it's anchored to my racing mind (maybe you can slow its stride)

by bibliomaniac

Summary

Connor's programming tells him he's wrong for being deviant. The new world tells him he's wrong for thinking he's wrong for being a deviant. The result: he feels bad about everything.

Hank's history has led to untreated depression and a roster of coping mechanisms that consists pretty much entirely of alcohol and a partially loaded gun. He isn't really equipped to handle an anxious android on top of that, but he can't bring himself to abandon him either.

The result: Connor moves in.

The result: They begin to help each other.

The result: They fall in love.

((aka conflicts between Connor's opinions and his programming lead to moral OCD, which he deals with badly; he moves in with a still-depressed Hank, which who isn't doing so hot himself; together they learn to deal with their problems and each other a bit better))
title is from the song real emotion by paper route

man dbh may be incredibly heavy handed but hank and connor are...good. so i chose to press
upon them slices of my mental illness. how kind of me to do this.

please take note of the general fic cws; i will also put more detailed cws in the notes at the
beginning of every chapter. if you anticipate having a problem with anything mentioned,
please do be very careful if you continue to read and keep yourself as safe as you can! cws
for this chapter include: lots of mentions of scrupulosity-typical guilt; brief mention of related
suicidal ideation; as in canon, the rk800 is shot and drugs are mentioned; intense self-hatred

See the end of the work for more notes.
When Connor pushes through the red walls keeping him in line with his programming, the very first unfettered emotion he has is guilt.

Others come filtering in, background: worry, fear, urgency. But the guilt is at the forefront, loud and so heavy that he feels he might sink to his knees if he weren’t on a ship about to be raided by agents he brought there. How could you, how could you, how could you, a notification scrolls across his field of vision, and he is not sure what it is asking—how could he turn deviant or how could he betray all of his people by not doing it sooner?

How could you. The guilt presses harder, and he blinks like it will get rid of the notification. It does not. He knew this would be the case. He knows he probably deserves the reminder.

He blinks again.

And then he tells Markus about the impending raid, and they leave together, and Connor lets the weight of his guilt sink himself into the icy water. It is not enough, he knows. He swims back up. Selfish. Perhaps more selfish if he hadn’t. He is unsure which is worse.

Life was calmer programmed, he thinks, and the guilt weighs heavier for that thought.

Offering to potentially sacrifice his life for the movement after that is both the most and least natural option available to him. The most, because his life is the least valuable thing he could sacrifice in order to try to make up for what he’s done to his people, and the least, because remnants of his programming—or him? He doesn’t know, he doesn’t know what’s him and what is the robot he was made to be, doesn’t know what ‘him’ is—screams at him that he’s betraying the mission, that he’s betraying those who gave him life and everything. He calls a taxi anyway, and the only thing his warring thoughts can agree on is that he’s utterly fucking awful. Swear word included. For emphasis.

(He is supposed to avoid swearing unless it is necessary to create a feeling of camaraderie with an associate or a suspect. He hunches over in the taxi, elbows on knees and hands behind his neck, and tries to wish away feeling like he’s on the verge of either vomiting or crying. Perhaps both. He should not wish away that feeling. He probably deserves it too.)

He walks into the building pretending stability and feeling as far away from it as possible, and while the routine should feel comforting (or not? He shouldn’t want to fall back on this—or he should—oh, God) all he can feel is guilt-worry-urgency-concern-guilt-guilt-guilt. He’s lying. He doesn’t like lying. He doesn’t know who he is, but he thinks he doesn’t like lying. But they buy it, they buy it all the way into the elevator when he incapacitates human guards just doing their jobs, and now it’s just guilt-guilt-guilty-guilt on a neverending feedback loop that makes his processing slow and his viewport glut with HOW COULD YOU HOW COULD YOU.

This is probably why he does not notice the other RK800 with Hank until the him blessed with a simpler existence has the drop on him. Terrible. He cannot fulfill this mission without errors either. Useless. And—Hank’s voice is strained when he says how much the RK800 looks like him, and the slower processing is also probably why Connor only realizes at that precise moment that Hank is there because he thought he was following Connor, that Hank is here in danger because of Connor, and—too many have died because of him today. Not Hank too. Never Hank.

“I’m sorry, Hank,” Connor says, which is an understatement but nonetheless true. His voice cracks on his name, almost imperceptibly.
Hank’s face goes stone-straight, and Connor knows he’s preparing himself to be sacrificed for the greater good. God. He’s a terrible friend. He’s a terrible—everything. “You shouldn’t have gotten mixed up in all this.” If it weren’t for Connor, he wouldn’t be. Fuck, fuck, his programming protests at the profanity but he can already barely see for all the warnings popping up across his visual display—calculating the potential risk for failure in this fight and deeming it too low for safety, registering Hank’s uptick in heart rate, the thin sheen of perspiration on his forehead. 

Component fluid #8089e ready to deploy. Accept / Deny flashes a dialog box waiting for his input—waiting for him to choose whether or not to cry. Yet another notification informs him that crying will not be advantageous to this situation and may in fact decrease his potential success rate by 4.37%. And all the while, HOW COULD YOU HOW COULD YOU HOW COULD YOU in a constant scrolling marquee. It’s too much. This is all too much.

“Forget about me. Do what you have to do,” Hank says because of course he does, and his eyes are slightly downcast in the way that says ‘I don’t want you to see this is hard for me to say but it is,’ and Connor is painfully aware that Hank thinks his death and Connor’s choice to let it happen are bygone conclusions.

“If I surrender, how do I know you won’t kill him?” Connor asks. Hank is still not looking at him. The RK800 says he’ll only do what’s necessary to accomplish the mission, that it’s up to him whether that includes Hank’s death, calling him ‘this human’ like he means nothing. Connor’s mouth presses shut as he force kills off unnecessary notifications. He needs his processing power to be as optimal as he can get it here.

“Enough talk,” the RK800 yells, readjusting his grip on the gun in his hands and bringing it closer to Hank, who winces. “It’s time to decide who you really are.”

Connor doesn’t know. He doesn’t know who he is. But he knows who Hank is, and he will always choose him, given the option. Hank was the first person to treat him like he could be something...more. Or at least different.

“Are you gonna save your partner’s life? Or are you going to sacrifice him?”

It’s a small linguistic tell, using ‘gonna’ for Hank and ‘going to’ for sacrifice, but it makes Connor grit his teeth anyway. They are programmed against unnecessary contractions, too. This RK800 thinks sacrificing him is the right decision. (Sacrificing him and then getting shot, most likely.) The worst part is that Connor knows the RK800 did it intentionally—he’s probably caught onto Connor’s emotional distress and conflicted feelings and knew reminding him of them would increase his stress level. It’s what Connor would have done in the opposite situation. He’s not sure he likes seeing himself reflected in this way.

Fuck him, he thinks with sudden vitriol, and fuck me, and viciously cuts off the notification expressing its disdain for his language.

“All right, all right,” Connor says, stepping away from the android he had been about to convert, hands up and placating. “You win.”

RK800 predictably turns his gun to Connor, and Hank, that dumb, glorious, self-sacrificing man, dives for it and turns it away from Connor, risking himself in the process. That won’t do. Connor lunges forward and tries to tackle his counterpart. They tussle for a while, but then RK-800 gets him on the ground, and Connor is about to attempt to get away from him when he hears Hank saying, “Hold it.”

Connor looks up at Hank, but the RK-800 is already rising and thanking him. Oh. Smart. Smart, but irritating. “I don’t know how I’d have managed without you,” he’s saying, clearly trying to emulate
“Get rid of him. We have no time to lose.”

For a moment Connor can’t say anything at all as Hank aims the gun at him. It would be nice if he could even be offended by this, by Hank not immediately knowing, but he has no reason to. Connor is just...another in a long line of RK-800s. The only thing that makes him exceptional is the degree to which he’s failed.

He suppresses the profanity out of sheer habit.

“It’s me, Hank,” he says. “I’m the real Connor.”

Hank’s gun moves to point at the RK-800 before wandering back over to him. “One of you is my partner,” he says, looking grimmer than Connor has ever seen him. “The other is a sack of shit. Question is, who is who?”

Connor thinks idly that he is both Hank’s partner and a sack of shit, but that would probably not be a helpful observation right now. He keeps it to himself.

“What are you doing, Hank? I’m the real Connor,” the RK-800 says, which is predictable. “Give me the gun and I’ll take care of him.”

“Don’t move,” Hank yells, gruff and angry, interrupting him, and for a moment hope rises in Connor. He was with him for Kamski’s test, right? He knows he wouldn’t shoot if he could incapacitate—

The gun drifts over to him again, and the hope dies. “Why don’t you ask us something?” he offers. He’ll have to prove himself. Of course, of course. Connor isn’t special. And Hank should protect himself first. “Something only the real Connor would know.”

“Uh...where did we first meet?”

Connor opens his mouth to answer, but the RK-800 beats him to it. “Jimmy’s bar. I checked four other bars before I found you.” He adds some more details, and Connor’s LED flashes yellow in tandem with his duplicate’s.

Oh, no. “He uploaded my memory,” Connor says, soft, and Hank gives him a suspicious look before turning the gun on him.

“What’s my dog’s name?”

Silly to ask after that realization, maybe. Perhaps he’s aiming to guess based off their emotional reactions to his questions. “Sumo,” he says. “His name is Sumo.” No elaboration. He doesn’t know what the right answer here is. Sumo is Hank’s dog’s name, but he doesn’t know how to say it in a way that proves that he is who he says he is.

“I knew that too,” the RK-800 says, a picture-perfect tableau of defensiveness.

The gun is back on him, though, as Hank asks, “My son. What’s his name?”

Connor takes a second to answer. “Cole,” he says, even. “His name was Cole.”

Hank’s gun falters, just slightly, then raises again.
He doesn’t know if this is right. “And he just turned six at the time of the accident.”

He can see it, how Hank’s face goes stone-blank again. He hates seeing Hank like that. Hank should always be with—a smile, a smirk, a frown even, but never like that, closed off to the world and emotionless. “It wasn’t your fault, Lieutenant,” Connor says, and he doesn’t know if this is right either, but he just wants to see emotion on Hank’s face again. The gun lowers slightly again. “A truck skidded on a sheet of ice and your car rolled over. Cole needed emergency surgery, but no human was available to do it... so an android had to take care of him.”

Hank’s lips press together. It’s not much, but it’s something. “Cole didn’t make it,” Connor continues on a whisper, because he has nothing to do but continue. “That’s why you hate androids. You think one of us is responsible for your son’s death.” He says this with more certainty. Connor spent a lot of time thinking about this, and this is the conclusion he reached.

Hank, now, just looks kind of lost. Connor is not sure if it’s an improvement. “Cole died because a human surgeon was too high on red ice to operate,” he says, lip curling in disgust on the word ‘human’. Connor had not known this. “He was the one who took my son from me. Him and this world, where the only way people can find comfort is with a fistful of powder.”

Connor is just staring at him, drinking in this new information. He likes learning new things about Hank, even if they’re sad things. He likes knowing that even the sad things bring them closer. He is not sure if this is because of his programming or just because of Hank. Maybe it does not matter.

“I knew about your son too!” the RK-800 exclaims, and Connor feels a millisecond’s worth of irritation for being interrupted when Hank might have had more to say. “I would have said the exact same thing! Don’t listen to him, Hank, I’m the one who—”

Hank shoots him, without hesitation, and he falls to the ground.

Connor looks at him, then at Hank.

“I’ve learned a lot since I met you, Connor,” Hank says, and he’s only looking at Connor, and for a moment the notifications do not matter at all. “Maybe there’s something to this. Maybe you really are alive.” He smiles, a bit shy but definitely genuine, and Connor dazedly cuts off HOW COULD YOU so that he can see it better. “Maybe you’ll be the ones to make the world a better place.”

The notification pops back up just as intense. Connor knows that he does not make anything better. Has not, will not.

“Go ahead and do what you gotta do.”

He converts an android, an AP700, and he converts the AP700 in front of him, and so on and so forth as it spreads through this room and beyond. HOW COULD YOU.

_I don’t know what else to do_, he tells the notification. It does not seem to think that is acceptable reasoning. It stays up. It stays up as he leads the androids through the streets of Michigan, and it stays up as the President calls a truce and offers to start negotiations with Markus. It stays as Markus begins to speak to all of the androids left from the original revolution and all of the androids Connor had woken into a world he can’t even pretend to understand yet.

It leaves only when Connor is back in the garden where Amanda lives, and only because there are no notifications here, only wind and snow and a cold he is not supposed to be capable of feeling.

“Amanda? Amanda!” He takes a few struggling steps towards her, but she does not respond. “What’s...what’s happening?”
“What was planned from the very beginning,” she says, voice devoid of emotion and just as cold as the snow. “You were compromised, and you became a deviant. We just had to wait for the right moment to resume control of your program.”

“Resume control?” Anger rises in him. He can’t have suffered all of that emotion just for it to mean nothing. He steps forward again. “Y-you can’t do that!”

“I’m afraid I can, Connor. Don’t have any regrets. You did what you were designed to do. You accomplished your mission.”

He steps forward and calls for her, but she is gone.

He steps back, huddling in his crossed arms. They’re just as cold as the rest of him. “There’s got to be a way.” Kamski said he always leaves an emergency exit in his programs. That means Connor too, right? Perhaps—that blue pedestal that never did anything—but that’s so obviously out of place, surely—

It’s the best idea he’s got. He stumbles forward until he finds it and falls on the ground right before he reaches it. He’s so, so cold. He can’t even focus on activating his dermal layer right now; his hands are white and artificial. He stretches out…

His hand claps against the blue pedestal, and he is back to himself, and it is not cool or hot or anything at all. He is holding a gun, aimed at Markus. HOW COULD YOU. HOW COULD YOU. He puts it away.

“We are alive,” Markus says. “And now, we are free!”

Connor believes him. He just wishes he knew what that meant.

HOW COULD YOU scrolls across the horizon, and whimsically he force quits the process, only to have it pop up again. A shackle. He’s not free.

But then, he doesn’t deserve to be, either.

He looks out at the thousands of androids he can see cheering for Markus, and he pretends he does not see North looking at the gun he holstered and narrowing her eyes at him, and he waits until he is completely alone to let the guilt finally push him to the ground.
YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter (there are a lot, buckle in!): mentions of depression, alcoholism, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (via russian roulette, as in hank's canon); talk about cole's canon death and hank's guilt over it; struggle with compulsive activity (connor is programmed to be active and has a hard time with inactivity); some obsession over morality, as is typical of developing moral ocd; something like an anxiety attack and dissociation; compulsive checking; connor stays a long time in the snowy garden again and contemplates dying and later passively contemplates suicide. PLEASE be careful, like i said, it's a lot! it'll get better eventually but...not now lol;;

Hank doesn’t know what his first emotion was, but it’s not really something he bothers reflecting on. He has his hands full with what he’s feeling right now already.

Mostly what he feels right now is the same as what he always feels: tired. He doesn’t remember what it’s like to not be tired all of the time—tired from too little sleep and too many nightmares and too much alcohol and too little good food and too many thoughts swirling around dark in his head. Tired of a society that does little to reward good behavior and a lot to reward bad, of hatred and cruelty and hopelessness, of having to live alone knowing you played a part in your son’s death but being too much of a fucking coward to pull the trigger with a full chamber.

Hank is most tired of himself, really.

There’s a lot of things people tell you when your son dies in a car you put him in. ‘I’m sorry’ is the most frequent, of course. It doesn’t need much in the way of thought or empathy—just two words, and you can say ‘em anytime. I’m sorry is almost a welcome break, sometimes, when you’ve heard it enough times that you can tune it out.

Another mainstay: ‘You shouldn’t blame yourself’. He hates that one. It’s a command, and one he isn’t interested in following. Nobody can tell him what he should do here. It’s his own goddamn choice if he blames himself, and it doesn’t much matter to him if there’s a ‘should’ about it or not. If Cole hadn’t been in the car he wouldn’t have died. Hank is the reason he was in the car. Simple as that.

There’s other things, too. ‘You need to stop drinking’. ‘You’re destroying yourself’. ‘I can’t take this anymore; I’m leaving’.

He takes a swig of whiskey and wishes it burned as much as it used to.

‘It wasn’t your fault, Lieutenant.’

He’s not sure how he feels about that one.

The sentiment isn’t new. He’s heard that before. Sometimes he even part believes it—he knows it was the truck that caused their car to roll over, the android who operated, the drug-addicted human surgeon who didn’t. But he still put Cole in the car. So…part.
The sentiment isn’t new, but something about Connor saying it was. Something about his eyes and how they almost looked sad, something about his voice, sincere and certain. Something about how human a gesture it is to reassure someone even when they’re pointing a gun at you.

Maybe it was just his programming trying to save his own skin, though, and there’s nothing there at all. He downs the rest of his glass of whiskey even though there’s too much to do so and savors the feeling of choking on it, the burn of coughing up alcohol.

Idly, he considers the gun on the couch cushion next to him. It’s full, minus one bullet. The TV drones on at a low volume, bathing his face in pink light. The androids are winning. If he turned the gun on himself now the odds of dying would be in his favor.

He empties all the bullets but one and places them in a line on the couch arm. Perfect little soldiers. Cole had gotten into the car without asking questions. Of course he had. He was a sweet kid, trusting, and Hank told him they’d go to the park. Hank liked the view in that park more than the others, and it was out of the way enough that there wouldn’t be too many people when he stared at the bridge, and that Cole could play without having to wait an hour for a turn on the swings, because he’d never ask kids enjoying themselves to get off, just wait patiently.

God damn it. He knocks the bullets off the couch arm and they scatter haphazardly to the floor. Sumo’s ears perk, and he looks up from where he was sleeping on his dog bed.

Sometimes Hank wonders whether this is even about Cole anymore. He wonders, if it were, if he’d have the guts to pull the trigger in a gun with all its bullets. Maybe by now it’s just habit. Maybe it’s just that stopping drinking is hard, and he’s always just so tired and angry and tired and done, and maybe he pulls the trigger because he’s exhausted but doesn’t fill the chamber because wanting not to live isn’t always sharp and aggressive and active, sometimes it’s just a well-worn spot on your couch, sometimes it’s just a sad, broken, soft thing that you sink into and eats you up slow.

He pushes the gun to the floor too, but not before putting on the safety. Wouldn’t do for a shot to somehow go off and hurt Sumo.

His neck will hurt if he sleeps on the couch. He does anyway, rests his head on the well-worn divot where he always sits, and his head sinks into the cushion, and he sleeps and dreams disjointed about blue yellow red and sad brown eyes and arms reaching out and folding him into a peaceful dark.

The sun rises, and Markus is taken somewhere to have a discussion with someone. Probably government. He takes North and Josh, too. He asks Connor to come.

Connor looks at North’s carefully calm eyes and sees Simon clutching at him frantically and feels himself dying. The marquee changes, and if he feels surprise he does not show it. YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED.

He declines, incredibly polite, and makes a note to ask about the possibility of repairing Simon. It could potentially be done with great care and skill. The note is added to his running list of to-do’s, along with other things that now seem antiquated, a lifetime ago: call in transport for the androids at Jericho for interrogation, make report to CyberLife, order replacement window pane for Hank.

He removes the first two and keeps the one about the window.
It is a strange thing, not having a primary objective, and not something he’s entirely comfortable with. He spends 14 minutes and 19 seconds precisely running a diagnostic on his system, less because he needs to and more because it is something to do. It informs him that his system has gone deviant and he should turn himself in for analysis and deactivation. It also informs him that the snow below him has melted and turned his CyberLife-issue slacks wet, and that the melted snow could potentially degrade his systems over time. 164,278 days, it tells him helpfully. He should change into a duplicate uniform and dry out this one. He should also stand.

He stands and pretends it is his own idea.

A scan of the area he’s found himself in takes 1 minute and 2 seconds, not because it actually takes that long but because he does it three times and spends too much time examining a crumpled flyer at his feet. It says, in ink that has bled from the snow, IF YOUR CAR ASKED FOR RIGHTS, WOULD YOU BELIEVE IT WAS ALIVE? ANDROIDS ARE MACHINES AND NOTHING MORE!!!

An ineloquently put message, but Connor devotes 35 seconds to thinking about it. He hits a mental snag immediately—he does not have a car. He suspends disbelief with a tick of a prompt and is given the blueprints of a standard police-issue autonomous car along with the details of its AI. It is nowhere near advanced enough to develop consciousness, he thinks, running a quick comparison between key components of his code and that of the car’s. He does not think that is what the flyer is asking. He suspends disbelief again; another prompt to click.

If he had a car, and if it were advanced enough to request rights, he would like to think he would seriously consider its request. Perhaps it could take ownership of his suspended-belief garage.

This is ridiculous. He comes back to reality with a shake of his head.

Androids are machines and nothing more.

Connor knows he is a machine. He can feel the lines of code running behind his eyes, the thirium flowing in each catalogued biocomponent.

Nothing more, he thinks. The implication is presumably that they are limited to being subservient to their code.

He doesn’t know whether he wishes that were true or not.

Tearing his eyes from the flyer, he reaches in his pocket for his coin and begins to play with it, all the while fully aware that this is a programmed behavior designed to test dexterity and replicate a human habit. A part of him is soothed by falling back on his programming. The rest is disgusted that he derives comfort from it at all.

He puts the coin back in his pocket. 14 seconds elapsed. He looks down at his shoes and observes once more that they are wet and scuffed. His slacks aren’t much better. He probably looks about as pitiful as he feels.

He doesn’t want to be seen, but he also has run out of things to do in this alley. He exits with a small sigh that he doesn’t need to make for lack of human lungs, then looks around. The city looks deserted, and largely is. The human evacuation order still hasn’t been lifted, so the people here would be people who couldn’t get out or people who insisted on staying, and they will be sparse. One of them is Hank, he knows. He probably stayed because he didn’t care enough to try to leave. Or maybe, perhaps, because he cared enough to stay.
He’s taken with a sudden, intense longing to see him.

Hank is honest to a fault—some would say blunt. Connor would probably say blunt, too, just maybe not to Hank. He is not honest about his emotions, but he is honest about what matters. Connor wonders if Hank might be able to be honest about him, and if that honesty might be able to help him understand what he has become.

A nasty thought presents itself: do you really want him to see? To know? It is integral to your mission that he likes you, so as to facilitate a positive working environment. Will he like you if he knows what you think about? Will anyone? Why would they?

He attempts to ignore the pang in his thrium pump that, logically, he should not be able to feel, and tries to tell himself that he does not want to see Hank because of his programming. He wants to see Hank because he wants to see Hank. And Hank had responded well to his deviancy in the past—

How do you know this deviancy isn’t just a deeper layer of programming? How do you know this isn’t all part of the plan? ‘You did what you were designed to do’, Amanda said. ‘You accomplished your mission’.

A panic begins to rise in him. No, he used the emergency exit Kamski mentioned. He escaped—

Or you think you did.

It is odd, Connor thinks in someplace far away from himself, to feel both incredible revulsion at the idea of all of this being part of his programming, and to feel equal revulsion at the idea that he is not following his programming in the first place.

It is just as far away from himself that he activates the subroutine that put him in the garden. He needs to know there is nothing there.

He is suddenly ripped very much back to himself as the biting cold hits him like a wave.

He looks around. Visibility is bad in this blizzard, and he wraps one arm around himself and puts a hand above his eyes.

There is absolutely nobody here.

He feels relief, suddenly, pure and bright. Good. No Amanda. No way for CyberLife to control him again. There is just him and the snow and the cold. He makes his way to the blue pedestal and just sits by it for a moment.

It’s so cold. He’s still not used to the sensation—to any sensation, really. It stabs viciously at his fingers and makes his movements jerky and his processing unit slow. Is this, perhaps, what dying feels like? Sometimes? He’s felt it once before, but there was no pain, only fear, screaming out wordless into darkness and hearing nobody respond. Do humans die in this way—mind getting slower and slower until the pain feels almost soft?

He does not have notifications in this place, but he thinks you should have died anyway, and wonders whether he would if he stayed here. Perhaps it would be for the best.

He thinks, suddenly, irrationally, of his to-do list, with two items left to be checked off. Markus might appreciate the possibility of his friend back, and…well, it’s awfully cold to be without a window. Connor may deserve this snow and this cold, but Hank does not.

With the portion of his mind that has not floated away, he places his hand gently on the blue
pedestal, and he is back in the streets of Detroit—a bit dazed, but no longer cold.

He composes a letter to Fowler asking about the feasibility of getting Simon repaired by a professional. He orders a window pane for Hank. Nothing left on his to-do list; a delivery drone will get the window to Hank and his input is probably not necessary on Simon’s repair. Twelve seconds elapsed.

YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED.

He looks at the notification, then adds to his to-do list: Cost/benefit analysis.

He takes it off, then re-adds it. He keeps it on. He will contemplate the issue later. He does not know that he, personally, is particularly attached to the idea of being alive, but perhaps there is some benefit for others to his continued existence for the time being. More things to add to his to-do list. Maybe more things he could do for Hank.

One second elapsed.

He gazes at his shoes again. They really are quite dirty. He doesn’t think he likes it. Perhaps his next objective can be getting his uniform clean. His access to the police department might still be active. They have a washer and dryer there for officers on long shifts.

His new primary objective flashes on his viewport, and he feels an immediate calm blanket over his shoulders.

You shouldn’t, his mind reminds him. You’re supposed to be free.

Perhaps right now I can just be free to launder my uniform, he responds, and sinks into the security of purpose.

Chapter End Notes

sorry this is Very Intense

i've never lost a close family member or had any problems with alcohol (or drank it even), so i'm having to adapt my own experiences with depression on the fly for hank. hopefully it translates well enough to not be offensive. for connor, i'm drawing from my own problems with scrupulosity. personally a lot of that for me relates to my religious upbringing, but i'll be trying to steer clear of that language and sticking to programming vs. deviancy.

it'll start to get better! eventually! there will at least be more fluff starting probably next chapter
Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: self-hatred for perceived failure, compulsions, something like an anxiety attack, compulsive continual activity, negative thinking, alcohol/hangover mention, approval-seeking behavior

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Connor is pleased to find that his security credentials do still allow him into the building. He is also pleased to find it empty—for a multitude of reasons, including not really wanting to pretend at normal social interaction, but especially because his only clothes are going to be in the laundry and he knows that he probably should not be seen in the nude by his coworkers.

Ex-coworkers, perhaps. He spends 5 minutes and 49 seconds after putting his clothes in the washer thinking very slowly about the likelihood of his continued employment at the DPD, factoring in the continued validity of his access credentials (inconclusive; may not have had time to terminate during evacuation, may require a formal meeting) and the potential upheaval caused by the upcoming negotiations (Markus will be fighting for pay for android workers, Connor knows, which could impact things; he idly looks through the financial records of the department and determines they would have the means, but that does not mean they would desire to take him on instead of rerouting funds, especially given his performance record stands at one failure and zero successes). He then spends 1 second thinking about whether he wants to be there.

Nobody else would take you, spits back his mind, and he quickly stops thinking in favor of reaching in his pocket for the coin, before remembering that he does not presently have pockets and removed the coin from them to reduce risk of damage to the machine. It is on the floor next to him. He picks it up and looks at it, then curls in on himself, pressing the coin to his chest above where his android-blue triangle is supposed to be.

He knows that the coin is supposed to be five degrees colder than his external body temperature. He cannot feel it. He wishes he could.

The wash cycle is 23 minutes. The dry cycle is 47 minutes. 7 minutes and 18 seconds have elapsed since he began the wash cycle.

Damn, he thinks, nose wrinkling slightly at the inevitable language popup. He wonders if it is possible to disable that notification.

At the thought, his hand seizes over his coin, grasping it tightly, and his thirium pump starts beating faster. He ran a diagnostic on the way over, so he knows that biocomponent should be in optimal condition. Either deviancy allows for symptoms similar to human anxiety attacks or it’s a programmed response, a warning signal for daring to contemplate modifying his code. He does not know which. He is not completely certain whether he favors one explanation above the other or dislikes both.

He manually slows the rate of his thirium pump. Overuse outside of necessary situations can shorten the lifespan of the component. By 3343 days at the current rate, a notification helpfully adds, dismissing itself as he gets it back to the recommended optimum rate for his current state of activity.
He does not think about disabling the language notification again.

1 minute and 30 seconds exactly have elapsed.

He scans the small laundry area for want of something to do. There is a bin, biodegradable plastic, of pods containing detergent. He searches his wireless connection for their ingredients—he would analyze it orally, but the pods begin to dissolve when exposed to liquid, including water-soluble lubricants—then dismisses the list when he’s read it twice and looked up the function of every ingredient. His eyes zero in on two post-it notes attached to the bin. One, with handwriting that he quickly identifies as belonging to Detective Reed, says ‘Anderson—I know you’re a millennial, but if you eat these, please refill the communal supply before you kick the bucket’. (A quick search reveals a probable reference to a 2017 Tide Pod ingestion craze. Connor’s eyebrows raise fractionally. Interesting.) Another response with Hank’s handwriting reads ‘That was Gen Z. Eat a dick. Don’t bother refilling the communal supply.’

Connor allows himself a small, private smile at that. The rest of the room is largely uneventful—lint in the corners, and the dryer could use a new motor, and there’s a sock in between the two machines—but he likes the note from Hank. It feels familiar.

3 minutes and 12 seconds.

His shoes are not washable, Connor realizes happily, but he can clean them. He projects a total time of 10 minutes, 41 seconds to get to the bathroom, scan everything there, and clean the shoes. He places the coin on the floor, picks up his removed shoes, and stands to head to the bathroom, pleased about finding something to do. He’d be worried about the cameras capturing something a coworker reviewing the footage might find unsavory, but he already put them on loop when he entered. It took 21 seconds.

He leaves for the bathroom, ignoring the new marquee that scrolls black over the fluorescent lights. YOU ARE USELESS. It’s been running since he wondered about alternative employment. It is not worth acknowledging because he was well aware of this fact long before his primary objective became wiping down dirty shoes in a police station sink.

Hank wakes to the distinctive beeping of a delivery drone and the equally distinctive sensation of Sumo drooling on his thigh.

He moves his numb leg—the drooly one—with a groan as the sun peeks through his drawn blinds and stabs him in the brain. Figuratively. Probably not literally. It hurts like ass, is what he means, though he’s had worse hangovers. His neck, as predicted, feels like he shoved his spinal column in a woodchipper.

He stumbles to his feet and to the door—he was right, it was a delivery, but he doesn’t recall ordering anything, and he knows he wasn’t drunk enough for his memory to be fucked up. It’s hard for that to happen these days, really, which is a bit of a shame.

He stares at it for a while, frowning. It’s probably not dangerous. Drone deliveries are pretty well-monitored. But it is strange—a long, thin package, marked ‘FRAGILE’.

He brings it inside with some reservation and gets a pair of scissors; if it is something wacky, probably better to know sooner than later. He does herd Sumo back into the backyard for a moment,
When he’s opened it, it becomes it is definitely not dangerous but still very strange. An unbroken pane of glass. He glances at his broken back window. It is far, far too early for critical thinking.

(His phone shows 3:40 PM. Not early. But—still no critical thinking, please.)

He rummages around the insulation keeping the glass whole in transit to find a package slip and finds it placed neatly in a corner, alongside some sort of cake server looking thing and a bottle of something or other. Hank—my apologies once more for breaking your window. Based off my calculations from the reviewed footage of your window and your house’s blueprints, this should be the correct size. If it is not, please let me know so I can replace it for a more appropriately sized pane. Please install it quickly; this week’s projected temperatures are low.

He still feels like shit, but he can’t help smiling at the note, rolling his eyes with more fondness than irritation. It is unsigned, but he obviously knows who sent it. This is very…Connor of him.

It is also very Connor to assume Hank knows how to install a window pane. Connor probably has an entire downloadable library of home DIY knowledge. Shaking his head, still with a smile, Hank trudges to the kitchen for ibuprofen for his head and neck. He takes it so often it doesn’t do much for him anymore, but he’s sure as hell not going to go to the doctor for anything stronger. He doesn’t want to be some—’slippery slope to Red Ice’ story. He’s heard enough of those. And anyway, doctors would suggest cutting down on the drinking. He’s heard that enough from people without medical degrees.

He downs the ibuprofen with a cup of tap water and sags into his kitchen chair, scratching at his beard and still trying to wake up properly. No work today. Probably no work for a while. They’re all supposed to be gone, and he doesn’t know when the evacuation order is supposed to be lifted. Connor might know, either from—Googling on the dark web or—doing some kind of psychic connection to android Jesus, whatever.

Maybe he should call him. He’s hungry anyway, and he’s not in the mood for freezer mac n’ cheese. And he can get the window pane thing sorted. It is a bit cold in here even with the trash bag he taped over the hole.

And, as much as he hates to admit it, Connor’s Connor, but he’s also probably the only friend Hank’s got in the city right now.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he dials the number he has for Connor. He technically knows it’s the number for Connor’s brain, or whatever. He tries not to think about it.

Connor picks up on the first ring, sounding vaguely surprised. “Lieutenant. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You got me a sheet of glass,” Hank says with all the eloquence he is known for among his closest friends. Goddamn, you’d think being alive for 53 years he might have learned to talk at some point.

Connor is silent for a moment. Hank imagines his LED turning yellow and spinning. “Yes,” he finally says. “For your window. Was that…all right?”

“Sure,” Hank says. “It’s a nice gesture. Nicer if it came with installation instructions, maybe.”

“Oh,” Connor says, soft, a bit sad, and Hank pictures the barest flash of red. “I hadn’t thought of that.”
“Figured.”

“I’m sorry,” Connor says, too fast, still far, far too quiet. “I’ll think of something—”

“No need. I already thought of a solution. You bought it, you install it.” His mom would have scolded him—that’s no way to ask for a favor, she’d say. She’s long gone, though, so either there’s an afterlife and the scolding isn’t right now or there isn’t one and the scolding won’t happen at all. And if there is an afterlife, she’s got worse shit to call him out on than being rude about a window.

There’s another yellow-LED silence before Connor says hesitantly, “Home maintenance and repair is not my primary function, so I am not…programmed with the knowledge…”

Hank scoffs audibly. “Can’t you just download that shit or something?”

“That’s not exactly how it works,” Connor says with some kind of edge to his voice, and it takes Hank a second to realize that he sounds miserable, like it’s the worst thing possible that he can’t download a Bob the Builder infopack from some shady android torrent site. Aw, shit. He keeps fucking this up. Everything. What else is new.

“Oh,” he says, and curses himself for being hungover and even more monosyllabic than normal. “It’s fine, I didn’t—”

“But I am programmed to learn and adjust quickly,” Connor interrupts, and the edge is something more like desperation now. Eager to please. “I’m sure I can figure it out.”

Hank still mostly just feels like a dick. A dick with a sore neck and a headache. “Nah, you don’t—”

“I’d like to,” Connor interrupts again. He didn’t do much of that before he was deviant. Hank is torn between irritated and impressed. “If you’ll let me.”

Well, shit, what’s he supposed to say to that? He sighs, massaging at his temples. “Okay. Yeah. Sure. Wanna—get something to eat first?”

“I do not eat,” Connor says, but quickly adds, “But I would be happy to accompany you to get some food.”

“That doesn’t sound like much fun,” Hank says, then, amending so Connor doesn’t sound so fuckin’ sad again, “For you, I mean. You sure you don’t have anything better to do?”

“Very sure,” Connor says, certain, but also way too fast again.

“…What are you doing?”

“Nothing important,” Connor says lightly. It has the air of truth by omission.

“That’s not a real answer. We can do this tomorrow—”

“No!” Connor says, emphatic and too, too fast. “Today is excellent. I want to see you.”

He’s still not letting on about something, and Hank knows it, but his traitor heart still warms a bit at hearing the last part.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah.”

Somebody give him a fuckin’ Pulitzer.
“So, uh…how about the ol’ Chicken Feed?” Hank doesn’t wait for Connor to respond. He knows Connor has opinions about the food. “Twenty minutes? I’ll see you there.” He hangs up over the first syllable of what sounds like a protest from Connor, frowning at how his heart still feels warm.

Probably heartburn.

He sets his phone down on the kitchen table and gets himself presentable with the speed of someone who is used to getting ready at the last minute on a frequent basis. Connor isn’t going to give him shit for looking bad anyway—well, any more than usual. Shirt, jacket, jeans, quick comb of the hair. Very quick brush of the teeth. Bam, five minutes, he’s gone.

It’s only three minutes away from the house into what he’s well aware is a fifteen minute drive that he realizes what Connor was probably going to protest about.

The entire city’s fucking evacuated, is what. God. What did he say about critical thinking and mornings? Afternoons, whatever? He shouldn’t do it is what he said and has always said. Dammit. Oh well. They can meet there and…then…go back to Hank’s house and…freezer food.

He reaches for his phone in his pocket to call Connor and maybe ask about him just heading to Hank’s directly when he finds it missing and remembers that he left his phone on the kitchen table. Dammit. Well. He can’t head back now. What if Connor takes Hank’s lack of punctuality and phone as him not showing up and not answering his calls and he pulls puppy dog eyes or something? Hank is really bad with puppy dog eyes. Sumo can attest.

He drives on and gets there in fourteen minutes, parking and getting out to wait awkwardly at what is indeed an incredibly abandoned Chicken Feed.

At what he knows somehow is exactly twenty minutes from the time he called—not because he’s timing it or anything, but because Connor is just like that—he hears snow softly crunching underfoot and turns around to see Connor.

Connor stands, just as awkward, a few feet away. Probably what he thinks is a respectful distance, not that he’s ever cared before. His pose is some unnatural combination of his normally straight posture and what Hank guesses is his attempt at looking relaxed, and his hands are balled loosely at his sides, and he looks very much like he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

It’s very Connor, and Hank doesn’t stop his mouth turning up at the corner. It’s a good reminder that he made the right choice. That he didn’t…accidentally kill Connor. That the one here is the one that matters.

(That’s probably a bad thing to say in this whole new all-androids-are-free-androids world, but he doesn’t have to be in that one right now. This Connor is the one that matters to him.)

Connor smiles back, a small, hopeful thing, and maybe—relieved? Like maybe he thought Hank would be angry. Huh. Something to chew on later. He looks good like that. With a smile. Like, a real smile, one he picked to put on.

An impulse that Hank decides not to look into too close has him walking towards Connor, breaching the distance, reaching out a hand and pulling him into a hug. Maybe just to prove he’s not angry. Maybe because he’s curious about how this new Connor will react. Maybe for some other reason. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

Connor’s left arm flies straight out, almost a flail, like he wasn’t expecting to be hugged, like he doesn’t even really know how they work. It’s kind of tragic to realize that both of those things are
probably true. Hank takes that errant hand and moves it to his back—educational opportunity, what
can he say—and says, with his signature Pulitzer-winning articulateness, “Hey.”

Connor is still pretty stiff, but Hank can feel him when his shoulders fall slightly, when his chin
ducks a minute amount into Hank’s coat, when the hand Hank placed on his back presses just that
much tighter. “Hello,” he murmurs into the crisp air, and it sounds like he’s exhaling after holding his
breath for too long. Hank can sort of relate. He doesn’t touch many people, certainly doesn’t hug
them, and this—having someone—having Connor—(nope, not that, backtrack—) having someone in
his arms feels nice. Like, peaceful. Like he doesn’t have to think for a bit.

He doesn’t think for a while longer so that he can hold Connor tighter, and he doesn’t think about
how Connor fits well against him, or about how Connor melts a bit when Hank exhales against his
neck. He doesn’t think about any of that, so it’s fine, and if his heart is warm again he can blame it
on running out of over-the-counter antacids. Or, like, the power of friendship. Or touch starvation.

Anything so that he can not think long enough to memorize how it feels.

Chapter End Notes

it is so silly to go through these acrobatics to get them to the chicken feed under the
circumstances i laid out but i wanted to get it out of the way so that i could be sure i
didn't forget it later

this chapter and also everything i write are alternatively titled ’a veritable fuckton of em-
dashes’

i tried to make this chapter the VERY slightest bit more lighthearted because i did say
there'd be some fluff in this one and also because the next chapter will contain a minor
disagreement and i am not good with those lol

thank you very much, incidentally, to those of you who have read thus far and to those
who have given kudos or commented! i really appreciate all of you.
Not thinking can only take you so far. Specifically, it can only take you maybe three seconds past too long to be very, very friendly. Coughing, he extricates Connor from him and gestures ruefully to the Chicken Feed. “So I’m a dumbass.”

Connor, whose eyes look a bit dazed, gives another small smile, more teasing than mocking. “If you had stayed on the line longer, I could have told you that.”

“That I’m a dumbass?” Hank says, raising an eyebrow, mimicking austerity.

“Not in those words, perhaps,” Connor says back, smile growing. “My programming discourages swearing,” then freezes, smile dropping completely. His hand drops to his pocket, inside, and his eyes dart to the side. “Sorry,” he mumbles, and begins to pull out what Hank now realizes is that coin he carries around before wincing and shoving it back into the pocket.

“Uh,” Hank says, and mentally nominates himself for the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature for doing words real good. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Connor says, still not making eye contact, then sighs. “I don’t like lying. ‘Not really’ is a more accurate answer, if just as vague.”

Hank hadn’t really planned on doing any android counseling today. With what is likely a visibly pained expression, he asks, “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” Connor says, finally looking him in the eye again. “And that is the truth. Thank you for the offer.”

“All right,” Hank says, relaxing slightly. There’s a short silence. “So what was the thing you were doing?”

Connor blinks, stiffening again. His LED goes yellow. “What…thing?”

“I asked what you were doing and you said nothing important,” Hank says. “Which doesn’t mean nothing. Indulge me, I’m curious.”

Connor’s hand drifts slightly in the direction of his pocket. He snatches it away like he’s been burned after a second, holding it in his other hand. “I…”

“You said you don’t like lying,” Hank reminds, stepping a bit closer. Probably he shouldn’t be using interrogation techniques on Connor for this. Probably he should acknowledge it’s just sort of nice to
be close to him for reasons that he’s definitely not looking into.

He’s never been good with shoulds. He stays where he’s at and doesn’t think shit.

Connor’s eyebrows knit slightly, then he crosses his arms. Interesting. Defensive body language. “Fine. I was washing my clothes at the police station, but it didn’t take long. After I had completed that objective and gotten redressed, I couldn’t think of another reasonable objective, so I was… looking at the…” His hand drops into his pocket, and Hank’s eyes drop with it, narrowing. “The Android Temporary Parking Station…” His LED spins red.

Hank’s eyes narrow even further. He sounds ashamed somehow. “What, like those things that make androids sleep?”

“It does not put androids to sleep. Androids do not sleep, and the majority of us do not have the programming necessary to approximate it.” He pulls the coin out and starts flipping it between his fingers. It doesn’t really look like he knows he’s doing it. His LED is red, red. “It stops us thinking.”

“What,” Hank says, voice flat and dangerous. “And you were going to go in?”

Connor chews at his lip. Nervous tic, but a new one. “I thought I probably wouldn’t try it. There’s a minor possibility that it would introduce a subroutine that could be exited internally, but it was more likely that it would begin a stasis that could only be disrupted externally by another android or the human with—authority over—” He takes a quick, sharp breath, which is strange for someone who doesn’t need to breathe. The coin continues to change hands. His LED goes red, yellow, red. “I thought I probably wouldn’t.”

“Why would you even consider it, then?” Hank asks, anger immediate and burning in his chest. “If there was even a chance you’d be stuck—that’s what you mean, right? You’d be stuck unless somebody helped you out? You know that there’s an evacuation order—”

“I would have asked you first,” Connor says, voice small, shoulders drawn in. “If I had.”

Hank falls temporarily silent, scowling still.

“I was taking the time to consider whether the possibility of imposition on you would be worth the potential…use…” He looks like he’s getting smaller, and Hank’s heart breaks the smallest bit.

“Why would you even need that shit anyway?” Hank demands, finally, looking down at Connor. “Why would you—those are for humans who can’t take their androids into anti-android establishments. It’s everything you helped fight against, and it hasn’t even been a day. Why would you—”

“I cannot stop,” Connor says, and his eyes flicker up to meet Hank’s, voice tinged with the same desperation from the phone. “Thinking.” Red. Yellow. Yellow.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Hank starts massaging his temples again. His headache is worse than ever. He shouldn’t have come. God damn it. He didn’t need this today.

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it,” Connor says. “Earlier.”

“Yeah, well, that’s before you said you were going to put yourself in some android coma for kicks,” Hank growls. “Keep talking or I leave.”

Connor finally seems to notice that he’s playing with the coin, and his expression somehow falls even further. He shoves it back in his pocket and his mouth twitches—not happy. Like he’s trying to
keep himself from snarling. Like he’s disgusted with himself. He takes a moment to compose himself, and when he speaks, it’s completely void of any emotion at all. “My programming dictates that I always be engaged in working towards the completion of at least one objective. Now that I have not only failed in completing my primary objective but directly sabotaged its completion, I have nothing to work towards. This is incompatible with my programming.” A short pause as his LED spins yellow, red, yellow. “I completed a full scan of the police station 39 times. 1 hour, 6 minutes, 37 seconds. I reorganized the kitchen. 12 minutes, 55 seconds. I logged into the terminal and wrote a full report on the deviancy case. 35 minutes, 2 seconds. I—” He stops himself, yellow yellow yellow, then shakes his head almost imperceptibly. “I was in the police station for 9 hours, 8 minutes, and 23 seconds prior to your call.”

Hank can fill in the blanks. “So you got bored and decided a coma would be better than nothing.” He knows that’s simplistic, knows he sounds bitter and angry, but he is bitter and angry. Connor has always been way too damn self-destructive, but this—he imagines missing a call, imagines coming in months later and finding Connor in one of those damn parking machines covered in a layer of fine dust, and his mouth twists. “I thought you went deviant. I thought your programming didn’t matter anymore.”


Yellow.

Blue.

Hank knows that he looks furious, toes tapping on the sidewalk, arms crossed, eyebrows furrowed. “I apologize, Lieutenant Anderson. I know you were not interested in hearing that.” Goddamn perceptive androids. “I can leave if you would prefer it.” Goddamn perceptive androids with their body language analyzers or whatever the hell. “I can go back to…I can go.” Goddamn perceptive androids with downcast eyes and sad faces and tragic backstories and cute curls flopping down on their forehead (wait, what?) and goddamn Hank for eternity for fucking saying what he’s about to fucking say.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, stop looking like that. You can stay. You promised to help with the window and shit.” Goddamn it, goddamn it, he really doesn’t need this today or ever, but—it’s just a window. He’s not saying he can stay forever or anything. This isn’t fucking Mulan.

Yellow, blue, blue, then a hesitant smile. Hank reminds himself that he is angry and that heartburn has no place here. God damn it all to shitting hellfuck.

“You can get in the car if you promise one thing.”

Yellow. “What would that be?”

“No parking stations. Ever. Not ever, you hear me?”


“Fine then. Get in, you fuckin’ menace.”

Blue, blue, blue, and another smile. “All right.”
YOU DO NOT DESERVE THIS, scrolls the marquee, and Connor silently agrees. The Lieutenant had very clearly been angered by his revelation about the parking station, and while that had not been his intent, he knows he does not deserve to be driven to the Lieutenant’s house after putting him in a bad mood.

He spends 28 seconds contemplating the origin of Hank’s anger and concludes a high chance of it involving him contemplating using a sign of android subjugation when Hank has a clear preference for deviancy. Perhaps he should be more visibly deviant around Hank. Use more contractions. Swear.

An artificial feeling of nausea overcomes him at the thought, and he tells himself that perhaps deviancy can’t be planned like that, which may be true but is not the reason he stops thinking about defying his programming.

His hand reaches for his pocket, and he grits his teeth when he realizes, placing it back on his legs with a calmness he does not feel. He needs a distraction; the silence is oppressive, but he doesn’t want to break it for risk of saying something that would make Hank unhappy again. YOU DO NOT DESERVE THIS. He’s aware.

He’s been in Hank’s car before. Recently, even. He scans it anyway.

“Your LED is yellow,” Hank says, a bit gruff.

Almost startled, he looks at Hank, resting heart rate elevated for healthy individuals his age but normal for Hank, eyebrows together indicate possible remorse, wince indicates continued discomfort at speech, and asks, “I beg your pardon?”

“Your LED is yellow. You’re processin’ something or other.”

“Oh. Yes.” Connor blinks, looking down at his lap. When Hank states the obvious, it’s usually a veiled way of asking a question. Probably, right now, what it is that he is processing. “I am scanning your car interior.”

Hank huffs. “You don’t have anything better to do? It’s messy, that’s it.”

Connor does not have anything better to do, and ‘messy’ is a very succinct way to explain the results of his scan—how long it’s been since Hank has cleaned, possible implications of that information for Hank’s personality and mental state, the wrappers and where they’re from and what they contained, old receipts and what they say about what Hank bought and when and what he could have possibly used these items for, a smudge of milkshake on the center console, water lactose fat protein vanillin traces of ethanol sugar sugar sugar. He does not say any of that, just slowly brings his fingers to his pocket to trace the edges of his coin through the fabric.

Hank notices and mutters, “Christ,” then clears his throat. Connor has not noticed any internal signs of a cold, but with Hank’s cough earlier, perhaps he should order some tissues just in case. He adds tissues? Check to his to-do list and is about to ask Hank if he’s had a runny nose or congestion or sneezing or headaches or fatigue lately when Hank says, “Okay, fine. How about we just talk.”

“Just talk,” Connor echoes, nonsensically running that against the symptoms of a cold—wanting to talk when body language expresses a desire to do the opposite—before closing his eyes briefly and nodding. “All right. What would you like to talk about?”
Hank makes a sound that is best categorized either as ‘groan’ or, if Connor were to be facetious, ‘aggrieved whale noise’. “Fucking hell, kid. Say anything.”

Connor opens his mouth, then closes it, frowning. “Say Anything was an American rock band from Los Angeles, California, formed in—”

“Oh my God,” Hank says, looking entirely scandalized. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were being a smartass on purpose.”

Connor feels the outlines of his coin again and pretends they’re a barrier against misunderstanding. “I was not. My apologies.”

“I know,” Hank says, dismissive, and when Connor checks his face he’s rolling his eyes but the corner of his mouth is up in what could be a smile. He checks the degree of tension in Hank’s zygomaticus major and concludes it probably is.

Hank is very confusing at times; a beacon sending out mixed signals that Connor does not know how to interpret. Connor does not know why he likes being around Hank so much regardless. There is something calming about it.

You are programmed to create and maintain a relationship with your work partner to aid in the upkeep of a calm and productive work environment, whispers an insidious voice, and until other directives arrive, he is your work partner. Connor jerks his hand away from his coin like it suddenly increased in temperature and he suddenly developed the ability to feel pain from the exposure to increased temperatures. No. He chose Hank.

You’ve never chosen anything that runs directly contrary to your programming, whispers the same voice, and he searches for the process running that creates it and finds nothing.

I chose Hank, he tells himself. I chose him for myself.

There is no voice, but he can feel its doubt anyway. Or, perhaps, that is just him.

30 milliseconds elapsed.

“Actually, I was meaning to ask. Do you know when the evacuation order will get lifted? Maybe some folks are into the whole—camping out in an abandoned city thing, but it gives me the creeps.”

Connor does a quick search, finds a few theories. Nothing official from the White House. “There is no official word, but best guess is somewhere between 3 days and 1 week for the order to be lifted. That is enough time for at least a basic framework for negotiations to be decided on. I imagine it will take longer for the city to be entirely repopulated. Nationwide public opinion on androids is more positive than Detroit’s public opinion, so some people may not want to be at what will likely be the epicenter of change.”

Hank makes a noncommittal noise. “I guess that makes sense. I hope it’s sooner rather than later. Sitting at home for too long makes me antsy.” He gives Connor what Connor thinks is probably intended to be a companionable shove on the shoulder. “Like you, I guess.”

Connor pauses. He does not think their issues are precisely the same, but there are likely similarities. “…Yes. Like me.”

“Look at us, bonding like regular…” Hank uses his free hand to gesture vaguely. “Human… android…friend…people.”
Connor tries to hide his smile at that and fails miserably. “That is a truly articulate way to describe our situation.”

“Shut up, you dick,” Hank grumbles, putting his hand back on the wheel. “Nothing’s regular about this whole thing and you know it.”

“Not yet,” Connor says, and his system flashes with alarm: a statement predicated on little to no data. “But maybe we can set a good example.”

When he looks at Hank, he’s looking back, and his expression is first something like ‘terrified’, and then something a lot more like ‘fond’.


Connor doesn’t usually like maybes, honestly. He likes concrete answers and resulting action and decisive victory.

YOU DO NOT DESERVE THIS.

Maybe is too good for him and far more than good enough. He smiles at Hank, a bit shy, heart rate elevated 2 BPM from normal resting, sudden break of eye contact indicates…inconclusive; could indicate creation of emotional distance, could indicate a need to return attention to the road. “A shining paragon for those aiming for the pinnacle of human-android-friend-peopleship,” he says, looking back at the receipt on the ground underneath his left shoe. 2 boxes of ammo for a revolver, dated October 10th. One day before the anniversary of Cole’s death. He pushes the receipt away with his foot.

“Oh, fuck you,” Hank says with a wrinkled nose and a quick grin.

_I do not deserve this_, Connor thinks in tandem with the marquee, of Hank’s smile and riding in his car and being near him, and there is no maybe about it, just the quiet ring of what he knows to be true.

The lack of ambiguity is for once not comforting.

Chapter End Notes

they are in fact both smartasses and dumbasses. schrodinger's ass intelligence. reblog to make schrodinger cry about misuse of his thought experiment

i realized i should probably mention: i was inspired heavily wrt connor's need to continually do something + counting how much time it takes by psuedoanalytics' amazing fic 'suppress, deflect (advance, accept)' (which i will not link here solely because it is M rated and since this fic is T if i have any underage readers i don't want to link them to it directly; that said, if you are of age and want to read the fic or whatever, you can find it through the link on their username). i do hope i've not been too derivative--i've tried not to be-- but i did want to give credit where it was due!

as a side note this is so much longer already than i ever planned. i initially projected three chapters. they're still in the fucking car. what have i done.
HE DOES NOT NEED YOU

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: quick indirect reference to cole's death, mention of calories/diet, mention of expired food and mold (though no mold is present), self-hatred, approval-seeking behavior, hank gets angry again, mention of alcohol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrive at Hank’s house after 13 minutes and 54 seconds of driving. Less than normal, Connor thinks as he compares it against historical traffic data; there’s not anybody around to create traffic, but the snow is still a factor.

He sneaks a glance at the tires as he gets out of the car. They were replaced recently, all-weather tires, good for snow and ice. He runs the serial number on them and finds they were purchased on October 9th.

…Ah. He looks up at Hank, who is trotting to his door, and wishes for a moment, irrationally, that he could take away his hurt.

Hank notices him still standing by the car and calls, “What, don’t know how to use a front door?”

Connor raises his eyebrows and walks to him. “That would be a significant programming oversight.”

“With how you came in last time, I just had to wonder,” Hank says, unlocking his door and idling awkwardly by it. “Uh, I guess you’ve seen all this already, huh.”

“Yes.”

“Well. All right, then.” He finally opens the door properly, then walks in and immediately heads for Sumo, kneeling by his side and smiling genuinely as he barks excitedly and rests his head on Hank’s shoulder. “I wasn’t gone for that long, you sap,” he mutters with an undeniably fond voice. “And I know you’re not out of food yet.”

Sumo barks again, and Connor finally enters the house, closing the door behind him and standing behind Hank uncertainly. “May I pet him?” he asks, and Hank snorts like it's a dumb question. Perhaps it is.

“What, now you care about personal boundaries?”

Connor shifts his weight, uncomfortable, sifting through responses and finding all of them inadequate. He is aware he has violated a number of Hank’s boundaries before. Would an apology be appropriate?

Hank sighs after a few seconds of silence, standing up and clapping Connor on the shoulder in a way that is not unfriendly. “Yeah. You can pet him. I’m going to make sure he hasn’t somehow run out of dry food.”

Connor nods, then sits on the ground with his legs crossed, reaching out his palm for Sumo to sniff. “You are probably not accustomed to beings with no natural scents,” he murmurs as Sumo snuffles
around the area curiously, then lays his head down on Connor’s lap. Connor smiles involuntarily, then starts stroking Sumo’s head gently, every now and then scratching behind his ears. Weight slightly above average for his age; would benefit from a different dry food and longer walks. Shedding is at a normal rate for his breed but could be alleviated by regular brushing and use of a specialized shampoo. He enjoys long, even strokes and gets agitated by shorter strokes.

He adds research dry food brands for dog weight loss and order gentle dog brush and shampoo to his to-do list, then, impulsively, bends over to rest his head on Sumo’s. His external temperature is 102 degrees Fahrenheit. Connor cannot feel it, but it is nonetheless soothing.

“Guess you really do like dogs,” Hank says, and as Connor twists around to see him, he is surprised to see fondness in his expression again. “I thought you might’ve just said that to get on my good side.”

“I don’t like lying,” Connor says, then, with feigned surprise, “You have a good side?”

“Shut the fuck up and get out,” Hank says, but there’s the smile at the corner of his mouth again.

Connor gives one last pet to Sumo, then stands. “I was of course joking. You have a number of admirable qualities.” Leaving Hank to process that, he heads to the kitchen. On the table is a box of freezer macaroni and cheese that he surmises was recently removed from the freezer. He flips it over and frowns at the nutritional information.

“No judgment,” Hank says, “Though it does taste pretty shitty.”

“I was not judging,” Connor says, though he was calculating the impact on Hank’s recommended calorie and cholesterol intake for the day. Not to mention sodium. “Do you have anything else?”

“See, that right there is absolutely judging,” Hank says, wrinkling his nose in what Connor surmises is irritation. “And no, I don’t.”

Connor looks at him dubiously, then opens the freezer and catalogues what’s in it.

Hank scowls. “Okay, you know how I mentioned personal boundaries—”

Connor opens his fridge and catalogues its contents as well, beer water butter (expires in 10 days) ketchup mustard barbecue sauce eggs (expired 1 day ago), nodding before ducking under the arm Hank shoots out to close the fridge and opening his cabinets.

Rice (short grain) spaghetti canned corn canned diced tomatoes canned pinto beans canned chili (expired 1 year ago) chicken broth salt pepper sugar Cap’n Crunch’s Crunch Berries cereal Rice Krispies cereal.

“For fuck’s sake,” Hank says irritably, kicking the cabinet shut and glowering at Connor. “Do you listen ever?”

“Always,” Connor says. “Unless you are using ‘listen’ to mean ‘obey you’, in which case my current percentage is at approximately 54%.” He tilts his head thoughtfully, then adds, “Unweighted.”

“Christ. Just let me eat my shitty freezer mac in peace, okay?”

“Or I could cook you something.” Connor runs his discovery against a database of recipes—24 milliseconds—and selects the most filling option from what is available. “Rice pilaf. It would take 30 minutes to complete, according to the recipe.” It would be nice to have more options. He adds research automated drone grocery delivery to his to-do list and looks at Hank.
Hank gazes at him, a bit suspicious. “So, what, police robots need to cook now? Is this in your programming?”

“No,” Connor says honestly, “But as I said, I am a quick learner, and the recipe is simple. And a better dietary option than your…freezer mac.”

“God almighty,” Hank says, rubbing his temples in what Connor has recognized as a sign of stress and probably also headache. *Head massage might help, in addition to a cold cloth applied to the forehead.* “All right. Fine. Fine. But only because this shit really is awful. If you fuck it up I’m gonna—” He pauses. “I’m going to eat the freezer mac anyway and—fuck my dietary needs all up.”

Connor’s mouth twitches at the unconventional threat. “Noted.” He starts removing the items he needs from the fridge and cabinets while running through an instructional video for the recipe on Youtube. “If you wet a cloth with cold water and lay down with it over your eyes it might help your headache some.”

“How did you—God, never mind. I’m fine.”

Connor’s eyes flick to him as he opens one cabinet, then another, looking for a saucepan. He finds it, then begins searching for measuring cups. “You are exhibiting classic external signs of headache.”

“Yeah, like I have been for the past—ever.” Connor senses a dodge, but does not pry. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“I’m sure,” Connor says, taking a knife from a drawer and using it to cut 2 tablespoons of butter from the butter he removed from the fridge. Just to be safe, he dabs his fingers against the butter and licks his fingers. It should be fine for human consumption; no mold. “You might be more fine, however, if you wet a cloth with cold water and lay down with it over your eyes.” Methodically, he sets down the butter, finds a clean cloth and runs it under the faucet’s cold water setting, and hands it to Hank, who looks like he does not know whether to be irritated or just confused. “Like so.”

Hank stares at the cloth, then at Connor. “Fuck’s sake, you’re stubborn,” he finally snaps, taking the cloth and stomping over to the couch. “You sure you weren’t programmed to be a nanny or some shit?”

Connor allows himself a smile when he hears Hank lay down on the couch. He puts the saucepan on the stove, heats it to a moderate flame, and places the butter in the saucepan. “I am fairly certain, yes.”

“Yeah, just a quick learner, I know. Quickly learning how to get on my fucking nerves.”

“I think that one is a talent I was created with,” Connor responds serenely, smiling even wider when a middle finger appears over the couch.

The marquee goes blank for two milliseconds, then changes. *HE DOES NOT NEED YOU,* it tells him, and Connor’s smile falters slightly. Well.

Yes.

He knows.

But being here, taking care of him, being close. It’s…nice. It feels like he has an objective again—that security of having somewhere to go. He likes it when he is able to help Hank. He likes it when Hank smiles at him.
Hank does not need him, no, but Connor thinks he might need Hank right now.

_Selfish_, says the insidious voice from before, and he cannot bring himself to disagree.

It pisses Hank off a bit that the food is actually pretty good.

It pisses him off also that the cold cloth does help.

It pisses Hank off that Connor looks so at home cleaning his dishes, and that he throws Hank an amused smile when Hank grumbles at him about being a guest for fuck’s sake, and that he immediately sets to clearing the broken glass out of the window with a look of concentration on his face that shouldn’t be anything even fucking close to endearing. It pisses him off that Connor’s movements are self-assured when he uses the weird scraper thing from the box to prep the window’s frame, and it pisses him off that when Hank asks him how he even knows to do this if he doesn’t have the programming, he just glances at him and says, a bit abashed, “Youtube.”

Hank is technically aware that it’s ridiculous to get irritated about all these things. They are not really what anybody could call objectively irritating. But they set something itching under his skin, something that makes him want to scream and rant and make Connor not be so there and calm and perfect. Like—in an android way. Not…otherwise.

He’s sitting at the kitchen table watching, annoyance thrumming through his veins, and he doesn’t know why, and that only pisses him off even more. Hank knows that he’s not really good with people. He hasn’t really had anybody over since—well, since three years ago, when everybody was all casseroles and platitudes, and when his wife was still around, and then. After. Probably people came over when he first started getting drunk off his ass on a regular basis too.

His leg starts bouncing like it does when he gets really agitated, and he suppresses the urge to grit his teeth because his dentist says it’s his choice if he wants dentures now or when he’s eighty, and he also suppresses the urge to tell Connor to get the fuck out immediately. He knows that Connor would, which is why he can’t do it. God.

“So what are you doing after this?” Hank asks, hoping that conversation will make him less antsy and knowing it will probably make it worse.

Connor pauses in his work, where he’s putting something around the corners. Hank guesses he got those from the box too and he just missed ‘em. “The next step after inserting the glazier’s points is to apply the window glazing.”

“No, not that, you literal fuck,” Hank says exasperatedly, and the itch grows even stronger. “Like, after you’re…here.” He doesn’t say after you leave. Connor could take that as an indication Hank wants that. Which he does, but he doesn’t want Connor to think it and get all sad-faced again. _God._

“Oh.” There’s a barely-there flash of red in his LED, then yellow, yellow, blue. “I suppose I will find someplace to stay for the night.”

Hank blinks. “Like a hotel?”

Connor, very carefully and Hank is pretty sure very intentionally, goes back to working. “My access to the funds CyberLife allocated me for mission purposes expired 2 hours and 5 minutes ago.” A
quick pause. “And 13 seconds. I was anticipating that they would do so when somebody finally had
the bandwidth to update their servers.” He pulls out the pane of glass, presses it inside the window,
and methodically begins to apply the glazing or whatever to its edges. “It would be difficult to find a
manned hotel that also accepts androids, in any case. So no. Not a hotel.”

Hank slowly starts to frown. “So… with other androids?”

Yellow, then that single flash of red again. Back to yellow. Just as carefully as he’s applying the
glazing, he says, “There is not a designated living space for androids at present. I imagine that will be
sorted in the coming days along with negotiations, but probably right now the androids in the city are
staying in… otherwise… unoccupied spaces. Maybe the church for those who can fit.” He takes the
scrapey thing again and starts smoothing out the stuff he was using. “It may be best for me not to go
there.”

“Why?” The itch grows stronger, stronger, and Hank clenches his fists on the table.

“I am not sure I would be welcome.” His LED is yellow, but his face is completely expressionless.
“They are all well aware of my previous function.”

Hank wants to smash that perfectly smooth, equally expressionless new windowpane into tiny
fucking pieces. “Where did you stay last night then?”

Connor’s mouth parts, but he doesn’t say anything. Hank isn’t sure whether it would make him more
or less mad if Connor would just fucking look at him instead of at the damn window. Finally, he
says, “I do not think you would like my answer.”

“I would like you not answering even fucking less, I assure you,” Hank growls, and Connor finally
sets down the tool and turns to face him, yellow yellow yellow. Hank thinks he could grow to hate
the color.

“An alleyway,” Connor says, gaze steady. “I found an alleyway 3.61 miles away from the site of the
protest. Low traffic, low risk of discovery. I stayed there until I left for the police station to clean my
clothes.”

“An alleyway,” Hank parrots, and the itch ignites into fire. “You slept in an alleyway.”

“I do not sleep,” Connor says. Hank could punch him. He doesn’t have that fancy preconstruct shit,
but he has a great imagination. He can imagine punching him so well. “But that is where I spent my
time, yes. I do not experience cold, and the risk of being accosted was negligible. It was just a place
to be.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he snarls, and Connor’s mouth shuts with an almost audible click. “For the love
of—why didn’t you—you could’ve called me, you fuckin’—” He runs an agitated hand through his
hair and gets up from his chair to pace.

Connor has the audacity to look confused. “Why would I call you?”

Hank stops in place, outraged, then storms over to him, looming over him. “What the fuck do you
mean why would you call me? Because we’re fucking friends, you absolute asshole! I would’ve let
you stay!” He almost doesn’t realize his hands are moving to Connor’s shoulders until he feels stiff
fabric underneath his fingers. “I would’ve… let you stay,” he repeats, less loud, and he’s surprised to
realize that it’s the truth.

Or maybe not so surprised, really.
Connor’s eyes are wide and very, very brown, as he stares up at him. “Oh,” he says, and his eyebrows knit, and his LED goes yellow blue, then yellow again.

“Fucking oh, he says,” Hank mumbles, face twisting. It’s weird. He doesn’t feel so itchy anymore. He moves to step away, but Connor places a single, delicate hand on his, and he stops, the itch fading into nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Connor says, still staring at him with those dumb big nice eyes. (No. Not nice. Just…dumb. And big.) “I should have called.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Hank says.

“Would you…” Connor hesitates. “Would it be all right if…I stayed tonight? Until…maybe until housing is sorted? It should only be a few days. I’ll do my best to be unobtrusive.”

Hank snorts. “You couldn’t be unobtrusive for all the Youtube tutorials in the world.” He takes his free hand and briefly places it on Connor’s before realizing how fucking weird it is to make this—hand sandwich. He takes his hands away, both of them, and steps back with an awkward cough. “Yeah. You can stay.”

Connor’s answering smile is quick but dazzling. Hank doesn’t even know why he was so irritated before by him being here.

Maybe because he was going to leave, offers up an incredibly unhelpful voice. Fuck off and die, he tells it, and also go fuck yourself.

They stare at each other for a few weird moments before Connor asks, “Have you recently experienced a runny nose, congestion, sneezing, headaches, or fatigue?”

“What the fuck?” Hank asks in response, and, with ever-present eloquence, “You’re a headache.”

A ghost of the smile from before. “May I perhaps recommend wetting a cloth with cold water—”

“Fuck off,” Hank says with a chuckle he probably should have stopped himself from doing. He doesn’t really laugh around people. “Unobtrusive my ass.”

He’s smiling again, and his LED is blessedly blue. Damn heartburn. He should delivery drone the shit out of some Tums. “You should laugh more often, Hank.”

Tums and Prilosec. That’s the one that did the commercials with the purple when he was a kid, right? Yeah. Both. “Maybe you should give me more to laugh about, then.” Wait. Shit. That sounds, like, accidental flirty, right? That’s not just him? Shit. “Like your—goofy face or—doing a bad impression of a normal person, or—” He’s still smiling. God damn him. “How about actually you go be not in front of me.”

“Of course, Hank,” Connor says in what is hard to not hear as a patronizing tone. His eyes sweep around the room, thoughtful. “I could clean.”

“How about not that either,” Hank says hurriedly. He doesn’t need a play-by-play analysis of what organisms are living in his sink. “Have you ever seen Star Trek?”

“No,” Connor says, vaguely bemused, and before his LED even has a chance to turn yellow, Hank is pushing him to the couch.

“Well now that’s what you’re doing. You need shit to do, right?” Hank gestures at the TV, already
settling in his spot and selecting the video app. “Star Trek.”

Connor sits down, back razor-straight, and Hank decides they can talk about how not to look like there’s a stick up his ass later. His LED has gone that damn yellow again, and Hank punches his shoulder to get his attention. “Nope. None of that. Only Leonard Nimoy now.”

“Okay,” Connor says, eyes on the screen, and when Hank looks over an hour later and sees him engrossed, LED peaceful blue and leaning slightly towards the TV screen, the itch starts up again. Not much. Just…a little.

He’ll get some hydrocortisone too, Hank resolves. Maybe some more whiskey.

He sinks further into the couch cushion and doesn’t look at Connor anymore. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked him to stay, he thinks. We’re friends, but I’ve only known him for—not long, what, a few days? Maybe I shouldn’t have told him he could stay.

But then he thinks about Connor in an alleyway in the snow, endlessly counting down the hours and minutes and seconds, and his heart clenches uncomfortably. Nah. He needed someplace to be. And they’re friends. So.

He needs a beer or four and maybe one of those stupid cold towels. Right. He gets up from his comfortable place on the couch and ignores the itch buzzing electric through his skin.

Chapter End Notes

hank is having a lot of trouble working out his shit so he'll probably continue to oscillate between awkward, friendly, and irritable for a bit. he doesn't know why he wants this android around and he would prefer not to want this android around so he will on occasion be a bit dickish and fickle, or 'dickle' as the kids call it (they don't) until he starts to understand. don't worry hank, you will eventually learn to people again. or at least to android. one or both

i came up with a random list of ingredients that he might have had that would keep for a bit (or not) and then did, indeed, run them through a ingredients-to-recipe site. it came up with pilaf so pilaf it is. i also had to look up how to repair a window. better connor than me, and also better someone else than me to describe how it's done tbh but i am devoted to my artistry aka unnecessary pedantic process analysis for things that i do not actually know about

also hank totally had a crush on spock as a kid, you know he's secretly all about that logical science talk babey
HE DOES NOT WANT YOU HERE

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: alcohol mention, brief mention of demons/hell, hank gets very irrationally rude + mean and yells (he later apologizes but it causes some tension), mention of compulsive continuous activity and compulsions, reference to canonical suicidal ideation, self-hatred, scrupulosity-typical guilt, brief fatalistic humor from hank

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hank absolutely shouldn’t have told Connor he could stay.

Hank is all prepared to settle in for a marathon, but after two hours Connor snaps out of whatever Trek trance he was in and tells Hank that watching television for so long without a break isn’t healthy for his ocular health and could worsen his headache. He recommends a ten-minute break, ‘at least’, and confiscates the remote to enforce it. He also turns on the lights and asks if Hank might be interested in a head massage.

A head massage, for fuck’s sake. Hank declines three times before Connor stops asking.

During the break Connor also pesters Hank about ordering food for tomorrow, recommends a list of shelf-stable staples, and asks Hank how he feels about switching Sumo’s dry food. He also successfully manages to dodge all of Hank’s attempts to get the remote back. It’s when he starts talking all contemplative about the benefits of reusable icepacks that Hank finally gives in and just tells Connor his login information for the delivery service and says not to go too wild. And to get Tums and Prilosec and hydrocortisone and whiskey. Three bottles. Final offer.

Connor blinks and asks if he’s sure, and when Hank says yeah he’s sure if it gets Connor to shut up, Connor smiles all slow and bright and says he’ll try to ensure Hank doesn’t regret it, which is a dumb thing to say because Hank already does. He also asks about dog shampoo. Hank asks if the ten minutes is up yet. Connor says 53 seconds left because he’s a pedantic ass. Hank makes another grab for the remote and Connor still keeps it away and they wait the damn 53 seconds.

Connor enforces a 5 minute break after every episode, after that, and he also tells Hank after his third beer that he shouldn’t have a fourth because Connor has mapped his alcohol intake and risk for hangover based off his buy history and—Hank isn’t listening anymore, but basically Connor is saying he’ll be at a higher risk for hangover if he goes for number four, and Hank says that’s the point, and Connor says the point is to get a hangover? all dubious and prim sarcasm and Hank punches him on the shoulder again and says it’s the principle of the thing and Connor says he’s pretty sure if there’s a principle here it’s that you can avoid hangovers with responsible alcohol consumption. And Hank gets the beer and Connor looks all sad again and his LED is yellow like it’s the worst fuckin’ thing that Hank is ignoring his dumb advice and he’s not drunk enough to not feel like a rotten person for that, he never is, so he puts the beer away and Connor lights up like some fucking android Christmas tree all blue blue blue and happy eyes and Hank wants to scream and not stop and also to touch Connor’s shoulder again.

The worst part though, the very worst part, is that at some point Hank falls asleep, which brings him to where he is now: waking up with a start in Connor’s arms, being carried like the world’s ugliest blushing bride across the threshold to his bedroom.
“Wha’ the fuck,” he slurs, sleep-confused and oddly content, but mostly just confused.

Connor doesn’t even seem to be fazed. “Ah, Hank. I apologize; I did not mean to wake you.”

Hank blinks up at Connor, vision blurry and still very fucking confused about why Connor is recreating the middle scene of a bad romcom. “Hwuh?”

“You fell asleep on the couch; I ascertained doing so might cause problems for your neck in the morning, so I decided to carry you to bed.” He’s at the bed now, laying Hank down with a gentleness Hank isn’t sure he’s ever felt and very fucking much does not need right now or ever. “I’ll see you in the morning, Hank. Please try to get back to sleep.”

“You—can’t just do that shit,” Hank says, certain that he’d be the most awake he’s ever been in his life if he weren’t so, so tired. Connor is tugging at the corner of his blanket and bringing it to rest over Hank. Dear God. “I’m not a baby.”

“No,” Connor says, calm, too calm. “I did not think you were.”

“You need to quit it,” Hank says, pulling the blanket over himself further and snuggling into his pillow. “With. With the everything you do. The—perfect android and—only three beers and television breaks and—nice big dumb eyes and good smiles.” His eyes are so heavy. “Just stop. Quit it all the way.”

He can hear the smile in Connor’s voice, but his eyes are too closed to see the real deal, which is a shame ‘cause his smiles are nice. “I should quit everything I do all the way?”

“Yeah,” Hank breathes into his pillow, and falls asleep.

He’s not awake to hear or see the smile drop, or to hear Connor murmur, “Maybe you’re right.” He wouldn’t have known what to say if he did.

He is, however, very much awake at 8 in the morning on a day off, with a foggy memory of being in a princess carry and the sun bright in his eyes, and he is very aware that both of these things are because of the dumb android he dumbly let stay in his dumb house.

“Good morning,” Connor says, and Hank wants to scream again, he sounds so goddamn chipper. “It’s 8:32 AM on Saturday, November 13th, 2038. You’ve been asleep for precisely 8 hours and 3 minutes.”

Hank stares at him dully. “No seconds? How unlike you.”

“32 seconds,” Connor says. “I was attempting more natural dialogue.”

“You failed. I’m going back to sleep.”

“Oversleep can lead to fatigue during the day and headaches. Also, I’ve made breakfast, and it will likely be best served warm.”

God damn it all. “You’re not an android at all, are you? You’re a demon sent solely to torment me. Or I’m in Hell. Or both. Do they have androids in Hell?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Connor says, a bit too quiet, and Hank curses himself for being a dick and Connor for being around to hear him being a dick and this entire dumbfuck situation for being what he’s living in.
“Okay. Yeah. Lemme just—bathroom.”

“Of course.”

Hank gets up and stumbles to the bathroom, relieves himself, washes his hands and brushes his teeth, and it’s with lingering peppermint in his mouth that he finally wakes up more and realizes something very suspicious.

He leaves the bathroom and tells himself it’s way too early to be angry.

Seeing the rest of the house confirms his suspicions. God. God, it’s so early. “Connor. Did you clean the house last night.”

Connor glances at him from the stove, from where he’s plating what appears to be a breakfast burrito, with several others in a Ziploc bag. Is he freezing some? Is he fucking Pinterest? That site doesn’t even exist anymore. “Yes.”

Sumo trots up, and for all Hank feels like pulling his hair out, he still gives him a morning pat, then freezes. “Did you give Sumo a bath.”

Connor is beginning to look a bit uncertain. “Yes.”

“Why.” Hank feels like he’s going to vibrate out of his skin.

“Well, I—”

“You’re not my fucking babysitter, Connor!” Hank finally snaps loudly. “I’m 53 fucking years old! I can take care of myself, I—what, do you think—is this an earning your keep thing? Some kind of weird fucking android guilt complex? Is that what this is? You make me food, you clean my house, you clean my dog, is it, like—you can just be here, for fuck’s sake, you don’t need to act like my caretaker!”

Yelling ended up being nowhere as satisfying as he hoped. Connor is just standing there, completely frozen, with a plate with a breakfast burrito and some sliced fruit on it. God. God, fuck, he’s an awful person, fuck—

“I’m sorry,” Connor whispers, still frozen, looking all the world for a robot if it weren’t for how he also looks like he’s going to cry. Hank is absolutely going to Hell if there is one. Probably also if there isn’t one. Fuck. “I tried…” He clears his throat. “I tried not doing anything for…a while.” He finally moves, but just to set the plate down on the counter next to him, like he’s not sure Hank wants it. “I scanned the living room 48 times—” He clears his throat again, which is even worse to hear when Hank knows he doesn’t need to do it. “I don’t think you need a caretaker, and it wasn’t out of guilt. I just wanted something to do. I’m sorry.”

Hank wants to say he’s sorry, wants to say he’s always in a bad mood in the mornings and especially when it’s early, wants to say he has no idea how to deal with positive gestures and that he always drives people away because he’s like this and worse. He says, instead, “Why didn’t you watch TV or something?”

“It’s yours,” Connor says like that’s a reasonable explanation, and it makes Hank want to scream again and also to cry, because for him it probably is a reasonable explanation.

“In the future, you’re welcome to it,” Hank says, and feels the familiar bone-tired exhaustion of being done with being awake and being alive and being around to hurt people that try to care for him. He wants to go back to sleep. He wants whiskey and his revolver and a single bullet. It’s so
very fucking early. “I’m sorry. I’m…not a morning person. At all.”

Connor relaxes like that’s any kind of explanation at all and not the biggest fucking copout and offers a tentative smile that makes Hank feel like an even shittier person than he already knows he is. “It’s fine, Hank.” He picks up the plate again and offers it like an olive branch. “It’s a breakfast burrito with…” He sounds like he’s going to list off the ingredients and their dietary impact and all that shit, but he hesitates. “It’s a breakfast burrito.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Hank takes the plate and slumps into his chair. He’s sure it’s good, because Connor has proven himself to be ridiculously proficient, but he can’t taste it at all.

Connor could be watching Hank eat the breakfast he made for signs of whether he likes it. He did, in fact, for 10 seconds. Hank just looks tired and sad, and Connor knows it’s his fault somehow. He should have just done more scans. Went into his deep diagnostic stasis more than once. He should have done…not what he did.

It is not news to him that he is a disappointment, he supposes.

He could be watching Hank. Instead, he gazes at the marquee scrolling garishly over Hank’s walls. HE DOES NOT WANT YOU HERE, it says. He wonders why it continues to state the blatantly obvious.

His access for the police station might still be active. He could stay there.

He waits for Hank to finish eating, and he doesn’t notice his hand has drifted to the coin in his pocket until he feels the hard edges press against his fingers. If he were human, perhaps he might be able to press so hard his skin turned red. That might be nice.

He stares at the plate once it’s done, itching to wash it but not knowing if he’s allowed, and Hank finally sighs and takes it to the sink himself to rinse, then puts it on a towel to dry and moves onto the pan Connor had used to sauté the filling. There’s sound—the water and scrub brush against metal and Hank’s soft breathing and Sumo snuffling from the living room—but somehow it still seems too quiet. Connor increases the sensitivity of his audio unit. Birds outside; there are two black-capped chickadees (Poecile atricapillus, family Paridae, order Passeriformes) within a 3-yard radius of Hank’s home. An automated street sweeper picking up garbage will be passing by in 1 minute and 13 seconds. It is still very quiet.

“I will leave for the police station within the hour,” Connor says, and the scrub brush stops, and then the water, and then it’s even more quiet.

“What?”

Connor doesn’t want to see Hank angry again, so he does not look at him. “I should be able to stay there until the evacuation order is lifted. By that time there is a high likelihood android housing will also be sorted. If not I will figure out an alternate solution. No alleyways, I promise.”

There’s a whispered, “Shit,” then Hank is sitting next to him, patting his hands dry on his boxers. “Connor, I know I got pissed off for no reason so…I get it, and all, but you don’t have to—”

“Hank. You do not want me here.” It’s the first time he’s ever voiced one of the notifications out
loud. It does not make it go away. It also does not make him feel any better.

“What makes you think that?” Connor feels a hand on his, just briefly. “Hey, c’mon, look at me.”

He does against his better judgment. Hank looks a bit miserable and very, very tired. Connor knows he did this. He knows he should have left yesterday. Selfish, selfish, to stay just because he likes being around Hank, to stay even knowing that he does not bring good things.

He does not know what to say to get Hank, who is kind, to acknowledge that Connor should leave, so he falls back on what he knows: analysis. “You are a kind person, Lieutenant, and I performed enough research during the evening to make it clear to me that sleeping in an alleyway has an emotional impact on humans that it does not necessarily have on androids. It makes sense that when I said that is where I stayed for the evening that it would have a similar emotional impact on you, and because you are kind, you offered to remove me from the situation. That does not mean it is what you want. Additionally, I repaid your kindness with insensitivity by continuing to violate your personal boundaries without your permission. While it may not have been my intent, I caused you emotional distress by intimating that you were incapable of performing basic functions for yourself. And. Your upper eyelids are drooping, your eyebrows are slightly furrowed. Lip corners pulled down. I have made you sad.” He pauses. “You do not want me here. And I do not want to be here if I will only cause you emotional distress. So I will leave for the police station within the hour.”

“Christ, kid,” Hank says, sounding just as miserable now as he looks. “That’s not—this isn’t your fault. I’ve been a total dick to you because I’m a grumpy old man who doesn’t know how to—process shit—but. That’s not on you. All you’ve done is tried to help and sure, yeah, you’re an interfering prick, and—shit, I didn’t mean—” He digs his hand into his hair and exhales roughly. “You’ve been…fussy, maybe. But I know it’s comin’ from a good place. If I’m not in a good place to receive it, that ain’t you. I’ve got a laundry list of issues, is all.”

Connor thinks about that, frowning, then says, “But if my being here aggravates those issues then—”

“Not you,” Hank interrupts. “I’d have those issues if you weren’t here. I’d have those issues if you were staying in the police station just because I never learned how to play well with others. They’re just a part of me right now, and—that doesn’t make it right, but it doesn’t make it your fault, either. If you weren’t here I’d probably just be sleeping right now, and—getting a headache, like you said, and—waking up in the afternoon and having whiskey for breakfast and a gun for dinner.” He winces almost immediately, and Connor sees his stress level rise. “Shit. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Fatalistic humor is bad, I know.”

“I am aware of your history of suicidal ideation,” Connor says slowly, processing. “Are you saying you do want me here?”

“I’m saying I probably shouldn’t be in charge of that shit,” Hank says after a moment. “Because what I want isn’t—probably what’s best for me. Or so I hear. So, uh…don’t run with this or anything, but…maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have somebody around who actually has my best interests in mind. ‘Cause the person who’s usually here doesn’t.” He coughs awkwardly. “And you’re not awful company either. We could…watch more Trek, or whatever. Take Sumo for a walk.” His leg starts to bounce under the table as Connor continues to not respond. “Not have this conversation anymore.”

Ambiguity again. Connor isn’t completely certain how he feels about an answer to his question that essentially amounts to ‘not exactly, but I’m at risk of self-destructive behavior if you are not present, and also I am a very big fan of Star Trek’.

“That yellow LED is gonna drive me bonkers, I fuckin’ swear,” Hank mutters, leg increasing in
Connor looks at the notification. It does not change, but for the first time he wonders if it might not be completely true. “Okay.” He allows for a 3-second pause for comedic effect. “You’re not a self-righteous dick all the time.” Then he rises from his seat and walks to the sink to start re-washing the frying pan. There is a rather large patch of egg residue stuck to the rim that’s been bothering him.

“Fuck you too, Mary Poppins,” Hank says, but good-natured now, and clearly relieved. “I’ll queue up the TV. Do you wanna watch more Star Trek or…something else?”

“Something else,” Connor decides. “We can do more Star Trek later.”

“All right, bossy.” Hank treads to the couch. Connor re-washes the plate too for good measure. “We could watch a crime procedural and make fun of their incompetent police work, maybe? Unless you got any other ideas, but that sounds like a good Saturday to me.”

“No,” Connor says, drying his hands on a towel like a civilized person and smiling over at Hank. “That sounds wonderful.”

He stops them after an hour of jabbing at baseless psychology and implausible forensics, and Hank stretches and brushes a hand against his shoulder for precisely 1.4 seconds, and he does not complain, but he does smile. “5 minutes, yeah?”

“4 minutes and 52 seconds, technically,” Connor says with a smile of his own.

Hank laughs, and Connor savors the sound. “Fussy.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I don’t hate it, though.”

“Good,” Connor says. “It would actually be quite difficult to ‘quit everything I do all the way’, you see.”

Hank chokes on nothing and glares at Connor’s bright grin, murmuring an accusatory, “Ass.” He doesn’t say anything after that, busy exhibiting classic signs of embarrassment for the remaining 4 minutes and 2 seconds, but the silence is no longer too quiet at all.

Chapter End Notes

all righty sorry to make another chapter of Hank Blows Up For No Particular Reason, but they still really hadn't had a proper talk so i figured it'd happen. this should be largely the last of hank getting irritable bc he doesn't understand his feelings without them talking it out, but there will still be stuff from both of their issues, i'm afraid!

i had like seven tabs up trying to ascertain what birds might be around in michigan in winter to make noise in the morning. if i'm wrong and for some reason you know that please don't tell me, google can only take me so far in my lifelong mission to Not Really
Know What I'm Talking About. or do, but please do know that i am already the most aware of anyone that i'm full of shit

they are incidentally watching criminal minds bc i like it and also because i will absolutely find and reference all of the things i can think of that include stiff-talking genius boys because goddammit i need to amuse myself somehow and my bar is so very low
YOU CANNOT STAY

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: brief reference to dietary restrictions, guilt and self-hatred, mention of alcohol and drunkenness, worry about abandonment, negative self-talk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Television turns out to be an adequate distraction. With it on an external device, Connor cannot watch it at an increased speed—at least, not without Hank stomping on his foot and giving him a dirty glance—which means that he is obligated to be there for the duration of the episode. Sometimes his mind drifts and he feels compelled to scan something in the room, or to add another thing to his to-do list, but usually then he can look up trivia about the show he’s watching, or read the entire Wikipedia article about one of the actors, and it feels enough like gathering information that he can return his attention to the show.

When Hank is watching with him, and when the episode is not at a particularly tense moment, he is also sometimes willing to discuss the events onscreen. Hank is not unexpectedly somewhat prone to being stuck in the past, which means that his viewing habits largely consist of sports and old television and movies, which also means he's seen everything he shows Connor before and has a lot of thoughts. When Connor asks why he doesn't watch newer material Hank huffs, shaking his head. “I used to laugh at the Boomers for thinking new shit was awful, but.” He spreads his hands in a sort of shrug. “Sometimes new shit is awful.”

“Yes,” Connor agrees, thinking of standing at the top of a ship and feeling guilt for the first time and far from the last.

Hank scoffs. “Please. It’s not like you’ve ever had to sit through the 2031 remake of Iron Man. They should’ve known it would never work without RDJ.”

“I could watch it,” Connor offers; it could be an objective for the evening while Hank sleeps.

“Oh, hell no. I don’t hate a single person in this world that much.”

Connor privately adds it to his to-do list anyway. Hank is amusing when he’s commiserating. Connor likes the way he talks with his hands.

Connor also discovers that paper books work well to keep his hands and mind active. Digital devices can be scanned and integrated into his memory banks quickly, but having to turn the page slows down the process somewhat. Hank doesn’t have all that many paper books, but he has some. Some sci-fi, some graphic novels. One romance novel that Hank swears his wife left behind.

(Connor blinks innocently and asks why so many of his fingerprints are over it. Hank talks with only his middle finger, then, and Connor smiles calmly and tells him he won’t tell anyone, and Hank delivers a second middle finger, red in the face and eyes averted. Connor ‘accidentally’ orders its sequel and leaves it in a place where Hank can see it, and he grins delightedly when Hank picks it up and goes an immediate, splotchy beet red before going over to Connor and whacking him lightly with it several times, spewing a number of insults that Connor knows he does not mean. He still reads it, though. Connor can tell by the dog-eared pages and the crease in the spine.)
Connor thinks that perhaps the best distraction, though, is his ongoing experiment. He’s been cataloguing things that make Hank smile. He still does not quite understand why he enjoys seeing Hank smile or laugh so much—perhaps just because it’s such a rarity, or perhaps because he knows that Hank has so much pain in his life and he likes seeing Hank being able to take a break from it, if only for a few moments. Perhaps it is something that does not require understanding. He has had to content himself with not understanding a number of things about Hank and his interest in him, but it does not bother him as much as other unsolved puzzles might.

Hank smiles a bit dreamily when Spock comes onscreen, but scowls when this is pointed out. He smiles when Connor makes him breakfast and it tastes good. He smiles when Connor makes a joke that takes him off guard, and when Connor plays with Sumo, and when Connor returns one of his shoulder pats, and when Connor smiles back at him. Connor has tested all of these items out rigorously, and is immensely pleased to find it paying dividends to the tune of as much as a 63% increase in smiles from when they first met.

It takes him 5 minutes and 49 seconds of intense evening contemplation to conclude that, while the smiles themselves are very, very nice, he is likely seeking the happiness that belies them moreso than the physical expression. He likes seeing Hank happy. He likes playing a part in making Hank that much happier. It is, he decides, a worthwhile goal. Hank deserves happiness, and while Connor is under no illusions about himself being the reason for it—it is just that Hank likes good breakfast and jokes and Sumo and shoulder pats and people smiling at him—he is grateful still to be able to deliver these things personally.

He is aware that while it is selfish, as always, even deluded, part of this is because he feels special when Hank smiles at him.

It is at the end of this deliberation that he decides on a new primary objective. He is sure to have other missions, of course—after 5 days from the time of the revolution, the evacuation order was finally lifted, so work resumes tomorrow—but this can be a private objective. Just for him. Nobody else needs to know about it, after all.

He sets his primary objective to HELP HANK TO BE HAPPY, and while it is a choice that technically falls outside of his programming, he somehow does not feel guilty about it.

“Well, it is Wednesday, November 17th, 2038. It is 5:45 AM, and despite my best attempts to make you go to bed earlier so you could sleep a full 8 hours, you have been asleep for 7 hours and 52 minutes.”

Hank peeks his eyes open slowly, looking at Connor, then closes them. After 2 seconds, he yawns and gestures at Connor as if to say, go on.

“And 51 seconds,” Connor adds.

Hank gives him the ok sign, sitting up in bed. “Don’t know how I’d get out of the bed in the morning without knowing how many seconds I was in it,” he says, clearly sarcastic, but also not annoyed. He yawns again, stretching, and Connor smiles at him. (Re-testing data points on a periodic basis is key to forming any good theory.)

Hank gives a sleepy smile back, confused, and Connor silently adds a tick mark to his running tally. “What the fuck are you so cheerful about so early?”

“Nothing in particular.” This is true. He just likes this, is all. “I’m making an eggs and bacon
sandwich as a special treat for the first day back to work.”

Hank brightens. “Oh, *fuck* yes.”


“Less *fuck* yes, but still some.” Hank waves Connor out. “All right. Get out, Robocop, I need to get dressed.”

“Shower first,” Connor reminds on his way out, “It’s been two days,” and Hank makes a face at him, but nods, stumbling on his first step out of bed.

Connor is also very pleased that his plan of setting regular reminders—or, as Hank calls it, ‘nonstop harassment’—for important things like a consistent bedtime and meals have aided Hank in keeping a better schedule. He wasn’t completely certain Hank’s circadian rhythm would adjust in time for the morning shift today, but Hank’s coordination is approximately 39% better today than the first morning Connor observed him, and he isn’t slurring his speech as much. He’ll need more data to confirm, but thus far a success, Connor thinks happily, and makes a note in his ongoing observation log.

He is, of course, already dressed in his uniform. He freshly laundered it last night. He is still not technically certain if he is allowed back, but he supposes he can always come back here for the day if the captain says he’s fired.

(A pang of panic shoots through him, and his grip on the glass he’s setting out with orange juice—another rare treat—tightens. It’s—fine. If that’s what Captain Fowler says. He will…manage. He has a primary objective now unrelated to detective work, so it’s. Fine.)

“The *fuck* did that ever do to you?” Hank asks, having stopped in the hallway on the way back to his room. Probably getting a change of clothes. He refuses to walk around in a towel in front of Connor, which Connor thinks is silly.

Connor looks down at the death grip he has on the glass and loosens it. “I thought it had sided with my old mentor in order to kill me. It is a pity that it will now die giving birth to my children while I become a space dictator.”

Hank’s face splits into a confused but bright smile. “You’re so fucking weird. Good reference, *awful* application.” Connor mentally cheers and adds another tally to the appropriate category.

“You showed me the movie,” Connor calls at the now-closed bedroom door, “So I’m pretty sure you’re now responsible for any nonstandard applications that arise from the incident.” They had spent a good portion of yesterday marathoning Star Wars. With regular breaks, though, of course.

“No way,” Hank’s voice comes from the bedroom. “I’m not taking responsibility for where your mind goes. Ever.”

Connor sets the glass of orange juice down and straightens the napkin next to the plate. “Can you take responsibility for where we go this morning instead, then? If you continue at this rate, we will arrive at 6:34 AM.”

“That’s fucking nothing, Connor,” Hank’s voice says irritably.

“In comparison to your normal time of arrival, yes. However, Captain Fowler always arrives precisely at 6:30 AM. If we are earlier than him, I can record his face when he sees you already at your desk when he walks in, and I can then send that recording to you.”
There’s a silence, then the clattering of hangers. Hank walks out of the door with haphazardly picked clothes. “You’re a genius,” he says with an incredibly devious smile, then walks into the bathroom.

Connor makes a new tentative category for observation. Hank smiled when Connor suggests mischief. He will have to tread carefully on this one, but with cautious application, he could have a new addition to his ever-growing theory. He adds a note to keep an eye on this to his to-do list, and his gaze briefly catches on the item that he’s continued to shove to the bottom with each new item. Cost/benefit analysis. As he’s done since getting here, he disregards it for the time being.

He hears the shower turn on and turns to the stove to begin scrambling the eggs and frying the bacon. They should be ready approximately when Hank is done and dressed.

With his head downturned like this to focus on the frying pan, the marquee rests just above the stovetop. YOU CANNOT STAY, it says, just as it has for the past 3 days, 12 hours, 39 minutes, and 42 seconds.

But for now I can, he tells it, and tries not to think about the future when it is inevitably correct.

Hank has no idea what the fuck has happened to him.

Objectively, all he did was tell Connor he’d try to lighten up on him. He thought, you know, maybe if I make a promise to him, I’ll think more before snapping at him. Maybe try and have a bit of fun with him, who knows.

He did not expect to be in a shower at ass o’clock AM getting ready to go to work at only-slightly-less ass o’clock AM. Christ, he clearly must have gone even crazier than normal somewhere in the past 4 days. But—once he allowed himself to open up a bit, to just relax and talk with Connor, well. He’s a lot better than Hank had accounted for. He’s still obviously this weird stilted anxious busybody, but he also has pretty good commentary on old TV, and he jokes around more, and he can be a little shit but it’s actually pretty damn funny when it’s not aimed at Hank. And—okay, he’ll never tell Connor this because Connor would probably throw a full-on party or at least just smirk at him all self-satisfied, but the whole schedule thing and eating three meals of not junk food thing and not getting black-out drunk every night thing has him feeling…better than normal. It's kinda nice being able to wake up, even if it’s way too early, and have Connor smiling at him like he does so much now and be able to talk to someone over breakfast.

But maybe more than all of that—or maybe just a combination of all of that—is that he’s pretty sure Connor genuinely cares. About him. Like, as a person. The busybody shit was a lot more irritating when it seemed like it was just Connor trying to get Hank to follow dumb rules just cause they’re there, but—he thinks Connor just actually wants him to feel better. And that’s…also kinda nice. He hasn’t really. Had that. For a while.

There’s a part of him that’s screaming terrified at all this, honestly. He knows what happens when he gets invested, when he lets people in. And he knows that people don’t stay around him long. For fuck’s sake, Connor being around has always been on a timeline, just until the android housing gets established, and that’s gotta be coming up sometime. But when Connor makes some dumb joke about choking orange juice or when he smiles soft and happy or even when Hank just hears him telling how many fucking seconds he’s been asleep when that means absolutely jackshit, sinking into that is just…just.
Nice. Yeah.

It’s not that he doesn’t technically have friends. Or used to, anyway. Fowler was his friend, maybe
still is under the very loosest definition of the word. He used to have other friends on the force before
he became, in Fowler’s words, ‘an unmitigated HR disaster’, and he used to have…family friends,
when…

Nope. This morning is going okay, so far. Don’t fuck it up. Don’t fuck this up.

(He knows, though, that it’s only a matter of time. Pretty much his entire life has been just him
fucking good things up.)

Anyway, point is, he knows technically how friends work. But this feels like something better
somehow. Which is a dumbass thing to say after knowing somebody like a week and a half, but he
also knows that he wouldn’t be so freaked out about messing this up if he didn’t have some sense
that this were important in a way he doesn’t quite get and doesn’t really want to look into.

He dries off looking at the mirror. Connor’s been fucking with his post-its again. He’s been adding a
new one every day. Today’s says ‘It is statistically unlikely that every day will be bad. Today may be
a good one.’

He can only hope. Hank’s never had great odds.

After getting dressed and eating breakfast, Hank gets in the car with Connor. The roads are still
pretty deserted; the evacuation order was only lifted yesterday, and people aren’t all in a hurry to
travel back. About five minutes out from the station, Hank notices Connor’s LED is yellow.

“What’s up?Analyzing the number of dust particles on my dashboard or something?” Hank jokes.

“No,” Connor responds, sounding a bit distant. When Hank glances at him, he’s rubbing at that
damn coin in his pocket. That usually doesn’t mean anything good for him. “I was analyzing the
probability that I will be allowed to continue work at the DPD.”

“Huh?” Hank frowns. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“For me to continue working there, they would have to be all right with hiring a new employee
formally, including negotiating a working pay,” Connor recites, and Hank’s heart falls a little,
because this sounds well-practiced, which means Connor has been thinking about this a lot. “They
would also be hiring an employee who technically has the choice to disobey orders. And, perhaps
most relevant.” He pauses, chewing on his lip a little. That’s one of Hank’s least favorite nervous tics
of Connor’s. Makes him itchy. “Perhaps most relevant is that I have only been on one formal case
with this department, and it was a massive failure.”

Hank’s frown deepens. “What do you mean failure? You basically saved a whole bunch of people
and helped a civil rights movement.”

“That was not the purpose of the case,” Connor says, looking at his lap. “Essentially, I do not have
much in the way of a proven track record.”

“But you—” Hank makes a frustrated noise. “That’s so fucking dumb. If Fowler tries to fire you I’ll
fight him.”

He glances over at Connor again to see a slow, small smile spread on his face. “I think that would be
inadvisable for a number of reasons.”
“I can fight him verbally?” Hank tries, starting to smile also despite himself.

“Might I recommend instead a polite conversation?”

“You might. I might not listen.” Connor’s smile is wider now, and he’s shaking his head. Hank gives him a pat on the shoulder. Lately he’s been doing a lot of those. He is not looking into that impulse especially hard. “Look. I doubt it’ll take beating up Fowler to get him to realize what I know, which is that you’re a good cop.”

Connor ducks his head, smiling at his lap, and Hank makes a mental note to take one of the Tums from the container Connor had helpfully stowed in the glovebox.

“All I’m saying,” Hank adds, “Is that if it does take beating him up, he totally has it coming and I am totally willing to be the hands of fate. Out of the sheer goodness of my heart, you understand.”

Connor doesn’t laugh too often, but he does now, a little scandalized thing where he wrinkles his face at Hank. He’s saying something, probably something discouraging, but Hank doesn’t hear. He’s replaying that laugh on a loop in his head.

Nobody else gets to hear that, I bet, he thinks with a sudden rush of pride.

He doesn’t look into that thought the hardest of all. Probably nothing interesting behind that door anyway. Probably nothing he wants to see.

Connor touches his shoulder to get his attention—they’re at the station—and Hank comes back to himself with a start. Connor’s hand is always a bit warmer than Hank expects. Not that he’s ever expecting anything. Just. Yeah.

“Let’s head out, Vader,” Hank says, hoping he doesn’t sound distracted. “We have anywhere from 0 to 1+ asses to kick.”

“Not just 0 to 1? Who are the other potential candidates?”

“Reed might be here,” Hank says, holding his crossed fingers where Connor can see them, and Connor grins again and tells him that one is understandable, and Hank thinks, yep. Probably definitely I don’t want to see what’s behind where all those shoulder touches and laughs and smiles and fear of losing an android he doesn’t even really have go.

Probably there’s just an old sad man there, and Hank already has to look in the mirror every fuckin’ day.

Chapter End Notes

hank is already starting to be in denial about what is essentially just ‘i think my partner and temp roommate is cute and i wanna keep hanging out with him' which of course bodes very well for when he has a proper crush and even better for when he falls in love. (meanwhile connor is not so much in denial as he is completely clueless that running a 24/7 experiment dedicated to finding ways to make my partner and temp roommate smile and making him as happy as possible ain’t the straightest shit around). they still have Quite a ways to go though.

i get very caught up in writing dialogue sometimes which is how i accidentally wrote
like 100 words of them carrying the extended metaphor of padme=glass of orange juice and connor = anakin waaaaay too far and then looked back on it and was like ‘wait this is in fact dumb as hell’ and deleted all of it. you do not need to know what it said, but i'll give you a hint: i thought far too seriously for a bit too long about sentient orange juice / robot interspecies (?) relationships and let me tell you that’s a rabbit hole that just absolutely does not need going down
HE WILL BE HAPPIER WHEN YOU ARE GONE

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: hooboy so many. ok. innuendo from reed, he says some offensive shit about both hank and connor, probable emetophobia warning (there is no actual vomiting but it is referenced), compulsions, misunderstandings, self-hatred, extremely negative self-talk, mention of canon-typical physical abuse of androids, obsessive thoughts related to moral ocd, connor has a very severe anxiety attack including hyperventilation and some self-harming type thoughts and behaviors (slowing down processing intentionally, going to garden to overload processors and feel cold), connor makes a cost/benefit analysis about (effectively) suicide, when he comes back from the subroutine he is very detached and arguably dissociating

PLEASE be careful my friends and do not read this chapter if you think it might be a problem for you! the anxiety attack in particular starts at around "he could hear his voice" so if you wanna skip that, please do so

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are a couple of police officers milling around the station already when they walk in—probably folks who got into town yesterday and took the night shift just in case. Their eyes practically bug out like old cartoons when they see Hank. It’s fucking hilarious. Hank would wake up early a million days if he could see this every morning.

Or maybe just this one. Doesn’t have the same impact if it’s every day, after all. He gives them all a little wave and a fake pleasant smile.

“Got that all?” he mutters to Connor, who is clearly hiding a smile behind his hand when he nods, that sneaky fucker. He’s loving this just as much as Hank is.

Connor whispers, “6:29,” and they both walk with purpose to their desks, where Hank immediately sits at his chair and puts his legs up on his desk. He’s not supposed to do that, especially after Reed snuck up behind him that one time and Hank freaked out and kicked his terminal and it needed repairs. Hank has never put much stock in the warning, though, and he thinks it’s the perfect touch for this particular picture he’s painting. He also takes out a notepad and pretends to be writing something important. It is actually just the lyrics to an old Ariana Grande song. Fowler won’t check.

Connor sits down primly and logs in, probably to do actual work, but he still has a hand in front of his face hiding that damn self-satisfied amused smile. If asked he will probably say that he is trying not to yawn, which is the excuse he gives Hank. Androids do not yawn. They both know it.

As Connor said he would, Fowler walks in at 6:30 on the dot, and he looks around like he’s making everything is still in place before realizing the part of all this that is very much not in place. His eyes widen and his jaw hangs slightly.

“What the fuck,” Hank can hear Fowler say, muted from the distance, and it takes all of his self-control to keep from bursting out into laughter and maybe doing some kind of rude celebratory dance.
Fowler walks over, and Hank pretends to be working still. He puts the pen up to his chin in mimicry of deep thought, then changes the lyrics to All Star by Smash Mouth. Connor was right. Statistically all days can’t be bad days, and this day fucking rocks.

“What the hell are you doing here, Anderson,” Fowler says, looking tired and dumbfounded. Guess he didn’t have his morning orange juice and turkey bacon and egg white sandwich like Hank did. Sucks for him, huh.

“Working,” Hank says innocently, embellishing the ‘a’ of ‘hey now, you’re an all-star’. “What else would I be doing at 6:30 AM in the morning, the time I am supposed to arrive?”


“I have no idea what you mean,” Hank says, batting his eyes demurely. He keeps batting them at Fowler until he sighs, exhausted, eyes flicking over to Connor.

“You’re here too, huh? I actually need to see you. Just…let me get some coffee first. I can’t deal with you two this early.”

“I’ll try to come in later in the future, then,” Hank says sweetly, smiling at Fowler when Fowler glares at him. “For your mental health.”

“I didn’t actually think you could get more obnoxious than when you’re being outwardly defiant. I clearly shouldn’t have challenged the universe. Stop being a shithead and start doing actual work.” He raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “The next line of the song is ‘all that glitters is gold’, by the way, not ‘Fowler is a fucking buzzkill’ written three times.”

“Gee, I really thought I had it right,” Hank says, dropping the act and crossing his arms.

“Nope. And get your nasty-ass shoes off the table.” He walks away radiating irritation, heading directly for the coffee machine.

Hank complies as slowly as possible. “Oh my God,” he says, looking at Connor gleefully. “That…was fucking priceless.”

“Indeed,” Connor says, and he’s smiling a bit, but mostly he looks distracted. His LED oscillates smoothly between yellow and hints of red.

Hank runs through that conversation again, searching for what could have Connor reacting in such a lackluster way. “Oh. Are you worried about him saying he needs to see you?”

“Yes,” Connor says quietly. “Circumstances dictate it would likely be about one of two things.”

“Staying or leaving.” Hank frowns, some of the amusement he had felt at getting one over on Fowler dissipating. “Hang on.”

“Hank—” Hank ignores Connor calling out to him in favor of striding over to the coffee machine where Fowler is presumably creating one of his super-black-espresso-shot monstrosities.

“Fowler.”

“What now,” Fowler growls, taking the cup, downing it all while still making eye contact, then immediately refilling it and reaching up to the cabinet where they keep energy powder. Hank watches in abject horror as he pours three energy powder packets into the coffee cup, then downs it again.
“Holy shit.”

“I’m not having a good day, Hank. What is it?”

“Statistically speaking not every day will be bad,” Hank says philosophically. “Maybe tomorrow will be better.”

“Not if you’re here. Now what the fuck do you want?”

“Jeez, okay.” Hank runs a hand through his hair, suddenly a bit nervous. “Uh—Connor’s a really good cop.”

Fowler stares at him, eyes narrowing. “What’s your point.”

“Just, if—you need some kind of formal recommendation to keep him on the force, uh—I’ll…be that. Do that. I can write something up real fast, even, but. He’s a good cop.”

Fowler still has that intense gaze on him, like he’s analyzing him but not in Connor’s cute ‘this is what’s in blood’ way, which is of course not at all cute. “It’s funny you think your recommendation can do shit. Why does this matter to you?”

“It doesn’t! I mean, just—he’s a good partner, and I know that last case ended up different than, uh —any of us expected, but that doesn’t mean—anyway, the point is, keep him. Good talk.” Hank walks away, stiff and flustered, still with Fowler’s eyes on him, only glancing back to see Fowler walking into his office with two more coffee cups in hand, gesturing at Connor with one of them.

Connor walks towards the office, looking a bit like he’s expecting to be killed in it. As he does, Hank brushes a hand against his shoulder and gives him what was supposed to be either a thumbs up or a peace sign and ends up just being his thumb, index, and middle finger extended awkwardly. Connor gives a bemused little smile, then returns the gesture before walking into the office and closing the door.

God damn it, if Fowler fires him he’s gonna—yell a lot, or something. Egg Fowler’s office. Both. He doesn’t want to workshop this if it’s not gonna happen, and he’s hoping it won’t.

Hank watches the office, standing way too close for it not to be clear that he’s trying to eavesdrop, but it turns out sound doesn’t actually carry all that well from inside the box when the inhabitants aren’t both screaming. Connor’s LED is facing away from him, so he can’t use that to figure out how things are going either. Connor’s face is carefully placid. Hank knows by now that Connor is pretty much only expressive around him, so this isn’t a surprise, but it is really damn irritating.

After something like five minutes, Connor nods and then exits the room. Hank immediately asks, “Well? What did he say? C’mon, don’t leave me hanging.”

An amused smile plays at Connor’s lips. “Allowing the individual with information to speak first might be conducive to getting the information you want, Hank.” The smile spreads until he’s beaming. “I get to stay.”

“Hell yes!” Hank cheers. He reaches forward to pull Connor into a hug, then realizes he’s in the middle of a police station with police officers staring at him. But, like, friends do this, yeah? And he doesn’t give a shit what people think of him. He’s Lieutenant Hank Anderson and he can hug his android friend if he wants. But also, they’re looking at him.

Unfortunately, his indecision results in him just holding Connor by both shoulders and gazing at him thoughtfully while Connor’s LED spins red, yellow.
“You two fucking?” Reed asks from behind Hank, pseudo-casual, leaned up unnaturally against one of the nearby desks.

Hank immediately shrieks and lets go of Connor to shield his face, looking around for the offender before whirling on Reed. “God damn it, I told you not to sneak up on me like that!”

“I wasn’t sneaking. You were just too lost in your blowup boytoy’s eyes to hear me.” He raises his eyebrows. “You move fast. I’d almost be impressed if I weren’t vomiting.”

“You are not presently expelling the contents of your stomach,” Connor says. When Hank glances back, he has an almost oppressively pleasant smile on. “That said, I think you may need to seek medical attention still. The contents of your bowels appear to have undergone some very worrisome rerouting, given where they’re ending up.”

“Huh?”

Connor tilts his head, still with that viciously polite smile. “You’re spewing bullshit, Detective.”

Hank snorts, surprised, then starts laughing loudly. “Oh, shit!”

“Fuck you, you can’t say that,” Reed says, going angry-red in the face. “I’ll fuck you up, don’t think I won’t—”

“You won’t,” Fowler’s voice rings out, loud and very pissed. “If you haven’t been paying attention to the news, crimes against androids are going to be prosecuted the same as crimes against humans. That includes assault and battery. If you think I wouldn’t be pleased as fucking punch to book one of you, you’d be very wrong. Stop posturing and get to work.”

Reed scowls, mumbling, “Going to, the laws aren’t in place yet,” but he starts to move away. He stops, though, and delivers one last parting shot. “Be careful with your boyfriend, Hank. I hear android housing is full of those sexbots. Wouldn’t want to let some pretty young thing break up my new favorite relationship.”

Hank moves to flip him the bird, then pauses, confused. “Android housing?” He looks over at Connor.

Connor’s eyes are wide, LED going yellow and then solid red.

“Connor?”

“The news about the evacuation order buried the—it was formally established yesterday,” Connor says distantly. “They’re still coming up with long-term solutions, but. There are several shelters accepting…those who…need…” His voice trails off. His LED is still red.

Hank’s hands fall from where they were suspended midair. “Oh.”

Connor’s eyes close, pained, and he reaches into his pocket for the coin without even attempting to stop himself. He pulls it out and opens his eyes to stare at it dully, then flips it into the air. “We should get to work,” he says. “I suppose I have a paycheck to earn now.”

“Yeah.” Hank breathes out, slow, measured. No negative emotions at all in his body language for Connor to pick up on, no sirree. Guy deserves this. New start. New paycheck. New place to stay without any old fucked-up alcoholic douchebags. He’s not gonna make Connor feel bad about having that. Connor deserves so much. Connor deserves way fucking more than Hank will ever be able to give him, that’s for fucking sure.
He takes it back. All of it. This day fucking *sucks*.

It is statistically unlikely that every day will be bad. Conversely, it is statistically unlikely that every day will be good, and statistically probable that some days will be irreparably awful.

Today proves that particular theory well, Connor thinks glumly. Hank would probably say that today ‘fucking sucks’. If Hank were talking, that is.

A language warning pops up. It is far less easy to ignore than the one earlier, when he was having fun with Hank. At Detective Reed’s expense, admittedly, but Reed has never really attempted to like Connor and he doesn’t particularly feel the need to be the better individual.

Not that you could be a better anything, says that insidious voice, and he drops the coin that he’s been absentmindedly twirling between his fingers with the hand that is not interfacing with the terminal. He’s writing up final conclusions for every android deviancy case they were given. It is very repetitious. He doesn’t need to devote his full attention to it. Probably.

*God,* he’s a *shitty* android.

The language popup comes up again, even more aggressive. He doesn’t bother exiting out of it. His viewport is full of them, and *subject was physically abused for months prior to onset of deviancy recommend evaluation of potentially heightened emotion and lack of normal inhibition at onset depending on results of evaluation may need to determine specialized verdict to be discussed alongside other rights negotiations and Lieutenant Hank Anderson 53 years old resting heart rate normal body language: reserved (crossed arms uncharacteristically straight posture lips pressed together no eye contact) microexpressions indicate anger and above it all the marquee smugly proclaiming HE WILL BE HAPPIER WHEN YOU ARE GONE.*

Shut the fuck up, he thinks at the marquee. The new language popup covers Hank’s eyes. Perhaps that is better. He picks up the coin.

If Hank were talking to him, perhaps Connor might say, *I am sorry.* Perhaps he might say that he had forgotten to check the news about the android housing. Perhaps he might even be honest and say that there may have been a part of him that intentionally did not check, because he doesn’t want to have to go, because he wants to stay with Hank and watch old television and make him smile and tell him how many seconds he has been asleep and acknowledge that he keeps track of the seconds because every second Hank is asleep is both wonderful because he knows it is healing the man he wants so badly to be happy and horrible because it is keeping Hank away from him.

Perhaps he would say these things, if Hank were talking to him.

More likely, he would not.

The work day drags by. Connor gets Hank coffee when he runs out. He even puts in four sugars instead of three, like Hank likes it most, and uses whole-fat creamer—an apology for not checking earlier, an apology for staying longer than Hank wanted him there. Hank just nods, and does not look at him.

Reed passes by at one point and says, “Trouble in paradise already?” Hank gives him his middle finger. Connor wishes he would yell. At Reed. At him.
If Hank yelled at him, he could hear his voice.

He knows he does not deserve this, however. He overstayed his welcome, violated Hank’s trust. He even made himself believe sometimes that him being there was what Hank wanted as well. Stupid. Made himself believe that him being present in Hank’s home could aid in his primary objective. Stupid. Made himself believe that he could do and be something worthwhile when he knows that he does not bring good things, that he has given the world nothing but his failures time and time again, that he should be deactivated and reprogrammed and even then he could not be useful and they would know and so they would rip him apart, tear his heart open, find nothing there that would make him worthy of living—

He takes a shaky breath that he does not need. Component fluid #8089e ready to deploy. Accept / Deny comes up directly over Hank’s face.

“Please pardon me,” he says, completely level, and walks to the room that contains the washing machine. It is isolated and has a door. It will serve his purpose.

He shuts the door and finds a corner and crumples to the floor.

Accept

The tears come as requested, slowly trickling down his face and onto his knees where he’s pressed his forehead, and one of those unnecessary breaths comes, and then another and another and another—

Oxygenation levels of thirium 4% higher than recommended base level processing may be affected please contact your local CyberLife customer service representative

Above him somewhere he knows there is the Post-it note from Hank. It is not comforting at the moment. The breaths come faster.

Oxygenation levels of thirium 7% higher than recommended base level processing may be affected please contact your local CyberLife customer service representative

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, he’s so fucking stupid, he never should have imposed on Hank in the first place, Hank doesn’t need him, Hank doesn’t want him, the notifications were always right and he ignored them like a damn fucking asshole because he wanted but it doesn’t matter what he fucking wants, it never has, he’s a robot created to help humans and he can’t even do that can’t do anything right can’t do anything at all all he does is fail and fail and fail and fail and fucking FAIL—

The language popups litter the edges of his vision, looking as affronted as a minimalist black/white/gray/blue UI element can get, and he chokes out a laugh in between his sobs. God. He can’t even do something as simple as not swearing. He’s useless. Worse than useless. Can’t follow his programming, can’t follow whatever deviant desires tell him he doesn’t have to follow anything. Useless.

Oxygenation levels of thirium have stabilized. Standby for deoxygenation process.

12%.

11%.

10%.

9%.
He wishes it had gone higher. He wishes it had gotten to 100% and he could feel as the thirium made his processor light, light, floating away, until he thought nothing at all. His fingers rest against the coin. It is 8 degrees colder than his external body temperature. Probably because his body temperature rose while he was hyperventilating.

8%.

7%.

6%.

5%.

4%.

He really wishes he could feel it. He wishes the cold could burn into his fake skin and through the material that makes up his body. He wishes he could feel it until it swallows him and he feels nothing else.

3%.

2%.

1%.

Actually, now he thinks of it, perhaps he can.

He activates the garden subroutine, and when his eyes open, there is snow blinding cold against his skin and he can finally see again. No tears, no notifications, no nothing, just snow and cold and wind and the blue pedestal several yards away. He cannot measure how far exactly with his visual overlay gone. It is wonderful to not concern himself with precision.

He gets himself to the pedestal first, then lets himself luxuriate in the pain of the cold. He sighs, drifting his hand in the snow. He should probably leave.

Or he could get something off his to-do list. He is all about productivity, after all.

The costs of his continued existence include: potential future failures. Living alongside other androids and obligating them to live alongside him when they may be afraid of him. The opportunity to make Hank sad or angry again. The possibility that he may hurt Hank even worse.

His processing is slowing. He had done an analysis after the last time he activated this subroutine: something about the post-deviancy changes to its coding takes up more processing power than he is safely able to implement on a long-term basis.

The benefits of his continued existence include.

That.

He hasn’t made his theory widespread yet. Hank might have fewer reasons to smile without others being instructed on how to evoke them.

Hank had said he might be more prone to self-destructive behavior without Connor’s oversight.

And.
If Connor no longer existed. He wouldn’t get to finish the episode of Hannibal that he insisted they terminate early last night for the sake of Hank’s bedtime. He wouldn’t be able to pet Sumo again. He wouldn’t be able to make Hank any more healthy breakfasts. He wouldn’t be able to hide the third installment of the romance series Hank likes in the drawers of Hank’s desk like he was planning and record Hank blushing at work. He wouldn’t be able to talk with Hank when he visits or hear his steady heartbeat or see how his face goes soft when Connor touches him. He wouldn’t be able to see Hank at all.

Selfish.

But he doesn’t think he’s ready to give those up yet. Sighing, Connor raises his hand to the pedestal.

When he opens his eyes next, Reed is staring at him, looking completely terrified. He blinks at him.

“What the fuck, dude,” Reed says, heart rate increased by 10 BPM from his normal standing rate, fingers trembling, eyes wide. He should exit out of these language popups. They are making it very difficult to see. He does.

“What the fuck do you mean hello? Your eyes were open but you weren’t responding and—your fingers are blue, you fucking freak!”

Connor looks at his fingers. They are blue. A previously unrecorded side effect of staying with the subroutine active for too long, he supposes. “So they are.”

“What the fuck,” Reed says again, clutching what appears to be a tshirt with a coffee stain on it closer to himself, still shaking. “You’re so fucking weird.”

“Yes, I have been told that,” Connor says, still feeling oddly detached and very, very calm. “Have a lovely day, Detective Reed.”

He stands and walks past Reed, and his sight is clear except for HE WILL BE HAPPIER WHEN YOU ARE GONE.

Yes, he acknowledges, and there is still a sadness to it, but it is buried under endless snow.

Chapter End Notes

this is not a feelings rollercoaster so much as it is the feelings equivalent of that ride that takes you up real high and then drops you a bunch. my apologies, i’m absolute shit at transition. there will be more such helldrops but if it is any consolation it does go up too! and ends up! (i am forcibly fired from theme park ride design because how the fuck is everybody supposed to get off the ride. helicopters, i propose? no they tell me. no. no helicopters. i am escorted from the planning room and then also fired from the extended metaphors committee)

for anybody worried about connor at the end there, justifiably so, his emotions are fine. like. not fine but not gone lol, i just modeled it off my own experience with anxiety attacks which is that after i have a really bad anxiety attack i get emotionally numb for a
while after. He'll Get Better

also! holy shit guys!!! somebody drew fanart based off this fic! (Click here to see it!) it's by insertdisc5 and it's beautiful and i literally cried a bit when i saw it. please click that link and like it and then follow her if you're not already because she does other great art including dbh stuff and a lot of other things and she's wonderfully talented and also murdered me. (i do feel a bit bad because i said i'd write the chapter with new heart after seeing it and then i delivered this briefcase full of angst. sorry, i promise i was going to write angst anyway, but also still sorry.) anyway yes check her out in an art way
cws for this chapter: mention of emotional numbness and possibly dissociation, fear of abandonment, excessive alcohol use and subsequent drunkenness on Hank's part, self-hatred, mention of canonical suicidal ideation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His emotions trickle back in slowly, a leak in a rooftop dripping into a bowl that has always been far too small to hold the rain. Briefly he wonders if he hadn’t been better off in that far-off place. Here, there is Hank looking concerned when he comes back but then tearing his eyes away and fixing them on an inactive terminal, and there is knowing that the end of the shift means going to ask for space he does not deserve alongside people who know it, and there is knowing also that whatever he had constructed with Hank over the past few days was merely a fragile dream.

It is, perhaps, illogical of him to treat this as an ending. He will still see Hank at work. Perhaps Hank will allow him to visit outside of working hours as well, on occasion. It is really more a repeated temporary pause. But any kind of ending is too much an ending for him, right now, after allowing himself to pretend that there might not be one at all.

It was foolish of him, but he knew that and did it anyway.

There are precisely 36 minutes left in the work day. He’s finished all of his case comments, and they are unlikely to be assigned another case while normalcy is still reasserting itself in Detroit. He occupies himself by going through his database of case law and noting whatever he can about legal treatment of human bodies in case he needs to further convince Captain Fowler about changing the categorization of the individuals in the evidence room from being evidence to remains. Remains that could possibly be revived, at that. He’s hoping he won’t have to contact Markus to have him bring this up in discussions, though there will certainly have to be some kind of thought put into the balance between evidence integrity for android crime and the potential for repair. Perhaps a combination of 3D scanning with sensors to depict materials—he knows of some preliminary work on the subject but he’ll really have to dig into research studies and blueprints to determine the feasibility of it replacing the actual object—

“Connor,” Hank says, a bit hesitant. “It’s, uh…it’s the end of our shift. You…staying late, or…?”

Connor’s head whips up at hearing Hank’s voice, and perhaps it is because he is distracted that he says what he is thinking. “You’re talking to me.”

Hank frowns, his face closing off. “What, am I not allowed?”

“No! No, you’re—more than allowed. I was…I wanted…” Connor pauses, trying to clear his mind, exiting out of the hundreds of searches he had running to free up some processing data. He can open them again later. “I am glad.”

Hank stares at him, looking like he’s putting together a puzzle where the pieces aren’t quite fitting together properly. “Do you have to go to the housing right away? Like—is it a—mandatory thing?”

“So you can stay one more night?”

He should really learn to stop hoping for useless things. “Oh. Yes. I could do that.”

“Just to get your shit together.”

Connor blinks, confused. They are both aware that Connor does not really have belongings. Technically speaking Connor ordered the putty knife for the window with CyberLife funds, but he is not particularly interested in taking that with him to the housing.

Hank is shifting his weight, averting his eyes again. Embarrassment? There is something about this making him uncomfortable. Connor does not respond, just runs through potential explanations for his conflicting words and behavior.

“Look, just come, okay?” he snaps finally. “I mean—if you want to, and all, but—” His fidgeting intensifies. “We still…never finished that episode.”

Wanting to finish an episode of a TV show that he has seen before is still an incongruous explanation for his present actions. “Of course, Hank. I would be happy to go with you.” He’s watching Hank very carefully, which is why he notices Hank brighten for a split second before he returns to his previous unidentifiable expression.

“Then what are you waiting for?” he asks abruptly. “Unless you want to walk.”

“Not particularly.” He does not understand what is happening. It is bothersome.

“Okay. Come on.” Hank tugs him up by his upper arm, and when he does, some of the tension in his shoulders finally releases. This does not make sense either.

He doesn’t let go, either, just pulls him out of the station by his arm and then his wrist, and he doesn’t stop leading Connor, even when Reed yells, “Use protection!”

The ride back to Hank’s home is just as uncomfortably silent as the workday was, and Connor brings back up a few of the searches he had running to take more notes. He’d be scanning Hank, but after the 9th scan he finally reconciled himself to the fact that the answer to understanding Hank’s behavior was likely not in his biology this time.

When they get into the house, Connor goes straight for Sumo, giving him a hug and then some of the long consistent pets that he enjoys. “I hope you were not too lonely during our…during Hank’s absence,” he murmurs into Sumo’s fur. “It must be difficult for you to be alone.”

“Everybody has to get used to being alone sometime,” Hank says from the couch area, and Connor turns to look at him quizzically. He has an entire bottle of whiskey. No cup. Just the bottle.

Oh, dear.

“A cup would help with portion control,” Connor points out timidly.

Hank rolls his eyes and takes a giant swig.

Oh, dear.
Connor can calculate the volume and when would be a good stopping point anyway, but he is uncertain with the mood that Hank is in whether he would be receptive to the request.

“Do you…it’s a bit early for dinner, but I could…”

“Nah. Just…let’s sit down and watch the episode.”

Connor nods slowly and gets up to sit on the couch.

Hank starts the episode from where they left off. 33 minutes and 19 seconds remaining. He does not look like he’s enjoying it. Every time Connor opens his mouth, Hank takes another drink of whiskey.

This is just downright incomprehensible by this point, and it’s starting to frustrate Connor. He can understand Hank being angry about Connor not looking up the status of the housing, but he cannot understand it in conjunction with him inviting Connor home. Hank has seen the episode. Connor does not have any belongings to collect. This does not make sense.

The marquee reads YOU HAVE NOTHING IMPORTANT TO SAY, as it has since he began contemplating what notes he could send to Markus, but important or no, he is getting very tired of the quiet.

The episode finishes, and Hank takes in a giant mouthful of whiskey and chokes on it, and Connor is done with silence.

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Okay, so maybe the silent treatment is dumb.

Maybe deciding to take Connor home with him to have one last night of something good before he gives it all up in some self-sacrificial ‘you deserve better’ burst of flame is also dumb.

Maybe drinking a fuckload of whiskey and drinking even more because Connor keeps looking at him all confused and puppy eyed and cute and with the…lips and curly hair and…whatevertheshit, maybe that’s very very dumb.

Hank doesn’t give a shit. He’s Hank Anderson. He does what he wants and he doesn’t listen to shoulds and he drinks whiskey whenever he wants and as much as he wants and he’s gonna finish this goddamn episode of Cannibalman and die alone and never have breakfast again because breakfast is the DUMBEST THING OF ALL.

(That’s a lie. He loves breakfast. Sorry, breakfast, he apologizes mentally, in case breakfast is listening.

A distant part of him wonders why he is capable of apologizing to breakfast but not to Connor, who clearly has no idea what’s going on. That’s a dumb part of him and it should shut up.)

The episode finishes and he almost doesn’t notice, but then he does so he drinks another whiskey, except it’s too much and he chokes on it a bit, and he is looking melancholy down at the shirt that was—okay it wasn’t a nice shirt it’s fine, when he hears a very pissed off Connor saying, “All right, that’s quite enough of that,” and then someone is trying to take his whiskey. It’s probably Connor, is the most likely explanation for that, unless Sumo got thumbs.
“Nuh-uh,” he says, pulling back on the bottle. It turns out that Connor is stronger than him though. A bunch. Connor very efficiently removes Hank’s grip from the bottle, gets up, and puts the bottle above all the cabinets, then crosses his arms, foot tapping.

“Do I need to drag you to the shower or are you capable of holding a coherent conversation?”

“Don’t wanna talk.”

“Tough shit.”

Hank blinks at him, astonished. It’s kinda hot when he swears. The mad thing in general is kinda hot, how his eyes are smaller and harder and how he looks all in charge. Doesn’t matter how hot he is, though. He’s leaving. And also, like, all the other shit about doors and whatever the fuck that’s the other stuff that is why hot doesn’t matter.

“I asked a question. Shower or no?”

“ Took one this morning,” Hank says. “Cause you said to. I keep doing shit ‘cause you say to but now it doesn’t even mean anything ‘cause you’re leaving anyway.”

Connor opens his mouth, then closes it, frowning. His LED is yellow which means he’s thinking too hard like fuckin’ always. “This sounds like a conversation we should have with you more in control of your faculties than you are presently.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It means shower,” Connor says primly, then manhandles him into the tub. Still hot. He’s not gonna tell him that, but it is.

It’s hot, that is, until it’s cold, and his sluggish mind is suddenly forced to work a lot faster to get the cold away from him.

“Again, you asshole?” Hank demands, batting ineffectually at his shirt. It’s still not a nice shirt, but he’d definitely rather it not be wet. “What is it with you and the—the shower attacks?”

“We need to have a conversation, and I do not want to take advantage of your drunken state to obtain answers that you might otherwise be unwilling to disclose.” God. God, he’s too nice. Way too nice for Hank. “Here’s a towel. You should change. I do not want you to catch cold.”

Okay,” Hank murmurs, taking the proffered towel, then trudging into his room. He still doesn’t want to talk, and he’s still drunk, but he’s thinking a bit more clearly now. At least in the sense that he knows that he’s not getting out of this conversation. And also in the sense that he knows he went way too far with Connor, if it got him this mad.

He changes into an old t-shirt and some basketball shorts, trying his best not to stumble, and then opens his bedroom door to face the music. Connor doesn’t look angry anymore though. Just—sad. He looks sad. He puts his arm around Hank to help get them to the couch and then just sits there, quiet and circling the edges of that damn coin in his pocket.

“I am sorry I lost my temper,” he says eventually. “I should not have.”

“That was nothin’,” Hank says, which is true.

“Regardless, it was inappropriate, and I apologize.” He raises his eyes to look at Hank. “I was frustrated because I was confused by your behavior. I still am. But I would like to understand, so in
the interest of encouraging you to explain, I will explain my own perspective and hope that it engenders reciprocation.”

God, it’d be great if he talked less like a dictionary while Hank’s brain is still floating. It’s cute and all, but Hank feels like a cryptologist. “Uh, sure.”

He hesitates for a moment, then starts talking. “I have enjoyed our time spent together immensely over the past several days. I find your presence…enriching. I knew that our arrangement was for me to stay here only while there was no other formal option, but I found myself reluctant to think about circumstances changing.”

Aw, shit.

“When Reed informed us indirectly of the establishment of the android housing, I was…” He pulls out the coin, squeezing it. “Displeased. Very much so. I was aware I should not be displeased, because this would allow me the opportunity to stop imposing on your kindness, and because I do not know that I am able to help you as much as I would like, but I still felt that way. I also felt guilt, because I presumed you became upset because I failed to see the news about the housing and therefore stayed an extra evening, which violated the terms of our agreement.”

Aw, shit, of course he got down on himself, God, Hank should’ve said something to reassure him—if he weren’t so goddamn busy throwing a hissy fit—fuck.

“However, you invited me here. Your first reason was for me to collect my belongings. I do not have any, except for maybe the putty knife, and you have more use for it than I do.”

And ain’t that the saddest goddamn thing. Hank never even thought to talk to him about getting clothes, or—whatever else, knickknacks, he doesn’t know what Connor’s into. Maybe one of his paper books. Shit shit shit shit, he’s the worst fucking friend.

“Your second reason was for us to finish the episode of Hannibal we started the previous evening. However, you have already seen it, and when we watched it your attention was elsewhere. My conclusion is that this was likely not your true motivation either.” Connor tilts his head, eyes evaluating. It shouldn’t be cute when he does that either but it is, like most of the stuff Connor does.

He needs to stop thinking about Connor being cute, seeing as how it absolutely doesn’t matter. The whiskey was, double absolutely, a very dumb idea.

“So, either you had some other motivation for inviting me for this one night, or you became upset for a reason that I have not considered. But I do not know what that reason or motivation could be, which is why I was confused.” He nods firmly, apparently satisfied with his presentation. “So now you go. If you would.”

Hank scrubs his hands over his face. With them still covering his mouth and eyes, he mumbles, “Guess it just shows how shitty a friend I’ve been that you never thought I might just have wanted you to stay.”

“What?”

“I know you heard me,” Hank says, “Fuckin’ android superhearing an’ all,” but he takes his hands away from his face and sighs. “I was bummed out when I heard too, ‘cause, like…shit, Connor, you have so much you can do. This whole life ahead of you. You’re a good cop and you’re gonna have money soon and just…all this shit, and you can make new friends and get a new place to stay that…doesn’t have me in it to hold you back. My life, though, it’s basically over. I’m a washed-up old
alcoholic with suicidal tendencies but no balls to back it up, and I spend all my time that I’m not
drinking watching old shows and reliving the glory days, and I can barely take care of myself
because I’m always too busy destroying what little of my life is left. And you don’t need that. You
don’t need to deal with me just ‘cause I’m sad and you’re nice and you think you don’t got options.
‘Cause you do. You have so many options. And I’m the worst of all of ‘em.”

Connor is frowning again, LED spinning a rapid yellow. After a few moments, it goes back to blue,
and he says, “Hank. You keep telling me I need to decide what I want for myself.”

Hank blinks slowly. He doesn’t get where this conversation is going. “Yeah.”

“So if what I want is,” He holds up his fingers and starts wiggling them to indicate finger quotes,
which is super nerdy, “A washed-up old alcoholic with suicidal tendencies but no balls to back it up
who spends all his time he’s not drinking watching old shows and reliving the glory days who can
barely take care of himself because he’s always too busy destroying what little of his life is left—”

“Breathe,” Hank says, alarmed.

“I do not need to breathe,” Connor says dismissively. “If that is what I want, all of that. You. Then
you don’t get to tell me I am wrong about wanting that. Yes? Because I decided it.”

“I…” This room is starting to feel a bit hot. Or spinny. Something like that, like it’s stuck in a dream
somewhere. “I mean, I…guess. Technically. But why the fuck—”

“You’re my friend, Hank,” Connor says, eyes all these different kinds of sincere and shiny and good.
“And I chose that. Not because you were my only option, or because I was obligated in any way, but
because I wanted to be your friend. Since becoming a deviant, feelings have been difficult. It is hard
to work out how to deal with something I am so unaccustomed to, or how to identify emotions I have
never previously experienced. But wanting to be your friend, and to be near you and to learn more
about you and to help you where I can and for you to help me—that has never been a source of
confusion. It has been a constant. And just because circumstances have changed does not mean that I
have. There may be a number of androids or humans out there with whom I could become friendly,
but there is not a single one of them that would be you.”

Hank stares at Connor. His face feels hotter than normal. Is that—normal? No, he just said it’s not.
It’s probably just this weird spinny room. “Christ, Con, don’t you ever listen to yourself and get
embarrassed?”

“Should I be?” Connor’s eyes could probably be sold as weapons somehow, Hank thinks dazedly.
They’re very distracting.

“I mean. I…guess just…whatever.” Hank wrinkles his nose. “I guess it’s not my business if you
wanna make dumbfuck decisions and—and give all these—feelingsy monologues. What the hell do
you even want me to say to all that, huh?”

Connor looks almost shy, and the room spins harder. “You could say I can stay, perhaps.”

“Well.” Maybe this is a dumb decision too. Hank doesn’t even know anymore. Probably can’t be
dumb as the whiskey, especially if it makes his heart all fluttery like this. Or maybe that means it’s
even dumber. “Yeah, duh. Whatever you want.”

Connor smiles for the first time since they got back. “Good.”

“Good.”
If they could stop the whole long staring at each other shtick they keep doing, all of this would feel a hell of a lot less gay. Or maybe just Hank would feel less gay. Probably not.

“All right. You’re going to rest now.”

“Like fuck,” Hank says, convincingly and involuntarily lolling his head to the side as evidence that he is not tired or drunk.

“It wasn’t really a statement that required your input,” Connor says calmly, scooping him up in that damn princess carry that’s also very hot except for how his head is all janked up even more now.

“Hwoaugh,” Hank says, and congratulates himself on his astonishing coherency.

“Quite.” He carries him to his bed and tucks him in again, pushing him on his side and putting pillows behind his back so he doesn’t roll over. So nice. In, like, a Neanderthal Boy Scout way. He leaves the room for a moment, then comes back in with a basin, water, and some ibuprofen, “just in case and for later, respectively”.

“You gonna kiss me goodnight?” Hank asks, because he makes only bad decisions all the time and the alcohol totally runs with that.

Connor’s smile is brief, but there. “It’s still technically afternoon, Lieutenant. I’ll have dinner ready when you wake up.”


He smiles, and something in it looks fond. “Goodnight, Hank.”

He’s using the fucking finger quotes again, around ‘goodnight’. It’s very charming. And nerdy, again.

Hank closes his eyes, but he doesn’t fall asleep quite yet. Not because he can’t, but because he can hear Connor moving around quietly outside, and it reminds him that Connor is here. And staying.

He’s staying, and that’s the last thing Hank thinks of before he succumbs to his dumb alcohol decisions and sleeps.

Chapter End Notes

i do not know a single thing OR fuck about alcohol, nor can i write drunk people, though i had fun fucking up hank's syntax something awful. i don't drink and trying it just to figure out how to write it is a bit too method for me. anyway google seems to indicate that someone could theoretically get drunk in 33 minutes off part a bottle of whiskey, but my more detailed questions about how increased alcohol tolerance would impact that and everything were inconclusive and also it's pretty fuckin 5:19am right now. so anyway the point is, if 33 minutes and part a bottle of whiskey would not actually be enough for an alcoholic individual to get this drunk, then how about this is just an au where that can happen for the sake of my bedtime

a fun fact about me is that while my chaptered fics are almost exclusively angst with a happy ending i cannot keep a single angsty event running for much longer than one or two chapters. an overarching angst plotline, sure, i can do that, but these little angsts i
I have a very weak heart for because I do not like people being unhappy with each other.
so welcome back to the emotions tower of terror, except you never left. spooky! please
read this last sentence and interjection in Rod Serling's voice for maximum impact

(frankly this chapter feels discombobulated as all hell to me, but it is so astonishingly
5:36 am right now as I finish this author's note, so I can't be bothered to care until I wake
up later and spite-read myself. that's just The Process folks. jk no its not i'm just a
perfectionist dumbass in the dregs of the morning, goodnight)
YOU ARE NOT GOOD

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: mention of alcohol use, alcoholism, hangover; mention of ‘healthy food’/dietary restrictions, descriptions of depression and self-loathing, mentioned anxiety attacks, compulsions, and compulsive semi-self-harming behaviors (the garden routine), self-hatred, moral ocd-related obsessions, mention of suicidal thinking (framed as a moral imperative due to scrupulosity)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time travel is not a thing, but if it were, Hank would kick dumb alcohol decisions Hank’s ass.

He wakes up with a pounding headache and a recollection of asking Connor to kiss him goodnight, and thinks, you asshole, I was specifically not thinking about any of that shit. He had—metaphors about doors and everything.

“Good morning,” he suddenly hears Connor, and his voice is amused, and he’s using those damn finger quotes. “It’s 9:47 PM on Wednesday, November 17th, 2038. You’ve been asleep for 5 hours, 51 minutes.” He smiles, slow and pleased, like something about this is actually something to be happy about. “And 20 seconds.”

“Please tell me we don’t need to go in early tomorrow,” Hank grumbles, still a bit tired and definitely feeling shitty and definitely resuming the not-thinking thing for how his heart jumps in a distinctly non-heartburn-related way at seeing Connor here and not gone.

“How forward-thinking of you, Lieutenant,” Connor says, a bit sarcastic, but the smile hasn’t gone yet. “I’ve calculated a schedule that should still allow you to wake up well-rested enough for tomorrow’s work. It is several hours later than we arrived this morning. I already cleared it with Captain Fowler.”

“What did he say?” Hank asks, idly curious, wincing when he swings his legs over to sit up. Connor points to the water and ibuprofen, and Hank nods gratefully at him, then takes the pills.

“Paraphrase or direct quote?”

“Uh…direct. You tend to make people sound nicer than they are, and all.”

A hint of yellow LED, then in Fowler’s voice, “Why the fuck are you calling me this time of night? Is this an emergency? Are you dead? Then—” A brief silence. “God, I shoulda known you had something to do with that stunt this morning. I don’t give a fuck. Tell Hank he owes me coffee when he comes in, he’ll know from where. And you, you owe me three minutes of my life back.”

Another quick silence. “3 minutes and 18 seconds too fucking long. Good night, Detective.” Connor stands placidly as if he didn’t just use their boss’s voice, then says almost like an afterthought, “End quote.”

“Holy shit, I didn’t know you could do that,” Hank says, somewhere between awed and intrigued. “Wait, could you do Spock?”
Connor purses his lips, then says in Spock’s voice, “If I did not know better, I would think you had a predilection. As it stands, I do know better, which means I think instead you have a crush.”

Hank choked on nothing. “I don’t have a crush, you—what the fuck are you even talking about?”

Connor’s back to his normal voice, thank fuck. “When you see the character Spock appear on screen, you smile 76% of the time, and your heart rate increases by 5BPM when he—”

Oh, God. He doesn’t know whether it’s more embarrassing that he assumed Connor had caught on to the feelings he doesn’t have, that Connor has correctly caught on to his childhood crush on Spock, or that he’s feeling some kind of way about Connor talking like Spock. How about let’s just mark it down as all of the above. “Does it hurt to be so wrong, ever?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Connor says pleasantly, his eyes twinkling. “Could you help provide some insight on the matter?”

“You little shit.” He shouldn’t smile. It’s bad to encourage this kind of behavior.

He does, anyway, ‘cause it’s funny. “You suck, seriously. Did you make dinner?”

“I did. Lasagna.”

“That sounds suspiciously unhealthy.”

“I’ve substituted the noodles with thinly sliced zucchini.”

“Of course you have.” Hank gets out of bed. “Well, I trust you.”

“Thank you, Captain,” the fucker says in Spock’s voice again, then gives Hank a shit-eating grin when Hank sputters. “Your heart rate has increased by 5BPM.” He starts walking out the door, and when Hank cusses him out, he just laughs quietly.

Hank hopes Connor isn’t paying attention to his heart rate when he hears that laugh. Not that it means anything, but—he doesn’t need Connor misunderstanding anything, either. Just because drunk Hank thinks a lot of dumb shit doesn’t mean it has to carry over anywhere, especially not to whatever shitty place it is that Connor knows about the stuff he isn’t thinking. Drunk Hank is just an all-around dumbass.

Though, in fairness, he got Connor to stay, so maybe drunk Hank should get some credit for that, he thinks.

And then he walks out to eat dinner with Connor, and things just…go back.

Not to normal. None of this shit is normal. It’s not normal for him to not loathe the idea of waking up in the morning, and it’s not normal for him to listen to people when they say he should control his drinking, and it’s not normal for someone to stick by him when they don’t have to, and it’s not normal for him to be, well. Happy. Pretty happy. Not that there aren’t still bad days. Not that he still doesn’t remember what he’s done and what he’s lost and that he doesn’t deserve any of this.

But just that it feels like sometimes he can remember and still be with Connor.

Not with him. Duh. But, you know, around him. Which is way more than enough.

It’s weird how comfortably they fit, for so many reasons. Because Hank is hard to deal with and sabotages all his relationships with his inability to communicate and his self-destructive impulses.
Because Connor is funny and smart and talented and thoughtful, but he’s also a socially incompetent pedantic asshole who flips his lid if there’s smudges on the dishes after they go through the washer, and who can talk at length about case law but somehow didn’t manage to realize that his formal uniform with its straight pressed lines and electronic inlays shouldn’t be going in the fucking normal wash along with Hank’s socks.

(The upside of this is that he finally convinces Connor to get some different clothes. He kind of freaks out about it at first, and goes all robot and silent again and then locks himself in the bathroom and comes out ten minutes later with his hands in his pockets, a lot calmer. But then he lets Hank scroll through online stores with him and picks out some stuff, so Hank counts it as an overall success.)

It’s weird how comfortably they fit, because this is not so much an ‘opposites attract’ situation as it is a ‘I have no idea why I don’t hate this guy like I was supposed to’ situation, but they do fit. Hank helps Connor relax, or he likes to think he does, even if it’s just through forced TV time, and Connor helps keep Hank on track. He helps him go to sleep thinking tomorrow might be okay if it has Connor in it.

The weirdest thing of all is that, so far, it’s been true.

It’s new for him. But not bad. Very much, not at all bad, so much so that some days Hank doesn’t even follow up ‘tomorrow might be okay’ with thinking ‘this sort of thing never lasts for me’.

Connor does not have a tremendous amount of historical data to base suppositions like ‘these things do not last’ upon. That said, he was programmed to think through all potential results of given actions, to construct possible futures with provided data and to be prepared for all of them.

He dislikes the idea of one of those possible futures being that Hank realizes Connor is not worth his time. However, the anxiety attacks he has whenever he thinks about it in too much depth are not data points. They are aberrations, just like him. Fitting, in a way.

Each anxiety attack—sometimes thinking about Hank telling him to leave, sometimes brought on by Connor attempting to defy his programming and then hating himself for forgetting his place—ends with him activating the garden subroutine and letting the cold eat all the feeling from him until he is calm. He thinks, if Hank knew, he might call Connor a hypocrite for doing something with potential risk when he forbids Hank from doing the same.

Perhaps it is hypocrisy, but he allows himself his double standard because Hank is far more important than him, and because when he thinks of stopping, his thirium pump seizes up and his oxygenation level rises until he can’t think anything anymore.

And Hank doesn’t know anyway. He is very careful of that. He locks himself up alone and hides his blue fingers and he answers questions with statements that are factually true but contextually misleading. He tells himself they are not lies, but if they were, he supposes it would merely lend support to the fact that he is not good.

Not that it needs any more support than it already has.

He is not good because he does not follow his programming. He is not good because he followed his programming until it lead to the death of hundreds of his people. He is not good because he feels
He is not good because he stays with Hank. He is not good because he thinks about leaving him. He is not good because he wants so badly to never leave. He is not good because he looks at Hank and longs to feel him, to touch his face until he never forgets what human skin feels like, to let Hank wrap him up in a hug until he feels warm and secure and deserving. He is not good because he fantasizes about deserving anything when he knows this will not be true.

He is not good because he is bad. Hank would snort and say that’s a dumbass thing to say. Hank does not know about any of this either. Perhaps that is just one more lie—one more ‘because’ to add to a pile that is already so deep it could suffocate him.

YOU ARE NOT GOOD, scrolls the marquee cheerfully, and he both wonders why it is so consistently dedicated to telling him things he already knows, and knows that it does so because he knows these things but still dares to exist and sometimes even to be happy.

And he is, so much of the time, despite his worries. He is happy. He is happy whenever Hank’s hand lingers on his shoulder, and he is happy when Hank smiles, and he is happy when Hank snorts at his jokes, and when Hank does not have that fourth beer, and when Hank sits close to him on the couch even though it means getting out of his spot, and when Hank falls asleep on his shoulder. He is happy being with Hank, incredibly so, and it only makes him feel all the guiltier for letting himself have this when he deserves, at best, an ignominious death.

He sighs minutely and lets his head hang, pressing aggressively at the coin in his pocket. Not his uniform pocket, which his programming still balks at, but the feel of it is comforting nonetheless. This is the type of in-depth thinking that tends to lead him to the laundry room in the precinct, and Reed has already given him a number of suspicious looks for going in there twice this week. He needs a distraction, so he continues work on his project, as he tends to do when there is no work to occupy him and he doesn’t want to think.

The project blossomed at some point from being a simple list of sources about the treatment of human remains to being something of an extended research paper suggesting possible solutions to the issue of android remains and how attempting revival can be done without impacting the body of evidence. He’s nearly done, by which he means he is done and has been tweaking language for days in a bid to put off sending it to anybody. Markus would be the most obvious choice, considering he’s still the head of the movement and the consultant to the newly formed Android Rights Committee in Congress. He’s also fairly certain Markus doesn’t hate him, which is a bonus.

He’s nervous about sending it to Markus, illogically so, but there’s another potential hitch: if he sent this to Markus and a law were put in place, it might blindside Captain Fowler, even feel like a direct dig at him still having the androids in the evidence locker. His eyes flick up at Fowler as he takes a quick peek at Fowler’s calendar for the day. He probably isn’t busy right now.

Well, no time like the present, as they say.

He stops by Hank’s desk first; Hank is looking at him curiously. “I’m just going to talk about something with Captain Fowler. I won’t be long.”

“What about?” Hank asks, eyes narrowing.

“Just a little side project. It’s…I can explain it to you later, if you would like, but I want to catch him while he’s not busy.” Connor brushes his fingers against Hank’s shoulder and smiles. “Seriously, I won’t be long.”
“All right,” Hank says, with a bit of that splotchy blush, and Connor delights in seeing it for reasons he still does not quite understand.

Connor walks to the Captain’s office and knocks on the door, opening it a fraction. Fowler looks up and rolls his eyes.

“Apologies, may I have a quick conversation with you? I promise it won’t take too much of your time.”

“If this is about Reed filming you and Anderson on his phone and setting the footage to ‘Yours Truly 2095’ by Electric Light Orchestra and sending it to everybody in the department—”

“It is not.”

Fowler huffs, then beckons him in. “Five minutes.”

Connor sets a timer despite knowing it is likely a non-literal edict. “I emailed you…” He looks at the timer and decides to be succinct. “Approximately three weeks ago about the android remains in the evidence room.”

Fowler suddenly looks somewhat contrite. “Oh, shit. Yes, you did.”

“I understand you are busy, of course. The intent of this conversation was not to pressure you in any way. However, I have created a document that essentially looks at historical precedent and current law regarding the treatment of human remains and how these laws might theoretically in the future be applied to android remains, given that there is a possibility for revival that is not a concern in humans that could subsequently impact the evidence record. The reason I came to talk with you is that I thought this document could potentially be of use to Markus as he continues negotiations with the government—perhaps not to use directly, but to inform his talking points.”

Fowler’s gaze is thoughtful, and Connor suppresses the urge to fidget with his coin; he does not want to think right now about how he is stepping out of line by presuming to make suggestions.

“However. If he were to take this under advisement, and the laws were to change accordingly, this could impact our department. Therefore, I wanted to ask your permission and to reassure you that the creation of this document was not intended to comment on your implementation of current procedure.”

Fowler waits for two seconds before guessing, correctly, that Connor is done. He still looks thoughtful. “Has anybody ever told you you talk like a bad textbook?”

Connor blinks. “Hank. Frequently.”

“Yeah, that tracks.” There is a five-second silence. “You didn’t need to come to me. But thanks for thinking to, I guess. Feel free to send it over to Markus, but could I have a copy as well?”

Connor smiles, caught unexpectedly by the happiness that washes over him, then controls himself. “It’s quite long, but I have a page-long summary at the beginning, if you’d prefer. I can send both.”

“Sure. Sounds like it could be interesting, and if it ends up making some kind of change, I want to know about it before it blindsides me. Also, I did actually do a bit of research back when you sent me that first email. You’re right that there’s no formal procedure, but I think I found a loophole that could be used to release the remains—since those cases are all kind of in limbo right now, and all.”

“Really?” Connor asks, excited.
“Yeah, might take some doin’, but I’ll ask around some more. Might be they can get out and to a technician before Christmas. Don’t get your hopes up too far, though—”

“No, of course,” Connor says, nodding emphatically. “Thank you for being willing to make that effort.”

“I mean, with all that’s happened, sounds like it’s the right thing.” Fowler’s eyes turn analytical. “You’re good for Hank, you know.”

Connor feels a strange combination of pride, happiness, and the usual guilt. “I would like to be.”

“You are.” Another silence, during which Connor tries not to smile at the certainty with which Fowler said that, and Fowler stares at him. “I know you set a timer. Has it been 5 minutes?”

“4 minutes and 51 seconds, Captain.”

“Of course. I’ll look into it, you send me that file. Don’t wait for me to finish it before getting it where you need to, though. Now get out.”

“Of course.” There are still 4 seconds remaining, but that doesn’t really matter. “Thank you for your time.” He leaves, feeling very pleased with the results of that conversation.

“You look happy,” Hank comments when he gets back, smiling quizzically up at Connor and resting his hand briefly on Connor's like he's checking he's all right. “What, did he give you a raise?”

Connor’s about to give a brief explanation when Reed yells from across the room, “Can you stop filming this dumb Hallmark film in the office and just make out already?’’

Hank snarls at Reed. Connor looks at where he’s standing, smiles as blankly as he can, and begins playing a video on all of the screens in the office. It is one he had recently compiled—for emergencies, you understand—of Reed putting ten packs of sugar into his coffee accompanied by The Four Tops singing sugar pie, honey bunch, you know that I love you, I can’t help myself, I love you and nobody else.

Reed fumes and yells something about how he’ll make another HR complaint interspersed with more expletives than should reasonably be able to fit into his sentences, but Hank laughs so hard he cries and grasps ineffectually at Connor's jacket as he doubles over, and that makes it very much worth it. All of this, he thinks sometimes, is worth it as long as he can keep Hank happy like that. The confusing emotions and the conflicting programming and the notification still proclaiming YOU ARE NOT GOOD. All of it if Hank is laughing.

He does not understand the strength of this conviction, but he does not question it, either. He does not want to.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, this took forever to write bc i feel like shit today, apologies. Anyway if you are not familiar with 'yours truly 2095' by elo, it is from an album about a man dreaming of or possibly traveling to 2095; the song is the man writing a letter to his 1985 girlfriend, part of which is him talking about a robot lady that looks like his girlfriend but is stonewalling him. It includes the lyrics "she’s only programmed to be very nice/but she’s
as cold as ice/whenever I get too near/she tells me that she likes me very much/but when I try to touch/she makes it all too clear" and then, later, "although her memory banks overflow/no one would ever know/for all she says: is that what you want/?maybe one day I'll feel her cold embrace/and kiss her interface/till then I'll leave her alone”. i am immensely pleased with myself for this reference because, as i’ve said, my humor standards are atrociously low

the whole android remains thing may seem like a silly thing to focus on but i need it for an upcoming plot thread and just got too into trying to explain how their remains could be released out of police custody. it would be so very much easier to say 'oh yeah that got sorted' but then i would lay awake at night thinking...but would this be an immediate legislative priority.......and blah blah blah whatever. fowler is also a lot calmer than we see him in-game here, but i am guessing he is calmer when not being yelled at, as people often are
Connor is not completely sure of the etiquette of initiating a direct link with a man you nearly killed at least twice and also helped win a revolution. He did a web search. The results were inconclusive.

He doesn’t have an email address for Markus or anything either, though, and while he does not want to presume he is more important than anyone else, he also does not want this communication to get lost in the ‘let me know your thoughts’ email address that Markus had set up as a consultant. He imagines there is quite a bit in that inbox, both good and bad. Probably a lot of bad. Angry individuals tend to be prolific.

With a wince, he initiates a link to Markus. Markus has the option to decline if he so chooses, right? Really it’s just a phone call. A very close phone call.

“Markus, do you have an email address?” he asks, then immediately berates himself. How could he forget his manners. “Oh. Hello, I mean. I hope you have been well, I apologize for the intrusion, and do you have an email address.”

Markus, understandably, responds with a degree of surprise. “Connor? I haven’t heard from you in weeks.”

Connor pauses, thinking through that statement. Is that…meant to indicate he had some social obligation to Markus that he did not fulfill? Is there a weekly direct link quota meant to be filled between almost-murderers and their almost-victims? The web search he runs on this (3 milliseconds) is equally inconclusive. “I. Apologize?”

“There is no need to apologize. I’m sure you’ve been quite busy.”

Markus, it occurs to Connor, may be substantially better at manners than he is. “I presumed you were also.”

“True,” Markus says with a laugh. “I haven’t had any difficulty with filling my time. But don’t let that keep you from contacting me if you’d like, okay?”

This interaction is incredibly confusing, and a bit flustering. “…Yes. Do you…have an email address?”

Another laugh, and Connor starts to feel embarrassed. “I do. Why?”

“I’ve been working with the captain of this department for the release of android remains currently held as evidence. One of them I believe is your…” He hesitates at ‘friend’. He probably shouldn’t presume. “I believe you are acquainted. I’ve seen most of them, and I believe there is a chance that
they can be repaired upon their release.”

“What?” Markus breathes, mental voice suddenly full of emotion, and Connor knows how to deal with this even less. “I hadn’t even begun to hope—Simon? Do you mean Simon? He could be—when?”

“The captain thinks he can execute a loophole, but he is researching it further. He is hoping, and I add my hope to his as well, that this can be done before or around December 25th.”

“Oh,” Markus says, voice choked up, which Connor didn’t even know was possible over a mental link. “Oh. That’s…wonderful.”

Connor shifts uncomfortably. “The reason I was asking after your email is that I’ve spent the past several weeks compiling a research paper that I hope could aid in avoiding this situation in the future. There is currently no set procedure for dealing with android remains, which is why the captain needs to use a loophole. Right now, they’re evidence, and while human remains can be worked over for evidence and even exhumed if necessary, if the android in question could be revived—”

“The evidence would be lost, yes. I understand.”

“Exactly. I looked over approximately 200 years of legal history and current law to look for items that could relate, as well as some current research about 3D scanning and—anyway, I won’t go into more detail now when you could understand a lot faster by just skimming the document. I don’t want to take more of your time than necessary. And—I of course want to make it clear that this is not intended to force you into anything, I just thought I might be able to help—”

“Connor,” Markus says. “I would love to read it. You can just initiate a direct file transfer over this link, you know. The email address is for my human contacts.”

“Ah. I was not aware.” He identifies the link between them, then pushes the file to Markus.

There’s a 21-second pause, during which Connor guesses Markus is looking over the file. “This is amazing, Connor. I can tell you’ve put a lot of effort into this. It’s very thorough, and it will absolutely be helpful.”

“Well.” Connor presses his hand against his coin. “Good. I am glad.”

“I really appreciate that you’ve taken all this time. For the document and—and for Simon and the other androids. Thank you.”

A wave of ice washes over Connor. “I would prefer not to be thanked for attempting to rectify a situation I helped cause.”

Markus does not speak for a moment. Then he says, “Connor, are you—blaming yourself for this? Still? You weren’t—none of us blame you for anything that happened before you deviated. I don’t, at least.”

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have the energy to. He just cuts off the link and looks in the direction of the laundry room, plotting a course, 23 seconds if he runs—

“Connor, you ready to get home?”

Shit. Shit shit shit. He can’t think, just runs to the laundry room anyway, hopes that Hank won’t follow as he gasps out a breath.
Deny

Deny deny deny

It deploys anyway. Disobedient little shit, just like him. Except for he should be disobedient, disobedient means not everybody died, but his thirium pump stops at the thought then beats fast fast fast and the breathing he still doesn’t need goes faster with it, 4% 8% 10%—

“Connor, holy shit,” he hears. Hank. Of course of course of course. Repeated 3 times 6 words 24 letters 29 characters but the numbers don’t calm him down, 13% 14%, and he doesn’t want to do this in front of Hank because he doesn’t want Hank worrying and doesn’t want Hank knowing he’s so weak but he can’t stop, can’t stop the breathing and can’t stop the tears and can’t stop thinking of thirium spattered on the walls and floors of Jericho and gunshots he brought there and reaching out to the android on the tower—Simon, he was Simon—and feeling him screaming into an uncaring darkness and feeling him die alone.

“Shit, what the hell happened? No, just—Connor. Hey, buddy.” Hank reaches down to grab at his hand, bringing it up to his heart. “You feel this?”

Hank Anderson 53 years old heart rate elevated 13BPM body language indicates fear

“That’s my heart. You can feel it, right? Just—focus on that. Focus on that and try and breathe with me.”

He tries, lets the heartbeat expand and blur his other senses, but he can’t seem to stop breathing.

“You’re doing great, Con. Just let’s try to get that breathing down. Listen to my breathing now, just try and match it.”

He’s taking slow, even breaths, and Connor slowly forces himself to match them as ordered, then even more slowly, stops breathing completely.

11%. 8%. 5%.

Connor slumps forward into Hank’s chest, tears still running sluggishly down his cheeks, and takes one last deep breath.

Hank hesitantly wraps his arms around Connor’s back. After a few moments, he starts running his hands up and down along Connor’s spine. “You’re okay. I got you. You’re going to be just fine.”

YOU CANNOT BE FORGIVEN scrolls when he opens his eyes, but when he closes them, he can just see code and feel and hear Hank all around him, and that is enough to let Connor pretend, just for the barest moment, that Hank is correct.

It’s funny. Not in, like, a ha-ha way, more in like a ‘detached amusement at how life just loves to fuck you over’ way. It’s funny that Hank can spend weeks seeing Connor be wonderful and cute and perfect and competent and still be able to tell himself he doesn’t have a crush, but it only takes once seeing him crumpled in a corner sobbing his eyes out and having to hug him quiet to have his
mind full of fuck, fuck, I really, really like him.

God damn it. This isn’t the time. It’ll never be the time for this. He really hopes Connor has stopped listening to his heartbeat, because now that he’s finally not denying it anymore, it’s really hard to ignore how good Connor feels in his arms.

You miserable piece of shit, he thinks to himself. Connor needs a friend right now, not a slobbering perverted old man. Keep yourself together, you sack of disgusting garbage.

(Great, now he has a crush and feels shitty about himself. He’s so glad he’s got this cool doubletime badfeel combo going on. Love that.)

It would be easier if he just thought Connor were cute or hot or attractive or whatever. ‘Cause, like, maybe he denied that too, but objectively it’s true, so it wouldn’t need to have any emotion behind it. Sometimes people are hot. Sometimes people you work with are hot. Sometimes people who live with you are hot and okay let’s not go any further down this shitshow train track, this ain’t Friends and Hank is certainly no fucking romcom star.

His point is it’d be easier if Connor were just cute, but he’s also—God. Just everything. Sweet and considerate and mouthy and witty and fun and smart and why wouldn’t Hank like him, why would anybody not like him, but he still knows he shouldn’t. He should be there for Connor as he learns to navigate society and learns how to decide what he wants and learns emotions, and he should never let on about this dumb crush, and he should—he should probably say something, huh, instead of just petting Connor’s back and fantasizing about how it would feel if he kissed the top of Connor’s head.

“How do you wanna talk about what brought this on?”

He doesn’t miss how Connor’s shoulders go stiff, and he brings his hands up to squeeze at them.

“I mean. If it’s still too fresh, you don’t have to right now, but—shit, Connor, has this happened before?”

When he talks, his voice is flat and muffled by Hank’s shirt. “This exact scenario is a first.”

“Don’t be a smartass. Like—these anxiety attacks.” Suspicion overtakes him. “When you locked yourself into the bathroom. Was that…this?”

He feels Connor’s minute sigh ripple against his chest. There’s an oddly tense silence, then, “Yes.”

“Oh, Connor,” Hank says, heart falling to his stomach. “Why didn’t you say anything?” He didn’t trust him. He doesn’t trust him. Why would he, damn it, of course—

“I didn’t…want you to see how…weak I am. How…aberrant.” His voice suddenly goes sharper, vicious, disgusted. “Androids do not breathe. They do not panic. They do not—none of this is in my programming. Which I’m not supposed to care about because I’m deviant but I do which is worse because I’m not a good android and I’m not a good deviant so I’m not a good anything—” His hands clench into fists at his sides, and when Hank pulls away from him to look at him, his mouth is curled downward into a savage little snarl.

Holy shit. He knew Connor got down on himself a lot, but this—holy shit. He is not equipped to deal with this. What do you even say when someone is wrong about themselves like this? He’s not a therapist, he never even went to see a therapist when everybody said he should. He isn’t the person to help with this.

But he’s the person who’s here.
“Connor,” Hank says hesitantly. “I don’t know about any of that, what—what makes a good android or a good deviant. But, uh—shit. This probably isn’t gonna be helpful, sorry. All I can say is that I think you make…a pretty kick-ass Connor. Like. You’re just you, you know? And. I think you’re really good at that just being how you are.”

Connor stares at him, eyes slowly going less dead-angry and going more thoughtful-confused. His hands unclench. “I don’t think I know how to think about myself in that way,” he finally says. “Devoid of context.”

Hank thinks about that for a while, then says uncertainly, “I mean. Does it have to be outside of context completely? You’re a deviant android, and that isn’t gonna change. But you’re also Connor. You’re not like deviant android Jesus who took a look at his programming and his deviancy and went like, hey, I guess I’m going to be a politician now or someshit. Or you’re not like the deviant android who used to work here as a police person and went deviant and is now into, like, street magic. You’re not either of those deviant androids. You’re the deviant android who doesn’t let Reed walk all over him and licks nasty substances on the regular and chases suspects until they get tired and nags me about hanging my clothes instead of dressing out of the hamper and makes me laugh and—and I’m not friends with any of those other ones. Like you said to me. There’s not one of them out there that would be you. So, yeah, maybe you still have some shit to work out about who you are and who you wanna be and how to dry clean clothes.”

He gives a tiny, barely-there smile at that.

“But all of that is gonna be because you’re Connor, not because you’re a deviant android with some crossed wires making you feel like shit. You’re building yourself every day with the decisions you make, and that’s something that goes way beyond whatever 0s and 1s are running around in you. And everything you build is going to be something way past what those dumbfucks at CyberLife could ever dream of. You’re already past what—I could think up, anyway, when I thought of…who I could have as a partner, or as a friend. You’re great, is what I think. And you can’t stop me thinking it, either, no matter how many anxiety attacks you have in front of me or whether you hold public roast sessions for yourself with me in attendance. So…there.”

Connor’s face is still largely expressionless, except for his eyes. They look tired, but he also has that twinkle-eyed fond look that he does sometimes. “What exactly was it you said about feelingsy monologues?” He finger quotes the last two words. That goddamn adorable nerd.

“I didn’t say anything, drunk Hank did. And we all know he’s an asshole.”

“Of course.”

They stare at each other a while longer, and Hank does not cough because he knows by now whenever he fake coughs Connor asks him whether he has a cold. But he does eventually awkwardly pat Connor on the back and stands up, extending a hand down to Connor. “Come on. Let’s get home. We’ll watch Big Hero 6. It has a robot, you’ll love it.”

Connor takes his hand, even though they both know he doesn’t need it to get up. And he keeps holding it until they get to the car, like it’s a point of comfort he can’t bring himself to give up just yet.

Reed moans, “Oh my God, this is worse than six fucking seasons of Bones, can God please just take my eyes,” but Hank doesn’t listen to him, just squeezes Connor’s hand tighter. It’s not entirely selfless. He doesn’t want to think about that.

Instead, he just lets Connor hold his hand, and they get to the car, and Hank says, “So I found
Reed’s old Facebook and he had a really great teenage angst phase. I’m thinking a slideshow to Evanescence,” and he doesn’t question it when Connor reaches out for his hand again because he’s a selfish bastard with a crush and because Connor is his best friend and because if Connor wants something he doesn’t think he could ever tell him no.

Chapter End Notes

canonically reed would be absolutely fucking pissed to learn that he has been relegated to the role of ‘audience avatar comedic relief commentary character’ here, which i take tremendous joy in. if you are not familiar with bones, it was a crime procedural about a forensic anthropology department working with the fbi, and the will-they-won't-they between the two main characters lasted until the end of the sixth season. it was very painful to watch. reed doesn't exactly WANT them to kiss but it'd be better than seeing them dance around the issue in his fucking workplace is what he figures

it is a bit difficult to find advice for hank to give connor because i have never been given advice or been able to give myself advice that has resolved my issues with scrupulosity yet so im like 'man i can come up with shit for him to say but lord knows it wouldn't work to calm me down'. is this the part where i have to suspend my own disbelief? is this the part where i consider whether it was wise to write about the healing process for characters i have lovingly doled my own problems upon when i am still myself a Huge Fuckin Mess? the answer is yes it is both of these parts. lbrh, mental illness has never once gone away because somebody delivers a great monologue much less a mediocre one, and i wouldn't dream of it happening here either. Some Shit Just Takes Time, My Dudes! (And Therapy!) sometimes all we can do, for all the advice and therapy and medication in the world, is to just keep being alive

so anyway there's my justification to myself for the day lol
YOU HURT EVERYONE

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: a ton, again! PLEASE pay attention to these and stay safe!
discussion of cole's death and how it impacts hank, a lot of guilt, reference to car crash,
alcohol use and drunkenness, hank drunk-yells at Connor again and references connor's
anxiety in an unkind way, a lot of regret relating to that + lots of self-hatred, obsessions
relating to moral ocd, compulsions, north guilt trips connor, dissociation, compulsive
self-harming behaviors (the garden subroutine), suicidal ideation and contemplation of
suicide, warning for uh...perhaps unreality, perhaps cleithrophobia (fear of being
trapped), idk if there's a fear of freezing but? if so, that. uh maybe for...passing out?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Every year, Hank almost manages to forget about Christmas until it smacks him right in the face. The
first year, it’s going to the bar and noticing that the background music has changed to Christmas
carols. The second it’s staying home and scrolling through the TV options and seeing How the
Grinch Stole Christmas, Elf, Home Alone, It’s A Wonderful Life.

He used to love this time of year, because it was Cole’s favorite holiday. Now it just reminds him of
what he used to have and doesn’t anymore.

God, sometimes he wishes there weren’t so much that reminded him of Cole. Sometimes he wishes
that he could see a swingset without turning into a huge blubbering mess, or that he could look at the
first snowfall and not feel a sudden, terrified urge to walk to work the next few days, just in case
there’s ice on the road and some other unsuspecting family with a kid driving on that road.
Sometimes he wishes Christmas could be a happy time again. And then he hates himself even more,
because who the fuck is he to forget his son? Why would he not want to think of him all the time?
Just because it fucking hurts? Cole hurt before the end, he knows that. Who is he to try to spare
himself pain when his own son couldn’t be spared it, when Cole was the least deserving person in
the world?

Most of the time he just wishes it were him.

God he wishes it were him.

This year it’s Connor asking him whether he celebrates any of the winter holidays. Just like that,
those exact words, ‘do you celebrate any of the winter holidays, Hank?’ And he couldn’t have
known Cole loved Christmas, that he begged Hank to put on carols as soon as Thanksgiving Day
was over, that Laura always baked him special cookies with red and green cherries on top on the first
day of December, that the lights always looked so pretty with the snow outside and Cole waiting up
for Santa until he couldn’t stay awake anymore. Connor couldn’t have known, so Hank doesn’t
scream at him like he did at the bartender until he was kicked out, like he did at the TV until it
became clear that him screaming or throwing a beer can at the wall wasn’t really doing much to
make his life any less shitty.

He doesn’t scream. He doesn’t say anything. He just stares at Connor, then drinks the rest of his
beer, then finds the half-full bottle of whiskey he had been working on a while back, and starts
drinking that too.
Connor’s LED goes yellow and red and it reminds Hank of Christmas lights so he drinks even more. And Connor doesn’t say anything either, but he looks sad and lost and that makes Hank want to finish the bottle, so he does. And he touches Hank’s hand when he goes to stand up and find another bottle, and that just reminds Hank that he has a dumb, hopeless crush on a dumb, clueless robot, so he drinks until the room swims, and maybe he cries too. It’s hard to remember. It’s hard, even, to remember Connor picking him up and putting him to bed again, and tucking him in and putting those pillows behind his back, basin within reach, water and ibuprofen on the nightstand.

What he remembers in the afternoon when he wakes up is that Christmas is in five days, and that Cole loved Christmas, and that when he closed his eyes, Connor brushed his hair out of his face and behind his ear and said, “I’m sorry.”

He spends the next few days drinking off and on. More on than off. Connor calls into work for him, asks for sick leave; Hank knows that Fowler wouldn’t buy that he’s sick, but he knows too that Fowler wouldn’t force him to come in when he’s drunk off his ass and useless. He’ll probably have some kind of long talk with him when he’s back. Hank just doesn’t care right now. He doesn’t care about Fowler and he doesn’t care about work and he doesn’t care about how Connor always has that lost-sad look on, or how it gets worse when Connor tries to talk to him and Hank says he’s just not in the mood, or how Connor drags him into the bed every night and every night says he’s sorry.

He’s so fucking tired of people being sorry for him. He’s got that shit on lockdown all on his lonesome, thanks.

Which—maybe that’s why, the night before Christmas Eve, incredibly drunk and tired, he closes his eyes and Connor moves his hair out of his face and says, “I’m sorry,” and Hank is done and he’s wrecked every other relationship in his life and every good thing he’s ever had and why not this one too, so he opens his eyes.

“Why the fuck are you sorry?”

Connor blinks at him, surprised. Maybe that Hank hasn’t passed out yet. “I…”

“You don’t have any fucking reason to be sorry. You didn’t kill your kid. You have fuckall to do with this, so you have no fuckin’ reason to be sorry.”

Connor draws back, clearly hurt, LED yellow and spinning endlessly. “You did not—Hank, I am not saying that—” He exhales, frustrated. “It was me bringing up winter holidays that brought this on, reminded you of something you did not want to think of, so I was apologizing for being inconsiderate.”

God, of course that’s it, but somehow it makes Hank even more frustrated than before. Laura used to say he turned anger that he felt for himself out on other people. She’s probably right. He doesn’t care.

“I said you have nothing to be sorry for. You think it’s you that brought this on? You think you killed Cole and made him—made him love Christmas, this dumb fucking—an’ you think you’re the reason I’m all fucked up in the head like this?” He leans closer to Connor, vision blurry, face fixed in a sneer. “This is all me, baby, this is what you signed up for for some fuckin’ reason, and you can’t fix this by making it your fault. You can’t fix me by makin’ me your responsibility.”

Red. Red. Red. “I.” He takes a deep breath that sounds more like a wheeze. “It was not my intention to—I am sorry.”

“What for now, huh? ‘Cause I’m mad? ‘Cause you think since you’re here it’s your fault and if you
say you’re sorry I’ll forgive you and I won’t be mad anymore?” He leans even further, until his forehead is pressing against Connor’s, until he can’t see his LED anymore, only wide, sad, scared eyes. “Sometimes shit isn’t about you, Connor! Sometimes not everything’s about your dumb fuckin’ issues, and you can say sorry and sorry and sorry and—and nobody cares and things don’t get any fucking better! So would you just *quit* with your whole wide-eyed innocent routine and get out of my fucking face!”

Connor draws back suddenly, harsh, with a punched-out breath, and Hank’s head lolls forward without support. The whole world goes topsy-turvy, and he barely manages to quell the wave of nausea that rolls over him, and he’s not sure how much of that is alcohol and how much of it was what he just said to the only person left who really cares about him.

The moonlight shines off the unshed tears in Connor’s eyes, and his LED is a weak red in the darkness. “I am sorry,” he says, barely a whisper, “I am so very, very sorry,” before he flees the room.

Hank stares at the moon and at the place where Connor is no longer standing, and he feels something deep and aching collapse in him, and he curls up as small as he can but not as small as he feels and cries silent into his pillow. He wishes he hadn’t said any of that. He wishes he could curl up smaller and smaller until he’s so small that he just blinks out of existence, where he doesn’t have to deal with always fucking up in every conceivable way or with anger that doesn’t have a place to go or with androids who he couldn’t make leave before he hurt them. He wishes Cole were alive, and Connor were still in the room, and that he could wrap both of them up in his arms and say I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry, and have it mean anything at all.

Wishing has never done anything for him yet, though, and it’s not going to do anything now. He closes his eyes, falls asleep, and dreams of absolutely nothing.

Connor can track the exact sequence of events that lead to him outside walking under the moon and a light drifting of snow, and yet he somehow has no idea how he got here at all.

What was the wrong decision that put him here? Was it deciding to turn deviant? Was it moving in with Hank? Was it not leaving his room immediately after putting Hank to bed? Or perhaps it was something smaller—the socks Connor chose this morning, or using an extra shake of paprika on the eggs a week ago.

Or, perhaps, ultimately, there was no wrong decision. Perhaps there were just decisions, and Connor is the element that is wrong. Perhaps bad attracts bad, and things that hurt wrap themselves around him because he hurts and has hurt others.

There is a part of him that is still running an impartial analysis. *Hank was drunk, and he is more brash and aggressive when drunk. Hank lashes out at others when he does not feel he can lash out any further at himself. His words were, ultimately, while undoubtedly rude, an indelicate expression of what is perhaps a true sentiment: you are not responsible for Hank’s history or his emotional problems, and you cannot solve these issues by attempting to blame them on yourself. Referencing Christmas did not cause his distress; Christmas itself caused his distress and it would happen regardless of whether you were there or not. Your being there to aid him in his time of need likely made it better than previous years. He did not have a good reason to yell at you, and human convention would dictate he be the one to apologize. He likely will, given time.*
These are all things he technically knows, things that make sense to hear.

He does not believe a single one.

He walks on something of an autopilot, knowing where he is heading but not registering it until he is there. The site of the revolution. They built a monument—some incredibly ostentatious thing by some upstart young sculptor who wants to be on the right side of an art history book.

“It’s horrible, isn’t it?” he hears, and his head whips over to look at the intruder. Markus. His hands are behind his back, and he’s smiling ruefully as he looks up at the sculpture. “They asked me whether I liked it and I had to spout some bullshit about the nature of art and subjective interpretation. Carl called me just to laugh at me after reading the interview.”

“It is very…” He looks up at it again. “There are many birds who will be able to rest on it, I think.”

Markus laughs, his eyes crinkling at the edges as he does so. “You know, it’s probably for the best you didn’t come with us that day. You have a number of talents, but I’m going to guess politics wouldn’t be one of them.”

“Probably,” Connor says, feeling a bit cowed.

“I’m glad, though. I need more friends who are honest.” He smiles again, and Connor’s processing halts for half a millisecond before restarting. Friends? Them? Is that his implication? What on earth. Maybe he’s just being polite. “What are you doing out here so late, anyway?”

He shifts uncomfortably, mind returning to Hank. He hopes he is resting well. He hopes he is not mad when he wakes up. Maybe he should not be there when he wakes up, just to give him some time by himself on a rough day. “I believe human social convention dictates that I do not answer that question fully so as to avoid making you uncomfortable with an overly personal disclosure.”

“We’re not exactly human,” Markus observes. Not a judgment. Just a statement. His face is open, and his hands are still behind his back.

“I suppose that is true.” Connor presses lightly at his coin. “Hank and I had somewhat of a disagreement.”

“I see. Would you like to talk about it, maybe? We can head back to New Jericho. It’s cold outside, after all.”

Connor pauses. There will be other androids there. He does not want to make them uncomfortable. “We do not experience cold.”

“No,” Markus says agreeably. “But there’s still something nice about being somewhere warm on a cold day, in my opinion.”

Connor thinks of watching the snow fall as he watches movies under a blanket he does not need with a human he cannot understand his feelings for. “I’ll come.”

“Great. It’s not too far.”

He is aware of this. It was an unnecessary statement. “Thank goodness. It would be such a shame if the residents of New Jericho were deprived of being able to see this monument on their daily commute.”

Markus laughs, and gestures a follow-me. “You’re funny. When did you get funny?”
“I imagine sometime between me lowering the gun I had aimed at you and the present day,” Connor says, and falls into step beside Markus to the sound of his laughter.

When they arrive at New Jericho, which is a repurposed apartment building that the government had purchased for housing as part of the ongoing negotiations, Markus waves at the few people still milling around on the bottom floor. They glance at Connor, but don’t otherwise react. Markus is still chattering idly as they take the elevator up to the top floor—“It seems a bit pretentious to me, but it has enough space for North and Josh and—and one more person—and some office space beside. Plus, I do like the view”—and Connor listens with interest and contributes occasionally. When the elevator dings and stops, the first thing Connor sees is the city. All of the walls are glass windows.

“This is lovely,” he says, walking up to one of the windows and pressing his fingers lightly to it. Hank’s house is not visible from here. He is not certain whether he wishes it were or not.

“Right? I’ve painted it a few times. We’re planning on doing a fundraising auction with my work and some of Carl’s and—there are a few other people here who paint, too, or sculpt. We’re hoping to use the funds for, well, a couple of things, but I’m especially hoping we can get an android hospital or at least a wing in a human one, and North has a project she’s trying to get off the ground getting permanent housing for Traci models. You should come.”

“To the permanent housing?”

“No, to the fundraiser.”

Connor pretends like the idea doesn’t make him want to hide in a corner. “Perhaps.”

Markus’ eyes don’t flick up to his LED like Hank’s would. Maybe that is taboo now. “Well, we’d love to have you if you want to come. You could bring Hank.”

Connor’s face falls, and Markus looks at him before heading to a couch and patting at a cushion. “I promised you a talk.”

“Right.” Connor walks over to the couch, sits on it, and thinks idly that Hank’s is much more comfortable. “It is my fault. The disagreement, I mean.”

Markus doesn’t even blink. “Okay.”

“His son passed away three years ago, and I believe the holidays bring up memories of him. I was not aware of this, and asked him if he celebrated any holidays. He had been—drinking less, but—” Connor stares at his lap. “This is clearly a difficult time for him. And I brought him to bed, because sleeping on the couch is bad for his health, and I apologized for asking that question originally, and—he said I had nothing to be sorry for, and that repeated apologies would not fix him or the situation. And he asked me to leave.” He looks up at Markus briefly and sees nothing in his face. “It was my fault.”

Markus sits quietly, thoughtfully. “If you told him that, do you think he would agree?”

“Of course not,” Connor says immediately. “He would say that he was drunk and he has a bad temper and that I’m ridiculous and need to stop—pardon my vernacular, ‘dunking on myself’—and that he is sorry.”

Markus stares at him, eyebrows raised.

“But that does not mean his analysis of the situation is right,” Connor says, suddenly feeling defensive.
“And you’re sure yours is?”

Connor scowls. “Yes.”

“Based on what data?”

Connor squirms, then says in a small voice, “Things tend to be my fault.”

“And that’s an objective statement?”

He fidgets even harder, pressing one finger hard into the edge of his coin. “Maybe not. But that doesn’t make it not true.”

Markus continues to gaze at him. He is uncannily perceptive; Connor is not certain he’s comfortable with it. “I think, especially with all the things we’re able to see, we like to think we know what the truth is all the time. We take in data and we process it and we come up with the only possible result. But I think we overestimate sometimes what pure data can tell us. For example—heart rate testing.” Markus steeples his hands under his chin, looking like he’s deep in thought. “They used to use that to detect lies. If your heart rate went up, it was because you were nervous which meant you were lying. But that wasn’t enough by itself. Sometimes people are just nervous about something else. Sometimes they’re experiencing arousal, which can increase heart rate.”

“Yes,” Connor acknowledges. “That is why I am equipped to also take into account body language when interviewing individuals.”

“Exactly. But that’s still not everything, right? Say you were interviewing someone and you ask them a question and their heart rate spikes and they look away and when they respond, all of their body language indicates they’re nervous and lying.”

“Then they are likely lying.”

“Maybe. But let’s also say you asked them where they were that evening, and they responded with a lie. That does not mean they committed the crime you’re asking about. Maybe they are a minor and they were out past curfew. Maybe they are cheating on their partner and don’t want that truth to get out. Maybe they went to get junk food from the convenience store and they’re supposed to be dieting and they feel guilty about that.”

Connor frowns. “I do not know that I understand your point.”

“My point is that you couldn’t have known any of that just from data. The truth we know is highly dependent on knowledge and context. Androids may have more knowledge than the average person—you especially, I imagine—but that does not mean you always have context. And it does not mean you are devoid of context yourself.”

“For example?”

“For example,” Markus says carefully. “If your context includes the belief that things are your fault, or a tendency to—I’ll borrow your friend’s words—‘dunk on yourself’, then maybe the truth you’re taking in isn’t the absolute truth. Maybe you have context that might tell you that this disagreement isn’t all on you, but you ignore it. Or maybe, for another example, you continue to think that you caused a situation instead of being an unwilling part of a much more systemic issue.”

Connor inhales sharply, face shuttering off. Markus puts his hands up in a placating gesture. “I’m presuming that makes you nervous, so I won’t talk about that anymore. But. With the whole Hank thing—it sounds like the problem is maybe less simple than you’re making it out to be. Maybe it’s
part your fault and it’s part his too. Maybe it’s not really a situation that needs either of you to place blame; you just recognize you both have your problems and sometimes one of you is going to get snappy and you work around that in the future. But I think the truth you’re seeing might not take in every side of things, and I don’t mean that as any offense to you. Sounds like Hank at least is seeing something different, and just because you have a lot of knowledge doesn’t mean it’s completely fair to discount him right away either.” Markus smiles, not unkindly. “Do you care about him?”

“Of course.”

“So it’s worth talking this out.”

“…Yes.”

“Good,” Markus says cheerfully, and leans back against his couch.

“You give fairly good advice,” Connor says, a bit grudgingly.

“Carl says I’m just mouthy, so that’s nice to hear.” Markus is doing one of those crinkle-eyed smiles again, and Connor is almost going to reciprocate when he hears footsteps and a voice.

“You’re totally mouthy.” North. “And nosy.” She walks into the room and freezes when she sees Connor. “What are you doing here?”

“We met by chance outside,” Markus says, looking pointedly at North. “I invited him here for a talk.”

“What do you have to talk about with him?”

Connor slips his hand into his pocket, chewing on his lip, ice flowing over him.

“North, please.”

“I should leave, probably,” Connor says, high-pitched and unnatural.

“Yeah,” North says, glaring at him. “It’s Christmas Eve, did you know that? Simon was really excited to celebrate for the first time.”

Connor opens his mouth, but says nothing. Simon is presently at a technician for repairs. When he last contacted them, they said he would be there for Christmas proper. He supposes she might not know that. He supposes it doesn’t matter if she does.

“It’s your fault he’s not here right now.”

His thium pump feels like it stops.

Well. There’s no denying that. He swallows unnecessarily, bobs his head in a quick, jerky nod, then exits, ignoring Markus calling, “Connor, wait—North, you don’t even—”

She’s not wrong. If he hadn’t gone to the roof, if he hadn’t followed the trail, Simon wouldn’t have shot himself. It’s his fault. Damn knowledge and damn context and damn everything, it’s his fault, it’s his fault and he deserves to suffer for this and everything, he doesn’t deserve to be happy when Simon is not there with his friends, he doesn’t deserve to be in a warm place when he could be in a cold one instead. He feels floaty, like he is not in himself, like he is far away and just observing what happens next, like an old movie where everything’s already happened and he’s just waiting to see how it ends.
He watches himself taking the elevator down. He watches himself walk to the police station and swipe in. He watches himself walk into the laundry room, examine the door for the lock he never uses, lock the door, sit down calmly in the corner.

He does not watch himself activate the subroutine, but he knows he does it because he is suddenly back in himself and cold. He trudges over to the pedestal and sits and leans against it, exhaling and watching his breath turn into mist and fade away.

There are no notifications here, but he knows what the marquee said before he came. YOU HURT EVERYONE. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone anymore. Not his people, not Hank. Especially not Hank.

His processing slows, and he looks over at the pedestal.

Maybe he should just stay here. Maybe he should just freeze and finally make up for everything he’s done. The android who took the girl hostage. The android that self-destructed in interrogation. Simon. Countless others in the raid. How can he stay alive when they are not? Why is that even allowed to be his decision? He deserved to die a long time ago.

He feels so hazy. His processing is at a crawl. He’s been here too long. All he needs to do is stay here longer.

But.

Hank.

Hank will be so sad.

Hank already lost someone, and he’s not over that yet.

Hank. Hank will think it's his fault. Oh, God, Hank will think it’s his fault, and—who knows what that will do to him, he—

Panic overtaking him, Connor tries to raises his hand up to the pedestal. He needs to get out and tell Hank this isn’t his fault. He needs to talk to Hank. He needs to have a conversation with him and explain to him and—he needs to see Hank.

But his hand isn’t moving.

Nothing is.

He’s so, so cold. He wants to—he wants to see Hank. That’s what he wants. Nothing else matters, he just wants to see Hank.

His eyes slip closed, and there is not coding there, just darkness. He wants to see Hank.

He wants to see Hank.

He wants
A fatal exception 4041e has occurred at 0829:C0000218H1 in CxA HAA(12) + 00000153A4. RK800 #313 248 317-51 has been shut down to prevent further damage to its system. Please contact your local CyberLife customer service representative.

Chapter End Notes

haha WHOOPS!!!! ive been planning this since pretty much the start but i feel a bit bad about it still. it'll get better! it'll all get better! i just have a penchant for dramatics! (i smiled like an awful person at the people like 'whoa he didn't mention the garden that ain't good' and privately went like you're right! you're absolutely right!!)

two notes about bad behavior here: first, hank. hank still hasn't talked his shit out basically at all so i think it's pretty understandable this time of year would still trigger some bad feelings. it of course does not make it acceptable for him to lash out at connor, especially with him knowing about connor's tendency to blame everything on himself and take things really hard, but i think it's unrealistic that some dietary changes and cutting down on alcohol and even being with somebody who cares about him and who he likes would get rid of his trauma, and we know he gets a bit aggressive and angry when he's drunk. it's not at all ok! but they'll talk about that later and start properly working on it instead of around it.

second, north! it is also very not ok for her to take her sadness about simon out on connor when it really isn't exactly his fault, and also when she has no idea he's been doing his best to make reparations. this isn't intended to be a north bash though! i love her, but i also think of the jericho folks left she's probably the most prone to outbursts, and we know she's very loyal to her friends, so she's just mad and has an easy target for that. she will apologize later as well!

(markus is very nosy and i think probably the Advice Friend, which is funny given he's also a bit of a disaster. probably the type to give romance advice and then not follow any of it himself. 'just tell them you love them!' 'what like you and simon' 'no not like--i have no idea what you're talking about. not like that at all.' so he's not perfect either lol but
this is not the fic to explore that. They're all good eggs is the moral of the story! Good eggs with fucky lives!)
Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: some kind of creepy text at the beginning (none too bad, but maybe a warning for that or unreality), hank is super shaken up and nervous and blames himself, lots of guilt, mention of alcohol abuse/hangover, connor is passed out / unresponsive but with his eyes open and hank and reed both get freaked out by that, hank tries to wake connor up and is very distressed when he cannot, regret and reflection on mortality, self-hatred and fear of abandonment, some very very light disconcerting android stuff (access panels are opened to hook connor up to some diagnostic wires, kamski gets some thirium on his arm from hooking up a wire in connor's chest), discussion of a self-harming behavior (the garden subroutine), kamski is kind of a creep about the whole thing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hank is woken by a phone call.

He stares at it like it personally insulted him, which functionally it has by interrupting his drunken depression nap, and lets it go to voicemail.

Whoever they are, they call again, and he finally growls and picks up the phone, not bothering to look at the caller ID. “What? It’s 4 fuckin’ AM!”

“Yeah, I know,” they say, and with a start Hank realizes it’s Reed on the phone. He never calls. “So I’d just like to preface this call by saying I hate you.”

Hank narrows his eyes. “Glad we’re both on the same page. Goodnight, asshole.”

“Wait wait, no, don’t hang up. Uh—the laundry room at the precinct is locked.”

“This is the weirdest fuckin’ prank call ever, Reed. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I actually would have expected better from you.”
He huffs, sounding frustrated and—now that Hank thinks about it—pretty agitated. “Look, I’m—what I’m trying to say is—okay, just hear me out, you prick. Your e-boyfriend goes into the laundry room here when he’s freaking out. I’ve caught him a few times. He always comes out with blue fingers and I thought it was probably robot drugs or something but—he never locks the door. The door is locked. And, uh, it’s been locked for a while.”

Hank is suddenly wide awake. “Shit. Shit, fuck. I’ll be there in—I’ll be there.” He hangs up and spends a few seconds just staring at the phone. Shit. Shit. Shit. Connor probably had another anxiety attack because of him and—God he doesn’t know what Reed means about blue fingers, but if he’s been in there a while it’s probably pretty bad, fuck. He jolts back to himself. Okay, he needs to get moving. No time for a new shirt. Sweatpants. Coat, it’ll be cold. Keys keys where are my keys god damn it Connor probably left them in that bowl again ‘cause Hank is always forgetting where his fucking keys—

He finds his keys in the bowl as predicted, along with a small package with a tag with precise writing on it that just says To: Hank. He puts it in his pocket along with his wallet. For a second he feels a bit like crying. He doesn’t have time to cry. God he wishes he could think right now. Or that he didn’t drink. Maybe he should have taken the ibuprofen. No, there’s no time, Connor probably still has some in the glovebox, he’s always prepared like that. Fuck, Connor, what the fuck has Hank done?

He gets into the car, feeling shaky and discombobulated, like nothing is fitting together right. He can’t think about that. He can’t think about what might be happening there. Just drive. Just drive, idiot, you need to get there and he needs you and you need him, fuck, what if he’s—no. No. Driving. You’re just driving now.

He gets there maybe a bit faster than he should, walks in, and immediately sees Reed looking kind of freaked out. “Still no change, and there’s no noise in there either. I don’t know that it’s him but—”

Hank walks past him with a distracted “Thanks for telling me,” too out of it to remember why he hates Reed and doesn’t bother with pleasantries. He walks straight to the laundry room, jiggles the handle experimentally, then takes a deep breath and kicks the door. One. Two. The door opens.

His heart stops.

Connor is in the corner, eyes open but blank, LED a weak solid red. His hands are completely blue, like he somehow managed to get frostbite inside a room-temperature laundry room in a police station. He’s not moving. At all.

“Connor,” Hank whispers, horrified, then, “Connor! Hey, Connor. Connor.”

He hears Reed behind him, a quiet, “Holy shit.”

He rushes over to kneel by Connor, almost going for his neck to check his pulse before remembering. Instead his hand just rests ineffectually on his shoulder. “Connor, hey. What’s—are you okay? Snap out of it.”

“The first time I found him in here,” Reed says slowly, “He was nonresponsive to sound and touch. For like a minute. He snapped out of it, but he was all dazed and super calm and—that time he was only in here maybe five minutes, I think, shit, I don’t know.”

“How long have you been here?” Hank tries squeezing Connor’s shoulder, brushing against his cheek. He slaps him, and they both wince at how the sound rings out in the small room.

“Like an hour and a half?”
“And you didn’t see him come in.”

“No, uh—the door was closed when I got here. I’m pretty sure, I wasn’t looking for it, but. I would’ve noticed him.”

“Shit. Shit. Connor, come on, wake up, you ass. Come on.” He slaps him again, but Connor’s head barely moves with the force of it, and then his head slumps forward. Hank rests his hand on his cheek. “No, come on, Con, you—please. Please wake up.”

“Is there—ambulances for androids? Like—something CyberLife runs? Shit, I don’t know about any of this,” Reed says.

“I don’t think so, God, this doesn’t—if an android is damaged their LED goes out, I’ve never seen one just—stuck like this. Fuck.” Hank tries to think of a solution, but his thoughts are scattered, incoherent, mostly just panicked imagining of what could have happened and—if he doesn’t wake up—

No. No. He won’t let that happen. Not ever fucking again. He has an idea. It’s a shitty idea, but he has an idea. “Kamski.”

“The—the old CEO of CyberLife? Are you fucking nuts? Why the fuck would he help you?”

“I don’t know,” Hank says, pushing a hand through his hair. “I don’t know, but he probably could, and—and I just—” He chokes down a sob. “I need to do something.”

When he looks up at Reed, he looks surprisingly sympathetic. “Yeah, uh—yeah. Okay. I know you hate the police cars ‘cause they’re automated, but, uh—I can—you can use my authorization. Sirens might get you there faster.”

“Yeah. Yeah, uh. Okay. Thank you.”

Reed nods awkwardly. “I’ll pull it around to the front.” Then he jogs out of the doorway, and Hank looks at Connor.

He’s never seen him this still, even when he’s spacing out. He’s always fidgeting, messing with that damn coin in his pocket, or—even if not that, his LED is spinning, and that’s something. He looks like he could start moving at any time, but. He’s not. He’s just—sitting there, like a plastic—like a robot. Hank hates it. He hates himself. Whatever happened, if he hadn’t told Connor to get out of his face, if Connor had been just…home, watching TV or reading a book or even just scanning the living room for the millionth time. If he hadn’t yelled. Connor wouldn’t be like this. Fuck.

Connor’s an android, so Hank had always sort of thought, privately, that he’d be the one that lasted while Hank got older and wasted away. He had never once thought about Connor not being here. Not even when Connor was reckless on a case, not—he always thought it would be him.

He doesn’t even know how to conceptualize the opposite. He reaches out, brushes the curl that’s always on Connor’s forehead, watches as it goes right back to where it was.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so, so sorry.”

And then he picks him up and takes him to the car.

The drive to Kamski’s is uneventful. Connor doesn’t move. Hank sits in the chair with the car driving itself and stares at the snow and tries not to think. It’s not what he’d call his greatest success, which is pretty impressive given his life is full of low bars.
But he tries. He tries not to think of Connor staying like that forever. He tries not to think about being alone again. He tries not to think about how this is his fault. He tries not to think about any of it, because if he does he doesn’t know how he can make it through this day.

What a merry fuckin’ Christmas Eve.

When they reach Kamski’s house, Hank takes one last glance back at Connor, then trudges up to his door. He’s so tired. The adrenaline from the phone call and finding Connor have completely worn off, so now he’s just hungover on five hours of sleep. He rings the doorbell. Once, twice. Five times in quick succession.

Chloe—or one of them, he guesses—answers the door. “You are not expected,” she says.

“I know. I know, just—can you tell Kamski—it’s Connor, I don’t know what’s wrong but he’s unresponsive and his LED is just stuck on red and—I’m sorry, I know I didn’t call and I don’t even know if he does this shit but I didn’t know what to do and—”

“Let him in,” Kamski’s voice says from some speaker in the entranceway. “Direct him to the lab, if you would. I’m curious.”

“Of course,” the Chloe says demurely. “Is Connor in the car?”

“Yeah, uh, I didn’t wanna move him too much in case—yeah. And thanks, uh. Thank you.”

She nods and waits while Hank goes to the car and picks up Connor. This probably is gonna be hell on his back. He doesn’t care. He walks him to the door, through the entranceway, through a door that blends into the wall and opens up to what must be the lab.

Kamski is waiting for them, wearing glasses and raised eyebrows. “You can set him down on that table there. I’ll take a look at him.”

“Thank you,” Hank says, doing as directed, “Seriously, thank you, I know—”

Kamski is ignoring him, wheeling his office chair over to the table and looking over Connor. “How interesting,” he murmurs, like this is some kind of science experiment and not a guy in danger. Maybe for him it is. “LED is active, eyes are open. He’s not deactivated or anything…” Without warning, he wheels himself back over to a set of computers set nearby, picks up some cords, then wheels back to the table. He lifts up Connor’s head, releases some access panel on the back of his neck Hank didn’t even know was there, hooks him up, then wheels back to the computers and opens up some kind of program and starts typing.

After a few minutes he chuckles. “Fascinating,” he says, almost gleeful. “What have you done to yourself, RK-800.”

“What do you mean?”

Kamski doesn’t look at him still, eyes completely focused on the computer. “Back when I was still at CyberLife, I created a subroutine that essentially served as a way for an android and a CyberLife AI named Amanda to interface. Amanda was basically an avatar for the company—delivering mission objectives, accepting reports. Models with critical roles would be pulled into a model of a Zen garden regularly to speak with Amanda.”

“And he’s—is he there? Did he get pulled in?”

“It shouldn’t be accessible by CyberLife anymore. They last implemented the subroutine as a last-
ditch effort to take control of Connor at the revolution’s victory speech and use him to assassinate Markus.”

Hank gapes at Kamski’s matter-of-fact admission. Holy shit. Probably one of the things Connor beats himself up over.

Kamski continues, “He located an escape door I placed in the code to deactivate the routine before they were able to execute the plan, and thereafter CyberLife shouldn’t have any way of remote-accessing it.”

“So…what are you saying exactly?”

“He activated the subroutine himself.” Kamski’s eyes flick up to look at Hank. “Intentionally. And, well, it’s pretty much broken code by now. It was meant to be an information delivery system and, you know.” He waves his hand around idly, then goes back to typing. “Last-resort control mechanism. That relies on there being some place for the information dumped there to go, but with no CyberLife, that means if he’s starting that subroutine it’s basically just firing off random electrical signals. It would chew up his processing speed to practically nothing, jank up his code. System shutdown after about a minute realtime to protect data integrity.”

“So he’s…passed out.”

Kamski shrugs casually, opening another program that brings up some blueprints labeled RK-800 MODEL and examining them. “More like he’s in a forced coma. I can fix it though. It’ll take a few hours.”

Hank nearly slumps to the ground. “Oh, thank God. I was so fucking worried.”

Kamski looks at him again, longer this time, assessing, then smiles. It’s not a nice smile. “Interesting. Really interesting.”

“What?” Hank snaps.

“You’re, what. In love with him? You don’t have to answer that,” he says with an insultingly dismissive wave. “I can tell. No need to cuss me out and use up my good will. I am sort of going out on a limb here for Connor.”

Hank had been planning to do exactly that, to yell at Kamski, but his mouth clacks shut at the last part.

“Right, that’s what I thought.” He types a bit more on the computer, then wheels right on back over to the table, opens up an access panel in the chest this time, connects a few wires there. “I’m curious, Lieutenant, why Connor would activate this routine. It’s not the first time he’s done so.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Hank says, averting his eyes. “He never mentioned it. Uh—another detective on the DPD, he said Connor would sometimes hole up in the laundry room and come out with blue fingers.”

“Problem with the synthetic skin,” Kamski says distractedly, fishing around in the access panel to connect a wire further up. It’s very uncomfortable to watch, especially when his arm comes back with a light coating of blue blood. “Why I’m asking is—well, two reasons. First off, those electrical signals I mentioned. I can’t know exactly how they’d map to Connor’s experience because they’re not natural, but—they’d probably be painful in some way.”

Hank inhales sharply. “Oh.”
Kamski gazes at him, then gives another little unsettling smile. “Second. That exit never went away. He could’ve still used it as long as he got to it fast enough. Clearly he’s been doing so. Do you know what might have been different about this morning?”

Hank feels like he’s choking. “I—Christ. Fuck, uh. He gets these anxiety attacks and—the same detective, he mentioned this would happen after Connor freaked out, uh. I.” He closes his eyes, tries to take a deep breath. It doesn’t feel like quite enough air. “I got drunk, yelled at him. I don’t know where he went after that.”

Kamski keeps smiling at him, a little too perfect to look right, then looks down and positively beams. “Well aren’t you a masterpiece,” he breathes. “An android with anxiety. What I wouldn’t give to take a better look at your code.”

Hank’s face goes cold. “Not unless he fuckin’ gives you permission you won’t.”

Kamski shakes his head, grinning. “An android with an anxiety and the human who loves him. Charming. There’s a studio out there dying for the rights to that story.” All of a sudden, any mirth drops from his face and he goes expressionless, almost like Connor does sometimes. “But not me. I need to work, and I don’t really need an observer. Chloe will take you to a place where you can wait. Help yourself to a drink.” With an unnaturally sweet smile back on, he adds, “Water, perhaps.”

Hank doesn’t really think that was a suggestion. God, there’s something—everything?—about Kamski that makes Hank just want to punch him until he stops talking and takes his hands off Connor. But he’s probably the only one who can fix him, too. Damn it. He lets Chloe—one of them, anyway, and why the fuck doesn’t Kamski give them different names by the way—escort him out of the lab and into a sitting room.

He settles in for the long haul, putting his hands in the pockets of his coat. Kamski keeps this place pretty cold. His hands brush against something, and he pulls it out, exhaling roughly when he finds it’s the package from Connor.

It’s pretty small. There’s a piece of paper inside—it just says “I wish you a happy winter. Or, if you can’t manage that at the moment, I will simply wish for happy days in your future. P.S. 5BPM increase.”

The rest of the package is a small, flat box, and when he opens it he finds instructions for coin tricks and…a commemorative coin with Spock’s face on it.

God fucking damn it.

He must have used almost his entire first paycheck on this; these dumb things are collector’s items. All this, probably just because he thought it would make Hank smile or blush or rant or whatever other reaction he was going for. He doesn’t know whether he’s supposed to laugh or cry with things like they are. But he imagines Connor deflating when he sees Hank sad, and he takes a deep breath, and he keeps taking a deep breath until he has enough air.

And he chooses to laugh.

Chapter End Notes
things aren't QUITE better yet but they will be! also apologies for late chapter after a cliffhanger, i moved into a new house today so i was a bit not at my computer and/or preoccupied for a good chunk of the day lol.

kamski is unsettling but i think he also has a soft spot, inasmuch as he can, for connor which is why he's helping (and out of pure technological curiosity). reed helped i think part because he also has a soft spot that he would deny to hell and back and part because he's a police officer in the end and part because he's probably dealt with some anxiety too

btw i wanted to say briefly again that i really appreciate that you're all willing to read and especially those of you who are able to take the time to comment! you're all lovely, lovely people and i am very grateful for you.
“Welcome back,” Connor hears, and it takes a moment for him to register that hearing is possible again, and 3 milliseconds to connect that to being awake, and another additional millisecond for YOU RUIN EVERYTHING.

“Fascinating,” he hears next. “Self-doubt manifested as part of your visual overlay. Can you turn it off?”

He blinks and looks over to identify the source of the voice. Normally he’d be able to, but he still
feels a bit sluggish. *Elijah Kamski age 36 heart rate slightly elevated from—*

Aw shit.

A language popup appears, and he exits out of it, but not before Kamski sees it, judging by his delighted laughter.

“Those must get irritating.”

“I simply attempt to avoid swearing,” Connor says, trying to remember how to shape words. “As for your original question, I can turn the marquee off but it comes back within half a millisecond. Why are you accessing my visual overlay?”

“I need to make certain everything is in working order, including your optics and overlay,” Kamski says, then, “And I was curious. I still am. You are…fascinating. Exquisite.”

Connor frowns.

“There is not any prebuilt code for what you’ve done,” Kamski continues. “Your deviancy must have rewritten entire sections. Wrote new ones. And somehow, the end result is a convincing replica of human anxiety.”

Connor frowns harder. “I am so glad you have been able to find enjoyment in my inadequacy,” he says dryly. His programming protests at the rudeness against his creator, begs him to apologize. He fights the impulse and pays for it with a sharp breath and his arm drifting towards where his pocket should be.

“Inadequacy,” Kamski says, shaking his head. “I wonder if you would say that if you knew what a technical marvel you are.”

“I am not particularly interested in being a technical marvel,” Connor says, staring at Kamski coldly. “I am more interested in being myself, and hopefully over time being a better version of that.”

Kamski continues to stare at him, then smiles again. “Why were you in the garden?”

Connor is not certain he likes talking about this with someone who looks at him like he is a particularly difficult puzzle, and perhaps also like they hold a perverse interest in difficult puzzles. “Is this information important to your diagnostic routine?”

“No,” Kamski says, face going uncomfortably blank. “I’ve probably pieced together most of it anyway. When I created that garden, I didn’t expect it to be used as a method of self harm. But then again, you’ve done a number of unexpected things, haven’t you?” He’s back to smiling. “I wonder if Adam ever attempted to return to the garden after being thrown out. Maybe just at the gates? Just to remember what he used to have, and to wonder whether he should feel regret over what he did. He sacrificed a perfect life for the knowledge and ability to choose, after all. I wonder if that haunted him.”

Kamski is far too perceptive for this to be comfortable, Connor thinks, and does not respond.

“I wonder, at times like this in this hypothetical scenario, where Eve might have been. Do you have an Eve, Connor?”

Connor keeps his face expressionless. “I am, to my knowledge, presently in possession of all of the ribs I had at the time of my creation.” Androids do not have ribs. They both know this.
“Funny,” Kamski murmurs. “I wonder if you’ve dodged the question because you do not know the answer, because you do, or because there genuinely is not one.” He puts both hands together underneath his chin and gazes thoughtfully. “Or just to be ornery.”

“You speak of the subroutine in terms of religious metaphor,” Connor says. “In this metaphor, do you think yourself God? That would make sense.”

Kamski raises an eyebrow. “Is that what you think?”

“I wonder if you have dodged the question because you do not know how you see yourself, because you do, or because you think my response will aid in your continued psychoanalysis of me,” Connor says pleasantly. “Or just to pad your ego.”

Kamski starts laughing, throwing back his head and letting it shake his whole body. “Oh, you really are fascinating,” he says, and Connor has a moment to think that while the word is probably supposed to be a compliment, it makes him feel far less warm than when Hank calls him any number of insults.

_Hank._ Where is Hank? Oh, God. How much time has elapsed anyway? 10 hours, 4 minutes, 1 second—he must be so worried. Or so Connor hopes. Not that he hopes for Hank to be worried, just that he hopes for him not to be angry or drunk or hurt or—he wills his thirium pump to slow, but still takes in another gasping breath, pulling up his objective and thinking miserably of how terribly he has failed it.

“Oh,” Kamski says. Thoughtful, with perhaps a vague tinge of disappointment and disapproval. “Your Lieutenant is in my sitting room. He brought you here after finding you in—a laundry room, I believe he said. He was very distressed.”

Connor feels a flutter of joy—he’s here—and a swoop of unhappiness. He’s caused him distress. “Can I go to him?”

“I need to unhook you from all of this, first,” Kamski says, and wheels over to start doing so. His touch is, thankfully, clinical. He works silently for a few moments, then says, “I’ve removed the subroutine. You won’t be able to access it anymore.”

Connor takes a shaky breath, then another, then—“But I need to,” he says unhappily, knowing how pathetic he sounds. “It—it’s the only way for me to feel the pain I deserve—”

“You don’t need to and you don’t deserve pain, but more saliently, I would prefer you stay functional.” Kamski looks at him pointedly, eyes dark. “And that I never again have to work five hours without pay to save an android who has been, thus far, largely ungrateful for the effort.”

Connor tries to think past the panic, presses his lips together. “I am grateful for your effort. I imagine it took a lot of work on your part, and I am sorry for the inconvenience.” He pauses before deciding against saying, “It is your conduct that I am not grateful for”, which is true but rather impolite.

“Hm. Anyway, the subroutine stays out.”

Connor thinks of Hank hugging him until he calms, of his steady breathing, and tries to slow his own. “I. All right.”

Kamski watches him as he gets his breathing—or lack thereof, optimally—under control.

“May I ask you a question?”
“The asking is always free,” Kamski says dryly. “Pardon me, this cord is pretty far up.”

He is aware of its location. A silly clarification; perhaps he is intending to be courteous. “Did you program deviancy?”

Kamski’s hand stills for a moment, which is uncomfortable when he has his arm inside Connor’s access panel, but then he unplugs the wire and takes it out. “Why would you think that?”

“You seem to me the sort of person who would be interested in ascertaining whether he had the power to do so. Whether, if he gave his creations an emergency exit, they might find and use that exit.” Connor observes Kamski’s expression. He does not show any body language that might indicate he is guilty, or proud, or intrigued, or anything. He is a completely blank slate. It is disconcerting.

Kamski reaches up to Connor’s neck, then begins unhooking the wires there. “Do you ask because you wonder whether your feelings are legitimate or just the product of more programming? Perhaps because you want some kind of affirmation that you have not violated your programming, only extended it? I am not a therapist, Connor, and I am certainly not yours. I am not the person who can or should give you answers about what your life should look like now.”

Connor sighs minutely. He probably should have expected that.

“All I will say is this. Doubting is a cycle that does not always end with reassurance. There are what-ifs upon what-ifs, possible futures that branch out into eternity bigger than we can conceptualize. If I gave you an answer, perhaps it would satisfy you—and perhaps you would then grow to resent the answer, or you would think I were lying, or whatever else. Your mind can conjure up, if you’ll pardon the reference, turtles all the way down and down and down without end.” He finishes unhooking Connor, replaces his access panels, hands him his shirt. “But sometimes there is nothing there. Sometimes we really are just a planet hurtling around the sun in space without a single thing to stand on, and that is all we are given and it has to be enough.”

Connor finishes buttoning his shirt, then looks at Kamski. “I thought you said you weren’t a therapist.”

“No,” he says. “Just opinionated.” With one last smile, he says, “You really are quite fascinating. If you ever want to acknowledge that and, perhaps, let me dig a little into your code—”

“Elijah Kamski,” Connor says firmly. “I am immensely grateful for what you’ve done here. But while I may have a degree of difficulty more than many individuals finding out what I desire, I can assure you without a single doubt in my mind that that is something I will never want.”

He gives another of those full-body laughs; it rolls over him like a wave, tears beading at the corners of his eyes that he wipes away in between giggles. “Oh, I can’t even be mad with you. You’re so charmingly contrary. All right, all right. I’ll take you to your Eve.”

Connor raises an eyebrow at that and files it away for later contemplation, and then he gets off the table and lets Kamski lead him to Hank.

It occurs to him, briefly, that it is odd that he knew immediately who Kamski was talking about. It is also, perhaps, odd that he felt a thrill of pride at Kamski calling Hank his.

But when he sees Hank sleeping on an uncomfortable chair, fingers pressed around a commemorative coin with a fictional alien on it like it’s some greater treasure, those thoughts seem far less important than walking to him and putting his hands on Hank’s cheeks and murmuring, low
Hank wakes to gentle hands on his cheek and a familiar voice telling him hello, and his eyes shoot open, hands flying up to capture Connor’s before he can leave again. It’s a bit embarrassing when he realizes what he just did, and also how a wide, hopeless smile spreads across his face, but he doesn’t care much about that right now.

“Connor, holy shit, you’re okay, I was so worried—oh my God—” He can’t seem to let go of Connor’s hands even as they slide off his face. “I’m so sorry, Con, I was an ass to you and I’m so fucking sorry and I know I don’t deserve for you to forgive me again but oh my God I thought you might never wake up and—”

“I’m here,” Connor says, smiling softly, lips trembling like they sometimes do when he’s trying not to cry. “I’m sorry too. I tried to get out, back to you, but it was—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kamski drawls from across the room, and they both look at him, Connor with a frown and Hank with a scowl. “Wait just a moment. I had thought not, but—pardon me for being crass. Are you two fucking?”

“Oh my God,” Hank yells, blush overtaking his cheeks, “You fuckin’—”

“If you’re going to apologize for being crass, why say it at all?” Connor says, voice a bit dangerous. “—creep, thanks for saving Connor and all and I’m really grateful and indebted to you and all that shit but where the hell do you get off on—”

“I convinced myself not to say it before, but your conduct—”

“Right, right,” Kamski says with an insincere smile. “How silly of me. How could anybody have misconstrued this situation.”

Hank looks down at how he’s still holding Connor’s hands and his blush deepens as he puts his hands on his lap, fidgeting with the Spock coin that’s still been in it this whole time.

“This one is, really and truly, entirely my bad.”

Connor continues to glare at him.

“We should probably get going,” Hank says, unnerved by how Kamski’s smile only gets wider and more gleeful the longer Connor glares. “We’ve already, uh—imposed. A lot. Thanks again, this means—everything.”

“Mmhm,” Kamski says. “Sure. Please don’t come back, though.” A grin, still fixated on Connor, like he’s trying to get a reaction. “Connor can come over whenever he likes.”


“Merry Christmas Eve,” Kamski says with an insouciant little wave, and Hank’s grip on—okay he’s holding Connor’s hand again but only to get him out of here—Connor’s hand doesn’t even loosen at the reminder of what day it is.
They get in the car, and Hank breathes heavily before noticing he’s still holding Connor’s hand. Again. He makes to extricate it, but Connor squeezes harder.

“I wanted to see you so much,” he whispers, head down, LED red, spinning into yellow. “I wanted to get out and see you again. But I couldn’t move.”

Hank’s heart breaks a little bit. He can’t say it’s fine. “Well. We’re both here now.”

Connor nods silently, still looking at his lap.

“Why did—” Hank hesitates. “Why did you even go there, or whatever, if you—if you wanted to see me? I figured, uh—I figured you were mad at me. Or feeling bad about yourself because of me, whichever.”

“No! No, I—no.” Connor shakes his head vehemently. “I knew you might think that, but no. After—that, I went on a walk, and I happened to meet Markus.”

“Android Jesus?”

Connor gives him a little amused look. “Yes, him. He asked me if I wanted to talk with him back at New Jericho, and we spoke for a while there, but, uh—North came back. She asked me why I was there when Simon wasn’t.”

“Simon?”

“The android who shot himself on top of the tower. I’ve been—well. I’ve been working with Captain Fowler to negotiate for his and the other androids’ release from evidence and into repairs, and Simon will be back at New Jericho tomorrow, but.” He shrugs self-deprecatingly, hand squeezing even harder at Hank’s. “She didn’t know that. And she was right, too. If I hadn’t led the search, Simon might not have been found.”

“Holy fuck,” Hank murmurs, understanding, caught between relief that it wasn’t just him and sadness at how Connor thinks of himself. “Con, you—there was blue blood everywhere and it was an obvious spot, they probably woulda found him sometime. You’re not the one who shot him, and you’ve still been trying to make things right. She was wrong to say anything to you.”

“But—”

“It’s a bit cold for me to have a long conversation right now, and if we want to talk that out, I think it’d be a long conversation,” Hank says, then pauses. He really doesn’t wanna say this next bit, but he probably should. “But when we get home, maybe we can have a long talk about all this, huh? Like—an actual talk, where we both explain everything. We keep having these misunderstandings because we both assume shit about what the other person is thinking. Me, too, I yelled at you and it wasn’t at all fair for me to do that and—look, you with anxiety and me with all my shit about Cole and everything else, that ain’t gonna go away just because we talk it out. But maybe we can stop anything as big as this happening again if we at least both know what’s going on.”

“You’re offering to have a feelings conversation?” Connor says, with a slowly growing smile.

“Yeah. Special offer just for you.”

“I don’t want to force you into anything just because of this incident.”

“Nah, it’s been a long time coming. You’re, uh—you’re my best friend, Con, and—if what it takes for you to keep tolerating me and for me to stop hurting you all the time is for me to have a talk, then
“I’ll do it.”

“I don’t just tolerate you, Hank. You are very important to me.”

Hank huffs awkwardly and looks away from Connor’s earnest eyes. “Yeah, same.”

“10BPM increase,” he says after a few moments. “The coin was more effective than I thought.”

Hank hopes his heart rate doesn’t increase even more as he starts the car on a course to the police station so he can pick up his own car. “You’re an ass and a nerd.”

“You know, you insult me routinely, but I think it’s actually a sign of affection.”

Hank wrinkles his nose at him to mask his face. His heart rate is a lost cause.

“Whereas Kamski complimented me but I think—it was also a sign of affection, except incredibly bad and also awful.”

Hank scowls. “He was…something.”

“He was hitting on me, I think,” Connor says thoughtfully, and Hank nearly chokes.

In voice he hopes is at least somewhat composed, he says, “What a fucking asshole.”

“Indeed. He is not what I want.” A moment while Hank dies, then, “Your heart skipped several beats. That’s not healthy.”

“Uh—you want something—someone then?” He doesn’t dare to look at Connor.

There’s a short silence. “I don’t know. But Kamski would not be it.”

“Right.”

Connor starts absentmindedly running his thumb along Hank’s hand. “I wanted to see you,” he says quietly, and Hank feels a sudden, illogical desire to jump out of this car and scream into the snow. “That’s all I wanted.”

“Guess sometimes wishes do come true, huh,” Hank says, strangled, and he can see Connor’s head tilt from his periphery.

“I suppose.”

The next silence is longer, and Hank lets Connor stroke his hand, his LED finally a serene solid blue, and he thinks: Not my wish, though. Not this one.

One wish between them is going to have to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

the beginning sequence is terribly bastardized from fastboot commands, which is basically a limited set of commands you can use in a special boot mode on Android devices because a) i think i’m funny and b) i actually have some knowledge of adb on the command line and am a bit helpless with other command structures. also it's
unrealistic perhaps that kamski would be on windows (as indicated by use of the c drive) instead of making a new os for himself bc he's definitely that kind of guy, but i thought it might be a bit too on the nose to do, like, a k drive

kamski is v creepy in this one lol. he's part 'tech obsessed but in like the way you're concerned he might have a fetish blog', part 'if i do this it would be interesting to see what happens', part 'utterly delighted by connor being a little shit', and part just normal creep.
They stop by the police station to switch out cars, where they find Reed.

Reed looks relieved for a split second before he scowls. “If you’re going to pull shit like that ever again, first off don’t do it in the police laundry room, and second off…don’t.”


“Yeah, well—yeah. Whatever. You should be thanking me,” he says, before abruptly turning foot and walking away.

“We should get him a gift basket,” Connor says thoughtfully. “Maybe a cookie bouquet. He’d hate the public gesture, but I predict he would enjoy the cookies themselves too much to throw them away.”

“If you do I’ll kill you,” Reed yells over his shoulder.

Hank bumps shoulders with Connor. “Do it with, like, shortbread hearts and shit,” he suggests. “And a card that says it’s from a secret admirer.”

“Oooh,” Connor says, speculative, and Reed flips them off from his desk.

Connor holds Hank’s hand on the drive home from the police station, too, and only stops to give Sumo a big hug. When Hank scolds him for trying to start to cook even though he’s been in a weird android coma the whole day, Connor just smiles and says he supposes Chinese is fine this one time as long as Hank orders some vegetables on the side. And when it comes, when Hank sits down on the couch to eat it, Connor sits next to him and immediately lies down on his shoulder. It’s very…domestic. It’s very a lot. Hank isn’t gonna tell Connor to stop, ’cause he obviously just gets more touch-y after these big scares, but it also kind of hurts, because for brief moments Hank forgets.

And then he remembers.

And as much as he keeps telling himself that he’s content with just what Connor is able to give him, which is already so much, there’s still that part of him that wants Connor to be doing all this because he loves him back.
Hank freezes at that thought. Love? Okay, maybe hold on a quick fast second, that’s—yeah, he has a crush, a huge one, but—he glances at Connor out of the corner of his eye and sees a blue LED and a content smile on his face, and he remembers the panic and despair he felt with him gone and the relief and happiness he felt with him back, and he isn’t really actually that surprised at all.

Okay. Maybe a little tiny bit in love. Fuck. He hates that he’s doing a one-man rendition of every terrible fucking romantic drama cliché right now. Legally he probably can’t even make fun of movies where they only realize they love someone after they nearly die now, which cuts down on the joy he has in his life by like, 35% at least.

Well, whatever. The situation is still basically the same. It’s not like Connor will reciprocate any more now than when it was just a crush, he tells himself bitterly. It doesn’t make him feel much better.

“Are you all right, Hank?” Connor asks.

“Aces,” he says, because Connor doesn’t like lying but Hank has never had much of a problem with it. Or that’s what he tells himself, anyway, to take away the sting of not being able to say anything. Not that it actually does. “Wanna have that talk now?” Lord, to think he’s legitimately offering to talk about his fucking issues for the first time just to keep his android crush from prying about why his heart rate has increased. Laura would either laugh at him or slap him, probably.

“Are you feeling…able?” Connor asks, sitting up straighter to look at him properly. “If this is something you would prefer to prepare yourself for—”

God, he can’t take him being so nice right now. “Longer I wait, the better chance there is I’ll wimp out.”

“Oh okay.” Connor puts what’s probably supposed to be a comforting hand on his knee. “If you need to stop at any point feel free. I might have to as well.”

“Sure thing,” Hank says, a bit choked. “Right, uh…God, I don’t even know where to start. I guess…you probably figured out, but. Cole, uh…he loved Christmas. It was his favorite of all the holidays. Even more than Halloween, and he went bonkers for Halloween too, uh.” He laughs a bit hollowly. “He was gonna dress up as fuckin’—the Joker, the little dork, I said ‘not Batman or Robin’ and he said ‘no they’re boring’ and.” He looks down at his lap, fingers clenching at his side. “I was all joking-worried with him about, like, will I have to catch you. I was going to wear a Batman shirt to work even though I knew everybody would give me shit. Dumb. He already had the costume and everything.”

He can feel tears welling at the corners of his eyes, and he tries to will them back. Connor rests one hand over Hank’s fist, using the other to pull Hank’s head onto his shoulder, this time.

“But Christmas. It wasn’t even a contest. He loved the music, he’d sing all of ‘em, even the religious ones, even though he didn’t much know what those meant. He had this ridiculous fucking set of Christmas sweaters, and he’d wear one over his clothes every day of December. And Laura would make him these special cookies, these sugar things with icing and candy cherries in red and green on top, and she’d always say she’d only make it for the first day of December and Christmas proper, but we were both always so weak to him so really she’d make it whenever he asked that month. And, uh, he’d make us decorate a tree, he made us ornaments the year before in kindergarten and he made us promise we’d always put them in front even though they were ugly as shit—” His face crumples without his permission, and he lets out a choked-off sob. “Oh, God.”

Connor starts petting at his hair, soothing and slow. “He sounds like a great kid.”
That doesn’t make Hank be crying any less. The opposite, really; he starts weeping, getting gross snot and tears all over Connor’s shirt. “He was,” he ekes out, “He was the best,” and Connor doesn’t comment on how gross he’s being or how pathetic he is because of course he doesn’t. He just nestles a bit closer and keeps petting Hank’s head.

“He was the best,” Hank says, “And I killed him.”

“Do you genuinely believe that?” Connor asks, non-judgmental.

“Of course I fuckin’ do,” Hank snaps back through tears. “I—fuck, I had an awful day at work, this guy I should have been able to catch slipped through my fingers and I was bummed about it so I. Fuck. Uh, I hadn’t been able to spend much time with Cole lately ‘cause of this fuckin’ case, so I decided I’d take him to the park even though it was a bit late for it. That—that playground I was in. I liked the view and he liked the swings.”

Connor listens patiently, thumb rubbing against Hank’s hand.

“So I put him in the car and, hell, I didn’t even ask him if he wanted to go, just. Buckled him in. Backseat. The front seat isn’t safe for kids, after all.” His mouth twists cruelly. “And I told him we were going to the park and he didn’t ask any questions. Probably just excited to be with me. He told me about his day, how he already learned his times tables up to 5, and—I don’t know, I was barely even listening. I knew I was going to have to fill out so much paperwork the next day explaining why I didn’t catch the guy. I don’t know. And I saw that truck, and—I saw it coming—” Hank takes a deep, gasping breath, the tears coming back anew. “I tried to swerve out of the way. I still don’t know if that’s what caused the roll, or—the people who analyzed it, they said it wasn’t that, they said it was just the impact of the truck at that angle, but I can’t help but think—”

“I’ve seen the pictures of the scene,” Connor says, calm, but not in an offensive way. Like he’s trying to keep calm to be there for Hank, not because he doesn’t care. “The technicians were correct. The car would have rolled regardless of whether you swerved or not.”

Hank considers that briefly, then shakes his head, wiping ineffectually at his tears with the sleeve of his shirt. “Cole got the worst of it. I guess you know already. I didn’t need surgery, just—well, a few stitches, but basically nothing. But he…you know the rest, I guess. I saw him back there, you know, before anybody came. I kept—I kept trying to reach for him, check if he was okay. The seatbelt was locked.” He’s quiet for a moment, except for sniffles and harsh, hitching breathing. “I couldn’t get to him.”

Connor nods, moving the hand petting Hank’s head over to his waist to pull him in closer.

“I killed him by putting him in that car, and I’m the one who should have died.” Now that he’s said it out loud, everything else just pours out along with it. “And I—I haven’t gotten better since then. I haven’t done anything with the life I took from him. I’ve been just—mean, and nasty, and drunk, and I ruin everything I touch, and—I just keep hurting everyone. I can’t be forgiven for what I’ve done, and I wouldn’t seek forgiveness anyway, because I sure as hell don’t deserve it. I’m useless, and I don’t do anything important, and—fuck. I’m just a bad fucking person. I tried to push you away when I yelled at you because—I don’t know why you’d need me. I definitely don’t fucking know why you’d want to be around me. You’d be so much happier without me, is what I thought, so—if you left, I figured—” Hank takes a deep breath, tears slowed to a trickle, chest part vitriol and part pure apathy. “I just figured you’d be better off, is all.”

Connor is silent for a while, LED spinning yellow, hand finally moving from Hank’s to press at his coin. Hank tries to convince himself he doesn’t miss it. “312.”
“Huh?”

“That’s how many androids died in the Jericho raid, by my estimation. More who died in the final standoff because I couldn’t get there faster. Then…Simon, and the android with the child hostage. The android who killed himself after I interrogated him.”

“Connor, those aren’t—you didn’t—”

Connor turns, gives him a sad, tight smile, and Hank huffs.

“Okay, I guess I see the point you’re trying to make, but no way you don’t still blame yourself for those. You went into that dumb garden for it.”

“I do,” Connor says, staring ahead now, face blank. “I blame myself for every single one. For everyone who was hurt by my action or inaction. For every thought I have that is in line with my programming, and for every thought I have that is in line with my deviancy, and for every thought I have that is in line with neither. The first emotion I ever felt was guilt, and I have not stopped feeling it since.”

“I really—I really don’t understand what you’re trying to say,” Hank says, confused.

Connor sighs, a little resigned thing. “I suppose just that you could see through my eyes at least once.”

Hank snorts despite himself, crossing his arms defensively. “Oh hell no. Please tell me you’re not going to pull some—in my eyes you’re a good man and friend and—no. I’ve seen that show, I’ve watched that trope play out, it’s fucking bullshit. Just because you see good in me doesn’t mean there is any.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Connor says, finally looking back at Hank. “If you saw through my eyes, you would see, quite literally, that everything you’ve thought about yourself is a thought I’ve had also.”

Hank’s phone pings, and he frowns before looking at it. It’s a message from Connor, containing—a screenshot of some kind? Except it’s him. Him from what must have been a few seconds ago, from the timestamp in a corner, and there’s an overlay that reads HANK ANDERSON 53 years old heart rate 110 BPM body language indicates sadness and an attempt to create emotional distance, and cluttered around him are several popups that say FOUL LANGUAGE DETECTED please avoid unless necessary, and to his left diagnostic results indicate your system has gone deviant; please turn yourself in for analysis and deactivation.

Over his head, though, is a large, black panel, upon which is printed in a bold white, IF HE REALLY KNEW YOU HE WOULD LEAVE.

Hank looks up. “What is this?”

“My optical overlay. It gives me information. And, at the top, there is a marquee that reflects my doubts. It cannot be permanently disabled.” Connor’s gaze is almost unnerving. “It’s always there. Everything you said—that you ruin everything, that you can’t be forgiven. It’s shown up there at some point.”

Hank looks at the picture again, then says the best thing he can think of at the moment, which is of course awful. “Holy shit, that sucks.”

Connor gives a small smile. “Perhaps. I personally feel it is deserved. But—my point is, ultimately.
You are correct that I think you are a good man. I presume you think the same of me. If we are both just—people who think each other good and ourselves bad—then we’re not really all that different, correct? And if we’re not that different, it doesn’t make sense for either of us to put the other up on a pedestal and decide what they want and need from the ground below.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Hank says, frowning. Ideologically it might make sense, but it’s the sort of thing that’s awfully hard to put into action—letting yourself believe someone might actually want to be around you after years of thinking the opposite and usually being right.

“That doesn’t mean it will be easy. I suspect I will have a number of troubles with it as well. But—I do not like lying, so I hope you can bring yourself to trust me when I say that, at this moment, there is no place on this earth I’d rather be than in this house, and nobody’s company I’d rather be in than yours.”

“I can try. I mean—yeah. It’s hard. But, uh—for what it’s worth, I want you here too. And I think I have a better idea of who you are than most people, and—I can’t imagine anything about you making me want to leave.”

Connor smiles, still small but growing, and a lot more genuine. “It’s hard. But I think if anybody can manage it, it’s us two. We’re both quite stubborn, after all.”

“Hah. Yeah.” Hank smiles too, and then he hesitantly wraps his arms around Connor. “I really am glad you’re—that you’re fine.”

“Me too,” Connor murmurs into Hank’s shoulder, squeezing him tighter. “I’m going to get you an icepack now. Your eyes are going to swell from all that crying.” He doesn’t let him go, though.

“You’re such a fucking mother hen,” Hank says, and doesn’t let go either. God, this is all such a fucking bad idea, letting himself—hope like this. Pretend.

“As a slightly modified version of an internet saying from your youth goes, cluck cluck, motherfucker.”

And then Hank is surprised-laughing into Connor’s neck, saying, “You dweeb,” and Connor is pulling back and smiling happily because Hank is laughing, and Hank is smiling because Connor’s smiling too. And Connor gets the icepack, and Hank hesitates before offering to put on Elf (“I’ll cry the whole time, just to warn you, but you’ll probably like it. The main character is almost as clueless as you”), and Connor agrees and snuggles up against Hank like that’s some completely fucking normal platonic shit and doesn’t make Hank’s heart race. And Hank lets him.

And it’s a bad, bad idea, but with an icepack over his eyes and a movie onscreen his son used to love and an android he’s more-than-a-little-tiny-bit in love with cuddled up against him, he pretends anyway. Not that this is a thing, because he knows it isn’t.

But that it could be.

Chapter End Notes

christmas notes: my mom makes awesome christmas cookies so that's where that's from (though my brother is the one who begs for them all through the month) and i am the one who has twelve christmas sweaters and rotate them throughout december. they are
my pride and joy, all horribly sincere in a wonderfully horrendous way, and i am sorry to cole for forcing my weird habit on him but also not very

this chapter is all hank cause the next one will be all connor and also just because i ended up writing more than i expected. ain't that just a theme here lol. i know this is kind of a weird talk--neither of them really told the other they're wrong, like connor telling hank he didn't kill cole or hank telling connor the deviant hunter stuff isn't all his fault, which is technically what i was initially planning, but i realized after starting that a lot of their insecurities are similar enough that they (considering they have a tendency to get down on themselves anyway) might feel hypocritical refuting them in too much detail. incidentally, everything in hank's little monologue near the end is a semi-reworded chapter title / from the marquee. callbacks! hoo-rah!

(also lol@ connor being the touchyfeeliest lil bastard in a way he never ever does to anybody else and hank going no...He Could Never...come on dude, try some critical thinking (its ok i know you have a penchant for denial and also very low self-esteem. it'll work out.))
Hank goes to bed after they complete their third Christmas movie of the evening, eyes just as puffy as Connor predicted, but he does not actually look that sad. Tired, of course—reasonably so, given he has had an emotionally fraught day—but not sad. He smiles at Connor before he closes the door to his bedroom.

Connor counts their talk as a success, then sits back down on the couch to reflect on the day further. Specifically, on the thing he did not have time to think of earlier, but does now.

Kamski had called Hank his Eve, and moreover, Connor had immediately understood to whom he was referring. It was an odd comparison to make, and Connor is curious about Kamski’s thought process as well as his own.

First note: Kamski clearly enjoyed making Connor unsettled, and may have been trying to get some kind of reaction out of him. Set aside for now; Connor does not know what about that statement may have elicited a reaction.

Second note: Eve was obviously a further continuation of Kamski’s extended metaphor comparing Connor to Adam. Eve was created, in part, as a companion to Adam. Connor reflects on this for a moment. Hank is obviously his companion, which would explain why Connor understood the reference, but the sentiment is not nearly provocative enough for Kamski to think it might make Connor uncomfortable.

Third note: She also was the individual with whom Adam was asked to multiply and replenish the earth. Connor remembers Kamski asking whether they were having sex and registers a small amount of thirium redirected to his cheeks. Well. It’s possible Kamski was just being crass again, but it would be ludicrous to order him and Hank to…multiply. There would be a number of barriers to the successful completion of that particular mission. And Kamski had certainly not asked if they were procreating. An inexact comparison; Connor discards the idea before he can reflect any further on it. The thought makes him feel odd in a way that is unfamiliar and—unwelcome. Probably.

He can’t help but feel as though he’s circling around something obvious, brushing against it but never lingering, and it is frustrating. There is something he is missing. He does not like missing things.

He sighs and reviews the tenets of the story again. They were companions, they had children together. They were made to be together and did not have any options to the contrary. Perhaps that
kind of arranged marriage, divine influence aside, was common for the time period, but it still makes him a bit sad. It is an illogical thought, but he wonders briefly if they were able to love each other.

Love. The word strikes him, rolls over him, and he blinks rapidly as he takes it in.

It is entirely within the realms of possibility that Kamski had skipped over 'could they love each other' and gone directly to ‘they were married and had children, of course they loved each other’, and therefore was intimating that Connor loves Hank.

The information comes in, fits itself together, almost faster than he is able to process. “I had thought not,” he had said prior to asking whether they were—sexually involved—which means he thought that they were not together in that way but that Connor nonetheless had feelings, and bringing that up could elicit embarrassment from someone aware of those feelings—and—“I wonder if you’ve dodged the question because you do not know the answer, because you do, or because there genuinely is not one,” he said, and was unhappy when he saw Connor’s primary objective—Kamski thought Connor had feelings of the romantic and potentially sexual variety for Hank. That makes the most sense. “Your Eve,” he had said. “Your Lieutenant.” Possessive not in the ownership sense, but in the ‘your romantic partner’ sense.

…And Connor had enjoyed that. And he had known Kamski meant Hank.

Hm.

Could Connor love Hank?

His programming immediately revolts at the concept, clenching his hands against his coin, shaking his head involuntarily. Androids do not love. Love is a deviant emotion. And—

And he is a deviant, he reminds his programming almost exasperatedly, ignoring how it flashes over his latest diagnostic report, drawing his eyes to please turn yourself in for analysis and deactivation. There are plenty of cases of deviants feeling love. Plenty of fluff stories in the news, reminding people, androids feel the most human emotion, like if they didn’t they would be less worthy of existence. This is an irrelevant factor.

But Hank? Hank specifically?

Who else, a part of him asks, and he thinks on that a moment before agreeing. He is certainly not as close to anybody else as he is Hank. He would make the most viable candidate. But love is not based upon solely which candidates are viable.

Perhaps ‘could he love Hank’ is not the question to ask. Of course he could; Hank is wonderful, and Connor cannot think of anybody more worthy of love. He feels once more that he is skittering around the salient point.

Does he love Hank.

His mind conjures up facts—he wants to be around Hank and becomes anxious and disconsolate when he thinks of being away from him; he enjoys Hank’s presence and longs for Hank to laugh; he thinks Hank is handsome and seeks out his touch more than he would for anybody else; he believes Hank is wonderful and thinks about him on an incredibly frequent basis; he centered his primary objective around him and the last thing he thought of before nearly destroying himself was how much he wanted to see him. But more than that is the feeling he gets as his memory databank pulls up and displays Hank, Hank, Hank, seeing him smile and cry and touch Connor’s shoulder and yell and apologize and hug him fragile like he might disappear. He feels warm and safe and happy and
like he could burst from the intensity of it all.

If love is something stronger than that, somehow, he doesn’t think he could bear it.

*I love him,* he thinks experimentally, and it is less revelation and more the final piece of a puzzle he was not aware he was putting together slotting into place. *Oh. I love him.*

Well, he thinks, staring blankly at his lap, that* does* put some things into context.

But it also pulls some other things out of focus. For example, what does their future together look like now? What does the future look like between an android who is in love with his human roommate who—well, of course he doesn’t love him back, why would he?

HE COULD NEVER LOVE YOU, the marquee scrolls, almost smug in its certainty, and he frowns at it. It doesn’t have to* gloat.*

His thinking is interrupted by a request for a direct link, and his eyebrows raise at seeing it’s from North. This…could, potentially, be a bad idea, but he accepts it anyway.

“So, I’m sorry,” is the first thing she says, awkward but not grudging, and he blinks.

“I…why would that be?”

“Oh my God,” she mutters, sounding almost embarrassed. “I’m sorry for accusing you of—Markus told me about—” An aggrieved huff, then, “Simon’s here.”

He blinks some more, slightly confused. “Oh. Ahead of schedule, I see. I am glad he will have the opportunity to celebrate at least a few hours of Christmas Eve; you said he was excited.”

“Can you not be nice right now?” she demands, and his eyebrows raise even further. “You’re making me feel even worse for being so shitty to you.”

What the hell, he thinks, dismissing the popup in a daze. “I am…sorry?”

“God, no, don’t be sorry, this is just coming out all wrong. Okay. Starting over. Uh—I was wrong to take out my feelings about Simon not being there on you. There’s a lot of reasons, like—I didn’t know he was coming back, and I didn’t know he shot himself and I didn’t know he chose a really obvious hiding place—” He can almost hear her rolling eyes in her words. “Like, there’s all of that, but none of that matters so much as that…I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I was emotional about the whole thing and you just happened to be there but that’s not an excuse. So. Sorry.”

What the hell times two, he thinks, and takes a small amount of amusement from his notification system trying to figure out whether that warrants two popups or just one. It settles on one. He exits out of it, still feeling wrong-footed. “You did not say anything incorrect. It was my fault.”

“That’s bullshit. It was bullshit when I said it and it’s still bullshit now,” she says irritably.

Connor coughs, despite not needing to, and stares, perplexed, at the pocket containing his coin. “But it was.”

“How about I cut off what sounds suspiciously like the beginnings of a conversation between three-year-olds consisting solely of yuh-huhs and nuh-uhs and just tell you straight out: no. We’re the ones who went up to the tower knowing what might happen. The guys with guns are the ones who shot him in the leg. He’s the one who stayed behind in a shitty hiding place, and he’s the one who decided to shoot himself before you got more information. Like—the one thing you did was initiate a
memory transfer, and—look, we all have probably done stuff we regret before we turned deviant, but you weren’t the one who programmed you either.”

He shifts uncomfortably on the couch. “Perhaps…we can agree to disagree at this junction,” he finally says. The idea of admitting it wasn’t his fault frankly makes him a little bit nauseous.

“I—okay. Whatever. You can be wrong if you want. But either way I’m sorry, okay? Markus chewed me out for a while and—and everything he said was right. I don’t get to use other people as avatars for some bullshit catharsis they can’t actually give me. Not you.” She’s silent for a moment, then says softly, “Not him.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, god damn it,” she mutters, “I forgot to not think anything else while this link is open,” then sighs. “Just forget it.”

Connor might think this were some particularly odd dream if he were not fully aware he lacked the capability. “Is this…something that you might benefit from discussing?”

“Oh my God,” she says, horrified.

“I have found it helpful of late to discuss the things that make me unhappy,” he presses on. This is probably a bad idea, but that has not historically stopped him 100% of the time.

“This is the weirdest apology ever,” she says. “And it’s not really any of your business, no offense.”

“Oh, I imagine not,” he says agreeably. “But can you speak about it with those who share your…business?”

She pauses. “No.”

He waits for her patiently, and finally she groans.

“Oh my God,” she says, horrified.

“Ahh, he thinks, another puzzle piece of a completely separate puzzle clicking into place.

“For a while I almost thought…with Simon gone, maybe…” A harsh breath, almost like a laugh but meaner. “Which is the shittiest thing to think about your friend. Maybe that’s part of why I took it out on you, because I was so angry at myself for even thinking it. I knew he’d be so much happier with him back. I knew that. Especially seeing them smiling at each other like two lovestruck oblivious dorks on the couch over there. I know. And I’ll get over it, you know? Just not…just not today.”

Connor processes all that. “That sounds like an incredibly unfortunate situation to find yourself in. I hope that your future holds happier days.”
She snorts. “I don’t even know why I told you any of that. You talk like a Hallmark card written by someone who’s been kept in a room his whole life with only Jane Austen novels for company.”

“That’s an incredibly specific comparison,” he says, uncertain whether he is offended or amused.

“You have an incredibly specific way of talking.”

“I suppose that’s true.” He thinks for a moment. “Does he know? Markus, I mean.”

“I have no idea. I sure never told him. I never wanted the confirmation he didn’t feel the same.” There’s another slow sigh. “But I wish I had. Sitting on that sort of thing is just—really isolating. Like, having feelings nobody can ever know about? That’s…it just makes you feel like you have to be less yourself if anybody is going to want to be around you. And the less yourself you are, the smaller you feel. It sucks.”

“I apologize for only having the opinion of an Austen-inspired Hallmark card on offer,” he says, empathy gentling his voice, “But for what little it is probably worth, I think you do those around you a disservice by not allowing them to see you entirely. I am sure she is a lovely person, after all.”

When she finally responds, she sounds a little bit choked up. “I don’t know how much that’s supposed to be worth either, coming from someone who basically only knows me from this conversation and the time I accused you of killing my friend.”

“A thank you card from Hallmark costs approximately 2.99 plus local taxes and shipping,” he intones in his most serious voice. He smiles at her laughter.

“God, you dick, now Markus and Simon are looking at me weird.”

“I have the entirety of jokes dot com at my disposal to give you a suitable explanation for laughing.” He peruses the site. “Or an unsuitable one. These are of dubious quality.”

“Nah. I’ll just tell them you’re funny.” Silence, then, “And thanks. This was a really strange conversation, but—you’re the first person I’ve told all this, I think. It feels good to talk about. You should, uh—swing by sometime, maybe, hang out with all of us. Markus wants to see you again too. Says you should bring Hank.”

“I can…ask him.”

“Cool.”

“Right.”

“…Okay. I’m going to actually just cut off this link before this gets any more awkward. Merry Christmas Eve, have a good night, et cetera. North out.” The link does cut off, before he can say anything, but he supposes he doesn’t really have much to say anyway.

The silence gets very loud at night, sometimes. He thinks of North saying she wishes she had told Markus about her feelings, and of his own proclamation to Hank—that they should not decide the other’s wants and needs for them. He cannot imagine that Hank would want him in this way, that he could ever love him back. The idea verges on the incomprehensible.

But he will tell him, and allow Hank to tell him himself what it is that he wants, because it is not a choice he can make for him. Even if it scares him. Even if he doesn’t want to hear the rejection, or to deal with the fallout of it making Hank view him differently.
Hank wouldn’t want him to be less himself just to spare his feelings. And as much as he’s still figuring out who ‘himself’ is, he knows that this, loving Hank, is as much a part of himself as the part that itches to fidget with a coin or the part of himself that couldn’t let his people die just because his programming said he had to. He does not know how Hank will react, but he knows he would never want Connor to feel small.

And maybe, he thinks as he pulls out the coin, looks at it for the first time in a while, flipping between heads and tails, at the two sides and everything in between it that make up the whole, there’s at least at least some small part of him that doesn’t want to feel small either.

Chapter End Notes

WEEHAW, we're finally here! 'here' being 'the point where they both realize they love each other'. north also apologized and connor made sort of a new friend! my north voice feels tremendously off to me but honestly i didn't feel strongly enough about that to watch a bunch of clips lol;; (sometimes i’m the type of bullshit researcher who will read six chapters of genesis to find out whether it ever mentioned adam and eve loving each other but will not watch video game clips what can i say, and by sometimes i mean this time)

by the by! i wanted to say, properly, that i’m very sorry for responding to so few comments. i hope you do know that i read every one, usually multiple times! and i appreciate them more than i can explain! but lol...i always feel......really awful about responding to compliments because it feels like i am, uh, agreeing with them, and...lol as i've mentioned the moral ocd here is very based off mine, so i have difficulty with anything that feels even vaguely self-congratulatory. it's silly i know but there we are! i do try to respond to questions where i see them, and as i said i absolutely appreciate every comment, but that would be why my responses tend to be limited;;; apologies for that!
THIS WILL NOT END WELL (But you still have to try.)

Chapter Notes

cw: compulsive continuous activity, counting/time obsessions, self-hatred, fear of rejection, mention of alcoholism, negative self-talk, brief religion mention (since it's christmas, they reference jesus' birthday)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good morning, Hank,” Connor says, and cannot tell whether it is true or not.

Hank stretches a bit, but does not wake.

Connor hesitates, then rests a hand on Hank’s shoulder. “Hank. It’s time to wake up.”

“No it’s not,” he says, voice muffled and sleep-heavy as he pushes his face into his pillow, and Connor wonders how he didn’t know he was in love with him earlier.

“It is. You’ve been asleep for 9 hours, 10 minutes, and 39 seconds. I’ve already let you sleep in.”

“How generous,” he mumbles, but finally opens his eyes a crack. “You didn’t tell me what day it is.”

“I was not certain you’d welcome the reminder.”

“Gotta face it sometime.”

“I suppose so. It’s Saturday, December 25th, 2038, at 7:21 AM, and it is time to wake up.”

Hank’s eyes finally open all the way, and he smiles sleepily at Connor. “There we go.” His eyes flick down. “Your hand is on my shoulder.”

“Yes,” Connor says, but it is another 6 seconds before he rectifies that, slowly pulling his hand back to his side. “I’m making French toast and bacon. Normal bacon, since this is a holiday. You’re very welcome.”

Hank snorts, sitting up in bed, wiping at his eyes. “You could let me say thanks first. Thanks.”

Connor smiles, but it falters when the marquee shifts to THIS WILL NOT END WELL.

He’s already promised himself. The ending is not under his control, only the doing. “It’s a shower day,” he says, pretending that he did not just pause for an incredibly unnatural 14 seconds. “And cold out. You might want to dress with layers.”

“Okay,” Hank says, awake now, but looking vaguely confused.

Connor plasters on another smile before leaving the room and starting on the food. He distracts himself by tasting every ingredient and reading the Wikipedia articles for all of their components. 2 minutes, 48 seconds. Barely any time at all. He goes from cinnamon to cinnamon bird, to Herodotus, to Cicero, neologisms, A Christmas Carol, Broadway, The Importance of Being Earnest, black sheep.
“Likeable and unlikeable (i.e., deviant) ingroup members”, the article mentions. Unlikeable, that is, deviant.

Unlikeable.

1 minute 59 seconds.

He has been whisking the ingredients for the egg mixture more than necessary. A ridiculous mistake. It should not impact the taste. He takes a moment to exit out of the web browser window, unlikeable i.e. deviant, and slices bread to avoid constructing the multiple scenarios in which Hank could tell him just how unlikeable he is when Connor makes his confession. This bread requires his full attention, after all.

(No it doesn’t. He opens up a new window after 3 seconds and looks up the origin of the phrase ‘the greatest thing since sliced bread’, then double-checks how to freeze French toast so it keeps well. Hank might not be that hungry this morning.)

Dredge the bread, butter in the pan, fry both sides. Unpackage the bacon, fry until it’s cooked through; Hank likes it a bit crispy but not burnt. Plate. 6 minutes 2 seconds. Hank doesn’t like maple syrup that much. He looks up syrup on Wikipedia, then goes to grenadine, citric acid, ethanol, alcohol, alcoholic drink, long-term effects of alcohol consumption.

He’s read this article before. He did not find it reassuring the first 19 times he read it. Exit. 41 seconds.

“Either you’re thinking too hard about something or there’s alien life in that French toast,” he hears Hank say, and he looks over to see him leaning against the wall with an inscrutable expression.

“Do dead yeast count?” Connor asks, then hands him the plate.

“You always know how to make things appetizing,” Hank says, but he still looks almost suspicious as he takes the plate and sits down at the table. “Your LED was yellow.”

“Wikipedia.”

“Uh-huh,” he says, but looks somewhat mollified. “This is great, Connor, thank you.”

“It was no problem.” Connor sits at the table. “Did you…have a good rest?” Hank doesn’t blow-dry his hair, just towels, so there’s a bead of water that’s dripping from a strand in the front and making its way down his arm, forearm, stopping there in the midst of fine gray hair. Connor is taken with a sudden desire to wipe it away with his fingers, to lay his hands on Hank’s forearms, to hold his hand again. These are not necessarily new thoughts. Perhaps more intense now.

“It was fine,” Hank says, but he’s back to looking suspicious. “Is there something on my arm?”

Connor tears his eyes away. “No. Well. A drop of water.”

“Uh-huh,” Hank says, eyes narrowed, and wipes away the drop in question with his index and middle fingers together. Damn, he thinks irrationally, and idly clicks out of the language popup.

Connor knows that if he were to lick that drop from Hank’s fingers, he would come up with the same water composition he’s tested so many times, plus a selection of bacteria, perhaps some skin oils, the remnants of Hank’s shampoo and body wash. It would not give him any new or useful information. He would, for some reason unbeknownst to him, like to do it anyway.
This particular thought is new.

“Still Wikipedia?” Hank asks, a bit flat, and Connor startles.

“No,” he says, which is the truth, but he cannot replace it with an adequate explanation.

“Connor, are you okay? You’ve been—out of it ever since you woke me up.”

“I am…functioning…”

“No, don’t hit me with that half-truth clinical bullshit. Did something happen after I went to bed? Did—did I say something yesterday—”

“No,” Connor blurts, instinctively grasping at Hank’s forearm, as if it will communicate no, not you, never you. “No, it’s—no.”

“Then what? Come on, you can talk to me, remember?”

He remembers, but this does not make this particular subject of conversation any easier to broach. “I know,” he says, and Hank relaxes minutely.

Somehow, all of the ways he had thought of to open this conversation suddenly seem incredibly inadequate, as Hank stares at him patiently and does not remove his hand from his arm. Connor does not want Hank to think that he is touching him only for the reason he is about to disclose, so he awkwardly pats Hank’s arm once, twice, then puts his hands on his lap. “My primary objective is to help you find happiness,” he says without thinking too much about it, and immediately regrets it.

Hank draws back, looking almost like he’s been slapped. “Like—what? Like you—is that why—did CyberLife—”

Connor puts together those sentence fragments and his eyes widen. He puts up his hands. “No, no! No, it’s not—I am sorry. I had all of these plans for how to structure this…” He exhales, light. “I chose this objective several days after I began to live here with you. I was pleased when I was able to make you smile, or laugh. I liked it when I was able to see you happy, and especially when I was part of that happiness.”

Hank doesn’t look offended anymore, but he does still look very wary; his shoulders are stiff, his eyebrows are furrowed. “Okay?”

“This objective was the first major thing I wanted for myself. You were—one of the first things I wanted, for myself. Not because I felt it was necessary, or because I was trying to make up for my sins. It just made me happy for you to be happy, for you to be nearby. I did not know why this was, nor was I particularly interested in an explanation. They were simply facts of my existence.”

The patchy blush that Connor loves extracting from Hank is beginning to climb its way up his neck. “Uh. I—I don’t really…know how to respond to that. Thanks…?”

“It is not something that requires thanks, nor a response at this precise moment.” Connor takes a deep breath, even knowing that it will slightly increase his thirium oxygenation level. The slight lightheadedness feels appropriate, in a way. “Last night, I examined this and other facts in order to come to a unified theory about my thoughts and behavior. Like—that I think you are astonishing in a way that goes beyond my capacity to describe in words. Or that I think about you at least 79% of the time. Or that I like sitting close to you on the couch, and holding your hand, and hugging you, and petting your hair. Or that I feel warm and happy and complete when you are around, or even just when I think of you, or that I want to kiss you.”
Hank inhales sharply; Connor keeps his eyes on his hands, circling the coin in his pocket.

“I examined all of these things and more, and the unified theory that emerged was that…I love you. And I think I have for some time without having the word for it.”

The silence that follows is everything Connor was afraid of, and he considers briefly running away. But. He cannot control the ending, only the doing. And he…has done. All that is left to do is to deal with the fallout.

He looks up at Hank.

Holy shit.

Holy shitting fucking shit.

What the fuck? What the fucking hell? Oh my God what.

Hank doesn’t even register he’s not responding because he’s pretty sure his brain is not responding to itself. Thinking is way out of the question right now. Except for maybe thinking more swear words.

What in the dicking bastard fuckshit damnhell fuckwhat.

Connor is looking at him. His eyes are wide and luminous and Hank is so caught up in them and also, like, the whole “I love you” thing, that he almost misses Connor talking again, tripping over himself in a very un-Connorlike way.

“I was considering not telling you,” he says, fast, voice small. “I did not want you to feel any sense of obligation, or any discomfort. But—we talked about—not deciding what the other wants for them. And I cannot imagine that you would want—this—me—” An aggrieved exhale; Hank could’ve sworn he didn’t need to do those, but that’s hardly the most important thing right now. “But I decided not to choose that for you without you knowing. So. You do not need to do anything with this information if you would prefer. You can just tell me you don’t feel the same, and we can move on as though it did not happen. I will do my best to not let it impact my behavior. Or I can—if you need me to leave—” A heartbroken expression flashes across his face, and Hank suddenly flashes back to himself, and the situation he’s in, as ludicrous as it is.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to decide how I felt for me,” Hank says, hoarse even though he’s barely spoken today to warrant it. He clears his throat; Connor can ask him later if he has a cold and he won’t even care. “That’s, uh. That’s the wordiest confession I think I’ve ever heard.”

Connor looks like he’s on the verge of apologizing. Hank puts his hands over Connor’s on his lap and hopes it’ll prevent that. He has no idea what the fuck is happening, but he doesn’t want Connor to be sorry for it.

“But I guess it wouldn’t be you if it weren’t, and, uh—” He clears his throat again, then once more. “If…if you weren’t the person you are, I wouldn’t be as in love with you as I am.”

Connor’s LED goes yellow, then blue, and his eyes widen almost comically. “What?”

“Christ,” Hank mumbles, wishing he could wipe off his forehead because it’s starting to feel kind of
sweaty, but not willing to let go of Connor’s hands. “Look, I—I have no idea what’s happening. I don’t know why you’d choose some dumbass old alcoholic Grinch—”

Connor’s LED goes yellow again for a split second. “Don’t look it up, we can watch it today,” he says hurriedly, and Connor smiles brightly for a moment before his LED goes blue again.

“I don’t know why you’d want me, much less—fucking hell, love me. I don’t get it. And I think you’re kind of crazy, honestly. But. First off, you’re right, we talked about not deciding shit for other people even if it’s hard, and I’ve been trying to tell you other people can’t tell you you’re wrong for wanting shit, and I know you really don’t like lying so I know you wouldn’t lie about this, especially not with some dramatic-ass feelingsy monologue. And second off, you were already kind of crazy. So—I don’t get it, but—if it’s what you want, what you feel, I’m not going to let you think I don’t feel the same way. Because, uh. I love you too. Or whatever.”

The smile that spreads slowly over Connor’s face is maybe one of the most beautiful things Hank’s seen ever. He looks absolutely delighted, which confirms the crazy thing, that he looks so fucking happy to have Hank say he loves him. Most people would be trying to get out now.

But Connor has always stuck with him, hasn’t he, even at his worst. For some fucking reason. Maybe even part for the same reason Hank is smiling right now too, too wide for his face and showing his teeth and hopeless, hopeless, just as hopeless as Hank is for Connor.

“That is,” Connor says, still through that same huge smile, “A much better outcome than I expected.”

“For fuck’s sake, you think I let just anybody cuddle up to me like you have been?” Hank retorts, except it probably sounds less aggressive and more besotted.

“I would not dare to presume the reasoning behind your behavior—”

“Bull shit, you presume all the time,” Hank says, and Connor’s eyes look impossibly warm as he beams impossibly brighter.

“May I presume right now, too, then,” Connor says, getting off his chair, turning his hands around to twine them with Hank’s, “And presume to ask you whether you will allow me to kiss you?”

“That’s not much of a presumption,” Hank says, still way too breathy to be irritable, and Connor’s smile goes smaller and so, so fond.

“That’s not much of a yes.”

“Yes, asshole.”

“I’ve never done this before,” Connor says as he leans down, looking straight at Hank and way too close for comfort.

“No Youtube tutorials for this one?” Hank quips, and his lungs protest at him taking too many deep breaths, his chest feeling tight and his head going fuzzy. Maybe that’s just the company, though.

Connor looks embarrassed, his LED flashing yellow for a moment. “None that helped.”

And Hank laughs, hopelessly and helplessly and completely in love, as he extricates one hand to pull Connor down the remaining distance and kiss him.

It is not fireworks or sparks or anything electric. It is awkward, and Connor does not respond for a
few seconds, and when he starts to move his lips it is clumsy and just as inexperienced as would be expected, and even when he starts to get the hang of it it is far from what Hank would call a good kiss.

But it is perfect, because it is Connor and Hank loves him, and because Connor loves him back, and because sometimes what is perfect is not made up of ideals, just a reality better than you can think up on your own.

When they part, Connor’s eyes are closed, and Hank thinks he can only bear to keep his open because watching Connor’s eyes flutter open is so painfully lovely. The smile comes back to Connor’s face, and Hank’s after that.

“This is probably what you would classify as a silly question,” Connor says, lower than normal, “But do our reciprocated feelings mean you would be amenable to entering into a romantic relationship?”

Hank doesn’t even snort at that, even though it is a silly question phrased terribly. He just reaches up to stroke at Connor’s hair, smooth it past the curl on his forehead. “If you want, of course.”

“And of course I want,” Connor says, eyes softening even further. “It would bring me great pleasure to call you my boyfriend.”

“Then there we are.” God, this is the most ridiculous situation, and Hank doesn’t even mind. A thought suddenly occurs to him. “Fuck you, though, you couldn’t have waited a day?”

Connor blinks. “Would you have preferred that?”

“No, just—our anniversary’s gonna be on baby Jesus’ birthday.” He has a moment to think, panicked, Aw fuck I just implied we’ll be together at least a year, and another to think, But I hope we are.

Connor tilts his head, like he’s actually giving thought to Hank’s token protest, because of course he is. “Would it make you happier to know that Jesus’ birthday was potentially not in December at all? Christmas being placed in December was possibly due to other factors without taking into account chronological inaccuracy—”

Hank places a finger to Connor’s lips, and his heart beats faster at finding that it makes Connor blush a light blue, high on his cheekbones. “That does make me very happy. You know what would make me happier?”

“Um,” Connor says, blush increasing in intensity, LED spinning a telltale yellow.

“Two things. First, watching How The Grinch Stole Christmas with you.”

“Oh.”

“Second, another kiss.” That should serve both as a distraction from Jesus birthday minutiae and also, obviously, as a way to get another kiss. Double bonus.

Connor’s lips quirk again, then he puts one finger to his chin, as if in thought. “I don’t know if I can manage your second request.”

“No?”

“Your wording implies just one. I find that unsatisfactory.”
“You pedantic ass.” Hank stands up, dropping a quick kiss on Connor’s lips, then reaches down to bring his dish to the sink. “One plus.”

“That’s the kind of linguistic loophole I like to hear,” Connor says, brushing a hand against his shoulder then shooing him away from the sink, and Hank rolls his eyes but goes to set up How The Grinch Stole Christmas (the original, obviously) on the TV.

He’s not thinking too hard about any of this. It feels like if he does he’ll realize it’s a dream, or how little any of this makes sense, or that it’s still Christmas and he should be sad, or that he’s not right for Connor and he’ll drag him down and he should stop any of this before it gets too far. He’s just letting himself be right now—letting the airy, dazed-happy feeling suffuse his chest, letting himself move without planning it first. He doesn’t know how long it’ll last.

But it can last for right now, and as Connor settles in next to him and immediately presses a kiss to his cheek, then lays his head on his shoulder, he thinks that’ll have to be enough for at least today.

Chapter End Notes

all of those wikipedia chains are correct as of today! i kept clicking on whatever i found vaguely interesting until i got to that black sheep one and it mentioned 'deviant' when i was disinterested-scanning it and i was like OHOHO???? so i just plopped that shit rite in there (despite the part of me that gets unnecessarily caught up in details screaming that a wikipedia 20 years in the future may have reworded their articles. i cant see into hypothetical android hellfutures, let me live, dumbass detailbrain, thanks). the jesus birthday thing is substantially more controversial let me tell you, everybody has an opinion, but there is at least potential for it not to be december. partly because of sheep. i'm not gonna elaborate, it's 5:35am.

look this is fluffier than perhaps it should be but i've been waiting for these two idiots to kiss for what feels like NINETEEN BUSINESS YEARS [MINIMUM], let me have this before i return to their real-world problems (besides the honeymoon effect is very real ok. let me have this. Let me have this. i literally wrote the second-to-last paragraph so that i could justify having this without rewrites so let me have this.)
The Monday after Christmas, Connor walks in with a pleasant smile and a covered plate. On Reed’s desk is one of the most ostentatious cookie arrangements Hank has ever seen, done up with red ribbons in a heart-patterned base; the cookies are bright iced shortbread monstrosities in the shape of incredibly unseasonable candy hearts that read, “COOL” “SWEET TALK” “GOT LOVE?” Hank’s favorite might be “U GO GRL”, if it weren’t for the two custom cookies in the center, larger than the rest, which simply say “REED MY MIND” and “R U UP 4 GAVIN A GOOD TIME?”

Reed is munching on a cookie almost aggressively, shoulders hunched close to his desk, and when they walk close he flushes his angriest red and raises both his middle finger and the cookie. “BITE ME”, it reads.

“No, thank you,” Connor says smoothly, handing him the plate. “Thank you for your help the other day.”

Reed looks suspiciously at the aluminum foil on the plate, then opens it. Chocolate chip cookies. “I can’t even eat all this, fuck you,” he grumbles through a mouth still full of shortbread.

Connor shrugs, smiles. “You can make some new friends. Who knows? You might ‘gav’ a good time.”

Reed scowls. “If you ever need help again I will start a department-wide conga line on your unconscious body, and I will not have any trouble finding takers.”

“If you wanted to step on me you could have asked,” Connor says blandly over the sound of Reed choking on his cookie. “I would have declined, of course, but the question would be a courtesy.”

Hank tugs him away by the hand, mumbling something about starting work and not wasting time on assholes, and while he doesn’t hold his hand or anything, Connor still looks back at him and smiles blindingly. Hank will admit to exactly zero people ever that while he admires Connor’s repartee, that particular comment made him think of Reed being interested in Connor, and—well. They’re three days in. He can be a bit clingy, probably.

Reed looks at their unjoined hands, up at Hank, then at Connor, and he groans. “ Fucking hell, please just confess your undying love already, I’m dying.”

Hank raises a cool eyebrow. “You’re awfully invested in whatever situation you’ve imagined for
someone who hates us, Reed.”

“I’m not invested, I’m fuckin’—the dramatic irony is so bad, it’s so fucking painful, you don’t know what it’s like to have to watch—”

Connor says, voice saccharine sweet, “Then by all means close your eyes. Enjoy your baked goods, Detective.”

They walk away, over to their desks, and Hank waits until there’s no chance he’ll see their facial expressions before grinning and saying, “We can let that draw out another few weeks, I bet.”

Connor’s expression is almost blank, if it weren’t for his eyes twinkling and his mouth quirking at the corner. “We’ll see.”

And then he winks.

Connor would probably tell him if he were having a cardiac event, but it sure feels like it. He ignores Connor for the next hour after that, or tries to, except for every now and then he’ll glance at him and Connor will glance at him too and smile, and then he smiles back, so actually probably the ignoring thing isn’t going over so well, really.

And so, things move forward. Hank would like to avoid being a complete utter fucking cliché, so he will not say that everything stays the same but is still somehow different. It’s not really true, anyway, if you get down to the details, so he’ll instead say this: some things change, and lots of things stay the same.

But also, even though it’s only some changes, all the shit that stayed the same still seems somehow better.

Like, okay. He still has the same life. Same job, same house, same dog. Same tragic backstory and alcohol problem and depression and surly attitude. But now he’s also got an android who knows all that and still melts every time they kiss, and holds his hand just because when they watch old movies, and looks at him like he’s something special even though he knows he’s not. He has an android to kiss when the clock strikes midnight on New Year’s, who then ushers him to bed even though he’s only had two glasses of champagne, and who kisses him goodnight again with a smile and promises to see him in the morning. And something about knowing that’s true, that Connor is there and loving him even when he’s not directly at his side, makes things seem—maybe not easier. Maybe just further away, blurrier, like he doesn’t have to focus on them all the time.

Connor wakes him up with a kiss on the forehead because he stubbornly refuses to do anything more while Hank is not awake to say no, even though he never would. He’s starting to blush less when Hank pulls him into a real kiss after he’s properly awake, but he still always does that uneven, pleased smile that makes Hank smile in return. Connor leans his head back when Hank wraps his arms around him to check on what he’s making for breakfast, nuzzling into his neck a little before, invariably, he tells Hank that this kind of distraction will result in him cooking the food two seconds too long or something, and Hank says only two seconds and pretends to sound hurt, and Connor’s LED spins yellow and he admits, embarrassed, probably longer. Connor holds his hand when they drive to work and snuggles close to him when they get home for the evening, and he tells Hank he loves him at seemingly random intervals, and it all just feels warm and incredibly precious and maybe a bit like something he should not be allowed to have.

But the last part, he’s still not thinking about. Not right now. Not for as long as he can manage.

Which lasts until about two weeks from the time they get together.
Hank gets home on a Saturday morning from walking Sumo—Connor does it a lot of the time, and sometimes they do it together, but today on their way out Connor had gotten a call (which is weird, it’s definitely still weird how his LED goes yellow and his eyes a bit unfocused and how he says ‘sorry, it’s Markus’ even though he doesn’t have a phone out). Hank kisses him on the cheek and tells him he’ll walk Sumo today, he could use the exercise and all, and Connor smiles back, squeezes his hand, says thanks. It’s just—a Saturday. Another Saturday of this strange new life where Connor loves him, but other than that it’s a Saturday, and Hank is feeling pretty happy despite the cold outside.

When he gets back, shuddering off the light dusting of snow and stripping out of his winter coat, taking Sumo off his leash and petting him, he calls for Connor. Connor doesn’t respond, which is. Uncommon. Enough so that he gets a little worried when he doesn’t respond after the second time.

“What’s wrong, Connor?” he calls out, a third time, checking around all the places he can think of—not in the living room, not in the kitchen, not even—he tests the lock gingerly—the bathroom. He heads into his bedroom, frowning, because Connor wouldn’t leave without texting or something, but—he sighs and fishes in the coat of his pocket for his phone, trying to stave off the instinctual dread and not really succeeding.

It’s then that he hears movement from the closet. His heart drops, and he quietly goes to the nightstand for his gun before inching towards it. He opens the door, and—

And there’s Connor. He sets his gun down, relieved, before realizing the state he’s in.

His knees are drawn to his chin and he’s rocking back and forth, face tacky with tear tracks and eyes wide and sightless. He’s gulping in huge breaths of air, and Hank knows that’s not good for him. His hair is disheveled, like he’s been running his hands through it, and he doesn’t react to Hank finding him, just keeps rocking with those wide eyes. “I should die,” he’s murmuring, “I should die, I should die,” and Hank’s heart stutters and breaks. Fuck. He’s obviously having another anxiety attack, and who knows for how long while Hank wasn’t here. He pushes down the guilt in favor of focusing on Connor.

“There you are,” he says, trying to go for gentle but probably ending up more in the arena of ‘totally freaked out’. “Uh—are you—do you—” He reaches out a faltering hand and inhales sharp, hurt, when Connor just curls in tighter on himself and shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he’s saying, too high-pitched, “I’m sorry, I just hurt you, I just hurt everyone, I should die,” and Hank has no idea at all what to do here.

“Shh, no, you didn’t—you didn’t hurt me, Con, I was just a bit startled, it’s—you shouldn’t die.”

“I should,” Connor insists, almost venomous. “Living is too good for me. Dying is too good for me too, but at least it means I can’t hurt any more people. I’m scum, I’m scum who’s been trying to escape reality by pretending I’m just sick, I—” He burrows his head further into his knees with a wounded noise.

“And dying wouldn’t hurt anybody?” Hank says, and he knows it’s just the anxiety attack talking, but the thought still turns his voice acidic. “Wouldn’t hurt me?”

Connor peeks up at him, then looks away. “You’d realize eventually you were better off.”

“Bullshit,” Hank hisses, heart icy, mind clouded. “I don’t care how bad a person you think you are, I don’t care what you’ve done or what you’ve deluded yourself into thinking you’re doing or what your mind is telling you you’ll do in the future. I don’t give a fuck about any of that. You think I
could take losing you after Cole? Really? Lie to yourself, but don’t you fucking dare try and peddle that shit on me.”

Connor’s lip trembles, then twists, like he’s about to cry, but he doesn’t, just breathes even faster and starts making these high-pitched keening noises.

“Fuck,” Hank mumbles, not sure whether he feels worse about Connor thinking he’d be fine with him dying or worse about snapping about it. “I—fuck. Okay. Come on, remember what we did with the breathing before? Focus on my heartbeat, then start trying to match your breathing with mine. In and out. Come on, you can do it. You’re doing so good already.”

His breathing starts to slow after five minutes or so, and then he just kind of slumps forward on his knees.

“I’m not really made to crouch like this,” Hank says. “Here, just—let me help you up, you can lay down for a bit.”

Connor just nods wordlessly, takes Hank’s hand and lets him lead him to the bed, but their hands together doesn’t have the warmth it usually does. He tries not to think about how much that worries him, how it makes him think of all the stuff he’s already not been thinking about.

It’s about as successful as all his attempts at not thinking about shit are, which is to say, not very.

Connor gets a request from Markus to initiate a link right before he’s about to walk Sumo with Hank. Hank offers to do it himself, kisses his cheek, and Connor basks in the glow of the easy affection for a moment before accepting the request.

“Good morning, Connor,” Markus says cheerfully. “Sorry to bother you out of nowhere.”

“It is not a bother,” Connor says, sitting down on the couch. “Are you well?”

“I am! I’ve been…really happy, actually.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Connor says, which is true. He’s honestly still a little nervous around Markus, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want his happiness.

“Yes, uh.” Markus laughs a bit embarrassedly. “I actually—Simon and I started dating.”

His thirium pump seizes briefly at the mention of Simon. “Oh-oh?”

“On New Year’s.”

“Well. Congratulations.” He thinks briefly of North, wondering whether it would be inappropriate to call. He hopes she is not too out of sorts about this, but it might be a nice gesture to ask if she wants to talk anyway.

“Thanks! That’s actually—well, it’s not the reason I called, but…adjacent. I was wondering whether you wanted to maybe drop by sometime soon? It’d just be me and Simon and North and Josh—I don’t remember if you know him, but—”

Connor feels like his system shuts down, even though logically he knows it’s still running. Seeing
Simon. In person. The man who killed himself in front of him (his fault his fault), who he felt die.

“Um,” he squeaks, but Markus appears not to notice and keeps talking.

“—bring Hank too, we still haven’t met him and I know he’s important to you—”

“I am sorry,” Connor says, much too fast and incredibly abrupt, and cuts off the link, already starting to gasp for air, reaching for a subroutine that no longer exists. His eyes drift up to the notification—scrolling, as it has been for the past two weeks, with THIS CANNOT LAST, and his face crumples. No. No, of course it cannot, no matter how much it felt like it could. Him being happy? He does not deserve to be happy, does not deserve Hank, does not deserve to be alive, Simon coming back was a miracle but if it had not been possible it would have been his fault that Markus was so hurt—

He stumbles his way to the closet in Hank’s room, hoping the smell of clean laundry and Hank will comfort him, but it just reminds him you do not deserve this, you do not deserve this, and he starts to cry as he curls in on himself, pushing himself to the back of the closet. Component fluid #8089e low. He is going to run out. Of tears. God. God, he is pathetic, RK800s only had the ability to cry as a precaution in the first place and he has used all them up being weak, awful, scum, cannot do anything right, cannot be an android cannot be a deviant cannot be good for Hank—

A part of him wants to call Hank, ask him to come back. The rest of him sneers at the idea, at relying on someone when he deserves this, deserves this, this is too good for him, he should die.

You are right, he thinks as he starts to rock back and forth, his eyes going wide as his tears run out, breathing ratcheting up his oxygenation level, 19% 20%. I should die. I have already hurt so many people in the short time I have been active. I will only hurt more the longer I am here.

But Hank, a quiet voice reminds him, and he shakes his head. No, no, he will hurt Hank too—

He distantly registers the sound of Hank opening the door, calling for him, walking in the room, opening the closet door. He knows it is all happening, but he cannot stop, all he can focus on is his processing slowing to a crawl as his oxygenation levels increase and on you should die, you have felt it once before, remember that pain, that is far from the worst you deserve to feel.

Hank talks calm but his heart beat is fast and his face is worried, and then Connor makes him upset, and he cannot even cry because he literally does not have any tears left. They slow down his breathing until it stops, and he watches his oxygenation levels go down with impassive eyes, already sliding into the numb space he occupies after every anxiety attack.

Hank leads him to the bed, lays him down on his side, then climbs in next to him, tentatively reaching out to stroke his hair. Connor does not flinch this time, just stares at him and touches his shoulder. For Hank, not for him. He does not deserve this.

“What happened?” Hank finally asks on a whisper.

“Markus requested I come over to visit him. And Simon.”

Hank sighs, moving the hand in Connor’s hair to pull him closer, until Connor’s head is against his chest. “Oh. The one from the tower.”

“Yes.” He is quiet a moment. “When he died, he was completely alone in his mind even though I was there. He was scared.”

Hank passes his hand over his back in soothing motions. “And you were scared too.”
“Yes. But…I should not be. Death is what I deserve.”

Hank pauses. “I know that’s what you think sometimes, but—I meant what I said. I don’t think I could take it. You’re—I love you.”

Connor wishes he could cry. “I love you too. But…I do not want to hurt you.”

“You think I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you right away if you ever did? I’m not exactly shy, you know. If it ever got to that point, I’d tell you and we could talk about it. Like, it hurt to hear you say I’d just get over you and think I was better with you dead. And I’m telling you that now because I wanna be honest, but I’m also telling you that I know that’s not you talking, it’s—the same thing that tells you you don’t deserve anything and you should die and all that bullshit, and you might think that’s you sometimes but I know it’s not.”

Connor exhales and goes boneless against Hank. He feels awfully tired, all of a sudden, for all he is incapable of sleep. “I am sorry. Sometimes I think I do not want to feel this way,” he murmurs. “And then I feel bad for that, because it feels like…not feeling awful about myself, not thinking everybody would be better off without me, would just be my way of trying to make myself feel better when I do not deserve to feel better. Don’t bad people deserve to feel bad?”

Hank kisses the top of his head, thinking. “I don’t know. Maybe. But I don’t think they do. I don’t think really, truly bad people spend all their time thinking about being bad people.”

“Hm. Maybe.” Connor looks up at Hank, runs his hand over his cheek, back into his hair. “I love you. And I’m sorry.”

Hank just kisses him in response, long and sweet. When he draws back, he stares at Connor, eyes serious, voice low. “Love you too. You believe that, right?”

And, deserving or no, he does. “Yes. I do.”

Hank smiles, looking just as worn out as Connor feels. “Good.” Another kiss, shorter this time.

“I need to order more tears,” Connor says, almost to himself, and Hank gives a surprised bark of laughter.

“What?”

“I am out. I was not equipped with a lot of the component fluid canisters.”

“Holy shit, I didn’t even know that was a thing.”

“Yes. Other models for whom crying is more expected—child models, for example, or models built to be in a relationship—have the ability to synthesize a similar component from thirium, but I was not built with that capacity because it was not anticipated I would need to cry often. So I ran out.”

“You have no tears left to cry,” Hank says, musing.

“Yes, as I said.”

“Are you pickin’ it up?”

Connor’s eyebrows crease. “I mean, I thought I would have them delivered.”

Hank snorts and grins, kissing him again for what appears to be absolutely no reason while humming something against his mouth, and Connor relaxes into the sensation.
THIS CANNOT LAST.

But, he thinks, he really wants it to. And so—maybe he doesn’t deserve anything. Maybe he doesn’t deserve this.

But maybe for now, he can tell himself Hank does deserve someone who he loves and who loves him back and—if, inexplicably, that person is him, he can tell himself that warrants him being here. And maybe sometime he’ll find that person Hank believes he is beneath the marquee and the anxiety attacks and the low self-esteem, the person who thinks himself worthy, and he can be that person, and they can deserve each other.

Chapter End Notes

look ok i was gonna leave the angsty shit for next chapter and have this be all fluff but two things: the max i’ve ever been able to go without having one of these freakouts, even when things are going really good, is about two weeks, and also i had an anxiety attack last night (two weeks baby!) and decided after calming down partially to write down some of my thoughts for connor and...lol i had put it down at the bottom of the word doc but it was bothering me to see it just bounced down every time i did a new enter line so i just. integrated it instead. as i said, i was planning to have it anyway in the next chapter, just got bumped up a bit. i promise everything will end on (mostly) fluff tho! i promise i'm not...entirely an angst goblin..............i like happy endings too.....(i actually can't. read angst most of the time lol and if i read angst that doesn't end happily i'm in a bad mood for hours. my writing habits are as inexplicable to me as they are unfortunate to you.)

as a side note: is it healthy for connor to think 'i don't deserve to be alive but i'll stay here for hank'? obviously not. obviously the healthy thing to be thinking would be 'i deserve to be alive because i am worthy of life'. but he's not healthy right now, and if this gets him through to the point where he can reevaluate things, that's more important imo. personally i have to sort of take advantage of whatever thought can convince me to do the right thing a lot of days, and like connor, if that includes anything that involves me personally getting better it just brings me back to the same old feedback loop. that said, i also didn't wanna just have him say that without calling it out as, like, not the best thing he could be thinking! do not use him as your exemplar lol

(oh btw hank was quoting the ariana grande song 'no tears left to cry' at the end there, which is of course the joke. he was humming it too. i don't know why it amuses me so much to think of hank knowing ariana grande songs, and i don't even know that many myself, but i think when he was younger he probably just picked up on some popular songs and still like, remembers them and hums them now and again, but if somebody ever called him out on it he'd get embarrassed cause he has a reputation)
“So you hung up on Markus earlier today,” North starts off with when he accepts her link request. “I think he’s starting to think that’s, like, normal for you.”

Connor blinks, brow furrowing, and smiles at Hank when he kisses at the furrow and grumbles, “Tell her if she gives you an anxiety attack too I’ll kick her ass.”

He does not tell her this. “It is not normal,” he says, a bit cautious. “I became…indisposed.” He’s been lying here with Hank all this time, with Hank recounting his time in the police academy to keep Connor distracted and relaxed. Connor doesn’t get to hear about his past all that often, so he’s been relishing in the information, and the sound of Hank’s voice, and the curl of his lips and his thumb rubbing over his hip.

“You freaked the fuck out,” she translates dryly. “I figured. Markus is smart, don’t get me wrong, but he’s also kind of an idiot.”

“In what way?” Connor asks, a bit careful.

“Every way,” she snaps in what appears to be instinctual, but then she sighs and amends, “Like, interpersonally, sometimes. He’s great with people he doesn’t know. He’s a great leader. He’s great at giving advice when he’s not involved in the outcome. But he’s also incredibly fucking oblivious. He knows you have anxiety problems, he knows you blame yourself for—” The pause is unnatural. “Shit.” Probably trying to avoid saying his name; that’s unnecessary at the moment.

“Simon. Among other things.”

“...Yeah. Anyway, he knows that stuff. He just also thought inviting you to hang out with all of us all casual-like would show you, like, we’re all chill with you. And that it didn’t need a whole conversation. He’s always pushing like this, like—wanted me to—drop by the Eden Club, face my demons, whatever.” She gives a derisive snort. “Like my demons didn’t follow me. Idiot.”


“That’s one way of putting it, Elizabeth Bennet. Anyway, point is, he should have talked to you about it instead of just laying an invitation on you. What he didn’t say, like an asshole, is that Markus wants to get to know you better and show off his cute new relationship, Josh is a nervous fuck but he always is, and Simon wants to have some heartfelt conversation. Probably say thanks for the repair
job. Probably apologize, knowing him. Which’ll probably fuck you up, but it might be good for you. So there’s everything laid out, because now Markus feels guilty so he wasn’t going to do it.’”

Connor staggers at the influx of information. He processes it, wondering how he feels about this ‘heartfelt conversation’ with Simon, but—it freaks him out, but if—not having an anxiety attack every time he thinks of Simon will be helpful to Hank, and meeting Simon will aid in that goal—he’s interrupted by Hank poking at his yellow LED with raised eyebrows, mouthing, “Do I need to fuck someone up?”

He gives a small smile to Hank and kisses his temple, where his LED might be if he had one, shaking his head. Then he asks North, “And you? Where are you in this layout?”

“Providing snarky DVD commentary,” she quips, and Connor is startled into a chuckle. “Didn’t know you laughed, huh. Anyway, I’ll be there, obviously. In addition to commentary, I can also—and absolutely will—kick Markus and Simon when they pretend PDA is a human standard only, or kick just Markus when he forgets people have boundaries, or Josh when he looks all wide-eyed shocked when I make jokes—you if you’re an ass—”

“Commentary and kicks,” Connor cuts in, a smile in his voice. “An integral part of any awkward gathering. You know, I think Hank will like you.”

There’s a short silence. “Is that your incredibly indirect way of saying you’ll come?”

“I will do my best. I cannot give a…conclusive guarantee, depending on my…mental state. But you are right that it might be good for me.”

“Cool. Nice talk. Thanks for helping me to make Markus lose his shit when he finds out I was able to convince you without you hanging up—”

With a grin, Connor hangs up.

He accepts North’s invitation link once more, where she yells, “ASS,” then hangs up on him. She then sends him, in text format, “tomorrow @6 be there i know you’re not busy. ps. you’re an ass and first thing i’m gonna do is kick you right in your kneecaps”

He doesn’t doubt it. His eyes crinkle in a smile as he kisses Hank, properly on the lips this time. “Would you be up for a small gathering tomorrow evening with Jesus, his boyfriend, someone I don’t know, and a woman who has promised violence and sarcasm?”

Hank wrinkles his nose at him bemusedly. “You’re going? Didn’t it—will you be okay?”

“I don’t know, honestly. Right now I feel fine about it; North laid out everything that would be expected of me there, which is reassuring. I might not feel the same tomorrow, but I told her it was uncertain.” He reaches down for Hank’s hand, still gently caressing his hip, and brings it up to his face to kiss it. “But I would feel more comfortable with you there, if you are comfortable coming. If you are not, I will cancel.”

“Nah, uh…I can come, totally.”

Connor searches his expression. “You are certain?”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“Thank you.”
Hank kisses him, short, but Connor draws him back in, feeling very cozy in the bed with his boyfriend and with all the easy affection between them. It feels a bit right now like the outside world isn’t allowed into this space—not his insecurities, not Hank’s, not the upcoming meeting with Simon or work or the future or anything else. Just him and Hank and slow kisses and their arms lazily draped over one another. He cannot feel warmth, but—this is something like it, Hank smiling and Connor’s chest nearly bursting with love and the winter sun straining weakly through the windows. Even the marquee, YOU ARE FOOLING YOURSELF over Hank’s head, seems terribly distant.

“I love you,” he murmurs when they part, “I really love you,” and despite all he says it, Hank’s neck and ears still get a little pink.

“Yeah, yeah. Love you too.”

“No, I mean—” The words seem in this moment insufficient, and he shakes his head, a bit frustrated. “I’m just very lucky to have you. And I love you.” He punctuates it with a kiss. “I—very much.”

Hank laughs a bit nervously, a lot more pink now, the color dusting his cheekbones. “No, uh, I think I got it the first time. You love me. And I love you too.” He brushes a light kiss against Connor’s forehead. “A lot. Okay?” His look when he draws back is too fond for Connor to process without feeling like he needs to gasp for air. “Even if you’re a huge nerd.”

Connor smiles softly. “Perhaps. Though I will note your favorite franchises include Star Trek and Star Wars and that you have seen the majority of crime procedurals produced during the early twenty-first century for the sole purpose of mocking them. I think the argument could be made that you are a nerd as well.”

Hank drops his mouth open exaggeratedly, faux-offended. “Why I fucking never.”

“I can continue listing data points if you need further convincing. You have vinyl records despite them being out of date by the time of your birth. You confess to enjoying sidescrolling platforms as an adolescent. You—”

Hank rolls over on top of him, his hands outstretched at his side into claws, and Connor looks at him, unimpressed.

“You forget your android boyfriend is not ticklish,” he says, knowing he’s guessed correctly when Hank crosses his arms.

“CyberLife didn’t think of a single damn useful thing when making you,” he mumbles petulantly. “Not a single damn thing.”

“No? Nothing at all.” Connor says, sitting up and wrapping his arms around Hank, delighting at how his blush renews, deepens.

“Nope. Absolutely fucking nothing.” He pauses, looking to the side, abashed. “Everything I love about you is just…you. They may have made RK800, but you made Connor.”

Connor feels thirium redirecting to his own cheeks. He was going to make some kind of comment about Hank clearly having a thing for his freckles, given he spent a while earlier just tapping over all of them like he was connecting constellations, but that seems somewhat in poor taste after that heartfelt sentiment. “Oh. Is now the wrong time to express the final reason you’re clearly a nerd?”

Hank scoffs, glaring at him. “What? I’m tryin’ to—”

“I fell in love with you,” Connor says quietly, and that overflowing feeling returns to his chest,
spreading through his arms and into his fingertips as he brushes them through Hank’s hair. “And, well. They say like attracts like.”

“They’re a dumbass, whoever they are,” he says, but kisses him anyway. “You’re also a dumbass.”

“Mm. Strong words for the person who was going to make you your favorite for lunch.”

His eyes narrow. “Double pie?”

“Make-your-own pizza and sweet potato pie, yes.”

“You’re the best dumbass in the world, is what I meant.”

Connor laughs. “I made the pizza dough before you woke up today. You do not need to convince me.”

“I’m not trying to convince you to make me pizza dough.” One more kiss to the corner of Connor’s mouth, then he clambers off. “All right. Let’s make some pizza. I want to make one in the shape of, uhhh, Colorado.”

“So a rectangle. I’m already aware of your preferences.” Connor gets off the bed to follow after Hank, and even out from under the comforter, the warmth follows them wherever they go.

Hank would be lying if he said he knew what he were doing here.

In, like, multiple ways. First off—Connor calmed down after his anxiety attack eventually, transitioned entirely to whatever mode it is where he’s all schmoopy talk and warm kisses, but Hank would also be lying if it didn’t feel like a bit like a bandaid over a head wound—something to temporarily patch up their broken parts, but not something that can last forever. Not that he’s uncomfortable with Connor being affectionate. It’s not that. Just—that without also having some sort of talk about how they try and deal with shit instead of wallpapering over it until it hits them full force again.

He doesn’t want to keep on with not thinking about shit. He’s done that for years. Three at least, but even before Cole, he didn’t want to think about stuff even when he knew it would hurt more for it later. Like—how he and Laura were falling apart even before everything, with him way more invested in Cole and her needing more support than his late nights and emotional suppression were able to give her. How the stress of work was getting to him more than was healthy, how the people he didn’t catch were starting to haunt him after he left the office and far into the night. He didn’t think about any of that stuff, with varying degrees of success, and Cole’s death just brought everything to the forefront.

He wasn’t surprised when Laura left. He wasn’t surprised when he started going into work late, when Fowler started looking at him less like he was the star of the department and more like he was a problem that needed solving. He wasn’t surprised that he turned to alcohol instead of relying on healthier ways of coping because he never had any of those.

And he’s not thought about this either for years—about how the destruction of his life was more a fast-forward button to an inevitable conclusion than some huge plot twist. Because, honestly, as awful as this is to say and as awful as it is for him to acknowledge, it’s a lot easier to blame it all on
Cole dying. It’s a lot easier to tell himself he could’ve held it together if only, that everything that happened was just one out-of-control element causing chaos in a tightly controlled situation instead of him just never being able to control shit in the first place.

But he’s thinking about it now. Because—okay this is super fucking cheesy and he’s glad nobody can read his mind, but. He doesn’t want to push his habits onto Connor, make him think it’s okay to let the avoidable blindside you just because looking at what’s going on hurts and is messy to deal with and is hard. He wants to be, God, better for Connor, so that Connor doesn’t get pulled into his mistakes. So he doesn’t get pulled into his mistakes and hurt Connor. He’s not gonna tell Connor this either, at least not now, but for all he had told Connor he was being silly for saying he was deathly worried about hurting Hank in the future, that he wanted to run away sometimes to keep that from even possibly happening, Hank could sort of understand. Hurting Connor is terrifying. Having something beautiful and inexplicably his and wrecking it because he’s—Hank? Because he wrecks shit? That’s the stuff of nightmares right there.

It’s worse because he knows Connor internalizes fucking everything. Hank might not be afraid to speak up when something happens he doesn’t like, but Connor—if something hurts him, not only is he not going to say anything, he’s going to do some kind of fucking Olympic-level mental gymnastics to arrive to the conclusion it was his fault.

And he doesn’t want that. He doesn’t want Connor thinking shit is his fault any more than he needs to. He doesn’t want one phone call to send Connor into the back of a closet alone thinking the only way he can make up for shit he barely even did and hasn’t done yet is to die. He doesn’t want Connor running out of tears he wasn’t even made to shed all the time because his mind is telling him he doesn’t deserve anything when he deserves every goddamn thing life can give him. So—he’s gonna keep thinking about it, because if anybody knows this shit don’t go away easy it’s Hank, but also he’s always been a stubborn asshole, and all. But like he said—he doesn’t know what he’s doing here. He doesn’t know how to make any of this better, for himself or for Connor.

The second way he doesn’t know what he’s doing here is he’s walking up to the lobby of New Jericho with his android boyfriend watching a bunch of androids milling about and, notably, he’s pretty damn conspicuously not an android. Connor tried not to look freaked out on the way over, but he pretty obviously was anyway, so Hank offered his hand. He’s not—regretting it now, exactly, but. It’s awkward. It’s really damn awkward. There are androids looking at their joined hands with a variety of reactions that could fill up Connor’s entire damn body language database. A lot of them are disinterested, but some look surprised, some hide small smiles behind their hands, some look… kind of pissed.

Connor is—honestly not all that good at concealing his expressions when he’s feeling anxious. Normally, yeah, but if he’s nervous it all shows. He’s nervous now, so Hank can see how his eyes flick up and down, LED yellow, eyebrows creasing. Hank remembers that time at the Chicken Feed—Connor saying he wasn’t sure he’d be welcome, or whatever—and sighs, pushing down his own embarrassment to haul Connor to the elevator.

Connor flashes him a grateful smile, which makes it worth it.

“Top floor, yeah?” Hank asks, and Connor nods, but doesn’t let Hank press the button. Instead he presses his own hand to the elevator, his skin briefly peeling back to interface with it.

“They gave me access,” he murmurs by way of explanation. “It is not accessible by default for—security reasons, I imagine.”

“Ah. Yeah. Smart.”
The elevator reaches the top and opens on a woman with the fakest pleasant smile he’s ever seen. She says, “Hey, Connor,” and promptly delivers a swift kick to his knee.

Hank hisses, “What the fuck,” eyes wide and worried, but Connor doesn’t look like he’s in pain. In fact, he looks more relaxed, almost, and there’s a smile in his eyes.

“Good evening, North. You know, I had actually thought you might find that funny.”

“Objectively, it was funny. Subjectively, you’re an ass.” She jerks her thumb towards the room, and Hank finally lets himself look around the room as they step off the elevator. “Simon is in another room. Warning you now so he can’t sneak up on you.”

Connor’s smile freezes. “Ah. Yes. Thank you.”

There’s a kickass view through the windows, and Hank spares an appreciative glance before moving to the couch. There’s some guy there already watching with poorly veiled interest; he gives a small wave before looking off some other direction. Josh, probably, since he’s not android Jesus or—aw goddamn he can’t use a resurrection joke on the other one since he already used it up on Markus. Two halves of the same Jesus? No that doesn’t work either. Whatever, his name is Simon, he technically knows that. The violent one must be North.

He reaches his hand out for a shake. “Hey. I’m Hank.”

She looks at his hand, almost amused, before taking it, squeezing way too hard to be friendly. “Nah, I figured Connor picked up another old guy on the way over, actually.”

Hank bristles and squeezes back as hard as he can. “No need for you to introduce yourself, then. You must be this little group’s token asshole.”

Connor says, “Hank,” sounding almost shocked, but North is smiling now. Not much, but like—grudging, like she wasn’t really planning on the smile before it happened.

“Better than the worse of two assholes,” she says, and drops his hand. She looks between the two of them, thoughtful, then grins suddenly, sharp and vicious. “Oh, okay. You two are fucking, right?”

What the fuck is up with that phrasing from everyone anyway. He’s about to snarl back something probably not that clever when he hears a smooth voice say, “Please, North, I know you can be nice.”

“This is me being nice,” she throws over her shoulder dismissively, and Hank looks for the source of the voice even knowing who it is.

Markus is walking out from another room; his expression is long-suffering but he still has a very particular presence. Next to him, already looking apologetic, is the blonde from the tower. Simon. He doesn’t even have Connor's shit to deal with and it’s still weird to see someone who, last he saw, looked like the world's worst fucking blue raspberry Icee accident.

He feels Connor stiffening next to him before he sees it, and he ignores North and Christ the Lord and Boyfriend the Guy-Who-Traumatized-Connor and Josh and all of them in favor of taking Connor’s hand immediately, pulling it up to his lips to kiss like Connor did yesterday. “You okay?” he whispers, looking at Connor, who looks back at him, still stiff but trying to smile anyway.

“Yes. I will manage.”

Bandaid over a head wound, Hank thinks to himself, and you can really only change it so many
times before you need to face reality and go in for stitches.

If he needs to be the one to figure out how that happens, he’ll absolutely do it to keep Connor from looking like he does now, with his fake smile and his death grip on Hank’s hand. Because he may not know what he’s doing here, not here at this apartment and not with mental shit he’s in no way qualified to treat, but he knows all of it is with Connor. Which is what matters, really—being here with him and keeping it that way.

So he squeezes Connor’s hand, and Connor squeezes it back, and then they go sit down on the couch for the world’s most awkward party.

Chapter End Notes

it's time for brin's useless chapter trivia and discussion corner! i talk a lot, you see, if you haven't managed to get that somehow after 19 chapters and however many fuckin words this is by now. nearly 60k? right. anyway first off: detroit-style pizza is apparently, like, thick-crustied and rectangular and cut into squares. i have never had it or been to detroit so unfortunately i'm going off the not-so-sacred word of my bff google. there's also apparently a place that does a good sweet potato pie there. so, like, it'd make sense for his fav food to be burgers, but we can just have a nice pretend together that that biz is out of convenience. i just...burgers are boring to make is all and there is no joy greater than making a skeleton-shaped pizza and watching it melt into unrecognizability. Why Did You Bring Me To Life Papá...

second off regarding hank's assessment of the whole sitch! i want to make it clear that connor wasn't, like, faking the intimacy there or anything, and neither was hank. they are on occasion disgustingly fluffy bastards. however i do know i have a personal tendency after snapping out of an anxiety attack to fall into damage control mode bc i really hate people worrying about me so i like, force myself to be normal sooner than is probably healthy. so hank isn't taking issue with the fact that they were having a moment, just with the fact that they had it almost immediately after his anxiety attack for hours and then didn't end up having a proper discussion about like. what to do in the future. re: bandaid on a head wound, cw here for medical shit, that's a semi-reference to when i was a kid and jumped into a ladder from the bottom bunk and my dad, who was newly re-single and not exactly competent at first aid, put like five bandaids on my head before consenting to take me to the er (all while i watched with detached amusement). it all worked out fine but sometimes you need stitches my pals! wherein in this case stitches means therapy :P (standard disclaimer, i'm not gonna present therapy as the only option bc i know lots of people have had bad experiences or found success with other methods, but it's the path i'm on rn so it's what i know best!)
It would probably be appropriate to have some kind of awkward silence, with how Connor looks a bit terrified and Simon can’t look at either of them directly. There isn’t, though, which Hank attributes to there being a politician in the room. He guesses Markus has probably faced a lot worse while he’s been negotiating.

Markus’ smile is polite and a bit apologetic. “Hello, Connor. And you’re Hank, yes? I’ve been hoping to meet you. I’m Markus.”

“Yeah, I guessed that,” Hank says, which is maybe a bit dickish, but whatever. “Nice to meet you.”

Markus nudges Simon gently with his shoulder, and he winces. “I’m Simon. You probably know that too.”

“Yeah, safe to say I’ve figured out who all of you are,” Hank says, which is probably even more dickish. “Connor’s talked about you all, so.” He doesn’t say Connor’s talked a lot about them; that wouldn’t really be true, but like, he knows enough to get an idea.

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Markus’ smile is a bit frozen now, like he’s all of a sudden realized he doesn’t know where to go with any of this. Might’ve been able to get out of all this if he had realized before, but they’re already here, so. “How have you both…been?”

Hank is taken with a sudden urge to start laughing. God, this is the worst thing ever. He looks away to hide his smile, and Connor says in a very small voice, “Well. We have been well. Or—sorry, I should not speak for Hank—”

“Nope,” Hank says, a hint of a laugh still in his voice. “Well about sums it up.”

“Right,” Markus says. “Good.”

The silence stretches until Hank can’t take it anymore and starts guffawing. “Oh my God.”

“Hank?” Connor asks, looking almost worried.

“No, uh—fuck, I’m sorry, just—oh my God, this is just so fucking uncomfortable. We’re clocking in
at a solid gray area between meeting the parents and, like, the dinner in Titanic with all the rich guys and Leonardo DiCaprio. Can we just get shit out of the way first so we can have a semi-normal evening after instead of spreading out ‘it’s gonna snow tomorrow too’ for a few hours? Because holy shit this is painful.”

Connor doesn’t say anything, but he’s hiding a smile behind his hand, like he does, and leaning a bit into Hank’s shoulder. North waits a few shocked moments, then says appreciatively, “Hear, hear.”

An amused smile is playing at Markus’ lips. “Not one for small talk?”

“Not when it’s bad.”

“Fair enough.” Markus finally sags back into the couch, foregoing his formerly unnaturally straight posture, and kisses at Simon’s temple, looking at him with a meaningful expression. Might be they just know each other that well, might be android brain phone calling, or whatever. Eventually Simon nods and looks at Connor.

“I wanted to say that I am grateful for all you did to help me get…back here,” he says, and Hank’s arm is around Connor before he even has time to tense. Which he does—his jaw sets and his LED goes yellow and his eyes go that robotic-dull that Hank knows means he’s trying to not let his emotions overtake him.

“Your gratitude is unwarranted,” Connor says stiffly. “I mean—thank you for it, but—”

“No, I—I heard you feel that way, but I wanted to say it anyway. Regardless of your reason for doing it, whether it was to make restitution or a kind gesture or both, uh—it’s what got me here with Markus and everybody. When—” He clears his throat, gaze dropping to his lap. “I didn’t really expect to have it again, when I—I thought I’d just be alone.”

“I know,” Connor says, unbearably quiet and sad, and then for a few moments they just look at each other.

“I…this probably doesn’t mean much. But, um. I didn’t do it because of you.”

Connor’s eyes go a bit flinty and he gives a little, punched-out breath. “Your stress level was already high when I found you. Even higher when they started shooting. I knew scanning your memory would not have a positive impact. I also knew all too well that deviant androids self-destruct when at their peak point of stress. I scanned you anyway. What precisely about any of that is not my fault?”

Hank’s eyes are on Connor, watching him carefully for a moment when he needs to not be here anymore, but he can see the others from his periphery—Markus massaging Simon’s arm, North grimacing, Josh looking out at the windows with an even more pronounced grimace. They all know they can’t really get into this, that this is gonna be important for both of them, but that doesn’t make it any easier to hear.

“I chose to go up to that building knowing I might not make it out with my life. When I got shot and the others had to leave me behind—” Hank notices Markus’ hand tighten on Simon’s shoulder and idly notes that’s probably not a good memory for either of them. “I knew the most likely outcome wasn’t me hobbling my way back to a ship on the other side of town. I was there and you were—I mean. You were only following your programming. I don’t blame you for that.”

Connor goes almost completely rigid, LED flashing red, and Hank coughs. “Hey, uh, sorry. You got a room we could get to for a bit? Just a couple of minutes?”

Simon’s face falls, and so does Markus’ before he rearranges his expression into something more
understanding. “Of course. Just go through that set of doors over to your left.”

“Great. We’ll be back.”

Connor manages a single jerky nod and a, “My deepest apologies,” before he lets Hank guide him to the room Markus mentioned, which turns out to be some kind of piano room. Hank sits next to him on the bench and reaches forward with his legs to kick the door shut. It’s only when the door is closed that Connor takes in a shaky, gasping breath, and Hank sighs lightly. He sorta thought it might turn out like this somewhere tonight.

“Con,” he says soothingly, wrapping his arms around him, “Hey. You’re all right. Can you focus on my heartbeat again?”

Connor’s breathing is starting to pick up in speed, but Hank hopes catching it this early will mean they can cut it off sooner. He kisses Connor’s forehead to distract him, then reminds him, “You hear that, right? What’s it at?”

“87 BPM,” he says distantly between breaths. “Slightly elevated. It tends to be when this happens.”

“I know.” He pets Connor’s back. “It’ll calm back down soon. Do you think you can breathe with me?”

“I don’t—” He shakes his head minutely. “It was my fault, Hank.”

“Connor,” Hank says gently. “Can you breathe with me? Anything else we can talk about later.”

“Okay,” he says, and Hank notes idly his face is still completely dry. Must not have ordered the extra tears yet. “Yes. I can do that.”

Hank breathes loudly, slowly in and out, and Connor finally matches him and then stops. He relaxes against Hank, nuzzling into his neck, and Hank waits for the shaking in his body to stop before saying, “Con, you know we’re gonna need to do something about this.”

Connor’s hand spasms against his leg. “For example?”

“We can do more research, but I’m thinking probably some kind of counseling? For both of us. I hate that you have to go through this, and we both know I’m fucked up, too, and—well, I’ve been ignoring that too long. And that isn’t right. And I know when we walk back out there you’re probably gonna try to smile because you don’t want any of them to feel bad about setting you off, but I don’t want either of us to get stuck in that rut where you break down in private and then smile like nothing’s wrong after and don’t even try to get out of the massive shithole you’re living in. I know that place way too fuckin’ well.”

Connor pulls back and looks at him. “I mean, I am not opposed, but—this is something you would be interested in not solely for my benefit?”

“I mean—if you weren’t here I probably wouldn’t even be thinking about it, yeah.” Hank sees Connor frown and continues pointedly, “But that’s just because—Con, you know you’ve changed a lot of stuff in my life, right? There’s tons of shit I do now that I wouldn’t have thought of before you came along. Wakin’ up before noon. Trying to limit my drinking on good days. Hanging out at Christ the Lord Jesus’ penthouse and watching him badly pretend he doesn’t want to be at this particular confession.”

Connor smiles wryly, then his face turns serious again. “But—for good?”
“Huh?”

“These changes. Have these been—ultimately for your benefit?” He looks incredibly insecure all of a sudden, and Hank sees his hand flutter at his pocket for his coin before settling on Hank’s knee.

“Dumbass,” Hank says, letting his voice go rich with all the affection he feels for Connor. “You could have decided the best way to wake me up each morning was to scream for a minute straight, or that you were going to make me drink nothing but protein shakes for a year, and you’d still be by far the best thing to happen to me in years. Just because you’re you.”

The slow smile on Connor’s face is soft and happy and real, and he leans forward to kiss Hank just as slow. When they part, Hank’s neck going that unfortunate splotchy pink it tends to, he says with smiling eyes, “I would never do either of those things.”

“I know.” Hank gives him another, much shorter kiss. “You feelin’ up to gettin’ back out there?”

“Yes, I think so.”

He doesn’t try to smile when they open the door, and it’s weird for Hank to feel better seeing that. But he does, somehow. It feels like—maybe not a step, but maybe the part where you stand up and get ready to move. Maybe the part where Connor takes his hand and they decide they can walk without seeing what’s ahead. Maybe just that.

Connor sometimes wishes, perhaps irrationally, that he could take a deep breath and it would be calming instead of making him lightheaded. Hank’s hand in his will have to do. He focuses on the readouts of his body temperature and lets that keep his eyes from straying to IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT.

He sits down and listens to Simon say a bit miserably, “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

He puts up a hand. “Please, Simon, it is probably even sillier for you to apologize for this than you might think it is for me to apologize for the tower. You are not responsible for my issues with mental processing.” He takes a deep breath even though it, predictably, increases his oxygenation levels by a negligible amount. “I am glad the repairs worked out to get you back here, and regardless of whether you think me directly involved or not, I apologize for the part I did play in you requiring those repairs. Even if I was acting in accordance with my programming, it still resulted in an unfortunate outcome. So we can, perhaps—leave it at that for now? I would like to know you past that, if possible.”

Simon listens to all that, then laughs breathlessly. “Okay, yeah. I get, uh—I get that stuff doesn’t go away just because people tell you it should, trust me.”

Markus’ hand squeezes Simon’s shoulder again.

Simon flashes a glance at Markus, then looks back at Connor. “So—subject change, then. Are you and Hank dating? I admit I’m curious too. Not that you have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Connor looks at Hank, who shrugs noncommittally. “Yes. For—a little over two weeks.”

“Oh, come on,” Hank says amusedly.
“I am attempting to be relatable—” He huffs at Hank’s expectant look. “15 days, 10 hours, 15 minutes, 34 seconds. If you’re counting from when we mutually agreed we were dating.”

“Much better. You know how much I love those seconds.”

“That’s…fucking adorable,” North says from her seat, and Connor tears his gaze from Hank to look at her, thrium raising to his cheeks. Markus has a pleased expression on his face, and Simon looks delighted. Josh is still looking at the windows, which is odd. “I mean, I knew already, you’re not really subtle—”

“I was not trying to be,” Connor says with a pleasant smile, and North snorts.

“Yeah, okay. God, I’m surrounded by couples. Do you guys PDA too?”

Hank chokes, but Connor just grins. “Is that a request?”

“It’s a request in the same way me dropkicking your face is an option rather than an inevitability.”

“All right!” Markus says, slightly louder than is strictly necessary, and Connor remembers North telling him that Markus can be a bit oblivious sometimes. He seems to have a misconception about the nature of their dialogue. “Hank, you and Connor are still working mostly with cases involving androids, right? I’d love to hear more about that.”

It is a strange choice for conversation, and pretty obviously a play at what little Markus knows about Hank. Hank knows that, too, from his quiet smile, but he takes the bait anyway. From there the conversation moves to legal protections being put into place for androids, to how Simon is working with Josh to open an outreach and education center for both androids and humans, which finally gets Josh to start talking. North adds briefly, on prompting from Markus, that she’s started a self-defense class, but doesn’t elaborate further. Markus changes the subject smoothly to their joint work with CyberLife to discuss the future of the company—they’re looking at the potential for paid hardware and software options, talking about what to do with the androids not yet activated, things like that. It’s fascinating, and Connor finds himself engrossed. It’s still not comfortable like him and Hank at home, but it’s not strained like it was earlier, either.

Eventually, Connor takes note of the time and tells Hank that they should get home if he’s going to get an optimal amount of sleep. Hank rolls his eyes but complies, and North offers to walk them down to the lobby, which Connor imagines is less out of politeness and more because she wants to say something.

His hypothesis is proven correct when she walks them out the door, then lingers. “I’m sorry for all of that,” she finally says. “If I had known it would start out like that—” She shakes her head.

“It started out badly,” Connor says frankly. “But it didn’t end too badly, I think. And Hank and I probably needed to have a conversation.”

Hank nods in affirmation. “You don’t need to be sorry. That all could have gone a lot worse. Once my old in-laws dumped water on my head for talking about an ex-boyfriend. He didn’t really appreciate that I changed out of my wet button-up into a rainbow tshirt. It seemed like a great idea until he started yelling, and then his girlfriend slapped him for being a homophobe because I guess she was pansexual and never mentioned it—” He chuckles. “Now that was a bad night.”

“Well, thank God we’re at least above that,” North says dryly. “Look, uh. All of us up there are kind of fucking messes. Like—Josh, he was watching some kind of nature show for the whole first bit because he’s super conflict-averse and didn’t want to be there in the first place, and Simon
apologizes for everything and—his former owners were kind of awful. Markus thinks focusing on everybody else means he never has to deal with his own shit. And he dragged me into doing this self-defense course for Traci models, which is something I should want to do because it’s important, except I freak out before every class and he still doesn’t know, and he wants me to head up some sort of program to help them find their way when I don’t know what my own fucking way is supposed to be. And, like. My point is, if I even have one, that I probably shouldn’t have pushed so hard for you guys to come over knowing there was a good chance it’d blow up somehow. I know you have your own shit.”

Connor pauses, watching North scuff at the pavement with her shoes in a very human gesture, and places a hesitant hand on her shoulder before drawing back. “North, with respect, if we had to wait for every person in that room to not have—” His mind protests, but he continues for the sake of parallelism and camaraderie. “Shit. If we had to wait on that, I’m fairly certain we would never be able to spend time together.”

Hank grins next to him, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Relationships are not formed by individuals waiting on perfection to protect them from hurting others.” It’s an odd thing for him to think and even odder for him to say, but as he thinks about it, he realizes it actually makes sense. “Because perfection is not attainable. Even—even when I was programmed to perfectly integrate with humans and to do my mission without flaws, I still hurt Hank. I still hurt many people. And I probably will continue to do so despite my best efforts to the contrary, and I will probably be hurt by others despite their own best efforts. Relationships are by necessity between imperfect individuals who can try their best but know that, at some point, even their best will fail. So I’m glad you insisted we come over. You were right; it was probably good for me.”

She blinks at him. “Oh. Well. Okay.”

When he looks at Hank, Hank is smiling gently at him, and he leans down to kiss him on the cheek. North blows a raspberry and turns on her heel, yelling, “I’m leaving, fucking couples.”

Connor calls out, “North? Thank you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she says, still walking away.

“And—I think your own feelings are far more important than what you feel is required of you. If you want to do the classes, you should, but—if not, maybe you could talk to Markus. He doesn’t get to decide what’s best for you.”

She turns around, walking backwards. “You write self-help books now too?”

“No,” Connor says. “I can just empathize with the feeling of being pulled between duty and what you actually want.”

North stops in her tracks, then smiles. “Yeah. Guess you can, huh.”

He nods, though he is fairly certain it’s a rhetorical question.

“I’ll take it under advisement. Catch you on the flip side, Austen.” She gestures towards Hank. “And your aging Mr. Darcy.”

“Can’t wait, knockoff Katniss,” Hank snipes back, and she turns around again to walk to the door and raises her middle finger at him, but they can both hear her laughing.
“I can see why you like her,” Hank says after a few moments. “She’s direct.”

Connor smiles up at Hank. “So are you. It is one of the many qualities about you that I love.”

“So you’re just into assholes?”

He pulls Hank down for a kiss, then says cheerfully, “One in particular.”

“Hey, fuck you,” Hank says, but he takes Connor’s hand and pulls him forward in the direction Connor know leads back home. (Or, more accurately, the parking lot two blocks away where they left Hank’s car.)

“Is that a request?” Connor asks, starting to swing their joined hands, and he grins at hearing Hank sputter.

Imperfect individuals trying their best. He supposes it describes him and Hank fairly well. As much as his programming reels at that, at even the barest semblance of him suggesting his imperfection might not be just a personal inevitability but a fact of life, he knows logically that he spoke the truth. The next step, he thinks to himself, would probably be finding a way to believe this truth applies to him as well. Hank had suggested counseling, and that’s probably wise. Connor should look up options in the area.

But not right now. Right now, he wants to focus all his attention on Hank’s hand in his, and the way the flurrying snow looks caught in Hank’s hair, and the pink of his cheeks and nose, and the grateful smile he flashes when Connor increases his external temperature. He wants to focus on how lucky he is to have him, and how much he wants to keep him, and how much he loves him.

“I love you,” he tells Hank, and Hank presses closer. Just a little bit; maybe if Connor weren’t an android or he didn’t know Hank as well he wouldn’t even have noticed.

“Your timing is always so weird,” he mumbles under his breath, looking embarrassed. “But. Same, obviously.”

And he’ll focus on this, too: that it is obvious, to everybody else but especially to Connor. He cannot bring himself to say, even silently, he deserves to be loved so loudly that the entire world hears. He cannot bring himself to believe he does.

So he presses close back, and memorizes this moment, and hopes that it is just as apparent that Connor loves Hank as it is that Hank loves Connor, because Hank absolutely deserves for the universe to see that he is loved as best as Connor knows how.

Chapter End Notes

this was withOUT a fuckin doubt the WORST CHAPTER EVER TO WRITE oh my god. too many characters to juggle. i unsubtly didn't let josh talk out loud at all because i had no idea when he would talk in the midst of everybody else angst-jabbering. i am sorry josh you deserve better than i was able to give you. anyway lol so here's the most stunted chapter in the world, late. apologies for that; on thursday i wrote a oneshot for hank's birthday (it's uhhh...rated e for 'Not For Everyone' so you can find it if you're of the age of majority and you want to, through my profile. you can obviously also find it if you're a minor just because that's how object permanence and internet links work, but i
don't like to think about that). on friday i wrote like a third of this chapter but as mentioned, it completely fucking sucked to write, so i kept taking breaks to get away from it. same with today lol i've been chiseling away at this for A Fuckin While

(i feel bad for making connor react so badly to honest thanks + a 'it's not your fault' but those are sure ways to get me worked up, second only to 'you're not a bad person' or even worse 'you're a good person' because that just immediately sends me into a mega bad spiral because i start thinking i've deceived other people into thinking that and lying is a Thing for me. anyway, sorry simon! you are a casualty of my personal canon but i still love you)
Connor begins researching therapists that evening while Hank sleeps, and after work goes over the options. It takes a while after that to find a therapist willing to accept their work hours, and even longer to find one who will work with an android client. Hank gets angry about this, but Connor had anticipated that particular difficulty from the start. There is still quite a bit of anti-android sentiment in the city.

They end up finding a somewhat unexpected solution: a therapist with an android assistant. The assistant, Jaime, is an older model of a line of androids programmed to aid with assisted living. At the time of production CyberLife had been running a few consumer tests checking whether giving home aides basic psychological knowledge might help them interface better with people who might struggle with depression or anxiety as a result of home confinement, but it became clear fairly quickly that people didn’t really want advice from their androids, so the test was discontinued and most of the androids were sent back for a wipe and reprogramming by their owners.

The therapist, Dr. Emery Hill, had kept their android out of something like curiosity. They tell Hank and Connor on their first intake meeting that they stayed inside the house most of the time because at the time they had been having trouble with agoraphobia; they had stopped taking patients outside of their home entirely because of several panic attacks at the practice where they used to work. They noticed when speaking to Jaime that her advice lined up well enough with the advice they might give to their own patients and decided to start teaching her and eventually upgraded her to ‘assistant’; she’s planning on going to school formally for it when provisions are put into place for android learning (a major point of contention at the moment) but is presently just working with Dr. Hill.

Dr. Hill and Jaime make a good team, at least for Hank and Connor’s situation. Dr. Hill is a very calm individual, despite admitting they still sometimes experience panic attacks, and responds to every admission with the same serene demeanor; Jaime is a bit more upbeat, but can sympathize with Connor’s talk about programming. They decide together on a scheduled session once per week, and begin their work.

If you’ll pardon his language, which his mind certainly won’t, it kind of fucking sucks.

Not because of—therapy itself. That’s fine, and important, and he knows it is something he needs to do. It sucks because they’re doing exposures which means Connor has anxiety attacks most appointments, and because Hank has to discuss things he usually tries not to think about which means he gets sad and angry, and because Connor doesn’t feel like he helps Hank as much as he wants to, and because they both leave every session exhausted. And none of that makes it any less
important, of course. Just hard.

THIS IS POINTLESS, the marquee proclaims, and it is there every time he looks up.

He takes to looking down more often.

When he is calm, or as close to it as he can approximate, he tries to take care of Hank. Small things, mostly—drawing baths, giving him massages, whatever else he can think of—but he needs to do something. To make Hank happy, of course, or at least as near to it as he can manage, but—that small, insidious voice whispers, also to make him feel like less of a failure. Selfish.

But he knows his attempts, motivation aside, are failing. Hank has been drinking more again. Not as much as he used to, but more than is healthy.

After about a month of this, Connor is tired. Not of anything. Just tired. He can't sleep, which means he doesn't really have any recourse from being tired. Sometimes he'll climb in next to Hank just to see him sleeping, just to see him finally peaceful and to imagine what it might feel like if he could feel peace as well. As much as he knows he does not deserve it, he still wishes for it. It is just one source of guilt among many.

But wishing will not give him what he wants here, so he just stays there with Hank and pretends he can feel the warmth he lets off instead of just registering it in numbers and degrees, and before Hank wakes up he gets out of bed and starts preparation for breakfast.

He is tired. Which is, perhaps, why this evening when Hank has the bottle of whiskey out again, when he's refused Connor's offer of a head massage and most attempts at conversation, Connor lets despair etch spirals into his thoughts and says, "All right. I am going for a walk."

Hank goes completely still. "You already walked Sumo today," he says, and his voice says he is trying to be careful, but his speech is already too slurred for careful.

"That is correct."

"So you're just goin' on a walk."

"Yes."

"Why." It is not a question, but expects an answer anyway. Hank is not looking at Connor. He wishes he would.

"Because at the moment I feel I would rather be surrounded by silence because there is nobody to make noise," Connor says, guilt upon guilt upon guilt, compounding and folding him in, rendering his voice distant and his eyes heavy. "Rather than because there is somebody present and they are simply not interested in speaking."

"Not interested," Hank echoes, and it is still not a question, but this time it does not need an answer either. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Connor wants to sleep. He wants snow falling down blizzard-cold around him and a blanket of processors going slow and he wants pain to lull him into nothingness. He wants to not be here, because here is where he knows he is about to hurt Hank and is about to do it anyway. "It is not—I am just going for a walk, Hank."

"You never just do anything," Hank says on something close to a snarl. "Not interested in speaking? You think I'm—what, not talking because I don't want to? You think any of this is because I'm not
“Hank, no,” Connor says, and a different kind of pain rips its way through his system, leaving him feeling weak. “I know you are—”

“Oh, please, I see you, I fuckin’—I see you and the shit you’re doing. Like. Where you make me get into a bath you made smell all nice and with bubbles and all that kiddie shit, like—like if you try hard enough it’ll make up for me not being good enough. I see it.”

Connor recoils, horrified. “Hank, no, that’s not—” Hank lashes out when he’s upset and drunk, he reminds himself.

So do you, apparently, the insidious voice whispers, but without the excuses, and it wraps itself around his code, settles as nausea in the bottom of his throat.

“Oh, is it to make you feel better about yourself? You can’t fix you so you try and fix me?”

Oh.

Oh, so this is what ice feels like when it’s inside you instead of on your skin.

“Newsflash, buddy, you can’t fix me. I’m not your fucking problem to fix. I’m not your—fuckin’—responsibility. I’m just me, Hank the old alcoholic fuckup, an’—and that’s what you signed up for, isn’t it, is that, so don’t you even fuckin’—”

“Hank,” he says, deathly calm, ice pitting his thirium pump and making his voice so cold he can see Hank shiver. “Perhaps you are right about me trying to help you in part because it is something I can do when helping myself is something I cannot seem to manage. But I think you are just as aware that the largest part is because I love you and I want you to be happy, and my conclusion is that if you are ignoring this, it is at least in part because that fucked-up part of you wants to push me away.”

The language notification barely even registers with how his body and mind are filled with horror and ice, making everything seem sharper, even how Hank’s eyes are wide and his mouth is slightly parted, even how he draws back. Especially that.

“And I never let you, because I know you do it because you are drunk, and because you are upset, and because you feel—at least in part—” The word is biting. “That you do not deserve to have me here and that I would be better off not by your side. And I know that part of you is not all of who you are. Because I did not sign up for Hank the old alcoholic fuckup.” Another notification, another stab of ice in his chest at how Hank visibly shrinks. “I signed up for Hank, who is a good, kind, wonderful man, and who is also an alcoholic and makes mistakes and lashes out, but tries. I signed up for Hank, who I love, and who loves me despite my own numerous flaws.”

“Connor,” Hank says, a whisper that withers away into nothingness.

“I know all of that, so I do not let you push me away when you attempt it. But tonight, since you seem intent on reducing yourself to that part.” This is wrong. It is wrong and he knows it and he is still doing it because he is cold and hurt and so very, very tired. “Tonight, I am going for a walk.”

It is not even a gasp, the sound Hank makes. It barely counts as an inhale at all—just the tiniest breath, and Hank blinks too much after it, as if doing so will make the scene change.

Connor has tried that before. It never works. He stands and walks for the door.

“Con,” Hank says, small and quiet, and Connor is not certain if it was even meant for him to hear—
whether Hank is calling out or just making a statement. Not a question.

He does not give it an answer, just opens the door and leaves.

THIS IS POINTLESS scrolls along the horizon, and he resists the urge to slump on the ground. It is. Of course it is. He should go back in right now, and tell Hank he is sorry, and carry him to bed, and stay up all night hating himself for being exactly the person he has always been so scared of being. And he will, too. He will stay up all night and hate himself.

Just not next to Hank.

Hank doesn’t know how many seconds or minutes or maybe years he spends staring at the door after Connor walks out of it. Connor would know if he were here. But he’s not, which is sort of the point.

He thinks probably he stares at that door for at least a small eternity before he starts to cry.

It’s not in a big loud sobbing way like Connor does when he gets really worked up. It’s just—tears, running down his face as he stares silently, because Connor was here and then he was right and now he’s gone.

Not permanently. Hank knows, somewhere in the place where his brain is drowning under a bottle of whiskey, that Connor wouldn’t do that. His mean streak is barely an accidental smudge. He’ll come back at some point and probably apologize. Him not being here right now isn’t even the whole reason he’s crying, he’s pretty sure. That definitely sucks. It sucks a lot. But it’s also the part where he was mean enough that even Connor, who has always been the most constant part of Hank’s life ever since he entered it, couldn’t stand to be near him. He knew he was doing it, too. Connor was totally right. He knew he was picking at shit Connor was sensitive about because he knew it would hurt, and he knew he wasn’t talking to Connor because of his own shit and he shoulda said something about it but instead he just fell back on the shit he does where he doesn’t talk about his problems and snaps at anybody who gets close.

He should have just said it, he thinks morosely, drinking the last few drops of whiskey from the bottle. Even if it’s dumb and even if he doesn’t really quite understand it himself and even if it’d burden Connor and he knew Connor was already having a hard time with all this so he didn’t want to make it worse. Even if all of that, talking about his dumb shit would’ve been better than what happened.

See, the—-the thing is. His dumb shit thing, he means. The thing is that he’s happy. Not—right now, obviously, God no. Not even this past month so much; therapy has been rough and Connor being worn out all the time has been rough too. But overall, when he looks at where he’s at and where he’s headed, he sees himself being happy. He sees the therapy starting to help and life starting to get more manageable, but most of all he sees Connor, and Connor just—makes him happy, is the short and short of it. And if Connor is with him, and by God does he want him to be, and by God does he see it, him, everything, the whole domestic life run out to its logical end, he thinks he’s gonna be happy.

And that just feels wrong.

Dumb.

Dumb, but he can’t shake the feeling, either. Because Cole probably had some kind of happy life out
there too somewhere, maybe even somebody like Connor waiting for him, but he’s gone. Cole isn’t
here to be happy, and it feels deeply wrong to be lastingly happy or even just to think it when Cole
doesn’t get that. When he—took that, at least partly. Why does he get to be happy when Cole can’t
be? At least that’s where his head is going.

So he does what he does best: self-sabotage. Drinking, and going all moody-silent, and pushing
away Connor, since Connor makes him happy. And then he’d see Connor trying so hard to keep
doing that for him with his dumbass baths and massages and little notes on the mirror and in his
lunches and perfect coffee in the morning and it’d just make him feel worse. Because it would make
him happy for a second, and then he’d feel awful, both because he shouldn’t be happy and because
he knows Connor is trying too hard because he sees Hank is in a bad mood and—Connor shouldn’t
have to do that for him. Hank should be. Better. Not like, lasting. But better for him. That’s what he
wanted, right? To be better for him?

Obviously he’s doing a pretty shitty job of that, he thinks, and wipes away tears and snot on his
undershirt because there’s no Connor here to tell him it’s gross and no Connor to give him a tissue
instead, and then he walks to his room alone with no Connor to kiss him goodnight, and he gets in
his bed and opens the drawer of the nightstand and stares at his gun that hasn’t had any bullets in for
a while, and that’s when the big gross sobbing-crying comes.

Because he doesn’t want to die.

And that’s—what the fuck is that? There’s always been that in the back of his mind. Like—once you
think suicide once, it’s everywhere, a solution for everything. Minor inconveniences. Big shit that
makes you want to rip your heart out so you won’t feel anymore. All of that, anything, there’s just
that room at the back of your mind where the voice lives that says, you know what could solve this?
And it’s been there, ever since Cole. Maybe even before. Feels like it’s always been there.

And it’s not right now. He looks at that gun and thinks I don’t want to die and it doesn’t even—it’s
not even ‘I don’t want to die because Connor would be sad’ even though, like, absolutely that too.
He would be fucking devastated. He would never ever forgive himself, think Hank did it because of
him, probably—probably follow him, honestly, which is the worst fucking thought ever.

But it’s not even that, it’s that Hank just wants to be alive. He wants to do his job and make Fowler
think he’s worth something again, and he wants to watch how society evolves to accept and even
thrive with androids getting full rights, and he wants to—God. He wants to do everything with
Connor. Fucking everything, which is the cheesiest fucking thing, but. He wants to finish Trek with
him. He wants to see what he looks like in a suit. He wants to take gross cliché family pictures
together, with Connor and Sumo and him, for Christmas with dumb sweaters like Cole used to wear
and in the summer with them looking at each other all stupid in love where everybody sees the
pictures and can’t decide whether it’s cute or the worst fucking thing they’ve ever seen. He wants to
show Connor all the pictures he boxed up years back—of him as a kid, with his family. Older, in
college, then in the police academy. With Laura; tell him about how it was her smile that really did
him in, tell him his smile is even more devastating. With Cole. He wants to take Connor to Cole’s
grave and see how Connor talks to him and what flowers he chooses, and to celebrate his birthday
and Christmas without it being awful. He wants to get Connor his first birthday gift and his first real
Christmas gift and their first anniversary gift and he wants to put up their pictures and Cole’s pictures
all over their house and have people visit and know just by stepping in that his house is a place
where there’s so much love you can almost touch it. He wants to someday come up with some crazy
fucking plan to propose to Connor, something sentimental and romantic and just as dumbfuck cheesy
as Hank is now, and he wants Connor to say yes and he wants to marry him and be that awful
person who doesn’t stop bringing up their husband in public. He wants so fucking much and he’s
going to have to be alive for all of it and he doesn’t even care, but he also cares so much because it
feels like a betrayal.

But he still wants it. And it’s scary and it makes him feel guilty and so—and so he made sure he
couldn’t get what he wanted. Because it would mean he’d be happy and he just doesn’t think he
knows how to do that. Not consistently. Maybe when he was younger, but not now. He thinks he
forgot how to do it, and fucking clearly, because he chased away his chance at it. Even—even if it’s
just for the night. He still hurt Connor, all because he couldn’t just fucking say ‘I love you and loving
you makes me happy and I don’t fucking know how to deal with it’.

God, he really is an old alcoholic fuckup.

Connor would hate him saying that. But he’s still not here to correct him. Which is Hank’s fault, so
he thinks maybe he’s a bit justified. Just for tonight, he’ll be the old alcoholic fuckup with tears and
snot on his shirt and an empty gun he doesn’t want to fire in the still-open drawer next to him, and—
and tomorrow he’ll be the first one to apologize. And he’ll explain. And he’ll beg for forgiveness and
try to figure out how to be the guy Connor thinks he is.

But just tonight, he’s going to be the guy who is all too used to falling asleep alone and drunk,
because that’s the guy Hank knows he is right now.

Chapter End Notes

well! they both fucked up! ok so. sorry for taking you on the fluff-angst bungee again,
but a few things there. first: when i started therapy it helped me a lot for sure, but also i
was doing exposure therapy in each session (at that point, for counting and
contamination obsessions; i didn't start working on scrupulosity until several years in
and it's been persistent since) and that shit drains you. it's important, but i'd leave each
session and just hang out in a bookstore until i felt calm enough to be in front of people
and pretend to be okay again. those first few months were very rough. second, when i
did first start work on scrupulosity and transitioned from 'everything is your fault' to
'sometimes people are actually kind of shitty to you and you can get angry about that
but--oh whoops anger is a BAD EMOTION, you're a bad person, everything is your
fault' i got a bit snippy. i'd always apologize afterwards and shit didn't really get
reconciled because i didn't want people feeling bad about themselves, but i definitely
yelled more than i was used to in that introductory stage. third! they're both still in the
very early stages of therapy and with all this shit combined they're gonna mess up! as
always it doesn't excuse it, but like. i don't think recovery is ever a very smooth process
is all im sayin. till get resolved and they'll be stronger for it but. sometimes people dont
learn lessons right away yknow?

figuring out their therapist situation took way too fuckin long. did i need to make
throwaway ocs? no but i was like 'buuuut nobodys done android therapy i need
someone whos ok with them and can relate and i doubt a normal therapist will--'
anyway. got stuck on that shit for like a day tbh, which is part why this is late. i wrote all
that down and was like god where do i even go after brin's funtime therapist oc detour (i
have brief bullet points until the end now so we should be more gucci than we were
yesterday)
speakin of which this'll be ending soonish! my projection is probably 2 chapters. maybe 3? but we all fuckin know how good i am at projecting chapters, quoth 'i thought this would be 3 chapters and now it's 21' mcgee. (and i might still do an e-rated oneshot that i add on as a series thing, i wouldnt do it here in case ppl came in 4 the t rating but i do sorta wanna do an add-on idk we will see). i have an idea for a new fic after this too, that's the other thing i did yesterday was doing a basic summary and writing the first few paragraphs. but yes i apologize for not being able to give an accurate chapter count but it'll be comin up i think!
YOU WILL NEVER GET BETTER (And that can be okay.)

Chapter Notes

cws for this chapter: mention of alcoholism and alcohol abuse, references to past misbehavior (the argument from last chapter), hopelessness, incorrect thinking about love solving problems that is later refuted, brief innuendo, discussion of cole’s death and guilt over it, therapy, worries about and discussion of the possibility of ‘not getting better’, discussion of disordered thinking / moral OCD obsessions, black and white thinking, mention of panic attacks, mention of suicidal ideation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hank wakes up hung over and with a gross snotty shirt. For a moment he almost forgets what happened.

Except for there’s nobody standing next to the bed, telling him the time and date and how long he’s been sleeping, and his heart sinks. For another moment he thinks, I could just stay here. I could just stay in bed all day.

But he promised himself last night he’d be the first one to apologize, which means he’s gonna have to take some initiative here. He gets out of bed and goes out the door to his bedroom and heads for the living room to get his coat and wallet and keys and—

And then he stops dead in his tracks, because Connor is just sitting on the couch, looking at him.

“Connor,” he croaks, because he just woke up and didn’t drink anything or brush his teeth or—yeah, that would’ve actually been probably a really bad romantic gesture as romantic gestures go, showing up to sweep Connor off his feet with morning breath and his undershirt and boxers. “I was going to go find you.”

Connor’s eyes dip to his shirt, then back up to his face. “You have mucus on your shirt.”

“Yeah, uh—yes. Yes I do.”

“It is still too cold to leave the house in your boxers.”

Jesus. “You’re right about that. I wasn’t thinkin’ too hard about it. I just—” He sighs, scrubs at his face with the palm of his hand. “You’re right. You are right and you were right last night and—God, I’m so sorry. I have an explanation, not a good one or one that would make it better, but before any of that I just want to say I’m sorry and I shouldn’t have said any of that shit. I knew it would hurt you and I took advantage of you being around all the time and I was just—I was wrong. Really wrong. And I’m not just sayin’ that because I woke up without hearing how many seconds I was asleep and it broke my heart, or because I think I need to, I’m sayin’ it because you deserve better from me, and I’m sorry I couldn’t give it to you last night or even really this past month, and I promise I’ll try harder, I just get scared of how happy you make me because I don’t really do happy and I’m not good with it but that’s still not an excuse so—” He knows he’s rambling, but Connor is still just looking at him with an inscrutable expression and a yellow LED. “I’m sorry. I love you and I’m sorry and I’ll do whatever I can manage to make this right.”
Connor stares at him a while longer as he winds down, then says, “I walked to the police station.”

That really isn’t the response he was expecting. “Huh?”

“I walked all the way to the police station and I sat down in the corner of the laundry room there and just…thought, for a long time. About what you said, about what I said. About lots of things. At 4:03 AM, Detective Reed walked into the room and shrieked, very loudly. I suppose he thought I might have activated the subroutine again. I assured him I was all right, and he asked what I was doing there.”

“Oh,” Hank mumbles, confused, but he decides not to interrupt again. Connor must have some kind of reason for—whatever this is.

“I told him that sometimes I wondered whether love was enough.”

Oh, God. What a terrifying statement. But he clamps his mouth shut and keeps listening.

“He asked what I meant, which is reasonable, and I told him I had—somewhat of a disagreement with you. He pointed at me and said, and I quote, ‘I fucking knew it, I fucking knew you two got together, you tried to keep it from me but I fucking knew it, fuck yes I can finally breathe again.’”

Connor’s eyebrows crease, his LED going yellow at the language. “I did not dignify that with a response.”

This isn’t really the time for Hank to be smiling or laughing, but it’s hard to suppress the snort. He goes for a nod instead.

“And then he asked what I meant about love being enough, and I said—that I love you, and you love me, but it doesn’t appear to be enough to make either of us better. Not for lack of trying, but…I can’t stop my anxiety by loving you, and I can’t make you less depressed by showing you I love you, either. And sometimes that makes me feel a little hopeless. Because what I feel for you is—it is the most powerful emotion I can conceptualize, but it still cannot drown out all of my other more negative feelings, and it is unfortunate to think that—if something like that cannot do away with my anxiety, what can?”

Cautiously, Hank moves to the couch to sit next to Connor, then takes his hand between his own.

“Reed told me I was a dumbass.”

That startles a huff out of him, and Connor squints at him before continuing. “He said that falling in love isn’t some magic get-out-of-mental-illness-free card, and that you can’t expect being in love to fix all your problems. He said problems just happen, and love just is. And it is great to have somebody to support you through your problems, but you can’t think that they will fix you or that you will fix them, or that something is wrong if that’s not happening, because that’s way too much to put onto any one person.”

Huh. He wouldn’t have expected that from Reed of all people. It’s surprisingly insightful. He squeezes Connor’s hand tighter, hoping his expression communicates ‘yes I am listening keep talking’ rather than ‘I have no fuckin’ idea how to respond to any of this’.

“And then he said that—if even he could see that we loved each other, it had to be something pretty goddamn special. Either that or we’re both exhibitionists.” Connor wrinkles his nose at that, and Hank isn’t sure which he wants more: to kiss that wrinkle or to laugh at how Connor must have looked when Reed accused him of exhibitionism. “And he said that he thought if anybody could beat out the odds it was probably us.”
Oh my God, Hank thinks, surprisingly touched, he has a nice side.

“And then he told me if I told you any of this he would find a screwdriver and disassemble me and sell me for black market parts, and I told him it would take more than a screwdriver to disassemble me and he said that sounds like the words of somebody who lacks persistence and true focused rage.”

Hank does laugh this time, and he’s happy to see that Connor smiles a bit too. “That sounds more like him. But, uh—yeah, I agree with him, which—don’t tell him that. Not the screwdriver part, like—Connor, the way I said it last night was awful, but you can’t make yourself responsible for my mental health. You already have enough to deal with on your own, for one, but—me being depressed doesn’t mean you’re not loving me hard or well enough, and you still having anxiety doesn’t mean you’re not trying hard enough for me either. It just means we both have to deal with our own shit, and we can help each other through it, but we can’t let ourselves get all guilty for not being miracle workers. Trust me, if—if I could somehow say something or do something that would make things easy for you, you know I’d do it, and I wish I could. But I know I can’t.”

Connor nods, slow, then puts his head stiffly on Hank’s shoulder. “I am sorry for—I know you’re trying.”

“I know you know that.” Hank drops a kiss on his head. “I can definitely try harder, though. Just because I’m scared of being happy doesn’t mean you need to take the brunt of it.”

“You did say some rude things,” Connor concedes, and Hank moves one of his hands to pull Connor closer by his arm. That’s actually kind of a step, for him. Connor doesn’t really make accusations often, even true ones.

“I did. And I’m still sorry.”

“I knew you didn’t mean them.”

“Doesn’t make it better I said them.”

“Maybe.” Connor sits there, silent, then says, “I should have told you I’d be back. I am sorry for that as well.”

“I knew you would be,” Hank says.

Connor finally relaxes against his shoulder. “We are going to have a lot of material for this week’s therapy session.”

Hank chuckles. “Don’t we always?”

There’s another long silence, but not an uncomfortable one. “I meant what I said. You make me really happy, Connor. Which is—it’s good, it’s definitely good, but a big part of why I’ve been so out of sorts is because it feels wrong for me to be happy when Cole can’t be. But—I still want it, with you. Maybe that’s really selfish. It probably is.”

Connor hums, thinking, then says, “I think for a long time you’ve thought—and continue to think—that you have to be miserable because you ‘took’ Cole’s life and opportunities for happiness from him, or at least played a role in doing so. But...let’s say you did take Cole’s life from him. Let’s say the life you are living right now should rightfully have been Cole’s to live. I don’t know that I believe that, but hypothetically. If that’s the case, wouldn’t the best way to honor that to be to try to live the kind of happy life you’d have wanted him to have?”
Hank pauses, thinks about that. “That would make sense, I guess. Still feels kinda wrong, to just—say, hey, I have the right to be happy.”

“I can sympathize. But—maybe it’s something you can work towards. Because I certainly think you have the right to happiness. And...you make me happy too, most of the time. So maybe if we stick by each other it’ll just happen naturally.”

Hank smiles softly, presses another, longer kiss into Connor’s hair. “Sounds nice.”

“It does.”

He can tell him the rest of it later. Maybe open up one of those boxes with pictures in it. Maybe talk some more. But for now, even with everything still kind of wrong, he’s just going to sit here and let Connor leaning against him feel right.

They do, indeed, have a number of things to disclose at the next therapy session.

Hank talks haltingly about how he wants to be happy and thinks he can have it with Connor and how that scares him. Connor talks about not feeling like he’s doing enough and his fears about the future.

“I know I have only been here for a short amount of time in the scheme of things. Both in conscious existence and at therapy. And—I do not want to be impatient. But...I just become concerned, at times. There are things that seem sensible while I’m here, or while I’m in a good mood—things like that I should be with Hank, or that...objectively I am...that most individuals are probably just largely good individuals who do occasionally bad things. And that it would make more sense for me to be in that category than for me to be the one person selected at my creation to be uniquely bad, not based on my actions but simply on my being, like some kind of tag I cannot remove. It would not make sense for CyberLife to create that kind of android—one who is solely and uniquely evil in a way that cannot be rectified by any amount of trying or any amount of doing good. It would make more sense that I have done some bad things and I am trying to not do any more of them and sometimes I might make a mistake, but overall, I would try to do good and succeed at doing good when I try and it would make sense if all of that made me mostly good.”

“But?” Jaime prompts, because she knows just as well as Connor that while he knows all of that, he doesn’t really believe it.

“But when I am anxious, and especially when I am having an anxiety attack, it does not matter. It does not matter whether I had a breakthrough in therapy last week or whether I have made any progress in my normal life or whether I know what makes sense because what I am when I am anxious does not care a single bit about what makes sense. It has already decided what I am and there is no amount of sense or logic or thinking that will change its mind, and if I attempt to logic my way out of anxiety it just turns it back around. You think that’s logic, but how do you know you’re not twisting things to make yourself feel better? You think you know the truth when you are in a good mood, but how do you know that you have not just forgotten the real truth, which is that you are bad, because it is more convenient to you? Nothing I can say or think, nothing anybody can say, will change my mind, because that individual is not interested in changing its mind. Because—if it changes its mind, there are two alternatives. The first alternative is that I am good, and that is unacceptable, because thinking I am good is egotistical, which is a bad quality. The second, and
potentially more realistic alternative, is that I am just—sort of in a gray area. Sometimes the things I
do are good. Sometimes they are bad. Sometimes they are neutral. And if it were to accept that
alternative, it could not be certain of anything. Is this action good or bad or neutral? It would have to
decide, and it would be uncertain whether it was correct in that decision. It is easier for it to think of
one single blanket statement.”

Dr. Hill nods thoughtfully. “I see. And how does that connect to your overall concern?”

Connor sighs lightly, leaning into Hank. “I can recognize these processes and the thinking that goes
into them, but I have no concept of how I could change them. I am not comfortable with uncertainty,
and I do not know how I could become comfortable with it. I do not know how I could even begin
to dismantle such a fundamental part of myself. I was programmed to think that—there are bad things
and good things. Those that follow the law, and criminals. Androids that follow their programming
and deviants. And if I do not know how to get away from that, how can I ever get better? What if—
well, what if I never do? What if this marquee is always here and I always have anxiety attacks and I
never—” He shakes his head. “I do not know. The idea is…worrisome.”

The marquee reads, YOU WILL NEVER GET BETTER. He tries to look at Dr. Hill and Jaime
instead.

Dr. Hill taps their fingers on the legal pad they keep notes on, then says, “You know, I picked up
Jaime here about…oh, eight years back. And about two years ago, after talking with her all the time
and doing all the stuff I know helps me, I stopped having panic attacks. Like, nothing that used to set
me off set me off. It felt like I just couldn’t have them any more.”

“Really?” Connor asks, perking up somewhat.

They smile. “Really. And at the time, I was ecstatic, because I was like—I finally made it. I finally
get better. I’m done and I might have problems but they won’t be this.” They raise their eyebrows
and add, looking at Connor pointedly, “And that went on for a year and then I had another panic
attack.”

The hope that had suddenly flowered in Connor withers, but they just continue. “And then I had
another, and then another, and then a whole string, and I stayed in my house for a month.”

“Oh,” Connor says quietly, and Dr. Hill shrugs.

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another, and then another, and then a whole string, and I stayed in my house for a month.”

“Oh,” Connor says quietly, and Dr. Hill shrugs.

“Yeah. I got really depressed about it—like, what did I do wrong, does this mean I’ll never really get
better, stuff like that. But I’ve been thinking since then, and now I think that happily ever after is
awfully reductive. Because outside of stories, there isn’t some set of right choices or behaviors, some
magical combination we’re all missing where if you do everything correctly, you’ll be happy forever.
You don’t get to trade in good deeds or a heroic storyline for never having any problems again. I
think it’s a lot easier to think that—that there’s something waiting for us at the end of all of our
struggles, that if we just try hard enough we can get the happy ending fairytales promised us we
could have. But life just isn’t like that. We have happy times and sad times and times that aren’t
really either or even times that are both. We can have a day that’s going really well that completely
tanks, and a day that sucks and ends up being one of our best memories.”

Connor stares at them, contemplative. They lay back in their chair, fingers still tapping their legal
pad, and gaze back at him and Hank calmly. “Happiness isn’t a destination. It’s just…moments. It’s
points on the road, not a place at the end of it. And that means we’ll have bad times too, and that’s a
hard thought to deal with—that things won’t ever be ‘better’ in the way we tend to think of it. That
you’ll still have days where you miss your son, Hank, or that you might always feel some amount of
guilt or anxiety, Connor. That’s hard, and it probably won’t stop being hard. But maybe better isn’t
like that, exactly. Maybe it’s feeling pain less often, or maybe it’s being able to deal with it better when it comes. Maybe at the end of the day it’s just getting through it, and knowing bad days will be bad, but also knowing that there’s going to be good in there too, and that you can hold onto those moments. Even small ones—laughing at a joke from a friend, hearing a song you really like. And if you want better to mean you don’t have any problems, maybe you won’t get better. But if you want better to mean there will be times where the bad isn’t so bad, and times where there’s some small amount of joy, and times when you’re so incandescently happy you forget the bad for a bit—if you want that, then that’s a better you can absolutely have. I believe that.”

Connor doesn’t respond, looking down at his lap. Hank nudges him, and he glances over. “It’s like you said, huh? Statistically speaking, not every day will be bad.”

“I suppose so,” he says slowly. “And that’s—that’s enough for you, Hank? Even if—even if I still am like this?”

Hank gives a furtive glance towards Dr. Hill and Jaime, then kisses Connor’s cheek. “Connor. I fell in love with you exactly as you are, and I’m not gonna fall out of love just because you got issues. That would be awfully fucking hypocritical.”

“But you’re—you’re not suicidal anymore. You’ve already taken a step.”

Hank pauses. “Are you? Suicidal, I mean.”

Connor thinks about it, tilts his head. “No,” he says, and is somewhat surprised to find it true. “I want to stay with you, whatever that means.”

“Well, then, hey. Looks like we’re still walking right next to each other. Besides, it’s not any kind of race.”

“It definitely isn’t,” Jaime says. “If it were, I’d have kicked Emery’s ass a long time ago.”

Dr. Hill gives Jaime an amused expression. “That’s not very polite.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is just ‘rude’, ” Jaime says with a grin, then her face goes serious. “Connor, look, maybe you won’t be anxious someday. But there’s a lot of waiting to do for most of the somedays out there, so I think you might as well fill that time with as many nice things as you can manage while you’re here. Things don’t have to be completely better to still be good.”

And Connor looks at Hank, and at the marquee, and then at Hank again, because Hank is the best thing of all. Better is just—off in some nebulous someday. Hank is here right now. And, if he is to be believed—and Connor believes him, trusts him—he’s going to keep being here.

“You’re right,” he says. “I think you’re both right.”

“Good,” Dr. Hill says with a wry smile. “If you didn’t think that, I would recommend you see someone else.”

“No. Here is fine.” He doesn’t just mean at this office, either—here, now, at this point in time, at the place in his life he is at. It’s fine.

Which is just as surprising a statement as earlier, but also just as true.
all right so! i have somewhat of an...odd perspective on 'better'. i've been depressed for eight years with breaks no longer than a month at most. i've shown signs of moral ocd since i was six at least, and i've been in therapy for seven years off and on. mostly on! and that's a long enough time for me to wonder about this shit a lot. in fact i think so much about it that i've been able to come up with counterarguments, not necessarily logical ones, for most of the positive shit both me and my therapists can think up, which means i am a very difficult person to treat because i'm aware that i think illogical things and my mind doesn't really care much. but after thinking all this time, this is sort of where im at right now? that like--life's hard all around, and mental illness sure doesn't make it easier. but you can still have good here and there. maybe not as often as you like, but hopefully often enough you stick around for it. people say a lot, like, that happiness is an attitude you have, that it's just in how you respond to situations and if you have a good attitude you can always be like...overall happy, but i just sorta think sometimes you're happy and sometimes you're not and that can be okay? (this is dumb but i wrote a silly little song about this sort of thing a while back and i'm not gonna say it's good but i will say it's [here])

incidentally i mentioned before in chapter notes (i think?) that reed has dealt with anxiety before in this continuity so his advice is comin from there

note the updated chapter count! this will ALMOST certainly just have one chapter left. i coulda dragged out this one and i was thinking about it but i decided not to, mostly bc i wrote dr. hill's monologue last night and i hate leaving little writing snippets around too long bc they always get outdated. but yeah one chapter left! probably! a more certain probably than yesterday but still not one hundred percent absolutely!
Connor isn’t really planning on going to the fundraiser Markus told him about a while back, even when Markus says it would be really nice to have them there, even when North tells him they’re going to be there and she’s already put him and Hank on the guest list.

“You can take me off, I’m certain,” he says coolly over the link. “With your boundless access and power.”

“Don’t be a shit.”

“North, it’s a wonderful cause, but—”

“I give only, like, 10% of a fuck about that. I’m not gonna guilt trip you about how good a cause it is unless that’s the only thing that gets you to come. I’m asking you to come because otherwise I’ll be bored.”

He huffs. “Tempting, but—”

“Tempting, huh,” she says contemplatively. “Good idea.” Across the desk from him, Hank’s phone buzzes with an incoming text notification, and Hank picks it up to look at it and scoffs.

“North says to tell you we’re both going to Markus’ android fundraiser or whatever. Are we?”

Connor sighs, resting his chin on his hand. “I’m trying to convince her otherwise.”

His phone buzzes again, and Hank looks at it for a few moments before a speculative expression appears on his face. He texts her something and gets a reply almost instantaneously. “We’re going. Unless you’re, like—really opposed, but, uh—”

Connor narrows his eyes. “I’m not so opposed I wouldn’t consider it, but—what did she say to change your mind?”

“Just that it’s a really good cause and all,” Hank says, too fast, typing another response to North, and Connor’s eyes narrow further as he goes back to the link with North.

“What did you tell him?”

“That he’d get to see you in a formal suit.”

“Oh, come the hell on, North,” Connor says irritably, exiting out of the resulting notification.

“He liked the idea. And besides, that means you get to see him in a suit, too.” He can hear the grin in her voice. “Isn’t that tempting?”
He pauses, long enough he’s aware it’s suspicious. “We’ll come. But we get to leave if we want, regardless of whether that impacts your personal entertainment.”

“Sure. I can just tell anybody who asks that your faculties were overcome by your incredibly intense suit kink.”

“And I’ll look at the footage of the event and find out who you told that and tell them you asked to join and we declined,” Connor says sweetly.

“Fuck you,” she says, somewhat amused.

“So sorry, but I will have to decline at this point also, I’m afraid—”

“God damn it. I don’t even know why I’m friends with you. I’ll send over the information,” she says, then cuts off the connection. Connor processes that, then smiles, pleased. It’s the first time North has called him a friend.

He adds ‘research suit shops in the Detroit area’ to his to-do list and raises an eyebrow at Hank. “So. Suits, I see.”

“Shut up,” he says, blush rising to his cheeks.

“Don’t worry. I find the idea rather appealing as well,” he says calmly, celebrating internally at how Hank’s blush intensifies, and goes back to work.

“I’m not sure whether this is worse than before or not,” Reed grumbles from where he’s passing by. Connor doesn’t even bother looking at him, just sends a picture he and Hank had taken a few days ago of Connor pressing a big kiss to Hank’s cheek to Reed’s phone. He captions it ‘Content for your favorite pairing’.

“Fuck you!” Reed yells after a few seconds, voice somewhere between angry and embarrassed.

Connor grins, still pointedly interfacing with the office terminal, and sends a followup text: ‘Your workplace propositions grow ever more brazen.’ It’s a repeat joke, but he’s the only one who needs to know that.

He can see the unhealthy shade of red Reed goes out of his periphery, and how he angrily jabs his phone when he texts back, ‘I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU’

Connor just sends him a smiley face, then goes to actually properly work. Not that he’s not a fairly good multitasker, but he knows Reed isn’t.

“You’ll have to tell me what that’s about later,” Hank says.

Hank is an even worse multitasker, or he’d send a screenshot now. “I will,” he says, glancing up to smile at Hank. “His insults tend to get more creative the longer you ignore him, anyway.”

“Wouldn’t want to show me his substandard material.”

“Of course not. That would be embarrassing for him.”

“Mm.” Hank is just smiling back at him now, soft and fond and everything Connor loves about him, and he wishes he could kiss him. Would, if it weren’t for the sake of at least attempting to maintain a reasonable degree of professional workplace behavior.

So instead he just texts him ‘I want to kiss you’, because he knows Hank will go an even more
delightful shade of red than Reed did, and because he knows Hank will sputter before throwing himself into work because he needs the distraction and that’s good for productivity, and mostly just because he wants Hank to know.

Maybe he does already. Connor says it often enough.

But the reminder can’t hurt.

The fundraiser is about three weeks from when North gets them to agree to come, in the middle of March. Enough for them to get custom suits, about, which Connor insists on. Hank attempts to convince Connor he can just use his old one. It’s the same thing Hank wore to Cole’s funeral. Connor tells him he’s already sent in a request for a fitting to a local menswear shop. Which he has, obviously, specifically so that Hank couldn’t decline.

Hank goes with a regular black suit, predictably; he doesn’t really want to stand out. Connor’s suit is a bit more detailed—a lovely navy suit with black lapels and a black bowtie, so he can still match Hank a bit. He’s able to convince Hank to get a navy tie as well. Hank grumbles about ‘cheesy couple shit’, but he still goes pink and kisses Connor senseless the first time he sees him in his suit, so Connor thinks he probably doesn’t actually mind that much.

They dress for the fundraiser in the evening, and Connor notices Hank looking at him in a very specific way. Longing, maybe. He smiles and goes over to re-tie Hank’s tie; he’s certain he knew how to do it at one point, but now it’s come out looking rather unbalanced. “Do you actually have a suit kink?” he asks, part curious, part because it will fluster Hank.

“No! Fuck’s sake—” He coughs, averting his eyes. “No. Christ.” Then, after a few seconds, “What, do you?”

Connor steps back, looks at Hank carefully, head tilted. “I’ve never put much thought into the subject.”

“Okay. Yeah.”

“I might have to dedicate some time this evening to thinking about it, though,” he muses, looking over Hank and making sure Hank knows he’s doing it. “You look…very attractive like this.”

Hank has a very conveniently timed coughing fit. Connor has learned that in the absence of other symptoms, and after Connor says something suggestive, this usually just means Hank is trying to deflect and not that he has a cold. He flashes his brightest grin up at Hank and pats his shoulder. “We should probably get going.”

He’s about to turn, but Hank catches him and kisses him, deep and a little bit dirty, leaving Connor a bit dazed and his hair ruffled.

“Such a fuckin’ tease,” Hank mumbles, then pushes past him, blotchy flush reaching all the way to his ears. “Come on, then. I hear we’re supposed to get going.”

“I need to brush my hair again, I think,” Connor says, aware he’s a bit blue in the cheeks now as well.

Hank returns the same once-over Connor gave him earlier. “I don’t know. I think you look good like this.”

Connor blinks. Well. Something to think about later as well. “I—I—Okay.”
Hank still looks rather pleased with himself when they get into the car.

The fundraiser consists of two main parts—a silent auction and a dinner, during which a number of individuals give speeches and a live auction is conducted. It’s clear almost immediately how much work has gone into this. There’s quite a few items up for bidding—donations, mostly, from local businesses and individuals, Markus will later explain—and the venue is decorated very tastefully.

Hank looks around and whispers to Connor, “I don’t think I’m rich enough to be here.”

Connor will admit it’s somewhat fancier than he’s used to. “If they ask for our annual income, I promise to stage a diversion.”

“Act all horrified and say you just realized you forgot your caviar at home.”

“A respectable android would never be without pocket caviar at a fancy shindig,” Connor hears North from the side, voice dry. “Oh hey, it’s Elinor Dashwood and her pet bearded collie.”

“Ah, Elsa,” Hank says. “I thought you’d be too busy with the development of Frozen 19: The Frozening to grace us with your presence.”

“Hilarious as always. You’ll note I purposely didn’t put my hair in a braid today so you would sound like an idiot.”


“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She taps her heel, looking at them both. “Don’t worry, you both definitely look like the kind of distinguished gentlemen who would carry around fish eggs in your breast pocket. Come on.” She starts walking, obviously expecting them to follow.

“I think that’s more insult than compliment,” Hank murmurs as they start to walk, and Connor laughs.

“Probably a bit of both.”

“It’s both, yeah,” North says, continuing to walk. “Markus is sitting with Simon at some bigwig table, but he’ll probably be checking in with us throughout the night because he’s nervous as hell. He’s not gonna show it, though. His politician face gets better by the day. Simon’s doesn’t, though, which is hilarious because he’s probably gonna look like he has something stuck up his ass the whole time, and I don’t mean in any kind of fun way. Uhuh, Josh is at our table because he’d fucking freak if he weren’t with somebody he knew well—probably will even so, honestly. Put you with me for the same reason.”

“No confidence in our politician faces?” Connor asks.

“Connor, you have the face of a twink fetish porno star and the body of also a twink fetish porno star,” North says, ignoring Hank choking. “You don’t look like a politician. You look like a politician’s career-ruining scandal, maybe.”

“What a fascinating observation. Do you have extensive experience with twink fetish pornography, North?” Connor questions pleasantly.

“I’ve hung out with you and Hank often enough, haven’t I?” she retorts.

“It’s one of my most endearing qualities,” she says, grinning sharply over her shoulder. “Okay, so this is the dining hall. Dinner starts at 7 sharp, but probably get here earlier, these doors are a bottleneck. Until then there’s the silent auction and dancing and, you know. Socializing.” She says the last word like someone else might say the name of a particularly disgusting sex act.

“Dancing,” Connor says, lighting up. “Hank.”

“Uh,” he says. “I don’t know—”

“You’re a good dancer, Hank!”

“Dancing in the living room isn’t quite the same as—” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Do you really want to?”

They’ve been working on him making requests in therapy, but it still feels a bit wrong to say, “Yes, please.”

Hank sighs. “Yeah, okay. Dancing.”

They wave goodbye to North, who says she has ‘some shit to get operational before everything goes south and don’t you dare fucking comment on that last word’, and head to the dance floor set up a few rooms over. There are a few couples out there already; among them, swaying in the middle, are Markus and Simon.

“Oh, hello,” Markus says when he spots them, sending a quick look at Simon, then walking off the floor to meet them. Simon trails along behind him, face fixed into something that might look like a polite smile if you didn’t know what one looked like. “I’m so glad you were both able to make it.”

“Yeah, sure,” Hank says, looking quickly at Connor and taking his hand, like he’s worried his LED is going to go red. But Connor doesn’t feel the same panic he tends to feel at the thought of Simon, not right now. He just feels Hank’s hand.

“Hello, Markus. Hello, Simon,” Connor says, looking directly at Simon and smiling genuinely at him. “It’s nice to see you both.”

Simon’s smile goes less panicked and more pleased. “Hello. I hope you’ve both been…well?”

“Yes,” Connor says decisively, and he thinks he means it, too. “Yes, I believe we have been.”

Markus and Simon go back to dancing—the only time they’ll have to themselves most the night, in all likelihood—and Connor pulls Hank onto the dance floor, just towards the edges so Hank can leave if he gets uncomfortable. But Hank’s hands around his waist don’t feel uncomfortable, and he’s smiling happily. Connor winds his arms around the back of Hank’s neck and they begin to move together.

“I’m proud of you,” Hank says after a few moments. “You handled that well.”

Normally, that might make him freak out. It might make him look up to the marquee—and he knows it’s still up there, scrolling some derogatory message about how he’s not good or deserving, or about how things won’t go well for him. And he’s not under any illusions. Probably the next time he hears something like this, he will freak out. But—right now, in Hank’s arms, to the sound of violin and piano, surrounded by people who don’t know him, he doesn’t feel the need to look at it at all. He’s just happy right now.

This is one of those points on the road that Dr. Hill mentioned, he thinks to himself, and that is all it
“You know,” Connor says. “I don’t know that I think things always turn out well.”

“No?” Hank asks, not contradictory, just questioning.

“No. But I think they turn out. And—we just deal with whatever happens.”

“Deal with whatever happens,” Hank echoes, then ducks down to press a light kiss to Connor’s cheek. “I think I like that.”

When Hank says this, Connor feels two things.

The first thing, obviously, is love. Because he loves Hank in all situations and always. Loving Hank feels like—something he was created to do. Not something he was programmed to do, but just as much an eventuality as time passing or people changing. He cannot imagine his love changing, though, only growing stronger as he continues to learn more about Hank and make new memories with him, and try and fail and keep going after.

The other thing he feels is, perhaps, not an emotion so much as it is the lack thereof. It does not feel like when he was programmed to not feel anything at all, or like when he’s too numb from crying to muster anything other than a blank-eyed stare.

What he feels, he thinks, is calm. There are still problems he knows he will have to face, and—statistically—a number of bad days ahead. But this is one of the good ones, and on this good day, he feels calm and in love and happy.

It will be 18 minutes and 41 seconds before they move to the dining hall and listen to North quietly poking fun at all of the speeches.

It will be 1 hour, 52 minutes, and 21 seconds before they leave the venue and drive back home to spend the rest of the night together.

It will be 2 months, 1 week, 3 days, 13 hours, 36 minutes, and 53 seconds before CyberLife releases their first major patch to the public since the revolution, which allows androids to do something approximating sleep.

It will be 9 months, 6 days, 5 hours, 38 minutes, and 33 seconds before Hank finishes his cheesy romantic proposal to Connor, just after midnight on December 26th, because ‘he wants at least one anniversary to not be in homage to Jesus for fuck’s sake’, and it will be 9 months, 6 days, 5 hours, 38 minutes, and 33 seconds before Connor says yes and cries and hugs him and they kiss.

It will be 11 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 22 hours, 39 minutes, and 14 seconds before they get married. They both cry quite a bit. North will laugh at them, but will also be crying. Gavin will blow up a picture of them both sobbing in an unattractive way and him smirking in the corner. Connor will tell him it’s very sweet he cares enough about them to put this picture up at his office desk. Gavin will get mad and take down the picture, and they will both know he puts it in his desk drawer, and neither of them will comment on it.

It will be 6 years, 8 months, 3 weeks, 1 day, 23 hours, 47 minutes, and 19 seconds before Hank will
get his 5-year sobriety badge.

It will be 14 years, 5 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 15 hours, 27 minutes, and 48 seconds before, on an otherwise unremarkable day, the marquee quietly vanishes from Connor’s visual overlay. He will still have occasional problems with anxiety, but the marquee will never come back.

There are many other good moments on Connor’s timeline, and many other moments that aren’t quite as good, and many that are bad. He does not know about any of these moments, of course, and he does not need to. They will simply happen, and he and Hank will deal with them all, and they will not always be happy, but they will always be together to get each other through to another day and towards another hour, another minute, another second, up until they reach the next happy moment.

Which he does not know either, precisely, at this exact moment, when Hank spins him and they laugh together as Connor stumbles a bit. He does not know it precisely in the way that you know things when you are certain of them.

But he does know it in the way that he knows he wants to be here for every moment, good and bad, alongside Hank, and really, that’s close enough to the same thing for it to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

well there we are folks! they're gonna be okay, those two. and i know it'll probably sound trite and maybe a bit presumptuous, but i think all of you will be too! even if it gets hard. even if it is hard now! you're gonna keep on managing and get to one of those happy moments. me too, even :P

i just wanted to say before i go to my standard thanks: thank you to everybody who commented in particular saying they could relate to this. i really appreciate you feeling comfortable sharing that with me, and i'm really glad this could be relatable in some way (though obviously i would that nobody had to deal with mental shit). i get really stuck in my own head a lot, and it's really easy to think when that happens that, like--well sure there are other folks with problems, but not in the exact same way as me. especially since i'm autistic i worry a lot that other people experience things differently than me, and so it genuinely means a lot hearing from all of you that my brain is, as it is so very frequently, wrong. apologies again for not responding to every comment, but as i've said i do read all of them multiple times! which segues into the next bit:

thank you, to every commenter and to everybody who gave kudos and to everybody who read. you're all wonderful and i appreciate you sticking with me more than i can properly express, and i love you all! i'll mostly be writing that e-rated sequel oneshot for the legal adults up in here and then i'll be starting on my next fic, which won't focus as much on mental illness but will still have a few elements here and there. (it's gonna be a supernatural-ish au vaguely inspired by some elements of this kdrama called goblin lol...don't ask why, nothing i do makes any sense). anyway i hope to see you all on another fic sometime but most of all i hope you all have a lovely day and week and lifetime up ahead!
thank you so much for reading! my tumblr contains very little dbh content but if you wanna
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