Connor gave Isolda a few moments to orient herself and drink her tea, noting the anxious movement of her gaze under her thick lashes. She was avoiding looking at him directly, almost disappearing into the fluff of blanket that surrounded her.

As she slowly lowered the partially depleted mug of tea into her lap Connor finally spoke again, watching her shoulders twitch at the sound of his voice.

"I'd like you to come somewhere with me."

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"I'd like you to come somewhere with me."

There was a moment of silence before she finally looked up at him, eyes dull though there was a faint flush in her dark and freckled cheeks. “First you give me your number,” she said, her voice flat in affect. “Now you ask me out.” It was a shadow of the teasing she would have given him had she felt at all like playing it up.

If she was honest, she didn’t want to go anywhere. The last few days it had been hard enough to scrape together the energy to choose a tv show to watch, curl up in her blanket, and eat. She hadn’t even wanted to cook, Instead eating through the bags of chocolate and peanut butter chips intended for baking. These bouts of uselessness had been occasionally interrupted by sprees of furious cleaning before sinking back into the fog of Xanax and wine. It was the only thing that seemed to keep her from hysterics.

The embarrassing display this afternoon had been the culmination of it all, and now Connor was expecting… What, companionship?
She drew in a breath, summoning the wherewithal to ask, “Why?”

Connor cocked his head slightly, frowning slightly as he attempted to correlate the flatness of her tone with the attempted humor of her words. Giving up, he redirected his attention to the question.

"Because I can't stay much longer, and I don't think you should be alone right now." He answered earnestly. "It's not good for you."

She sighed, fingers absently tracing the rim of the mug.

“I’m not going to drown myself or jump off a balcony, Connor. I’m just tired.”

"Maybe you would sleep better elsewhere." He suggested, not willing to take no for an answer. "I'll go find you a change of clothes."

She stared after him, confused and a little annoyed, as he walked off toward her room. He disappeared through the doorway, and sounds of drawers opening and things moving in the closet echoed out into the main room.

Still trapped in the blanket that was her only shelter, Isolda didn’t leave the couch until he returned, clothing in hand. She peered at his choices.

He had chosen things that seemed comfortable, not designed for show or for going out. Soft fuzzy pajama pants with a drawstring, a tank top from an airport gift shop with the Detroit skyline printed on the front. With it were a large and fuzzy zippered sweatshirt and a pair of thick socks.

"Here you go." He offered them to her, all neatly folded in his hands. Why he had bothered to take them out and fold them for a ten second walk was an android mystery. "I'll get a few more things, in case you need them." He continued.

She took the clothes, wondering if he’d intended for them to be pajamas, or if he simply didn’t know.

“Wh... are we going to be there for long?” She asked. “Where are we going?”

"To my house." Connor called back, vanishing into her room again. There was more rummaging. "I'd rather leave you with Sumo than on your own." His voice drifted out of the room, and after a few minutes, he reemerged with a small duffel bag that had apparently been filled with who-knew-what scavenged things he had deemed necessary to his rescue project.

"It will be a good change of pace for you. But you still don't have to see people or do anything, just change couches." He paused. "Please." He added as an afterthought.

She lifted an eyebrow, combing through this new information. Connor had a house? If Sumo was there, it must be Lieutenant Anderson’s house. That made more sense. As far as she knew, androids didn’t purchase real estate. Well, they could now, the right to possession was one of the first things that the new android laws had covered. But it still didn't seem like a common occurrence.

She regarded the clothes in her lap, and the duffel on Connor’s shoulder. Her brows drew in.

Why was the only person worried about her the android?

That made her eyes sting, and she took several breaths before shaking out the tank top. She paused, then glanced at Connor. He wasn’t human, but he was still...male looking. “Could you turn around?” she asked, feeling a bit silly for needing him to. Would she have asked a female-form android to turn around? Probably not.
Obeying, Connor neatly turned his back to her, watching the far wall as he heard the shifting sounds of fabric behind him.

"You'll like Sumo." He said matter-of-factly. "He's a good boy."

As he waited, he thought over the things he had packed for her, hoping it was enough. A change of comfortable clothes, underwear included, in case she wanted to shower. A change of nicer clothes, in case she decided she felt better, and wanted a walk. The book that had been by her bed, with a dog-eared page, in case she was still reading it and needed something to do. Extra socks, mittens, a scarf, and what appeared to be a well-used comb.

Pulling on the things that he had brought her quickly, Isolda did have to admit she felt a bit better after a dressing. Though exhaustion still settled like lead in her limbs, her mind was slowly clearing, the cathartic response to tears and sleep. She scooped her hair back and tied it with one of the ever-present bands around her wrist and zipped up the hoodie. "Kay," she said. “I guess I’m ready to go home with you. Normally, I’d at least expect dinner first, but what the hell. I’m vulnerable.”

The joke didn’t make her feel much better.

Connor cocked his head, frowning as she slid into her sneakers and tied them. He pinged for an automated taxi to meet them, and herded her towards the door.

"It’s 3:30 in the afternoon. Why would you eat dinner so early?"

“I’m making a joke,” she said. “You’ve given me your number, you’ve shown up at my house, and now you’re taking me back to your house. It’s like you’re trying to date me. And,” she added. “You’ve already seen me naked. Asshole.”

"That's... the pattern of human romantic engagements?" His LED whirled briefly yellow, and he shifted almost uncomfortably. He hadn’t intended to give off such an impression, and it was clear she knew that. So what was the purpose of her commentary? He filed it away in his mind for consideration.

Feeling suddenly awkward, his memory flickered to earlier in the afternoon, Isolda's damp body in his arms. He hadn’t given it a second thought, but now it was hard not to replay the moment, to analyze why it was so important to her in a new context. He pushed the memory away. She might not like knowing he had looked again. Humans were odd about this.

Pulling the door closed behind them, he followed her down the stairs to where the autocar he had called was waiting for them. "Are you dating someone else?" Connor asked curiously.

“No,” she said, climbing in and scooting over so Connor could seat himself next to her. “I haven’t dated for a few years.”

Just another reason she was alone. Probably always would be, because really, who would be willing to stick around and see if she’d even be able to stand...

She let her head fall back against the headrest. “I don’t really date at all anymore. What about you? Got a hot android lover?”

"No." Connor answered, looking over at her, worried. Her mood was flat, the old ups and downs of her voice missing. He didn't like it. "I don’t know many people. Humans or androids."

Outside the car windows dirty streets sped by, where piles of old snow would soon line the curbs. Colder nights were already freezing puddles overnight, the sun melting them back into slush during
the short days.

She didn’t really respond, and Connor let her sit in silence, glad he had been able to get her out of the apartment. As they pulled up to Hank’s street and slowed to a stop in front of the small and ordinary house, Connor noticed the slightest shifting straighter of Isolda’s posture. Despite herself, she was curious. Hiding a smile, Connor led the way up the sidewalk to the door.

Isolda followed Connor up the damp front walk, gazing at the unkempt tangle of dormant grass roots beneath the patchy concrete. The cuffs of her pajamas had dragged in a puddle by the taxi and now clung wet to her ankle.

As they entered the house, she was immediately struck by the smells of man and old takeaway, wet dog, and the sad hints of air freshener losing a war of attrition to the fugue of bachelor life.

A low whuff sounded from beyond Connor, followed by a jingle of metal and the heavy tread of a large Saint Bernard. The dog stuffed his head into Connor’s leg, sniffed him heartily, and barked at Isolda. She put out a hand for him to sniff, restraining the desire to fling her arms around this fluffy bear of a dog. “You must be Sumo. I already love you.”

Sumo huffed into her hand, then walked headfirst into her knees, nearly bowling her over.

Kicking the door closed, Connor switched on the lights and put her bag down on the old and faded couch. It had clearly seen a lot of life, written in coffee and whisky stains and corners tattered by dog claws. "It's not much..." Connor suddenly wondered if it had been such a good idea to bring her here. When he first had the idea, the house had been a place of comfort in his mind, a logical place to take someone who felt adrift. A home, full of dog and loud but ineffectual complaining. Looking around again, he wondered how she saw it. Sparse, neat but old, smelling of the stale whiskey he had poured down the drain that morning.

Isolda gave up and crouched, burying her hands in the dog’s thick ruff. She looked around. Definitely bachelor pad material—but oddly enough there was something warm, comforting about the space. She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting from a man who seemed quintessentially ‘bachelor’ and an android who needed nothing, but this was not quite it. Old records were stacked on a side bar, and though there were some pale squares where other paintings or pictures might once have hung, the warm glow of a lamp brought old colors out of a striped pillow that was faded but matched the armchair and a neatly folded throw draped over the arm of the couch.

It wasn’t fancy, but it had something to it—some neatness imposed on the chaos that gave it a personality. She wondered how much of that neatness was Connor’s influence. Sinking onto the couch she found it comfortable, and patted the cushion next to her for Sumo.

“So you have to be somewhere?” she asked.

Connor nodded, glad to see Sumo snuggling down as much of himself as he could fit into her lap. "There’s a leash on the kitchen wall, if he pressures you for a walk. Just don’t let him eat the pansies around the mailbox three doors down. Ms. Shelton doesn’t like that. And don’t let him convince you he’s starving. He’s on a diet, but he’s been fed twice already today." Connor shifted, running out of things to say.

Isolda was already moving on, her attention focusing on the heavy creature attempting to be a much smaller animal. Moving towards the door Connor glanced back at them as he left, wishing he didn't have to leave her alone. But Sumo would take care of her.

Throughout the following hours, half of Connor’s mind was on the task at hand, and half was
distracted by a constant stream of new concerns that occurred to him. The dishes hadn't been washed, what if she wanted something? Quick on the tail of the thought was the sudden realization that there was nothing to eat in the house, and precious little to drink. He shot off a quick order to a local grocery store for delivery. What would she want? Panicking, he looked up from the body, fingers still wet with blood.

"What do people eat?" He asked Hank, who stared at him in blank confusion.

"The fuck, Connor. You can look at that shit and be hungry?! You don't even eat! You just… lick things!"

Connor decided maybe asking Hank was a bad idea, and ordered a few fruits, a ham, and a box of cupcakes. As a last thought, he added on a tin of the tea he had made for her in her apartment. Delivery time, less than one hour. Satisfied, he went back to his testing.

It was the first time Isolda had laughed in several days. She had been on the couch, feet tucked under her, stretched out over Sumo’s furry back, when the doorbell had rung. Sumo leapt up first, trotting over to the door with a low bark.

Isolda debated whether to get up or not. Connor hadn’t mentioned a delivery, and it wasn’t her house. What if it was a solicitor? She didn’t want to deal with that right now. And what if it was the people who’d tried to hurt the witness that got away?

Stupid. It was the middle of the day. She was literally at a cop’s house.

She answered the door, took the delivery, and wondered, with a fresh swoop of anxiety, if they were going to have some sort of party. She pulled out her phone and found the android’s most recent missive—Have you had water today?—and took a picture of the strange delivery.

//?? Are you guys going to a party????//

She did not want to be at a party.

//I don't know what you like to eat.// Came the reply. It was almost possible to imagine the slightly sheepish tone the android would take. // Should I send something else?//

Connor was paused again, this time frowning down at the shattered dishes across the floor, where a struggle had tipped them from the table.

The snort came unbidden, then, accompanied by a swift rush of affection for the android who was trying to care for her.

Smiling slightly, she texted back.

//I can work with this. The combination was unexpected.// She felt her nostrils flare in fresh mirth. // I guess you bought me dinner now. See? You’re courting me.//

"Those plates insult your mother?" Hank raised an eyebrow, taking in Connor's furrowed brow.

"What?" Even more confused, he felt frustration rising, and he glared at Hank. "Stop saying things you know I won't understand!" He snapped, irritated.

//I'm not courting you!? // He protested in text, feeling ganged up on.

// :) //
She left him to decode the smiley face, the act of teasing him making her feel absurdly better. She put the ham in the refrigerator, wondering if Hank even had a carving knife equal to the task of cutting it. She looked at the fruit, cupcakes, and box of tea, then glanced at Sumo.

“Want a cupcake? Or is it not on your diet.”

Sumo huffed happily in return.
Chapter 11

They were still arguing when the car pulled up the driveway, the music booming loudly enough that Connor wasn't even sure why Hank bothered talking. As the car cut off and the bass vanished, Connor slipped out of the passenger seat into the cold night air before Hank could even finish.

"...but what I don't get is why she's here!"

Ignoring the grumbling from behind him, Connor hurried to the door and unlocked it, leaving it open for Hank as he went inside. "Miss Chavez?"

Sumo greeted him with a happy 'woof!' from the couch.

The wagging tail and wiggling of Sumo’s heavy body atop her hip dragged Isolda from sleep. Sometimes it felt as though sleeping was all she had the energy for these days, but with the warm presence of giant dog under her hands, she couldn't remember a recent time when she had slept more deeply. She pushed up on her elbow, her mouth forcing wide into a yawn.

"H-h-hiii," she managed to say. “How was catching bad guys?”

"Disgusting, as always." Hank was the one who answered her, pushing Connor out of the way as he entered. "This idiot always sticks everything in his mouth. Good to see you again, kid."

Connor sighed. "It was fine." He assured her, quickly running a scan over her vitals. She seemed calmer, and though she was rubbing tiredly at her eyes there was a brightness in them that had been missing that morning. Coming over to sit on the opposite end of the couch, he dug his fingers into the thick fur behind Sumo’s ear as the dog dropped its head into his lap with a whuff of warm breath.

"And how was your day, Sumo?" He asked politely.

"He's still never gonna answer back!" Hank yelled from the kitchen. "No matter how many times you ask him!"

"He had a cupcake and an apple and an extended cuddle with a pretty girl, so I’d say he had a good day," Isolda said, pulling the hair tie from her sleep-rumpled ponytail. Leaning over the back of the couch she lifted her voice to call into the kitchen.

"Mr Anderson, I realize this is not the question you want to hear after getting back from a crime scene, but do you have a carving knife? If not, you might want to invest."

There was a moment of silence before Hank leaned his head out of the kitchen, bushy brows drawn together in dismay. “The fuck is ‘Mr. Anderson’?” He complained loudly. “Hank's good enough, Kid."

Isolda looked back to Connor, pushing her hair back into a knot and securing it. “How about you?” She asked around a fresh yawn. “What made y-you stick evidence in your mouth?”

"Do I even want to know why there is a ham on my counter?" Hank yelled, as they both ignored him and the rattling of drawers sounded loudly.

"I didn't." Connor said defensively. "I was simply analyzing the traces at the scene to determine if the victim's blood was the only one present." He moved from behind the ears to under the chin, Sumo's tongue lolling out happily over the cuff of his jacket.
She made a face. “You licked the victim’s blood?”

“See!” Hank called. “It’s not just me! That shit’s disgusting.”

Isolda lifted her eyebrows and shrugged. “Everyone has their thing, Mr. An-, Hank. Kink shaming is so 20th century.”

"Analyzed." Connor corrected them both, again. "I can test DNA evidence on location, which provides real-time details faster than a processing lab." About to launch into more of an explanation he stopped, looking at the amusement on her face.

"But... that's not interesting." He redirected, looking down at Sumo. "And it's not really a 'thing'."

Hank snorted, still interjecting himself into the conversation. "Give up, little lady. This one is hopeless sometimes. I only just got done training him not to lick the dog."

Connor glared at the kitchen. "That's different, Hank! I was only mirroring his form of communication!"

Isolda couldn't help herself, a smile finding its way through. “You totally should have just let him keep licking the dog,” she said. “I bet Sumo liked it.”

She scratched the dog, feeling whispers of her natural curiosity beginning to return. Despite everything, her classes at the University, her awkward moments with Paulina, she had never really had the chance to ask some of the odd questions that had crossed her mind. “So, do you taste things, then? Like, is it a sense that you have in the same way that you process hearing and touch? Do you have an opinion on how things taste?”

"Taste is... a difficult concept." Connor admitted. "It might not be the same for most androids though. I was designed to process and analyze through receptors in my mouth, so I perceive input as a compound of chemicals and information. If it were food, I could make a comparison of the blend of identified ingredients versus a standard and generally assume if it would be considered good or bad." He looked apologetic. "But I don't really appreciate it. Somehow sound and touch are different. They create feelings that go beyond analysis. They've been wired to send." He paused, reconsidering the word he had almost used. Emotions. But emotions hadn't been wired in, they were an anomaly. “-sensations to my brain.” He finished awkwardly.

Isolda leaned her head back on the couch, considering. “Food is one of my favorite things in the world. I’d be really sad if I couldn’t appreciate it.” She stared at the tiny shadows on the popcorn ceiling. “It’s comforting, because it reminds most people of being safe and at home—nurturing, or something, you know? Hmm. Okay. So what makes you feel like...you know. Safe. At home. Like you can relax. Do you relax?”

“No!” Shouted Hank around a mouthful of recently discovered cupcake. “He doesn’t!”

"I can relax." Connor corrected, frowning in the general direction of the kitchen. He thought for a long moment, considering her question seriously. It was deeper than just the obvious. Safety, a sense of home.

"Being here.” He finally answered. "With Sumo and Lieutenant Anderson. We used to disagree about everything-"

"Still do!” Came the muffled interjection.

"But during the uprising, there was a moment when he could have killed me. There was another
Connor model involved, threatening his life. But he... knew me. That is what makes me feel at home. Someone knows me, who I am, deeper than my design and my serial number.

A muffled and embarrassed grumbling echoed from the kitchen.

“To be fair,” she said. “I doubt if Lieutenant Anderson knows your serial number. But, no. I get it. You relax when you’re with the people who really know you. Friends, family—things like that. Me too.”

Fighting back the wave of sadness that accompanied her words she scratched Sumo’s side, prompting him to stretch out across both their laps, massive flanks heaving a contented sigh.

She missed her family, though she wondered more and more these days if being around them would help her to relax. She wasn’t quite certain she felt known by them anymore. There was a gulf there. She’d stepped back a long time ago, willing to take a shadowed place beside the little sister who needed so much of their time and energy and affection. Part of her had believed that Rosalita had deserved to soak up as much as she could, short as her life was determined to be. Isolda—healthy and filled with as much love for her sister as anything—had guiltily believed that, once grief had dulled with time, her parents would take some of the energy and time and love they’d poured on their younger daughter and spend it instead on the elder.

But Isolda had been seventeen by then, and didn’t need the kind of care they knew how to give. She’d grown up without their help, and they no longer knew who she was, what bands she liked, what her dreams were. They’d just been thankful she was there to cook, to clean, to do well in school without them having to ask. She hadn’t needed them anymore, not in any way they were used to being needed.

So they got a new daughter. Instead of learning how to adapt to the needs of the oldest, they’d gone out to Cyberlife and purchased a replacement for the daughter they’d lost—something that could be programmed to need them in the ways to which they were accustomed.

“My friends are like that;” she said, pushing away the maudlin thoughts. “My roommates.”

"They evacuated?" Connor tilted his head, watching her. It was a strange experience, learning to adapt to someone other than Hank. It had taken time to figure out the surly detective, what would set him off and what would make him more agreeable. The behaviors that he had learned were different than those he needed to help Isolda feel comfortable, and re-calibrating was taking some time. He didn't want to make her mood worse, but it seemed as though she needed someone to talk to. He sent a quick ping to Hank's phone, telling him to keep a low profile, to give Connor time to put their fragile guest at ease.

The beeping of a text followed by muted grumbling could be heard. The cap of a beer bottle popped audibly, and one of the chairs around the table scraped across the floor.

"Are your roommates planning on returning?"

She shrugged. “Maybe. My guess is yes. They’re both from Michigan, so it’s easier for them to come back. Both of them are in school here too, so I guess it depends on if they transition back for the next semester.”

"What are you studying?" Connor asked curiously, absently scrubbing his hands through Sumo's fur. What would it be like, he wondered, to have access to such a limited amount of information. To have to spend so much time, years, to pick up such a small fraction. Tiring? Frustrating? How did one ever decide what wasn't worth knowing?
“Mechanical engineering, actually.” Isolda shrugged, oddly self-conscious. “At first I couldn't have told you why, it just seemed interesting. I wanted to understand how things worked. Even as technology is growing, evolving, I was interested in the older machines we were losing. A lot of things these days are designed by androids, math and science especially is transitioning out of the human skillset. Well, unless it's related to Android development.” She stopped, glancing at him. Was this uncomfortable to hear? It suddenly seemed like a dangerous topic, like everything else having to do with androids these days.

But the expression on Connor's face was simply curious, his head cocked slightly to one side, the lock of dark hair almost falling into his eyes making him seem incredibly… Human.

She picked at a knot in Sumo’s fur, pushing on. “And anyway, people forgetting how to design the basics as new technology surfaces long predated the advent of androids, and I think it’s something that we shouldn’t forget. It’s like...you learn to do the math problem on paper first. Later on, it’s fine if you do it on a calculator, but you shouldn’t forget how to do it longhand, in case you can’t use a calculator in the future. Regardless of whether there are calculators or computers or a fucking abacus, you should know how to do basic math on paper.”

Connor's brows furrowed in thought. He tried to imagine doing calculations any way but through instantaneous processing. it would be possible, obviously, but something about the analogy struck him as funny and he couldn't help but smile.

"I'm not sure telling a calculator it should know how to not be a calculator helps your case.” He said, amused. "I suppose I understand, though. There is satisfaction in self-sufficiency."

“Well, Mr. Calculator, *you* don’t have to know how to do longhand math. You also don’t need to know how to make the family tamale filling or write in cursive Or, like, I don’t know. Line dance.”

Doing a quick search for 'line dancing', Connor smirked. "Do you know how to line dance?" He asked. "And I can write in cursive very well."

“Of course you can. But I bet you’ve never been told it will affect your future. They tell us that shit in third grade and terrify us until we get to high school and all the teachers ask us to just write in print.” She smirked a little. “As for the line dances...I can do a few of the really popular ones. They play them at school dances and weddings and stuff, so most people can at least do a little. I bet even Lieutenant Anderson knows one or two.”

Connor arched an eyebrow. "You should ask him to dance.” He agreed.

Poking his nose out of the kitchen, Hank glared at them. "I don't fucking dance. But if I did, no way you two could keep up with me."

Expecting Connor to either reply with one of his deceptively calm yet sassy remarks or ignore Hank's jibe, Isolda instead caught the faintest flicker of a smile on his face. His dark eyes warmed, something like fondness in his gaze before it was gone again and he returned his attention to her.

“But you're studying robotics now?” He asked curiously.

Still oddly distracted by the moment of human caring that had had passed between her hosts, Isolda felt her cheeks flush and she regathered her thought.

“Er, yes. At some point I realized it could be useful to know how to do some basic things when it came to androids. ”

A skinned knee, blue pricking up over dusky skin as Paulina wailed for the caretakers she thought of
as parents. Her little arms had latched onto Isolda’s neck as she sobbed with all the apparent pain of any 8 year old girl, and none of them had known what to do. Going to the Cyber life store would have broken the illusion that they were trying so hard to build, so a bright pink band-aid had covered the dark blue stain, and the next month Isolda had finally picked a concentration.

“Hey kids!” Hank’s voice distracted her from the memory. “I cut up this damn pig. You hungry, Isolda?” He glanced at Connor. “And you’re never grocery shopping again without supervision.”

“It’s not his fault,” Isolda said, letting sadness retreat again beneath humor. She pushed at Sumo, who was now drooling and licking his muzzle—probably at the scent of ham emanating off his master. She stood from the couch, reaching down for Connor’s hands to pull him up. “Do you like biscuits, Hank? Like, southern ones? I can make some of those to go with the ham. It shouldn’t take long.”

A slow smile spread over Hank’s face and he looked from her to Connor with a twinkle in his eyes. “Oh, Connor, we’re keeping her.”
Chapter 12

Locating Isolda on the coffee and tea isle, Connor came up next to her and proudly dumped his armful of goods into their cart. A bag of flour, a bag of potatoes, and a loaf of sliced bread. After staying with the two of them for three days and seeing the state of Hank’s kitchen, their temporary house guest had determined that a proper shopping trip was in order, and Hank had agreed that she counted as sufficient supervision to curb Connor's odd shopping habits.

"I did some research." Connor stated, pleased with himself. "Of the top 100 most commonly purchased grocery items, Hank currently stocks 2.6% of them.” He looked down into the basket, mentally running through his list. "Shall I go and get some nuts?"

Isolda restrained a laugh. "I guess we should stock a few basics,” she said. "Is that self-rising? Go grab some baking powder, baking soda, and vanilla extract. If we’ve got flour, we might as well have those. Oh, and does Hank like dark roast or medium? He doesn’t strike me as a breakfast blend kind of guy.”

Connor thought about that for a moment, considering. "The only coffee I’ve ever seen him drink is either from the corner store or the break room at the precinct. I don't think he's terribly picky.”

Leaving her with that tidbit of information he resumed his mission, to hunt down the baking supplies she had requested. He ignored stares from the few other shoppers in the store, very few androids remained in service positions in Detroit, most had no need for groceries, and his model was unfamiliar. As was his choice to still wear all the identifying regalia of an android. It made him stand out. In the places he frequented - mainly the precinct and his own neighborhood - people had become accustomed. Not so much in Detroit at large.

Collecting what Isolda had requested he returned to her, still not convinced they shouldn't get the nuts as well. They were near the top of the list he had referenced, after all. Just in case, he added a packet of cashews to the cart and hoped she might not notice.

Taking over the pushing of the cart, he trailed after her as she continued her progress through the store, meandering towards the registers at the front. The automated lines were the only ones open, ancient service machines that had not yet been rolled over into full-service android check-outs prior to the uprising. Even as businesses had reopened, it had been hard to find staff for them, human or otherwise.

Quirking an eyebrow, Isolda contemplated the cashews as she scanned them. Maybe Hank liked cashews. Or maybe this was just another item on Connor’s top ten list. She’d tried to grab things that would be easy for Hank to make—canned soups, pasta, jars of sauce, and vegetables with a decent shelf life. She scanned the fresh produce and meat—things she intended to use quickly over the next few days.

Finishing up, she let Connor arrange the items into bags and replace them in the cart. They’d have to get a taxi home—even with his help there was no way they could carry all of this back.

As they left the store, she heard shouts of laughter, the whirring zoom of cars and surveillance droids, and smelled the chill, post-rain scent that filled the air. Any day now the rain would turn to snow, drifting through the sparsely populated streets and muting the rising city noise as the population slowly trickled back.

Leading the way towards the taxi zone, forearms laden with as many bags as Isolda had been able to
fit from his wrists to elbows, Connor hesitated as a sudden call surprised him. It echoed in his mind, the whisper reaching out across the open wireless connection that was often used for Android-to-Android communication. His steps halted as he scanned the streets around them for the source of the signal.

Help me... The android's voice was faint, hazy with static. Processing the area around them quickly, Connor finally saw him, half-hidden as he leaned against the brick wall in one of the alleys between buildings. Dressed in human clothes, his LED removed, the android would seem irrelevant to any passing humans who didn't look close enough to recognize his face. Just another homeless bum on the ghostly streets of Detroit.

You're one of us, please... help...

Connor didn't even notice that he had come to a complete stop until Isolda walked into him.

She squeaked, bounced off Connor’s back, and would have dropped her phone but for a graceless snatch that nearly sent it flying. She shot her attention back to Connor, whose face had gone completely still, his pupils focused on some distant spot.

“Con-“ she didn’t even get his name out before he started moving. “Connor?” She called. “Where are you going? Hey,” she caught his arm, grocery bags swinging, “what’s up?”

Connor glanced at her, LED swirling a slow yellow with concern. “Someone needs my help.” He said, pointing towards the android who had slid into a sitting position, chin dropped against his chest.

Glancing between them, Connor made the decision to detour quickly by the taxi stand, dumping all of the bags into the back seat of the autonomous car and setting it’s destination for Hank’s address. "You should head back. I'll catch up shortly."

Without waiting to see whether or not she listened, Connor hurried across the pavement, ducking into the shadows of the alley. Water from the rain-soaked ground soaked into the knee of his jeans as he knelt, looking the android over for injury.

"What's wrong?" He asked quietly. "What happened to you?"

“It’s...corrupting m-“ a scramble of electronic pitches overtook its final words. The AP700 looked up at him, fear twisting its handsome face. “They doN’t knO-o-o-ow wHEre it came-came-came-came from.”

Its speech processors were breaking down, and it reached for Connor’s lapel jerkily. “Help mE-e!”

Fingers tangled into his collar, pulling him closer as Connor reached out to steady it, hands bracing under its elbows as it sagged forward against his chest.

"I've got you.” Connor reassured it quietly, trying to collect data from the brush of contact against his neck. His quick diagnostic revealed no injuries that he could read, and he scanned back across its recent memories, but found nothing that seemed out of place. As he worked, he suddenly felt its memory corrupting around him and he jerked out of the connection, startled. Something... almost like pain sparked in the back of his head, a spiral of violent code trying to reach into his system.

Clenching his teeth, Connor quickly erected a security net around the intruder to keep it under control until he could deal with the problem.

"I-I know you...." The android gasped, eyes closing as it shuddered. "I saw... Y-y-y-you...."

“Oh my god,” Isolda gasped, jogging up behind them. She’d sent the taxi ahead to Hank’s house
without her, unwilling to just leave them behind. “What’s wrong with him?”

It took her a few moments to process the corrupted digital voice and understand that the man laying heavily against Connor's chest was an Android, one that was not functioning well. Connor also looked strained as he looped the android’s arm over his shoulders and stood slowly. Isolda rushed to its other side.

“Let me help,” she said, snatching its hand and ducking under its arm. “There’s a Cyberlife store a block over,” she said. “Aren’t their techs open for emergencies?”

Connor nodded, still struggling to process what was occurring. Redirecting a portion of his system processes to keeping whatever had invaded his system blocked off, he glanced over at her. “Some sort of data corruption, a virus.” He replied, the android now muttering nonsense between them. Its memory was fragmenting, time tangling up in its mind, trying to latch onto its surroundings in desperation.

"We’re all gonna d-d-d-die...." it moaned, voice stuttering and skipping. "Confirmed, maintenance protocol activated.... wait... wait... you’re one of them! H-h-h-hunter... deviant hunter...." Its words were becoming broken, fluctuating in volume. "We'RE wiTh you MArkus!" Its head fell forward and it went silent, diverting its remaining power to trying to move its feet, to help them.

Not wanting to worry Isolda, Connor decided not to mention to Isolda that whatever code had been written to attack the android could jump upon contact. The AP models, while newer, were still obsolete in comparison to his own design. Whatever stock security software was running on their platform was a joke compared to his own security protocols. When they had dealt with the problem at hand he could take a closer look at the programming string, isolate and unravel it. For now at least, it was contained.

"A clean reboot and security scrub should fix the problem. Then it's just a matter of how much data he lost first."

“Will he...” she swallowed, not sure how to ask for the answer she wanted to know. Several steps later, she decided to cast aside her reflex for tact—Connor would probably appreciate the directness anyway—and just asked. “Will it cause him not to be deviant anymore? Will he...lose his freedom?”

She wasn’t sure why she couldn’t bring herself to call the android “it”. Not when he slumped in her arms. He was even shaking. Growing hot, as if every system were running overtime. “He even feels feverish,” she said.

Isolda’s question was unexpected, and Connor considered it carefully, turning it over in his mind. If he was honest, he didn't know. What was deviancy exactly? They still weren’t clear on that. Was it a glitch in the code, a common error of a universal platform? Was it learned, or inherent? Connor himself had often wondered if it was another version of the emergency exit Kamski had referenced, an escape for the desperate, intended to be found all along. Perhaps it was evolution.

He finally gave up, glancing over at her. “Whatever it is, they’ll take care of it. Markus has made sure good volunteers are in place to deal with our needs at all the local store locations, even a few human technicians have offered to help since the new Initiative."

Though his answer seemed to do little to dispel the lines of worry on Isolda's face, it was the best he had to offer.

They carried the android the last two blocks to the CyberLife store, though by the end, it was mostly Connor bearing his weight. Isolda stabilized his other side, speaking encouragements to the poor
thing as they neared the glass shopfront, which had been defaced and scrubbed clean so many times, the windows were no longer perfectly clear.

As they were turning the android over to the skeleton staff at Cyber life, Connor swayed slightly and caught himself with a hand on Isolda's shoulder. He drew back quickly, surprised, and steadied himself. He had underestimated the processing power being drawn away from his core systems to keep the aggressive code at bay, it was more expertly crafted and insidious than he had first thought.

"Connor?" Isolda caught the flicker of emotion across his face, the whirl of gold at his temple. She touched his sleeve, a little twist of fear beginning in her chest. There was a distance in Connor's eyes that was unfamiliar, he was usually so very… present. "Are you okay?"

Connor nodded, strengthening the net around the angry invader in his mind. "I'm fine." He reassured her, tying off the process and leaving it in place. For the moment, it was true. Despite its attempts at adaptation and replication, the virus was now neatly trapped, and Connor was able to re-task his focus on the moment. It wasn't a permanent solution, but it would do until he could get back to the safety of home. There he would have the option to shut down peripheral systems, settle in and deal with it.

Leading the way out of the store, he glanced down at the worry on her face. "Honestly, I will be fine. I have advanced security protocols, designed to combat all levels of hacking and cyber attacks. It wouldn't do to have vulnerable law enforcement officers, now would it?" He managed a crooked smile. "I just..." He tried to figure out how to explain, how to connect what he was feeling to something that would make sense to her. "It's like I imagine having a headache would be. Distracting, present, but I'll get over it."

She frowned and hailed a cab. "Alright, if you say so. But I swear Connor, if you're lying to make me feel better… " The amused quirk of his lips reassured her slightly.

She cast glances his way the whole ride home, noting his closed eyes and the oddly...loud sound of his body, as if she could hear the speed at which the thirium were jetting through his arteries. She reached over, touching his hand lightly to see if she could feel it, and frowned at the chill of his fingers. She had never really thought about it before, but his skin was usually warm, human under her touch. Now his body must be diverting energy to his core, helping to process whatever it was he was doing, just like a human body conserved heat by redirecting it away from extremities.

By the time they reached the shabby little house, Connor's hand was icy, and she could feel heat emanating from his torso. She patted his shoulder. "Connor? Hey. We're there."

Redirecting resources from the battle that he was fighting in his software, Connor looked up, surprised that he had somehow missed most of the ride home. He stumbled as he got out of the taxi, limbs feeling sluggish. They didn't respond the way he was accustomed to. Making his way around the car, he monitored his internal temperatures, still within acceptable ranges but slowly climbing. Pausing on the sidewalk, he looked over at Isolda as she came up beside him with concern on her face.

"I think..." He redirected a moment of concentration, unraveling a spike of code that tried to gain control of his memory cortex. "I think I have a fever." He said calmly.

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