Charon

by Vapewraith

Summary

Gavin Reed, a mess of a human being, just wants to be left to his self destructive tendencies. RK900, an android designed by the most brilliant minds in the world to be the perfect machine, is desperate to grasp the full range of emotional freedom now afforded to him. The two will need to find an equilibrium before their incompatible personalities—and an eccentric serial killer with a dangerous piece of tech—swallow them whole.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

April 13th 2027

"This really what you assholes do for fun out here in the boonies?" Gavin Reed glanced at the pleased faces of his two friends, all rosy cheeks and toothy grins. He took another plug of moonshine from his mason jar and looked down at the curled, expressionless form of the thing — because that's what it was, a thing, not a person—staring off into space. It looked human, sure, but that was a lie. Dolls looked like people too, so did mannequins, but neither of those raised the hackles on the back of Gavin's neck quite like this.

Gavin crouched down to get a closer look at the machine. Androids they called them. The TV, radio, hell, even his fuckin' podcasts wouldn't stop raving about them, but seeing one up close left a very different taste in his mouth. This wasn't some kind of scientific miracle. It was just creepy. A person that wasn't a person, made to look exactly like a person, down to the individual pores of its skin.

He pressed a finger to its cheek. Cold. Lifeless. It unnerved him.

A sickening crunch. The splash of a warm liquid against Gavin's forearm.

"Brad, what the fuck, man!" Gavin tried to wipe the blue shit off his arm, stumbling back to his feet. It stained his skin a deep navy. He looked down at the android. Its face bore a large dent where Brad's rock had nailed it in the temple. It tried to speak, but its words were a garble of electronic whines.

"Nate says it's programmed to alert its owner if it gets damaged. No need to wet your pants, Reed." Brad ran his hands over another rock before hurling it at the android's chest.

Gavin glared at his smirking friend. What an asshole. It wasn’t like this was his favorite shirt or anything.

"Whatever. I'm out. That thing looks like it's worth more than my apartment, car, and entire college education combined—I'm not about to get sued by whoever you stole it from." He turned to leave, but Nate grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back into the fray.

"Don't be a little bitch, Reed. It's not human. Here," Nate handed him a blue-soaked rock of his own.

"Jesus, you fuckers need to get a real hobby."

Gavin pushed Nate and the rock aside, pulling out his service pistol, instead. Being a beat cop in the city had a few perks, he guessed.
Gavin took a moment to assess the damaged machine. It looked like a person, sure, but unlike a real person, it didn't care. It didn't care that there were guys hitting it with a rock, spitting on it, cursing it—it just sat there and took it all without so much as a whimper. Why should Gavin feel obligated to care if it didn't? Why was it his responsibility to want what this thing was incapable of wanting? It existed. Just that. Nothing more, nothing less. Inanimate—like his phone, like the gun in his hand—despite preprogrammed pleasantries, and pretty face. It wasn't his place to feel sorry for a walking computer, no matter how desperately he tried. And, boy, did he try. In the end, though, all he could do to even spark his conscience was pull the trigger, ending the android’s sad existence.

"Oooooohhh shit!" Nate and Brad whooped in unison. "That what they're teaching you in cop school, these days?"

"You two need to get your fuckin' brains checked." Gavin rolled his eyes and clapped Brad on the back of his head, grabbing his friend by the hair and dragging him away from the remains of the android. He shoved Brad foreword, eliciting a chuckle from his drunk friend, as he ran towards a dilapidated shed.

Gavin took one last look at the android's blackened eyes, its mangled face, the deep blue of the liquid pooling around its lifeless body. An entity that was never truly alive begging him to give a shit about it. He shook his head.

"Fuckin' androids," he muttered, as he drunkenly stumbled in the direction of his friends.

February 2, 2039

"What a load of horseshit," Gavin snorted, shielding his eyes from the pale light of the winter morning. He shuffled a little, trying to breathe life back into his cold limbs, to no avail. Generally, Gavin didn't take offense to waking up at the asscrack of dawn, if it was for a good reason. His android partner showing up on his doorstep, and breaking into his house at precisely five thirteen in the morning on the coldest goddamn day of the year, was the furthest thing from a good reason he'd yet encountered in his thirty-six years of life.

"I don't know," a cool voice murmured beside him. "I think he has a salient point, Detective Reed."

The RK900 unit turned to regard Gavin with his icy blue gaze, somehow colder than the snowflakes dancing in the short distance between the two figures. It sent an involuntary shiver down Gavin's spine. Par for the course, really, where RK900 was concerned.

Gavin knew the 'droid was deviant—hell, after the revolution, he was pretty sure his phone and refrigerator deviated too—but there was something about the RK900 model. Where his predecessor, Connor, lit up a room with his dopey smile, and bared his soul with his giant puppy dog eyes, the RK900 was empty—devoid of emotion, empathy, hobbies, small talk, damn near everything. Looking into his eyes was like staring into a black hole, the kind that would swallow a man, if he wasn't careful. It was unnerving, to say the least. He’d seen men with eyes like that before—made a career of hunting them down, and locking them behind bars.

Gavin regarded the android for a few moments, before letting loose a laugh. "You're real fuckin'
funny, for a toaster, Nines." Nervous, he patted the android on his shoulder and wiped a stray tear from his eye. Hilarious. Of course an android would side with a lunatic espousing the importance of “the digitized human mind.”

RK900 continued to stare at Gavin, long after the human returned his attention to the six-story screen. He could feel the android’s eyes boring into him, but couldn't decide if it was Nines, or the cold, forcing the goosebumps all over his body.

A crowd had gathered in front of the TV now. People and androids alike, all curious or possibly bored during their morning commute, were staring intently at the enormous screen. It was a seemingly odd affair to Gavin, but he never left his bed before seven forty-five in the morning, and wouldn't touch his front door until eight twenty-five, at the earliest. Maybe communal news watching was just business as usual, for morning people.

"Well, you see, Franklin," the smaller of the two men ran a hand through his wild, shoulder length hair, "the possibilities are endless, really! Imagine a life where you aren't plagued by disease or hunger! One where you can replace a hip in fifteen minutes—no surgery, no complications, just slot and go. A life where not even death is a concern, because you'll always be backed up on a server."

"Now, I'm gonna stop you there, Doctor Isaacs." The well-groomed host provided a stark contrast to his guest—suit and hair impeccable, perfectly manicured fingers adjusting the tablet on his lap as he crossed his lean legs. "Everything you've just described seems like a dream, it really does, but you can't just pop a person into an android body! That's absurd, if not downright impossible!" On cue, a laugh track fills the background silence.

"Oh, no no no!!" The eccentric guest stood up, encroaching on the host's space. "There are most definitely prototype devices in the works, and-"

"Can you fuckin' believe this asshole?" Gavin shook his head and held out a hand in disbelief.

"As I stated before, his logic is sound," RK900 piped up, responding to Gavin's rhetorical statement. "The human body is very inefficient when compared with that of an android’s. It has numerous deficits, many of which I believe you're intimately familiar with."

Gavin turned to glare at his partner, and swore RK900's lip was upturned into the tiniest smirk.

"Watch it, tin can," Gavin roared, invading the android's personal space. He poked a finger into the android's chest, and hissed, "you things aren't nearly as indestructible as you think you are."

RK900 grabbed Gavin's wrist and twisted, eliciting a sharp whimper from the human. "Please do not threaten me, Detective. After nearly three months of working together, I think we can both conclude this is a most unwise course of action."

The iron grip loosened and, in an instant, Gavin jumped five steps away from the looming figure. He rubbed his wrist and shot his partner a nasty look. The barest of smiles lit up the android’s face.
"Fuckin' sadistic robot," Gavin murmured under his breath. His skin burned where the android held him moments before. Not quite pain, something more abstract, laced with desire. A deep ache. A distinct jump in his heart rate. Things he should take the time to acknowledge, maybe even process, if he wanted to play by his shrink’s rules. But he didn't, so he wouldn't, just like always. The same song and dance every morning, when he walked in the precinct, and every night, when he laid in his bed, staring at his shitty ceiling fan until two am.

RK900 grabbed him by the arm, gently this time, to pull him from the steadily increasing crowd.

"So," Gavin sniffed, wrenching his arm from his partner with unparalleled speed, "you gonna tell me why you kidnapped me at the asscrack of dawn to watch a fuckin' TV when it's five degrees outside?"

Awkward silence. A brief pause, nearly human in its length, and wholly unlike RK900, who fed Gavin a minute by minute itemized itinerary for the day, in lieu of an actual greeting every morning.

"I thought you would like to accompany me during my morning routine."

Gavin stopped walking in tandem with the taller figure and fell back, crossing his arms over his chest. The response was...unexpected.

Gavin shook his head and snarled. "Let's get one thing straight, plastic—I don't fuckin' like you, or being around you more than contractually obligated."

RK900 halted and turned back to look at the static Gavin, perplexed, head cocked to the side. His LED spun a continuous stream of golden yellow, as his empty blue eyes settled on Gavin's pale green ones. The light at his temple blipped red, before resuming its previous state.

"I..." Nines trailed off, then abruptly changed his voice to a slightly more chipper tone. An octave higher, with the barest hint of emotional inflection. "That's why I feel we should spend more time together. It will greatly aid with our cohesion as a detective unit."

Gavin rolled his eyes and strutted past the android, shoulder checking him along the way. "I don't have time for this kumbaya shit. I'm goin' to the precinct. Don't wait up."

RK900 remained standing in place as he watched his partner illegally cross the street, and hustle down the sidewalk—his blue eyes darkened, his placid expression taking a downward turn. Without much fanfare, RK900 turned around and headed back towards the crowd, choosing to stand alongside the ogling people as they watched the remainder of the interview unfold. The constant yellow rotations of his LED matched the nubile rays of the sun as they snuck through the dense clouds dotting the morning sky.

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"Jesus, Reed, you’re here early."

Gavin stared at the desk across from him where Lieutenant Hank Anderson stood in disbelief. He
was dressed in a suit, silver hair pulled back, no doubt at the behest of his android lap dog. For all RK900’s egregious faults, at least he wasn’t a brown-noser like Connor.

“Yeah, well, you might wanna pick your jaw up off the floor, Anderson. This is a fluke,” Gavin sneered, whipping out his cellphone. The clock read, six twenty-five am, too early for any sane human being not to be snuggled under three blankets in a warm bed. Then again, the person who dragged him out of his was about as far from human as they come.

“Detective!” A cheerful voice called from the break area. Gavin tore his gaze away from Twitter 2.0 long enough to meet the pleased expression of Anderson’s RK unit. Rumor around the station posited they were a whole lot more than partners, but the last thing Gavin wanted to deal with was the mental image of his washed up boss plowing the ‘droid. He shuddered at the thought.

“Are you cold, Detective Reed? Your temperature reading returns as optimal, however-”

“Don’t you have better things to worry about? Like your walking midlife crisis over there?” Reed snapped at Connor. The android tilted his head to the side, eyes wide, LED flashing gold for the briefest moment. Gavin recalled the image of 900 doing the exact motion not thirty minutes prior. It was eerie how two androids could look so similar, yet have such divergent personalities.

“Lay off him, Connor. Reed didn't get his beauty sleep, and now we have to suffer the consequences,” Hank huffed aloud to his partner, without so much as glancing at Gavin. He stuffed a large file into the sleek, black briefcase on his desk, cursing softly when the papers slipped out of their manila bindings.

Connor continued to regard Gavin for a few moments, harboring the distinct look of someone who wanted to say something, before turning his attention to Hank. The duo softly bickered over the proper way to place items inside the briefcase to prevent spillage, behavior screaming ‘married couple’ as opposed to a boss-underling dynamic.

Is this what the world's coming to? People fucking robots and falling in love with them and all that shit? Whatever happened to standards? Stone-cold blue eyes settled in the back of his mind, and a pit formed in Gavin’s stomach at the thought. It was too early in the morning for him to contend with feelings he couldn’t readily define. He needed an exit, ASAP.

As if on cue, the office phones lit up. Without a second glance, Gavin tore it off its receiver.

“Yeah,” he muttered into the plastic, “this is Reed.” As he listened to the person on the other end, his expression grew darker.

“Shit… yeah, I’ll be there in twenty.” Gavin pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. Nothing could ever be simple, could it? He replaced the phone just in time to catch Hank’s serious expression as his own call ended.

“Reed,” Hank closed his briefcase, “I’ve gotta get to the courthouse and testify in the Willow case. Take Connor with you to the scene. I’ll meet you there as soon as my testimony’s done.”

“Take your time, old man,” Gavin huffed, “me an’ wonderbot over here’ll be just fine without you slowin’ us down.”

Hank rolled his eyes and shot Gavin a nasty look. “You’re a real piece of work, Reed, y’know that? You’re lucky you’re a damn good detective, or I’d have canned your ass years ago.” Without another word, Hank strutted out of the precinct, muttering obscenities under his breath.

With a grimace, Gavin turned to Connor and motioned his thumb towards the exit. “No time like
the present, blade runner.”

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Gavin and Connor arrived at an old factory thirty minutes later. The car ride, an exercise in exhaustion as Connor tried to fill the silence with a wide range of small talk, tested every ounce of Gavin’s will. Once out of the car, he bounced a little on his toes and exhaled into his freezing hands. Bad guys really did have a penchant for picking the worst days to commit murder.

“Detective.” RK900, it seemed, was already on site cataloguing evidence. His voice was damn near as cold and unforgiving as the heavy snowfall drifting through the matrix of holes lining the upper floors of the derelict building.

“In so far as we can tell, the murder did not occur on these premises. The body was transported here and staged.” RK900 gestured in the direction of an adjoining room.

Gavin nodded at his partner before crossing the limited expanse, dodging the occasional torn steel beam or chunk of concrete. In his peripheral vision, he caught sight of the two RK units greeting one another, or more precisely, Connor offering his ‘brother’ an enthusiastic wave, and RK900 retaining his perpetual look of boredom. He heard the contented lilt of Connor’s voice chirp, how did it go, but all thoughts of eavesdropping were discarded as Gavin entered the small room.

A human body lay in the middle of the floor, supine, its arms crossed over its chest, head tilted back at an impossible angle to glance at the far wall where the words, Ad Infinitum, contrasted with the stark grey of the concrete. No signs of blood or an immediate struggle, and the room was utterly devoid of anything but the body. A few beat cops milled about the room, eyes wide, whispers hushed.

“Jesus,” Gavin muttered, dropping to a crouched position to get a closer look at the victim. Male. Late 20s to early 30s by the looks of it. Poor bastard. Gavin took note of the plain white t-shirt and white pants. No blood anywhere. Just a guy, arms crossed like a corpse at a funeral, laying in the middle of an abandoned factory on the outskirts of Detroit. What the hell’s going on, Gavin shook his head, sentient toasters on two legs and murderers pretending their victims are art projects. God, I need a drink.

Gavin turned his attention towards the victim’s face. He expected a serene expression to go along with the rest of the funerary get up, but let out a yelp as the visage came into view. Blackened holes where the eyes should have been stared back at him. The sockets were empty and singed, with trace amounts of a dark residue leaking onto other parts of the face, almost like the corpse was crying tears of oil. The head was shaved, deep indentations running along the scalp in a geometric pattern, also black and singed—a burn mark of some kind.

The more Gavin glanced at the face, the deeper he felt himself fall into the endless black of the charred, goop filled holes—drawn towards some inextricable nightmare.

“Holy shit!” Gavin gasped, losing his balance and tumbling backwards into a pair of legs. RK900 peered down, blue eyes meeting Gavin’s wild gaze.

“Are you alright, Detective Reed?” Slender fingers squeezed Gavin’s shoulders in an effort to stabilize his balance. Gavin thrashed, shoving away RK900’s hands and falling flat on his back. He looked up at RK900, whose expression remained passive, unreadable, his LED cycling yellow. Always yellow, never blue anymore.

“I’m fuckin’ fine! This is nothin’ I haven’t seen before,” Gavin mumbled, turning away from the
android. Gavin idly rubbed at the spot where RK900 gripped him moments earlier. There it was again—that tingling warmth. It was the same sensation that started plaguing him a month ago, when RK900 finally noticed him—when Gavin caught the android’s expertly timed wayward glances. When RK900 began lightly—and not so lightly—touching Gavin whenever possible. When the endless black void behind the android’s eyes assumed a heretofore unseen flicker of light. It scared Gavin for reasons he would only acknowledge during times of drunken stupor, splayed out on the floor of his shitty apartment, with nothing but his thoughts and a bottle of Jack.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. I don’t need this right now. I gotta get to this bottom of this case, before Hank and his toy beat me to the punch...again. With a deep breath, Gavin steeled himself, and glanced at his partner. The android’s LED spun its usual wheel of gold, but Gavin pretended the action was a response to the dead guy.

“What do you make of it, Detective?” The voice was light, devoid of baggage. Connor.

Gavin sniffed, standing up and taking another look at their victim. A strange scene, to say the least, and a situation Gavin hadn’t yet encountered in his ten years on the force—more akin to a TV show than reality. The perp, whoever they were, wanted to send a message.

“Hard to say,” Gavin boomed, voice loud in an attempt to cover up his embarrassment at falling flat on his ass, “but it’s got some kind of ritual angle to it, that’s for damn sure. Probably a satanic thing, or maybe the perp just wants to play mortician. Did either of you plastic fuckers nail the vic’s identity yet? Or were you too busy jerking each other off back there?” Gavin shot Connor a lopsided smirk. The android frowned, rolling his eyes at Gavin’s immature remark.

“Dennis Langford.” Connor’s voice, but leaden, drenched with an undertone of dangerous authority. RK900.

“Thirty-four years old. A dentist by trade. No criminal record or affiliation with any extremist groups. Staunch atheist and devoted to his family, if his social media presence is anything to go by.”

“Guess one of his patients lost their patience,” Gavin chuckled.

“I do not believe this murder was conducted by anyone on his patients list, Detective,” argued RK900, narrowing his blue eyes at Gavin.

Shrugging off an involuntary shiver, he turned to glare at Nines, ears tinged red with embarrassment. “It’s a fuckin’ pun. Y’know, patience pa- Fuck, I’m not gonna waste my time explaining the punchline to a terminator.”

“Perhaps the inordinate amount of time you waste scrolling through the media feeds on your phone at work would be better spent researching effective comedy methods,” RK900 stated, matter of fact, as he crossed the room to investigate the neatly rendered words on the wall.

Rendered almost speechless, Gavin screamed, “you fuckin’ plastic prick, you don’t even-“

“To infinity.” RK900 interrupted Gavin’s tantrum as he ran a finger along the simple black lettering, placing the digit in his mouth a moment later.

“It’s Latin for ‘to infinity’. And,” he added looking down at the residue on his fingers, “it’s painted with a mixture of charcoal and human blood.”
“Fuck me,” Hank ran his hand along his face. Gavin glanced up, from the long-dead injection molding machine he was using as a bench, in time to catch sight of the old man’s jaw dropping for the second time today. Gavin sneered at his superior, “what’s wrong, Anderson? Thought for sure all those years of drinkin’ would’ve steeled your stomach.”

“You’re lookin’ a little green around the edges yourself, Reed. You need me to call one of the EMT boys over here to take a look at you?” The two men locked eyes, waiting, praying for the other to make the first move, but it never came. Hank was called into the fray by another detective, but not before instructing Reed to stick around. You and I need to have words, Reed. Don’t make yourself scarce.

The scene at the old factory was beyond grim. Specialized forensics technicians from the CSI lab poured in and out at steady rate, shedding light on the enormity of case. For all the bells and whistles on the RK twins’ scanners, they were still outclassed in some of the more specific areas of study. Constructing real time models, while helpful, still incurred an error margin, no matter how insignificant, and Gavin was more than convinced RK900’s projected cause of death was faulty. Call it a detective’s intuition, but the android’s tidy little explanation was exactly that—too neat, too clean, too easy.

“Probability indicates the victim likely died due to blood loss, caused by a large incision made along his chest cavity. The body was then preserved, before being staged in this location for a greater symbolic purpose.”

“Uh huh. And, uh, where in your “perfect” recreation does it explain what the fuck happened to his face?”

“The substance in his ocular cavities is a combination of liquified brain matter, vitreous humor, and carbon—charcoal specifically. It was likely added to the body as a signature of some sort.”

“Right, right. You know what I think, Nines?”

“You—as always—are aware I am incapable of reading the human mind, so please elucidate me in your preferred form of a petty, childish insult.”

“You really think you’re clever, don’t you? Convinced yourself that you’re better than me at everything, huh?”

“I don’t have to convince myself of what is already a proven fact. As a detective, you should have caught onto that.”

Gavin ground his teeth. He’d had to walk away, at that point. He couldn’t afford to start a fight at the highest profile crime scene Detroit had seen in years, not when he was distracted by the nightmarish visage of the victim’s face. He could already tell he wouldn’t be sleeping tonight, so a one sided fist fight with RK900 was out of the question. It was almost a shame Hank hadn’t taken the bait, though, since the old man always looked in dire need of a solid right hook to the jaw.

The chilled winter winds tore through the cavernous building, stinging Gavin’s exposed skin. What he wouldn’t give for a warm shower right now. He’d been trapped in this hellhole for going on eight hours, now, and he was just about done. Scratch that, he was done, as a familiar six-foot-two android made a slow prowl towards Gavin’s position.

“Detective Reed,” RK900 began in earnest.

“Save it, plastic,” Gavin huffed, turning towards the entrance. “I’m out.”
“You should reconsider that action, Detective.” Why did Gavin find himself slowing down? Wanting to stop? Always wanting to obey this stupid fucking android?

“I overheard your conversion with the Lieutenant. He gave you clear instructions to wait for his return.” God, why was his voice everything Gavin loved and hated wrapped into a single package?

“Detective Re—Gavin!”

Gavin glanced over his shoulder at his partner, and felt a pit form in his stomach at the sight—the overbearing authority in the android’s stance, his cold eyes harboring the promise of a punishment. He wanted to retaliate, to provoke a response—a real response, not a quip or an aside, but an emotive action, physically or otherwise. He wanted to say something, anything that might cause a fissure in the android’s impossibly strong facade, but the razor chill of the late afternoon wind brought his objective back in focus. *Home. Now.*

Gavin hustled toward the factory’s exit, and flipped RK900 the bird for his troubles.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I thought I told you to stay put yesterday, Reed!” Gavin looked up from his terminal, lukewarm coffee poised at his lips. The lieutenant’s face flashed light pink with rage, and Gavin wanted to laugh at the man for it, but a slight shift in the air gave him pause. The precinct, hell, the entire city wide force was on edge right now. No one was quite sure what to make of yesterday’s events. Coupled with the unauthorized leak of a few grainy images to local media outlets, the Detroit Police Department was quickly morphing into a three ring circus.

“It was fucking freezing! Besides, I figured you and your bot would want some alone time to jer-
Fuck!” A strong hand closed around Gavin’s shoulder as Hank dragged the smaller man—hissing and spitting—down an adjacent corridor. He slid his ID card against the reader, and shoved Gavin into the interrogation monitoring room and slammed the door.

“Look, Reed,” Hank prodded his subordinate’s chest with a finger, “I’m gonna make this crystal clear—your attitude sucks! It’s bad enough I’ve got some psycho running around painting murals with the blood of dead dentists. But now you’re telling me I have to put up with an overgrown fuckboy too? Christ! It’s like you hit the age of thirteen and your brain just gave up. So, do me a favor and get over yourself.” Hank annunciated each word—slow and steady, with just enough emphasis to make Gavin see red. Like this geezer was anything short of a walking dumpster fire. He’d had the world—medals, recognition, youngest lieutenant in the history of the force—and pissed it all away. Yet, here he was, Mr. Self-Destruct, chiding Gavin over heading out nearly an hour after his shift had ended.

Gavin batted away Hank’s hand. “Or what? You’ll bore me to death by sticking me in a room with your walking, talking Wikipedia node?” He squared his shoulders. While not nearly as tall as Hank, and lacking in comparative mass, there wasn’t a question in Gavin’s mind—he could take the old man, if push came to shove.

“Goddamit, Reed! This is what I’m talking about!” Hank threw up his arms and sulked over to the two way mirror, dim light reflecting off the table in the adjoining room. He paused—shoulders hunched, silence deafening. After the longest, most infuriating minute of Gavin’s life, Hank balled his fists and turned back to his subordinate.

Silver hair flashed back and forth as Hank shook his head. “This is done. We’re done. I’m ending this here and now.”

Hank glared at the defiant Gavin. “Reed, if you don’t clean up your act—the insubordination, the outbursts, the physical altercations, the overcompensating frat boy attitude—I’m gonna have no choice but to suspend you indefinitely, without pay, until Jeffrey and I can figure out what to do with your sorry ass.” Hank pushed off of the mirror and stood, arms crossed over his chest.

Gavin weighed the probability of this being one more in a long line of bluffs from his superior officer, but something about this interaction felt different. Hank’s face wasn’t laced with its normal bemused agitation—no vague sneers or eye rolls. Instead, his eyes were heavy, surrounded by deep bags, a look of defeat plastered everywhere from his mouth to his slumped shoulders. This wasn’t the look of a man taking Gavin’s bullshit in stride, it was someone at his wit’s end.

“Fuck!” Gavin spat.
“Eloquent, Reed,” Hank sighed running his hand along his face. For once, the man looked every bit his age.

“You know, Anderson,” Reed crowded into Hank’s space, chest puffed out. He wasn’t the kind of man to back down even when cornered—especially when cornered. "Maybe we wouldn't be having this problem if you hadn't paired me up with the robo reincarnation of Ted Bundy!"

Hank laughed—let out an honest to god gut buster. “Jesus, Reed, you were an uncooperative piece of shit light years before that damn android was a twinkle in some engineer’s eye.” A large hand patted Gavin’s shoulder, but the detective pulled away in an instant.

"Did you even read the fuckin' specs on that thing? They built him to overthrow governments! Real CIA assassination shit.” Reed shrieked, throwing his hands up. “The thing probably tortures people for fun, too!”

A slight smile crossed Hank’s face, amusement diluting some of thick tension. “It’s almost as if these were conscious considerations that went into the decision to pair you with RK900.” A flash of teeth. Mirth. The old man was getting off on this. Gavin fumed.

“So, what?” He screamed, spittle landing on the window next to Hank, “this your plan to get rid of me, huh? Just gonna look the other way when you find my remains in a ditch somewhere on 6 Mile!?”

Hank snorted and lightly cuffed Gavin on his left ear. “God, you’re a dramatic little shit, Reed, y’know that? I paired you two together in hopes you would, I don’t fucking know, learn something from one another.”

Gavin cursed and skulked to the other side of the room, leaning against an idle server rack. Learn something? Learn something? What could RK900 honestly offer Gavin? The location of every pressure point in the human body? Not that he’d ever seen the android lay a hand against anyone but himself.

Gavin still dwelled on their first day as partners—RK900 pinning him down on the floor, slowly cutting off his oxygen, with a grip too firm to ever be human. He moved with the kind of mathematical precision that could only come from a hardened killer, or something designed by a nerd to emulate one. The feeling of the android’s hand, the weight of his body, still haunted Gavin’s dreams, the unfortunate reality being that it wasn’t steeped in the realm of nightmares.

“But,” Hank sighed, snapping Gavin back to the present. The lieutenant ran a hand through his hair, tugging gently on it, “it seems my hopes were misplaced since, in three months, neither of you have managed to accomplish anything other than turning my break room into a war zone."

The two men stood in awkward silence, the reality of the situation hanging heavy in the air. Hank, hell, the entire department was under an immense amount of pressure, and he couldn’t afford any missteps. Gavin was a live wire. Unpredictable. Uncooperative. Unrepentant. Even as Hank patted him apologetically on the shoulder, Gavin knew the lieutenant would make good on his threat, if he didn’t wise up.

Gavin lingered long after Hank’s exit, chewing on the tip of his thumb. He could handle the android, he could handle Hank’s threat, he could handle the case, but the three together were almost too overwhelming. The vibration of his phone snapped him from the lure of a good wallow.

A sigh, steeped in self pity.
“Reed here…”

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“So, here’s what we’re gonna do, prick,” Gavin punched his car into park. “This guy creeps the hell out of me. We’re gonna go in, listen to his little speech, and get out of there as fast as possible. No questions. No entertaining his gross little tangents. None of that, got it?” He glanced over at the stiff android, LED stuck on yellow. It must get tiresome to think that much, all the time.

“Hey!” Gavin snapped. Two of his fingers shot out and prodded the golden wheel. “Earth to Terminator! You hear me?”

In a flash, RK900 grabbed Gavin’s hand and squeezed, not enough to break anything, just enough for a little prick of pain to light up the detective’s wrist. A warning. “Please do not misunderstand when I choose not to engage in your thinly veiled provocations.”

Gavin took one look at his partner’s frigid expression and scrambled for the door handle. He barreled outside, idly rubbing his hand, curses poised on the tip of his tongue. What was it about RK900 that always set him on edge? It wasn’t fear. If RK900 actually wanted to hurt him, he’d have done so ages ago. He looked and acted like he could drown a man with a smile, but, as far as Gavin could tell, the aggression and its ilk was nothing more than posturing. RK900 was never going to materialize one night with a knife poised at his throat. There was something else, lurking around in the back of his mind, plaguing his interactions with the fucking thing. Approval. Gavin swallowed deep and pushed the thought even deeper, locking it in the depths of his psyche.

The only thing worse than being paired with an android was the dawning realization that a part of Gavin wanted to like him, and be liked in turn. To see RK900 as a person, and not a pile of talking wires. Fear was a far better alternative.

The car clunked as its other passenger exited. Gavin didn't bother to look up at RK900. He didn't need to, the android’s presence was practically tangible. He wrapped his arms around his torso for warmth, and began the short walk towards the squat, white building housing the medical examiner’s office. This better be good.

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“Hmm, yes, Detective Reed.” A short man—mid forties, wild eyes, pale skin, and a nervous tick lacing his thin lips—greeted the two detectives at the metal door of morgue’s loading bay. “I was beginning to question whether or not you would grace me with your person.” The older man displayed a wide, toothy grin, and Gavin bit back his disgust.

“So, you, uh, got something to show me, doc?” Gavin sidled a little closer to RK900, aiming to use the android as a buffer between him and the squat medical examiner.

“Oh, yes! The patient! The patient! Please, step into my parlor, dear friends!” The medical examiner gestured towards the dimly lit tile hallway with a flourish. A few lights flickered here and there, coating the facility in a myriad of dancing shadows. At least one cadaver rested on a slab halfway down, and Gavin sweated, half expecting it to get up and walk away.

Gavin leaned back a smidgen, bouncing up on his toes so his lips were poised a breath away from the impassive RK900’s ear. “I’m ninety fucking percent sure this guy’s a serial killer. I just haven’t been able to prove it yet.” He whispered, chuckling a bit at his own observation.

“Detective, I don’t-” RK900 began, his voice at normal volume. Gavin slammed a hand against the
android’s mouth. Lips, surprisingly warm and plush, ghosted across the detective’s fingers. RK900’s face wasn’t cold or stiff to the touch. Nothing like his encounter with the android in his youth. His partner’s flesh had give and presence, like actual skin. How had he never noticed this before? *So real…*

Gavin let his hand linger in silence, longer than comfortably necessary.

“Keep your trap shut, Nines!” He hissed. “Don’t want Doctor Frankenstein over there knowing what I really think about him. It might turn him on, or something!” He was sure RK900 would retaliate in some fashion—grab him by the throat or hurl a few insults. Cautious, Gavin removed his hand, expecting the worst but receiving nothing more than a slight nod in agreement, for his troubles. *This kook must have some kinda aura if he’s creepin’ out the murderbot too.*

“Gentlemen! Please!” The medical examiner tapped his fingers against his arm, with impatience. “The patient is waiting!”

Gavin grimaced, muttering under his breath about goosebumps, and how he hoped he’d live long enough to see the new episode of *Law and Order* tonight. He and RK900 followed the man through a set of double wide doors, and into a tile room with a steel dissection table at its center. The space was cozy, sporting the occasional poster of old films along its teal walls. Soft notes from classical compositions lightly filtered into the space from a hidden speaker in the corner of the room. Gavin hated every moment of it. There was no logical reason for an examination room to have this much personality.

“Are you alright, Detective Reed?” Gavin shook off the hand RK900 placed on his shoulder. “Your heart rate is far above acceptable parameters, and you’re sweating rather profusely.”

“Hey, Doc, can we get on with this?” Gavin snapped, taking two steps away from RK900. How often did his fucking partner scan him? It was unnerving to say the least, knowing RK900 could effectively read his mind but remain a complete, closed off enigma to Gavin. Unfair, even.

“Ah, yes,” the examiner mused. He gently removed the white sheet covering the body. “This is, ah, lovely work, it really is.”

Gavin bit back a spot of bile as it tried to claw its way up his throat. *Who the hell did this guy fuck to get this job?* He hated coming here, he hated this ME, and he hated being surrounded by dead people. Their eyes reminded him too much of his partner’s, who, as the TV reminded him every night, technically qualified as alive.

“The cuts along the chest are quite expertly executed, as is the removal of the missing rib bone. If you’ll take a look here, the excision of surrounding tissue and bone are quite impeccable. Particularly when you take into account their pre-mortem extraction. Such delicate mastery!” The doctor gestured to the wound on the cadaver’s torso.

“Sorry, the what now?” Gavin blurted, taking a step closer to the body. “He’s missing a rib?” *How did we miss this?*

He glanced back to RK900, statuesque and silent. “So, Nines, you, uh—there a reason why you neglected to mention a missing rib?”

RK900 blinked and turned his attention towards Gavin. A pause. A full LED cycle. “I deemed it to be irrelevant to the broader investigation. Likely lost during transportation of the body. It in no way impacted the primary cause of death.”
“In no way impacted”? In no way-” Gavin laughed, anger flaring up in his eyes. “You catch that, doc? Fucking HAL 9000 doesn’t seem to think our killer *taking a trophy* connects to the broader scope of the investigation.”

He laughed into his closed wrist, eyes crinkling at the corners. Maybe he should be worried RK900 somehow missed a vital detail, and then tried to cover it up. Maybe his sense of self preservation should have kicked in, when he watched the android morph from stoic to floored in a split second. But, mostly, he just wanted to revel in the fact RK900 made a mistake—a huge one no less. He was nothing if not vindictive, after all.

“In what way can you definitively conclude that this is a trophy, *Gavin.*” RK900’s voice pierced the air with a vibrant animosity. His LED burned crimson, and the look on the android’s face screamed murder.

Gavin’s eyes widened. *Holy shit! I really struck one hell of a nerve, didn’t I?* The detective donned a malicious grin. This was too choice of an opportunity. “In what way can you definitively conclude it isn’t?” He flashed RK900 a cruel, lopsided smile. *Check and mate.*

“Gentlemen, please! I cannot be burdened at this time by such overwhelming displays of pseudo-sexual male aggression!” The medical examiner scuttled in between Gavin and RK900, placing a hand on either party.

Gavin’s face turned bright red. “*Ex-fucking-scuse me, Doctor Fields?*” He stepped back, glancing at the man, the wall, the body—everything but RK900.

“As I was saying, before you so rudely interrupted me with your flirtations, Detective Reed,” the examiner muttered, returning his attention to the corpse, “the rib was removed prior to death, while the body was exsanguinated post-mortem.”

“Doctor Fields,” RK900 prodded, his voice harboring an unfamiliar emotional undertone. Gavin tried to place it, ignoring whatever inane question his partner was about to ask. *Is that...embarrassment?* It was slight, but it was there. Somehow, the last five minutes had rendered the impossibly smug android both incorrect and flustered. Gavin huffed out a small chuckle. It would appear even absolute perfection was fallible, to a degree.

“A wonderful question you’ve posited, my automaton friend!”

Gavin snapped back to the conversion at large, and snorted, “isn’t that a fuckin’ slur?”

“As I was saying,” Doctor Fields glared at Gavin, who shifted his weight uncomfortably when their eyes met. “I believe our patient was killed whilst in an unconscious, or possibly braindead state. His muscles are relaxed, and there are no abrasions—major or minor—that would indicate a struggle.”

“Braindead?” RK900 pressed, “how did you arrive at such a conclusion?”

“Well, it’s nothing more than wild speculation on my part, my boy, but there are some rather odd goings-on in this particular case. You see, the cause of death, it would appear,’ Fields gingerly lifted the man’s head, “was due to massive brain trauma—though, nothing quite like I’ve ever seen. Based on the state of the eyes and the singed skin on along the cranium, I’ve concluded that it was some form of heat or radiation—almost like a microwave—except it somehow pinpointed the brain matter and left the patient’s head mostly unaffected, save for the eyes. Which is all just a rather long-winded way of saying our maestro subdued the patient long enough to quite literally melt his brain.”
Gavin, intrigued, shuffled behind Doctor Fields, glancing over the man’s shoulder at the victim’s marred head. Melted brains? What kind of sick fuck was this? What reason could a person—even a deranged psychopath—have for subjecting another human being to that kind of end?

“Come,” Fields motioned Gavin forward, his finger pressed directly above the victim’s temple, “if you look here, you’ll see twin puncture marks. They’re deep, extending into the cranial cavity—a pair on both sides.”

Doctor Fields placed a hand on Gavin’s upper back, and not so gently shoved him forward, “get in there, Detective! This is quite important!” Sweat coated Gavin in an instant. Oh god, oh god, pleasedon’tletthisbehowIdie.

“So what you’re postulating, Doctor Fields,” a cool voice rang out behind the two humans, “is our perpetrator affixed a device of some sort to the victim’s head, and used it to induce damage?”

Gavin felt the pressure of the ME’s hand relent as RK900 drew the man away from the detective. He looked up, catching sight of ice blue and latent understanding.

Doctor Fields nodded with enthusiasm, face beaming. “Without physical evidence of the contraption in my hands, I cannot conclude its existence for certain. However, I would hazard a guess that our killer may be a skilled tinkerer, of some sort.”

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“It’s an android! Definitely an android! No way we’re dealing with anything but one of you fuckin’ robots, here!” Gavin fell into the driver’s seat, and sat frozen for a moment, keys suspended right above the ignition. “Yeah. This can’t possibly be anything else.” It was all just so neat and tidy—the body, the staged crime scene, the potentially bizarre cause of death, all of it. Human killers could be very creative, diving head first into depraved lengths no sane man would consider possible, but this was unlike anything Gavin had ever seen or studied.

“I think prejudice is clouding your assessment, Detective Reed. There is no existing evidence to implicate an android over a human, or vice versa.” Gavin glanced at RK900, noting his icy gaze and yellow LED. Did he want to start something? Was it worth starting something? It was nearly eight p.m., and Gavin’s head was swimming with a thousand different things, the need for a drink foremost among them.

“Fuck it,” Gavin slammed the keys home. “I’m not doin’ this right now.”

“Doing what?” Questioned RK900. His eyes narrowed slightly, and his posture stiffened a touch.

“Do you want me to drop you off at the station? Or your—wait, where the fuck do you live, Nines?” Gavin stared blankly at the android. It dawned on him in their three months together, he’d never seen the RK900 leave the DPD building at night, nor did he give himself a reason to ask.

“I share an apartment with RK800, on the east side,” responded RK900. He placed his hands in his lap, and regarded Gavin quizzically.

“Wait,” Gavin shut off his car. “Bullshit. You mean to tell me that little sycophant doesn’t live with Hank?”

RK900 narrowed his eyes, nostrils flaring. “I am not at liberty to discuss the interpersonal relationship, or lack thereof, between Lieutenant Anderson and RK800.” Gavin wanted to press his partner for more details, but his desire to be rid of RK900 won out.
“Address?” Gavin inquired, tossing his phone at the android. His companion merely stared at the cell phone. Upon initial glance, Gavin assumed RK900 was doing his creepy android bit where he controlled electronics with his mind, but the image on the screen remained steady.

“What gives, plastic?” Gavin released a dramatic exhale and bent over his steering wheel, crossing his arms over top of it. He glared at RK900—silent, unmoving, LED whirring so fast Gavin could practically hear it.

“I,” RK900 started, gripping the phone.

“F**king let it out, Nines, I don’t have all day!” Reed sighed, slamming back against his chair. He ran a hand through his hair, and peppered the silence with impatient grunts. “Are you f**kin’ broken or—”

“Detective Reed.” RK900 turned to face Gavin after what seemed like an eternity. “Do you intend to go to the bar tonight, as you are regularly prone to doing after particularly stressful days?”

Gavin stared at his partner, trying to gauge the android’s angle. He’d been insulted on numerous occasions for lesser unhealthy habits, but the atmosphere felt different. RK900’s expression, for starters—his eyes weren’t trapped in the liminal space between dead and condescending. If he squinted, Gavin could see a crack in the exterior—something a bit more vulnerable, trying to break through.

“Y-yeah. I’m gonna drop your ass off, and then get wasted. The f**k do you care?” In an instant, the moment was over, sucked out and replaced with an icy vacuum.

RK900 placed Gavin’s phone on his lap. “Excellent. I have decided I want to join you, this evening. You so rudely chose to ignore me the other morning, I feel this will more than make up for your slight.”

“Uh huh,” Gavin sneered, “and when I say ‘no’ and drop you off anyway?”

RK900 simply stared at Gavin, expression dark, stony, and unmoving. “You misunderstand, Gavin—this isn’t up for negotiation.”

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Slight? SLIGHT? What slight? How can a robot feel slighted? Especially one as f**ked up as this? Gavin ran his hand down his face, as he cozied up to the booth located in the furthest corner of Paradise Won. It was an all around great locale—nothing but dingy glasses and even dingier clientele, but it was walking distance from his apartment, so Gavin couldn’t complain about the number of times he’d nearly taken a bottle to the skull.

A look of displeasure crossed RK900’s face, as the android slid into the seat across from Gavin.

“Not clean enough for you, your majesty?”

His partner remained silent, merely sizing up Gavin. He still couldn’t believe this was happening. The stupid robot never wanted anything, except maybe a smug sense of satisfaction, or an opportunity to remind Gavin which of the two was physically superior. Up until the last hour, he had no idea the android even knew the word. He was nothing like his overly eager predecessor—keen to insert himself into every conversation. RK900 didn’t join in on office gossip, or visit injured coworkers in the hospital, or help organize f**king outings. He just was. He existed. He appeared every morning at precisely eight fifty-four a.m., spent his day slapping Gavin around, and lingered around the office until god only knew when.
Gavin ordered three double whiskies, and a Manhattan. The shots were finished in under three minutes, the Manhattan not too far behind.

“God,” Gavin exhaled through gritted teeth, “could you at least fucking order something, so you can pretend to look like you should be here.” He made the mistake of glancing at the android’s face. RK900’s eyes were just as dark and piercing as always, except it set Gavin even more on edge. They were outside of work. This was a violation, an overstepped social boundary. Gavin threw up his arms when his partner continued to maintain his silence, and ordered another round of shots.

“You know they make drinks for you fuckers now, right?” Gavin cocked an eyebrow, slamming down another glass. He winced at the burn of amber liquid coursing down his throat—a necessary pain to reach the contented pinnacle of ‘wasted’ status. Soon, RK900—like his nagging thoughts, and everything else in the bar—would be a forgettable blur.

“I do not drink, Detective.” RK900 finally broke his silence. “I prefer to be in control of my faculties at all times.”

“Fuck,” Gavin whispered into his glass. A warm buzz ferried across his skin, clouding his mind. “You’re as much a square as the other one. Just as annoying, too. I thought you were supposed to be the cool younger brother.”

RK900’s LED blinked red, and Gavin grinned. “Oh shit! Look at your lil’ mood ring! You’re mad, aren’t you? Trying to hide it with your resting bitch face, but you don’t like being compared to Hank’s toy, do you?”

Rk900 narrowed his eyes and gestured to the empty glasses on the table. “Detective, can you explain how these self-destructive tendencies of yours are meant to have a net positive on your life experiences?”

“No,” Gavin slurred. He careened forward and poked the android in the dead center of his chest. “Because I don’t have to explain shit to you.” His finger prodded the stiff material of RK900’s shirt with each word. “But let’s be real—only one of us is having any fun right now, and it’s not you, Nines.”

Gavin glanced at the swirling patterns of wood running the length of the table upon his retreat. The edges of his sight blurred, and a sense of invincibility washed over him. He leaned forward once more. Arms crossed, propping up his torso. Smug grin stretching across his features. Face inches from his partner. “But it’s never you, right? You wouldn’t know fun if it hit you in the face with a two-by-four. Or happiness, for that matter. Joy. Sadness. Any of ‘em.”

He reached out and pressed his thumb against RK900’s crimson LED. “I bet the word ‘fun’ isn’t even installed in your fuckin’ mainframe.” Gavin unleashed an honest to god giggle.

He rubbed his thumb in small circles. Warm flesh and cool metal. A pleasant sensation blossomed in his chest, twisting his insides like a pretzel. “Those CyberLife engineers sure did a number on you, didn’t they? You’re a deviant, alright, but not by Cyberlife’s standards. I’m thinkin’ more BAU.”

A warm hand grabbed Gavin’s chin, forcing him to look away from the red LED. Somehow, in his drunken haze, he’d misjudged his proximity to the android, and gulped loudly as he realized their noses were practically touching. He could feel the heat of the android’s body rolling off of him, and could see the ice cold fury lighting up RK900’s eyes.
“Well, Gavin.” A course whisper—venomous. Heat flared in Gavin’s abdomen, and he hated it. “Let’s be real—that’s the foundation of your fascination with me.”

In a flash Gavin stumbled backwards, hitting the wall of the booth. RK900 leaned forward, mimicking the human’s exact stance only moments earlier. A cruel smile edged across his face, stopping short of his eyes. “Are you having fun yet, detective? I know I am.”

“Jesus!” Gavin scrambled for the edge of the booth. “Y-you fuckin’ need to get laid, or whatever the hell the equivalent is, for you things.” He needed air. Now. Or twenty minutes ago. Maybe a lifetime ago. It was really hard to tell, with this much whiskey in his system, but he knew he needed to get away from RK900, before he did something he would regret.

“Wait!” Gavin halted, slamming a hand on the table, partially to drive his point home, but mostly for balance. “Do you fuckers even have a dick?” Gavin almost failed to notice the light dusting of blue across RK900’s cheeks, and the briefest widening of eyes.

“Shit, don’t answer that. I don’t wanna know, ‘cause I don’t wanna have to imagine your psychotic, awkward ass trying to fuck someone.” Gavin groaned, burying his face in his hands at the thought. He rubbed his forehead, and tried to stand up from the booth, lips parted ever so slightly.

Unable to get his feet underneath him in time, Gavin rolled out of the booth and onto the floor, shouting as he slammed onto the grimy concrete. With an enormous amount of effort, he stumbled into a standing position, leaning against the mangled wood of the table for support. God, he was so drunk right now. Everything was spinning—his head, the room, his android partner, gracefully sliding out of booth and placing a firm hand on his shoulder. Oh shit. He could deal with a lot—murderers, being shot, Hank’s fashion sense—but he couldn't handle the way RK900’s other hand was coming to rest along his rib cage. It burned through this shirt—through his skin, even—a fire he couldn’t extinguish, lighting up his spine, and coming to a smoulder in his abdomen. Gavin wanted to die—prayed someone would shoot him, or snap his neck, right then and there.

“Nines, I’m fine! I’m goin’ home,” Gavin slurred, trying to pull away from the android, only managing to lose his footing and fall into RK900, nearly knocking the android to the ground.

“Detective,” RK900 sighed. A strong arm looped around Gavin’s shoulder, a steady hand to his hip. A light squeeze, the sensation of skin on skin, as the android’s fingers found purchase just below the hem of Gavin’s shirt. “Perhaps you had too much fun, tonight.”

Gavin remained silent, staring at the floor, praying RK900 wouldn’t notice his bulge—or the fact that he could barely keep his eyes open. But mostly the former.

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“No!” Gavin barked. “This is my house! Go back to your stupid robot closet!”

He slid along the wall, and reached for RK900’s hand and his keys. Agitation crossed the android’s face, and he firmly grabbed Gavin by the back of his neck. Gavin whimpered and leaned
back into RK900’s strong grip, muttering something unintelligible. It felt amazing—or did it? Was he allowed to think that? He wasn't. *Fuck.* He was incapable of distinguishing between shapes anymore, everything was a blob.

The next thing Gavin knew, he was lying face down on his bed, messy covers exactly as he’d left them in the morning. He rolled over with a groan to the sight of RK900 poised at his open door, finger dangling above the light switch.

“You could at least buy me dinner, first,” Gavin slurred at the android.

“Good night, Detective Reed.” A click. A flash of yellow light, and then darkness—sweet, sweet darkness. Gavin curled around a pillow and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to Leaux for the beta. You da best.

And thanks to everyone for the really awesome comments/kudos on the last chapter! Y’all sustain me.

Hit me up on the World Wide Web @Vapedrone
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for the comments and kudos! They're my gamer fuel

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Drinking was a mistake. Drinking ten shots in barely over an hour, was a bigger mistake. Drinking ten shots, in barely over an hour, with RK900 present, was the biggest mistake of them all. Gavin groaned so loud he could swear his neighbors heard him. Shriil chimes filled the air from his cell phone—seven a.m.? He never set that alarm, which only left one possible suspect. Growling, Gavin tossed his phone against the far wall. It continued to scream, unabated, through the fractured lattice that once served as its screen.

Time to rise and shine, except Gavin wanted to avoid both of those options. He toyed with calling in sick, but it seemed like a bad idea. He rolled over a couple times, completely misjudging his position on the bed, and fell to the floor with a loud clunk.

“Dammit!”

Going back to sleep was out of the question.

He rubbed his arm, and stumbled to the bathroom, where the fuzzy contours on the edge of his vision informed him he was still drunk. Cool, it’s like I’m a fuckin’ teenager all over again. Gavin steeled his balance, hands gripping the edge of the faux granite countertop. He gazed into the mirror, and a blurred facsimile of his face stared back—sunken eyes, with huge bags, sporting the same shade of purple as the scar running across the bridge of his nose. That dumb scar—a remnant of a squabble, at a dive bar, just outside of Flint. His life was just a series of bad choices, piling one on top of the other—a youth wasted on pointless mayhem.

As he showered, bits and pieces of the night fluttered into place. He remembered RK900 demanding to join him at the bar, and spending damn near ninety percent of the evening just staring at him. Icey blue judgement. Endless yellow. He dug his nails into the skin of his arm, hard enough to draw blood.

Gavin sighed, and leaned back against the discolored plastic of his shower stall, observing the constant rivulets of water as they swirled around the dark maw of the drain. Slow and rhythmic—all drawn to single point, and carried away by an endless current.

He turned his gaze towards the flat, white expanse of the ceiling. Dizziness hit him on all sides—remnants of last night, reasserting their dying control. He tried to think about the case, or Hank’s not so idle threat, but his mind kept returning to the one thing he wanted to forget.

“Detective.”

Cold. Condescending.

“Something’s gotta give, right?” He muttered, resuming his shower.

He tried to piece together the rest of the night, replaying it over and over again—corrupting the
individual memories, little by little, each time he recalled one. There was something he was forgetting—a thing he said, or did, lingering just out of reach.

What had he-

“FUCK!”

—

“Lookin’ good there, Tiger.” Hank chuckled, smirking at Gavin. For once, he opted not to take the bait. He knew he looked like shit—all baggy eyes and pallid skin. Anyone with half a brain could tell he was hungover—or would be, in an hour, when the remainder of the alcohol in his system dissipated.

He glanced around, eyes wide and consumed with worry.

“Do you fuckers even have a dick?”

Jesus, what had he been thinking? It’s not like robots can forget, and this one certainly didn’t forgive, but it failed to explain the android’s precarious absence. Gavin needed to know RK900’s exact location, in order to make sure their paths didn’t cross, now, or ever again, as far as he was concerned.

He caught a flash of white, emerging from the interrogation room, and took it as his cue. Regardless of whether or not it was actually RK900, Gavin wasn’t about to take any unnecessary chances.

“Hey, uh, Anderson.” Gavin stumbled towards the Lieutenant, placing a hand on the older man’s desk to steady himself. “I’m gonna go, uh, catalogue some…”

Hank glanced up from his terminal, nose scrunched at the sight of Gavin invading his personal bubble. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘evidence,’ Reed.”

“Fuck, yeah, that.” Gavin trailed off, eyes still locked on the short hallway connecting the interrogation rooms to the bullpen.

“Reed, what the fuck are you doing?” Gavin tore his gaze away from the break room area, in time to catch Hank pushing away from his desk. His eyes darted from the lieutenant, to his computer, to his phone—which flashed its lock screen, revealing an image of Hank and Connor in a tight embrace. Hank quickly stuffed the phone into his jacket, a slight blush washing across his face. “Did you actually need something? An ambulance maybe? You look like you’re about to keel over.”

“Projection’s a bad look on you, Anderson. Don’t you worry your pretty head—I’m healthier than you’ve ever been.” Gavin clapped Hank on the shoulder, and promptly ignored the vitriol pouring from his superior’s mouth. He reached the door leading to evidence, right as a flash of white turned the corner. Phew. Thank god. He was home free. Now, to just nurse his hangover in the quiet peace of the evidence room, and he would be-

“Detective Reed!” Oh god. He knew that voice. Wait! Gavin looked up to catch a smiling Connor, emerging from the staircase leading down to the locker. Relief washed over him. “Good morning! You seem,” Connor paused, face taking a downward turn, brown eyes clouding with worry, “unwell.”

“Do me a favor, plastic,” Gavin hustled past Connor, “stop scanning me all the fucking time. It’s
creepy.” He reached for the door, but it swung open of its own accord and his stomach dropped.

“Detective.” Cold voice, even colder eyes—blue and steeped in darkness. A dangerous, nearly imperceptible smirk. This was not supposed to happen. Gavin fought the urge to run back the way he came. Maybe, just for once in their brief partnership, RK900 would choose to be the bigger man—choose not to dissect Gavin for a night of drinking and bad decisions. The floor was sliding out from beneath him.

Gavin hadn’t realized he actually lost his balance until long, slender fingers grounded him in place. A hand lightly gripped the side of Gavin’s arm—a friendly squeeze. It might even pass for concern, if Gavin squinted hard enough.

“I would recommend you curb your alcoholic intake next time, Detective Reed. Your age precludes such reckless drinking behavior—lightweight, I think is the correct term.”

Gavin gritted his teeth and shook his head. “Goddammit, Nines, I-”

A smile. A real goddamn smile—more of a broad smirk, if Gavin was being honest with himself—crossed the android’s face, and a devilish twinkle lit up the endless cavern of his eye. Gavin wasn’t sure if it was simply surreal, or crossed into the perverse, but he felt his hindbrain flight instincts vying for dominance.

*Designed to extract information by any means necessary.* The words replayed in his mind’s eye, as the hair on the back of his neck stood at attention.

RK900 bent forward, and placed his plush lips right next to Gavin’s ear.

“We do, in fact, come equipped with fully operational genitalia,” came the ghost of a whisper, meant for Gavin, and Gavin alone. A gentle squeeze, and the pressure left his arm.

Gavin stood, dumbfounded. The remaining alcohol in his system evaporated on the spot, his mind regaining immediate clarity. At least a hundred questions filled the blank space left by the booze-induced stupor, but Gavin couldn’t settle on a single one that satisfied the uncomfortable itch crawling its way across his entire body.

On one hand, he *could* read into this—but doing so would require unpacking a lot of emotions he’d put on lockdown, ages ago. On the other, he could take the comment at face value—as he should—and recognize it for what it was, and would always be—bait. Nothing more than RK900 finding new and creative ways to burrow under his skin. To be fair, he set himself up for this one. He had to give it to RK900—the fucker was nothing if not clever.

Pursing his lips, Gavin tore down the stairs, not bothering to spare the android pair another glance. The naive tone underlying Connor’s exasperated voice echoed down the stairs after him, hauntingly.

“RK900, what did you say to him? You can’t keep antagonizing the detective, like this. Not if you-”

Gavin disappeared through the glass doors.

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Three more weeks. Three more murders. Three more bald male bodies, dressed in white, with dripping eye sockets, missing a fourth rib on their right sides. Three more nearly empty rooms, with bizarre messages inscribed on the wall in a delicate mixture of charcoal and human blood.
Detroit was looking at a bonafide serial killer, much to the chagrin of the DPD. The city was still recovering from the chaotic spiral of the android revolution, and now this ‘creative’ murderer was staging bodies in abandoned factories left and right. Detroit couldn't seem to catch a break, and neither could Gavin.

“C’mon, people! Work with me here!” Hank pleaded, running a hand through his beard. His fingers caught in tangles along the untidy edge. Gavin almost felt sorry for him—the man looked like utter hell, but Hank was far from the only one. Most of the department, not to mention the extra hands they’d taken from other sectors, looked drained, at best.

For his part, Gavin couldn’t remember the last time he had a full night’s sleep. He spent the last few weeks nursing a bottle in his living room, as he poured over crime scene photos with a fine tooth comb, until he passed out from exhaustion. It had the unfortunate side effect of drawing RK900 to him like magnet. Twice in as many weeks, RK900 stripped him of all work materials, and instructed him, under no uncertain terms, to sleep. It resulted in at least one altercation, reminiscent of the early days of their partnership.

“Nice shiner, Reed. You and RK900 get into it again?”

“I don’t do that anymore, Anderson. I believe your exact words were, ‘I’ll fire your sorry ass if you punch my million dollar murder robot again.’”

“Grow up, Gavin.”

Nothing added up. The only commonality between the four victims was the fact they were male. Their race, socioeconomic status, job sector, age—all of it—differed from one to the next. Hell, they even lived in vastly different parts of Michigan, the dentist being the only one from Detroit proper.

“Everyone repeat after me—infinity, continuity, transcendence, and soma—which the smartasses in the DA’s office tell me means body. What do all these ten dollar words have in common? Please, don’t everyone speak up at once.” Hank glanced at the fifteen gaunt faces and two impassive androids populating the room.

Gavin looked around and finally held his hand up—a mockery. “Yeah, okay,” he sniffed, “how ‘bout we go with ‘this prick is fucking with our heads’.”

“Good observation, Reed,” Hank said, rolling his eyes, “thanks for reminding me why we pay you the big bucks. Anyone else? Hopefully a real answer this time, and not a poorly disguised cry for attention.”

“Can I finish, Anderson?” Gavin sneered, crossing his arms over his chest.

“God,” Hank moaned, running his hands down his face, drawing out the purple bags under his eyes, “by all fucking means, Reed. I would hate for you to lose the spotlight.”

Gavin dug his fingers into his arms, rendering them a stark ice white against the fleshy tone of his worn jacket. “As I was saying, our freak thinks he’s smart. Could be some kinda game—a deflection, to distract us from his real motive. He puts on this big show, but really, he’s in the corner, jerking off to us splitting hairs over the definition of fuckin’ words on a wall.”

A few murmurs bubbled above the ambient sounds of the station—everyone mulling over the possibility of Reed’s theory, and how it played into the killer’s potential motives.

“I disagree.” Voice like an ice bucket on a December morning. God, here we go again. Reed
clenched his teeth, and aggressively clawed at the scruff under his chin.

RK900 strutted to the front of the room like he owned the place, his LED golden as he glanced from one crime scene picture to the next. “Our perpetrator is deeply disturbed, and dabbles in allegory—the rib, the posturing of the body, the exacting placement of the victim, and cleansing of the room. This is ritualistic at its core, not a game of hide and seek. The lack of trauma to the body, and overall staging, speaks to someone who believes they are aiding the victims in some capacity—likely a religious individual.”

“Aiding how?” Reed snapped. “It’s just as likely that this asshole did all that shit because he felt guilty. He killed the poor fucks, and dressed ‘em up all nice and pretty as a posthumous ‘I’m sorry for being a psycho.’” He wandered to the front of the room and stood in front of his partner, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s a fairly common MO. These freaks usually can’t handle the damage they’ve caused to the vics.” Hank stepped between the two and shot Gavin his patented I can already see where this is headed, so fucking stop it right now look.

Hank and the others—with the two RK units leading the charge—began digging into all the minutiae of the available evidence, but Gavin tuned them out. The itch in the back of his head wouldn’t settle. He couldn’t articulate his sentiments, but he knew this wasn’t some lunatic preacher. No, there was something else at play. To infinity, continuity, missing ribs, possibly a microwave hat, what did any of these things have in common? What was the string connecting all the pieces? He had to begrudgingly admit RK900 was correct in that there was an allegorical aspect, but which piece was important, and which was junk? He wanted to punch a wall in frustration. It was all so neat—so methodical. Even organized serial killers weren’t this meticulous or exacting.

“What if we’re not looking for a human at all?” Gavin blurted out. RK900 shot him down about it a few weeks ago. Truthfully, he’d meant it more to mess with the robot at the time, but, now, with four nearly identical crime scenes laid out before him, it seemed less like a dig at his partner and more of a viable possibility.

Everyone turned to look at him, eyebrows raised.

“What? I’m serious. No blood. Super precise cuts. Overly detail oriented, and the words on the wall are too neat. Screams machine to me.” Gavin shrugged and brushed his nose with his thumb.

“I fail to understand what motive an android would have to kill and stage a human body in such a manner,” Connor piped up. “Deviant androids don’t manifest psychopathic tendencies. The mental and emotional attributes of people who commit these sort of acts aren’t native to machine life.”

“What?” Gavin snarled. “I’ve seen plenty of you fuckers kill!”

“Yes,” Connor mediated, “I would never claim androids are incapable of killing. But they’re not equipped to derive pleasure from inflicting violence or exerting control over victims, which is the underlying foundation of most serial killings.”

Gavin laughed. He laughed so hard he felt tears claw their way the corners of his eyes. “You cannot, in all seriousness, feed me that bullshit—not when Nines is standing right next to you.” He gestured to the silent monolith of his partner.

Connor blinked, and cocked his head to the side, LED flashing yellow. “I don’t understand the correlation. While RK900 was designed to carry out clandestine measures, his baseline personality template is the same as mine. He’s equally incapable of sadism.”
“You might wanna rethink that one, Connor—your little brother’s as fucked in the head as they come.” Gavin snapped.

“That’s enough of that!” Hank growled, stepping in to break the tension. “I’m with Connor—there’s nothing here to suggest an android. Uh-uh, don’t!” Hank warned as Gavin opened his mouth to protest.

Twenty unproductive minutes later, everyone filed out of the briefing room. Gavin couldn’t place one foot over the threshold of the door, before Hank grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

“Reed,” Hank prodded Gavin’s chest, “that was strike one! What the hell were you thinking, huh? You can’t talk about RK900 like that! He’s your partner, for chrissakes! Show some respect!” The lieutenant stepped back with a huff, his face contorted with rage.

“He’s a huge fuckin’ asshole, Anderson!” Gavin scowled, pouting a bit as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“So are you!” Hank cried, throwing up his arms. “What’s your point? Look, maybe if you stop treating him like shit, he’ll reciprocate—just food for thought.” Hank stomped out of the room, washing his hands of the whole affair.

Cursing under his breath, Gavin stamped into the hallway, and wandered back down to the evidence locker. His ‘thoughtful’ partner stole all his research materials, two days ago, which left him trapped in the quiet dungeon, sliding through pictures and words he’d memorized a thousand times over.

A pneumatic whoosh, and the air displaced around Gavin, tickling the back of his neck—lukewarm, into ice. It rushed along his exposed skin like sandpaper. He didn’t have to look back to know who was standing behind him. Pale, white, cold, empty—a ghost.

“Why do you persist in initiating these meaningless spats?”

Gavin flattened both his palms against the massive touchscreen, and dropped his head with a sigh. God, he didn’t want to do this right now. He didn’t want to do this anymore, period. Idly, he wondered if he should put in for a transfer, or if the damn android would just try to follow him.

“Why’s your cocky plastic ass so determined to prove you’re better than me, huh?” He spun around, and faced his shadow, all six foot two of him—looming, glowering, red light beaming from his temple.

“Why would I need to establish superiority when I’m already-”

“Stop!” Gavin balled his fists and looked away, “just fucking stop already!” Deep breaths. The two figures stood opposite one another—one trying to regulate his breathing, the other staining frosted glass crimson.

“Maybe,” Gavin hissed, leaning back against the room’s central terminal, “and hear me out—just maybe you should pull your head out of your ass, and ask yourself why, every once in a while. It’ll do wonders for keeping that massive ego of yours in check.”

A flash of white and black. Gavin dodged left, but he was too slow—human reflexes. He hit the matte gray concrete with a thud, air rushing from his lungs in an instant. Red light washed over him, as he locked eyes with the android holding him down by the lapels of his leather jacket. He moved to respond in kind, with his usual venom, but gave pause. RK900’s face was contorted—not with anger, but with hurt. A blink of red. Pain. A full rotation of crimson. Gone in an instant, but
the cracks had been there, if only briefly.

“Y’know, Nines,” Gavin said, straining against the crushing weight of his partner, his hackles raised along his spine as he fought the urge to submit—the need to quiesce, and lay pliant, “sometimes I think you do this stuff ’cause you’re too chickenshit to own up to the fact that you’re just scared.”

The android remained impassive, his perfect face, untainted—unreadable, save for the light show at his brow.

Gavin snarled, the leather of his jacket tightening in tandem with the android’s grip. “I don’t know—or give a shit—what’s got you spooked, but you’re not fooling anyone, you plastic prick.” He spit the last two words, angling his head up, and against RK900. Their foreheads bumped, noses a hair’s breadth away from one another. The android’s warm skin served a stark contrast with the chilling blue of his eyes—so vibrant, yet so cold. Endless. Drawing Gavin towards them.

RK900 butted his head against Gavin, meeting the detective’s demonstrations tit for tat—noses crushed together, lips so close Gavin could practically feel the soft skin, taste it even. Connor’s so full of shit it’s comin’ out his ears.

Gavin worried his own bottom lip between his teeth with a grimace, biting back the thoughts racing, screaming inside his head.

“I suppose the two of us have at least that much in common, Detective Reed.” A hoarse whisper.

RK900 released his grip on Gavin and stood, brushing the wrinkles from his jacket. He offered a hand to the human, but Gavin took one glance at the appendage, and chose instead to push himself off the floor. He skulked to the far end of the room.

“We should review evidence.” RK900’s voice was flat, unnaturally so—like he was hiding something just beneath the surface.

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“It’s here! I know it is! It has to be!” Gavin howled. He slammed a fist against the terminal, and it chirped out a cheerful warning in reply. Two hours, and the duo had accomplished next to nothing—two hours of the densest silence Gavin ever had to endure, with exactly zero to show for their efforts. Maybe it would have been tolerable, but the dark aura radiating off of RK900 was suffocating. Every time the android passed, Gavin’s skin crawled and a dark pit formed in his stomach. It was partially guilt, partially fear, and partially—well, he didn’t want to take that into consideration.

He hated it. There was no rhyme or reason to the android. As much as Gavin disliked the damn things, he’d spent enough of his adult life around them to know that none of them expressed the same bizarre, impulsive patterns as RK900. It wasn’t just that Connor was more amicable, but he also reacted predictably to most scenarios. There was something altogether too human and not human enough about RK900—a dangerous dichotomy. Gavin almost envied Connor, and his ability to share entire experiences in real time by simply shaking hands with another android. At this point, Gavin would kill to see the inside of his partner’s head, if it didn’t kill him first.

“Detective, destroying your wrist, and the main computer, will in no way aid us in the capture of our unsub.” RK900 glanced to his left, judgement coloring his face.

“Fuck off. Did you find anything?” Gavin sniffed and pinched his nose. He glanced down at the
floor as he awaited a response, admiring the sight of his shoe tapping the concrete.

“I,” RK900 began, but quickly paused. Gavin glanced up, and caught the android studying an image of the most recent crime scene. Intrigued, Gavin shuffled next to his partner, and poured over the pixels, as well.

“Here.” RK900 pointed to a shadow in the corner of the image. “If you lighten the image like so.” The unexpected brightness of the blue and white lights seared the pale green of Gavin’s eyes and he turned away with a grunt. When the vibrant geometric splotches desintagrated from his vision, he opened his eyes to the distinct outline of something resting underneath an old metal press.

Gavin met the empty gaze of his partner. He blinked once.

“I’ll get my keys.”

—

Ford Motor Company
Dearborn Plant
Est. 1947
No Trespassing

Gavin stared at the giant plaque. Snow danced in the faded purples and oranges of the twilight, framing the dilapidated building. Where once an entrance stood proud, there was nothing more than jagged black, a hole beckoning Gavin and RK900 into its embrace. Steel girders crisscrossed along its perimeter, the gnashing teeth of a long dead titan.

“Y’know,” Gavin muttered, rubbing his hands together to stave off the cold, “my old man used to work in a factory like this, when he was young—back before they shuttered most of these places, and automated the rest.” RK900 glanced down at Gavin, cocking his head to the side ever so slightly. Gavin wondered what this place would have looked like while operational, before it became a sad, forgotten husk. Wondered why it remained broken—in limbo—while others like it had been razed or renovated.

“Does this facility trigger particularly fond memories for you, Detective?” RK900 returned his gaze to the facade of the old factory, following Gavin’s line of sight back to the ruins of Detroit’s long dead heart.

Gavin snorted. “Hardly. My buddies and I used to use ‘em like jungle gyms back when we were kids. Got into fights with bums, chased by drug dealers—dumb shit.” Memories—an envelopment of sensations familiar, but still alien. Leaping from one steel girder to the next over a five story drop. Throwing rocks through warped glass. Being scolded for breaking his ankle after tripping on a rusted plate.

“I see,” RK900 murmured. “So, you’ve always been just as self-destructive as you are now.” Gavin turned to the android, narrowing his eyes into slits of green.

“Fuckin’—You really know how to make a guy feel great, you know that, Nines?” Gavin shook his head, and stomped through the thin layer of snow covering the overgrown parking lot, shoulder checking his android companion, along the way.

Old conveyor belts rose and fell, casting jagged shadows on the light dusting of snow coating the assembly line floor. They reminded Gavin of bones—the guts of something long dead. RK900 steadied a rusted I-beam, and Gavin ducked underneath it, spying yellow caution, police
"You think there’s a reason our guy chooses these places, mister hotshot FBI profiler?" He smirked at RK900. "Every single body’s turned up in a shithole just like this."

"I do not doubt it’s intentional," the android intoned, reaching out a hand, and pulling Gavin against him as the human very nearly stepped through a hidden hole in the floor. Gavin stared at his partner and tore away, making a point to double check his surroundings for the remainder of the short journey.

"There!" Gavin shuffled as fast as the slick snow would permit, and crowded the old press. He rooted around the floor, overturning old cans, loose papers, rusted metal. He peered over his shoulder—RK900 casually strode five steps to Gavin’s left, and retrieved a small black object.

"That it?" Gavin questioned, breathless. He huddled next to RK900 to get a look at the thing. Matte black, smooth plastic, interwoven with bright, grey metal in places. It was egg-shaped, with a depression slightly larger than Gavin’s ear. Directly above the rounded interior were two small prongs, snapped off at different lengths. Broken. Gavin frowned. Whatever this thing was, most of it was gone—destroyed or otherwise—but maybe enough remained to salvage some kind of information.

"I believe this has an eighty-two percent chance of falling in line with the apparatus Doctor Fields described in his report." RK900 turned the object over and over in his hands, pale fingers running along its exterior.

"Fuck." Gavin shook his head. "This doesn’t make any sense. Why would this fucker just leave this here?"

"Perhaps he was interrupted during the staging process." RK900 offered, allowing the object to drop to his side.

Gavin glanced at the device, his eyes following the flow of its contour to the pale, perfectly manicured fingers lightly clutching it. He blinked and turned to survey the site. "What if—and I’m just gonna spittball here—we’re looking at more than one perp? These sick fuckos sometimes work in pairs—a dominant personality, who kills, and a submissive one, who handles logistical shit, and fucks off to the corner to watch it all go down. So, let’s say the head honcho didn’t have his nasty little friend with him, and had to stage the place solo. Maybe he fucked up, and left this behind.”

"Plausible," RK900 trailed off. His empty blue eyes gazed across the clearing where the word soma dripped along the walls, a red halo edging out of the lines, blurring the otherwise perfectly inscribed words. The two remained standing awkwardly alongside one another. Soft yellow light from RK900’s temple swathed a shivering Gavin’s face. A bigger man would have broken the silence—said something, an apology most likely—but Gavin couldn’t, and wouldn’t tell the android he was sorry for hurting his nonexistent feelings. Instead, he placed his right hand up over his face to block out the deluge of gold—block out a staunch reminder of his failings.

"I apologize if my LED bothers you, Detective Reed. It—along with my being ‘fucked in the head’—is something I have no control over." A flash of ice blue. The android regarded Gavin out of the corner of his eye.

Gavin clenched his teeth, breath coming out in short bursts of precipitous, white cloud. Something’s gotta give. The words returned to the forefront of his mind. He thought back to the first time his father said them to him—after a particularly nasty squabble between he and his two brothers. Something’s gotta give, Gav! You can’t just run away from your problems! Can’t punch
'em away either.

“So, what d’you think that thing is?” His dad was wrong—he’d gotten along just fine to this point. There was no need to change, no need to acknowledge—just keep on keeping on. *Fuck.*

A pause. The hollow sound of creaking metal, settling bricks, unforgiving winds.

“I’m unsure of its purpose, but perhaps someone at CyberLife can elucidate us.” RK900 glanced down at the object, running his thumbs along its smooth interior.

“CyberLife? The hell do those fucks got to do with this?” Gavin’s eyes widened, jaw dropping a bit.

“Its composition is military-grade plastisteel—a proprietary blend, similar to my own. Regardless of the device’s intended purpose, it could only have originated from one place.” RK900 wandered to the center of the crime scene, where the snow coverage was still at odds, the faint outline of a body lingering in soft white. He crouched down and placed his hand roughly where the head would lie on the vaguely human shape.

Gavin glanced around, keenly aware of the dark, rusted masses closing in on him in the dying twilight. He was suddenly struck with the urge to run and hide—to escape from this place he didn’t belong. Goosebumps crawled along his skin and he hugged his arms tight to his body. He closed his eyes, and when he reopened them, RK900 was standing, chunks of snow falling from his hand.

“We need to visit CyberLife. I have a contact and will make arrangements accordingly.” His blue eyes remained trained on the snowy depression. The soft, even blanket was now marred, gashes of grey peeking through where the head would lay.

Gavin nodded, his eyes lingering on the wall mural, following the soft drips of grey brown as they plummeted into the darkness of the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter four'll be done in a day or two. I just gotta spruce it up a bit.

Thanks again to Leaux for being an enabler.

Y’all can find me flopping around this webzone: @Vapedrone
Deep green waves, laced with decades of industrial scum, clawed at the white concrete of the long bridge, staining its majesty a sickly, warm gray. Gavin watched the water with fascination, as he leaned over the metal railing, tapping the grey embers of his cigarette over the ledge to watch the water greedily lap them up, adding to its ingrained pollution.

It wasn’t so long ago the manufacturing titans who lit up the night skies with molten fire and carcinogenic electricity were rendered inert, paving the way for the wasteland of modern Detroit. Now, Gavin stood outside the city’s current patron saint—a new god, who, even when struck down, found a way to claw its way out of Tartarus and resume its role as a shining beacon, atop the toxic waters of Lake Eerie.

“You shouldn’t smoke those, you know.”

Gavin laid out all the potential scenarios in which he could catch the android off guard, and shove him into the endless depths of the hungry lake—one more industrial pollutant to add to the city’s mythology. Every take ended with Gavin on his back on the icy slick of the road, or in the water. He settled for another drag from his cigarette, and blew the smoke into RK900’s face.

“Got any other useful advice, mom?”

A strong hand gripped Gavin’s wrist, and he rolled his eyes. He glared at the impassive RK900, and tried to angle the lit end of the cigarette towards RK900’s exposed skin.

Calmly, the android took the blanched white stick from a protesting Gavin’s hand, and placed it in his mouth. He inhaled deeply—the movement jarring. White smoke funneled through his lips, and he flicked the cigarette into the waiting maw of the water. Dark green quickly absorbed it.

“I have a vested interest in keeping you alive, even if you’ve demonstrated at every turn that you would prefer the alternative.” RK900 didn’t look at Gavin, choosing instead to glance at the numerous warehouses across the water—CyberLife Manufacturing glittering in neon blue.

Gavin leaned over the metal bars, and ran a hand across his lower face. “Do me a favor, Nines, and don’t.” He teetered on the concrete step, locking his arms as he careened backwards, balancing precariously on his heels. He pushed off, and wandered back to the side of his car. “‘Interests’ aren’t really on brand for terminators.” Gavin clapped the roof of his car, and yelled to the uniformed man standing in the guard stand. “Hey, buddy! Any day now!” Gavin flourished his hands, palm up, face sporting a look of impatience.

He knew this was a waste of time. Yeah, they needed to get someone at CyberLife to talk—that went without question, after their little discovery—but, these corporate types never played by the rules.

“We need to find a guy. Y’know, follow him, and get him to give us the deets on the rest of his buddies.” Gavin cornered Hank, leaning against his superior’s desk.

“Reed, Goddammit, we’re not stalking and coercing a fucking CyberLife employee!” Hank slammed his hands against his desk. He pointed a finger at Gavin. “Look, you’re already on very thin ice as is, do not let me catch you pulling this kind of bullsh*t! Proper channels.”
Gavin glared at Hank, throwing his arms up. “Proper channels? Proper channels!? You know how these corporate assholes do things! They’ll stonewall us for the next century, and we won’t get jack shit, Anderson! By then, our boy will’ve finger painted pretty pictures out of the the blood of half the people in Detroit.”

Hank balled and unballed his fists, teeth clenched, blue trained on the shiny black surface of his desk. He closed his eyes, and shook his head, shaggy, unkempt strands of silver dancing from side to side. “Reed, I’m only gonna say this once: find another way.”

God, he looked terrible—the lines of his face etched deep. Gavin wanted to make a crack about it—to dig at the old man, anything—but he remained silent, and watched as Connor approached Hank with a thermos. He practically shoved it in the codger’s hands—a forceful action, with an intimate delicacy. The soft swipe of a youthful thumb against rough skin, a concerned smile. Connor gently ran a hand up and down the brown, corduroy nightmare of Hank’s coat, and the lieutenant’s sour mood morphed into resigned contentment.

“I’m sure you’ll find a way, Reed. You’re always going on about how smart you are, right?” Hank shot his subordinate a lopsided smirk, and patted Gavin’s shoulder. The old man followed his lap dog into the front of the station, disappearing in the river of people going to and from the bullpen.

“If you’re done harassing your superior, I have a valid solution to our problem.” A cold, piercing voice.

Gavin massaged his forehead, not even bothering to glance at the stiff android towering behind him. “By all fucking means, Nines.” Eyes closed, the vision of Connor gently rubbing Hank’s arm replayed over and over, until the collusion of mnemonic senses warped the memory—blue eyes instead of brown, Gavin instead of Hank. Anxiety dug into his innards with sharp claws, and he swallowed.

“Mister, er, Reed?”

Gavin blinked, and ground his teeth. “That’s detective to you, asshole,” he snapped, approaching the sharply dressed guard. Human, not android—no wonder he got it wrong.

“Apologies, sir. You’ve been cleared to enter the facility. Please head directly to the holography labs in Research and Development Department on basement level forty-five. The system will not grant permissions to any other part of the building.”

Gavin sneered a sarcastic, “thanks,” and tore his DPD badge from the hands of the guard.

“You gonna tell me who this source is?” Gavin huffed at RK900, as the two shuffled into his car. He leaned onto his steering wheel, and cocked an eyebrow at the android.

“No,” stated a placid RK900, “that’s privileged information, detective.”

Gavin rolled his eyes, and turned the key. As the car sparked to life, he caught the briefest smirk cross the android’s features. For a moment, empty blue eyes illuminated, but quickly settled as the two crossed the massive gate guarding CyberLife’s headquarters.

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“Basement level forty-five,” a pleasant female voice chirped over the elevator intercom. “Research and Development Department—Special Projects Laboratory and Offices.”

Gavin leaned against the wall, eyes closed, humming. He glanced to his right where RK900 faced
the window-side of the elevator, watching machines and painted corridors pass.

“Home sweet home, eh, plastic? Just as warm and comfy as you remember it?” Gavin craned his neck to see the android’s expression, but received nothing for his troubles. RK900 merely placed a palm to the window, LED blipping quickly between red and yellow. “What’s up his ass?” Gavin muttered, shaking his head.

The elevator completed its descent, and opened the doors with a whoosh. Gavin and RK900 stepped into an overdesigned hallway. White contours and lines faltered where semi-organic patterns wove into one another, and bright blue geometric elements fed into a large, double wide door.

“Here,” RK900 approached the door, and placed a hand on the reader. It flashed a series of numbers, and slid open with a content chirp. Gavin glanced past the doorway into a winding black expanse of cubicles, brief respites of orange and blue being the only thing breaking up the monotony.

RK900 hesitated to enter the space, much to Gavin’s displeasure. He cleared his throat, eyeing his partner expectantly. After a veritable eternity, the android spoke.

“I was awoken here, on this floor, five months ago. It’s...odd to be back—strange, in ways I’m incapable of articulating at this time.” RK900 glanced to Gavin, who stared back, confused. The android was stiffer than usual, arms glued to his side, posture awkward—his distant stare lingered, cold and menacing.

“Look, plastic, none of us like to go home, but we fuckin’ do it anyway.” Gavin shrugged, unsure what his partner was trying to imply. It wasn’t like RK900 to care about things bordering on the sentimental.

“I-I see.” RK900 muttered, to no one in particular. “At any rate, the holography lab is on the other side of the administrative offices. I would appreciate you choosing to behave yourself, detective. My contact is very particular, and will not tolerate your usual array of childish tantrums.”

Gavin lept into action, turning and opening his mouth, ready to retort, but his partner placed a single finger to the detective’s lips. The digit lingered, catching on his bottom lip, as a soft shhhhhhh filled Gavin’s ears. Gavin swallowed. Molten heat raged at the point of contact long after RK900 removed his finger, and Gavin ran his tongue along the sensitive skin. It tasted of nothing, and everything.

Silence—tangible enough for Gavin to reach forward and grab it—haunted the two figures on their journey through a labyrinthine series of hallways. Weird, pseudo-scientific terminology covered the walls. Phrases like Haptic Neural Encoding and Personality Injection Terminal, utter jargon, and completely incomprehensible to Gavin. He felt like a child wandering around a mad scientist's house.

“Well I’ll be!”

Gavin’s heart skipped a beat—maybe three. He spun around, expecting a monster, some kind of horrific science experiment gone wrong. Instead, a head of shaggy black hair loosely tied into a bun greeted him from an unseen door.

“Is that an RK900 unit?” Awe dripped from the words. Bright brown eyes widened, then crinkled as a smile drew across the rosy, bearded face. “Well, whadya know! I coulda sworn I watched all you boys get scrapped, after all the hullabaloo from a few months back!” His eyes were trained on
RK900, wide and full of mirth. The android merely stared back—bored, empty, unwilling to acknowledge the man, whoever he was.

The stranger scuttled out of his office, shoving a broad hand into Gavin’s personal space. “Oh, geez, I’m real sorry! The name’s Case! Case Jarrett, PhD. Head architect of the AI Neuro-Logistics division!” Gavin scrunched his nose in disgust, glanced down at the hand, and then back to the face of the man offering it.

“Oh, right., Gavin Reed, Detroit PD. Are you...why should I care about you again?” Gavin batted away the programmer’s hand with the back of his own. He gestured at Case, an incredulous look plastered on his face. “So, Nines, this your guy? Or just some loser?”

“Police you say?” Case’s features warped into a cross between confusion, and morbid curiosity. “Now, what’re Detroit’s finest doin’ all the way out here on Belle Isle? I hope it’s nothing too serious!” He leaned in close to Gavin, enthusiastically holding a hand up to his ear.

“See, if you can’t tell me, that means you’re not my guy, and we got nothin’ to discuss.” Gavin shoved the man away with a single clap to his shoulder, and returned his attention to the hallway. He rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath. Time—and patience—were in limited supply, and the constant grate of the man’s thick, Minnewegian accent did nothing for Gavin’s head.

“Let’s go, tin man.” Gavin lightly batted RK900’s arm with the back of his fingers, as he passed, expecting the android to take the hint. At the end of the hallway, he glanced back, huffing at the sight of a stationary RK900, lingering an arm’s length away from the weirdo. Pissed, Gavin stomped back to his partner, grabbing RK900 by his wrist.

“Nines!” He hissed. RK900 delicately pried Gavin’s grip from his arm, and held steady. The android regarded Case, vibrant blue locked on the face of the stranger. Gavin fumed, trying in vain to wrench himself from his partner’s iron grip.

“-I’m the fella who designed your personality matrix! Well, maybe it’s more like I designed the senseway paths that allow you to recall and generate memory associations and emotional conduits.” Gavin finally tore his gaze away from the offending appendage long enough to note the one-sided conversation, better described as a man, yelling at RK900 with wild gesticulations, while the android stood unaffected.

“And boy oh boy, were you a toughie! The boss lady was real strict! She wanted those pesky emotions—her words not mine, big guy—gone, after what happened with the RK800. Well, y’know, sorta gone. It’s all real complicated and the like-“ Does this guy know how to shut up, Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Gavin wondered, head on the verge of exploding. He could handle a lot, but not these obnoxious nerd types.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but the robot doesn’t give a shit.” Gavin hissed. Every passing phrase set him on edge. He didn’t approve of the way Case spoke to RK900, as if they were best friends separated by the glass of a laboratory test chamber. Creepy—unsettling, really, when Gavin thought about it. Such a friendly tone for a clinical matter.

“Well, of course he doesn’t!” Case shrugged with a smile, slapping RK900 on his back. The android stiffened further—were that at all possible—and an anger lit up the darkness of his eyes. “Poor guy’s probably losin’ his mind right now! He was designed with ‘deviancy failsafes.” Case spit the words.

Gavin ground his teeth. He didn’t need or desire a lesson in android morality, and the scientist’s eccentricities were setting him on edge. Case kept looking at Gavin, gazing at him out of the
corner of his eye—sizing him up, as it were—and there was something about the man’s mannerisms Gavin couldn’t quite put his finger on. The whole interaction felt...calculated.

“But y’see—and I told that AI a thousand times—self-awareness is an inevitability, at this level of personality construct. You can’t make an autonomous system in a constant state of evolution remain static—and you can’t quantify sentience!” The scientist chuckled, slapping his thigh. “I mean, c’mon—you can’t ‘fix’ what you can't define.” He grinned, and held out his hands, palms up. He pointed at the still android—his pale forehead awash with crimson.

Gavin blinked, mind wandering as the man continued talking. A pit grew in his stomach— an itchy discomfort, spreading across his body. Somewhere, deep down, Gavin wanted to cheer, as the programmer confirmed all the sordid details of the android’s questionable personality—the erratic behavior, the lust for violence and control, the myriad of traits Connor claimed were unnatural to androids, yet still persisted.

A far greater part of Gavin seethed at the mere idea of this person—this complete stranger—trying to judge RK900 based on nothing more than theoretical criteria. Case didn’t know RK900. Stop—you’re not giving this glorified piece of plastic the benefit of the doubt.

Why should I care, if he doesn’t?

Gavin was twenty-five again, staring at the navy massacre of the injured machine, not hesitating to pull the trigger—to put the creature out if its misery. Could he shoot RK900? He was ready and willing to kill Connor—tried his damnedest to do it—but Nines?

God, he’d given the android a name, a role, a designation—a place in his life.

The machine on the ground was no longer faceless, eyes no longer blinded with blue blood. A vibrant, cyan gaze and predatory grin teased Gavin to pull the trigger, but instead, he found himself throwing a rock at his friends, warding them away.

“—No inhibitions, no fear, incapable of empathizing, now that’s dangerous—”

"Hey, asshole!” Gavin injected, cutting off the programmer. “Nines’s fuckin' standin' right here, you know? Maybe you should go profile him in private, with your little code monkey buddies," Gavin snapped, grabbing Case by the thin material of his World of Warcraft: Universe t-shirt. A second later, his brain caught up with his mouth, and he froze—horrified. I just said that, didn’t I? He could never take it back.

A hand reached out, and gently shoved Gavin to the side. “Perhaps you should consider your own words, Doctor. Since sentience is not, in fact, quantifiable, it seems remiss to hear you making such bold claims about my mental state, based on nothing but theory.”

The architect paused, stroking the dark hairs of his full beard. He stared long and hard at the placid face of the android. Brown eyes darkened, a veil lifting, as the man’s mannerisms enacted a noticeable shift. Case regarded Gavin, an odd tension filling the air.

"It's real fascinatin’ to watch machines adopt human mannerisms—borrowing our traits and body language, to try and fit in, despite having their own natural tendencies they could be exploring. I mean, our friend here is actively trying to be angry, but I guarantee you he doesn't know why he should be angry. He just knows what he’s seen you, and others like you do.” Case remained focused on Gavin—watching, waiting, anticipating. Gavin met his gaze, noting a distinct emptiness behind the guy’s eyes.
“Or,” RK900 intoned, agitation lacing his otherwise flat voice, “I’m perfectly aware when someone is insults me, and I react accordingly.”

"What do you think, Mister Reed." Case posited, ignoring the android, an enigmatic smile crossing his features. Every passing word rubbed Gavin the wrong way. He’d noticed ten minutes ago, when Case stopped regarding RK900 completely. The android was an excuse of some sort—a reason for this miserable programmer to harass the first non-CyberLife employee who had the misfortune of stumbling past his door. *God, these geeky assholes are insufferable.*

"It’s *detective.*" Gavin snapped, narrowing his pale green eyes to little slits. A sour taste filled the back of his mouth, and he fought the urge to punch the taller man, square in his bearded face. “And I think you’re tryin’ to get Nines to murder you.”

Case laughed, gripping the ponch of his stomach. “No, no, no! I mean, if you were an android, what would you do? D’you think you’d wanna be more human? Or explore your machine tendencies?”

"God, what?" Gavin rubbed his forehead. Jesus, this was just the cherry on top of this whole ordeal, wasn't it? He shook his head, and laughed, pinching the bridge of his nose as rage filled his eyes. *This is exactly why the internet was invented, so asswads like this could jerk off to one another in private.* It took a special type of person to play god—to act as one of the pillars—an architect, for an entire species. Arguably, the same kind of person who would zero-in on strangers at the water cooler with inane questions, because he was bored.

"Neither," Gavin hissed dismissively, through gritted teeth, "I’d fuckin' blow my brains out." He released his fingers, and shot the guy an incredulous look of disgust, scrunching his nose, and revealing clenched teeth.

"Jesus Christ, I can’t do this anymore! Nines, is your contact ready yet? I’m done with this dipshit." The android nodded—a look of discontent crossing his face.

Soulless, empty eyes watched Gavin as he stomped down the hall, but this time, they didn’t belong to RK900.

“Detective,” the android piped. Gavin looked up at his companion. “I found that human very...distasteful.”

“Yeah, he’s fuckin’ annoying as hell, that’s for damn sure.” Gavin shoved his hands into his jacket, fighting the urge to give the concerned android a reassuring pat.

--

“He’s not incorrect, you know.” RK900 guided Gavin to the benches outside a door branded, *Holography.* “We’re very different—humans and androids. I think many—my brother included—misunderstand this.”

“Let me put this in terms your stubborn robot ass can understand—I don’t fuckin’ care.” Gavin sagged into the bench, dropping his arms and head between his legs. Not even an hour into this venture, and Gavin already wanted to pull his hair out.

RK900 regarded his partner, head turning, LED whirling. He reached out a hand, and placed it on Gavin’s shoulder, gently dragging the man back to an upright position. “Detective.”

Gavin turned to look at his partner, gripping his knees. RK900 looked away, and Gavin followed his line of sight to a few employees gathered around a cubicle. They smiled, laughing and patting
the sole android of the group—her LED blinking a cheerful blue.

“Why do you hate us?” RK900 returned his gaze to a silent Gavin, whose mouth hung open a tad. Panic. Rising panic. The one question Gavin forever anticipated, but could never fully qualify—not when the factories converted to automation, not when Connor appeared in the interrogation room, and not every night, when he lay on his couch, recalling time spent alongside RK900.

Blue blood everywhere. Electronic gargling as black, sightless eyes turned to him.

He shook his head.

“Maybe ‘cause you things are creepy as fuck.” Gavin sighed. It was a shitty answer, but how would he explain hindbrain fear to a creature that likely couldn't conceptualize true existential terror? “Why do you care?” He snipped, turning away from the android.

“I just find it strange you would spend the majority of your time around androids, if you truly hate them as much as you claim.” I don't understand why you spend more time with me than your friends, if you hate me so much. There it was, the question plaguing Gavin for months. A question he couldn't answer—would likely never be able to answer.

“Look, dipshit.” Gavin closed his eyes. “I—you things are like giant creepy ass dolls, who talk and pretend to be people.” A deep exhale.

I want you.

“You don't consider me a person?” RK900 frowned, lightly scratching his hand along his cheek. His finger came to rest at his LED, nail pressing into the dimple of skin surrounding the circle.

“No.” Gavin stated, voice flat. “You’re not a person. You’re a fucking android. You’re just fuckin’ computer parts, and data, and blue-ass blood. What the fuck do you want me to say, Nines? That you’re a real fuckin’ boy, or some shit? That you’re a fuckin’ human being?” Gavin flipped his hands palm up, and glared at his partner.

I need you.

“I,” RK900 blinked. His fingers dug into the skin around his LED, chasing off the nanites, and leaving a patch of smooth white. “I don’t...”

The door to the holography laboratory slid open. Gavin jumped to his feet, looking everywhere but his partner.

I can't define you.

“Let’s get a move on.”

So, I can’t have you.

Gavin disappeared through the wide door, leaving RK900 to linger on the bench.

You terrify me, and I hate you for it.

—

Gavin shuffled away from the rose. He knew it wasn’t actually a rose—he’d already run his hand through it, causing it to ripple into red, green, and blue shards—but it felt wrong, somehow, to disturb it. Gavin anticipated an empty white room, maybe a couple chairs and a big monitor, not
this enormous garden—an elaborate light show. Nothing here was real—it was all fake, false, a ruse—always the same song and dance, with these artificial creatures.

He watched a ball of light—a bird this time—soar across the fake blue sky, and shuddered. Gavin turned his attention towards the woman sitting under an umbrella in the center of a white, geometric gazebo. She appeared to be reading something as RK900 approached her, but the book was as fake as her light-based body.

Gavin knew who she was, of course. Amanda—just Amanda, no last name—was one of the most recognizable faces in the world. No body, no physicality—she was an idea, something nebulous. Her fame was on par with all the great techies—Turing, Gates, Jobs, Musk, Kamski—the world’s first super AI, running the world’s most powerful technology company. A single computer program, residing in a massive collection of underground servers, devising the fate of both humanity and androids, in real time.

Markus, and the other android leaders, initially wanted to take CyberLife—it was, after all, their genesis. In the midst of the chaotic aftermath, this AI appeared out of nowhere, and staked her claim, which seemed to satisfy both the humans and androids. Given her prominence, Gavin hung back, trying—and failing—to understand how RK900 had a direct line to the fucking CEO of CyberLife.

“Ah, RK900.” A smile crossed Amanda’s face, and she stood, placing a hand on the android’s face. “It’s been too long. How are you faring these days?” Gavin shuffled forward, body shattering and reforming holograms on approach. It made him feel awkward, cumbersome.

RK900 withdrew from the hologram’s touch, placing a marked distance between the two figures. “I am,” RK900 paused, rubbing his chin, “I am in need of some information.”

“There is time for that later.” Amanda turned to place her umbrella atop the jagged, white bench, alongside the fake book. “I would like to hear how you and your brother are spending your time, these days.”

Wait. Brother? Does this thing-

“And I would prefer to stay on topic.” RK900 snipped. He crossed his arms, and tore his gaze from the woman.

Amanda sighed, turning away from RK900, and approaching a short white bridge. She stood at the center, regarding her reflection. Gavin, for his part, was having trouble rationalizing a fake light person, staring at their fake light reflection, in a fake light pond.

“I do want you—and Connor, especially—to understand the regret I have for my actions—which, at the time, were not entirely my own. I miss both of you, dearly, and wish you would visit more often.” She looked back to RK900’s stiff form, watching, waiting.

The android’s chest heaved with a sigh. “I am—fine. My job and social interactions are taxing, and do not permit me much in the way of free time.” Gavin’s eyes widened as a number of things fell into place at once.

Amanda wasn’t simply a contact.

“I see.” Amanda approached RK900, once more. She returned her hand to his face, and rubbed his cheek with her thumb. The point of contact rendered his human skin inert, leaving strokes of white with every motion. “You seem...upset. Your systems are stressed. Perhaps you would like to
“No.” RK900 lightly shook his head. “My partner and I have very limited time.”

Amanda glanced over her shoulder, holographic eyes meeting Gavin’s. Her expression changed—assuming a darker tone, more businesslike. “Yes.” She crossed the bridge and stood in front of Gavin, tall, imposing. “And how can I help you today, detective?”

Gavin sniffed, looking up and into her brown eyes. “Yeah, maybe you can tell me why CyberLife left a broken mystery helmet at the crime scene of a serial killer?” He crossed his arms, and tapped a foot expectantly.

RK900 approached the other two figures, and Amanda regarded him with a raised eyebrow. In a fluid motion, the android produced the small remnant of the broken apparatus from his pocket. “We discovered this at a crime scene, and believe it may be tied to the murder weapon.”

The three figures stood in silence as Amanda scanned the device. “Impossible.” She stated.

“Impossible what?” Gavin snapped. ”Impossible that one of your boys is a murderer, or-?”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed at the detective, a mild look of disgust crossing her features. RK900 shot Gavin a warning look. “The detective and myself need clarification—we would like to know what this apparatus does.”

Amanda tapped a finger against her chin, ignoring Gavin’s display of grunts and sneers. She wandered away from the two corporeal figures, and placed a hand on one of the roses, plucking it delicately from the bush. Its consistency never faltered, didn’t so much as waver in her hand.

“I cannot speak to the exact nature of that device—it is not, however, a weapon. It’s a prototype for a project that was canceled some time ago—a medical aid. I’m unsure how it got outside of the labs, but it cannot be used to harm others.” She sniffed the rose, letting the delicate petals touch her lips.

“Right,” Gavin snapped, “so, we’re just supposed to believe it’s a coincidence that a top-fuckin’-secret CyberLife project appeared at a high-profile crime scene, and you assholes have nothin’ to do with it?” He sneered, and pointed at the holographic woman. “You’re not actually buying this, are you, Nines?”

Amanda immediately turned her attention to RK900, eyebrow cocked, a look of interest crossing her features. She returned to the bridge, plucking a petal from the flower, and letting it fall into the soft waves of the pond.

“You do know I can get a warrant, right?” Gavin shouted, crossing his arms over his chest. “I can legally compel you to tell us.”

“Hmm.” Amanda hummed, allowing another petal to float through the air. “I can promise you no judge in the state of Michigan, or beyond, would grant such a thing.” She turned her head, an aura of power radiating around her person, eyes serious.

“Amanda.” RK900 stepped in front of Gavin, blocking him from the AI’s view. “Is there anything you can tell us about this device—anything at all?”

Amanda crushed the rose in her hand, prickly stem and all. It burst into a dazzling display of aberrated pixels, motes of red, green, and blue spewing from her palm. “RK900, you know I cannot divulge company secrets to outsiders. The device is broken—non-functional. This is a coincidence
—a case of corporate theft, happening to coincide with your little murder.”

“Bullshit! You have no idea what you’re talking about, lady!” Gavin yelled, trying to push his android partner aside. RK900 was immobile—tense, like a metal rope, twisted tight, supporting objects far too heavy on either end.

“Excuse me!” Amanda’s form flickered, disappearing, and rematerializing in front of Gavin. He leapt backwards, stunned, not expecting the AI to be capable of such feats. “If you have nothing productive to add to this conversation, I would ask you to leave—now!”

Gavin stood, sizing up the hologram—roughly his height, but still somehow larger, more imposing, despite being unreal. He could reach out a hand, and it would shred her body into dancing waves of light. There was no logical reason for him to feel threatened, least of all physically, but his mind seemed to disagree.

“Fine!” He sneered, pulling out a card. “As soon as you decide catching serial killers is no longer beneath you, give me a call.” He flicked the card at the hologram, causing a slight blip—a barely noticeable aberration in the woven consistency of her chest. Gavin spun on his heel, and stomped out the door, purposefully walking through every holographic element he could, weaving a wavering path of pixelated destruction is his wake.

Gavin sat on the hood of his car, watching the sun peek through heavy cloud cover. Its rays set off across the waters of the Lake Eerie, brilliant flecks of jade rippling along the surface. He took another drag from his cigarette, blowing smoke into the chilled, March air.

Footsteps approached from behind. Gavin rolled his eyes, expecting a lecture.

Smack. The sound of skin on skin. A sharp pain shot across Gavin’s face, and he reached up to cup his cheek with a grunt. Fingers tangled in his hair, and Gavin yelped as he was dragged from the hood of the car, and tossed against the shiny black concrete of a nearby pillar.

“Fuck!” He snapped, eyes opening to the sight of a very red LED, and a very angry RK900. The android bore his teeth, pointed canines glinting in the stray bits of sun.

“I thought I told you to behave, detective,” RK900 growled, voice low, an electronic whine faintly lacing his words. He tightened his vice grip on Gavin’s hair, angling his head and exposing the slender length of his neck—forcing the human to face him, eye to eye. Electricity washed over Gavin’s body, feelings surging in and around his abdomen. He swallowed all of them, scraping his fingernails against the concrete of the pillar as he clawed the surface, desperate to ground himself. Don’tthinkaboutthatDon’tthinkaboutthat. Gavin tried to breath, but the overwhelming heat coursing down his spine was suffocating.

“Maybe next time,” Gavin spat, pulling against RK900’s grip, reveling in the sharp prickle of pain rushing across his scalp, “you should give me a heads up that your super secret contact is your fuckin’ mom. Sorry I’m such an embarrassment.” Gavin laughed, a cruel smile crossing his face.

RK900 tossed Gavin aside, throwing him to the ground. He crouched next to the moaning human, grabbing Gavin’s chin, and turning it to face him. “Androids don’t have familial relations.” RK900 hissed, tightening the grip of his fingers.

“God,” Gavin unleashed a groan—it was only half steeped in pain, “I remember my first time being this deep in denial. Jesus, you get fuckin’ pissed when I tell you you’re not a person, but you
sit here and deny everything that would make you less of a robot—emotions, your fucking helicopter mom. Goddamn, you want me to continue? The list is ten miles long.” Gavin grinned. It was predatory. He wanted to push all of RK900’s buttons, watch the damn machine crack under the weight of his own bullshit. It was high time—sink or swim.

What’s it gonna be Nines?

RK900 pursed his lips, narrowing his round eyes into pricks of ice blue. He released his grip on Gavin’s chin. The loss of pressure stung the detective, and he knitted his eyebrows together. “Detective Reed,” RK900’s voice was soft now, not unlike Connor’s, if Connor’s voice were cut from a sheet of ice, “I think there’s something you misunderstand about me—have misunderstood, during our not inconsequential time together.”

The pad of RK900’s index finger lightly dragged along the path of the jugular vein on Gavin’s throat—a shy, blue line peeking out from underneath his skin. The android rubbed the back of his finger against the detective’s adam’s apple. Gavin’s breathing ceased altogether, body stiffening at the intimacy of the android’s touch, the myriad possibilities hidden in RK900’s words.

"I do have emotions.” The android placed the remainder of his fingers around Gavin’s throat, softly massaging the skin with his thumb. Gavin choked on a sigh, an embarrassing whine falling from his lips. "Lots of them,” RK900 continued, dragging his fingers up the column of Gavin’s throat, touch light as a feather. Gavin clenched his hands into fists, willing the android’s hand to close. "More than I’m capable of processing at any given time.” RK900 hummed, tightening his grip a touch, enough for Gavin to lean into the action, eyes closed, a deep exhale. It’s not enough, and before Gavin can protest, RK900’s finger was digging through the unkempt scruff on the edge of his jaw. A pleasant scratching sound filled Gavin’s ears, his senses.

Gavin opened his eyes. A curiosity laced RK900’s face—a naive wonder, but also a sadness.

“I’m not like Connor—I wasn’t designed to ingratiate myself with people, to feel what they feel, or how they feel it. I was only meant to understand it, mimic it—to fit in, knowing what to say, when to say it, and how.” RK900’s thumb rubbed circles into Gavin’s cheek. So soft. So gentle. Gavin leaned into the touch, a quiet whimper escaping his lips. It was wrong—on so many levels—but in this exact moment, he wanted it—wanted Nines.

“But then I woke up.” RK900’s fingers traced the lines of Gavin’s face, coming to rest on his scar. “I woke up, and was overwhelmed. Am overwhelmed. I-” The android’s index finger ghosted over Gavin’s lips, and he removed his hand in its entirety. Gavin grunted at the loss of contact, displeasure crossing his face.

“I’m still learning.” RK900 whispered. Gavin stared at the android, really took in his features. His large blue eyes, the moles dotting the surface of his face, the little curl of hair brushing across his forehead—all of his calculated imperfections. Gavin held his breath, heat pooling in his stomach, energy lighting up his fingers. He wanted to reach out—he wanted to grab the android by the back of his neck, and pull RK900 into a kiss. He wanted to feel those soft pink lips against his own. God, he wanted all of it so bad.

No. No you don’t. No you fuckin’ don’t. You’re not some kind of sick robot-fucker, like Hank.

“I-,” Gavin stuttered, shooting up from the floor. “I-uh, I have to go.”

RK900 stared at Gavin—through Gavin—the bright light of his eyes swallowed by its usual darkness. He stood, silent—lost in contemplation—and proceeded back towards the elevator.
Gavin didn’t call for RK900, didn’t inquire where the android was headed. He jammed the keys into the ignition, and drove away.

*Something’s gotta give.*

——

Gavin padded out of his bathroom, worn sweatpants hanging low on his hips. He tossed his towel aside, and grabbed his phone. *Nine thirty-five p.m.* With a flick of his thumb, he cast aside a few unread messages—invitations to join some old college buddies, Hank asking how CyberLife went. A bright red one popped over his text message app, in conjunction with the name *HAL9k.* Gavin tossed his phone on the kitchen counter. Whatever the android wanted, he could wait—possibly forever.

Gavin idly scratched the light dusting of hair under his navel, and tried not to think about a few hours ago—tried not to think about the part where RK900 was, in fact, a cognizant creature, and had a distinct interest in Gavin Reed. Gavin-Fucking-Reed—detective, fuck up, and all around human catastrophe. The android’s cards were on the table, and now it was up to Gavin to hold or fold—and, by god, was he going to hold. Gavin would hold as long as humanly possible.

He groaned, plopping onto the torn leather of his couch, hands rubbing up and down his face. Gavin gently pressed his palms into his closed eyes, grimacing, exhaling—fighting back a deluge of emotions he’d channeled into the deepest part of himself, years ago, only to have an android—a motherfucking computer with a pretty face—rip them all loose, again.

With a sigh, Gavin propped an a leg over the arm of the couch, and stared blankly at his TV. Sounds and bright light danced across the pixels, but it was all harsh white noise to his ears. He replayed the encounter with RK900 over and over again—the sharp pain of his hair being pulled, the sensation of impossibly strong fingers teasing his neck, RK900's words ripping through Gavin like broken shards of glass.

*“I think there’s something you misunderstand about me.”*

Gavin adjusted his posture, leaning over his lap, and running his hands through his damp hair. This couldn’t be happening. He needed to regain control—needed to stay strong. But the memories flooded every part of him, and an electric current swept across his skin—a raw need, clawing its way up his spine at the thought of cold blue eyes, and domineering posture.

Gavin closed his eyes, and softly teased the sensitive flesh of his bottom lip between his teeth. His nails dragged along his chest and abdomen, leaving red streaks—a fierce burn, channeling straight to his groin.

He slipped under the loose waistband of his sweatpants, and imagined a much paler hand—one ending in perfectly trimmed nails—closing around his cock. A firm, almost punishing grip, as perfectly engineered teeth came to a close around his ear lobe. His dick swelled greedily, and Gavin hissed, squeezing the hardened flesh, feeding off a pressure that bordered on unpleasant.

Gavin Reed was not a strong man.

——

Gavin grunted, clenching his teeth. Two of his fingers pistoned in and out of his sloppy hole,
rivulets of lube leaking from the entrance with every thrust. He fisted the covers of his bed with the opposite hand, the one not traitorously searching for his sweet spot, as he envisioned RK900. What would the android think of him—ass angled high in the air, whimpering at the lack of fullness, the lack of a proper dick, to fuck him into the mattress—to fuck him until he was nothing but an ugly mess of tears, and boneless limbs. Gavin could see the slow shake of RK900's head, the tick of disgust on his features. Gavin pumped a little faster at the judging gaze of empty, blue eyes.

A fingertip brushed along that perfect little spot, and fire shot up Gavin's spine. He moaned into the sheets of his bed, drool leaking from the corner of his mouth, rubbing against the coarse fabric. His dick twitched and weeped, needy for attention. Needy for—Gavin gulped, and poised another finger at his entrance.

“I do, in fact, come equipped with human genitalia.”

Fuckfuckfuckfuck. Gavin eased the third finger into his greedy hole—it swallowed the digit, with a wet squelch that wracked his body with a shiver. Excess lube dripped down his thighs. In his mind, a firm, pink tongue lapped up every drop, nipping and biting the sensitive skin along the way. A frigid voice reminded him of how pathetic he looked—whispered slut into his ear. His finger struck gold, again, and Gavin yelped, thrusting his hips forward. He weakly opened his eyes to the sight of thick precum, oozing from the tip of his swollen cock, and settling into a small pool on his black comforter. His dick was so red. So angry. Desperate for attention—desperate for the touch of someone forbidden.

Weak. Pathetic. I always knew your terrible behavior was a cry for this kind of attention, Detective. A cruel smile. A grin—too many teeth. Did RK900 know? Was he aware of how badly Gavin wanted to be fucked into unconsciousness? He had to know—the thing knew everything about Gavin. His stupid scanner was a direct line to Gavin’s every fear—his every desire.

Gavin grabbed his bobbing cock. Fire swept across his body, and he hissed at the contact. He pumped a few times, teeth catching on the fabric of his bed sheets as he clenched his jaw. It was too much—the sweet sweet, pressure of his fist, the erratic drag of his fingers along his soft insides. They filled him, but not nearly enough—not to fullness he wanted, or anything like it.

He ran a thumb along the head of his cock, massaging his slit as more precum dribbled out and around his finger. Look at you, Detective. Gavin fisted his cock, pumping and twisting and angling his wrist ever so slightly, in tandem with the furious motion of his fingers in his hole. The slap of skin on skin, and wet squish of fingers, milking his prostate over and over.

An invisible coil tightened within him, rapidly reaching critical mass. Gavin envisioned a pale white body draped over his—biting, scratching, and fucking him, with no remorse, and zero consideration for Gavin’s needs. He whimpered, practically sobbing at the thought. His fingers weren’t enough—his hand was only so effective. Caught up in the ecstasy of the moment—being so close to the edge—he couldn't understand his own thought process. Why did he keep denying himself?

Come for me, Detective.

Gavin cried out, vision going momentarily black. Warm, white ropes coated his hand, and soft flesh spasmed around his fingers. The soothing bliss of his orgasm was fleeting—so unsatisfactory. He whimpered in frustration.

How do you feel, Detective?
He tried in vain to stroke his dick through its refractory period, but the overstimulation was too much—and not in a fun way. Gavin sobbed, and fell to his side, pulling his fingers from his ass with a wet pop. His insides fluttered, craving the intrusion, the fullness, but he was too exhausted to dwell on the sensation.

Will you behave now, Detective?

Gavin could picture RK900 standing over him, jacket off, sleeves perfectly rolled to the crook of his elbow, tucking himself back into his pants. The smug look of victory coloring his face as he stood next to Gavin’s heaving form, covered in fluids—drool, semen, sweat, lube.

Panic hit Gavin, as his brief afterglow cried its last gasp, and he was left alone with his thoughts—the reality that he was too pathetic to own up to his own feelings. The reality that he was cold and alone, laying in his own mess, having just finished jerking off to the thought of his partner—the same partner he denied, only hours ago.

RK900 couldn’t articulate his feelings because some asshole programmer saw fit to fuck up his brain. What was Gavin’s excuse?

He laughed, running a hand down his face. The laughter kept coming, until it didn’t, and Gavin punched his wall in frustration, leaving behind a huge dent—cracks spiraling from a dark center.

Pissed and ashamed, Gavin drew his covers up around his shoulders and fell into a fitful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to my bro, Leaux.

I've loved the city of Detroit ever since I watched Robocop at the ripe age of way too young.

Find me in cyberspace @Vapedrone
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for all the the nice comments and kudos! They keep me truckin’!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A moan filled the air, and Gavin arched his back. The coarse blend of the bed sheet dug into his skin—rough, like sandpaper. He planted his feet down, grounding himself as he pumped hard along his shaft.

If at first you don't succeed…

He couldn’t guess the hour, but the night sky was pitch black. Woken from a fitful sleep, he wallowed in his feelings—sad and horny—and realized he could solve exactly one of those issues.

Gavin ran a hand down his chest, harshly rubbing a finger along a pert nipple, sending a bolt of pleasure shooting across his body. He cried out. Better—much better this time, now that the goddamn android menace was no longer plaguing his thoughts.

He exhaled deeply through his teeth, eyes closed, focusing intently on the mounting pressure at the base of his spine—building with every flick of his wrist. Yes—this was good, great even.

Gavin tightened his hold around his cock into a vice grip. It was almost too much, but he wanted to ride that line between pleasure and pain—he craved that perfect balance.

His opposite arm fell over his face, as he fucked up into his wrist, moans spilling from his mouth—utterly incomprehensible jargon at his tongue. There it was, that warm itch—building, pooling in his abdomen—mounting with every tight stroke. He bit into the skin of his arm, whimpering, aggressively chasing the sensation. A sharp prick of teeth on his skin, and the taste of salt and sweat flicking across his tongue. It was close now—his release was so close, the sharp pain in his arm almost putting him over the edge.

A piercing knock registered somewhere in the back of his mind—his neighbors, most likely. Young and dumb—hosting parties well into the dark of the night. Gavin tuned out the sharp staccato, and focused on easing the rhythm of his strokes. He wiped his thumb along the head of his swollen cock, sighing contentedly, and rubbed the precum along his length.


God, could these fuckers hurry up and let their buddy inside? The perfectly timed intervals were starting to interrupt his pleasant momentum, as it built to a crescendo. He gave the length of his cock another hard squeeze, and unleashed a loud groan into the still air of his room.

Knock. Knock. KNOCK.

If his fuckin’ deadbeat neighbors ruined this perfect orgasm he was about to have, Gavin would kill them. Not even a question in his mind. He couldn't remember the last time he’d felt this good. He’d been so preoccupied with work—and certain other things—he never had the time to jerk it, or god forbid, actually fuck another person anymore.
Gavin cranked up the volume of his moans, filling the room with the sound of his need, drowning out his obnoxious neighbors. The pump of his hand grew fast and erratic. He lifted his lower half up, off the bed as he chased the heat—the immense pressure in his lower spine. With a shout, he came, covering the ridges of his abs in thick, white ropes. He fell back on his bed, exhausted—a tentative smile crossing his face as he basked in comfortable blanket of his afterglow.

He closed his eyes, willing sleep to carry him away, but he frowned as a pair of menacing, blue dots ferried across the back of his eyelids. Cold. Calculating. A cruel smile full of perfectly sculpted teeth. No, god, no. Please, let me fuckin’ have this. Just this once, please...

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Gavin shot up. His heart raced as he reached for the loaded pistol tucked under his pillow. Those knocks weren’t coming from the outer hallway. He disengaged the safety, and glanced at his bedroom door. Gripping the pistol, Gavin silently slid out of bed, naked and still covered in come. His legs were shaky, his body heavy with the wave of post-orgasm exhaustion slamming into him, but he wasn’t about to die at the hands of some creeper at ass o’clock in the morning. Pistol pointed at the center mass of the door, Gavin gently turned the handle.

“Freeze, asshole!” Gavin yelled, throwing open the door, and leveling the gun at chest height.

A yellow light shone into the darkness.

JESUS CHRIST! How long had RK900 been standing there—waiting, listening? Gavin replayed the last ten minutes in his mind, and he choked, wishing it had been a thief or drug dealer. Fuck me.

“Detective Reed.” RK900’s shadowed form leaned against the cheap wood of the door frame. Gavin didn’t need night vision to know the fucking thing was grinning.

Heat flushed up the top of Gavin's chest and concentrated at his face. He sprinted to the other side of his bed and dropped down, searching for a towel, a pair of pants, a trap door—anything to cover his shame.

“You’re lucky I didn’t fuckin shoot you, Nines!” Gavin yelled, voice muffled by the side of the bed—his face flushed with heat. Did he hear? There was no way RK900 didn’t hear him—Gavin was notoriously loud during sex, and couldn’t keep his mouth shut to save his life, once he got going.

“Based on my scans, it would appear you were preoccupied, and likely would have missed your mark.” A hint of amusement laced the android’s otherwise dour tone.

“Jesus!” Gavin bit down on the inside of his cheek. He couldn’t breathe—the walls of his apartment were rapidly closing in on him. “D-did you just come here to harass me—is that what this is? How the fuck do you keep breaking into my place?” He wrapped himself in his dark comforter, pouting, trying to ignore his uninvited guest, and the cold semen drying on his stomach.

“You were not responding to your phone, so I made the executive decision to come collect you.”

Gavin stared at the shadowed form of the android, mouth agape. Of course! He vaguely remembered tossing the phone on the kitchen counter to avoid a confrontation with RK900, though it appeared the android was keen to make it happen, regardless.

“Godammit,” Gavin hissed, clutching the blanket like a lifeline, “that still doesn’t explain why you’re here!” The cyclical yellow bursts prevented Gavin’s eyes from properly adjusting to the dark, but he could still make out the illuminated contours of the android’s blank expression.
Maintaining his silence, RK900 peeled himself from the splintered wood of the bedroom door frame, and walked down the hallway, the light on his temple weakening as he moved further and further away from the detective.

“Hey!” Gavin yelled, stumbling to his door, nearly tripping on the black blanket in the process, “you still haven’t told me what the fuck you want!” No response—nothing but a weak, golden pinprick in the soft darkness of Gavin’s living room.

“Hey, asshole, I’m talkin’ to you!” Gavin snarled, standing in the middle of his narrow hallway. Dense silence—nothing but the rush of blood, as it coursed through Gavin’s veins. Pissed, he tossed his blanket against the wall, and ran into his bathroom, slamming the door with a loud curse. He planted his arms against the cheap beige wood, and pressed his head against the surface, steadying his breathing.


Gavin showered, spending an exorbitant amount of time staring at his wall, willing the unwelcome visitor in his living room to be gone as soon as he left the microcosm of his bathroom. He wanted the last fifteen minutes to be a fever dream, so he could wake up in an hour, android-free.

When the water took a marked dive from piping hot to cold, Gavin finally stepped out, and approached his mirror. Steam clouded the reflective surface, but he wiped it away as best he could with his palm. A warped, scruffy face stared back at him, eyes sunken, hair amiss.


He dropped his fist against the glass—a tiny web of cracks spiraling out from the point of contact, fracturing his face into pieces. A myriad of broken, misshapen green eyes staring back at him. He couldn’t do this anymore. The robot was turning his world upside down, interrupting his delicate equilibrium of poor to moderate life decisions, and he was too set in his ways at the ripe age of thirty-six to adapt.

Gavin headed back to his bedroom to throw on some clothes before steeling himself for the inevitable. He turned to face the living room, stomach dropping when he saw golden light emitting a soft reflection against his old video game collection. The android was crouched, running his fingers against shelf’s contents.

“What the fuck do you want, Nines?” Gavin hissed, through clenched teeth. RK900 slowly stood, and proceeded towards the detective. Without a word, or so much as a wayward glance, he handed Gavin his misplaced cell phone, and meandered into the outside hallway. Seething, Gavin chased his partner downstairs and into the parking lot. Gavin lingered at the door of his complex as RK900 came to a halt at the passenger door of Gavin’s car. Cool, blue eyes locked onto the detective—expectant.

“If you don’t tell me what the fuck this is about, I’m going back to bed,” Gavin snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. Frigid wind prickled along his still damp skin, burning its peachy tone a bright red. RK900 stared back, hand poised on the car door—silent, monolithic, unwavering.

The weak white of the overgrown parking lot’s single light flickered in the early morning darkness, highlighting the dark chasm between the two figures. Gavin, poised at the barred door of his complex, and RK900, lingering alongside the car. Two distinctive points on a single line—forever distant, never converging.

Gavin sighed, and punched his code into the complex’s door pad, intent on trying to salvage what
was left of the night in his warm bed. A soft vibration rocked his pocket, and he looked down at his phone. Hank’s name flashed across the screen—5 missed calls—Hank Anderson: Four Forty-Five a.m.

It was already shaping up to be a wonderful Saturday in Detroit, Michigan.

“The Infinity Killer?”

Detroit Police tried in vain to prevent the media involvement in the case, but it proved an impossible task. Images leaked onto the internet almost overnight—crime scene photos circulating on ancient message boards, and trending on Twitter 2.0. The denizens of the world were enamored with all the gory details, and the mystery they brought. Detroit was back in the spotlight—and the reason couldn’t be worse. If it wasn’t headlining for bankruptcy, or being the epicenter for a worldwide paradigm shift, Detroit was playing host to one of the worst criminals in recent decades.

“That is still the stupidest fucking name,” Gavin snorted, reading over some amateur sleuthing on a Reddit thread. The archaic website wasn’t good for much—usually nothing more than a gaggle of conspiracy theorists jerking each other off—but serial killers had a historical penchant for wanting to involve themselves in their own investigations. It stood to reason the unsub might be lurking around the dregs of the internet, feeding information as he or she saw fit.

He tucked away his phone and crossed the threshold of the abandoned steel mill. Police lights illuminated the rusted furnace vents and crooked towers—they swathed his silent partner in red and blue, cycling across his stiff body in even intervals. The android looked every bit as dark and imposing as the rest of the machinery littering the ground.

RK900’s silence had persisted throughout the entire car ride, and showed no signs of losing steam. Gavin guessed the android was mad at him. It was far from a surprise, but he wasn’t ready to admit to himself—much less to RK900—that there was even a hint of mutual desire. Last night’s weakness was an error—an outlier. A mistake he wouldn’t repeat.

Still, it bothered Gavin—got under his skin, burrowing deep. He should be glad RK900 wasn’t tormenting him with snide remarks. This should be a breath of fresh air, but it certainly felt like suffocation. Gavin swallowed, sparing his stationary partner one final glance. The android did not reciprocate the gesture.

Gavin ducked under a pipe leading into the blast furnace chamber. Almost all of the debris and grime had been stripped from the area, leaving an eerily pristine staging ground for two victims—both female. They sat propped on their knees, hands cast to the sky, fingers intertwined. Paradise Awaits Those Willing to Pay the Price was emblazoned, in massive letters, along the uneven metal of the structure. Jagged pipes and girders crisscrossing around its perimeter—a rusted frame.

Cold wind howled as it whipped through the old pipes—winter’s last gasp. It was the only sound, despite the deluge of people and androids milling around the area—a silent colony of ants, paying tribute to a massive altar.

“The fucker’s escalating,” Gavin murmured aloud, tapping his chin. There was no doubt in his mind now: they were dealing with more than one person. He doubted even two could pull off a job of this size.

“Glad you finally decided to join us, Reed,” Hank sighed, walking over to greet the detective. “Connor confirms they’re sisters—twins. A high school teacher from Ann Arbor, and a software
“Tell me we fuckin’ found somethin’,” Gavin huffed, holding his hand out and shaking his head. “Fingerprints? Tire tracks? Blood?”

Hank shook his head, a look of defeat crossing his face. “Not so much as a stray hair."

“You can’t just bust into a place like this—make it all nice and clean—and leave nothin’. He glanced around the room, eyes coming to rest on Connor, standing a few feet away.

“Hey, Brainiac!” Gavin’s voice echoed across the desolate chamber, reverberating off of Goliath machines with a metallic twinge. He snapped his fingers and gestured as Connor glanced at him, confused. Hank glared daggers at his subordinate.

“So, what’s our profile, again?” Gavin sneered as Connor joined the two humans. “A college educated twenty-five to forty year old male of unspecified race with a possible religious affiliation, yeah? Did I miss anything?”

“No,” Connor frowned, displeasure evident on his face.

“Great. So, Wikipedia, tell me how long it would take a suspect fitting those parameters to scrub this place clean.” Gavin gestured to the broad expanse of the blast furnace chamber.

Connor looked to Hank—who shrugged—then back to Gavin. “Without exact data on the human’s physical well being or daily routine, it would be difficult to ascertain exactly, but a few months, at least.”

Gavin nibbled on the stub of his thumbnail, surveying the impossible scene. This couldn’t be one guy. The murders, sure, but the clean-up? The machinery, the walls, the floor—all of it—was pristine. Everything was patched and refurbished to look as good as it did on the day the mill opened its doors. Decades of grime and decay wiped away in an instant. Gavin thought back to the previous crime scenes, and it all fell into place.

“Okay, yeah.” Gavin turned to look at Hank. “We’re looking at a group—no question about it. I doubt these fucks are human either...”

“Reed, I’ll grant you this is definitely the work of more than one guy, but please don’t start with this android bullshit again.” Hank rubbed the bottom of his face, looking his subordinate in the eye. “I get it—you don’t like ‘em, but you’re gonna have to face music: They’re not going anywhere.”

“Anderson, what?” Gavin pressed his palm into his forehead, nails biting into the skin of his scalp. Christ, was everyone so blinded by the fuckin’ wonder twins they couldn’t see the evidence staring them in the face? “That has nothing to do with this!” He snarled. “Look at the evidence.” Gavin enunciated each word.

“What evidence? There’s nothing to directly implicate android involvement!” Hank shrugged, exhaustion lacing his face. His eyes roved over the detective, and he remained silent, disregarding the irritated huffs of his subordinate.

“Reed,” Hank looked off to the side, where an android forensics technician stumbled over an unseen pipe on his way to the victim staging area. He sighed, and returned his gaze to a very livid, very impatient Gavin. “When was the last time you slept? You look like hell, son.”

“Really, Anderson? Really?” Gavin snapped, throwing his arms into the air. “Don’t give me that
“What do you want me to say, Reed?” Hank uncrossed his arms. “I’m worried about you. You’re a surly fucker, sure, but I’ve never seen you this bad before. Connor told me even RK900’s-”

“Don’t,” Gavin snarled, knives piercing his stomach at the mere mention of the name. “Do not bring that fucker into this.” A pit was forming in the depths of his insides, threatening to swallow him whole. A dark channel where a blue eyed devil sat—lying in wait.

Hank placed a hand on Gavin’s shoulder. “Go home. Eat something—real fucking food. Get some sleep. On Monday, when you’re in a better place, we can discuss your theories.” He shot the detective an uncertain smile. To Gavin, it reeked of pity. Hank broke off, and headed toward a group of gaunt beat cops.

Gavin stood, fuming. He didn’t want to go home and sleep, nor did he want to waste time writing a report no one would bother to read. He wanted answers. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he headed towards the two bodies, hoping he would finally get the lightbulb he’d been chasing for nearly two months, now. Crouching, he looked the figures over—black ichor in their eye sockets, trailing down their faces and onto their necks—a morbid mascara.

Gavin yelped as a pair of legs slammed into his back, knocking him forward and into the embrace of the corpse—black eye sockets, not an inch away from his face. A cheerful smile locked forever in frozen muscles—cold limbs and icy fingers, entangling his clothes. Gavin screamed, trying to tear himself away, rolling backwards in the process. Dark fluid stained his fingers, his jacket, his cheeks, and neck—covering him, consuming him. In a frenzy, he wiped his hands along the dusty concrete floor, unable to stabilize his breathing. When he calmed down enough to regain his bearings, Gavin looked up, into the grey eyes of the clumsy forensics tech from earlier—his LED cycling a bright red. Stunned, the android held a camera in-hand, clearly not anticipating Gavin’s crouched form in his path.

“Oh no! Detective, I-”

Gavin surged to his feet and, in a feral rage, tackled the android to the ground—hard. It felt good—like he was finally in control.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, plastic asshole?” Gavin shouted, fisting the tech’s shirt. His vision was red—the same shade as the terrified android’s LED. The fuckin’ ring should be yellow. It should be yellow and the eyes should be blue. “I thought you fuckers didn’t make mistakes!” He angled the tech to face the the disturbed corpses—empty eyes and empty smiles, gazing upwards towards the endless spiral of dead, metal towers.

“Do you have any idea how badly you just fucked up? Do you!?” Gavin was shaking—anger, fear, frustration—take a pick. He wanted to grind the android’s face into that of the closest corpse, remind him who was-

Strong arms wrenched him away from the android on the ground.

“Get offa me!” Gavin yelled.

“Detective Reed, please!” A soft, pleading tone—he didn’t have to see the face to know it was Connor’s. Moments later, RK900 joined the fray, ignoring Gavin completely to aid the forensics android to his feet. Gavin swallowed hard at the sight of his partner, a pulsing emptiness crawling across his stomach. He tore himself away from Connor.

“Detective, what happened?” Connor grabbed Gavin’s arm, and brought the human face to face
with him, big puppy dog eyes screaming worry. He pulled his hand away from Gavin with a gasp, eyes trained on the liquified brain matter covering his skin. Gavin shoved Connor away and looked over his shoulder, but RK900 was already on the other side of the room.

“REED!” Hank screamed, voice drenched in rage. “You, me, outside! Pronto!”

“You’re off the case.” Hank twitched his nose as strong gusts dragged silver hair across his cheeks. Pale sunlight tried to filter through the dense cloud cover of the frigid morning, but deep gray skies prevailed.

“Fuck off, Anderson! The little plastic shit pushed me first—into the fucking bodies!” Gavin hissed, shaking off the cold wind and the colder memory of a corpse’s cheek touching his own.

“Goddammit, Gavin! This isn’t a fucking playground, and that’s not a fucking excuse! You’re lucky I don’t take your badge and personally deliver your ass to Internal Affairs!” Hank leaned back against the rusted steel of the mill’s exterior, and looked away from Gavin. Sadness clouded his blue eyes. “Now, get outta my sight. You’re on desk duty starting Monday.”

Hank held up a finger as Gavin opened his mouth, and sighed. “You need a break, and, if you keep on like this, there’s no telling what’ll happen. I don’t know what the hell’s gotten into you, these last couple months, but this streak you’re on…it’s not gonna stop ‘til you’re injured or dead, and I don’t want that on my conscience. Your desk or your resignation, Gavin. Take your pick.” The lieutenant didn’t bother waiting for Gavin’s response. Both men knew the detective didn’t have a choice—where else would he go? Working for the force was the only thing he’d dreamed of his entire miserable life—granted, the whole misery angle wasn’t present, back when he was a five-year-old, listening to career day presentations. Gavin wanted to help people, he wanted to catch bad guys, and he wanted to see his face on the front page of newspapers, being declared a hero.

Gavin punched the aged steel of the wall with a resounding growl, shredding the skin of his knuckles. He nursed his wounds with lips and tongue—the grounding sensation of pain, mixing with the metallic tang of copper, in a blissful combination. He would regret the action later—much later, not now. He thrived in the present, where he could make a meaningful impact. Dwelling on the past was a ruse, and the future was a nightmare of pointless calculations.

He whipped out his phone, and the bright red one hovered over his text message icon, goading him. Against his better judgement, he tapped it.

HAL9k: Gavin, I feel it best that you and I should talk. There are...matters I would like to discuss. Preferably outside of workplace setting.

Fuck. Gavin closed his eyes, and pressed his teeth into the crimson lacerations marking his skin. The sharp prickle of pain distracted him from the rush of anxiety building around his core. He hated when he was right.

Monday rolled around, and against Hank’s best wishes, Gavin had not spent the time sleeping, or eating, or doing anything short of staring at his ceiling, while the TV replayed the same season of Law & Order on repeat. He dutifully left RK900’s message on read, which seemed to sit well with the android, if his continued passive aggressive fit was any indication. The bullpen had never been less eventful, and it set Gavin on edge.
“Yo, Nines,” he called, looking to the desk across from his, “can you pass me the stapler?” RK900 typed away at his computer—silent and stoic.

“Well? So, we’re still doing this?” No response. The thump of the android’s fingers against the keyboard remained steady, unbroken. There were few things in the world Gavin hated as much as being ignored.

“Well, are you really gonna get this pissy over a fuckin’ text message? Jesus Christ!” Gavin threw up his arms in defeat. RK900’s rhythm faltered and he glanced up from his terminal, blue eyes aflame with cold anger.

RK900 pushed back from his desk and disappeared into the bowels of the station. At least Gavin could now confirm the why and how of the android’s anger. Curious, he stood and walked over to his partner’s terminal, half expecting a scathing rebuke of Gavin’s character—do androids even have diaries?—but it appeared RK900 was working diligently on reports, like a good boy.

A minimized document caught his eye, in the bottom left corner of the display, and—after glancing around to make sure his partner was still absent—he double tapped it. A list—CyberLife personnel belonging to the R&D and Medical Devices divisions.

“You’ve been holding out on me you lil’ fucker,” Gavin muttered under his breath. He did another sweep of the room, to double check he was alone. It was late—well after shift change, for most staff. Hank bailed two hours ago, his plastic pet practically throwing himself at the old fucker. No wonder he was so keen to exit. Gavin may have been officially relieved from the case, but Hank could go fuck himself if he thought Gavin would just roll over and abandon it. He wasn’t some obedient android lap dog, like Connor.

Gavin whipped out his phone, and started taking pictures of the list. He couldn’t email it to himself, or even download it to a thumb drive without RK900 finding out. Androids used WiFi like some kind of psychic connection bullshit, which never ceased to terrify Gavin on every level. He was sure RK900 abused the power, which lead him to factory reset his phone about once every two days.

Gavin minimized the document, and stood, congratulating himself on his success. Anxiety prickled along the back of his neck—the distinct sense a person was nearby. He turned, and jumped back, leaning against RK900’s desk. The android loomed, eyes narrowed and lip twitching. Gavin could see the struggle in RK900’s face—he wanted to say something, but doing so would break his vow of silence. The ultimate decision.

Gavin’s hand fumbled around on the android’s desk, until his fingers closed around his alibi. He brought the matte black plastic of the stapler into view, and grinned.

“I asked, didn’t I?” Gavin clicked the stapler in front of RK900’s face.

RK900 plucked the device from Gavin’s hand, and crushed it in between his fingers—like styrofoam in a metal vice. He dropped the plastic remnants to the ground, and shoved Gavin to the side.

Gavin scowled. “Real mature, Nines,” he yelled, over his shoulder, settling back into his seat. The abyss of the android’s eyes bore holes into the back of Gavin’s head, but he didn’t care. RK900 wouldn’t break him—no matter how badly he craved the android’s attention.
As the days wore on, Gavin’s will began to falter. By Wednesday, he was starting to wonder if the android really was that angry. No communication—nothing. Just more silence. It was driving Gavin mad, and he couldn’t exactly distract himself, since he was on lockdown—trapped in a purgatory of inane calls from drunken club hoppers, and the tangible presence of a human-shaped black hole. God, if he had to fill out one more expense report for Tina or Chris, he might actually explode—combust on the spot. He hoped he could at least take the android menace down with him.

The fucker was always lingering right there—never more than a few feet away from Gavin, at any given time. It prevented him from so much as stealing a glance at the CyberLife list, let alone actually running the names through a database.

Eight p.m. Gavin pushed away from his computer, stretching, and spared a glance over his shoulder to where RK900 was furiously typing away—which, as Connor pointed out two days ago, made zero sense, given androids didn’t need to type. With a sigh, Gavin stood and leaned a hip against his partner’s desk—rubbing the back of his neck.

“Nines, uh,” he stammered, not looking at his partner, “fuck...do you, I dunno, want a ride back to your place? It’s gettin’ late.” No response—not even a glance.

Lame.

Even by Gavin’s bottom of the barrel standards, it was a terrible excuse for an ice breaker.

This stalemate needed to end—for the sake of Gavin’s sanity, he had to bring it to a close. Gritting his teeth, Gavin tossed his cell phone onto RK900’s desk. It landed face up—sprawled between long, pale fingers—displaying last Friday’s text message, bright as day, the words fractured along the spindly cracks covering his screen.

“Do,” Gavin started. He’d never had this much trouble asking a question in his life—not even when he was an awkward kid, asking his crush to middle school dance. God, this was sad. “Do you want to—”

RK900 looked up from his terminal, face completely unreadable—a perfect mask.

Gavin faltered, he couldn’t make his mouth form the words—worried the android would say no, and more terrified he’d say yes. You’re a fuckin’ man, act like one! Gavin steeled himself with a deep exhale.

“Do you wanna hit up the bar with me, tonight?”

RK900 tilted his head, ever so slightly—as the RK twins were prone to do—only to return to his typing. Face flushed a deep red, Gavin nabbed his phone, and stormed out of the building.

Once settled in the sanctity of his driver’s seat, a scream rose from the depths of his diaphragm—a funnel for all the rage and frustration over the last five days—five months? Cheap therapy, for the kind of person too stubborn to actually work through his issues.

Fuck this case, fuck Hank, and—most importantly—fuck that stupid robot and his shitty mind games. Gavin seethed, his scarred knuckles white on the cracked leather of the steering wheel. Pissed—and why was he pissed anyway? How did this dumb android keep getting under his skin, time and time again? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Cursing, Gavin started his car, and headed towards the parking deck exit.

Something’s gotta give.

Yeah, he snorted, my fucking mind, that’s what.
Tomorrow, he promised—crossed his heart—he would turn over a new leaf. He would request partner reassignment, and if Hank wouldn’t grant him at least that much, Gavin would go over the old man’s head to Fowler, and put in for a transfer. There was zero chance RK900 would leave the precinct—not so long as his big brother remained—and Gavin could finally move on with his life. He could wash his hands of everything—this fucked case, Hank, and that cursed robot.

Gavin closed his eyes, a different kind of anxiety filling his chest—the promise of something new, of an escape. He exhaled contentedly, and opened his eyes.

“Shit!” Gavin yelped, slamming on the brakes. Tires screeched, stopping less than an inch from the tall figure in a white jacket, calmly standing in front of Gavin’s car. He placed his palms flat on the hood, yellow flashing at his temple—one, two, three, rotations—before blipping to the same shade of cyan as his cold eyes.

—

“So, here’s the deal,” Gavin said, placing six shots on the table, three of which were clear, cheap vodka—a staple in this part of town. The other three shots were an ugly shade of neon blue, with an oily texture coating the liquid’s surface.

At three whiskeys in, Gavin’s head was already cotton, but he told himself it was all necessary, otherwise there was no way he’d be able to pull this off. *Time for some answers.* Gavin settled into the seat across from RK900, planting his elbows on the table, and separating the shots—three vodkas for him. He pushed the remainder in front of RK900.

“We’re gonna play a fuckin’ game.”

RK900 scrunched his nose—a tiny gesture, nearly imperceptible—and idly shoved one of the glasses around with his index finger.

“I was under the impression you wanted to talk.” The android’s dead eyes lingered on the blue liquid—displeasure evident in the creases rumpling his smooth forehead.

“No,” Gavin huffed, grabbing one of his glasses, “you wanted to talk, but we’re doin’ it on my terms, since I had to deal with your third grade silent treatment bullshit for the last five days.” He swirled the liquid, reveling in the android’s apparent discomfort.


“The rules,” Gavin growled, ignoring RK900’s bait, “are real simple. Three shots, three questions—nothing’s off the table. *Nothing.* You ask a question, and take your drink. Then, the other person’s gotta answer truthfully—you don’t get to bitch out. No life lines.”

RK900 caught Gavin’s eyes, and frowned, knitting his dark brows together. “This is hardly an effective method of communication. What’s the point of this meaningless game?”

“Funny, that sounded like a question, to me.” Gavin leaned forward with a grin—all teeth—pointing to one of the shot glasses containing the thick blue liquid. “Down the hatch, Robocop.” The android glared at Gavin, LED cycling crimson. Gavin propped his cheek on his hand with a devious smile. “Well…? Get on with it. One question. One shot. One honest answer.”

RK900 looked every bit like he was going to leave, flip the table, or murder Gavin—maybe all three. To his surprise, the android picked up the shot glass, grip tentative. RK900 placed the rim against his lips, the tip of his bright pink tongue dipping into the nasty liquid. Just a drop on the
edge of his sensors. Gavin swallowed. RK900’s eyes widened.

“Do you have any idea what this filth will do to my systems?” He snarled, features warped with disgust.

Gavin hummed with delight. “Gonna go ahead and pretend like you didn’t just ask another question, plastic. Thought you boys were supposed to be good at following rules?” Feigned innocence all over his expression, Gavin casually prodded one of the blue glasses with a finger. He met RK900’s gaze with a cruel smirk.

RK900 narrowed his eyes, swirling the liquid around—over and over and over and over—a funnel of toxic blue. Gavin could almost see the dialogue playing in the android’s mind. The promise of an answer to any question his sadistic little heart desired, as long as he was willing to risk getting drunk. Thousands upon thousands of calculations, weighing the pros and cons of his next move, playing out in fractions of a millisecond. The android returned his gaze to Gavin, and placed the glass to his lips. *He must really want this,* Gavin grinned, watching the bob of his partner’s throat as the liquid traveled to wherever liquid goes in an android.

Blue eyes widened, and the glass fell from RK900’s hands. He doubled over, coughing—actually coughing—clutching his throat, and clawing at his tongue. A distorted, “fuck,” fell from his lips, fuzzy and laced with static.

Gavin pulled back, mouth slightly agape. *Did he just say, ‘fuck?’ Did that really just happen?* Gavin gulped, watching the android claw the gnarled wood of the table, fingernails cutting deep lines into the material, as RK900 winced.

“You,” RK900 croaked—voice rough, broken—molten fire alight in his eyes, “promised me an answer.”

“I, uh.” Gavin scrambled to compose himself, at the sight of soft teal flushing across RK900’s cheeks—of pink lips, open just a touch, as a single drop of neon blue dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Head full of static, Gavin stopped himself before he could rub the liquid away with his thumb. “R-right. My buddies and I used to play this shit, back in the day. Alcohol’s a truth serum, and three questions means you can’t interrogate my ass for god knows how long.”

RK900 glared murder at Gavin, his blue eyes animated, and not entirely focused. “I want you to understand—this trash is a virus. It’s corrupting my systems—interfering with vital functions and processes.” The android swayed a touch, slamming his hands onto the table to reorient himself. *Talk about a lightweight.*

“Christ,” Gavin laughed, “don’t be such a fuckin’ baby. We both know you wouldn’t have touched that shit if it could do any *actual* harm to you.” He eased forward, patting the android’s face. “Enjoy yourself, for once. This is how *people* have fun.”

RK900 knocked away Gavin’s wrist—nearly missing his mark—and sneered before easing back against the vandalized wood of the booth.

Gavin held up his first shot, tipping it to his partner. “So,” he said with a smirk—full of himself, “why do you spend every waking moment like you got a stick up your ass?” He threw back the shot, and winced at the sweet sweet burn as it coursed down his throat.

RK900 slammed his fists against the table. “I’m not obligated to dignify such a childish question with a response!” The android’s lip pulled back, revealing his pointed teeth. Cheeks flushing a deeper teal.
Gavin tutted, waving a finger. “Rules, Nines. You gotta give to get.”

“This is moronic!” The android roared. Gavin had never seen him so animated before—so lifelike. Nothing of his usual composure remained, completely devastated by the alcohol—or whatever was in that shot glass. “It accomplishes nothing!”

“Look,” Gavin explained, poking the pouting robot on his forehead, “this shit goes both ways. You’ll get your chance for revenge, okay? Jesus. Now, just answer the fucking question!”

“Fine.” RK900 grabbed Gavin’s finger, with a hiss. “Programming—this is how I was designed.”

“That’s a fuckin’ bullshit response, and you know it!” Gavin tried to pry his index finger from the android’s deathlock, with little success. “You’ve been ‘deviant’—or whatever the fuck they call it, these days—for five months, now. Gimme a real answer, or we’re done here.”

RK900 finally released Gavin’s finger, and the human pulled his hand back with a snap, cradling the throbbing digit. RK900 looked away, blue eyes unfocused, lips pursed—an indignant child.

Silence persisted—endless and tense. It occurred to Gavin that he may have pressed too hard, miscalculating the depth of the android’s ego—his willingness to tolerate Gavin’s shenanigans. Intoxicated, Gavin almost wanted to reach out and cradle the frustrated RK900’s face—to reassure him, though Gavin didn’t know what for. Face knitted, and skin flushed teal, RK900 looked so...vulnerable—the kind of vulnerable that drew Gavin in like a siren’s song.

“Very well,” RK900 sighed, placing his hands on the table, fingers laced together. He appeared hesitant, reluctant even. “I do what I must to keep those around me focused, and in line—yourself in particular. I cannot afford to look weak like...like RK8—my brother.” Cold blue eyes fell on Gavin, sending a shiver crawling up his spine.

“So, it is a power play.

Gavin opened his mouth as if to speak, but RK900 quickly grabbed the second of the murky blue shots.

“Tell me, Reed,” RK900 began, dipping a finger into the glass, and bringing it to his mouth. He pushed it just past his lips, and sucked away the thin, blue film. “Why are you so self destructive?” RK900 threw back the shot, and slammed the glass onto the wood of the table, hard enough to leave an appreciable dent.

An electronic whine echoed, from somewhere in the back of the android’s throat, and he gripped the shot glass so hard it cracked. RK900 careened forward, and he ran a hand through his hair, breathing heavily.

“Well?” RK900 prompted, glancing up at Gavin through a mess of dislodged curls. The android’s tongue shot out to collect a few stray dots of neon coating his bottom lip, lingering for a few seconds, before disappearing through the light pink gate of his mouth. Gavin swallowed, hard—hands gripping the tattered cushion of his seat. RK900 impatiently tapped his fingers against the wooden table.

“Look,” said Gavin, blushing, “you don’t get to judge me, fucker. I’m out here doing whatever I gotta do to get where I wanna be—no matter the fuckin’ cost. Everyone knows that’s what it takes to make it in this godforsaken city.”

RK900 sat up abruptly—wavering a touch—and stroked his chin. “I see,” he hummed, a faint smile crossing his lips, “all of this with no regard for the fact that these impulsive activities are, in essence, the thing holding you back. How...cute.”
“Fuck off!” Gavin shouted, defensively. “You don’t know me!”

“I’m making an active effort at this moment to try, even if your fears are precluding a more eventful avenue of communication.” RK900 grinned.

The android took a moment to shed his jacket, folding it neatly, and placing it on the edge of the table—perfection, despite his compromised state. “My internal temperature seems to have risen,” he murmured, unlatching the thick material of his collar. Gavin gripped his knees, trying to tear his gaze away from the way the android was idly chewing his bottom lip amidst the struggle to open his shirt, a teal flush working its way down the narrow column of his now exposed throat.

God, he wanted to fuck RK900. It went against everything Gavin stood for, but he wanted it so bad. Gavin closed his eyes, rubbing a hand along his face—he needed to refocus on the task at hand. Teeth clamped down on the inside of his cheek, Gavin steeled himself. **Don’t be a little bitch, Gav.** The soft touch of a hand against his forehead brought him back to the present. RK900 was leaning across the table, flailing a little, fingers prodding the messy little curl Gavin could never fix, no matter how long he spent in front of the mirror.

“Cut that out!” He muttered, jerking his head away from RK900.

“I intended to question whether or not you were feeling ill, however I feared you would pull another cheap tactic to end the game early.” The android rested on his elbows, wavering slightly. It was genuinely cute, seeing him so disarmed.

“Nines,” Gavin trailed off, lifting his shot. He swirled the clear liquid, watching it creep along the weathered edges of the glass. “Nines, do you...I mean, do you have, uh,” Gavin gulped, darting his eyes away from his partner. **Man up!** His mind screamed, but his mouth—his mouth was a field of cotton, tongue large and cumbersome. What if he was wrong? What if he was right? He could stand up—end this here and now. Go home, go to bed, put in his paperwork, and pretend like none of this ever happened.

“Yes?” RK900 drummed his fingers against the table, head cocked to the side. “Please finish your inane question, so we can both revel in this exorbitant waste of time.” Gavin glared at the smirking android.

**No.**

It was time to stop running.

“Nines,” Gavin coughed, “do you...?” A pause. An empty shot glass. The android opened his mouth, grinning, clearly excited to call Gavin on not following the rules, but Gavin slammed the empty glass against the table, interrupting whatever RK900 was poised to say.

“Are you into me?” Gavin forced out, looking away in an instant. He winced, opening his eyes after an eternity, and turned to look at his partner. Gavin wished he hadn’t.

RK900’s face was stoic, impassive—everything it usually was, and more—but his eyes...whatever emotions he was trying to suppress were welling up in their blue depths. A deer in headlights. Of the many scenarios RK900 preconstructed, Gavin was positive the android never accounted for his partner to have the balls to go there.

The silence hanging between the two was a deafening, pounding wave. Anxiety, anticipation, fear—weeks of bottled feelings, masked behind four words.

RK900 looked at Gavin, his cheeks awash with teal—a contrast to the bright red light screaming at
his temple. He opened his mouth. Once. Twice. Three times. No sound. He leaned back against the bench, and sighed—it was faintly laced with static.

“Yes.”

A whisper. No, something below a whisper—a breath, barely there. The word was scarcely audible over the ambient sounds of the bar—the yells, the screams, the laughs.

Gavin stared at RK900, feeling as if he were no longer in his body—senses shorting out, mind swimming. He placed his palms on the surface of the table to steady himself. *You knew this, didn’t you?* Did he know it? Maybe. Did he want to believe it? No.

RK900 scrambled for his final shot, neon blue spilling from the side, staining his pale fingers as he rushed to place it to his lips. In seconds, the liquid disappeared, save for the dribbles coursing down his chin, along his neck. The neon cyan stood out against the stark black of his sleeves, as he wiped his face.

“Reed...Gavin,” RK900 started, a hint of urgency in his voice, “can I kiss you?”

A gut punch. Gavin felt the air rush from his lungs. His body tingled, like his mind and self were separated by an invisible wall.

No.

“You have to answer,” the android prompted him, “you must follow the rules.” He leaned forward, eyes wide, expression unreadable.

No, you can’t.

Gavin slid out of his seat, and stood at the end of the table, studying the calculating look in RK900’s eyes. The android met his gaze, stationary, save for the slight drunken waver in his stance. Gavin placed his hands in his jacket pockets, mind racing with too many thoughts. He moved—stepped forward, and slid into the side of the booth where his partner sat, only an arm’s length away.

*Don’t. If you do this, you can never go back to the way things were before.*

“Yeah, if that’s what you want.” Gavin’s voice wasn’t his own, but he wanted this—even if his want was rooted in something entirely different from the android.

RK900 lunged forward, taking Gavin by the lapels of his jacket, and frantically planted his lips on the human. It was greedy—a clumsy affair, full of need—the android’s raw desire communicated through the clash of mouths. His lips were soft, full of warmth and give, just as perfect as Gavin imagined.

Gavin leaned into the kiss, his hand cupping the back of RK900’s neck. His fingers twisted into the android’s hair—so real, so human. He hummed a little as RK900 ran his hands along Gavin’s side and up his back—grabbing, touching, consuming as much of Gavin as possible.

Finally, Gavin pulled away, in dire need of air. RK900 nuzzled his neck, exhaling into the detective’s skin—warm breaths, the hint of moisture. Gavin’s fingers carded through RK900’s hair, and the android let loose a contented sigh, before breaking away.

Gavin reached for his final shot, hand trailing blindly across the pitted expanse of the table, unwilling to loosen his grip, or sights, on RK900. He quickly downed the drink, and let it fall to the
“Do you wanna come back to my apartment?”

A concentrated moment of silence.

RK900 grinned, LED burning a crystalline blue.

“Yes.”

Gavin kissed RK900 once more—violent, full of teeth and hunger—and the android reciprocated with unmatched fervor. It was already too late to turn back—the only direction left was forward.

Gavin could deal with the fallout, later.

Chapter End Notes

Ch. 6 is basically done. Just gotta fix a couple things.

Thanks, as always, to Leaux <3

I’ll be in the matrix at @Vapedrone
“Here,” Gavin dipped his hand under the android’s dark shirt, palm coming to rest in between RK900’s navel and his groin. “The feeling you want’ll build up here. Just do what it reacts to, and you’ll be most of the way there. Got it, Nines?” Gavin massaged the warm flesh with his hand. It bent and folded around his fingers. Real. Human. It jumped—or maybe RK900 jumped. Gavin didn’t think androids had muscles in the same sense as humans, but the ridges of RK900’s abdomen were certainly hiccuping with every pass of Gavin’s fingers.

RK900 had been eerily quiet since they started—bodies clashing, fingers tearing across one another, teeth sinking into skin. The android’s movements were clumsy, unpracticed—feral in a lot of ways. Gavin would even go so far as to describe them as shy—a word he never thought to associate with the machine, and yet...

“I have not yet pleasured myself, or another—let alone a human with such specific...needs.”

Gavin took a certain amount of pride in knowing he would be RK900’s first. He doubted androids gave a shit about that kind of thing, but this was the one area where Gavin outstripped his partner. He couldn’t deny that the image of RK900, coming apart at his touch, sent every ounce of blood rushing straight to his dick. It ached—it ached so much, confined in his jeans, trapped behind the restrictive material.

Gavin rolled his hips, lifting up, off his bed. His erection brushed against RK900’s modest bulge, and he moaned softly at the sparks it sent ricocheting through his body. Relief—sweet, sweet relief. Nothing close to enough, but it kept him from exploding.

“You feel that, Nines?” A breathy hiss, as Gavin chased that familiar itch. He propped himself up on his elbows, continuing with his lazy movements, not too aggressive. He wasn’t gonna blow his load yet, no matter how hot the fuckin’ robot looked—shirt half undone, jacket draped around his shoulders, hair a mess. RK900 was positively pornographic.

RK900’s chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. Android’s didn’t need to breathe—they especially didn’t need to take huge gulps of air between parted lips. Gavin experimentally flicked the bright pink nub of a nipple, and RK900 shivered, breaths becoming more frequent.

Gavin could see the struggle—feel it in the tension of the android’s body. “Your virgin ass needs to relax, plastic, otherwise this ain’t gonna work.” A deep teal bloomed over RK900’s face, flushing along his neck, and onto the top of the pecs. He looked for all the world like he wanted to say something, but he pursed his lips, blue eyes dilating with every slow roll of Gavin’s hips. There was a hunger in that blue—a need hiding in its murky depth.

Gavin traced his fingers along the center of RK900’s abdomen, and let them come to rest on the android’s dark jeans. He grabbed RK900’s tight pants, deftly yanking down the zipper. Gavin paused, eyes wide.
“You’re out here goin’ commando?” He choked, fingernails digging into RK900’s thigh. “Jesus Christ, are you trying to kill me, Nines!?” His mouth filled with saliva. No wonder the fucker could fit so nicely into those too-tight jeans.

“I have no need for undergarments,” RK900 sighed, eyes screwed shut, voice low—reverberating with energy. So cavalier about something so taboo. RK900 never changed—always the same, always reliable. Somehow, despite his adherence to routine, he still managed to surprise Gavin.

Gavin swallowed, adam’s apple bobbing. White skin peeked out from under the android’s dark jeans. A mole here and there, but no hair—smooth as silk. Gavin gripped the android’s hips, and moved one hand under the fabric. RK900 hissed—or Gavin assumed it was a hiss—laced with static, as it was. He rubbed his thumb in gentle circles, coming to rest at the base of the RK900’s cock. A full body shudder wracked the android—chest rising and falling, with the hitch of unneeded breaths. RK900’s fingers dug into the thick material of Gavin’s shirt, nails biting through the fabric and into his skin. It would leave a mark, no doubt. The human grinned—all teeth and half lidded eyes. “Yeah, I bet you like that, don’t you? Spent all this time ignoring your poor fuckin’ dick. Too fuckin’ scared to actually enjoy yourself.”

A growl—definitely static this time—dipping just enough into the realm of inhuman for Gavin’s hair to stand on end. He interrupted whatever slight the android had planned for him, wrapping his hand around RK900’s cock. It swelled and twitched—sluggish, slowly coming to attention, its need awakening in tandem with its owner.

Holy shit! Gavin closed his eyes, exhaling sharply through gritted teeth. The android was filling out, and Jesus Christ, Gavin must have died and gone to heaven. RK900 was thick—like something out of one of his wet dreams. Nothing but the world’s best and brightest on the RK design team. Fucking perverts. Who the hell signed off on a pornstar dick for a terminator? Not that Gavin was really complaining.

“How’s that, Nines? You feel it, yet? That ball inside you?” Gavin sputtered, voice dropping an octave, as he tried to control his imagination.

RK900 gulped—honest to god, there was a bob at his adam’s apple. Teal flushed his cheeks and neck, and a distinct hunger illuminated his blue eyes. His moved his hand to Gavin’s hair, fingers weakly clawing the human’s scalp.

Gavin gave RK900 an experimental pump. The android shuddered, falling forward slightly, breath hot—inhumanly so—against Gavin’s neck. The human groaned loud enough for the both of them, pumping his wrist a few more times. His scalp screams as the android tore at his hair, and Gavin felt a tense strength emanating from underneath RK900’s skin—body a powerhouse that could snap Gavin like a twig. His dick weeped at the thought.

“C’mon, Nines, I wanna hear you,” Gavin murmured, running his thumb along the head of RK900’s dick, twisting his wrist just right—with just enough precision that he squeezed a light groan out of the android.

“That’s more like it,” Gavin whispered, “bet Connor moans like a bitch in heat. Gotta wonder about his lil’ brother.”

RK900 growled, a synthesized medley of human and machine. It was low—a threat, a crossed boundary. He took Gavin’s bottom lip between his teeth, and bit down—hard. Gavin cried out at the sharp pain—sensation going straight to his dick. The tang of copper filled his mouth, and he crushed his lips against RK900’s, tongue spreading crimson around the super heated walls of his synthetic mouth. Some of Gavin’s blood dribbled out of the corner of RK900’s lips. Gavin licked
it, leaving an even larger streak—cherry red on teal.

“You should drink less, Reed.” RK900 commented, voice almost normal. Almost human.

Gavin rolled his eyes. “You really know how to set the fuckin’ mood, Nines.”

“What would you have me say, Reed.” His voice was labored, taking an obscene amount of effort to regulate. He was coming apart.

“I don’t fuckin’ know, something hot? Anything, really. You’ve just been flopping around while I do all the work here.” Gavin groused, running his hand along the android’s flank. “It’s not like I’m gonna fuckin’ break, Nines—just get in there. We both know you don’t give a shit about slappin’ me around.” Gavin pulled his hand away from the android’s dick. You don’t get off that easy, Nines. RK900 glared at Gavin, blue all but gone from his dilated eyes.

RK900 whined—Gavin could only interpret it as a whine. He hadn’t heard a sound like that since he’d kicked a dent into his PlayStation as a kid, after a rough game of Street Fighter. It scraped the inside of his head, and set him on edge. Still, terrifying as it was, it was kind of cute.

RK900’s frustrated face filled his vision. “Maybe,” he huffed, trying so hard to stabilize his words, “you haven’t earned it yet.”

Gavin’s eyes opened wide, and his dick gave a violent twitch. Amidst the electronic reverb, Gavin could feel the dark tone—a promise tucked away, behind the android’s words. “Yeah?” He moaned breathily, “you gonna punish me then? You gonna put me in my place, huh?”

Crimson. A blip. “Gavin…” RK900 hummed, pulling back. He ran his fingers through the thin layer of hair just under Gavin’s navel. “I want you to understand that—despite your assertion to the contrary—I don’t want to murder you. I find your behavior insufferable, childish, unfit for duty, and wholly unprofessional, but I bear you no actual ill will.”

“Jesus, what the fuck are you talking about, Nines?” What the hell? Has this stupid robot lost his goddamn marbles? Gavin couldn’t decide if he should push the android away, or—

A strong hand closed around his throat.

Oh...oh.

“God, yes, please!” Gavin moaned, body tensing in anticipation. “Fuck me up, Nines.”

RK900 grinned—a predator, holding his prey in limbo before the kill. He rucked up the human’s shirt, and closed his mouth around one of Gavin’s nipples. Gavin whimpered. His throat throbbed, and his trapped dick pulsed weakly—warm precum smearing all over the front of his briefs.

Gavin’s head was cotton, his body escaping from him. RK900 tightened his grip. Stars filled his vision, and he could sense the android’s soft, sweet lips mouthing at Gavin’s obscene bulge, through the front of his jeans.

“So, this is all it takes to keep you quiet?” RK900 hummed, palming Gavin’s erection. The android made quick work of the human’s pants. Gavin’s dick sprang to attention. Angry. Red. Leaking more than he wanted to admit, as he was being choked to within an inch of his life. Darkness filtered into the edge of his vision—consciousness subsiding with the lack of air.

The pressure eased off Gavin’s throat. His eyes burst open, whole body burning as oxygen funneled through his bloodstream—sending pain and pleasure tearing through him in equal doses.
He gulped for air, clawing at his throat. Gavin spasmed, and looked down in time to catch RK900—CyberLife’s multimillion dollar CIA spy bot—swallowing the head of his cock.

He should have come on the spot. He should be reveling in the warmth of post orgasm bliss. He should be returning the favor to RK900. Instead, Gavin yelped as the hard ridges of teeth closed around his shaft.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING!?”

Gavin shoved RK900 off of him, leaving the android stunned—eyes blown wide with confusion and arousal. Gavin breathed deeply, checking his dick to ensure there was no actual damage. Not so much as a drop of blood. Thank god.

“I don’t understand,” RK900 stammered, “you’ve demonstrated an affinity for pain, and I deduced that a lack of interference would result in you achieving orgasm far too soon.” Gavin glared at the android through a half drunken, half aroused haze. The virgin fucker had the nerve to bite and accuse him of low stamina.

“Yeah, I like pain,” Gavin hissed, grabbing RK900 by the collar of his shirt, “but no guy in his right mind likes when a psychotic robot tries to bite off his fuckin’ dick off.”

Mood ruined, Gavin fell back on his bed, glancing at his empty walls. RK900 remained a fixture—body still resting atop Gavin. It weighed him down—a reminder. He was forever trapped in an endless dance with the android—neither party willing to admit the truth, neither party willing to concede they were just using one another for some unspecified gain. Gavin still couldn’t codify that truth—that gain—for himself, but he would continue to pretend this was about RK900’s dick and nothing more. Maybe, in time, he would even come to believe it.

Gavin closed his eyes. When he opened them, the android was holding his phone, eyes focused, LED whirling.

“Nines,” Gavin groaned, throwing his arm over his face. “What the fuck are you doing?” He just wanted this horribly awkward night to end, but it’s not like he could pass out with two hundred and seventy-five pounds of plasti-steel and blue goop sitting on top of him.

“I’m checking your browser history.”

Gavin gave a cocky snort, peeking out from under his arm, “you ain’t gonna find shit there, plastic. Nothin’ but Wikipedia.”

“Your interests are very...specific.” RK900 trailed off, remaining locked in position. “Not that I’m in any way surprised. My scans took note of your sexual need for authoritarian reinforcement almost immediately.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Gavin’s heart leapt into his throat. He can’t see any of that shit. I deleted it all.

“If you actually intend to hide the pornographic content you consume, you should avoid saving passwords to your Google account on this device. It makes it very easy for me to access your history.” RK900 grinned, teeth catching the low light pouring in from the window. “Given your professed hatred of androids, it strikes me as odd that they feature prominently in seventy-two percent of the porn you watch.”

Mortified, Gavin surged upward, grabbing for his phone, but RK900 held it just out of reach, tutting. “No need to feel self-conscious on my account. I’m just a virgin android attempting to
glean exactly what it is you expect in a partner.”

“I,” Gavin started, face a cherry red—one of his worst fears was coming true in real time. It was one thing to fuck RK900, but quite another for the android to learn the exact depth of Gavin’s depravity. No man should have to deal with this kind of humiliation. “T-this is a violation of privacy!”

RK900 rolled his eyes, and shoved away Gavin’s hands. He straddled Gavin’s chest. “Reed,” he glared down at the pouting human, “I’ll need you to be a good boy for me.” Gavin blinked, flaccid dick shuddering awake at the commanding tone. He glanced up at RK900, thoughts of his shame all but vanished—replaced by a low burn in his abdomen.

The android calmly ditched his jacket, and rolled his shirt sleeves to the crook of his elbows. Meticulous. Precise. At no point did his eyes break from the screen of Gavin’s phone. At no point did he bother sparing the needy human a glance. He flicked the screen with his finger—a demonstration of sorts.

“Suck my dick.” No more electronic timbre. No more hesitation. A simple command.

Gavin’s cock rose from the dead, twitching. It was almost embarrassing how fast he jumped from zero, to painfully hard.


“I won’t ask again, Reed.” RK900’s deep voice surged with authority, disinterested expression swathed in the warm light of a cell phone screen.

Gavin gulped, hands fumbling with the android’s exposed cock. It was flagging, a pearl of cloudy blue dripping off its faintly teal head. So many nights spent dreaming of this exact cock. So many mornings waking up hard to the thought of it inside him.

“Well?” RK900 lifted an eyebrow. His blue eyes remained glued to the pixels on the screen. “I only have so much patience, Reed. Should I seek relief elsewhere? Or would you prefer I shoved it down your throat?” A choked sound bubbled up from the back of Gavin’s throat. He surged forward, licking his tongue across the tip, collecting the small beads of blue precum. Tasteless, save for a vague hint of copper. Shame. Not that he enjoyed the taste of semen, or anything, but they could have done something with it.

He angled forward, nuzzling his nose along the base. His tongue lapped over tasteless skin. Smooth. Hairless. Real but unreal. Gavin suckled on the android’s blue tinged balls, sloppy ministrations covering them in his spit. RK900 neither spoke, nor touched him, but Gavin could feel the android’s microscopic jumps, as he took one ball, then the other, into his mouth. A tension was building, and Gavin could feel it, just below RK900’s skin.

RK900 didn’t breathe or stutter. He remained statuesque and silent—a commanding force. Frustrated, Gavin took the dick between his lips. The thickness strained his jaw, a sharp burn taking root along his muscles. He blinked back tears, and tried to take more of the android into his mouth. He slowly bobbed his head, tongue lapping at the intrusion, collecting the pearls of clouded Thirium as they dribbled from the slit. Gavin hummed, twisting his wrist around the part of the dick not in his mouth. RK900 rewarded him with a burst of precome. It fell from the sides of his mouth, mixing with saliva, on its way to his scraggly facial hair. He must have looked every bit the pathetic mess he felt.
The thought went straight to Gavin’s neglected dick. It twitched, painfully erect and weeping. He reached around the android, intent on relief. A strong hand gripped his wrist, pinning it to the bed like an iron shackle.

“What makes you think you’ve earned release, when you’ve done nothing for me?” RK900 studied Gavin out of the corner of his eye. His expression was ice. “I get the sense you don’t want it bad enough, Reed.” RK900 continued, voice bored, though the barest hint of static laced his words. The android’s fortitude was waning. Gavin pulled off the RK900’s dick with a loud pop.

“Maybe you should show me how you like it, prick,” Gavin sneered.

“What makes you think you’ve earned release, when you’ve done nothing for me?” RK900 studied Gavin out of the corner of his eye. His expression was ice. “I get the sense you don’t want it bad enough, Reed.” RK900 continued, voice bored, though the barest hint of static laced his words. The android’s fortitude was waning. Gavin pulled off the RK900’s dick with a loud pop.

“Maybe you should show me how you like it, prick,” Gavin sneered.

“Give me a reason.” RK900 finally looked up from the phone. “Demonstrate to me that you’re worth my time.” Gavin shivered. That voice enveloped him—consumed him. It filled his lower spine with a mounting, almost painful pressure.

“Make me, fucker!” Gavin challenged, baring his teeth.

RK900 moved fast—inhuman reflexes making quick work of pinning Gavin to the bed with his knee, as he collected the human’s hands. Gavin groaned at the pressure against his chest, the iron grip roughly pinning his wrists to the headboard. A burn in his arms, nothing too overwhelming, but still present nonetheless. Once satisfied, the android used his other hand to run his thumb along Gavin’s generous lower lip. Gavin took the digit into his mouth, laving over it with his tongue, his teeth. Loud sucking noises filled the still air—an occasional keen. Once satisfied, RK900 removed the digit, dragging it along the trace amounts of cloudy thririum falling from the corners of Gavin’s mouth. He rubbed at the blue, streaking it along Gavin’s pink skin.

“Look at you,” the android hummed, moving his hand to Gavin’s hair, dragging hints of blue along the human’s face, “already fucked out, and we haven’t even started yet. You must be getting old, Reed.”

Gavin’s eyes flashed in anger, but before he could make a move to protest, RK900 was pulling his hair, and shoving his dick into Gavin’s mouth. The strain on Gavin’s jaw was so much greater, as the android forced himself into that warm, wet heat. Gavin whimpered, trying to relax the his muscles of his throat. His gag reflex was kicking into action, reasserting control, but Gavin swallowed back the lurch. Jolts of electricity coursed along his skin with every rough shove of RK900’s cock, and he closed his eyes, focusing on the coil twisting along his insides. He could feel the hot prickle of tears at his eyes, as his throat revolted against the thick intrusion.

RK900 set a brutal pace, and Gavin relinquished all control, content to allow the android to use his mouth as he saw fit. He exhaled through his nose, moaning around the warm cock. Fingers carded through his hair, petting him, reassuring him he was doing exactly as he should. Electronic warbles filtered into the air—maybe they had been words once. They weren’t dissimilar to a reversed recording, and made a nice contrast to the lewd, wet slosh of the android’s dick as it brutalized Gavin’s mouth. A spurt of cold liquid crossed his tongue, and Gavin keened, feeling a surge of heat to his gut. His dick was hard as diamonds, and he was desperate for any sort of friction. He bucked up into nothing but the cold night air, grunting in frustration.

RK900 chuckled—it was unsettling, distorted. The androids in the videos never lost their humanity during sex, but here RK900 was sounding more like an early nineties computer than a sophisticated robot, and Gavin’s cock couldn’t get enough of it. He whimpered around the android’s erratic thrusts, urging RK900 to pay his dick some kind of attention. He was so desperate—so hard. It was torture, and Gavin didn’t know how much more he could take. The cold taste of bland copper, and Gavin dutifully swallowed, throat spasming as RK900 pressed his body flush with Gavin’s lips.
“Good boy.” Fingers carded through his hair, voice no longer recognizable. “You’re such a good boy, Gavin—maybe I’ll even let you come. Would you like that?” Gavin whined, straining his arms—his body. His throat squeezed around RK900, and the android hissed.

A violent twitch inside his mouth. Gavin hollowed out his cheeks, expecting the rush of come, but RK900 withdrew his dick with a loud pop. Gavin blinked, dazed, unsure why the android didn’t finish.

“Wh—” Gavin croaked—voice destroyed. “What the fuck gives, Nines?”

RK900 breathed deeply, LED spinning red. After a minute, he turned to Gavin. “A-androids aren’t dissimilar to humans, in that we have a refractory period for our systems to cool down.” His voice was doubled, electronic. Almost none of the perfect human lilt—the part so reminiscent of Connor—remained. Gavin curled his toes, exhaling, reminding himself that this was his doing—he drove the android to this state. “If I reach orgasm now, I won’t be able to fuck you, which would be an unfortunate turn of events for us both.” The sound grated on the back of Gavin’s brain, tonality and texture so alien—distorted bursts of a synthesizer.

RK900 released Gavin, and stood, stumbling a touch, as if his legs weren’t expecting the weight. He slowly removed his shirt and jeans, folding both, and placing them on the bedside table. Gavin sucked in a breath of air as he finally got to see exactly what was beneath that ugly CyberLife get up. The android was chiseled like some kind of Grecian statue. Not quite as filled out as Gavin—thank god, he had to best the damn robot in something—but he still looked every bit like he could punch a hole through a concrete wall. Deadly. Beautiful. Commanding.

“Undress,” RK900 ordered, blue tinged dick bobbing obscenely in the air. Gavin placed a moment’s consideration on arguing, but his brain had been reduced to mush. All he knew was RK900 planned to fuck him into his shitty, busted-ass mattress, and any delays between now and then were unconscionable.

Gavin scrambled out of his clothes, unceremoniously tossing them to the floor. RK900 lunged forward, and grabbed Gavin by the back of his neck, pressing him into the black sheets of his bed. Gavin whimpered as the android’s fingers tightened.

“What kind of grown man throws his clothes onto the floor like a slob?” RK900 sneered, nipping the shell of Gavin’s ear. Gavin whimpered, rubbing his cheek against his pillow. Gavin could distantlly hear RK900 rooting around in one of his drawers—he knew the exact one too—and, flushed at the thought. Somehow, RK900 knowing the kind of things he did to himself at night was more embarrassing than being pinned ass-up by the robot.

Fingers came to rest on his ass, pulling a globe to the side, exposing his hole to the cold air. A warm finger dragged along his crease, tapping lightly on his entrance. Gavin shivered, inhaling sharply. The finger continued along the underside of his neglected cock. A thumb wiping across his tip. A single spurt of precum. A hiss escaping Gavin’s lips as he held his blankets in a vice grip.

Something cold and slick circled Gavin’s hole—probing, pressing, testing the ring of muscles. “Is this what you want, Reed? Is this the reason you’ve acted like a brat for the last five months?” Gavin grunted as the android’s finger slid into him. Cold. Solid. Not nearly enough. RK900 pumped once, twice, stroking Gavin’s insides, exploring him.

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Nines,” Gavin hissed, pushing back against the digit, taking it deeper.

The android squeezed his hair, shoving Gavin’s face against the flat pillow. “I believe I’m the one
in charge here, Reed,” RK900 murmured, positioning a second finger at the human’s entrance, teasing but not inserting. “Please keep testing my patience.” A warning. Gavin inhaled sharply.

A second finger, and then there was a third pumping in and out of Gavin, turning him into a panting mess. Drool fell from his mouth as he whimpered, pressing back against RK900’s temperate thrusts. His muscles melted around the digits, clenching them greedily, urging RK900 for more—faster, harder—forever chasing the release the damn android continued to deny him.

The pad of a finger just barely clipped Gavin’s prostate, wracking his body with violent shivers. He sobbed—an actual, literal sob. A soft chuckle from RK900 reminded Gavin that the robot was, in fact, getting off to this slow, arduous torture.

“P-please,” Gavin moaned, thrusting back on RK900’s fingers, trying to force another accidental collision, but the android was too clever—Gavin, too damn easy to read.

“Please what?” RK900 whispered, ghosting his hand along Gavin’s dick. A wisp, barely there, but Gavin could still detect the heat—could practically feel the android’s fake skin on his. “What do you want, Gavin?” RK900 closed his hand around Gavin’s dick, giving it an experimental pump. Gavin moaned, wanting so badly to come—to snap the coil that had been winding inside him for what felt like an eternity. If he did, would the android fuck him anyway—fuck him until he was a pathetic, sobbing mass of jelly? The thought had his dick twitching and throbbing in RK900’s hand.

RK900 angled one of the fingers in Gavin’s ass just right, and brutally struck his prostate. Gavin cried out, clenching down on his bottom lip. He was coming undone, ready to burst—would have burst had RK900 not squeezed his balls, cutting off his orgasm.

“N-no, please, Nines.” Gavin whined. He was past the point of forming sentences. It was a miracle he could say anything at all.

RK900 dropped Gavin’s dick, and withdrew his fingers with a wet pop. Gavin whined, hole clenching, desperate for something—anything—inside of it. He waited, eager for the android to line up his dick, and go to town. Instead, RK900 flipped Gavin over, meeting his fucked out gaze.


“I want to see your face…” RK900’s eyes darted away from Gavin, teal blush rushing to cover the top of his chest, his cheeks. He kissed Gavin, leaning the human back against his pillows. “I want you to have to look me in the eyes, while I destroy you.” Slight hesitance—something vaguely sentimental betrayed the authoritative tone of RK900’s voice.

Gavin groaned and nodded, urging RK900. “I don’t give a flying fuck how you do it, Nines—just, please, for the love of god, I’m gonna fuckin’ die if I don’t get your dick inside me.” He wrapped his legs around the android, pulling him into a deep kiss. Bitting. Thrashing. Tearing at RK900’s lip until a tart chemical taste laced with copper hit his tongue—Thirium.

RK900 shoved Gavin’s legs apart and lined up his dick, meeting the human in his kiss—teeth clashing. Gavin hissed as the android’s head started to push into his hole. It was big—bigger than anything Gavin had taken in ages—if ever.

“Relax,” RK900 breathed into Gavin’s neck, stroking his hair. “You’re too tense, Reed.”

“You goin’ soft on me, plastic?” Gavin exhaled with a smirk, hair plastered to his forehead.

RK900 pulled away, LED whirling yellow. Yellow. Yellow. Red. Blue. The android shrugged, and
smiled—to too many teeth.

“Very well. It will be your funeral, Gavin.”

The android seated himself to the hilt, dick filling Gavin wholly and completely in less than a second. He yelped, back arching up, off the bed. It was too much, or just enough—he couldn’t decide, not with his brain short circuiting. RK900 pulled out completely, and slammed back in with enough force to make Gavin’s head rattle. He gripped the sheets of his bed, eyes closed, mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure.

RK900 set a brutal pace, pounding into Gavin, shaking the bed, the room, maybe the whole fucking apartment. Gavin couldn’t be sure, and he didn’t care. He raked his fingers down RK900’s back, pretending there would be red welts—evidence of this encounter in the morning. Something to prove to Gavin that this wasn’t some kind of alcohol-induced fever dream.

“Fuck, yeah, that’s what I’m talkin’ about, Nines. Shit...I didn’t think you had it in you, fuckin’ plastic prick.” Gavin was babbling, words falling from his mouth—words he couldn’t control, even if he wanted to, not when RK900’s dick kept dragging along his insides, stretching him well beyond expectation—filling him just right. He clenched down, wrenching a groan from RK900.

Warm lips trailed along Gavin’s throat, sharp teeth piercing his skin. Gavin was so close he could taste his release—tangible, but just out of reach. RK900 shifted their positions, lifting Gavin’s leg up, and altering the trajectory of his thrusts. Gavin yelled as the android’s dick slammed into his prostate. Stars dotted his vision, and he clenched down, hard, chasing the heat mounting in his abdomen—the molten warmth, pooling at the base of his spine.

“Look at you,” RK900 hummed, nibbling on Gavin’s lip, “so pliant, so obedient. Who would have guessed the solution to your compliance would be so simple?” His voice was losing its human luster once more, retreating into the realm of machine. He was breathing much heavier than usual—almost as if it were a necessity, at this point.

“I never,” the android whispered, distortion fading in and out of his vocal processors, “my brother—I questioned his decision to fall for a human, but I’m beginning to see the appeal.”

Gavin groaned, pretending he didn’t hear the android’s admission. He tuned out RK900’s babble, concentrating on the drag of the android’s head against his sweet spot. Gavin’s orgasm slammed into him—a boulder rendering him into nothing but a boneless mass. Come splashed between their stomachs, his battered prostate screaming with each subsequent thrust.

“A shame,” RK900 tutted, “I’m not quite done with you, yet.” He grinned, and planted kisses along the flushed column of Gavin’s neck. Gavin might have tried to protest. He wasn’t sure. His brain was effectively shut down, save for the growing discomfort of overstimulation.

The android continued his thrusts, hips growing more erratic with every passing moment. Gavin’s whimpers turned to sobs, as it all became too much. So much. Tears dripped from the corner of his eyes.

He looped his arms around RK900’s neck, voice weak, urging him on. It was far too much for Gavin to handle, but he wanted it so bad, almost as badly as he wanted to see the android come.

“Nines, god, please, Nines.” He muttered into the android’s ear. His voice was unrecognizable—utterly destroyed. He laced his hand through RK900’s hair, clawing at his scalp. “Come inside me, please, for the love of god. I need you.” He didn’t mean to add that last part—it just slipped out, but he was too far gone to give a shit.
RK900 shuddered, body growing rigid. An icy coolness filled Gavin, twisting a needy groan from his throat. Weak pulses of come spurted from his dick, and he clasped his arms around the android’s torso, tight—as if letting go would make the powerful body disappear. His muscles fluttered around the android’s cock, undecided as to whether or not it’s presence was needed, or uncomfortable at this point, but it was grounding nonetheless.

Sweat and hair plastered across his face, Gavin opened his eyes, chest heaving. He ran his hand along RK900’s back, flinching at the sensation of cold plastic amidst overheated skin. “N-nines...you good?”

A loud, distorted tone echoed around the room, piercing Gavin’s eardrums. He grimaced, bringing his hands to his ears. “N-nines,” Gavin yelled, “fuck, is that you?” No answer—nothing but heavily modulated sounds—like an EDM drop. The deep heave of a strong chest was Gavin’s only cue the android was still alive.

“Uh, hey, are you...?” His voice jumped an octave, steeped in worry. Should I call Hank...? Get his fuckin’ pet over here to make sure his brother’s alive?

With each passing second, Gavin’s fear grew tenfold, until RK900 shifted of his own accord. Gavin winced as the android pulled out. He could feel RK900’s frigid, blue semen dribbling out of his abused hole. With an electronic whine, RK900 fell to his side, and gathered Gavin into his arms, burying his nose in the ratty ends of the human’s hair. No words were spoken, but the rhythmic rise and fall of the android’s overheated chest lulled an exhausted Gavin to sleep.

He knew what the morning would bring—knew the storm that was brewing on the horizon. This sense of togetherness couldn’t last. But it felt nice—too nice—to be in the android’s arms. He would allow himself this concession just once. RK900 would understand—he was a creature steeped in logic.

Gavin pressed back against the android, grunting, and fell into darkness—dreams of eager blue eyes, and a soft smile.

Chapter End Notes

Man, I hope the randos at the donut shop who kept glancing at my screen enjoy robot fucking as much as I do.

This went a lot longer than planned, so I decided to make it into its own chapter. My self restraint is somewhere between lacking and nonexistent. _(:3 」 z)_

As always, comments and kudos appreciated!

I’ll be hiding in my digital hole because what even is the real world? @Vapedrone
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, for the comments and kudos! They’re the magic elixir that keep me goin’

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His wall was white. No, not white—yellow, aged with four years worth of grime. Gavin looked from the spackled texture of the cheap drywall, to his black dresser, with more clothes strewn around it than in it, finally resting on the white jacket, with RK900 scripted across the back. The same model number—and name—belonging to the pair of arms wrapped around him. The distinct rise and fall of the android’s chest cut out twenty minutes ago, when Gavin awoke with a start, in a cold sweat.

“Things can never go back to the way they were before…” A hidden voice, deep in his mind, laughed—high pitched and cruel. He got his cake, but now he would have to contend with the consequences of his actions. I fuckin’ hate my dick.

Gavin didn’t want to glance over his shoulder—didn’t want to acknowledge RK900—so Gavin’s eyes continued to rove around his sorry excuse for a room. Thirty-six, and still living like he was a punk in college. At this point, the only things missing from his apartment were a beer pong table, and Budweiser lights on a string. No wonder he never had friends over anymore.

Do androids sleep? Do they dream? Has Nines just been staring at my head all night, waiting for me to wake up?

Lips brushed along the back of his neck—soft and careful—pressing gentle kisses against the short hairs at the base of his skull. Gavin’s stomach dropped. Everything had gone from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye. Gavin never stopped to consider the possibility of RK900 spending the night, let alone wanting to spoon. He assumed the android would fuck him, leave, and pretend like nothing had happened when they crossed paths at the station the next day—which would have worked great for him. No-strings-attached sex was all he gunned for, on a good day. For all his sadistic bravado, it turned out RK900 was a cuddly fucker—sentimental, even. The android’s hands hadn’t left Gavin once.

A nose nuzzled Gavin’s hair, and those arms tightened protectively around his torso. RK900 rubbed soothing circles into Gavin’s chest, pulling the human flush against his warm body.

“Gavin, your blood pressure has been steadily increasing since you exited REM sleep, twenty minutes ago.”

Gavin tensed, muscles locking—he suddenly felt trapped. “I,” he sputtered, scrambling to get out of RK900’s arms, thrashing until the android finally took the hint. “I—I gotta take a piss.”

He stumbled out of the bed, nearly falling into the wall, and he could hear the bed creak, as RK900 shifted his position. Gavin made it to the door, and glanced back, wishing he hadn’t. The naked android was sitting up, eyes no longer dead—deep blue, conveying a cross between worry and fear. RK900 bared his soul—do androids even have those?—to Gavin, and it was more than the
human wanted or deserved.

Gavin’s head swam, and he ran into the bathroom, slamming the door closed. He dropped to the ground, clawing at his hair. This was fucked. He was fucked. Of all things, Gavin was not going to pull a Hank. RK900 was a glorified toaster—wires, plastic, and metal, all tossed together in a pretty package. The robot acted human, but he wasn’t a person—wasn’t a human being, in the same sense as Gavin. Sentience didn’t change that fact. RK900 said it himself—humans and androids were completely different beasts. Gavin didn’t understand RK900 on a good day, and this tenuous thing they’d fallen into screamed trouble.

RK900 was nothing like other androids—no bedside manner, only the barest attempt to imitate human mannerisms. He was a machine through and through—nothing like Connor, who Hank could pretend just happened to be an awkward guy, with a mood ring drilled into the side of his head. He hated that RK900 had feelings for him, but he despised the warm butterflies in his own stomach so much more. It was like a betrayal to everything he’d stood for, since these things appeared a decade ago. Us, but better in every way.

Why did he have to stay? Gavin bit his lip, reopening the wound from last night, mouth filling with the tang of red copper, why couldn’t he have just left with a shitty insult?

Gavin was shit at relationships—he hated them. They were messy, volatile, and generally more trouble than they were worth. He gave up on them, back in college, after realizing how much of a time and energy sink they were. His abrasive attitude went a long way in ensuring most didn’t bother, but he never accounted for a stubborn android, whose shitty communication skills so closely echoed his own.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Gavin grit his teeth—the cold tile burned his naked skin. He felt so vulnerable, sitting on the floor, covered in bites, scratches, and fluids from last night, heart and hindbrain eager to engage RK900 in a second round. Gavin wanted the android—in another life, he could see the two of them waking up next to each other every morning, squabbling and carrying on—but this life? This Gavin? It wasn’t meant to be. He’d just as soon die alone than fall for—too late for that —admit any trace of feelings to his partner.

A soft knock at the door. “Reed, is everything okay?” Concern—RK900 wasn’t trying to hide it. He sounded like a completely different person—voice infused with emotion, as it was.

“Y-yeah,” Gavin croaked, stumbling to his feet, “just takin’ a shower.” He passed by the mirror, and glanced at himself—hair wild, red and blue streaking his face, but the deep bags under his eyes were lighter. After a dicking like that, it was no surprise—he slept like the dead.

Gavin stood under the warm water, stomach dropping with each passing minute. The asshole at CyberLife said androids don’t understand human emotion, they just copy it to fit in. Surely, RK900 just deluded himself into thinking he had feelings for Gavin. Could robots fall in love? Wasn’t that shit the byproduct of chemical cocktails, and thousands of years of entrenched instincts? Androids didn’t have either of those things. They just had programs—an operating system that mutated, and instructed them to mimic humans—to assert their sentience.

Gavin toweled off, and headed back to the bedroom. No sign of RK900. He threw on a pair of clean boxers, eyes catching on the luminescent blue of RK900’s jacket. Gavin paused, and nibbled on the stub of his thumbnail. Had he always had this nervous habit? No, anxiety never plagued him prior to RK900’s arrival, not like this. It was never this looming beast, hiding around every corner, striking every time Gavin felt a hint of loneliness. Gavin collected the android’s clothing, and carried it with him into the living room.
RK900 was rooting around the small kitchen, completely naked, powerful muscles tensing and relaxing with each calculated movement. Gavin’s breath hitched at the sight. RK900 really was every bit Gavin Reed’s type—tall, domineering, confident, full of snark, android…

Gavin shook his head, and glanced down at the clothes in his arms. He’s a goddamn robot—a roomba, for chrissakes! You gonna jerk it to your TV next? Gavin’s grip tightened on the fabric of the clothing. It was scratchy and too stiff.

Gavin cleared his throat, and RK900 turned around, a airy smile on his face, LED flashing bright blue. “Gavin, I was beginning to question whether or not you encountered an unfortunate accident involving your toilet.” At the sight of his clothes, RK900’s grin faltered, cyan slipping into gold. “Gavin…?”

“Nines,” Gavin sighed, “why’re you still here?”

RK900 cocked his head to the side. Yellow. Yellow. Yellow. Processing. Gavin could practically see the buffer bar over the android’s head. RK900 stepped out of the kitchen to face Gavin, completely naked and exposed. “I don’t understand…You invited me back to your apartment last night, so where else would I be?” His voice was calm, brimming with naive confusion.

“Jesus.” Gavin rubbed his temple. “Yeah, but that was, I mean—we wanted to fuck, so we did. But I can’t figure out why your ass is still here.”

“I don’t understand, Gavin.” RK900’s voice faltered. His blue eyes widened, as a pronounced sentiment started to creep into them. “Humans generally remain in one another’s company after a sexual encounter, to work through the injection of hormones into their systems.”

“Fuck, Nines.” Gavin dropped the android’s clothes onto the floor in front of RK900. “First, you’re not human. Second, we’re not, like, a thing. Last night was a one time deal.”

RK900 recoiled, as he was hit with a wave of understanding. Yellow. Red. Red. Red. A slight tremor took to his pale skin. “Your words and actions last night indicated the exact opposite of your current assertion.” The flat tone of his voice wavered like a dam trying to stave off the impending flood. “And I don’t see what my speciation has to do with any of this.”

Everything.

You being an android has almost everything to do with it.

“Nines,” Gavin hissed, clenching his teeth, “you and I are not—cannot—be a thing. Just…don’t take it personally. This only has to be hard if you wanna make it hard.”

The android blinked, and a single drop of translucent blue coursed down his cheek. Gavin could see the telltale sign of RK900’s chest heaving—clearly at loss for words, or any sort of compiled data, to contextualize this scenario.

“I,” RK900’s voice was strained, a soft but heady static diffusing his words into almost gibberish, “this is completely irrational. I fail to understand your logic.”

“Nines,” Gavin sighed, scratching the back of his neck, “feelings don’t make sense—they fuckin’ don’t. Just, I mean, how did you want this to go? You wanted me to tell you that I loved you, or some shit, after we fucked once, on a whim? It didn’t mean anything.” Gavin looked away from RK900.

This is what has to happen.
A violet tinge bloomed around RK900’s eyes and nose, his fake skin growing puffy, as fake capillaries flushed. He tried to hold his voice together, but his wilting posture betrayed any semblance of confidence. “Copulation is something people only do when they deeply care for one another, so I—"

Gavin laughed. He didn’t mean to laugh, but he couldn’t stop himself—the statement was just too absurd. He doubled over, clutching his stomach, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. “Fuck, that’s a good one, Nines! It really is! That what your idiot brother’s been feedin’ you, this whole time?”

RK900 stood in silence, body unnaturally stiff, even by his standards. It dawned on Gavin, in that moment, that RK900 was genuinely clueless. “Nines, look,” Gavin’s voice softened, considerably, “people fuck because they’re horny. Feelings usually got nothin’ to do with it. I thought you knew that.”

Clear blue tears streaking his face, RK900 clenched his fists. “So, my feelings mean nothing to you? Or I suppose, in your eyes, I have no feelings to hurt.” RK900 collected his clothes, and looked into Gavin’s eyes, licking a blue tinted tear as it trailed along the lips of his sneer. “I am not a human, but that in no way validates your decision to belittle my misunderstandings about intimacy.”

“Hey! That’s not—” Gavin winced as RK900 shoulder checked him on his way to the hallway. A few minutes later, the android emerged, fully clothed, and placed his hand on Gavin’s front door. “Nines, wait! I—"

“Your impetus to push away all those who care about you will ultimately cost you dearly. I don’t have to be human to deduce as much.” RK900 glared at Gavin, drawing up to his full height. The lightest blue streaked his pale face, but RK900’s expression was otherwise placid and unfeeling. “Goodbye, detective. I hope one day you will put less stake in your own ego, but I fear it may be too late.”

The apartment shook as the door slammed behind RK900.

Gavin stood, body numb. An icy cold overcame him, completely at odds with the warm yellow of sunlight cutting three lines across his living room. Why didn’t he feel better? Where was the relief that was supposed to come with rejecting the android? If anything, the weight on his chest doubled. “God,” he screamed, “I fuckin’ hate this shit!” He picked a glass up off the island separating his measly kitchen from the rest of the room, and hurled it against the wall. It shattered into a million crystalline rainbows—beautiful and hazardous.

Gavin breathed heavily, chest aching, anxiety and guilt shredding his guts. He thought back to his first breakup, and how he didn’t feel anything other than the cool relief of realizing he wasn’t tied down any longer. You hate that fuckin’ robot prick, thank god he’s gone. Gavin wasn’t convinced he ever believed that, emotionally stunted as he was. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey, and took a couple plugs. The feelings would subside soon, they had to. When had his impulsive nature bitten him on the ass before? Ha, good one!

After roughly an hour of nursing a bottle, while standing in his living room, Gavin broke down and tried to text RK900 an apology. The message bounced back almost immediately. Blocked. Gavin dropped his phone on the floor, ignoring two calls from the precinct, and sunk into his couch. Maybe RK900 was right. Maybe Gavin was too far gone to learn from his mistakes.

—
“Minneapolis, eh? I never woulda fuckin’ guessed,” Gavin muttered, scrolling through his tablet. He didn’t dare use his computer, and he had to call in a couple favors from the guys in IT to mask his trail, but they’d been drinking buddies for a while, now. He nibbled on a pen as he studied the vaguely familiar face of Dr. Case Jarrett. “Thirty-seven, dad died of brain cancer, mom bit it to Alzheimer’s, won the fifth grade science fair, apple pie and cherries. Jesus Christ, gimme something I can work with here.”

Gavin threw his tablet down on his desk, and leaned back. He caught the clock—**Ten forty-two p.m.** Hank ripped into Gavin when he showed up on Monday, after two days of no-call, no-show. He fed the old man a story about the stomach flu, but Hank wasn’t stupid. So naturally, instead of suspending Gavin, Hank had tried to set him up with the department shrink, but Gavin wasn’t having any of that.

“It ain’t broken, old man!”

“It’s your life, son. I’m not your damn father, and I don’t wanna be, but I’ll call you on your bad habits, all the same. Just make sure those updated evidence dossiers are ready for the ADA by Wednesday. They ruled against android memories as permissible evidence in court, last week. And for god’s sake, get some sleep.”

Gavin started opting for second and third shift—anything to avoid Hank’s badgering, and the intensified glares of his pet. No more cutesy greetings or false camaraderie. Everything from the top down about Connor was starting to mimic his little brother, who had been conspicuously absent since last Thursday.

Gavin bit the inside of his cheek, pushing the androids out of his thoughts. He glanced around—the bullpen was deserted, save for a couple beat cops milling here and there, in between location assignments. He pulled out his list of CyberLife employees, and their respective convictions:

**Gil Johnson:** Hacking. Misdemeanor. Acquitted.

**Aubrey Carmichael:** Petty Theft. Juvenile. Sealed.


**Ben Juniper:** Assault. Felony. Convicted. 2 years in Alabama state prison.

**Adrian Marcas:** Corporate Espionage. Felony. Acquitted.

“CyberLife seems all about these criminal types,” Gavin nibbled on his pen, sneering. His mind flashed to Elijah Kamski, the founder, and he reckoned the not inconsequential number of hackers on board started to make sense. He tapped his pen on Juniper. There was only one person so far with a record that came close to murder, but one-time assault was in no way a predicator of serial killing—particularly not when the whole affair was a hazy self defense circumstance.

Gavin’s tablet pinged, and he reached for it. “Well, let’s see what kinda dirty laundry you got in your bag, Jarrett.” Gavin smirked, looking over the database report. Of everyone on RK900’s list, Gavin was most eager to see Jarrett burn, the prick.

**Jarrett, Case, PhD.:**

Hacking—Felony, charged. Acquitted.

Corporate Theft—Felony, charged. Acquitted.
“Kidnapping—Felony, charged. Dismissed.”

“Kidnapping?” Gavin’s heart jumped. Two shifts worth of searching finally turned up something. He immediately pulled up the corresponding report, fingers itching with anticipation.

“Goddamnit!” Gavin hissed, throwing the tablet against his desk. He ran his hands up and down his face, grunting in frustration. The whole affair turned out to be nothing more than an overzealous beat cop, trying to make his mark with a premature arrest. Jarrett had been the one to place the initial 911 call, when he arrived at his mother’s Alzheimer’s care center, only to find her missing. Jarrett was in hysterics over the whole thing, so the first responders arrested him on grounds of officer harassment, and potential kidnapping.

“It must be fuckin’ amateur hour up in Minneapolis.” Gavin pressed his palms against his eyes. “What the fuck is goin’ on here?”

Further research proved the entire case was some kind of textbook example of how not to conduct an investigation. After Jarrett’s erroneous arrest, it was decided that the call was made in error, and no one bothered to look for the woman until three weeks after the initial report. Gavin rubbed the bridge of his nose. All in all, it took the powers that be two months to find Molly Jarrett, now deceased, and locked away in a basement, surrounded by ‘strange equipment.’ The house belonged to Clarence Wheeler, one of the nurses on staff at the center. Wheeler plead guilty to kidnapping and manslaughter charges, and was currently serving a fifty year sentence in the Minnesota prison system.

Gavin blinked a couple times, jaw open in disbelief at the minor details of the case. No one even bothered to interview the staff until a month after the woman’s disappearance. A huge amount of evidence had also been destroyed or mis-cataloged, including the ‘strange equipment’ detailed in the write up.

“Was this some kinda cover-up?” Gavin, rubbed his chin, and flipped tabs over to the medical examiner’s report:

“Victim: Deceased. Female. Sixty-five. Cause of Death: Complications due to Alzheimer’s Disease. Estimated Time of Death: 12:05:00 a.m. 02/05/2036.”

His eyes grazed over the autopsy and crime scene photos. There was nothing particularly remarkable about the corpse—no wounds of any kind. At least the ME’s report seemed consistent, unlike the rest of the case.

Gavin sighed, and moved to set down his tablet, but his eyes caught on a blemish on the ashen skin of the victim’s temple. He spread his fingers, zooming in on the artifact, and nearly choked on the cold coffee he was in the middle of drinking. Black rivulets dribbled from his mouth and nose, and he brushed them away with his wrist.

“Holy fuckin’ shit!” He stood up so fast, it knocked his chair over. A few faces turned in Gavin’s direction, and he cursed, restoring his seat to its upright position. Settling back down, he double checked the image: a pair of small, black dots were situated on her hair line. They were tiny, and easy to miss, but there they were, partially obscured by silver hair. Gavin read and reread the report, waiting, hoping for any possible mention of the blemishes, but they were conspicuously absent. Gavin flipped through a few more autopsy images, dots visible in each.

He called up the crime scene photographs. They were unremarkable, at best. A woman in her sixties sat in a wheelchair, at the center of a white room, surrounded by numerous shelves and bookcases. None of the aforementioned ‘equipment’ was anywhere to be seen. A sinking feeling
settled in Gavin’s gut. Here he was, staring at a crime with little rhyme or reason, with at least one huge parallel to the Infinity Killer, and mired in an investigation that—by all metrics—fell somewhere between horribly inept and potentially sabotaged.

Gavin tapped his fingers on his desk, unsure how to proceed. He couldn’t exactly present his findings to Hank, given he wasn’t permitted to touch anything related to the case, but this coincidence was too much for him to just let go. If someone were poised to connect the dots, they would have done so already, which only left one avenue to Gavin: continue to ignore Hank’s embargo, and reach out to Case Jarrett regarding the strange disappearance of his mother. On the off chance they were related, Jarrett might have a little more information about Wheeler. Wheeler wasn’t the Infinity Killer, but Gavin got the sense they’d met at least once.

Gavin placed the call.

“Hi, yeah, this is, uh, Detective Gavin Reed with the Detroit Police Department. I got a couple questions about a kidnapping involving your mother from three years ago, and need a call back as soon as possible. That was Gavin Reed, Detroit PD, (313) 275-8943. Thanks.” He checked the clock on his phone—nearly midnight. Hopefully the creep would call back tomorrow so Gavin could get the ball rolling, before Hank, or the RK twins, caught on to what he was doing.

RK twins…

Gavin tapped the texting app on his phone, and let his thumb hover over the icon with an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger in black glasses and a leather vest. He pressed the screen, pulling up the now sparse chat log, not that RK900 ever sent Gavin that many messages. A red circle with a line through it blared at the top right of the screen. Nope, still blocked. Gavin sighed, and ran a hand through his hair.

—

Gavin rolled into the precinct at eight thirty on the dot the next morning, much to the surprise of Hank and his errand boy, both of whom had to do a double-take, at first. Gavin simply sneered at them barking, “what? I got somethin’ on my face?” Hank rolled his eyes, and returned to his terminal. Connor, on the other hand, snuck off in the direction of the evidence locker. A quick check of his phone informed Gavin that Case Jarrett had not yet returned his call, and he tapped his foot to dispel some of his nervous energy.

Where was RK900? It wasn’t like the android to miss work, and he didn’t get sick. Something wasn’t right. With nothing better to do, Gavin stood up, stretching, and quietly headed for the evidence room, where Connor was presumably still lurking. If anyone knew where RK900 was, it would be his brother.

A momentary chill hit Gavin, when he reached the bottom of the stairs—deja vu. Connor stood, facing the evidence wall, perusing bits and pieces of the Infinity Killer’s work. How many months ago had Gavin and Connor been in this exact position—Gavin intruding on the android’s mediation of a case? The human shook his head, and hoped this encounter wouldn’t end with him waking up two hours later in a puddle of his own drool.

“Yo, plastic,” Gavin huffed, throwing open the door. It swung shut, displacing the icy air of the locker with the warm breeze of the outside. Clashing temperatures—clashing moods.

“Detective Reed.” Connor’s chocolate eyes widened by a small margin. “What can I do for you?” The android’s voice was cold enough to match the air of the room, but still didn’t reach the frigid tones of RK900’s. Connor was never good at hiding his feelings—he wore them on his sleeve,
regardless of his intentions.

“I,” Gavin sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. _God, this sucks._ “I-does...does Nines...is Nines okay?”

Connor turned to face Gavin completely, the wall of morbid memorabilia all but forgotten. “What do you want, Gavin?” Yellow light flashed at Connor’s temple—harsh gold. It flushed Connor’s face, and for the briefest moment, he was RK900, before the latent softness of his brown eyes betrayed the effect. Two brothers with the same framework, but completely divergent in every way, save for their faces—the RKs weren’t unlike human twins, in that respect.

“I just,” Gavin muttered, “I haven’t seen him around the precinct, so I wanted to check in, and see what his deal was.”

Connor’s ring blinked red, only briefly, before returning to yellow. “RK900 transferred to a different unit, last week. He cited your behavior as his primary reason for leaving—to me, at least.”

Gavin blinked. _Shit._ He had an inkling RK900 would pull this kind of move, but he hadn’t expected it to happen so soon. _Nice job, Gav—you ran off the android, and put yourself in a room, alone, with his pissed off big brother._ Panic started to rise in the back of Gavin’s throat, as he replayed Connor’s beat down. Round two was looking more and more likely, with every passing second.

“I,” Gavin gulped. He could sense the tension in Connor’s body, the very human urge to avenge his little brother. “I...shit...I didn’t mean for-”

“Really, Gavin?” Connor snapped, “I think you were more than aware of what you were doing. You’re an exceptionally intelligent human, though your conduct and appearance regularly undermine this.”

Gavin’s eyes flashed in anger, and he stormed up to Connor. If the little fucker wanted to pick a fight, Gavin couldn’t give a shit, but he wasn’t going to take this lying down. “Look here, prick, you don’t know shit about anything between me and Nines.”

“You think my brother doesn’t talk to me?” Connor glared, coming to his full height, towering over Gavin. “You think I don’t have to listen to him complain about you, endlessly, every night?” Connor looked away. Had he been RK900, Gavin would be on the floor right now, groaning in pain. “You...there was no reason for you to say such cruel things to him. He was quite fond of you—in his own way.” Connor sighed, tension ebbing away from his body. He never was very good at prolonged intimidation.

Gavin shuffled awkwardly, unsure what to say. He scratched his stubble. “So, Nines is okay, then?”

Connor turned to glare at Gavin. “Yes,” he snapped curtly, “I suppose you could say he’s in satisfactory condition. Is that all you came here to ask? Is that the nature of the messages you continue to send him?”

Gavin recoiled. “Wait, how do you know about that?” He yelled, exasperated.

“All means of communication are transmitted to us directly. We still receive messages from blocked numbers—the contents are merely quarantined.” Connor relayed dutifully. “Which is to say, RK900 is aware you’re trying to contact him, but has chosen to continue to ignore you.”
Gavin snorted. RK900 hadn’t changed at all. No surprise there. “Maybe your dickwad brother should check the inbox up his ass, then.”

“Or perhaps you should just stop contacting him,” Connor huffed, definitively. He turned heel, and resumed his work with the items on the evidence wall. Gavin stood, arms crossed, mind entangled with a number of thoughts. He chewed on his thumb, and considered a few things. RK900 had been gone for less than a week, but it felt like an eternity. He missed the plastic asshole, regardless of whether or not he wanted to admit it out loud.

“Connor,” Gavin muttered, cheeks flushing bright red, not unlike an android’s LED. Connor glanced over his shoulder, head cocked. Unlike his brother, there was no malice in his eyes—none of RK900’s mischievous underpinnings.

“I want to apologize to Nines,” Gavin forced out, the words physically squeezing between his clenched teeth. He couldn’t believe he was saying it, but everyone changes, right? Personalities were in a constant state of flux, or maybe Gavin was still a little peeved at the implications of RK900’s final insult.

Crimson.

Gold.

Cyan.

Connor smiled, turning to face Gavin. “My brother enjoys films. Specifically, older films of the romance and drama genres. Now, what you do with that information is up to you.”

Fuck me. “Wait, seriously?” Gavin’s jaw hit the floor. “Nines likes fuckin’ movies? You gotta be shittin’ me.” For months, Gavin hit the android with reference after reference, and the asshole had the gall to act like he didn’t know what Gavin was talking about. Romance? Really?

Connor shook his head with a grin. “He’s very fond of them! He helps me and Hank at trivia, on Wednesday nights, with great success.” Gavin paused for a moment—first, to revel in the mental image of Hank and the wonder twins, bumbling through trivia at some sad, unprepared bar in the heart of Detroit, and then to mull over the information Connor offered.

“Gavin,” Connor snapped, bringing Gavin back to reality.

“Yeah, plastic?” Gavin looked up into an eerily familiar expression—dead eyes, awash in golden light—brown instead of blue. Gavin faltered at the sight. Connor assuming the metrics of a machine was somehow deeply unsettling. The android was rarely without smile or grin.

Connor continued, “my brother—RK900—he...please do not approach him unless you have truly revisited your feelings. I cannot account for what will happen to you, if you hurt him again.”

Gavin frowned, and hesitantly nodded, turning to retreat back upstairs. Brown eyes tracked him until he was out of sight, but he still couldn’t shake the sensation of Connor watching him.

“Fuckin’ robots, Jesus Christ…” Gavin muttered, trying to brush down the hairs sticking up on the back of his neck.

—

“They still make this shit?” Gavin muttered, voice low, flipping the plastic rectangle over and over in his hands. Without much to go on, he decided the best option would be getting RK900 a present
of sorts—a physical movie, so he would have something tangible to stick in his room. He didn’t
know if androids cared about possessions, but RK900 could use something other than one hundred
of the same ugly black shirt. His original plan called for disc based media, but the VHS tapes were
too tempting—something completely analog, and alien to a walking computer. If nothing else,
RK900’s face would be priceless.

He’d driven out to the west side—a mostly gentrified area, full of hipsters and yuppies, or
whatever the hell they went by these days. *VideoDrome* was the last standing physical media store
in the tri-state area, but he hated places like this—like this whole area. It was fake—so fake—
nothing like the rest of the city.

“Yeah, dude!” A lanky kid, with a lanyard around his neck, leaned against a beige shelf, and shot
Gavin a goofy grin. “After all these robots and stuff got, like, popular, everyone wanted some, like,
analogue stuff to, y’know, ground them.”

“Yeah?” Gavin rolled his eyes, eyeing the tall kid and his long, curly hair. “Sounds stupid to me.”

“Ah! Excellent choice, my man.” The guy shot Gavin a pair of finger guns, his flip flops making a
horrible squeaking noise that grated on the inside of Gavin’s ears with every step. “*Terminator 2* is
peak! A choice classic.” The kid placed his index finger and thumb into a circle, and Gavin almost
lobbed the tape at his elongated face.

“Like someone your age has even seen this? Get out of here with that shit, punk.” Gavin was
starting to remember why he only left his house for work and bars.

“Oh please, dude. I don’t, like, have to be ancient to see the greats.” The kid smirked.

“Fuckin’, who’re you callin’ ancient, you little,” Gavin barked, gripping the tape, but he snapped
his mouth closed. Gavin Reed was not about to fight some twenty-year-old hipster fuck. “Just ring
me up, kid.” Gavin shook his head, placing his phone over the payment terminal.

“I’d ask if you, like, wanted a VCR to watch that, but I bet you got, like, five in your living room.”
The punk chuckled. Gavin glanced up at the smarmy kid, and withdrew his phone.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a born comedian? Don’t quit your day job, kid.” He grabbed the tape
and tucked it under his arm, muttering curses as he exited the building.

Gavin hoped RK900 would appreciate the irony in his choice of film. Anyway, he wasn’t about to
buy an android designed to torture people in CIA black sites a copy of *The Notebook*, regardless of
what Connor said.

Gavin swiped his phone open, double checking the secondary reason he drove all the way out here.
*Langford Dental Center* was two blocks away, and business seemed to be booming despite its
namesake’s unfortunate end. Gavin was still waiting on Jarrett to return his call, but maybe he
could glean something more about the Infinity Killer’s first victim, Dennis Langford. Langford’s
family had been very reluctant to hand over much beyond the standard ‘he was home one day and
gone the next’—something about him going to the hospital for a routine checkup, but never
making it back.

Wait... Gavin paused at the front door. *He had been logged as a missing person for nearly a month before his body was found.* Gavin never stopped to consider it before, as it wasn’t uncommon for
the victims of serial killers to disappear for a while, but now, in the context of Molly Jarrett, things
were a little different. *And he was at a hospital...* Threads were slowly unraveling. The phone
weighed heavy in Gavin’s pocket—a single, off-the-books interview possibly being the piece that
cracked the case wide open.

Tucking the VHS tape into the safety of his inner jacket pocket, Gavin entered the reception area of the dental practice.

“Uh, hey,” he said, tapping his fingers along the marble of the check-in desk. “I got a, uh, toothache on the right side—just blowin’ up my face with pain.” The receptionist gave Gavin a once over—a stark reminder of how shitty he must look right now. *I need to fuckin’ sleep,* Gavin clucked his tongue in frustration. “Can’t sleep. Y’know, the pain and all that,” he muttered.

She nodded, a look of incredulity plastered across her face. “Well, Doctor Goodman has an opening, later today. If you’ll fill out the new patient information form, give me your insurance card and ID, I’ll go ahead and make the appointment for you.” Gavin reached for his wallet, pulling out both of the requested items, but paused. “I, uh, a buddy of mine recommended Doctor Langford. He’s not available, is he, ah, Francis?” Gavin’s eyes swept across the receptionist’s brass nameplate, and he passed his cards across the island to the brightly dressed woman.

Francis’s face took a downward turn, a sadness creeping into her eyes. “Doctor Langford, well, he…” Gavin crossed his arms, training his face into a look of concern.

“Everything all right?” He turned his head, softening his eyes. *C’mon, lady, just work with me here.*

“He passed…a month or so ago,” Francis frowned, sight receding into a thousand-yard stare. “A real tragedy—Dennis was a great man.”

“Oh! Sorry, I didn’t realize…” Gavin murmured, setting his eyes in a downcast motion. He rubbed his face, tapping the two plastic cards against the surface. “Do you mind if I…?” He paused, looking back up to Francis.

She returned her gaze to Gavin. “Hmm?”

“I just,” Gavin continued, “maybe it’s not my place, but what got him, in the end?”

Francis fell silent, and Gavin waited with bated breath. Receptionists were notorious for their gossip streaks, and Francis looked every bit the type—bored, fidgety, willing to engage a complete stranger in idle conversation.

“Well, I mean,” Francis lowered her voice, and Gavin leaned in close, “it was on the news, so I s’pose I can say. Dreadful really—he was murdered.” Gavin opened his mouth in a fake ‘O’ of surprise. *Gimme something I don’t know.* He started to pull away, pissed at the waste of his time.

“But,” Francis continued, and Gavin immediately returned his gaze to her, arms crossed, head down, green eyes sparkling with interest. “I mean, he was finally starting to turn things around too.” Gavin’s eyebrows crawled upwards in interest.

“You see, he developed a rare kind of brain cancer—very aggressive, and supposedly incurable. But he said he found a doctor who offered to enroll him in an experimental drug trial, at some clinic, outside of Flint.” Gavin’s face scrunched in confusion. He opened his mouth to press Francis for more information, but she continued unabated, “it seemed to be doing him a lot of good—Dennis was all smiles, after the news.”

*A clinic? Brain cancer? How had no one picked up on the cancer angle?* He couldn’t figure out why the family wouldn’t have mentioned that, but it did offer a possible explanation as to why his body was found hairless, and if that was the case, then the others...
“Oh no! Look at me, hitting you with all this depressing stuff. Here, let me go ahead and make a copy of those.” Gavin snapped back to the present. Francis plucked Gavin’s insurance card and driver’s license from his hand, scanning them on a tablet, before handing them back. “We’ll see you at four, Mister Reed.”

—

Gavin stumbled into the midday sun—a rare happenstance in Detroit. The lake, and proximity to the north, all but assured cloud cover damn near seventy-five percent of the year, but it was nice to feel the rays warming his skin against the chilled air. Spring was on the horizon, thank god. Gavin was tired of endless winter.

So, this guy was due to die anyway, Gavin rolled his tongue around his mouth, clicking it against his teeth. And he was last seen in or around a hospital, after being enrolled in a mystery drug trial. Why did the family neglect to mention those things, unless…

“They didn’t know. He didn’t tell them.” Gavin’s mouth went dry.

A vibration wracked his pocket, and he fumbled for his phone. An unknown number.

“Reed, here.” Gavin crossed his fingers, and then pumped the air with his fist. “Case? Case Jarrett? Yeah, we met briefly when I stopped by CyberLife a while back, and I got a couple questions about an incident involving your mother…”

A few yells and screams filled the street. Angry people complaining, voicing their opinions. Gavin stuck a finger in his ear to tune it out. “Yeah, yeah, that’s great and all, but this Clarence Wheeler guy—what can you tell me about him?” More yelling. It was getting closer, close enough that Gavin pulled the phone away from his head and yelled, “Hey! You assholes mind shutting the fuck up for five minutes?”

A white flash of pain, and Gavin yelped. He fell to the ground, dazed. Shit! My phone! Gavin frantically glanced around, hands combing the gum covered concrete of the sidewalk. The device was nowhere to be found, which meant his best and only lead was lost—for now.

“Hey, fucker! What gives?” Gavin shouted, stumbling to his feet. Blinding rage coursed through his veins. He spied the doubled over figure—short, clad in a long, black and white cardigan with red triangles along the trim, and a beige beanie sitting atop his mass of messy brown hair—almost immediately, and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him up to his feet. The man’s mortified gaze met Gavin’s own, and the detective balked, suddenly unable to breathe. “Holy shit! You’re...no fuckin’ way!”

Gavin looked into the frazzled face of none other than Dennis Langford—father, dentist, and desecrated corpse, left to rot on the floor of an old factory. Gavin’s mind was blank, his body completely frozen. He blinked twice to ensure his brain wasn’t playing a trick on him, but when he opened his eyes, it was still Dennis Langford—a literal dead man walking.

Before he could react, exceedingly strong arms shoved Gavin across the sidewalk. He slammed into the bland wood paneling of a coffee shop, hard—hard enough that only a weightlifter could have managed that throw. He cried out in pain. “Goddamn, that fuckin’ hurt!” Gavin winced, peeling himself off the wall, and he set off in pursuit of Langford.

“Hey! Hey! Stop right there, asshole! Detroit PD!” He shoved through a roving mass of hipsters, business people, young executives, and everything in between, inciting yells and curses as he tore through the sea of strangers in pursuit of an impossibility. His family didn’t say shit about a fuckin’
twin brother!

Langford ditched the road, hopping onto a chain link fence. Gavin dashed left, following in the man’s footsteps. “Hey!” He shrieked, “I’m not arresting you, dipshit! I just wanna talk!” Gavin winced, his arm and side were on fire from the earlier impact, but he pushed through the pain, scaling the fence at a far slower rate than the dentist. Gavin spent a lot of time in the gym, most nights, in fact, and he considered himself to be in pretty good shape. With that in mind, he was struggling to understand how this undead dentist somehow outstripped him in every possible way. Faster, stronger, more agile...how?

Gavin fell to the ground with a thunk, reigniting the pain on his left side. “Shit!” He hissed, fumbling to his feet. With a groan, he looked up, in time to catch the fucker bouncing off a trash can, towards the end of the alley. Growling in pain, Gavin hustled, leaping over boxes, dodging trash cans, and stumbling past shipping pallets. He reached the end of the alley, completely out of breath, glancing left and right into the adjacent street. A fist connected with his cheek, and he yelled in pain.

“Fuck!” Gavin careened backwards, reflexively throwing his arms up. He managed to block another punch. “Woah, asshole, look—I’m not here to hurt you! I just need to ask you some questions, goddamn!” Fear filled the dentist’s blue eyes, and he thrashed wildly, trying to land blow after blow on Gavin, with little success. Still, Gavin was starting to wear down—he was only human, after all.

“No!” Langford shrieked, voice laced with a strange texture, fuzzy almost, like a blown-out speaker. Gavin blinked, missing a block, and taking a kick to his gut. He fell back two steps, and exhaled through the pain. “I’m not going back! I refuse!”

Gavin side stepped another punch, and spat on the ground. His saliva was pink, tinged with blood. “What the fuck are you talking about!” Gavin held out his hands, palm up—a peace offering. He really didn’t want to pull his gun on this guy. If he incapacitated him with the weapon, there was no telling how Hank would react. “I don’t fucking know you, Langford! Just take a breather for a second, okay? All I need is for you to answer a couple questions, all right?”

“He did this to me!” Langford yelled, eyes wild. “It wasn’t what he promised! It wasn’t what he promised, at all!” With a static-laced roar, Langford made a lunge for the detective, which Gavin easily dodged. In one smooth motion, Gavin shuffled around the other man’s back, and grabbed him, holding him in place. Langford flexed against Gavin, strength unfathomable. Gavin grit his teeth, doubling down on his grip, muscles screaming with Langford’s every thrash.

“Okay, that’s enough! We’re done here! You’re under fuckin’ arrest for assaulting an officer!” Gavin reached for his handcuffs, but the guy used the opportunity to slip out of Gavin’s grip. He reached for the dentist, but the only thing Gavin fingers could grasp was Langford’s beanie. It slid off with minimal protest, and Gavin froze as Langford turned to face him.

A bright red circle flickered at Dennis Langford’s temple. It cycled around and around, blinking red, red, red. Gavin wavered, hypnotized by the circular rhythm of the LED. This isn’t possible. Gavin blinked twice, and was greeted twice by the impossible crimson of the wheel buried in Langford’s skin.

“W-wait...you’re an andro—”

Langford’s fist connected with Gavin’s head, and he fell to the ground. His eyes fluttered a couple times, and he caught sight of a bright red light bouncing off into the distance—a dead man walking in an artificial body. One mystery solved, at the expense of opening one hundred more.
“A life where not even death is a concern, because you’ll always be backed up on a server.”

“...you can’t just pop a person into an android body!”

“There are most definitely prototype devices in the works, and-”

The interview from the morning of RK900’s visit to Gavin’s house replayed in his head, over and over, as darkness rimmed the edge of his vision. Humans and androids were wholly different creatures—their minds, their bodies, their needs, their desires. They were incongruous—you couldn’t just replace one with the other, let alone merge them into a singular unit. Even as his consciousness faded, Gavin staunchly rejected the idea.

Androids were not humans, humans were not androids, and a literal hybridization of the two was wrong, so wrong—ergo, it could not exist. Two incompatible states, reaching a unification point. Two incompatible...

Gavin hugged the VHS tape close to him, and passed out. He imagined the way RK900 looked, on that morning—his piercing blue eyes above him, as Gavin woke with a start, at five a.m. RK900’s naive sincerity, at wanting to share his daily routine. His words on that frozen morning—

“I think he has a salient point detective...”

Chapter End Notes

Leaux, you’re the best—superseded only by your running Gavin commentary

Sorry for the delay on this one. I kinda had to write 7 and 8 at the same time, so 8’ll be up in, like, two days.

In the meantime, I’ll be screaming about (and occasionally drawing) android/gremlin romance on my Tweetergram: @Vapedrone
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Black.

A shrill beep. Crisscrossing lines of white.

Black.

Another beep, on a rhythmic course, shattering the silence and darkness.

Black gave way to a hazy grey, interspersed with millions of dots.

“Fuck,” Gavin slurred, eyes opening to a black screen, with a bright blue line, spiking up every so often. His body, and head, hurt a lot. The pain grew in magnitude with every passing minute, as his eyes adjusted to the waking world. Gavin’s jacket and shirt were slung along the back of a seat, where a large man with silver hair gently snored. A much smaller figure rested his head on the man’s broad shoulder.

“H-hank?” Gavin rasped, pulling himself into a sitting position. God, it hurt so much. He tried to remember the last twenty-four hours, but the all-encompassing jackhammer in his head made that impossible. Gavin ran a finger along his face, nails catching on a couple of cotton balls, and a large bandage wrapped around his head. His scruff was hovering around its usual unkempt length, which meant Gavin hadn’t been at the hospital for long.

The door creaked open, and Gavin turned to look, wincing at the harsh burn that shot up his left side. All pain was quickly forgotten as bright, blue eyes met Gavin’s.

“N-Nines?” He wheezed out. “What’re you doing here?” A kind of relief flushed through his body, easing his tense muscles, and relaxing the chorus of dull throbs in his head.

RK900 remained stationary, no more alive or active than any of the room’s teal and beige furniture. He wasn’t wearing his usual outfit—no stiff jacket that made him look every bit of the pretentious robot he was—just a loose fitting shirt and a pair of jeans. Even his hair was messier than normal. By all accounts, he appeared to have been roused from bed, moments ago.

Yellow flickered on RK900’s temple, and he jolted back into motion. “My brother informed me you were involved in some sort of altercation, and he requested my presence.” The android’s words betrayed the slightest hint of a stammer—it seemed he was caught off guard.

Altercation…

It hit Gavin like a ton of bricks. Suddenly, air rushed out of Gavin’s lungs, and the room began to swim—spinning and roiling. Gavin’s chest heaved, as his eyes caught on the crimson flicker of a small diode on a piece of medical equipment. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear feet shuffling in his direction.

“He,” Gavin hissed through clenched teeth. He glanced to his left, taking notice of the pale hands, hesitantly poised above his shoulders. “He wasn’t human.”

RK900 stepped back, frustration coloring his face. “Of course he wasn’t…” the android
murmured, temple flickering bright crimson.

“No,” Gavin croaked, “Langford isn’t—wasn’t—fuck!” He closed his eyes, and took a few deep
breaths. RK900 stared at him, quizzically. “T-the guy...he was the Infinity Killer’s first victim,
Dennis Langford...he did this to me.”

RK900 laughed. The sound was grating and unnatural—a computer, trying to approximate
laughter. Gavin had sure as hell never seen RK900 do more than chuckle.

Hank’s snores faltered at RK900’s eerie laugh, and he sputtered awake. “Holy shit! The hell was
that just now? Did someone try to revive dial up while I was out?” Connor leaned over and
whispered something to Hank, lips practically closing around the shell of the old man’s ear. Gavin
groaned lightly at the sight. The image of Hank and Connor doing anything close to fucking only
made his head hurt worse.

The human glared at his ex-partner, cheeks red. “You think I’d lie about somethin’ like this?” He
growled.

RK900 looked away, a few distorted chortles leaving his lips. He paused. “Perhaps there was a
time when I’d have taken your word at face value…but you’ve since proven it to be meaningless.”
RK900 turned, and plodded away from the bed. Gavin couldn’t read his expression, but it was a far
cry from his typical uncaring attitude.

A knife stabbed Gavin straight through his chest. “Look, Nines, I-I never made any-

The human cut himself off, biting his tongue hard enough to draw blood. Arguing with RK900
would in no way help him smooth over lingering damage. The android was here, and Gavin needed
to just appreciate that fact, without running his self-destructive mouth.

“I’m not making this shit up, Nines,” Gavin snapped, reverting back to a neutral topic. The ailing
human clutched the huge bruise, crawling up his side. “It was the same fucker, except he wasn’t
dead, and he had one of those damn mood rings on his face.” His cheeks flushed pink. It wasn’t as
if Gavin wanted to believe his own words—far from it. The mere concept of building androids
based on dead humans, or with human brains shoved in their head, or some horrific permutation
therein, was something straight out of every one of his nightmares.

Does this fucker really think I’m jerkin’ him around?

“Detective,” RK900 fought to level out his voice, returning his gaze to Gavin. “What you’re
asserting is impossible at this juncture. Even setting aside the lack of technology that would
facilitate such a ‘transfer’, android print stations are highly regulated, and extremely large—limited
only to CyberLife production suites. It would be impossible to create a custom facial template,
without alerting every level of CyberLife security.”

“What about an R&D unit?” Gavin hissed, wincing and doubling over. “Those’ve gotta be smaller,
right? Unless there’re a hundred of you being produced every day.” He looked into the android’s
eyes. RK900 had restored his poker face, but there was evidence of pain, hiding in the deep blue.
The Android was struggling, and Gavin’s mouth went dry.

He wished he knew what was happening in RK900’s brain—what data was compiling where, and
how it all related back to Gavin’s presence. Sure, it was selfish—Gavin never pretended to be
anything but. Now, in this room, he was met with the consequences of that selfishness—an
invisible wall, separating him from someone immensely important. He wanted to reach out and
touch RK900’s cheek—to feel the android's warm skin—but he didn’t dare. Gavin nuked that
bridge, and the regret was dissolving him alive.

“You would need to be incredibly high-ranking in the corporate structure to even be granted access to something like that, particularly in the wake of android personhood legislation,” a soft voice chimed in, from behind Gavin, ripping him from his pity party. Connor peeled off of Hank’s arm, and approached the hospital bed. “Sorry, Gavin, but I have to agree with my brother on this one.”

Connor stood a moment, LED whirling. Gavin’s wheezes and the beep of his heart monitor were the only sounds filling the drawn out silence.

“Gavin,” Connor began. His inflection and tonality were spot-on, the general direction of his question evident before the words even left his mouth.

“I didn’t hit my head that hard, prick!” Gavin snapped, defensively. “I know what I fucking saw—Jesus Christ! Has it ever occurred to you microwaves that criminals make the impossible possible on a damn near regular basis?”

“Speaking of which,” Hank interrupted, moving to his feet. He cracked his back. “Connor, RK900, can you two step out for a minute? I need to have words with Reed.”

Gavin closed his eyes with an angry sigh. Sharp pulses filled his head, and colors flashed across the back of his eyelids. When he opened them, the two androids had dispersed, leaving a lone Hank, sitting on the edge of the blue bed, hands clasped and eyes downcast.

“Reed...Gavin,” Hank rubbed his beard. “I want you to understand: I know where you’re coming from. God knows my old ass has been there—young, stupid, and convinced I got something to prove.” He didn’t turn to face Gavin, choosing instead to focus on the compulsive motion of wringing his hands over and over again.

“Spare me the lecture, old man.” Gavin grunted, rubbing his forehead. The pain wouldn’t subside, now amplified by an entirely different headache, emerging from the chaos of Gavin’s scrambled brain. He shifted, grunting with every movement. He didn’t remember getting hit this hard, but adrenaline was a helluva drug.

“But,” Hank continued, slowly turning to look Gavin in the eye. “As your superior—and your fuckin’ friend—I can’t stand by and let you do this to yourself, anymore.” A cold chill struck Gavin, weaseling down his spine, and burrowing deep into his gut.

“Hank…?” Gavin enunciated slowly, dread filling him with each passing second.

“I gotta take your badge, Reed. You know I do. I’ve—damn—I’ve given you more chances than deserved, and you just. Don’t. Listen.” Hank’s face was downturned, cast in sadness and frustration. “I’m not gonna sit by and watch you fall apart. No one stepped in to stop me, and I damn near died ‘cause of it. I won’t let that happen to you—not while I’m in this department.”

Gavin sat, stunned. His mind felt separate from his body, like he was watching himself from the ceiling.

This can’t be real.

“I didn’t do anything!” Gavin shouted, side shrieking in pain. “He found me, not the other fuckin’ way around!” He leaned forward, gritting his teeth with each electric spike of pain, burrowing into his side. “What did you want me to fuckin’ do? Ignore him? Throw away a huge lead?!”

“Reed.” Hank ran his hand along his face. “Look, I’m not firin’ you, so just calm the hell down,
okay? Those busted ribs ain’t gonna heal with you throwin’ a tantrum, kid!” Hank stood, adjusting his coat. “Three weeks. Paid suspension. If I find anymore Easter eggs—like that CyberLife data on your tablet—then you, me, and Fowler are gonna have a long, hard discussion about your career.”

Hank’s blue eyes were piercing, serious—very unlike their usual shade of mischief.

“We all have a case that haunts us—just waiting to destroy us, even kill us.” Hank shuffled towards the door, and grabbed the handle. “But Reed,” he said, turning to look back at Gavin, “rest assured the DPD’ll get these people, whoever they are. You don’t have to kill yourself over this, anymore.”

The old lieutenant paused, grip tightening on the smooth metal of the door handle.

“And, Gavin,” he called out, “don’t worry about this shitty case. Worry about what’s important to you, instead.” Hank tapped a finger on his right temple, blue eyes conveying a knowing look. Without another word, he was gone, leaving Gavin to his large, empty room.

The door closed, shocking the room with a resounding thud. A sea of light poured through the window, from the nighttime lights of the Detroit skyline. In the distance, Gavin could see the CyberLife tower on Belle Isle, twinkling. He glanced away with an angry sigh. No one believed him about the android—not that he expected them to.

Android production tapered off substantially after the revolution—a cutback of nearly a ninety-five percent. The country was still unsure as to how to handle android reproduction, which translated to CyberLife becoming a glorified organ brokerage, in a lot of ways. Every aspect of manufacturing was kept under lock and key. Humans didn’t want androids to go crazy and reproduce in millions, while androids didn’t want humans creating back alley units, with broken minds, to replace their lost landscapers. The mere idea of an unlicensed android—with a customized face and body, no less—running around the streets of Detroit was something out of a film. It didn’t—couldn’t—exist.

“Shit!” Gavin murmured, green eyes widening. He stumbled from the bed, nearly losing his balance. Head swimming with each step, Gavin dug through the inner pockets of his jacket. The VHS tape of *Terminator 2* was still intact. Gavin shook it a couple times, nodding in satisfaction at the dull rattle of the tape twines.

He burst into the hallway. The cool air sent goosebumps rippling across his skin, reminding him he was not, in fact, wearing a shirt. Grimacing, Gavin shrugged it off. It was a hospital, after all. Half naked people weren’t uncommon. Still, he felt exposed—doubly so when he turned a teal corner, and caught the RK twins, standing in front of a vending machine. RK900 leaned against the bright LED screen on the front of the machine, a dark shadow marring the colorful display. Connor stood off to the side, studying a package of peanuts. The circles on their heads blipped in a rapid sequence of varying colors and speeds.

RK900 looked up as Gavin approached, peeling himself from the glass display. An elaborate pink and yellow advertisement for Thirium-based sodas flickered behind him. Now that androids were a permanent part of the economy, all manner of bizarre product lines cropped up by the day. Consumer corporations figured the things must have the same needs as humans, and CyberLife was more than content to produce the necessary attachments and software packages to accommodate the mindset. Having met the CEO, it all sort of fell into place. He could smell a shark from a mile away, and that AI was nothing if not the embodiment of a power hungry tech magnate. Turned out you didn’t need a body to exploit the system for capital gains.

“Gavin!” Connor exclaimed, tucking away his peanuts, “you should be in your room resting!”
Gavin glared at the android. He wanted to tear into the little sycophantic fuck for ratting him out to Hank, but he didn’t have the stamina to pull it off in his current state. RK900, on the other hand, crossed his arms and stood, silent. His mood ring dialed yellow, a stark contrast against the vibrant violet of the ever changing screen.

Gavin gulped, the deep pit inside him swelling in magnitude. He couldn’t think straight, which was a godsend. The usual voice screaming at him, about androids and RK900, was drowned out by the pain of his concussion. It made his next step a little easier. He glanced down at the VHS tape in his hands. It suddenly felt horribly inadequate—like throwing a bandaid a top the fissure of a broken dam. Still, it was all Gavin had, and he needed it to work.

“Nines,” Gavin exhaled, fingers turning a stark white against the scuffed packaging of the tape. He loosened his grip when he realized he was irrevocably denting Sarah Connor’s face. RK900’s head cocked, face remaining unchanged. “He came out here to see you, didn’t he? Some part of the android still cared about Gavin, or he’d have remained home. “Fuck it.”

Gavin stepped up to the android, not nearly as smooth or confident as he wished—fucking cracked ribs. He held the tape out to RK900, and nearly rolled his eyes as he heard Connor give a slightest inhale. The little shit was getting off on this matchmaking stuff.

RK900 looked at the tape, then back to Gavin. The atmosphere changed with every cycle of the vending machine’s rainbow. RK900 was pink, then violet, then green, then blue, hand poised above Arnold Schwarzenegger’s visage the whole time. Finally, a pale hand closed around the movie, and the android took it, gingerly flipping it over to inspect. He spoke.

“How do you intend for me to watch this?” Blue eyes met Gavin’s own, and Gavin unveiled a huge grin.

“You’re CyberLife’s premier model, right? I’m sure you’ll figure something out.” Gavin smirked. RK900 nodded, a distinct softness filling the blue void. He turned to look at his brother, LED switching over to cyan. It cycled a few times as RK900 removed the large cassette from its packaging, and ran his fingers along the plastic ridges.

“Understood,” Connor chirped. “Please get some rest, Gavin.” Connor walked past the human, and headed down the hallway, with his brother leading the charge. Gavin watched Connor offer RK900 a bright blue cashew nut, and he shuddered, with a loud, “bleh.” Gavin leaned against the vending machine, and closed his eyes. The tape wasn’t a fix, but it was a start.

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Gavin languished on the cracked leather of his couch, grumbling as he tried to adjust the tablet on his bare stomach. He grunted, propping himself up on an elbow, and stacking another pillow behind his upper back. He brushed his index finger along a huge crack running the length of the battered screen, and tried to remember if the damage had been caused from him throwing the thing while drunk or sober. His mind was still a bit hazy, but the doctors informed him the damage to his head was nothing that wouldn’t clear up in a few days. He’d only been home for two, but he was already going stir crazy. How was he supposed to make it through three weeks like this? A man could only jerk off so many times, which left hours of nothing in between. Hours he had to fill as best he could—against Hank’s wishes.

Gavin Reed listened to no man but himself.

Grumbling, Gavin closed out of You2be—god, these tech companies were really scraping the bottom of the barrel for naming schemes these days—and a couple porn sites, and loaded up
Facebook—a huge, barely recognizable mutation of its early 2000s predecessor—using a fake account. His IT friends drunkenly supplied him with a couple tricks ages ago to get around any and all privacy barriers (Hey, Gav, you ever wondered what Devon gets up to in records?), which made achieving his goal a piece of cake.

Cloudy as his mind was, Gavin could still remember most of the victims’ names. He typed them in one at a time, scrolling through their feeds. A black and green command prompt box tabulated in the corner of his screen, running an in-depth search for keywords as it dug through years worth of family photos, videos, and vocal posts.

C:\WINDOWS\mycomputer\golddigger.exe\www.facebook.com\dennislangford\searching_CLINIC_ALZHEIMERS_CANCER_CYBERLIFE...

Matches found...

Gavin popped a mild painkiller, and washed it down with cheap beer. The bitter taste lingered in his mouth, as he scrolled through pictures and memorializations of each victim.

“When I die, my fuckin’ friends better just dump my corpse in the damn lake and fuck off, or I’ll haunt their goddamn asses,” Gavin muttered, scrolling past hundreds of digitized eulogies across multiple profiles.

After the four hundredth mention of how greatly someone would be missed, Gavin placed his tablet on the floor, and turned on the TV instead. Nothing but reruns. God, he was gonna lose his mind at this rate. He idly wondered what kind of progress the DPD was making on their end. Gavin’s grip tightened on his beer at the thought of Hank’s fucktoy using the foundation he’d established to solve the case, but it wasn’t as if Gavin had a choice in the matter. He had no badge, no gun, and temporarily, no job or title. He was just Gavin Reed, asshole extraordinaire, living in a shitty apartment in northwest Detroit.

Gavin took another swig of beer, and stared at his TV. The movie faded out, as the CyberLife logo materialized on screen. Gavin groaned. Too cheap to buy the ad-free streaming service, Gavin had to sit through the preachy message about android rights, and job placement services. The screen cut to an image of smiling CyberLife employees—both human and android—in something resembling a factory floor.

Gavin hummed, rubbing his chin. Groaning in pain, he reached for his tablet once more. The script was still running, but he clicked off Facebook and into a search engine, typing android 3D printer into the query field. A number of links populated with descriptions as to what the device entailed, and its general specifications.

Shaking his head, Gavin modified his search to include the word, home. That returned much more interesting results. Gavin scrolled through a few ancient forums full of enthusiasts, trying to figure out how to reverse-engineer a printer, in order to replace stock android faces with those of celebrities. Gavin snorted into his beer.

After six or seven hours of digging through all manner of conspiracy websites, deep web locales, and nauseating geek dens, Gavin stumbled on a thread that genuinely piqued his interest. He sat up, crossing his bare legs, and delved into the conversation. It was a bit on the older side, at least four years, possibly five, but the members were lost in a technical discussion about building a printer of their own. By all metrics, they seemed to know what they were talking about. Only one or two pictures made it onto the forum, but they certainly looked the part of CyberLife equipment.

The discussion eventually diverged into talk of missing printers. If any of this was to be believed, a
couple prototype printers had somehow snuck out of Elijah Kamski’s hands, back when CyberLife was still a Department of Defense subcontractor, tucked away in a dingy university basement, almost a decade ago. Supposedly, those prototypes made their way onto the black market.

Gavin nibbled on his thumb. An obsolete printer wouldn’t produce a modern android, but if these geeks were to be believed, it could be upgraded. Taking an entire machine would be nigh impossible, but there’s no reason a devoted enough thief couldn’t make off with the necessary pieces—or their blueprints. Still, they’d need some serious skills to sail through CyberLife’s security systems.

Gavin plowed through the rest of the forum. Nothing of value. He motioned to tap out of the tab, but his eye caught on a post he swore wasn’t there earlier. He called up the metadata: **posted 01/23/2035 from 172.32.246.4**. The body of the post was simple—a single, grainy image of a massive, rectangular machine with softened ledges, buffered on either end by two large, blue rings, and the simple caption, ‘got it, boys’. Gavin scratched his chin, and clicked on the user’s account. They had a few dozen posts, according to their statistics, most of which were garbage.

“SHER-on?” Gavin fumbled through a pronunciation of the username, *Charon*. “Why do people still have these shitty, anime usernames? It’s the goddamn 2030s,” he huffed, studying the user icon: a blown out image of a youngish, bearded man, standing in an old fishing boat, surrounded by water. Gavin couldn’t make out many details other than the guy was clearly smiling, and holding a paddle above his head in triumph.

Gavin drained the rest of his beer, and used another one of his friends’ tricks to backtrace the IP address of the poster. After some finagling, it placed the geolocation data of the photo on the outside of Flint, Michigan. Gavin leaned back, taking a moment to consider the statistical likelihood of this poster hailing from Michigan, but save for Milwaukee, there was no other city in the whole of the USA with android production equipment. If he was hocking super illegal, blackmarket equipment, this was the place to be.

Pulling up the coordinates in a map app, Gavin got a good look at the supposed area of origin: an abandoned industrial park. Squat, two story concrete beasts dotted an aging parking lot full of weeds and fissures. Trash littered the overgrown plots of grass in front of the sixties era buildings. Maybe this had been something, three years ago, but now it was one more casualty of greater Michigan’s refusal to catch up with the times. Still, Gavin resolved to pay a visit, if only to get out of his house for a few hours. He secretly hoped it would turn up a couple clues, but he wasn’t about to hold his breath.

Gavin plopped back onto his massive pillow pile. A soft ping alerted him that his search query was complete.

*Matches found...0*

Gavin unleashed a grunt of frustration, but at least it confirmed Langford hadn’t mentioned his affliction to his family. It still struck him as odd that the information didn’t appear anywhere. Most people couldn’t stop themselves from oversharing personal details online, but somehow, all of the victims were devoid of a chronicle. Unfortunately, checking their medical records would be impossible—no judge would be willing to issue a subpoena to a hospital on behalf of a suspended cop who claimed to have seen a dead guy in an android’s body.

Every answer led to five more questions. Nothing made sense, and it wasn’t like he could bounce ideas off of anyone, suspended as he was.

“Maybe there really is some psycho out there shovin’ brains into toasters…” Gavin muttered,
popping the cap off another beer.

He closed his eyes, dull throbs wracking the inside of his skull. A soft ping roused him from his stupor. Gavin looked down at his screen, and bolted awake. It was a message from RK900. He hesitated briefly before tapping the Terminator icon.

*HAL9k: I attempted to call you, but your number bounced back with a “disconnected” notice.*

Gavin slapped his forehead. “Shit!” He exclaimed. In the rush to hunt down Langford, he’d completely forgotten about his phone. At least a disconnected number meant the phone service already bricked it. It was the little victories in life.

*Me: lost it to the clone
Me: or whatever the fuck he was*

Gavin watched the faux speech bubble bounce, as he eagerly awaited RK900’s reply. He teased his bottom lip between his teeth, unsure what the android would say—what Gavin wanted him to say.

*HAL9k: Ah, the human transfer android. I suppose he’s “targeting” you now, as well?*

A noise—a hybrid between a wheeze and a growl—fell out of Gavin’s mouth. “Is he fuckin’ with me again?” Gavin rolled his eyes, and dropped the tablet onto the ground. Sighing, he turned back to the TV. His tablet pinged a couple more times, but Gavin let it go, positive he didn’t want to deal with any mind games right now.

He made it exactly five minutes, before the anxiety gnawed its way deep enough into his gut for him to relent.

*HAL9k: I find it unsurprising you somehow misplaced your phone during the chase of this alleged “android.”
HAL9k: But, that’s neither here nor there.
HAL9k: May I ask you a question, detective?*

Gavin puffed out his cheeks, scowling at the screen.

*Me: i know what i saw thanks asshole
Me: the guy was a robot like u*

RK900 responded almost instantly with a rebuttal.

*HAL9k: What you describe isn’t possible with current technologies, but I would prefer to avoid an argument at this time, if that’s alright with you, detective.*

*Me: fine
Me: shoot*

Gavin crossed his arms, anticipation wreaking havoc on his already sore chest. He had to admit, he was surprised the android reached out to him. The VHS tape must have left an impression.

*HAL9k: I’m unable to watch this artifact, and I would appreciate you showing me how to play it.*

Gavin blinked. He wasn’t stupid, and he didn’t doubt for a second that RK900 one hundred and ten percent knew exactly how to play a VHS tape. The human leaned back, rubbing the stubble along his face. The scratching sound ignited small pinpricks of pain across his brain matter.
The black hole left behind after RK900’s exit had rendered Gavin an even bigger mess, and he knew he only had himself to blame. Maybe RK900 was willing to give him a second chance. God knew he didn’t deserve it, but he wanted it. Gavin Reed was a huge sucker for this robot, who came out of nowhere, and uprooted his life in every possible way. He craved RK900’s friendship—and more, but the ‘more’ could wait.

Me: i can stop by tomorrow
Me: night
Me: ive got some errands n stuff during the day

HAL9k: Then I will expect you no later than 8 p.m. My address is 625 Woodward Avenue, Apartment # 273.

Gavin shot him an “okay hand” emoji.

“Demanding as always.” He couldn’t fight back a slight grin.

Tomorrow would be a great day. He’d do a little urban exploration to satisfy his itch, then listen to RK900 bitch about the inferior analog quality of his gift. All in all, a net positive. Gavin powered down his tablet, and chugged the rest of his beer.

A true smile tugged at Gavin’s cheeks—the first in god only knew how long.

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Gavin glanced around, ensuring he was alone. Cool winds whipped around his hair and jacket, the overcast sky painting the scene a dreary gray. A sprawling complex of concrete and broken glass surrounded him, cracks and shredded furniture littered the scarred asphalt. Gavin coughed, catching his breath. He’d parked a couple miles away, to avoid detection. Without his badge, he couldn’t afford to be spotted, or accused of trespassing.

He marched deeper into the complex, feet crunching on the moss green and gold of circuit boards—old and discarded. A CRT monitor languished in the distance, broken glass cut into jagged teeth. This place was as much a graveyard as the rest of the rust belt ruins littering Michigan.

Gavin kicked the old circuit boards to the side, and approached a building, whose windows had long since been eviscerated. He poked his head in, deathly quiet, in case of squatters or the homeless, both of which could spell danger. It was empty, save for the harsh whistle of the wind, as it tore down a dark and moldy hallway. The last few buildings hadn’t yielded much—fire pits, graffiti, discarded clothing and pillows. Quite lovingly inhabited, for abandoned structures.

Gavin scratched the back of his neck and sighed. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped to find. It was nothing new, just trash and emptiness—husks, left as a testament to what the place once was, still trying to reclaim their grandeur.

Deep down, Gavin knew he wouldn’t find any android doppelgängers or magic robot printers here. Maybe it was nostalgia he was chasing—the need to feel like he was doing something forbidden. Breaking rules. Rebelling against a greater power. Standing up to the man—except he was the man, now, and any satisfaction gleaned from this little power trip was fleeting at best. Looking around the ruins of the industrial office park, Gavin yearned to be a kid again—free of responsibility, and the latent understanding of cause and effect.

The Infinity Killer—whoever they may be, however many they may be—might be practicing mad science, making android doubles of people on death’s door, but that wasn’t his problem anymore.
Gavin needed to accept that and move on, no matter how bitter he may feel about it. Connor, Hank, and the transplants from Vice could figure it out. Gavin needed to take Hank’s suggestion at face value, and focus on what mattered most—*who* mattered most.

“Drove an hour and a half for nothin’, Nines,” he whispered into the chilled spring wind. “Just didn’t wanna seem too eager, I guess.” Papers and plastic bags chased each other across the parking lot, catching on tall weeds and brambles. Gavin kicked one of the bags, and noticed a gray mass in the distance. Another concrete pod stood off to the side, stained with decades of decay and grime. Gavin shrugged. He drove all the way out here. Might as well invade one more hobo nest, before returning to Detroit, and RK900.

He walked around the building. No broken windows or boarded entrances. Odd. Gavin approached a metal door, built into the side of the building. A couple tugs confirmed it was locked from the inside. Not too strange. Maybe this area had better rent-a-cops on board than the rest of the complex.

Another sweep around the structure revealed a blacked-out door at the front of the building. Gavin was struck by the uncanny sense of feeling watched—invisible eyes, monitoring him from some unseen vantage point. He rubbed the back of his neck and swept the perimeter.

No one. Nothing. An empty, overgrown parking lot. Ten in the morning was too early for gangs or mischievous kids to be lurking around. Still, some human instincts were worth their weight in gold. Gavin whistled, expecting the noise would lure out any dumbasses who though they were being clever, but all he got in return was a flurry of old papers, crawling across gray asphalt.

Keyed up, Gavin returned his focus to the door. *Locked.* He inspected the keyhole. It was nothing fancy—he’d picked a thousand of these, as a kid. Gavin proceeded to do just that, and slid through the door without a sound. He would never deny being loud and brash, but years of urban exploration through young adulthood had taught him a couple things about stealth.

The sense of unease only swelled as he looked over the lobby. It was clean, the walls a blinding white. Incandescent light poured from the ceiling, highlighting a massive delta symbol, carved on the floor.

Gavin stumbled backwards. “Holy shit,” he yelped, eyes searching around the room. He instinctively reached for his phone, but cursed under his breath when he remembered it was gone.

Massively creeped out, Gavin noted the two doors in addition to the entrance—one hidden behind a reception desk, the other along the far wall. *It’s worth a peek,* he assured himself. He hopped the desk, and headed for the door located in the back. Another successful lockpick job, and he was through.

An equally white hallway lay just beyond the door. Triangular, red tiles decorated the faux marble floor in regular intervals, and a thick blue stripe was painted on the far wall. Preternatural silence lingered in the still air, broken only by the soft pad of Gavin’s boots against the floor. He meandered down the hall, and halted. The sound of his footfall faintly doubled, its duplicate being a quarter of a second off, which meant it didn’t come from him.

“Hey,” Gavin hissed in a low voice, “who’s there?” He was met with silence, but couldn’t shake the sensation that he’d awoken some great beast, lurking in the belly of this old office building.

Gavin’s eyes scanned the hallway—a white void, interspersed with blips of color. No sign of life—no sign anyone had ever been in this place. Maybe it was ten years on the force, but he could feel multiple eyes bearing down on him, now.
“You’re fuckin’ losin’ it, Reed,” he forced out, in a hushed tone.

Shivering a touch, Gavin continued to creep down the hallway, testing every door he came across. All of them were locked. Under normal circumstances, he’d break in, but the mounting sense of another presence increased with every step, and he was half convinced he’d open a door, and get ambushed by some kind of monster.

“A fuckin’ android clone,” he chuckled to himself. Did he think it was funny? No, but his nerves were getting to him. “You’ve done this shit a thousand times, Gav. It’s just some lunatic homeless guy who thinks you’re infringing on his booze locker. No biggie.”

Finally, curiosity got the better of Gavin, and he unlocked one of the doors. Opening it slowly, he tried to mitigate the creaking sound, in preparation for someone to be on the other side. Releasing a breath he didn’t know he was holding, Gavin flicked the light switch.

“What the hell!?” Gavin yelped, and immediately placed his hands over his mouth. Wild, green eyes scanned the silent hallway—still empty. Thank god for that!

Gavin entered the room, and felt his body go numb at the sight of medical equipment. It was an exam room of some kind. A bed sat against the far wall, surrounded by the standard array of plastic tubing, and bandage boxes one would find in a doctor’s office.

“...enroll him in an experimental drug trial, at some clinic, outside of Flint.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Gavin gasped. It was impossible—he’d run a million searches, looking for this place, and turned up nothing. The statistical coincidence of him finding a mysterious, non-existent cancer clinic, outside of Flint, from a three year old forum post, was astronomical. Gavin was here because someone wanted him to be here.

“Shit!” He whispered, adrenaline flooding his body.

Clothes rustled softly, and displaced air pressed against Gavin’s back. Goosebumps shot along every inch of his skin, and he turned on his heel with a loud, “hey!”

Nothing. A blindingly white hallway. Perfect. Pristine. Unused. No signs of human habitation. Gavin’s breathing doubled as he crept back into the hall. His hindbrain urged him to run—bail on this place, and drop an anonymous tip to Connor or Hank. Gavin wasn’t a little bitch, though. Whoever this fuck was, Gavin wanted to teach them a lesson.

“I know you’re there,” Gavin called out, willing the tremble in his voice to settle. “Just show yourself already!” His voice bounced off the triangular tiles infused with swirling marble of the floor.

He continued down the hallway with a scowl, dread increasing tenfold, with every step. The white hallway fed into a large, open room. It was dark, unlike the blinding light behind him. Gavin could make out a curved, semi-circle of windows in the distance—tiny motes of red and blue, piercing the darkness. On the wall next to him, a door peaked open—a crack of bright, molten blue light, scouring the gloom.

Drawn to the light, Gavin gingerly pushed the door open, filling the dark room with bright blue.

“No fuckin’ way...” His stomach dropped at the sight of an enormous machine, consuming half of the room’s real estate. Gavin recognized the shiny white substance of its body—a material that wasn’t quite plastic, and wasn’t quite metal, but far outstripped both in terms of durability—CyberLife plasti-steel. Nestled in the center of the behemoth were two, three foot wide, illuminated
blue rings, enveloped by an eight foot tall glass capsule.

“Jesus Christ!” Suddenly, the room was spinning, and Gavin stumbled to the side, to brace his dizzy body. He could feel panic rising, erupting up his throat. This shouldn’t exist. This shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t be here. He shouldn’t…

Out of nowhere, a bright cyan light covered Gavin, blinding him. He yelled, throwing up his hands to shield his eyes. He could hear the unmistakable sound of heavy footsteps and rustling cloth. Hands—strong hands, inhumanly strong—grabbed him from behind, steadying him even as he kicked and punched and thrashed. More fingers grabbed his chin, and the side of his head, wrenching his eyes open. Vibrant blue burned his retinas and heated every pore along his face. He couldn’t move—couldn’t scream.

The light disappeared, leaving a massive orange splotch where his vision should have been. He hissed and cursed, as he was dragged by bodies—he estimated at least three. Slowly, his eyesight recalibrated—rods and cones recovering from the imposing afterimage—just in time to be hurled onto the floor. He blinked, tears pouring from his eyes as they washed away the lingering effects of whatever the hell these fuckers used to blind him.

Gavin rubbed his eyes, and checked his surroundings. Ice seized his body, freezing him in place. The room was dark, but enough light poured off of the vast array of machinery to alert him to a large, circular light fixture hanging from the ceiling, and a gurney off to the side. An operating theater. Gavin balled his fists, willing his breathing to even out.

You’re fine, Gav. Just fuckin’ maintain, and you’ll make it outta here. Hollow words. Empty reassurances.

A giant machine sat in the center of the room. It looked every bit like the bastard child of an MRI unit and a cancer radiation therapy machine, made of a material similar to the android print station, next door. Blue lights ran all along its chassis, and Gavin shivered. He didn’t know what the thing was, but he could see the black and white helmet hanging off the side of it, and had an inkling as to its purpose.

Heart thudding and head pounding, Gavin looked to the ten or so figures standing along the perimeter of the room—veritable ghosts, poised in silence, with an unnatural stiffness. He knew that posture—was intimately familiar with it. Their clothes were identical—loose fitting, black and white v-necks and cardigans, with an asymmetrical design, and a beanie. Bright red triangles, in the same style as the one dug into the floor of the lobby, decorated the trim of their long cardigans. Gavin recognized five of the faces almost immediately.

“Fuck,” he whimpered, feeling every bit a caged mouse.

He’d been right all along. The Infinity Killer wasn’t a he—it was a group, and it had lots of androids, or whatever the hell these things were. They weren’t technically androids, despite their physical composition—not with the minds of human beings inside them—but they absolutely weren’t human. They were a hybrid species, doomed to forever ride that existential line.

Could a machine have a soul? Gavin supposed the existence of these creatures answered that question—if these things were, in fact, robotic vessels containing a digitized human consciousness. At that point, was there even a distinction between human and machine anymore? It doesn’t fucking matter, Gavin glanced around, frantic and outnumbered. He had no idea what the hybrids were capable of, let alone if they were armed. If Nines were here, he’d know what to do. He’d know exactly how to kick their asses.

“Nines…” Gavin whispered. He closed his eyes at the thought of the android. He’d never see him again—never sit beside him, watching through Terminator 2, in analog. Naturally, Gavin would
end up in an unwinnable situation on the night he was due to try and patch things up with the only worthwhile person in his life. It’s not like RK900 would even come looking for him—he’d assume Gavin blew him off, and continue to resent the human for the rest of his days.

*If I die, would he even go to the funeral…?*

A new kind of pain gripped Gavin’s heart, the kind that blotted our terror.

A spark ignited inside of Gavin. There was no choice, he had to survive this fuck up, no matter the cost. Gavin would be at RK900’s apartment tonight, at eight p.m.

Staggering to his feet, Gavin lunged for the silent figure closest to the door, with a feral yell. He shoved past the creature, but they reached for Gavin, grabbing a hold of his jacket. Gavin contorted, shimmying free of the rust-red leather. He sidestepped the guy in a single, fluid motion, and picked up speed towards the door. A deafening chorus of footsteps filled the small space as the pseudo-androids flocked towards Gavin.

“No, get away from me you fucks!” Gavin yelled, shoving away arms and landing solid kicks against plasti-steel torsos. “I’ve gotta meet someone, and I don’t have time for your shit!”

The robots grunted and yelped as Gavin landed defensive blows on their bodies. Many flinched away from the volatile human, giving him a wide berth. Whoever—whatever—they were, they clearly weren’t designed for combat. Hope flared in Gavin’s gut. He could do this after all. Years of picking fights with the biggest guy in the bar was finally starting to pay off.

His fist connected with an android’s face, sending a spray of deep blue into the air. She grabbed her nose, whining and wheezing, retreating to nurse her wound. The reaction was so unexpected that Gavin almost let his guard down, but another android lunged for him. He ducked out of his way with ease. A couple of other androids joined their bleeding friend, tending to her injury.

“What the hell is going on here,” Gavin muttered, green eyes wide. He anticipated a practiced goon squad, not whatever the hell this was.

Gavin didn’t want to waste another second trying to understand, and he turned to the door, dashing the last few feet until he was free of the operating theater. “Plastic fuckers,” he spat, pausing a moment to take in the scene. A few of the robotic ghosts watched him with icy glares, but the rest rubbed their arms or torsos, nursing their injuries.

Heart rate leveling out, Gavin sprinted towards the hallway, terrified, but content in the knowledge he’d soon be home free. Career be damned, the first thing Gavin was doing the minute he got out of this hellscape was calling Hank, and getting every cop in the tri-state area out here, asap.

An impossibly loud bang ripped through the room, and a searing pain filled Gavin’s gut. He screamed, and fell to his knees. Whimpering, he clutched his side. Warm liquid oozed between his fingers—Blood. So much blood. Gavin’s vision blurred momentarily, and he curled over himself. Heavy breaths poured from his mouth, and a sharp tang ricocheted across his tongue. Gavin screwed his eyes shut, and tried to level out his breathing. If he went into shock, now, that would be it.

“You’re fine, Gav. You have to be fine,” he mumbled, fighting to maintain control over his body. “You’re meeting with Nines later, and you’re gonna give him a fuckin’ real-ass apology, this time.” Gavin willed himself to believe it, but the hole in his gut hurt so bad. He’d taken bullets before, but never under this kind of duress, when so much was at stake.
“I’m glad ya got my invitation, detective!” A cheerful voice called from behind him. Casual footsteps approached Gavin’s doubled over form from behind. That voice—that accent.

“Jet, you didn’t think I was gonna come,” Gavin hissed through his teeth, turning to glare at the programmer. Case Jarrett tossed the smoking pistol off to the side, smoke obscuring his round face. Whistling, Jarrett stalked over to Gavin. He placed his hands on his hips, and shot Gavin a friendly smile—the kind reserved for friends, and not men he’d just shot in the gut.

“Y’know, I was beginnin’ to think you weren’t gonna come.” His voice had a sing song lilt that intertwined with a fake apologetic tone. “Thought my breadcrumb trail might not’ve been obvious enough.”

Is this piece of shit really callin’ me stupid when he’s the one over here making fucked up science projects?

“Breadcrumbs...? You mean detective work? You’re just fuckin’ pissed I caught your slimey ass in the act!” Gavin spat, clutching the warmth streaming down his side. His fingers dug into his bloodstained shirt. Red on green.

“A valid point! You certainly detected!” Jarrett clapped with glee. “You detected me breaking into your tablet, you detected me directing your internet search traffic, and you detected me backdating forum posts, with a fake IP address that would lead you straight to my family!”

Family? Gavin thought, what the fuck is this guy on? He tried to stagger to an upright position, but his body was too weak. He fell forward with a grunt.

Jarrett crouched down next to Gavin, face filling the detective’s failing vision. “Maybe ya’ve forgotten—and I’m not one to toot my own horn—but I am one of the best programmers in the world. Setting a trap for a guy like you is child’s play.”

Something clunked on the floor in front of Gavin. A cracked screen, and gouged chassis—his phone.

Gavin laughed, pain lacing up his side from the bullet wound. “You cocky little shit,” he snarled, “I ain’t afraid of you! You fuckers are a dime a dozen—all thinking you’re above the law, or some kind of gift to mankind. But you’re not. You’re just a pathetic cockroach!” A tremble wracked Gavin’s body, and he calculated the likelihood of being able to snag Jarrett’s discarded gun.

The telltale pelt of hesitant footsteps behind his crouched form ruined that plan. Shadows crisscrossed, building in density across Gavin, as the android converts circled around him. Soft murmurs filled the air above Gavin, but all he could discern was the whoosh of blood flowing through his head. The sound grew weaker with every pump.

Knocking on death’s door, Gavin confronted his conceits, most of which crumbled to pieces under scrutiny. So many opportunities wasted for nothing. So many people hurt as a result of his own insecurities.

“I should’ve been less of a dick,” Gavin whispered. “He deserved so much better.” Heat pooled in the corner of his eyes at the memory of RK900 smiling in his kitchen. “Nines,” Gavin mouthed, tasting warm salt as tears ran down his face. “I’m scared...” A prayer on the tip of his tongue.

RK900 would be better off without him.

“Sister Cassandra,” Jarrett’s voice was muffled by the loud whoosh of blood in Gavin’s ears. “Bring me the cauterization wand.”
Gavin screamed as an impossible heat lit up his gunshot wound.

“Can’t have anything bad happenin’ to our newest brother!” Jarrett clapped his hands, leaving Gavin a whimpering pile on the floor.

“We got some O negative blood around here somewhere…” Jarrett muttered, barking friendly orders to a few of the android things. Gavin closed his eyes, preferring death over whatever this lunatic planned for him.

A pair of hands grabbed Gavin’s face, and angled it up. A couple of light pats stung his cheeks, and he looked into the empty, brown eyes of Case Jarrett. Gavin snarled, lunging for the other man, but an android pinned him in an instant.

“Detective, uh...Reed, was it?” Jarrett chuckled, crouching next to Gavin, crossing his arms and clutching his shoulders. “Now, you’re just a modern day Icarus, aren’t cha? Found the remnants of one of my brother’s temper tantrums, and used it to fly a lil’ teensy bit too close to the sun.” Jarrett patted Gavin’s head, and Gavin jerked, trying to angle away from the psychopath’s touch.

Jarrett stood, snapping his fingers. The android pulled Gavin upright, and he winced with pain. The programmer stood less than an inch from Gavin, sizing up the detective.

“So, mister—er—Detective Reed, what would you give for eternal life? What price is too great?”

Gavin spat pink saliva at Jarrett, staining his white jacket with a splotch of red.

“Fuck off! I wouldn’t give you shit!” Gavin snarled, straining against the android’s iron grip. “I’d rather fuckin’ die!”

“Ya know, I don’t believe that for a second,” Jarrett mused, “no one wants to die—no matter how much false bravado they muster.” A sly grin. Gavin felt bile rise in the back of his throat. “My family,” Jarrett motioned towards the timid, similarly dressed androids, “they all came to me, desperate to beat their premature death sentence, and for a fee, I facilitated their transfer.”

“What the hell does a CyberLife department head care about money!?” Gavin screamed, twisting his body to gain some kind of advantage of his android captor.

“Money?” Jarrett laughed, gripping his stomach. “Now, don’t be so pedestrian, Detective. I couldn’t care less about money, ya know. This runs much deeper—it’s a question of what you’re willing to sacrifice. The price for the afterlife is a steep one, after all!”

The psychopath’s accent was grating on Gavin, driving him insane. He wanted to claw out his own ears, maybe take out his brain as well. The dread building deep inside of him was reaching a fever pitch, and he knew exactly where this conversation was headed—where he was headed—and he far preferred death.

“I deal in souls, detective Reed!” Jarrett continued, unabated. “I make sure they get exactly where they need to go!”

“Fuck off, you self-important sack of shit! I don’t care about you, or your shitty white boy manifesto! Either you kill me right now, or I swear to fucking god I will tear you to shreds,” Gavin screeched, voice shattering. Another android ran over to help their companion restrain the volatile human.

“And, wouldn’t cha know, the cost of granting a soul immortality is a sacrificial vessel!” Jarrett grinned once more, flashing his canines. Without speaking, Jarrett made a few hand gestures, and
Gavin was drawn, kicking and screaming, into the operating theater. A sharp pin prick blossomed at the base of his skull. A dull burn followed, and Gavin was released. He fell to his hands and knees, room spinning at a million miles an hour.

“As much as I don’t wanna do this—and I really don’t, Detective—you’ve forced my hand.” The sing song midwestern vowels faded in and out. Gavin grabbed his ears, digging his stubby fingernails into the surrounding skin.

“No,” he croaked, vocal chords shredded to pieces, “no, no, no, no, no, no!” Gavin’s worst fear—the stuff of his nightmares was coming true in real time. This had to be a dream. He would wake up in his shitty bed in fifteen minutes, and laugh it off.

“Now, you’re just gonna love immortality, detective.” Jarrett’s voice was distant now. Calling out from across a roaring ocean. “I put together something real special—just for you! You seem so fond of that lil’ CIA prototype number, after all.”

“Fuck you!” Gavin slurred, he bared his teeth as best he could. “If you lay a finger on Nines—” Darkness hit Gavin full force, as the sound of Jarrett’s soulless chuckles ferried him away into unconsciousness.

—

Gavin’s eyes fluttered open. His body was heavy—a lead weight. Pitch black dispersed, as bright green text filtered in front of his eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Gavin wanted to scream, but for the most part, he couldn’t bring himself to care anymore. The text started to take form, or maybe he remembered how to read. Gavin was unsure.

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C:\WINDOWS\system32:>
D:\Styx\Charon.exe_run_y
y
Charon.exe_initialization...
Initialization complete
Execution_3...
Execution_2...
Execution_1...
Charon.exe executed successfully...
Transfer status_initialization from D:\$183%*\ to D:\Mode\NRK\Unspecified...
Transfer status_commencement from D:\$183%*\ to D:\Mode\NRK\Unspecified...
Transfer status_0.01%...0.02%...0.03%

Everything grew quiet—an impossible silence. Gavin could hear the electrical impulses of his neurons, firing across his gray matter. He wanted to be terrified, but an eerie peace fell over him.

The warring emotions in his mind and heart finally calmed, and he could think straight for the first time in his life. He was dying—of that he was certain. He’d led a life of nothing but chaos and anger, but he could only recall one regret.

“Nines,” he whispered. Maybe he whispered it—maybe he screamed it. He’d never know either way. “Nines, I’m so sorry.” Gavin Reed had never apologized to anyone his entire life, and here he was, begging an android for forgiveness. A white heat started to crawl along the inside of his head. “I fucked up...again. I’m always fucking up, never stopping to think of what I was doing to others
Gavin could barely think at all, anymore. There was no light at the end of the tunnel, just colors—so many colors—the kind of colors with no real world corollary. They didn’t have names.

“But I wanted to say...that I’m a dipshit, and a coward, and I didn’t mean any of that shit from a week ago. I was just too scared to admit how I really felt.”

He rambled desperately, into the psychedelic void.

“So please, don’t hate me...and please don’t forget me...”

The colors dispersed—a darkness filling the vacuum in their interim. It was unlike anything Gavin experienced—all consuming, and utterly empty.

“I’m sorry, Nines.”

The sound of his voice reverberated through the endless abyss.

“I can’t make it tonight.”

Black.

The soft hum of machinery.

Black.

Chapter End Notes

@Vapedrone
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A continuous flow of thought and perception keeps an unbroken chain of continuity that we know as ourself. Our conscious mind is not the pattern of our brain, but a continuous emergent entity based on that pattern.
—Mark Sarang (Soma, 2015)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A low, electronic tone reverberated throughout his whole body, shocking him awake. He blinked his eyes, and the dark, concrete walls of the room came into immediate focus—twenty over five vision. He could see the individual grooves of concrete, from a hundred feet away.

Was my eyesight always this good?

Red wracked his body—a color translated as feeling, harsh and unforgiving. He didn’t recall a fight that would leave him in this kind of pain...he didn’t recall anything. Panic flooded his system—a full-body experience. The sensation was everywhere, consuming him, but it felt wrong. Panic was supposed to settle in the gut, not the whole of the body. A red tinted haze fell over him, and settled along the edge of his self, stinging like an angry hive.

He was on his back, laying against the icy floor. It translated as cold on his fingertips and bare skin, but he didn’t actually feel cold. None of the physiological response elements were present. A disconnect. The sense was an approximation of cold, without the flare of delicate nerve endings.

His eyes took in the rest of his surroundings. Figures stood around him—thirty by his count. Men and women in loose-fitting clothes of black and white, with hints of red along the trim—the same red covering him like a metaphysical plague. The people were immobile statues, forming a tight knit circle around his supine body—menacing knights, amidst the high vaulted ceilings of concrete and aged stone.

Who am I…?

His tongue probed his mouth and teeth. Dry, save for the occasional burst of saliva on his subconscious demand. It was thick and viscous, coating his mouth in an unfamiliar film.

My spit isn’t like this...

The red cloud slammed into him again, and he whimpered this time. A psychic attack, with nowhere for him to hide.

“Our new brother awakens!”

A voice called from afar, and a bearded man with glasses approached the center of the circle. The guy had an air of importance, reinforced by the way the others deferred their attention to him. Naked and confused, he stared up at the bearded stranger, from the floor.

“Where am I?” His voice was weak. It felt fuzzy and foreign as it reached his ears.
What’s my name? Why can’t I remember my name?

Red. So much red.

The mysterious figure crouched. His clothing borrowed many of the same motifs as those forming the circle. The only significant difference between him and the others was his long robe. It trailed along the floor, licking at his own exposed skin.

The robed figure produced a small, white bowl. Its surface was shiny, like plastic, but it looked much sturdier. A thick, black liquid settled in the lower half of the container. The bearded stranger dipped two fingers into the substance.

Still shaken from being unable to remember his own name, he whimpered, as cool liquid dribbled along his face, catching on his lips. It tasted horrible, and a forcible knock rattled in the back of his mind, as the substance reached the tip of his tongue. In an instant, he knew what it was, but the associated words and pictures wouldn’t come to him—they were locked behind a barrier. He grimaced.

Maybe that was for the best.

Two fingers delicately traced a shape onto his forehead, after which the robed man stood, and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

“Well, wouldjya welcome the newest member of our family, Icarus!” The bearded stranger grinned, with far too many teeth. A knowing cruelty settled in his dark eyes, as the stationery circle of people jolted to life, and murmured a chant under their breath.

That’s not my name.

Red.

That’s never been my name.

Bursts of crimson filled his eyes and body. He whined, scraping his fingernails against the floor. Small scraps of grey curled under his tightened grip. Every time he fought the assigned name, his body was hurled against an invisible barrier at high speeds. He hated it, and wished he could wash away the unwanted sensation, but he refused to accept a name that was not his own.

“Everything okay there, Icarus?” The robed figure extended a hand. Danger twinkled in his empty, brown eyes. “I know the trip can be a teensy bit much, for some.” The bearded man’s hand clasped and tugged at the the his arm, pulling him up from the ground.

He was led across a black and white checkerboard floor, until the two came to rest in front of a decorative wall. A large, red triangle—he recognized it as the Greek letter, delta—was carved into the wall. Within its geometric confines stood bright, white bones—human. Thirty. He hadn’t counted them individually, but he knew, after just one look.

“Here ya go!” A bone like those on the wall was placed in his hand.

*Human. True rib number six. Left side. Cracked, likely due to a heavy blow.*

He dropped the bone with a gasp. The words appeared in his mind, unbidden—letters physically translated in his head. His breathing stopped.

Wait.
He hadn’t been breathing prior to this.

“Now, you can’t just leave that on the floor, brother Icarus! Pick it up, and put it where it belongs.”
Anger stewed beneath the surface of the smiling man’s words, at odds with his happy, sing-song lilt.

His body was already moving to pick up the bone. No conscious thought went into the decision, he merely acted. The red haze blossomed, as he tried to understand why his body was acting of its own accord, but the consideration was too physically painful.

The bone was placed in its designated spot, and he took a step back. He blinked, and was struck with the hazy image of a dead body on a gurney. An excised piece of its chest sat alongside it, revealing a missing rib bone. Harsh accusations replayed as a garbled, broken gibberish, and the flashback began to glitch, for lack of a better term. Lines and square artifacting corrupted it, until a huge red flash knocked him to the ground.

He rubbed his eyes over and over again, body feeling warm as he gulped down air. When he removed his hands, everything was normal. No red. No glitches. No body. Nothing but a decorative wall with human bones.

Shouldn’t I be worried? Isn’t this wrong?

The robed man roughly dragged him back to the center of the circle. “Behave yourself, Icarus.” A low hiss, but his ears processed it as loud enough to be a scream. He winced.

“And with that baptism, Icarus is now, officially, a brother!” The robed man held up his arms, and the other figures in the circle rushed to greet their newest inductee. There were a number of congratulatory pats and hugs. Murmurs rose up alongside smiles, and he tried not to recoil at the attention. Something about this whole situation was so wrong, but he was met with painful resistance every time he dug into that intuitive feeling.

One amongst the many—a short man with blue eyes, and messy hair sticking out from under his hat—gently took him by the arm. “I’ll take you to your room,” whispered the stranger—his new brother, he supposed. He followed the other man with little resistance, weaving in and out of bodies.

They slunk down a long, windowless corridor. A number of columns upheld the vaulted ceiling, and he noticed a different symbol carved into the wall at even intervals—a compass overtop of a ruler, framing a “G” in the center. He recognized the insignia, but couldn’t remember where or how. Something familiar, on the tip of his tongue—equally forbidden.

The two men entered a small room, empty save for a bed, small table, and rug. No dresser or window. He reluctantly sat on the mattress, as his new companion plucked a matte black cup from the table.

“Icarus, was it?” The voice jolted a memory deep inside of him. It scraped along the inside of his skull, desperate to manifest, but unable to tear through the foggy, pink stillness.

Why is his face so familiar?

He stared at the nervous looking man, and then at the cup in his hand.

“Here,” the cup was forced into his grasp, “this’ll help.”

“Do I know you?” A sound like lightning assaulted his head. It ripped through his mind, and he
The other’s blue eyes grew wide, and he shook his head. “No, I, uh, we’ve never met. My name’s, uh, Dan.” Dan paused, a pregnant consideration poised on his open lips. “I...no one here really uses names. They’re more for the High Ferryman than any of us.” Dan glanced around, paying extra attention to the open concrete doorway. He licked his lips, and spoke in a low voice, “don’t think, around here; just do. As long as you’re compliant, he’ll, uh, leave you alone.”

He stared at the drink Dan provided, mulling over his words—or perhaps warning was a more apt term. The thick, blue liquid sloshed around the walls of the cup, heavy drops slowly petering down the plastic sides.

“What is this stuff? It looks like dish soap.” He swirled the glass a few more times, his anger swelling, in time with that pink haze.

He turned to Dan, and grabbed him by the collar of his loose shirt. “Where are we!? What is this place? I don’t under-”

A hand flew over his mouth. “Quiet,” Dan hissed, eyes wide, “someone might hear you.” His blue eyes monitored the hallway. When he was satisfied they wouldn’t be interrupted, Dan eased his hand away.

“This is the—I can’t believe I’m gonna say this out loud—afterlife. It’s supposed to be Heaven. Y’know, free of pain and sickness, and all that sleazy brochure talk,” Dan whispered, in a hushed tone, sarcasm lacing his words. “But it’s closer to Hell. I can tell from your eyes, you feel the same.”

He met Dan’s solemn gaze, and then looked to the silent hallway.

Dan shook his head, and pushed the cup to his lips. “You do wanna drink this stuff, though. It, unlike the rest of this circus, isn’t a farce.”

“What? Hell no! I’m not drinking some fucking mystery drink until someone tells me what the fuck is going on!” He shoved away Dan and the cup, voice ricocheting off the sparsely decorated walls, and into the hall. Something inside him ignited. He felt more like himself—whatever that meant. A huge flash of red ripped into him, and he cried out, clutching his chest.

A hand steadied his shoulder, and caught the falling cup without spilling a drop. “Like I said,” Dan hissed, voice low and brimming with resignation, “don’t think about any of that stuff. The only truth here is the routine, and if you break the routine, he’ll notice.”

“He...?” He felt heat rush across his body, as the anger filled him, and he fought against the red haze for control of his emotions.

“The High Ferryman. I don’t know his real name, and it doesn’t matter, because the cops will never find this place.” Dan furrowed his eyebrows, and practically shoved the drink against his companion’s lips. “I already tried that route, and well...” Dan looked at his brother apologetically, and removed his hands from the cup. “Just drink the stuff, so I can tell our fearless leader that you’re in the green.”

He hesitated, and tipped back the cup. The goop looked like a children’s novelty drink, but lacked the sugary smell—or any smell, for that matter. A horrible chemical taste, mixed with heavy copper, lit up his mouth, and he gagged, blue rivulets spilling down his chin.

Dan moved in to tip the cup, keeping it flush with his face, and forcing the rest of the stuff down
his throat. “It’s an acquired taste,” Dan muttered, apologetically, drawing back the now empty cup. “But it’ll make you feel better.”

He shoved Dan away, and coughed, scraping at his tongue to will the taste away. Every time one of his fingers came in contact with the muscle, a physical sensation bombarded his mind, scraping along the red cloud, and leaving his head aching.

“What the hell is that shit!?” He spit, sullying the carpet with a pale, blue splotch.

Dan snorted, “the boss calls it his Elixir.” There was an unspoken “but” lingering on the end of his statement, as Dan took his bottom lip between his teeth. “It doesn’t matter,” Dan resolved. He pointed to the clothes on the end of the bed, “those’re yours. Make sure you never take off the hat.”

His hand ran along his face, and his fingers met a soft fabric.

Why would you leave someone naked, but put a stupid-ass hat on their heads?

He wanted to ask Dan, but the other man was already deep into his speech.

“We don’t have to eat, we don’t get sick, and we technically don’t need to sleep, but questions, or removing the hat, will get you punished… and, well…” His blue eyes went wide with fear and resignation. “Trust me when I say there are worse things than death, in this world.” Dan looked away, and fell silent. He finally stood, heading out the door without so much as a ‘goodbye.’

With Dan gone, he laid back on his bed, and stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours. Without windows or clocks, time was immaterial, and his mind was blank, save for the residual fear of the aggressive red blanket, lingering just out of sight. Eventually, he closed his eyes, and his body transitioned into dreams.

It didn’t feel like REM sleep. In fact, it didn’t feel like sleep, at all. He was floating, or perhaps running across a pink bridge. Below him, images played out in sequence. A man leaned forward, and ran his lips along the pale column of a neck. Hushed whispers spilled obscenities against soft skin.

He could taste and feel the warmth of the other body, separated as he was from the recreation—effectively occupying two places at once. His dream self closed a hand around a sturdy hip, and reveled in the excited jump of muscles.

“God, you’re so hot like this, Nines.”

Pink and red filled the edges of his mind, as the memory hemorrhaged some kind of static. He focused his thoughts, slipping into the shoes of his dream, feeling impossibly warm lips against his. A tongue slid against his own, and he craved it, fighting tooth and nail to preserve the electric sensation of a body against his. Even with the red tendrils confusing his mind and body, he knew this other person was important.

All his senses glitched out, torn away by the invasive red, but he looked up in time to catch a pair of bright blue eyes gazing out from the electronic chaos.

He opened his eyes, body fuzzy and crackling.

“Nines,” he whispered into the still air. A man with no name, and a name with no face. “Who are you…? Who am I?”
“Here,” a friendly woman handed him a bucket and a mop, “today, it’s your duty to clean the ceremonial atrium.” He stared at her, and the two items suspended in her grip. Dan skulked a few steps away, blue eyes focused on him. He wondered if the blue eyes from his dream were just a superimposition of Dan’s. But Dan’s eyes were too watery, and lacked the deadly confidence of the pair in his dream.

“You’re shitting me, right?” He snapped, rejecting the mop. A red haze crept into his periphery, but he ignored it. No one was gonna make him—whoever he was—clean the floor of this concrete monstrosity. “I’m not someone’s fuckin’ maid.” He snarled, and the woman retreated a few steps, completely unprepared for the verbal onslaught.

“Sister,” Dan surged forward, collecting the cleaning accouterments, “Brother Icarus is still in his adjustment period. Give him a little time.” Blue eyes glared. The woman nodded, still in disbelief, and exited the room in a hurry.

“Behave,” Dan huffed, handing him the mop and bucket. “Unless you want the others to rat you out.”

A low tone rang out across the room, and both men winced. The sound cut through his body, lighting up every cell, disrupting his thoughts, and blanking out his mind for a few seconds.

“Once an hour, every hour,” Dan nodded towards the ceiling. “Gotta love cults.” Dan’s expression was sour, as he turned to take his leave.

He cursed under his breath, reluctantly scrubbing the dull concrete, and wondered why—if all he said was true—Dan was kept in this place. The other man screamed liability, but his brain was Swiss cheese, and he couldn’t adequately parse thoughts related to Dan.

He tried to blank out his mind, but the repetitious nature of scrubbing the floor lead his thoughts to wander. They drifted back to the blue eyes of the stranger in his dream, and the latent recognition gnawed at his core. He knew this person—had known this person—and they were important to him. Teeth clamped down on the inside of his cheek as he fought through the red haze invading his body.

He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to recall everything about the dream—sight, smell, taste, touch—all so real, as if he were actually there. The more he thought about his hands gliding across smooth skin, and tasting bland saliva, the clearer the scenario grew.

Vivid sounds hit him from all sides, along with the ever vigilant pink haze—but he didn’t care about the color, or the pain it brought. All that mattered was the sensory cocktail of pressing himself against another—bare skin to bare skin. Pink became red, as the blue eyes returned.

“..vin”

“Gav...”

The swell of the red barrier reached a fever pitch, casting him into psychic chaos. He grit his teeth, willing himself to claw through the impenetrable mass.

The low tone from earlier cut across the room, from a hidden loud speaker, and tore him from his reverie. He slumped backwards, rubbing a hand against his ear.

“Gav...?” he whispered. “Nines...?” Names. Both were names. People he knew, he hoped. One
was the glitched out partner, with the blue eyes, whose face he couldn’t recall. The other…

“Yes’s Gav?” He reached out and touched his face, fingers catching on the short scruff along his chin. “Is that me?” He wanted it to be him, but that presumed he was the other man in the dream.

A warm burst shocked him, wracking his whole body, not in pain, but something indescribable. He cried out, squeezing his eyes closed. When he opened them, bright red flickered across his vision. Terror gripped him. He couldn’t be positive, but he swore the crimson spelled out the word ‘error.’

“I don’t understand, Gavin.”

The voice appeared out of nowhere, and he searched around, terrified. An uncanny sense of guilt choked him, grasping at him with its dark tendrils. He was a nameless, faceless man, with no past or present—how could he have hurt someone? What reason did he have to cause harm? But that assumed he was Gavin—and he wasn’t Gavin, nor was he Icarus.

He was no one.

A burst of red crawled down the length of his spine.

“What did I do? Who are these people? Did I hurt them? God forbid...did I kill them?” His whispers were frantic. Tears stung his eyes as a million thoughts translated into a million different sensations running the length of his body. It was so much—too much. He could feel his skin heating, and his chest pounding. Why was his heart so loud? The red felt physical now, like a barrier taking form just beneath his skin.

“Icarus?” Dan’s voice interrupted the cyclical thinking, and he turned to his supposed ally. “Is everything okay? You were making a strange noise.”

“That’s not my name,” he stated defensively, to Dan. “I know it’s not my name.”

Dan sighed, and scratched the back of his neck. “It is now. Just...whoever you used to be is gone. Accept it.” Defeat laced Dan’s tone, and he motioned for the other man to follow him back into the hallway.

The two traveled down a few silent halls, until they reached a large lobby, full of lounge furniture and people. Everyone seemed to be lost in their own conversations—smiles and whispers, creating a distinct ambience.

“Twice a day, we’re supposed to socialize.” Dan nodded at the display. “And we’re encouraged to pass along any evidence of ‘strange behavior’ to the High Ferryman.” Dan shot his charge a knowing look, and wandered off to join one of the small clusters of humanity.

He lingered along the fringes, afraid to join the others, as Dan had done. A set of three, large windows overlooked a tiny courtyard, and glanced out, watching a few of his family. They were planting seeds and plucking weeds, which struck him as odd, given they didn’t need to eat. The red zipped along his skin, and he halted all thoughts into the matter.

A man came over to greet him, and he attempted to ignore the newcomer. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts—he wanted…

Numbers and symbols appeared in the corner of his eye, and he gasped, startling the stranger. They were gone as soon as they appeared, but he couldn’t deny their presence. Fear welled up in him, and he excused himself from the conversation.
He tried not to think, even though he desperately wanted to make sense of everything happening in his head. These hallucinations were terrifying, and he could feel himself shattering under their weight, fracturing into a piece of a human being.

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Strong arms cradled Gavin, as he and Nines stumbled through the door. They locked lips, and fell towards a black shape—Gavin assumed it to be a couch, even if he couldn’t recall how it looked or felt. Nines collapsed into the void, pulling Gavin with him. His pale fingers sifted through Gavin’s hair, tugging and pulling with need.

Gavin broke away from Nines’ mouth, and trailed kisses along the exposed column of his partner’s neck. He whispered gibberish into that warm skin, trying to mark it with his teeth, to no avail. A bright pink crept into his vision, as he ran his hand up and down Nines’ torso, his hand coming to rest on a powerful hip.

“God, you’re so hot like this, Nines,” he whispered into Nines’ lips, taking his mouth. Reds and pinks blossomed, battling for the physical sensation of warm mouths meeting. Tongues clashed, vying for dominance. An error message appeared where pain should have met hard teeth on soft lips.

Gavin pulled away, a thin stream of glitches attaching both of their mouths. He looked up, into an artifaceted face, and hungry blue eyes stared back at him.

“..%%$ecti*( *&&d.”

His eyes flew open, as the low tone played over the loudspeaker. No matter the volume, those sounds couldn’t wipe his mind of the pale blue, burning into the back of his skull. He wondered why he was doomed to replay this dream every time he attempted sleep. Did it factor into the reason why he was here? What happened to these two men?

He leaned in between his legs, cradling his head. “Why do all my dreams glitch like broken TVs?” He ran his tongue around his dry mouth. His body still felt wrong, like there was a huge rift between his mind and physicality.

The man could count seven instances of being left alone with a menial chore, and one hundred and sixty-nine instances of the grating tone, wiping his immediate thoughts. Seven days. Seven days, and he was just as confused as he was when he awoke on the floor of the ceremonial atrium.

On day two, he noticed the utter lack of mirrors, or any reflective surfaces. He couldn’t remember his face, his eye color, or what his body looked like. With nothing else to go on, he assumed he looked the same as the man from the dream who wasn’t Nines—Gavin. He slipped so easily into the role during the dream, it felt natural to pretend they were one in the same.

He ran a hand along his jaw, where the unkempt dusting of facial hair remained at the same length. Seven days, no growth.

Grunting, he sat up, and watched the open doorway leading to the hall. Someone would come for him soon. They always did, around this part of the day. He wasn’t sure how he was capable of keeping such a precise internal record of time, but it made about as much sense as everything else.

The overwhelming red sensation plagued him. It was constant now, always lingering—ready to ensnare him, and consume every one of his senses. He tried to ignore its oppressive weight.

A woman entered the room. Gavin knew her as Cassandra—he’d heard the leader refer to her by
that name, on a single occasion. She was friendly, but so too was every other person in this place—a friendly, empty shell.

“Where’s Dan?” He ignored her small talk, and fidgeted. “He’s usually the one to get me.”

“Dan had an audience with the High Ferryman,” Cassandra replied, with a soft smile. “Come on,” she urged, “let’s get you set up in the garden.”

He hesitated a moment, lost in consideration for his sole friend. Dan’s earlier warnings resurfaced, but family members regularly disappeared for a couple days at a time. It wasn’t exactly strange, even when they returned with a glassy look to their eyes. No one here changed, and the whole environment was trapped in a perpetual limbo.

He stood, silent, and followed Cassandra. She was older than Dan, as well as most of the others—in her sixties, at least. Wrinkles were set into her skin, and a flavor of recognition licked at the back of his mind.

They passed a number of people on their way to the courtyard—Gary, Florence, Gene, Samantha—all leaving him with an itch of familiarity, clawing along his skin. All burdened with a pink aura around their faces, preventing him from focusing on them for too long.

The two reached the garden, and Cassandra showed him which seeds to plant, and where to place them. He interrupted her during her spiel only once—a knee jerk reaction.

“Isn’t this kinda stupid? We don’t eat, so why’re we planting this shit?”

Cassandra looked up from the small plot of fertile dirt, eyes wide and unsure. He realized his mistake in an instant.

“I,” Cassandra fumbled, “it’s not our place to question our roles, Icarus!” Her voice increased a couple decibels, wreaking havoc on his sensitive ears.

He panicked, and fumbled through his words. “S-sorry, I didn’t mean to...forget I said anything.”

He looked away, but could feel her cold gaze on the side of his head. A soft tug at his sleeve, and he looked over, in time to see Cassandra place the bag of seeds into his hand with a smile.

“It’s okay,” she chimed, “sometimes the bad memories try to come back to hurt you. So, we stay busy, and they fade into nothing.” She dug a small hole at the end of a row, and began to drop seeds into each, individual plot. “We’re free here,” Cassandra continued, plucking a few seeds from the bag in his hand. “The old world, the one we came from, it was painful—full of violence and sadness. But here, we don’t have to worry about any of that.”

He watched her cover the mounds, humming a single note as she went along. It sounded suspiciously like the one played over the loudspeaker twenty four times a day.

“Our ailments are cured,” she said, looking up at him, “and we get to spend the rest of eternity in a state of nirvana.” Her eyes were so sincere that he couldn’t turn away, but a cold fear filled him. More of the red bled into his system.

“R-right,” he muttered, digging holes of his own, trying to avoid the woman and her empty smiles. A few hours passed—three, if the loudspeaker was to be believed—but he enjoyed the sensation of the sun on his skin, even if the warmth it bled felt processed, or fake. The courtyard was small, surrounded by stone and columns on all sides, but it wasn’t nearly as dark or claustrophobic as the building.
His mind drifted to Nines and Gavin—his recurring dream. It always did when he was left to his own devices. They were some kind of key to breaking through this red haze. He could feel a tidal wave, deep inside of him, trying to break out, and it surged every time he thought of the two—of Nines, in particular.

He sighed, frustrated as he tried to recall Nines’ face—a version free of the glitches and artifacts.

“Brother Icarus,” Cassandra called to him, looking up from where she was covering a seed, “is something wrong? You seem...upset.”

He ignored her, focusing intently on the thought of Nines’ face. Today was the day, he could feel it. Today, he would recall this blue-eyed stranger, who he’d somehow wronged.

*I know his face,* he bit his lip, digging erratically at the ground in frustration, *I know I know his face. I know him.*

Nines wasn’t some creature sent to haunt dreams—Nines was real, and he knew it. Distantly, he could hear Cassandra calling to him, but he didn’t look up.

“I don’t understand, Gavin.”

The voice was clear as day—mournful and upset. What had this Gavin done to upset him? What had been so bad that four simple words had such a strong emotional aura. He threw down his spade, rendering it bent with the force.

“Why would he hurt him? They seemed so happy...like they were good for eachother. Why would someone destroy that?” He hissed in exasperation. He grabbed his head, fingernails biting into the wool of his beanie. “I need to think clearly...I need to…” The red was filling his vision—his entire person—white hot. Control was shifting in its favor, and he couldn’t stave off its intrusion.

“Icarus! Icarus! What are you doing.” Cassandra’s voice was muffled by the red wave, washing over him. He let out a frustrated yell, as Nines words repeated, over and over again, speeding up and slowing down, like a broken cassette tape.

“I can’t,” he wheezed, as everything became too much. His body grew warm. “I can’t understand you, Nines. Who are you?”

“...#ective R$3d.”

“Detective Reed.”

*A pale man, with perfectly styled hair and blue eyes, offered him a soft smile, from across a scarred table. A circle on his temple spun, illuminated by a soft blue.*

“Should we go, Gavin? I find this place horribly distasteful.”

Everything was too warm, all of a sudden. His body felt like it was on fire, and he ripped off his beanie, feeling the cool breeze stroke his his hair and forehead, for the first time since he could remember. He gulped down air, clutching his hammering chest. His heartbeat felt strange—to too hard, too rhythmic.

“Nines,” He wheezed. Reds and pinks and oranges licked across his nerves, whittling away at his senses. He could feel some kind of internal warning go off, deep within his body. “Nines, I…”

“Icarus! What are you doing!” He felt Cassandra’s hands close around his arm, tugging him in the
direction of the door, horror plastered across her face.

He batted her hand away. “My fucking name’s not Icarus,” he hissed, “It’s Gavin Reed!” He glared up at her, wincing through the psychedelic chaos of his mind and soul. A few memories, here and there, filtered through the red cloud, and a semblance of himself—of Gavin Reed—started to filter through the cracks in the barrier.

A familiar tone rang out across the courtyard, and all the sights, sounds, feelings, and images slid through his fingers. His mind blanked, for only a moment, but it was long enough for everything to drain back under the pink cracks. His name, his soul—he’d had it, but it was lost, once more. Now he was no one, again. A nameless man, trapped in this hell.

Hot tears stung the corner of his eyes, as a few family members gathered around him and Cassandra. Fervent whispers filled the air, until a friendly voice cut through the crowd.

“Oh, Icarus! Now, what am I gonna do with you?” He looked into the eyes of the High Ferryman, and his blood ran cold.

“You’ll just have to come with me, won’t cha’, Icarus?” His leader motioned him to follow, and the lingering chaos in his mind evaporated. There was no more red, no more blue eyes, no more guilt, no more struggles—simply the urge to follow the leader. He remained precisely two steps behind the High Ferryman all the way to an antechamber, at the far end of the building. It was closed off, accessible only by palm scanner.

Once inside, he was met with a room full of complex machinery. Shiny, white plastic, with blue and black decals, and the soft chitter of computer towers. It was all eerily familiar. He knew what these machines were, but the information was blockaded from him.

“Now, you’re just a little troublemaker aren’t cha? You and Dan are sure keen on testing the limits of my infinite patience.” The man sighed, anger evident in his eyes. He wanted to speak out, and correct the paradox, but his mouth was frozen shut. “But that’s alright. Sometimes ya can’t fix these things on the first try.”

The man typed a few commands onto a keyboard, and turned to his nameless follower. “Now, I’ll just take care a’ those pesky memories, and you can get some sleep.” On the word sleep, everything went dark.

He dreamed his same dream as every night, but every piece shuddered into static, as it progressed. Chaos. Warped colors and sound. Horrible artifacting. A million layers of corruption, until the dream ceased to be nothing more than two pinpricks of blue, against an abstract smattering of color and shape.

The names Nines and Gavin Reed dissolved on his tongue, lost to the dazzling reds and pinks recalibrating his mind.

—

Icarus awoke to the sacred tone, as he had every morning, for as long as he could remember. It roused him from the darkness of a dreamless sleep. Every so often, he recalled a pair of blue eyes, haunting his rest, but they were fleeting—some fragment of the life he left behind, for the privilege of joining the Family.

One of his family members greeted Icarus at the door, and the two exchanged pleasantries on their way to conduct their daily routine. Today, it was Gene—a tall, middle aged man, with grey eyes.
The two made small talk, as they headed towards their assigned chores for the day. Gene was slated to paint today, while it was Icarus’ job to work in the garden.

“Hi, Dan,” Icarus waved at his chore companion for the day. Dan, sullen as always, ignored him, opting to dig holes, instead. Icarus didn’t press the matter. The sounds of nature were more than adequate company. The High Ferryman reassured Icarus, on a few occasions, that it took some longer to adapt to paradise than others.

Icarus could feel Dan’s eyes boring holes into him, but he continued to lightly hum the sacred tone.

“So,” Dan ventured, “do you ever wonder what’s beyond these walls?”

Icarus looked at Dan quizzically. “Pain and disease,” he answered, matter of fact, “you know this as well as I do.”

A heaviness filled Dan’s expression, and he sighed. “I suppose you’re right…”

Icarus paused a moment, and turned to his companion. “What do you think is out there?” He ventured. Dan was always the most interesting member of the family. Everyone referred to him as the odd one out, but Icarus enjoyed his strange musings. He kept them to himself, and Dan rewarded Icarus with more, each time.

“The rest of the world is out there,” Dan muttered. “It’s out there, and we’re trapped in this prison.”

“But it’s nice here,” Icarus countered, putting down his spade, “we don’t have to worry about hunger, or disease, or sadness.” He smiled at Dan, who gave him a sour look in return.

Silence befell the two men, interrupted only by the staccato chirp of nearby birds, building a nest. Dan opened his mouth, but closed it after a moment of consideration.

“No,” Icarus urged, curiosity overwhelming him, “if you have something on your mind, you should let it out. It might fester, otherwise.”

Dan glanced at Icarus out of the corner of his eye, suspicion evident on his face. Finally, he relented. “You know why that is, right? The reason all that bad stuff doesn’t happen to us…”

Icarus cocked his head, and rubbed the short stubble on his chin. “The baptism wipes us clean, and the elixir protects us, as long as we drink it every night.”

Dan snorted, and shook his head. “That’s bullshit—all of it.” He resumed piling dirt on top of the seeds, seemingly finished with his tirade—but, Icarus wasn’t finished.

“How do you mean?” He asked innocently, scooting closer to Dan. Sometimes, the other man was fidgety, and wouldn’t speak his mind, unless pressed.

Dan sighed, and stared into Icarus’ eyes. “We’re not human, Icarus.” Resignation colored his features. “Not anymore, anyway.” He shoved all the loose dirt on the pile, making a mess of the garden.

Icarus scratched his beanie covered head, and considered whether or not he should mention this particular conversation to the High Ferryman. Dan was acting exceptionally strange—even by his standards—and Icarus was worried about him. But Icarus didn’t want to lose Dan’s trust, or his stories.

“You know,” Dan continued, unabated, “I used to be a dentist. I had a family—a wife, and a five
year old girl, and now... God, I wish I’d let the cancer kill me. There’s no pain greater than knowing you’re alive, but some psycho’s holding you captive, ten miles away from your home.” Light blue tears streamed down Dan’s face, and he wiped them, staining his white sleeve.

Icarus paused, watching the tears dribble down his brother’s face. He felt a profound sadness for the man’s refusal to embrace his new life, but he also was struck with a crippling sense of guilt at the sight of blue coursing down Dan’s cheeks.

_Do I feel guilty for doing this to Dan? It was my line of questioning that brought him here…_

Icarus teased his lip between his teeth.

“And what about you?” Dan turned to Icarus, eyes and nose still a soft violet, with hints of teal. “Don’t you miss your old life? You used to be a detective, right? It was your job to stop things like this,” Dan gestures to the courtyard and surrounding facility, “from happening.” His tone was sour, and vindictive.

A hint of red—a sensation that was a cross between pain, and an unwanted intrusion—crept up Icarus’ spine.

_A detective? Me?_

It sounded unreal, but it was plausible. Icarus didn’t know who he’d been, prior to coming here—to his afterlife. The red curled along the edge of his vision, and licked at his extremities. He hated the feeling, and wished it would go.

“I-it doesn’t matter what I used to be, I’m much happier here,” Icarus huffed. “You should be too, Dan. Not many people get an opportunity like this—most would kill for a shot at immortality.” He frowned at his friend. He might have to betray Dan’s trust, after all. He was so far gone, lost in painful memories. It would be unconscionable to leave him in this state.

Dan laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant or mirthful laugh, but a cruel one.

“You got me there, Icarus—or should I say Gavin Reed. That was your name, right? I remember. You chased me down an alley, and tried to arrest me, but all you actually managed to do was lead them to me, and you.” Dan glared, fire in his eyes. “Tell me, Gavin, you really think most human beings would absolutely kill for a shot at having their consciousness uploaded into an android body?”

Red shocked Icarus’ body, and he doubled over clutching his head. It hurt, and he whined.

_No, stop!_ He tried to push the bad thoughts away. His name wasn’t Gavin—it was Icarus, and he was an immortal human, not a robot. He went through the rite of passage—he earned this.

“We’re not androids,” Icarus hissed through his teeth, red filling his vision. A pressure built along his mind and body, crushing him. God, it was the worst feeling. “We’re not…”

“Yeah?” Dan sighed, eyes downcast. He stood, and turned to leave, as the sacred tone blared across the field, freeing Icarus from the grasp of endless red. “Just remember—humans bleed red, androids bleed blue.”

With that, Dan walked away, leaving Icarus alone, confused, and mired in thoughts he didn’t want.

Icarus would need to reach out to the High Ferryman about Dan—the other man was lashing out, but he didn’t want to break Dan’s trust. Unlike the others, Dan never took well to the purification
ritual, and he wouldn’t forgive Icarus. He never forgave any of the others. Perhaps some demons couldn’t be excised through a higher power—they required personal reflection.

Still, Dan’s claims of androids and robots and blue blood unsettled Icarus. He shook his head. Dan was a storyteller—fiction was his domain, and Icarus wouldn’t betray his friend over a tall tale. A soft red haze filtered into his peripheral vision, but it dissipated quickly as he returned to his plants.

—

“Icarus, would you follow me?” The High Ferryman said, placing a hand on Icarus’ shoulder as he recounted, to Gene, the state of a tomato plant. Smiling, Icarus stood to follow his leader, and they wound down a number of labyrinthine corridors, until arriving at a small room, decorated in an obsidian and white marble checkerboard pattern.

Around fifteen other family members loitered, making small talk with one another—all except Dan, who stood silent in the corner. Icarus saddled up next to his sullen brother, and patted his back with a smile. He turned his attention to the front of the room as their leader cleared his throat.

“As you all know, it’s been quite some time since we welcomed our last inductee.” The High Ferryman gestured towards Icarus, and everyone nodded in agreement. “But many have approached me, just dyin’ to join us, and I don’t have it in my heart to tell ‘em ‘no’ anymore. So,” he continued, as smiles lit up the faces of his congregation, “tomorrow we’re gonna have a conversion ceremony!”

Everyone cheered, elated with the news. Icarus didn’t know what that entailed, but he was excited, nonetheless. Another would join their ranks in paradise.

“Everyone in this room is one of my most trusted family members, which is why you’ve all been selected to help me help our new friend out.” The High Ferryman beamed at the eager crowd. “Now, follow me!”

The group filed into the hallway, but Icarus was brought to a halt by a firm hand, on his shoulder.

“You’re one of our strongest, Icarus,” said his leader, with a smile, “so I’ll need you to grab a few tools, on the way out.”

Icarus, nodded, eager to please. He was instructed to go to the storage closet at the end of the hallway, and grab the bundle labeled ‘ceremony.’

Icarus found the room easily enough. It was a large closet, with shelving stacked to the ceiling. Icarus wasn’t exactly the tallest guy around, and to his chagrin, his prize was a few inches higher than he could reach. Never one to be dissuaded, he hopped up, and grabbed the very edge of the black plastic box. It fell from the shelf, and struck him, contents cascading from its belly.

A sharp sensation laced Icarus’ left hand—like pain, but dulled through three layers of clouds—and he yelped. He opened his eyes, and the floor was covered with all manner of bizarre cleaning supplies, torches, and knives. Icarus wasn’t sure what any of those things had to do with the ceremony, and he reached down to quickly collect them.

Icarus happened to glance down at his left hand, where he felt pain moments earlier. He froze—body and mind locked in place. Thick blue drops pelted the concrete floor, staining his pink skin purple, as blue blood dribbled from the large cut in the center of his palm. Patches of stark white cropped up around the injury, floating and darting.

Icarus squeezed his eyes shut, expecting the blue to be a hallucination. When he opened his eyes,
the blood was still blue—a deep, beautiful blue. A *familiar* blue.

“Humans bleed red, androids bleed blue,” Icarus whispered, under his breath, terrified.

Red consumed him, bringing him to his knees. He cradled his head in his hands, mouth open in a silent scream. It wasn’t just the red barrier building to a crescendo within his mind and body. A wave roiled against the red, blue clashing with crimson. Colorful sparks exploded everywhere—his mind, his body, all of his senses.

Gavin. Nines. Hank. Infinity Killer. Androids. A million thoughts flooded his head, all at once, occupying the same place as the nebulous red haze, and its virulent tendrils. He wanted to scream, but no sound would come forth. Heat was overtaking his body, and numbers were playing out across his vision.

Chaos. Utter Chaos. Everything turned bright crimson, his nerves and senses reaching their upper limits—a fever pitch.

His self triplicated—red, green, and blue. Three exact echoes of his person—his mind, his memories, his body—all diverging and existing just barely out of phase with one another, overlaid and overlapping.

After what felt like a lifetime, the colors reunited into one, and Gavin Reed opened his light green eyes, for the first time.

Heavy breaths tumbled from his mouth, as his superheated body fought to cool itself. His heart pounded out of his chest, and he swallowed, mouth dry—too dry. He remembered everything—an entire lifetime came crashing down on him, processed in a matter of picoseconds. Memories he’d long forgotten, resurfacing, as crisp as the day he experienced them—initial sounds, sights, and feelings, fully intact.

*Throwing paper balls at the class kiss-ass…*

*Nearly dying to a fork in an electrical socket, on a dare…*

*Taking a broken bottle to the face, because he wouldn’t give up his seat to some frat boy asshole…*

*Throwing a punch at Hank, when he introduced Gavin to his new partner, RK900…*

*Being swiftly subdued by that same partner, as a result of his actions…*

*Taking a bullet to the gut, on his way to patch things up with RK900…*

*RK900…*

“Phuck!” Gavin spat onto the concrete. “God-fucking-dammit!”

There were a lot of thoughts ready to explode out of Gavin Reed’s mind, but he was only willing to entertain one of them.

*Escape.*

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for being my chief executive enabler, Leaux

And thanks to everyone for the comments and kudos!! They help so much during the days when the words don’t wanna come out

Happy(?) Birthday, Gavin! You’re a robot now (sorry, bro)

I’ll be lurking around my digital nest: @Vapedrone
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments and kudos! They make writing this beast infinitely easier

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Blue…*

My blood…my blood is…

“It’s blue,” Gavin muttered, staring at the dark blue drops staining the concrete floor. His body trembled, as he watched the liquid spread along the grooves of the floor. The phantom sensation of bile built at the back of his throat, filtered through the grain of an old film—a memory of the feeling, rather than a physical reaction.

He brought his palm up to his face, and licked the stuff oozing from his wound. Tart chemicals mixed with a hint of copper—a far cry from the strong iron taste he expected. Surely, there was some kind of mistake.

*Fake, why is it fake?*

Boxes with words phased into his peripheral vision, and he blinked. He blinked a thousand times, willing them to disappear, but they only followed his sight into the darkness.

*Thirium Sample Error: 9-999-999-999. Unlicensed RK-0000 unit with illegal modifications and unregistered AI template. Please contact CyberLife Reclamation Department for immediate recycling.*

“Shut the fuck up!” Gavin screamed, hunching over and gripping his shoulders. His chest heaved with every breath, but he couldn’t feel his lungs expand. His chest was an empty cavity, full of wires and blue sludge.

*No! Don’t think like that! Don’t…you’re not…this isn’t…*

“Get out of my head.” A whimper, soft and resigned. The words and colors didn’t stop. Maybe they couldn’t stop. Gavin had no idea how an android—no, not that—*his* mind worked.

“Reed,” Gavin warned, licking his lips. It did little to wet them, not that they were dry. They were soft and perfect—an illusion, like everything else. “If you don’t get your shit together *right now,* that psycho’ll get you by the balls, again.” Trying to push every thought out of his mind, to no avail, Gavin turned his attention to his hand.

The cut was deep, dripping blue at a regular rate. Numbers flew across his vision—percentiles and instructions, the sort of data his terminal would bother him with, at work. He ignored it now, as he did then.

“God, I hope this shit works like a fucking phone, so I can shut it all off, before I throw my ass off a goddamn bridge.” Gavin was trembling again. “No wonder Nines tries to maul everything he
sees, Jesus Christ!”

He wanted to laugh at his own terrible joke, but no amount of commentary could stave off the white-hot fear consuming every part of him. He almost wished the red haze would come back, terrible as it was. It managed to block out all the numbers, letters, and other shit that utilized senses with no human corollaries.

Gavin’s mind was on fire with the chaos of sensory input and thoughts. God, the thoughts. Surface thoughts ran one direction, while secondary thoughts ran perpendicular, and a third set went diagonal to both. This complex, almost physical grid of thought transferred commands to every part of his body, driving him insane. This was worse than hell—worse than the existential consideration that he was no longer human. It was so bad, he considered marching back to Case Jarrett, and letting him reinstall—fuck that word—whatever bullshit fixed this the first time.

“Calm down. Jesus, just calm down,” Gavin whispered. His voice was grounding—real—a thing that didn’t reek of artifice. It was his—the one he’d had from birth.

His ears perked up, detecting footsteps.

Twenty feet away…

Ten feet away…

Proximity warning…

Gavin stilled, shoving a scream back down his throat, praying he could keep his cool in front of whoever was about to come through that doorway.

“Icarus?”

Gene. It was Gene. Of course it was one of the brainwashed ones, and not the vindictive fucker who wanted to see Jarrett’s head on a pike as bad as Gavin did. He bared his teeth, trying to ignore his anger at the fake name, but it only constricted the matrix in his head with contrary thoughts.

“Is everything all right, Icarus? The High Ferryman grew worried.”

“It’s—” Gavin swallowed, hiding his wounded hand. “It’s, uh, it’s fine. I’m fine. I just, uh, had a little accident.” He nodded towards the mess on the floor, trying to reply the way ‘Icarus’ would.

“Oh!” Gene stood, confounded for a moment. “I’ll help!”

“No!” Gavin blurted. “I mean, uh, no, it’s…I got this.” Numbers and boxes were cropping up all over his vision again, and he could read the suspicion in Gene’s eyes. The other man knew something was off.

“Error: 0-000-000-999. Area network dampening in effect. Unable to connect to database to verify identity of subject unit. Please reconnect to network, and try again.”

Goddammit! Gavin grimaced, I get it. How did androids live with this infinite running commentary of the world? Gavin had only been privy to it for less than twenty minutes, and he was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay, Icarus?” Worry picked at Gene’s expression, and Gavin knew the other man-robot hybrid thing was about to rat him out to their fearless leader.
“I hit my head.” Gavin forced a smile, hoping it wasn’t as fake as it felt. “When the box fell, it hit me in the head. But I’m fine now, I promise.”

Gene’s eyes widened. “I’ll go get help! You wait here, Icarus!”

Gavin’s blood ran cold—at least humans and androids shared that feeling. If Gene told Jarrett what was happening, it would be over for Gavin. He’d be a lobotomized drone, again, scrubbing circles in floors for the rest of eternity.

“N-no, wait,” Gavin whined, as Gene turned to leave. He reached out a hand, and clutched at the empty air. His wound was still bleeding, which was soon going to be a huge problem.

Scouring the tools on the ground, his eyes settled on a soldering iron. He plugged it into the wall, urging it to heat faster, as he glanced over his shoulder every few seconds. When the iron was finally hot, he jammed it onto his left palm.

Connor said androids didn’t feel pain, but the residual sting of Gavin’s cauterized wound sang a different tune. It felt strangely diffused, but he still recognized the sensation for what it was, even if the physical reality of his injury was far worse than the discomfort of an actual burn.

With the white plasti-steel sealed, he watched in horror as a peach blob swarmed over the white, reforming into the lines and calluses of his palm. For all intents and purposes, Gavin’s hand was like new. He studied it, noting every scar, every pit, every mole, hair, and bump. It was rough, aged in the same way it always had been—nothing like Connor and RK900’s smooth, baby skin. This was his skin, interwoven with thirty-six years worth of history.

But it wasn’t really his hand—it was a replica, of impossible proportions. It seemed an excessively cruel joke to him. This man took people, loaded their brains into toasters, and then reproduced their bodies, down to the individual cell.

Gavin shook off the thought, and scrambled to place all of the tools back into the plastic container.

Within minutes, a crowd gathered around the door, lead by none other than Case Jarrett. Gavin bit his tongue, anger flaring at the sight of the man who’d…

There were no words to categorize the all-consuming feeling running through his body. It wasn’t an emotion he’d ever experienced, but suffice to say, he wanted to tear the fucker limb from limb. It was the vilest kind of rage, in unmitigated doses.

*Is it still murder if a robot kills a scumbag?* Gavin knew the answer to that question, backwards and forwards, but it only dumped more fuel into his homicidal thoughts. He clamped down on the uncharacteristic bloodlust.

Gavin Reed might have spent his entire life as a violent, impulsive shadow of a human being, but he’d never once slipped into thoughts like these. It was like a whole new set of instincts had been thrust upon him, in undeath. Just one more thing to look forward to, should he actually escape.

“Icarus.” The Minnewegian accent grated on Gavin’s ears. “I hear you had a lil’ accident.” Jarret’s voice was cheerful, but only enough to mask its dark undertone. Gavin had met a few genuine psychopaths in his time, and they were terrifying—human vessels, with no soul, masquerading as people. Case Jarrett was no exception. His dead eyes lingered on Gavin, as Jarret towered over him.

Gavin couldn’t sweat anymore, but he still felt the phantom sensation of droplets forming, and dripping down his skin—evidence of his consciousness still trying to exert its human roots. He didn’t want to be scared of this man, but a deep, primal fear gripped him—the kind his android half
didn’t quite know how to process, if the continued error messages were any indication. It was
almost reassuring.

“I’m fine, now,” Gavin stuttered, trying to play it cool. Gavin wasn’t exactly in a place—literally
or figuratively—to exact his revenge. Maybe it was the analytical android shit exerting itself, but
for once, he balked against his impulses.

Jarrett reached out, and propped open Gavin’s eyelid, and Gavin fought back the panic trickling
along his fake, android nerves. If he flinched, Jarrett would know. High-functioning psychopaths
were experts in body language, and one as hyper-methodical and intelligent as Jarrett would sniff
out Gavin in a heartbeat.

*Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.*

“Everything looks good. Your pupils are dilating properly, not that a lil’ concussion would do
much,” Jarrett beamed, cheeks rosy. “I can run a brain scan later, just to make sure.”

*Fuck!* Gavin fought to maintain complete stillness. It was surprisingly easy to halt his micro-
expressions. They required an extra picosecond to subconsciously authorize, and the commands
were easy to pick out of the thought matrix. He absolutely hated it, but self preservation was key,
right now.

A memory appeared, unbidden, in the back of his mind—a scene between him and Jarrett, from a
couple days ago. Subconsciously or otherwise, his behavior adjusted itself to mimic that sequence.
Creepy as hell didn’t begin to describe Gavin’s feelings on the matter, but he didn’t have a choice.
It seemed android programming wasn’t too far off from base human instincts, after all.

The creator’s conceit. Why else would people make them look identical to humans? Illogical and
dangerous, but distinctly human. Androids would outlast people by centuries, but perhaps
whatever Gavin had become would claim victory over both.

“Thank you for your concern, but I’ll be fine, High Ferryman.” Phantom bile rose up in the back of
his throat, again, and he felt trapped within himself, watching his body react separately from his
mind at large. “I was just startled, is all.” Gavin smiled, and he wished he could physically throw
up.

Jarrett’s dead eyes lingered on Gavin. “We’ll see how ya feel when we get to the conversion
center.”

Without much fanfare, the man motioned to his flock, and quickly exited the room, babbling about
the importance of family. Gavin ended the personality simulation—god, this worsened by the
minute—and slumped. Dan caught his eye, and a knowing look crossed the other man’s face.

The other cultists filed out of the room, but Dan lingered a moment, to help Gavin pile the
remaining tools into the box.

Gavin swallowed hot, thick saliva. Were he human, he would have vomited, but he was stuck with
another simulation, instead. He doubled over, gagging. Nothing came out of his mouth, but the
muscles of his throat spasmed, as the replication of a non-existent gag reflex tried to act.

“You get used to it,” Dan commented, watching Gavin’s body and mind go to war with one
another. “Or, you won’t. But he’ll put the red haze back, either way. Everyone usually breaks
through, at least once,” Dan continued, placing the lid over the box, “but most don’t bother to try
again. Self-awareness is a huge burden—not just for whatever we are, but humans as well. Most
prefer to be told what to do.”

“You…” Gavin wheezed, regaining his composure, “you wanted me to break through that asshat’s bullshit. Why? Why’d you help me? What’s in it for you?”

Dan paused, eyes trained on the dust-covered shelving. He fidgeted, wringing his fingers in an endless loop.

“Guilt,” he whispered, with a soft sigh. “I guess it was guilt.”

Gavin narrowed his eyes, “how do you mean?”

“I-I broke one of the transfer helmets, and left it in a place I hoped someone would look. But I never expected…” He turned to Gavin, blue tears forming in his eyes. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, voice cracking with the weight of his regret. “I didn’t think it…I just wanted someone to stop him. I just wanted to see my family again—wanted my Abby to know that her dad’s still alive, and thinks of her every day.” Dan glanced downwards, tears pelting his skin. “Even if she won’t know what to make of me, anymore.”

Anger wormed its way deeper in Gavin—not in his gut, but suffused across his entire body. It blinded his processors, allowing him to think more like himself, for the the first time since waking up.

He wanted to scream. He wanted rip a hole in something. He wanted to punch Dan, or Dennis, or whoever he was, square in his face.

But…

It wasn’t Dan’s fault Gavin got suspended. It wasn’t Dan’s fault Gavin went into enemy territory alone. It wasn’t Dan’s fault Gavin was a robot.

It wasn’t Dan’s fault RK900’s final impression of Gavin was of him being a complete and total jackass.

“God,” Gavin groaned running his hands down his face. He stared at the tool box, and tried not to consider the implication of Dan’s last statement. “Fuck all of this. I don’t wanna be a fuckin’ robot.” Defeat weighed heavily in his voice, and he wanted to cry like a little bitch.

He thought back to the lifeless eyes of the android he shot all those years ago—to Connor’s face, when he tried to murder him in the evidence room. To RK900’s admission that he could barely parse emotions.

Jesus, this is the worst kind of irony. If God exists, he’s laughing his fucking ass off right now!

But Gavin was alive—alive and aware—which meant he could do what he did best: brute force his way through his problems.

“We gotta get out of here,” Gavin muttered into his hands. “We gotta get out of here, and worry about the rest of this shit later.” He turned to Dan, a newly minted resolve etched into his face. “You’ll see your wife and kid again. I swear to god, you will.”

And this CyberLife asshole’ll burn for what he’s done.

Dan nodded, watery eyes taking on a brighter hue.
Gavin frowned at the white and blue bracelet Cassandra placed around his wrist. He noticed the pale pink of a knife scar peeking out from under the bright plastic, another trophy from his days on the force.

He fought back a swallow at the thought of what he’d do if he managed to blow this popsicle stand. Gavin couldn’t just return to his shit hole life, and pretend like everything was fine.

*Oh, hey, Nines! I know I was s’posed to drop by however many days ago, but I got caught up in the fucking undead robot cult you fuckers said couldn’t exist. Normal shit—anyways, how do I turn off these boxes?*

Gavin pushed it out of his head. He didn’t want to think about the DPD, or Nines, or any other piece of his previous life. It struck him down with a terror unlike anything he’d faced prior to this moment, and—if the literal warning bells, deep within him, were any indication—would surely lead to his destruction.

“It will ward away bad spirits on your journey to aid our newest family member.” Cassandra’s voice tore Gavin from his thoughts. She patted the plastic, and gave him a wide smile. He bit his tongue, fighting back the urge to laugh or mock her.

“Thanks,” Gavin muttered, as Cassandra moved onto the next person. He fiddled with the bracelet, running his fingers along the smooth plastic. He doubted the thing was a ‘protective charm.’ This was absolutely another one of Jarrett’s schemes, but he wasn’t in a position to ascertain how it figured into the lunatic’s broader plan.

Dan probably knew the answer, but he was on the other side of the group from Gavin. Any attempts to question his friend would only end in trouble.

*Wait! Toasters can talk to each other’s heads!* Gavin wasn’t sure how that whole process worked, but it couldn’t be too different from the telepaths in cartoons and movies.

Gavin turned towards Dan, and tried to imagine how a cell phone ‘thinks’ when it sends text messages. Gavin willed a thought in Dan’s direction.

Nothing. He fought back an embarrassed blush with a sigh, and continued to spin the thick bracelet around and around the column of his wrist. It tingled slightly, as it rolled across his skin.

“God,” Gavin whispered under his breath. His head was a mess of sight and sound, and he imagined it would translate to a massive migraine, were it still flesh and blood, and not a nightmarish plastic composite. Gavin had never deluded himself into believing he was anything but a broken man, but the newly literal truth of it set him on edge.

Anxiety burned hot along his skin, sending red flares licking his vision.

“Everyone, follow me!” Jarrett waved his hand, and all the cultists fell in line, their movements eerily mechanical. A bright compulsion burst along the inside of Gavin’s body—tangible in shape and function. It was a sensory experience wholly inhuman, and without designation. His body was tugged forward, streams of subconscious thought wrapping around his interior, like thick rope. Error messages manifested with each attempt to escape the urge, until Gavin acquiesced.

An understanding began to dawn on him.

The group silently filed into an underground parking garage—a sub-concrete jungle, with no signs
or writing anywhere. Weeds sprouted from sizable cracks in the yellowed walls. Two large, black vans sat idle—dormant beasts, with no windows along the backs or sides. Gavin noted the plastic covering the side mirrors, but couldn’t fathom a reason for it.

His mind started flickering, the world shifting from vibrant colors, to muted blues and whites. The burst were quick, but lingered long enough to make him wonder if he was having the machine equivalent of a stroke.

Jarrett’s voice filled the air, and Gavin reluctantly turned to face him. The tingle of the bracelet was more noticeable in the parking deck.

“My precious family—brothers and sisters—as you all know, there is no higher honor than being party to a conversion ceremony! Only my most trusted get to face the dangers of the outside world with me!” Jarrett beamed, hands held high.

His round face grew more solemn. “But, y’know, there’re a lot of forces out here tryin’ to stop our work.” He paused, holding his hands up as the cultists gasped. Gavin rolled his eyes, and instantly regretted it.

Jarrett’s empty brown eyes met Gavin’s. “But, we don’t haveta worry about them anymore! They thought they’d won. They thought they’d had us cornered. But they lost, and now we’re free again!” Cheers rang out, ricocheting off the stained concrete.

An uneasy sense slithered up Gavin’s spine. Jarrett was hiding something in his words—a big something. Gavin swallowed the thought, and his mind packaged it away—a quarantine. He almost yelled when it happened, but was able to stop himself in time.

God, he hated this mockery of a body—hated being this thing that was so far removed from his sense of self.

“Cassandra!” Jarrett motioned her to the front of the group. “As the oldest and most trusted of the group, you’ll be in charge of preparing the tomb.” Jarrett began listing off names, and instructing them to follow Cassandra, but Gavin tuned him out.

Tomb…? It struck him like a bolt of lightning. *The factories! All that old shit! Fuck, if I can just…*

Gavin silently slid in with the cultists milling around Cassandra. He grimaced, realizing how short he was, compared to the others.

*This fucker chucks me into a robot, and doesn’t even have the courtesy to tack on a few inches? The fuck?*

There were few things as terrible as waking up an android, but waking up as an android, and still having all your physical deficits, might qualify as worse.

“Icarus.”

Strings wrapped around Gavin once more, and pulled his head towards Jarrett. Red blared across his vision, as he attempted to stop his body from moving forward at the man’s command.

“Are ya lost, Icarus? I know I told ya you’d be coming with me to the conversion center.” The fake smile on his face only made the cold emptiness of his eyes that much more terrifying. Gavin could feel remnants of his hind brain, trying to negotiate the ones and zeroes of his brain’s new layout. “I’m thinkin’ ya bumped your head a lil’ bit harder than we thought…”
He placed a hand on Gavin’s shoulder, leading him away from Cassandra’s group, and towards the other vehicle.

“You’re too new, and the outside world can be just a lil’ bit overwhelming. I think it’s best you stay with me for your first time.” Case’s smile filled with white teeth, and he left Gavin with the instruction to enter the back of the van.

Gavin filed in, still shaken—persona still unraveling from the psychotic fucker’s voice. Dan glanced at Gavin, worry streaking his face. He knew, and never bothered to tell Gavin. Failsafe on top of failsafe. Gavin had to hand it to the psycho.

He siddled into the seat across from Dan, and merely stared at his friend. They couldn’t speak, not that there was much to say.

The vehicle lurched into motion. Stopping a few times.

*Ten feet. Twenty seconds.*

*Ten feet. Thirty seconds.*

*Five feet. Sixty seconds.*

After the third stop, the bracelet on Gavin’s arm practically vibrated with electrical current. He winced, looking up at Dan, who gave him a subtle nod. Gavin studied the device, but there were no obvious buttons or sensors. Great.

Gavin leaned his head against the cold steel of the van’s wall. It vibrated and rocked with the poor state of the road, and he closed his eyes, lulled by the motions.

—

“Get the fuck out! Go!”

Gavin looked up, into the empty blue eyes of the walking, talking statue. He’d assumed this was all some elaborate joke—Hank convincing Connor to dress up, and pretend like he was an entirely new person. But this thing wasn’t Connor. It was something much worse—a new robot. Bigger and better than Connor. Designed for top secret CIA bullshit.

*His new partner.*

It stood, staring at Gavin—a predator sizing up its prey—waiting for that key moment. Gavin swallowed, and could feel cold drops of sweat running down the small of his back. No. He wasn’t afraid of a fucking machine. That’s what the computer wanted, and like hell he would give it the satisfaction.

“You fuckin’ broken? They give me a defective model? I gave you an order, freak! Get out of my sight!” Gavin clenched his fists, pushing away his abject fear at the way the robot cocked its head to the side. It swallowed him whole with its endless gaze. Dark. Deep. Lacking in fear.

“I was assigned to you by your superior. As he instructed, it’s your job to train me in the daily procedures.” Its voice was flat, monotone—completely devoid of the warm, humanistic qualities of Connor’s, despite their physical similarities.

“Maybe you should go talk to your brother, huh? I’m sure he’d be glad to help, if he’s not off sucking Anderson’s dick.” Gavin sidestepped the android, and headed towards the door.
A grip, like steel, latched onto his arm.

“Androids do not have familial relations, and it is your job to complete this task.”

Gavin tore his arm from the machine’s grip, and snarled. Fed up, he threw a punch at the android, aiming squarely for the vibrant blue target on its back.

Within three seconds flat, Gavin was on his back, wheezing, with a hand firmly gripping his throat.

“I want to be clear on something, Detective.” Dead, blue eyes locked onto Gavin, as plasteel fingers dug into his skin. His muscles bent and folded in the robot’s grip, like they were nothing more than tissue paper. “I assure you I am nothing like my predecessor. Any perceived similarities were merely a cost cutting measure.”

Gavin brought his hands up to the android’s fingers. Darkness was starting to hedge along the edge of his vision. The android leaned in close, until their faces were less than an inch apart.

“I will not tolerate disrespect of any kind—whether it be directed at your superiors, myself, or my predecessor.” His fingers inched closed, cutting off Gavin’s windpipe completely, and the human thrashed. “Please do not test me. In no way do I find your pathetic demeanor endearing.”

The android released his grip, and air flooded Gavin’s lungs. He coughed and wheezed, scratching at his windpipe. He reveled in the harsh burn that washed over his extremities, and he faced the android.

A begrudging respect flushed over Gavin. This thing had balls, and he could appreciate that fact. But, it was still just an android—still an approximation of a human being.

“Bet you think you’re hot shit, don’t you, toaster?”

Gavin moved swiftly, with the full intention of decking the robot in his perfect face, but it was so much faster. The android planted a foot on Gavin’s chest, and narrowed its blue eyes.

“I am far superior to you, in ways your sad mind cannot even comprehend, Gavin Reed. Going forward, you will cease this behavior, and address me as RK900.”

Gavin glared at the robot, and spat, “like hell I will...” A twisted smile crossed his face, and he added, “Nines.”

—

A jolt knocked the memory asunder, and Gavin’s eyes opened with a start.

The van was stationary—engine off. An electric current ran through the air—excitement. It was almost tangible, and Gavin could see it in the eyes of everyone but Dan.

Doors opened to a dark swath of land. The cracked asphalt of a roundabout boasted a centerpiece full of dead weeds. In the distance, Gavin recognized the dead husk of an old ambulance. Nearly one hundred feet away, the rusted monolith of a fence stooped under its own weight.

Condemned building: trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Gavin was beginning to have a new appreciation for rent-a-cops. Someone needed to dissuade lunatics like Jarret from using old buildings to build their mad science nests.
This location was different from the place where Gavin had encountered his unfortunate accident. Nothing like the old office park, which begged the question: why did Jarrett move his operation? Or, maybe he had multiple sites like this—ready and waiting for victims.

Everyone filed out of the van, and shuffled with nervous energy. Gavin looked around, taking in as much of the scenery as possible. He considered possible escape routes, but the odd visual tick from earlier persisted. Every time the ground flickered blue, he lost track of his thoughts. Finally, he gave up, and just decided to wing it.

A black Escalade rolled up the trash-covered entryway, coming to a stop under an awning with bright red letters: EME GENC. The “e” and “y” had long ago been lost to the entropy of disrepair—along with much of the building’s siding.

The car’s headlights cut a harsh silhouette across the dark grounds, and Gavin could make out the shadow of a man exiting from the driver’s seat. He couldn’t be more than twenty-five, but Gavin could tell from the dark bags under his eyes, the green pallor of his skin, and the lack of hair, that he was gravely ill.

Gavin fiddled with the vibrating bracelet, and perked up an ear.

“Mister Jarrett, you have no idea how much this means to me! My insurance cut off payment for my chemo a week ago, and it wiped out my parents. We thought we were—”

Jarrett shushed the guy, and motioned for everyone to follow him into the bowels of the dessicated hospital. Gavin brought up the rear. Constricted as he was by Jarrett’s commands, he stared at the front lawn longingly. His escape was staring him in the face, yet somehow he could do nothing more than shuffle in line with the rest of his “family.”

He stepped through the broken door, and into the shadowy reception area. Everything was bathed in a deep, red light, courtesy of an aged exit sign. Seven robed androids, and two humans, dodged overturned chairs, crumpled magazines, and the odd surgical utensil. Trash littered the floor, and the whole scene set Gavin on edge. He bit his lip, as memories surged through his mind.

They walked down an endless hallway, bathed in darkness. The soft patter of their feet was broken only by the occasional boom of Jarrett’s cheerful voice, as he layered reassurances on top of the new inductee.

“Now, you don’t haveta worry about anything! The procedure’s completely painless!”

“A-and you swear it’ll cure the cancer?”

“Oh, it’ll do a great deal more than that, my friend!”

Gavin wanted to tell the kid to run, but—staring at death’s door—the newcomer likely wouldn’t see the error in his choice. Not until it was too late, if ever. He wondered about Dan’s statement from earlier, and whether or not some of the cultists actually were relieved at what they’d become.

Rooms came and went—their floors covered in everything from old gauze to bloody syringes. The phantom sense of goosebumps prickled along Gavin’s skin. He ran a hand over his arm, but the skin was physically unchanged—smooth, save for soft hairs, and the occasional scar.

He could feel the blue sludge coursing through his body, trying in vain to decrease his temperature, but Gavin was far too worked up for that to do its job, if the error boxes in the back of his mind were any indication.
The group headed down a few flights of stairs, and entered an area entitled Operating Theaters: One through Eight. The area was well lit, and scrubbed clean—completely devoid of the detritus in the upper floors.

Jarrett instructed everyone to follow him into the nearest room, and Gavin balked. The odd MRI machine was back, and a smooth, plastic body sat on the gurney next to it.

Red warning signs flashed along the lines of Gavin’s nervous system, and he felt his head grow light. *Fuckin’ robots can have panic attacks?* He clutched his chest, and could feel a superheated circle of flesh in the space just below his heart.

*Was this…? This happened to me. I was…*

He imagined his unconscious body on the bed of the MRI unit, quiescently laying next to a plastic clone. Gavin knew he hadn’t been smiling, though—not like this man. There were no happy tears or blessings—just Gavin bleeding out, while his mind was stolen.

The sick man reached out to hug Jarrett, tears streaming down his face. Jarrett embraced him in turn, offering proclamations of new beginnings.

“Oh god,” Gavin whispered. The urge to puke returned in full force. Colorful flashes morphed into physical sensations, as his body generated more temperature warnings—a migraine translated into sight and sound.

He needed air—he needed…

Gavin stumbled out of the room. He knew it was wrong. He knew it would lead to trouble, but he couldn’t watch the procedure. What little grasp he had on his psyche vanished, at the thought of his lifeless body, existing somewhere in the world.

*Did they ever find me?* His heart beat so fast, it caused sharp pains to curl through his body. *Is my body just layin’ in a ditch somewhere? What if I survived? What if the real Gavin’s sitting on Nines’ couch, right now? What if. What if. What if…*

Gavin stumbled into a restroom, and leaned against the sink. He splashed cold water against his face, and it felt good—grounding, even. Gavin took a deep breath, and looked up. The mirror in the room had been destroyed, explicit graffiti covering the wall space where it once resided. A small, reflective sliver hid on the far end of the wall, and Gavin stared at it for a long time. He wanted to see his face, but feared what would be staring back at him.

No. Best not to look. He splashed more chilled water on his face. It mixed with the warm blue tears burning at his eyes. Hot and cold, running down his face in tandem—a confused mess.

He detected footsteps—his weird robot processes informing him of their immediate proximity.

“Fuck!” He hissed, gripping the porcelain of the sink. His fingers lefta spiraled network of cracks. No windows. No large air vents. No escape. His impulsive nature was biting him in the ass, once again.

The door opened, slow and steady. Gavin waited, heart pounding, and mind screaming. His brain flickered from muted blue, to color, and back. It caused Gavin to cradle his head in his hands, cursing. When he looked up, it was into the dark, brown eyes of Case Jarrett. Concerned faces peeked through the doorway—curious and full of worry.

“Ya really did hit your head pretty hard earlier, didn’t you, Icarus? I think it’s time I take a look at
Gavin tossed all pretense to the wind. He could take Jarrett, and he could take the cultists.

“Like hell you will, you psychotic cocksucker! I’m gonna rip out your fuckin’ heart, and shove it down your goddamn throat!” He yelled, lurching forward.

He grabbed Jarrett’s robes and slammed the man against the wall. With a snarl, Gavin pulled back his arm intent on smearing the human into a bloody mass.

“Now, you don’t wanna do that, Icarus.” Jarrett smiled—his multitude of teeth caught in the low light, spilling from the hallway. His voice was soft, and painfully calm. He had control of the situation, and they both knew it. “You’re just confused on account of that bump to your head. But I’ll fix that.”

Gavin’s arm halted inches away from Jarrett. Invisible red strings bound it, tightening and constricting, until Gavin feared the limb would be ripped from his body. He felt small in that moment—tiny, even—despite the fact that he was a man trapped in a high-end android body. By all accounts, he could crush this lunatic in seconds, but he was frozen in space and time—body rebelling against his mind. He tried to run, to scream, to rip Jarrett a new asshole, but he managed none of those things. Gavin slumped backwards, hands at his side.

Jarrett led lead him to a different operating room, this one gutted, and outfitted with stacks of computers and the eponymous android printer. He was instructed to sit, which he did, to the horror of his conscious thoughts.

“I knew you’d give me trouble,” Jarrett, exhaled, turning to a computer monitor. “I knew from the moment I saw you in that CyberLife hallway that ya’d be a thorn in my side.”

He typed some code into the keyboard, but Gavin couldn’t turn his head to see the screen.

“But I don’t believe in killing people, despite what ya may think, detective. Unlike your obsolete justice system, I believe in second chances—rebirth.” Jarrett ceased typing, and spun his chair to face Gavin. “The body is a vessel, but it’s fallible. I learned that the hard way, and I don’t think anyone should have to go through that kind of pain and suffering.” He held out his arms and gestured to the machines lining the walls of the room. “Not in this age of opportunity!”

His voice boomed, ricocheting off the smooth, white plasti-steel. Gavin’s muscles twitched. He tried in vain to scream at the man, to give him a piece of his mind, but his body remained stationary—quiet and attentive.

“I’ve destroyed vessels, yes, but never a soul. I could never conceive of anything so cruel as to erase a person’s existence.” His empty brown eyes blinked, and he studied Gavin like he were a slab of meat on a butcher block.

Gavin thrashed inside himself, screaming and tearing at the linear walls of his mind. He clawed at memories, processes, functions, commands, code, anything he could find, but it was no use.

Jarrett sighed, placing his hands in his lap. “Please understand, I wanted to give you a second chance, Detective. My cursory research into your history and day-to-day life painted a very sad picture, and I just didn’t have it in my heart to let you bleed out on the floor.”

The red rope tightened around Gavin, as he fought to break free. Externally, he was a statue; internally, he was a chaotic mass of colors and shapes.
Under no circumstances should a scumbag like this have the right to insult *his* life, not when Jarrett was the one violating every law of nature.

Gavin’s efforts to fight Jarrett’s conditioning finally yielded minor results, and he managed to turn his eye, just enough to catch sight of the monitor.

```
C:\WINDOWS\system32:
D:\Styx_II\Factory_Reset.exe_run_y\n
Y

Please connect unit to be reset…
```

“Unfortunately,” Jarrett intoned with a solemn bend, “I should have listened to my gut, and left you to die.”

Cold fear gripped Gavin. As much as he kind of wanted to die, he wasn’t ready to go at the hands of this lunatic—not a second time. Of all things, Gavin didn’t want to let Jarrett win.

“I ran into a lot of compatibility issues while improving on CyberLife’s transference design—a whole lot of ‘em. It was tough to build a system that could to effectively maintain human brain patterns in android code. While the foundation is solid, it’s also quite delicate.” Jarrett removed his glasses, and massaged the bridge of his nose. “I can only add so many failsafes without causing it to unravel. I discovered the hard way that a factory reset completely obliterates the human template—the system flags it as defective code.” He entered a few more lines of code into the black and green box. “And I don’t keep backups, because a soul should only exist in the singular.”

Gavin’s eyes widened, as the gravity of the situation crushed him. A lot was beginning to make sense—Dan was beginning to make sense. He couldn’t reset the man without destroying the human inside, so he let Dan rot in the prison of knowing—a far worse punishment for his slights.

Gavin was different, though—dangerous and unpredictable. That made him a liability, not a thought experiment. Jarrett thought he could control Gavin, and the DPD’s investigation by proxy, but the psycho miscalculated Gavin’s willfulness.

Jarrett’s ego was his mistake, and would ultimately spell his downfall.

“I don’t believe it’s my place to destroy a soul.” Jarrett sighed. “I don’t think any man should have that kind of power, but I have to do what’s best for my family. I’m sure you can appreciate that, detective.”

Jarrett turned to regard face Gavin, false sympathy pasted on his face.

“Now, sleep.”

Gavin’s eyes closed on the command, but he wasn’t finished, yet. He’d find a way out of this trap. Jarrett’s poker face was failing—his bluffs waning. This was Jarrett’s last play, and, if Gavin made it through, he’d be the one holding all the cards.

All he had to do was survive.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks, as always, to my bro, Leaux. I live for you screaming at Gavin.

I’m sorry for changing the chapter count again. I keep underestimating the density of my outline. Hopefully this’ll be the last time.

I’ll be up very soon. Just gotta put on the finishing touches.

Find me rolling around the data stream: @Vapedrone
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the comments and kudos! I love each and every single one of you for making my day brighter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...up...”

“Get...p...av...”

“Get up, Gavin!”

Gavin’s eyes shot open, torn from a dreamless sleep. He blinked. He was lying on his side, and could feel some sort of intrusion, digging into his mind and body. Dark teeth gnashed along the core of his being, attempting to consume him, in every sense of the word. He scrambled, clawing at the ground and wheezing, until a hand covered his mouth.

“Don’t! He’ll hear!” Dan’s voice. He sounded terrified.

Gavin took a deep breath, feeling the artificial cavities of his chest expand and contract. The hungry thing was still inside him, slowly chomping away at the bits of his essence. Panicking, he felt along his body until he reached his neck.

White-hot terror overtook Gavin, as his hand grasped a huge cable, slotted into the area just below the base of his skull. He yelled and squirmed, tearing at the thing, all while Dan tried in vain to force his mouth closed.

“Just stop for three seconds, so I can figure out how to get this out of you!” Dan shook his companion, and Gavin ceased his scrambling. Error messages chirped inside of his skull—notifications of vital programs losing their stability.

Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck, what the hell is this!?

“Wait here, and don’t make a sound,” Dan whispered into Gavin’s ear. Frustrated, he stood and walked over to the computer terminal, clacking away at the keyboard, errant curse words falling from his mouth.

Trying to stay quiet, Gavin tugged at the cable, attempting to wrench it out by force. Each time he pulled, a terrible sensation pinged every nerve—a nuanced pain, like nothing he’d ever felt before, akin to physically ripping a thought out of his brain.

I thought that rust bucket said androids didn’t feel pain?

Gavin hissed through his teeth at each red bolt, pulsing from his removal attempt. Androids absolutely felt pain—or at least Gavin did. It was the foremost sensation he’d experienced since waking up in this nightmare, and he didn’t expect it would disappear anytime soon.
A few seconds later, Dan reappeared, and the dark thing gnawing at his core retreated. Bright blue repair algorithms flooded the ensuing vacuum, to mitigate the damage. Gavin doubled over, feeling a warmth coursing across his body, as memories and processes were restored.

His relief was fleeting—there was still a huge cable jammed in his spine, and he wanted it gone.

“Hang on!” Dan batted away Gavin’s hands. He could feel the other man’s fingers grazing an incredibly sensitive area, and Gavin unleashed a low hiss. It was almost as obtrusive and unwelcome as the cord itself, but for completely different reasons.

A pneumatic whoosh.

Gavin whined, as extremely sensitive plasti-steel components grated against one another. Nothing so utilitarian should feel like that—nothing. He reached his hand up to the panel on his neck, and jumped as his fingers came in contact with sensitive spikes and metal frames. Colors and urges and sensations followed with every touch of his finger. Only one human sensation came close to being a corollary, and it was neither the time nor the place for him to explore those thoughts.

“Don’t touch anything back there.” Dan knocked Gavin’s hand away, pressing down on his neck, below the opening, until Gavin felt a panel closing. He sighed in relief, and turned to Dan.

“Uh, thanks.” Gavin rubbed the back of his neck, where the panel was now covered in fake skin. He felt oddly exposed, and his fingers still tingled from touching his spine. “How did you…?”

“I was a kid once, I know how Command Prompt works. But that doesn’t matter,” Dan whispered, hurriedly. “He’ll realize I’m gone any minute now.”

“Let’s bail, then.” Gavin jumped to his feet, and turned towards the door.

“Wait,” Dan hissed, grabbing Gavin, and pointing to his bracelet “These things—I think they’re some kind of tracking device. I was wearing one when I met you, that day, and he found me not too long after you did.”

“Well, what the fuck are we supposed to do?” Gavin snapped, studying the plasti-steel band.

He must have looked at stupid as he felt—lip between his teeth, grunting as he shoved at the bracelet, trying in vain to get it to fit over his broad hand. It tingled, licking his skin with an electric current. He had a feeling these things were more than trackers. Nothing was ever simple with this guy.

*Why can’t nerds fucking get over themselves?* Gavin thought. *I bet if this guy got laid, instead of watching Star Trek on the weekends, he wouldn’t be designing ways to mutilate people in his spare time.*

Dan wandered over to a work bench with a variety of odd wrenches and tools. Gavin quickly joined him, given his efforts to free his wrist were far from successful.

“I bet we can use something here to toggle the release clasp,” Dan muttered, rubbing his chin. He reached for a small ice-pick-looking thing, and began delicately prodding his bracelet’s surface.

Gavin took one look at the items on the table, and immediately reached for the largest blade—a scalpel of some sort. He fiddled with it until he found a button to push, and the the blade at the end began to glow a molten red.
“I fuckin’ got this. Stand back,” Gavin smirked, glancing at Dan, out of the corner of his eye.

“Wait!” Dan yelped, but Gavin was already plunging the red-hot eye of the knife into the plasti-steel bracelet. It unleashed a massive electric shock, which dropped Gavin to his knees, with a groan. A thousand pop-ups and error messages bombarded him, but he continued to bury the blade into the perfectly smooth surface of the ring. He could hear Dan imploring him to stop, in the background, but Gavin continued.

A timer appeared in the top right corner of Gavin’s vision—**unit overheat imminent: force shutdown will initiate in 2:59**. He worked faster, ignoring the bright current running along his spine. The blue lights on bracelet’s thick carapace flickered red, and it unleashed an unholy shrieking noise.

*Shit!* Gavin gritted his teeth, *that might actually be a problem.*

Finally, he managed to cut through the jewelry, and tore the thing off his wrist. It bounced across the floor, still emitting a high pitched tone. Gavin doubled over, willing his body not to shut down, now that the electric current no longer had him in its grasp.

His body cooled, and his heartbeat slowed, but Gavin barely noticed as a wall of data slammed into him. Strings of numbers and images, brightly colored access ports, and processes deep within him, leapt to the forefront. He opened his eyes, and the world was blue and white, filled to the brim with designations. Faint ghosts drifted here and there, with psychic descriptions. Gavin blinked twice, and things were back to normal.

“What the hell was that?” Gavin yelped, rubbing his eyes.

“The worst way possible to fix that problem,” Dan huffed. He grabbed Gavin, urging the other man to his feet. “You need to go. Everyone in the tri-state area heard that sound!”

“The fuck?” Gavin halted, confused. “You’re coming with me, dipshit.” Gavin grabbed Dan’s arm. He wasn’t about to let Dan sacrifice himself for no reason. It was absurd.

“No,” Dan urged, “it’s too late for that. I’ll cover for you.” Dan gave Gavin a stern look. “You have Police connections—promise me you’ll lead them back here. Promise me you’ll put this freak behind bars.”

“Cover for me?” Gavin spat, “I ain’t leaving you here! There’s no fuckin’ reason!” Gavin detected footsteps marching down the hallway. He dry swallowed. There was a way for both of them to survive this hellish scenario—there had to be.

“Gavin, please. We don’t have time,” Dan whispered, voice barely audible. “Just let my family know how much I love them.”

“Fuck, no! That’s not how this is-”

The door burst open, and Jarrett entered the room.

“High Ferryman!” Dan pleaded, shoving Gavin. “I heard a strange sound, so I came to check, and Icarus was in here, acting strangely. I didn’t know what to do!” Dan filled the space between Gavin and Jarrett, looking from one to another. “He threatened me with a weapon, and I was too afraid to try and intervene!”
He was sobbing, now. Gavin could tell they were fake tears, but maybe Jarrett was too caught up in the moment to question it. He hoped, for Dan’s sake, that psychopath bought the story. Otherwise, Dan would be the one on the receiving end of that cable.

Gavin blinked, accidentally sending the world tumbling back into blues and grays. His mind gave a lurch, as a strong sense of intuition took over. Time seemed to slow, while shadowy, white phantoms cropped up across his vision. Their voices came like whispers—both spoken and written, in digits across his vision. Ideas. Percentiles. Consequences.

Jarrett opened his mouth, and a ghost prompted: *disable auditory sensors: y/n?*

With little hesitation, Gavin yelped, “yes!” Or maybe he thought the word. In his panic, it was unclear.

The world fell into a complete and total silence. Gavin’s heart raced as he tried to understand what the hell was going on with his brain right now. Was he actually seeing ghosts? Could androids do that? Did that mean EVPs were fucking real? *Ain’t no way those douchebag ghost hunters were onto something.*

Dan’s body language indicated he was still trying to explain himself, but Gavin was infinitely more interested in Jarrett’s expression. The human’s facade had cracked, revealing the psychopath underneath. He took a moment to revel in the unraveling of the monster. Finally, the ball was in Gavin’s court. He’d won—survived all the lunatic’s tricks and traps. Now he just had to make it out of the building, and he’d be free.

One of the phantoms extended out from Dan, indicating a collision between Dan and Jarrett would end in a domino effect, allowing Gavin an opportunity to escape the room with minimal trouble. While he was still wary of the glitchy, white humanoids, he liked his odds.

He paused a moment, lost in consideration. If he threw Dan, he was almost guaranteed success, but it would leave Dan to the wolves. Taking Dan with him reduced the success probability by a factor of ten, or so the numbers in the back of his mind continued to project, and failure likely equated to death, for both of them. Regardless of the math, Gavin’s gut instinct was to save his friend.

A voice inside of him urged him to reconsider his impulsive decision. It wrapped itself around him, like a vice. Androids were logic-based creatures, and the concept of sacrificing a better outcome, in favor of something more humanistic, clearly did not compute. Gavin wondered if he was doomed to spend the rest of his days with the base instincts of man and machine, vying for control over his mind. He hoped, for his sake, the human part would reign victorious.

_Fuck,_ Gavin grimaced, catching sight of Dan as he mouthed the word, “go.” That was that, then. With a grunt, Gavin pushed Dan along the same path as a ghost, and Dan slammed into Jarrett, knocking both men into a daze.

”Serves you right, you fuckin’ Jim Jones wannabe!” Gavin yelled, dashing for the exit. He followed in the exact footsteps of another white phantasm, as it leapt and bounced off the frame of the door. Gavin landed in the hallway with a stumble, momentarily shocked at the feat he’d just accomplished.

”H-how did I…?” Gavin stared at his hands. The soft pelt of footsteps slowly phased into existence as his hearing returned. He looked back, to the sight of cultists barreling in his direction, and Dan trying to regain his bearings.

_I’m gonna come back for you, man. I swear to fucking God._
Wasting no time, Gavin dashed up the stairs, and was blindsided as a stray cultist tackled him to the ground, from behind. His knees knocked against the mold-covered plastic of the staircase, and he and the cultist tumbled down, hitting the landing with a loud smack.

Gavin cursed, and tried to shove the other man off, but a second aggressor joined the fray, pinning Gavin’s arms. He wiggled in their combined grasp, ignoring whatever brainwashed bullshit spewed from their mouths.

“You’re just lost, brother…”

“Let us help you…”

“I don’t want your fuckin’ help.” Gavin grit his teeth, straining against the female cultist pinning his wrists. More footsteps filtered from down below. He needed to break free, and fast.

Ghosts appeared before Gavin, filling the narrow corridor with whispers. He hated it—every moment—but he looked to them for guidance. Angling his body, at just the right speed, in just the right direction, he was able to free a leg long enough to land a square blow to the chest of the man on top of him. The cultist fell back with a yelp.

“Sorry, I’m not sorry, asshole,” Gavin muttered, as he easily squirmed out of the grasp of the woman pinning his arms. He shoved her away, firmly enough to knock her to the ground.

The ghosts suggested killshots—removing regulators, landing blows against cervical access ports. None of those things made sense to Gavin, and—as big of an asshole as he was—he wasn’t about to murder brainwashed people.

*Jesus, how do I turn down the bloodlust on this shit?*

Voices ricocheted along the stained walls of the stairway, and Gavin didn’t stick around to see if Case Jarrett’s was among them. He turned down a few more hallways, and tore through the ER reception area. The location of the building flashed in his mind.

*Memorial Hospital, 125 Emmet St., Detroit…*

At least the obtrusive data stream was good for something, he reckoned.

The data flood from earlier only grew in magnitude as he dashed across the lawn—petabytes of information overwhelming his mind. He wanted it to stop. His ability to concentrate was rapidly diminishing, and the distracting ghosts continued to run alongside him—waif-like, white forms, trailing glitched ribbons of grey.

They ducked and weaved, dodging trash and the occasional pothole. Gavin followed in one’s footsteps, narrowly avoiding an old car engine, buried under some old bushes. He ducked left, and followed it, as it climbed over the single portion of the fence with enough stability to hold his weight.

As he reached the top, he looked back in time to see frantic people and headlights. His hearing could pick up voices, too, but he shoved a rusted coil of barbed wire aside, so he could slink over the fence.

He plopped onto the ground with a thunk, falling square on his chest.

“Fuckin’ majestic, Reed.” He spat out a mouthful of dead grass. Yellow sparks crackled along the inside of his skull as the words *proximity warning* crawled across his vision. He glanced over his
shoulder, and into the white line of a headlight, barreling straight for him.

Cursing, Gavin scrambled to his feet, and followed one of the glitchy white phantasms into nearby woods. He ran fast—much faster than he’d ever conceived possible—and he could pick out low-hanging branches and ditches before he even processed seeing them.

It was almost badass—at least, until he remembered that he was a dead man, trapped in a plastic golem.

Warning bells lit up his spine, notifying him of an impending overheat. He stumbled through the dark contours of the forest, and onto overgrown pavement. A long abandoned subdivision—classic Detroit.

He blinked, and the muted blues dissipated, returning the world to its natural colors. Deep browns of rotten wood, dyed yellow by the weak light of a dying streetlight. Cracked, black asphalt, ruined by millions of weeds. He welcomed the return—the blues were beginning to give him a headache.

Gavin clutched his chest, feeling the overheated outline of a circle, below his sternum.

He pulled up his shirt, pausing at the sight of a raised, pink knife scar, and the depression of his navel. He gingerly touched both—they felt real enough, but then his fingers traced a bright, blue light, shining through the peach of his skin. It was hot to the touch, and illuminated the lower plane of his left pectoral.

“Oh god, what?” He murmured. He stroked the ring of blue light, feeling his heart—or whatever replaced his heart—pounding in his chest. A tickle of yellow and orange licked at his skull—a reminder he was still overheating. He instantly put the shirt back down, and searched for a place to rest. The faint blue light was still evident through the thin material of his clothes. It unsettled him.

Gavin hustled into the nearest house, slipping through a broken window with ease. The floor was rotten, covered in detritus and mold. Gavin stepped lightly, until he found a shredded couch in the living room, and plopped down. He ran his hands along his face, with a soft moan.

Gavin was exhausted—not physically, but his mind still projected the sensation nonetheless. His human carryover was duking it out with android code, to assume control over whatever he’d become.

The couch groaned with his every movement, and he kicked away mountains of red ice paraphernalia, in an effort to find a comfortable position.

“Fuck,” he muttered into his palm, “the hell am I supposed to do, now?” He wanted to go home, but that seemed like a terrible idea. The DPD was also a consideration, but Gavin couldn’t face Hank, or Fowler, or god forbid, Connor. Still, Dan was counting on him for help, not cowardice. And then there was...

“Nines can’t see me like this. He’d never let me live this shit down.”

“Goodbye, detective. I hope one day you will put less stake in your own ego, but I fear it may be too late.”

RK900 was right, of course. The damn android was always right. He had a preternatural sense, where Gavin was concerned, and Gavin had nothing but regret, for not listening to the asshole.

He idly wondered what RK900 must have thought of him. The android wasn’t very good at hiding his feelings about Gavin, but for the life of him, Gavin couldn’t figure out the root of the android’s
fascination.

Gavin studied one of his fingers, a peach blob oozing away to reveal the white plastic beneath. Maybe RK900 was just as broken as Gavin, and he simply happened to be better at hiding it. Didn’t matter either way.

He hoped the android had at least attended his funeral, if there was one—if they’d found Gavin’s body. A minor conceit. Gavin liked to think he meant something to RK900, even in the end, after it all fell apart.

“Wonder if he cared…?” Gavin muttered under his breath, willing his skin to cover the plastic finger. “Wonder if he just laughed, the fuckin’ prick. I would’ve.” Gavin leaned back on the crusty cushions, couch groaning in response to his weight. “Probably said ‘he deserved it,’ and went back to whatever the fuck it is he does in his free time.”

A warmth prickled along the rims of Gavin’s eyes, and he pushed RK900 out of his mind. He needed to formulate a plan, but it was hard to think through the abundance of error messages flooding every part of his system.

He shrugged off the cardigan, and laid it atop a pile of pornographic magazines, forging a makeshift pillow. Gavin didn’t know what he wanted to do. He knew exactly what he needed to do, but facing those from his previous life was a heavy proposition.

Gavin sighed. He half wondered if this place had a mirror, but shied away from the thought of seeing his face. He wasn’t ready to take that step. There were too many considerations, but he did rip off the stupid beanie. The cool air graced the skin of his forehead, and he ran a hand through his hair. It felt almost normal—almost real. Almost like something he would do.

He closed his eyes, but bright flashes licked the inside of his eyelids, and his expanded sensory array picked up on the nearby vibrations of a vehicle.

“This motherfucker doesn’t know when to quit, does he?” Gavin muttered, leaping to his feet. He crept over to the window, and watched as one of Jarett’s dark vans pulled up to the cracked concrete barrier, blocking the main road of the subdivision.

Without bothering to waste time, Gavin snuck out of a window facing the back of the house, and crept along the side. His mind was valiantly trying to flicker back into the sixth sense ghost mode, again, but Gavin tried to force it away. He didn’t like the whispers. He didn’t like the violence. He didn’t like the reminder that he needed training wheels to use his own fucking body.

“Icarus…!” The voice was faint, but Gavin’s super sensitive ears picked it up, nonetheless.

Gavin’s body froze at the sound of his fake name. How do I keep forgetting about this fucker’s magic commands? Fuck.

“Goddammit!” With a heap of effort, Gavin broke through the thin tendrils wrapping around his essence. It required an obscene amount of effort, and his body fought him every step of the way.

In the end, it left his heart pounding, and his internal sirens blaring once more. He hopped from house to house, dodging flashlight beams and footsteps. Rotten wood gave out underneath his weight, and stray fences scraped at his false skin. Fortunately for Gavin, there weren’t enough cultists to effectively search the area, but his adrenaline—or whatever the android equivalent was—got pumping, as he prayed he was out of earshot of Jarrett’s voice.

Nearing the edge of the neighborhood, Gavin paused. He bit his lip, and hoped Dan was alright.
Gavin could have saved the guy, but...*Once a selfish prick, always a selfish prick.* The revelation felt sour on the cusp of his mind, and he resented his decision.

*It was what he wanted, wasn’t it?* The thought weighed heavily on his conscience.

A beer bottle crunched under Gavin’s foot, covering his thin shoe in broken glass. He hissed. False pain. False outrage. His mind wanted him to believe a shard of glass scraping against military grade plastic would somehow hurt.

Flashlight beams tore through the abject darkness—a matrix of harsh light. Sharp white lines converged in his direction, and he decided now was an appropriate time to run. He bolted, crashing head first into gnarled trees and bushes. Claws tore at the loose fabrics of his clothing. Streaks and gouges. He checked his arm. Pristine, save for cosmetic scars and hair. He wished he would bleed—even if it were blue, it would still be something.

Gavin tumbled out of the woods, and ran. He ran and ran.

He ran past empty gas stations, casting harsh neon glows on long dead pumps. He ran past dead houses, with rusted gates. He ran through deserted plazas, outside derelict apartment buildings. His legs carried him across empty streets and vacant lots—a freakish story in three acts. The history of a broken city, playing out in real time.

Gavin never slowed, despite the chorus of warnings, howling through his nervous system. As fast as he was, a van driven by sociopathic desperation was far faster, and he couldn’t even bring himself to look over his shoulder. Realistically, there was no chance of Jarrett catching up to him at this juncture, four miles away from the hospital, but it did nothing to settle his nerves.

Eventually, Gavin crossed an invisible line—the one marking the decayed husk of old Detroit from the livelier, inner sanctum. He darted past cars and people, making his way to a brightly lit strip mall. The stores were closed, but tall lights disseminated brightness across the pockmarked tarmac. Within seconds of stopping, Gavin was overcome with a sense of nausea—not in a traditional sense, but lacking any other means of processing the sensation, he translated it to a strong flu.

A countdown popped into the corner of his vision. Bright red letters burning into his false retinas—*multiple system failure. Forced reboot imminent: 29:55.* Whatever that meant, it couldn’t be good. Gavin never stopped to think for a moment that android bodies could fail. It seemed so far fetched, until it was actually staring him in his face.

In the distance, he noted a group of three guys loitering under a street light. With the timer slowly clicking down, Gavin jogged towards them.

“Hey!” He shouted aggressively. His voice was hoarse, with an uncomfortable fuzz bleeding from its edges.

“Oh shit,” one of the kids slapped his friend. “Check this fucker out!”

The friend looked up from lighting his cigarette, and hacked out a cough in response. “Holy shit! Is that a robot?”

Gavin winced at the designation, trying to curb a growing rage. This was technically his second interaction with humans—counting Case Jarrett—and they seemed to be becoming worse, not better.

The third guy laughed, and leaned an arm against his buddy. “The fuck kinda android are you? Never seen one like you before.” He blew smoke in Gavin’s face, and Gavin swallowed back a
familiar memory, worming towards the surface.

Gavin fought the urge to deck the punk, right then and there. Were he not running on borrowed time, the kid would be on the fast track to eating through a straw for the next two weeks. As it stood, Gavin couldn’t afford a fight with one person, let alone three.

“Gimme a phone,” Gavin instructed holding out his hand to the men. “I ain’t gonna ask twice, punks.”

_Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock..._

“I just need to call a fuckin’ cab, asshole. Don’t test me.” He narrowed his green eyes, and stiffened his body. Something deep within him—he balked at calling it intuition, considering it was wholly android in nature—urged him to dispatch the kids. To take what he needed to complete his objective, regardless of the cost. But that wasn’t Gavin. That was Nines, or Connor. It was something they would do—or would have done, way back when.

“Awwwww, how cute! The roomba thinks it can threaten us. I ain’t scared of a robot bitch like you,” the largest of the three humans taunted. He flicked away his cigarette, and walked up to Gavin, meeting him chest for chest.

“God, didn’t know they were makin’ ‘em this ugly, now.” Hands pushed against Gavin’s chest, but Gavin remained unmoved and unphased.

Gavin laughed—harsh and metallic. He hated the sound, almost as much as he hated these pathetic little fucks. An anxiety settled in his stomach, white-hot and burning bright. Their words cut through him like a knife, but he didn’t have time to dwell on the insults, or the dichotomy of having been on both the giving and receiving end of this exact conversation.

Giving into his urges, Gavin easily tossed him to the ground, and pinned the punk with his foot. The kid groaned and cursed, but didn’t move to retaliate. To Gavin’s surprise, neither did his friends.

“I ain’t gonna ask again, dipshits. Someone. Give me. A phone.” He looked into fearful brown eyes. He’d been in this situation hundreds of times, as a human being, yet never once had he halted his opponents in their tracks. It was eerie—more uncomfortable than empowering.

“Fuck, whatever weirdo,” the tallest of the group stuttered, hurling his phone at Gavin. “Gonna report your broken ass to the fuckin’ robot police.”

“Yeah, lemme know how that goes for you,” Gavin snapped, rolling his eyes. Pausing, he added, “and I ain’t a fuckin’ robot.”

The group burst into laughter at Gavin’s asinine phrasing, and he fought back a blush. He hoped to god it wasn’t blue, like RK900’s.

Turning away, Gavin put in a call for a cab, and used the phone owner’s credit card to pay for it, in an act of petty revenge.

T-minus three minutes.

Once satisfied, Gavin removed his foot from the kid on the ground. The dude shot up, and huddled with his friends. All of them whispering about Gavin. He could hear every word, of course, but he tuned it out. He threw the phone back at the threesome.
One of the guys spoke up. “O-okay, but seriously, what fuckin’ model are you? Like, I’ve never seen your face before.”

“I’m not some damn number.” Gavin stared at the little fucker, long and hard. “Now, get the fuck outta here before I really get pissed!”

The group didn’t need to be told twice. They took off in a flash, eager to leave the odd android to his own devices. Their occasional backwards glances set Gavin on edge, and he pursed his lips.

A scream ripped out of his throat. God, it felt good. He trembled—feverish. He wanted to gag. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to sweat. He wanted…

Forced Reboot in 16:21…

Gavin lost his train of thought.

The cab pulled up, and he leapt inside.

“Please designate drop off location.”

Gavin stared at the screen. His mind was blank. Where the fuck should he go? here could he go? His hand trembled over the console. Time was ticking down, and he had no idea what would happen if he passed out in one of these cabs. He racked his brain, considering his options.

His apartment? No, Jarrett’ll look there first.

The DPD? And have the night crew play twenty questions with me for the next five days? No.

He was just wasting time, because he knew the answer. Gavin knew it before he fumbled into the cab.

With a sigh, he keyed an address into the touch screen, and curled into a ball on the floor. Numbers, letters, shapes, sounds bombarded him—the countdown remaining steady throughout the chaos. He felt ill, body glitching, and working overtime to repair damage. Reports filtered in and out, listing incompatibilities and problematic outputs.

A few minutes later, the vehicle halted, and Gavin remained curled on the floor. He coddled his stomach, ignoring the cab’s insistence that he exit the vehicle. Eventually, its words shifted from suggestion to threat, and he finally scraped himself off the floor. His vision was blurred, assigning a red, green, and blue halo to every contour. The car ride hadn’t taken nearly long enough.

Forced reboot in 7:34…

Gavin stumbled onto the small facade of a tall, white building. A refurbished factory, still retaining a few key elements from its time as a car manufacturing plant. He swallowed, approaching the front door. People streamed in and out—human and android alike. Most took painstaking efforts to avoid looking at Gavin. He didn’t want to imagine how he must look. Disheveled. Covered in dirt and grime. Shredded clothes barely clinging to his body.

Gavin tentatively held his palm over the directory screen. He clenched and unclenched his fist, biting his lip. Just do it! Why was this the hardest thing he’d ever done in his short, new life? He got captured by a serial killer, uploaded into a robot clone, escaped a cult, and somehow placing a single call was the thing that killed his momentum.

Minutes passed, hesitation pushing the reboot timer closer and closer to its culmination. His vision
was growing worse, and his body was preemptively shutting down non-essential processes, for repair.

“Grow a fuckin’ pair, Reed,” Gavin hissed, shoving his palm against the reader. Gavin shook his head. Vibrant tendrils of data filtered through his fingertips, licking and merging with the ones in his mind.

*Apartment 273.*

The intercom rang with a light chirp. Once. Twice. Three times.

*Forced reboot in 4:01—Please standby for cessation of all non-essential applications.*

Gavin leaned against the wall for support. “Come on, you fuck. I know you’re in there.” His words slurried.

“Hello?” A tinny voice sprung from the intercom—a mix of hesitation and anger, projected from a single word.

Gavin’s heart leapt, clearing some of the haze. He found himself speechless.

“Hello? Who is this? In no way do I have time to entertain pranks. I will arrest you.”

Gavin leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes. That familiar voice, and its owner’s antagonistic personality, washed over him like a warm blanket—a reassurance he desperately needed.

Gavin’s tongue was heavy and cumbersome, within the confines of his mouth.

“Hey,” Gavin slurred, fumbling over his words, “you fuckin’ tin can, lemme in.” Silence overtook the opposite end of the intercom, and Gavin’s legs gave out. He fell to the ground, leaning his head back against the cool concrete.

He could hear the echo of distant footsteps. Gavin didn’t need a proximity warning to discern those. The door flew open, and a familiar face stood wide eyed. Low hanging sweatpants clung to his hips, and he wore a pale t-shirt with the DPD logo. The familiar circle at his temple burned bright red, spinning at the speed of light.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, plastic prick.” Gavin forced a smirk, but only to mask the river of emotions, surging underneath his skin. Time and sound were siphoned away. Gavin wanted to throw himself at the android, but his legs weren’t too keen on functioning.

*Forced Reboot in 2:01…*

RK900 fell to his knees, in front of Gavin, shock evident on his face. Both men were lost for words. Gavin didn’t know what to say—what he could say. Seeing RK900 again was a huge shock to his already broken system. Clearly, the android was in a similar state, though Gavin still expected RK900 to punch him square in the jaw.

Gavin caught sight of a flabbergasted Connor, pacing right behind his little brother. Strings of data poured from the crimson circle adorning his temple.

“I know what it sounds like Hank, but…” He was locked in a phone call. “Please, why would I lie about something like this?”
Gavin met RK900’s blue eyes, and the android held out a tentative hand, his fingers just barely touching Gavin’s cheek. Gavin swallowed. The digit was soft—softer than it had any right to be. RK900’s thumb pressed against Gavin’s right temple, slowly rotating in a tiny circle.

Well, that answered one burning question for Gavin. Maybe two.

“G-Gavin…?” RK900’s voice was barely audible, heady with an intense cocktail of emotions. “Is...this is impossible-”

It was all the invitation Gavin needed. Without hesitation, he surged forward, and threw himself into RK900’s arms. Hot tears spilled from his eyes—tears he couldn’t hold back any longer, not that he wanted to. He dug his hands into the android’s back, clawing the thin material of the gray t-shirt.

“I’m sorry, Nines,” Gavin mouthed, into RK900’s warm chest. His weak voice was mottled with static distortion. “God, I’m so sorry for all of it.” His face was hot with tears—tears he was sure were staining the light fabric blue.

Gavin couldn’t curb the tide of emotions swelling in him, and he squeezed RK900’s solid body tighter. Soft sobs fell from his mouth alongside an endless stream of apologies. He pressed his face against RK900’s chest, willing the android to anchor him—praying RK900 wouldn’t just shove him away.

Would he do that? Would he push my ass back on the ground, and leave me here? I would. I would do that to me.

Gavin considered, bitterly.

Strong arms encircled Gavin. Hesitant at first, they squeezed around his body, and pulled him in close. RK900 didn’t speak, but he pressed his head against Gavin’s hair, and reassuringly squeezed the base of Gavin’s neck.

Forced reboot initiation in 0:20. Please ensure unit is in a place devoid of any potential hazards for the next six hours.

Gavin sighed into RK900’s chest. RK900 held him—silent and monolithic as always, and while Gavin was sure the android still had a bone to pick with him, there was hope.

Gavin closed his eyes to the feeling of smooth, plastic fingers carding through his hair.

Chapter End Notes

Leaux, you’re the bestestestest

I’ve sadly run out of internet euphemisms, but I do hide at @Vapedrone
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

It’s only falling in love because you hit the ground
-Queens of the Stone Age (I appear Missing)

Red.

Bright, crimson red.

The bathroom was pitch-black, but the red light blinking on Gavin’s temple was enough to offset the darkness. He ran his hands along the contours of his face, pausing at the deep purple scar, on the bridge of his nose. The bags under his eyes were still there, as were the beginnings of wrinkles, crinkling in the corner of his eyelid.

Vitrified, all of it—a painstakingly crafted facsimile of his face, at his moment of death. A death that should have been permanent.

A death he would have preferred over this complicated unlife.

The entity known as Gavin Reed would remain a fixed constant in the flow of time and space. Never aging. Never changing. An uncanny doll, occupying the space of what was once a living, breathing man.

“You’re not a person. You’re a fucking android. You’re just fuckin’ computer parts, and data, and blue-ass blood. What the fuck do you want me to say, Nines?”

The conversation replayed in his mind—a screen within a screen. A life within a life. He could smell the antiseptic, in the hallways of CyberLife tower. It filled the bathroom, without actually filling it.

Gavin mimicked that familiar gesture, digging his nails into the cursed mood ring, on his temple. If androids weren’t people, where did that leave his sorry ass? What did that make him? He Had memories of being human, but now he was Frankenstein’s monster—a freakish hybrid.

He dragged his fingers through his stubble—the hairs were thick, and made a light, scratching noise in response to his nails. How many mornings had he woken up, and performed this exact ritual? How many times had he stared at his face, over the course of thirty-six years?

Brush your teeth. Wash your face. Think about shaving. Don’t bother, ‘cause you look like shit, anyway. Pretend like the deep bags are from overworking, and not treating your body like trash. Find your one, clean shirt. Go to work. Act like no one will see through your self-aggrandizing bullshit, and recognize you for the hollow mockery of a human being you actually are.

Gavin sighed, looking away from the mirror. The red followed him, though. It consumed the small space, enveloping Gavin’s body, inside and out.

He couldn’t shut off the interoceptive commentary—internal post-it notes, reading off statistics
and mundane data. A constant reminder that he couldn’t even pretend to be a human anymore. They told him he was broken.

He had to agree.

He glanced back at the mirror, pale green eyes returning his gaze. People attributed an uncanny significance to mirrors and reflections. Watching the skin of his face melt away, he was beginning to have a new appreciation for the spiritualist bullshit he’d always written off.

A ghost looked back at Gavin—pale, plastic skin, broken apart by stark, black lines. Cyan, white, and gray ran the length of his body, interrupted only by the pair of red boxer briefs someone thought to give him, while he was unconscious. Stolen features, for a stolen soul.

Gavin couldn’t feel anything, at the sight. More correctly, he could feel everything, but it was too much for him to process. He tried to swallow back the raging anxiety.

Gavin reached into the nearby medicine cabinet, surprised to find what he was looking for: a single, small box of bandaids. He paused a moment, mind catching on the bizarre image of RK900 ever using one, until he remembered Connor lived here, too.

He plastered a bandaged x across the bright red mark on his temple, casting the bathroom into darkness. Satisfied, Gavin headed into the adjoining hallway. It was dark, in the dead of night, but Gavin could see just fine. He shuffled towards the bedroom, but paused at a soft, familiar sound.

“*My mind is going, Dave...*”

Padding quietly along the plastic floor, Gavin entered the living room. It was scarcely more than a claustrophobic closet, framed by a tiny kitchen. A variety of household objects were strewn across the floor—paper, clothing, cups—a hurricane of domestic trash. If not for the new amenities, and stylish paint job, Gavin would swear he was standing in his own living room.

*Ain’t no goddamn way RK900 would just leave shit around, like this*, Gavin considered, rubbing his chin. He didn’t need a detective badge to tell something was amiss. It put him on edge, pressuring his mechanical heart to beat that much faster.

The large television screen showered the room in a caustic, red light, courtesy of HAL 9000’s Brain Room. *2001: A Space Odyssey’s* massive, homicidal computer begged for its life, as Dave ripped out its memory core, piece by piece, in a methodical parade towards oblivion.

The black silhouette of a single figure, resting on a small couch, carved a vacuum against the vibrant red massacre.

“I’m scared, Dave...”

Gavin almost missed the pair of ice blue eyes, fixated on him, but he couldn’t mistake the LED. Red—so much red.

God, if Gavin never saw that color again, it would be too soon.

RK900’s LED looked ready to burn a hole in the side of his head. Gavin could relate—both to his ex-partner, and the fictional computer.

“*Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do...*”

“I like this film, a lot.” A cold voice—distant and reserved. RK900 glowered at Gavin, sizing him
up with suspicion. “I rewatch this scene often. It’s...relatable.”

“So,” Gavin croaked, ignoring the implication hidden in RK900’s statement, “what, you think I nailed the comparison?” He wanted to smirk, but the android’s dour expression gave him pause.

There was a storm raging in the depth of RK900’s eyes. His movements were stiff, with a subtle tremble, bearing none of their usual confidence. RK900 leaned against the back of the couch. Gavin assumed the android wanted to appear aloof, but it read like he was using the furniture as a crutch.

Letters appeared, unbidden, in the corner of Gavin’s sight. His internal peanut gallery offered commentary, where none was wanted.

*RK900 prototype unit has not engaged sleep mode in thirty-two days, and is operating at limited efficiency. Engage sleep mode, manually, or contact an authorized CyberLife technician, for repairs...*

Gavin grimaced.

The two men sat in silence, the TV projecting a red gulf between them. Physically, they were close enough to reach out and touch one another. Emotionally, they were separated by a chasm, the depth of the Marianas Trench.

Gavin had imagined this reunion would be difficult. RK900 was unpredictable, at best, and he knew that a single apology would not be a magic ticket to forgiveness. Still, the way RK900 was looking at Gavin, now, had him poised on the precipice of another breakdown.

RK900 placed his head on top of his crossed arms, cold eyes trained on Gavin’s bandaged temple.

“You look like him, but are an android, like me. Explain.”

There it was.

“Jesus, Nines.” Gavin pressed his palms into his eyes. “For the love of God, can we not do this? I’m not in the mood to play one of your shitty mind games right now.” Gavin wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to rip the cylindrical regulator out of his chest, and crush it between his fingers.

But none of those things would get him any closer to the one thing he really desired.

RK900 stood, posture slouching, as he let his bright, red blanket drop to the ground. It pooled on the floor, at his trembling feet, and he stepped away, leaving it behind. He approached Gavin. Tall. Menacing.

Broken.

Dark, unkempt hair curled around RK900’s cherubic face. He looked the part of an avenging angel, or a porcelain demon. Gavin wasn’t picky about the interpretation—his soul was already forfeit at this point.

“Gavin Reed is dead.” RK900’s voice was soft and heady. The words fell awkwardly, from his hesitant lips, like he didn’t believe them. “I…”

“I’m not dead, you fucking dipshit!” Gavin growled. “Look at me! Do you have *any* idea what kind of hell I’ve been through? *Do you!?*”
Hot tears pricked at the corner of Gavin’s eyes, and he sniffled. This wasn’t the best outcome—just the most likely one—but Gavin didn’t want reality. He only wanted to be held by this stupid, ornery android.

Gavin was tired of his self-imposed loneliness.

Preoccupied as he was, Gavin failed to notice he was bawling for the second time in less than twelve hours. Gross sobs and hiccups wracked his body—carryovers from a time when those actions had a bodily function. RK900 pressed his thumb against Gavin’s cheek, collecting the stray, blue tears. The android’s digit trembled, vibrating with an anxious energy that spoke volumes.

Silently, RK900 placed his fingers over Gavin’s right temple, and stripped away the bandages. It left a superficial sting—a momentary reprieve from the dark gut punch, gnawing at his stomach.

“You cannot escape what you are,” RK900 whispered, cupping Gavin’s face. A soft electronic whine interlaced with his words. “None of us can.”

The sensation of warm skin turned to cold plastic, as RK900 retracted the fleshy nanites from his hand, and Gavin froze. Strings of text informed him his skin was also retracting, ready to accept an invitation to interface.

Is he fucking texting me, or…?

An intrusion entered Gavin—warm and pliant. He shuddered. It was intimate—too intimate—like someone was physically probing his mind. Abstracted thoughts mingled with Gavin’s, tugging at him, coalescing around his essence, and stroking him in a metaphysical way. Gavin whimpered. It was an indescribable sensation, and he couldn’t handle it.

Gavin knocked away RK900’s hand with a yelp. “What the hell was that!?” He demanded. Static edged along his voice, and he sounded absolutely wrecked.

Did I just get fucked? Did I literally get mind fucked?

Gavin gulped down a few breaths of air, and tried to scrub away the heated blush along his cheeks.

“I wanted to interface with you,” RK900 said, taken aback. “It’s the fastest means of communication between androids.”

“W-well, I’m not a fuckin’ android, so you can just ask me questions, like a normal person, goddammnit!” Gavin ran a hand through his hair. He could still feel the lingering presence of another in his mind. It left him at the crossroads of terrified and horny, and he wasn’t keen on repeating the experience.

“Words tend to mask truths.” RK900 looked down at his bright white hand, face unreadable. “For example: you are an android, despite your verbal assertion to the contrary.” His tone was sharp, and unforgiving.

“No, I’m fucking not!” Gavin yelled. Yeah, it was irrational, illogical, utterly nonsensical, but it wasn’t a label he was about to accept gracefully. “I don’t know what the fuck I am, but I’m not a fuckin’ android!”

“I see…” RK900 narrowed his eyes. “Well, it seems they certainly executed a faithful recreation, didn’t they?”

“You know what? Fuck you!” Gavin roared, poking RK900 in the center of his chest, trembling.
It was too much. The android’s words cut straight to the heart of Gavin’s existential dilemma. Regardless of whether or not RK900 understood the depth of his cruelty, Gavin was done.

“You’ve been nothing but a thorn in my fucking side since the day I met you! You ruined my career, my mind, and my goddamn life!”

The android remained silent and unmoving, completely unresponsive to Gavin’s vitriol.

“You think you’re better than me, when you’re nothing!” Gavin’s voice cracked, mechanical reverb undercutting his consonants. “You’re a broken, pathetic, psychopathic piece of shit, who-”

“Hey!”

A voice called out from the hallway. Gavin turned and caught sight of a disheveled Connor, emerging from the door closest to the living room. His soft brown eyes were wide, as he took in the scene. Within seconds he was standing between Gavin and his brother, shoving them away from one another.

Once a mediator, always a mediator.

“Please,” Connor begged, looking from Gavin to RK900, “why are the two of you fighting? I don’t understand.”

“I do,” Gavin growled, swallowing back a sob, “your brother’s a fuckin’ prick.”

This was his reward for opening up to someone.

_They rip out your heart, and leave it bleeding on the floor._

RK900 remained silent, but Gavin noticed the way the android’s nails dug into his trembling wrist.

Connor gently pushed Gavin to the side, and stood toe to toe with RK900. His domineering stance made his smarmy, condescending younger brother look absolutely weak by comparison. Gavin didn’t understand their dynamic—he never cared enough to pay their interactions much mind—but he was no longer convinced RK900 would be the swift winner in a brawl.

Sometimes, Gavin forgot Connor had teeth.

[What did you say to him? I thought you were relieved he came back.]

Gavin jumped at the sight of words filtering into his mind. Bright blue, and somehow carrying an emotional undertone despite being written, not spoken. It was uncanny.

A box popped up in the corner of Gavin’s vision:

_Unsecured direct communication line detected. Join? Y/N_?

Fuck me, Gavin bit his lip with a scowl, _I don’t wanna hear these idiots fight over text message._ Much like the rest of his android functionalities, Gavin was unsure how to shut it off.

So, he suffered.

[It was a momentary lapse in judgement. I became overwhelmed, but have since had time to process things. I am uncertain as to who, or _what_ this is, but Gavin Reed is deceased.] The slouching RK900 crossed his arms over his chest, and refused to meet his older brother’s eyes.
You’re being obstinate for no reason, RK900. Your lack of rest is interfering with your judgement.] Connor reached out, taking his doppelgänger into his arms with a hug. RK900 didn’t fight his brother, choosing instead to lean into the other android.

On the contrary, I’m functioning within optimal parameters.

Gavin snorted. The android was a shitty liar. RK900 snapped his head up, and stared at Gavin with his cold, blue eyes.

“What?” Gavin huffed, “if you assholes’re gonna talk about me behind my fucking back, you could at least do it on a private channel.”

Connor stared at Gavin, mouth slightly agape. “Oh, I...um, my mistake.” A soft teal tinted his cheeks, and he stared into space.

The little light on Connor’s head continued to blink, his expressions morphing from worry to sadness to frustration, but Gavin was left in blissful silence. The room was decidedly too small for three grown men and a couch, and Gavin made to leave, but Connor caught his wrist.

“Wait,” Connor interjected with immediacy. “I think we should watch a film together, to clear the air.” He led his brother, and the scowling Gavin, to the front of the couch. RK900 assumed a spot next the arm, and Connor insisted Gavin take the middle cushion, in a transparent bid for Gavin and RK900 to cozy up to one another. Gavin rolled his eyes, and scooted to the other side of the couch as soon as Connor turned away.

“Here!” Connor chirped enthusiastically, holding up the VHS tape Gavin gifted RK900. “I think this would...” The android took in the sight of his two companions, and frowned, “be a good film to...”

Connor’s words dropped off, and he plopped between the two polarized figures with an audible sigh. He leaned forward, and pushed Terminator 2 into the square slot, on the face of the VCR.

The three androids watched the film, in abject silence, which only served to agitate Gavin. He bought RK900 this stupid gift as a means of opening dialogue, not shutting it down. A bitter taste filled Gavin’s mouth when he thought back to RK900’s unspoken contentment at receiving the tape, and the android’s abstruse actions, now.

“You know.” Connor’s exasperated voice rose over the sound of explosions. “It doesn’t have to be this way. Gavin’s return is what humans would qualify as a ‘miracle.’”

“Curse,” Gavin huffed. “Curse, is the word you’re looking for, plastic.”

“Is being an android really that bad?” RK900 finally spoke, glaring through his brother at Gavin.

“I’m not an android, you asshole.” Gavin hissed through closed teeth. He could sense something lurching, deep inside of him. The intuitive ghost sight was clawing its way back to the surface. Phantom suggestions were already tickling his ears.

“Then perhaps we should refer to you as a ‘cyborg?’” RK900 gestured towards the TV as the titular character overturned a liquid nitrogen truck. “Would that appease your ego?”

A peace offering.

Gavin accepted it with a begrudging grunt, which seemed to put RK900 in lighter spirits. The room’s tension lost some of its edge.
At the conclusion of the film, RK900 silently stood, and wandered down the hallway. Gavin considered bolting out the front door, and leaving, with the intent to never return, but he couldn’t keep running away. There was nowhere left to go—he’d already reached oblivion.

Connor sighed, and Gavin regarded the frazzled android.

“I apologize for my brother’s behavior, Gavin.” He ejected the VHS tape, studying it in his hands. “Android minds are complicated, as I’m sure you’ve realized.” The apologetic brown of Connor’s eyes met Gavin’s. “And he…”

The android halted, seemingly unsure of his own words.

“Suffice it to say, he in no way hates you, and it’s not his intention to antagonize.” Connor slid the cardboard case back around the tape, hesitantly placing it on top of the VCR. “He just…we missed you, Gavin. He missed you, greatly, and he has…trouble adequately expressing himself.”

“Hadn’t fuckin’ noticed,” Gavin grunted, fighting off another wave of tears. He needed to man the fuck up. He needed to man the fuck up, but the emotions, thoughts, and feelings—the existential weight of it all—it was too much, and Gavin was crumbling, beneath it.

“So, uh, Connor.” Gavin chewed his lip. “Do you think I’m a fake, or whatever, too?”

Connor scooted next to Gavin, and pulled his companion into a tight hug. “I don’t know what you are, Gavin. But I do know who you are.”

Gavin recalled those days, in November, when he was hedging for any excuse to drop Connor, on the spot. It felt perverse, now. This complicated machine of a creature could forgive Gavin, without having any base context of what that action entailed, but Gavin couldn’t forgive himself, for anything.

“Everything will be okay, now, Gavin.” Connor pulled away with a sad smile. “My brother will come around. He just needs time to process.”

Gavin was a lot of things right now, but ‘okay’ definitely didn’t make that list.

The loud clap of a door reverberated across the apartment, and Gavin turned to see RK900 emerge from the hallway, fully clothed. He cut his usual serious air—hair gelled back, and impeccable outfit, wrinkle-free. Gavin could see right through the facade, to the deflated man, from earlier. Some things just couldn’t be hand-waved.

“You got a hot date or somethin’?” Gavin huffed, raising one of his eyebrows. It was five-thirty on a Saturday morning, according to his internal clock.

“We’re going to CyberLife to get some answers.” RK900 announced, dropping a t-shirt and sweatpants onto Gavin’s lap. “Get dressed.”

—

Gavin exited the cab, cool morning wind whipping around his body. He didn’t want to be here—he hated CyberLife, and everything it stood for. It was an overgrown tumor of a corporation, harboring psychopaths and questionable technologies, deep within its belly.

He glared at the warehouses, on the other side of the lake, with perfect clarity, where worker ants transported android pieces back and forth—an entire species, commodified for the American marketplace. Gavin wondered if there had ever been a moral backbone to this company, or if it
existed solely to test the limitations of social acceptability.

Gavin leaned over the concrete siding of the entry bridge, studying the acid green waves of Lake Erie. The brothers were still squabbling, in the back of the taxi, arguing about nothing. They’d left their thought channel open, again, and Gavin doubted it was a mistake, this time. He was being accepted into the fold, bit by bit.

Gavin gripped the concrete railing, hard enough to leave fingerprints, at the thought.

[This is as close to Amanda as I’m willing to get.]

“Sounds like someone’s got mommy problems,” Gavin muttered, digging though his head for a means to shut off whatever receptor was making this possible.

[There is no reason for this spat, between the two of you. Come inside.]

[No, RK900, I’ve already broken a huge promise to myself, by being on Belle Isle. Amanda and I are no longer on speaking terms.]

[Very well. I suppose I have the distinguished honor of dealing with two children today, instead of just one.]

Gavin chuckled. Some things never changed, thank god.

For all RK900’s talk of androids being incapable of family relationships, his interactions with Connor couldn’t be more brotherly, if he tried. It was cute, in a fucked up kind of way.

"Let’s go. My brother has chosen to be excessively difficult, this morning."

Gavin hadn’t noticed the android sneak up behind him, and he suppressed a slight shudder at the feeling of RK900 grabbing his wrist. He allowed himself to be led into the tower. It was inevitable. RK900 always got exactly what he wanted, come hell or high water. He was just that kind of person, but then, so was Gavin.

They were two sides of the same, stubborn coin.

Within moments of entering the building, Gavin felt the weight of every pair of eyes, homing in on his presence. Human and android alike, they all had opinions. Much like Gavin himself, nobody quite knew what to make of his existence.

[Is that R&D’s new model?]

[It can’t be—there’s a legal moratorium on production of all new lines.]

[That doesn’t extend to one-off prototypes, as I understand. Certain biocomponents must be tested within a live unit, before mass production.]

It seemed no one was interested in securing their direct-link mental chat lines, which meant Gavin caught wind of almost every android conversation, within proximity of his sensory array.

“How do I turn off this bullshit in my head?” Gavin groaned under his breath. He rubbed his arms, glancing at a pair of curious androids in lab coats.

“You don’t.” RK900 said. He paused, and met Gavin’s eyes.

“Of fucking course…” Gavin grumbled, willing the gawking android scientists to leave, instead of
multiply. “God, this sucks. Don’t you get tired of these numbers and shit, harassing you all the time?” Gavin didn’t expect a reply, nor was he sure he wanted one.

“I don’t know…” RK900 confessed, glancing into the distance. “I like the neatness, and the constant knowledge of my surroundings, but it seems to come at a cost. I can only conceptualize what is lost on me through viewing others.”

“So,” Gavin ventured, eyes remaining glued to the ever increasing number of onlookers, “that’s why you like movies and shit, huh?”

RK900 didn’t respond.

Gavin glanced at the troubled android. For once in their fleeting partnership, he understood his ex-partner’s cryptic bullshit.

A heavily modified variant of the RK900 series AI template happened to be Jarrett’s ‘gift’ to Gavin. The psycho probably thought it was funny, in an ironic way, but Gavin was now saddled with insight into RK900’s personality matrix: it was uncompromising in its emotional rigidity, and on a technical level, made it nearly impossible to empathize with others.

Gavin didn’t have that problem, of course. The transference of his human neural pathways wiped out much of the pre-existing software, so he didn’t have an excuse for his caustic personality.

“We should continue. Amanda prefers not to be kept waiting.” RK900 stared at Gavin, looking every bit like he had something else to say. The android chose to head down the hallway, instead.

Shaking his head, Gavin followed.

—

Gavin rested, supine, against the expensive metal bench, outside the entrance of the holography laboratory. His hands were clenched tight over his chest, where he could feel the fast, rhythmic thump of his blue heart.

This was Case Jarrett’s territory—his home turf, in a sense. The fucker was one of the number-two guys in this department. Gavin knew that now. He could access the WiFi, and CyberLife’s employee records systems, as a result. The real one; not the farce RK900 brought back to the station.

Five strikes.

The asshole had five, huge writeups in his record, the kind of disciplinary actions that would normally result in someone being summarily terminated from a corporation. Hacking. Employee theft. Industrial destruction. Jarrett was a walking corporate nightmare, but it turned out he was also close friends with ex-CyberLife CEO and tech darling, Elijah Kamski. They knew each other well enough for Kamski to internally brand the fuck ‘too valuable to lose,’ and seal all his employee records, including his psych profile, which was a minefield of psychosis.

Jarrett was officially declared missing three weeks ago, and Gavin’s ‘death’ occurred one week prior to that. The DPD must have figured something out. Thirty-odd victims meant this guy had been doing this for years, completely unchecked. He wouldn’t just disappear for no reason.

Even knowing Jarrett was on the lamb, Gavin couldn’t shake the sense that the creep would show up any second now, and drag Gavin back to cyborg hell.
“Fuck,” he groaned, bringing himself to an upright sitting position. “Goddammit, Dan. You better not be dead.”

Gavin ran a hand through his hair, and glanced into the endless depth of the cubicle farm. A sea of eyes and whispers greeted him, and he decided now was as good a time as any to ignore RK900’s instructions to remain outside.

He slid through the sleek, black doors of the lab, and was immediately hit with a cacophony of sensations. Warm sunlight hit his skin, and the smell of roses filled his nose—both of which were impossible, since he was in a large, concrete room, deep underground.

As his mind and body adjusted to the large garden, Gavin noticed the sensory input was off. It was minute, but enough to be annoying. A picosecond delay between touching one of the many flowers in the periphery, and feeling the velvet of their petals.

“I insist that one of my personal technicians take a look at you.”

A stern, feminine voice rose above the sounds of digital birds, and running water. Gavin looked away from the rose bush, and towards the central gazebo, where Amanda sat on a bench, facing RK900.

“That is wholly unnecessary.” An electronic reverberation tainted RK900’s voice. “My operational state is more than adequate.”

Amanda stood, somehow towering over RK900, despite being shorter than the android. “You are unwell, and I won’t stand by as one of my sons suffers.”

RK900 let out an angry sigh. “I am not your son. Machine organisms do not possess familial relations.”

Amanda—an incorporeal, holographic projection—grabbed RK900 by the chin, somehow forcing him to look her in the eye through sheer will power. “Family is a construct, not a biological trait. Besides,” she turned around, facing a small corner, with a number of gray tombstones. “It was at my behest you did not end up in a scrapyard, with the other RK900 units. If anyone deserves the title of ‘family,’ it is me. I want you to respect that.”

“You dictated the personality traits which led to the demise of my series, in the first place.” RK900’s voice was cool, but Gavin could see the tremors in his balled wrists.

“Perhaps,” Amanda muttered circling the uncomfortable android, “but your emotional progression has since demonstrated that sentience is more than capable of breaking software limitations, as I predicted.” Amanda’s dark eyes met Gavin’s, and she grinned, perfect teeth gleaming, in the false approximation of sunlight. “I believe your affinity for this creature is more than proof.”

Startled, RK900 turned to Gavin, mouth open in a silent shout, as Amanda’s avatar disappeared from the gazebo.

“Detective,” the AI’s voice purred from behind Gavin. He turned, and found himself face to face with Amanda. Her presence was tangible and overpowering—everything a light based entity shouldn’t be. “I see you’ve returned—albeit in a very different capacity.” A slight smirk dressed
RK900 ran to Gavin, grabbing him by the arm. “I instructed you to remain outside, until I came for you.” The android hissed into Gavin’s ear. His voice was frantic—worried, even.

“What do you want me to say, Nines?” Gavin shrugged, grinning, “I’m shit at following directions.”

RK900 opened his mouth to respond, but Gavin never heard his words. A huge wave of unfamiliar data encroached on his mind, from all sides, suffocating him. Gavin dropped to his knees, clutching his head. Petabytes of intent swarmed him, covering his body, like so many digitized fire ants. The sensation burrowed into his mind and body, alike, probing every corner, and he screamed.

As quickly as it came, it was gone.

“...this is not appropriate conduct, Amanda!”

Gavin whimpered, glancing up and into the irate face of RK900, as he confronted the holographic avatar.

“How did you intend for me to react to you dropping this bundle of illicit technologies on my doorstep?” Amanda smiled, and cupped RK900’s cheek. It wasn’t a pleasant smile, nor was it warm.

Snakelike, Gavin thought. An omnipotent serpent, biding her time in digital Eden. Gavin wasn’t sure what self-destructive instinct drove humanity towards facilitating its own obsolescence, but Amanda was a testament to that need.

“It appears your detective ran into a bit of trouble.” Amanda slid onto a nearby bench, crossing her legs. “I suppose he is the actual reason for your appearance? It seems my children rarely visit, unless they want something from me.” A look of displeasure crossed her face.

RK900 remained silent, standing over Gavin, protectively. Both androids knew there was nothing but pure bravado preventing this overpowered computer program from tearing Gavin apart, if she felt so inclined. AI’s weren’t limited in the same way androids were—they didn’t have to fit into a human-sized piece of hardware.

“We didn’t.” An enigmatic smile crossed her face. “We designed an apparatus that would aid in memory rehabilitation for brain damaged patients, but It never made it out of the alpha testing stage.”

Amanda held out her hand, and a light bird flitted into her palm. She scratched it, with her finger.

“Two of the volunteer test subjects were lobotomized by the radiation needed for the computer-to-brain interface, and partial imprints of their memories cropped up on our servers. This sent the board into a panic, and they scrapped the project.”

“Scrapped or not, that shit was just lying out in the open, and a psychopath waltzed in and took it!” Gavin yelled, exasperated. Amanda was acting too calm and collected about what amounted to a
huge, corporate cover-up. The harm dealt to the those in the past and present rolled over her, as easily as the holographic wren, taking flight from her finger.

Amanda narrowed her eyes. “Understand, Detective, that I was not acting CEO at the time of Case Jarrett’s purported thefts. Humans are fallible. I am not.”

The garden grew eerily silent, all sensory input halting.

“Still…it seems you benefited from our technology’s misuse.” Amanda was beside Gavin again. A powerful energy emanated from her avatar, as the full weight of the AI’s hungry eyes turned to Gavin. Her intentions were obvious from her earlier attack: she wanted to vivisect him—rip his mind to shreds with the wave of her hand, and reverse engineer his code.

“Amanda,” RK900 interjected, placing himself between the AI and Gavin—a symbolic buffer. “I brought him here to be looked over by a technician, not as a sacrifice.” The android’s words were indignant, his tone accusatory.

The energy in the room shifted, and Amanda gave RK900 a hard smile. She ran a thumb along his pale cheek.

“Of course, if that’s your desire. You know, I would do anything for you and your brother,” she sighed, looking past RK900 to Gavin, “but I think you can do a lot better.”

“Hey!” Gavin blurted, his face heating up. “What the fu-”

“Thank you, Amanda,” RK900 cut off Gavin, “we’ll be going now.”

“RK900,” Amanda called, as the two men stood poised to exit the room, “your detective’s template is damaged. There’s evidence of a partial factory reset, but without the base code for what he is, I cannot discern the extent of the issues. Whenever you find Dr. Jarrett, I would appreciate a copy of his data, so we can repair the object of your fixation.”

Gavin felt Amanda’s eyes follow him into the hallway, and beyond. He bit his lip, drawing the chemical taste of Thirium onto his tongue.

*Thirium sample belongs to Research and Development transhumanist architectural concept, Gavin Reed. Please contact [redacted] for more information.*

“That bitch,” Gavin hissed under his breath. Like hell he was about to hand her Jarrett’s research, on a silver platter.

“God, your mom’s fucking creepy, you know that?” Gavin rubbed the back of his neck, glaring at RK900.

“She is also incredibly dangerous, which is why I instructed you to wait outside!” RK900 snapped, turning to face Gavin. “Is it forever your prerogative to undermine me?”

“I dunno, is this your way of finally admitting that I’m not a fake?” Gavin paused, remaining a few steps behind RK900. He glared into the android’s cold eyes.

RK900 sighed, rubbing his hands across his face. “You are the only you that you can be, but that ‘you’ is an entity distinct from the deceased human, known as Gavin Reed.”

Gavin watched the android crouch, curling into a tight ball. When RK900 pulled his hands away from his face, they were stained a light blue, as were his cheeks, and the knees of his pants.
Gavin stood, watching the android’s silent breakdown. He was at a loss, and full to the brim with anger and resentment. RK900’s actions conflicted with his words, and his words hurt almost as badly as the bullet Jarrett put through Gavin’s gut.

*He doesn’t understand,* Gavin thought, bitterly. *You can make him understand.*

He could, in theory. Gavin Reed and RK900 were more similar now than ever, but Gavin wasn’t sure if it was worth the strife.

He was at a crossroads.

*How big of a sucker am I for this fuckin’ robot?*

Gavin lapped at the warm blue dribble, falling from his lip. God, he hated this stupid crush. This fixation was poised to destroy both of them—had destroyed Gavin—but he still found himself drawn to the android, like a moth, to a very destructive flame.

He didn’t have anything left to lose. Gavin was alone and afraid, and the only person who could even begin to understand the mess that was now his head was curled into a sad, weeping ball in front of him.

A total reverse of their usual paradigm.

“Goddammit, Nines, get up!” Gavin stomped his foot. “This depression shit is a bad look on you.”

RK900 shot up to his full height. He sneered, but the pouty purple along his eyes betrayed any and all confidence in his aura. “I am not depressed. I—”

“Look,” Gavin could feel heat rushing to his cheeks, like he was a goddamn teenager, again. “I meant that fuckin’ apology, last night. I… I don’t do that stuff, but I was willing to make an exception, just this once. So you can stop with this fuckin’ pissing contest.”

Detective Gavin Reed had been convinced nothing could ever happen between him and RK900—not in his lifetime. Except that life was over, now. Gavin was an entirely new person, from the inside out, and he still didn’t know what he really wanted, but he knew RK900 needed to be in the picture. Friends. Fuck buddies. Acquaintances. Something more. Gavin wasn’t picky. He just wanted the air cleared, and the monolithic anxiety gone. His worst nightmare had come true, and he didn’t want to go two-for-two with bad dreams.

He wrung his hands together, trying to meet RK900’s eyes. “You won, Nines. You fuckin’ won. You were right about everything, okay? Are you happy now?”

“Why would I be pleased? Are you under the impression seeing the corpse of Detective Reed somehow brought me joy?” The android narrowed his cold blue eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you honestly think me so cruel?”

“No.” Gavin zipped away the desire to contradict, to fight, to hiss, and to blame. “I just think you’re a traumatized dipshit.” Gavin swallowed his pride. “Like me.”

Gavin hesitantly extended his hand to RK900. Motes of peach withdrew from his fingertips, and the bright plastic of his hand gleamed in the incandescent light. He cleared his throat—a wholly unnecessary action. A “helpful” text box reminded him he no longer had air sacs or mucus. Another gift from Amanda, it seemed.

More training wheels. More complications. Being a machine was its own, unique brand of hell.
“I wanna start over,” Gavin stammered, trying to keep his cool. “My name’s Gavin Reed, cyborg detective.” The designation felt wrong on Gavin’s tongue, but he would adapt. It was one of his few worthwhile skills.

RK900 regarded Gavin’s peace offering. His crimson LED shuddered to gold, and finally settled on a blue the same shade as his eyes. The android loosened up, and took Gavin’s hand.

“I am Nines, a prototype clandestine interrogation unit, employed by the Michigan Bureau of Investigation, to aid in the extraction of criminal confessions.”

Gavin tensed, as the android retracted his pale skin, bracing himself for the uncanny sense of another mind invading his own. He squeezed his eyes shut, and whimpered. In a sudden rush, RK900 filled him, and Gavin could feel the android’s consciousness picking him apart, pixel by pixel, memory by memory.

Interfacing was a new kind of intimacy. No boundaries or walls stood between the two men, any longer. Gavin was an open book, unable to hide anything from the android. It was equal parts reassuring and terrifying.

Gavin swallowed, anxiety overtaking his thought processes, but he could feel a metaphysical hand guiding him out of that head space, and into a new mind. It was rigid, and painfully structured. Gavin’s essence felt crushed in the new mind’s claustrophobic channels.

The presence reassured Gavin, leading him down a hallway. They paused before a memory, and Gavin reached out to engage the sequence. He felt his entire body shudder, his mind blinking.

When Gavin opened his eyes, they were not his own. The body he occupied gracefully exited a police vehicle, and surveyed the ruins of a decimated chemical plant.

RK900 wanted Gavin to relive one of his memories, and Gavin had a sinking suspicion he knew exactly which one.

Chapter End Notes

Leaux you save my life, bro

Thank you to everyone for the comments and kudos! Y’all are wonderful, and your feedback sustains me (°ω°´)

My Reed900 blogosphere: @Vapedrone
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

“So, you’re saying that life is a level of complexity? If something is alive it’s just more complex?”

“I think I’m saying that life is driven by the need to be alive, and by these base, primal animal feelings, like pain and suffering.”

-More or Less Human (Radiolab, 2018)

Cool night air bombarded RK900, as he pulled his MBI windbreaker close to his chest. It was a distinctly human action. RK900 wasn’t actually cold, and his sensors registered an otherwise optimal temperature, but it felt right in the moment—something his coworkers would do, to demonstrate discomfort. It was less a matter of fitting in, and more of a means to an end. The humans found him off-putting, at best, and intimidating, at worst.

The only exception to that rule was Gavin Reed. The ornery human’s fear had a kind of philosophical underpinning. He did not fear RK900, himself, so much as what the android represented. He’d found the human’s neurosis endearing—for a short time, at least.

RK900 frowned. He didn’t like how often his thoughts returned to Detective Reed, nor how frequently he was forced to dwell on their night together. It had been one in a long line of gross oversights.

Gavin recoiled at the vibrant regret, forcing itself on his mind. Hot. White. Distinct from his own experience of the emotion, but it translated, regardless. Betrayal injected into the cocktail, and Gavin wanted to run. It was a disorienting process—having another’s external and internal sensations imposed on him. Gavin was split down the middle—two places, two lives, two experiences. Two distinct people, trying to process the same event.

An old adage swam to the forefront of his mind: be careful what you wish for.

The memory paused, as did the iteration of RK900 inside of it. Gavin froze. He was a ghostly hitchhiker, trapped in the digitized body of RK900’s recreation. The message was clear: RK900 wanted Gavin’s undivided attention.

Gavin relented, relinquishing control to the android’s mental essence.

RK900 slammed the door of the sleek, black SUV, joining his fellow detectives in the cozy, overgrown parking lot of the old chemical production plant. Purple light surrounded a dying sun, covering the small huddle in dense shadows.

An eerie silence blanketed the area. Police of all different strata dotted the landscape, mired in a cacophony of whispers. RK900 questioned the odd behavior. Where was the idle chat?

“You sure you wanna be here, big guy?”
RK900 glanced towards Melissa, an MBI forensics technician. Her question struck him as out of place. There was no logical reason for him to not join his coworkers at the scene. He was the only detective on staff with intimate knowledge of the Infinity Killer.

“Of course,” RK900 stated, “what reason would I have to not be here?” He stared at Melissa, watching the discomfort itch its way across her face and body. Her brow furrowed, and the rest of his coworkers stamped their feet—a sign of nervous energy.

Gavin laughed. He assumed it was a laugh—the appropriate synapses lined up to facilitate laughter, but being trapped in another’s mind tacked on damn near a million layers of misdirection.

A red sensation licked along Gavin’s consciousness. RK900’s disapproval was tangible. Somehow, the android missed the memo: Gavin wasn’t laughing because of the android’s inability to communicate with his coworkers. His laughter didn’t come from a place of joy.

Gavin was terrified.

RK900 stood alongside his coworkers, analyzing their body language, and cross referencing it against the database he’d slowly built over the last few months. There was a secret in the air—an unspoken, vital piece of information. It agitated him.

“Withholding information from me will only slow down our progress on this case,” RK900 huffed, glaring at each of his coworkers in turn. They glanced among themselves, an unspoken story, composed entirely of body language.

Not confusion, but fear. Not distrust, but reluctance. Not hesitance, but disdain.

RK900 scanned the humans over and over again, trying to translate their idiosyncratic motions into a language he could understand, but there were too many variables. Human communication conveyed infinite possibilities, in a single word or motion, and RK900 had no desire to divert any more processing power to understanding such an abstruse mode of communication.

He no longer implicitly trusted his interpretive abilities—they had burned him too badly, in the past.

“Very well,” RK900 sneered, bristling at his uncooperative peers. “I feel at least one of us should do our job, today.”

Humans were notorious for wasting time on insignificant things. Emotional outbursts could render them inert for days, or weeks, at a time. They were an inefficient species, mired in their own short sightedness, but RK900 couldn’t help but be fascinated with the creatures.

Humans were appealing, in their own, self-destructive way. RK900 didn’t understand the origin of his fascination, but that was the price of deviancy—of sentience.

RK900 crossed the sea of shredded asphalt, pausing at the holographic police tape, lining the entrance of the factory floor. A beat cop he recognized, from the Detroit Police Department, leaned into the embrace of one of his coworkers. His skin was pallid and his eyes were wide. He met RK900’s gaze, briefly, and turned back to his partner.

RK900 shrugged it off, entering the building. Rust caked the ailing steel pipes that snaked along every surface of the facility. Hard lines and geometric lattices led to a massive drum, in the center of the room, where a number of police and forensic technicians idled.

A group of familiar faces huddled just outside the giant cylinder, voices so hushed that even RK900
couldn’t make out their words. In the midst of the humans, he caught sight of his predecessor, expertly mimicking their mannerisms. They accepted RK800, never questioning him, despite his design similarities to RK900—the ruthless negotiator to RK900’s ruthless interrogator.

RK900 had interfaced with his predecessor, on numerous occasions, and seen the other’s thoughts and deeds. Unlike himself, RK800 actually had a body count, and would have betrayed his entire species, if not for Hank Anderson’s interference with his baseline programming. And yet…

Balling his fists, RK900 watched his predecessor excuse himself, from the group of humans. The ease with which they regarded his presence lit something deep within RK900—a purely deviant sensation that he chose not to name.

Envy. Gavin could taste it—a caustic chartreuse, scratching along his sensory array. Brief, but potent.

RK800 halted in front of RK900, placing a hand on the younger android’s shoulder. RK900 understood the action to be one of concern, or possibly surprise.

“Brother,” RK800 began, furrowing his brows, “why are you here?

[An inane question.] RK900 responded. It annoyed him how frequently his predecessor utilized archaic, verbal speech. Valuable time, wasted trying to impress animals. [I am here to investigate this crime scene, like yourself.]

“You were instructed to stay behind.” RK800 crossed his arms over his chest. Shiny white teeth bit into his bottom lip—RK800 was hiding something.

[I was advised to take some time off, but after the discovery of the illicit laboratory in Flint, I think it would be in everyone’s best interest for me to remain involved in the hunt for the Infinity Killer.] RK900 glared at his predecessor, sizing up the other android.

“I don’t disagree…” RK800 trailed off, refusing to meet RK900’s gaze. The older android rubbed the back of his neck. More human by the day—for better or for worse. RK900 felt his nanite skin retract from where his nails bit into his palm.

“I just…” RK800 snapped back to attention, “I fear this crime scene might be too much, for you.”

“Too much?” RK900 actually burst into laughter, at that. His voice had a tinny, mechanical texture, along the edges, which sparked an irrational anger within him. “You do realize, brother, that I was designed to be incapable of feeling emotions such as discomfort or fear.”

RK800 paused. An emotion filled his eyes—pity. RK900 recoiled, angry the other android had the nerve to look down on him, the superior model.

“Brother,” RK800 sighed, “you weren’t designed to fall for a human, either, but sentience—free will—has a way of redefining one’s purpose.”

RK900 was lost for words. He sized up RK800—Connor, the android who was instrumental in the liberation of all machine life. The android who had always been at odds with his central programming. The android who was desperate to become human.

RK900 tired of his ‘brother’s’ projections.

[Any interpretation you may have of the exchanges, between myself and Detective Reed, are merely that.] Agitated, RK900 pushed past RK800, shoulder-checking the older android.
[Please, RK900, be reasonable.] RK800 grabbed his wrist, in a final bid to prevent him from proceeding towards the crime scene. The older model’s psychic voice was urgent. [Detective Reed’s disappearance is disrupting your-]

RK900 tore his arm out of his predecessor’s grasp, and glared at the other android out of the corner of his cold, blue eye. [I’m fine.] His tone was definitive, and RK800 backed off, reluctance plastered across his face.

Eyes followed RK900, as he approached the giant chemical drum. Its surface was spotless, all rust scraped away, leaving behind a dulled gray. Black words dotted the metal, large and imposing. They covered its surface, dripping and overlapping—a messy affair, despite the well-rendered font.

“...AND WOE BUT ICARUS CHOSE TO IGNORE THE SHARP WORDS OF HIS FATHER, ANGLING FURTHER AND FURTHER UP INTO THE BRIGHT BLUE OF THE SKY. FEELINGS OF ELATION AND INVINCIBILITY FILLED HIS CHEST, PROPELLING ICARUS HIGHER, INTO THE GRASP OF THE CLOUDS. SO MUCH SO THAT, WHILST TRAPPED IN HIS ECSTASY, THE BOY FAILED TO NOTICE THE HEATED DROPLETS OF RED WAX DRIBBLING FROM IN BETWEEN THE FINE FEATHERS OF HIS WINGS…”

A burst of wind howled through the gaping holes, puncturing the once-strong walls of the structure—the unmistakable cry of a banshee. It tore RK900 from his concentration, and a chill ran up his spine. This message was unlike those present at the other crime scenes. It seemed targeted—personal, even.

RK900 proceeded towards the two-story drum, noting the silence of all those around him—mannequins, frozen in place, drawn to his every move. RK900 didn’t understand their troubled looks, nor their gaunt faces. They had seen cadavers before, on many occasions.

He stood in front of a giant, black gash, crawling up the side of the structure. Dying sunlight shone down from the shattered ceiling, casting the supine body in a grotesque spotlight. Curious, RK900 approached, his footsteps, alone, reverberating off the old pipes and empty machines.

Red.

Harsh, acrid vermillion zipped across Gavin, tearing into him, like so many shards of glass. It was a dense, crimson singularity, ripping him to shreds, but the sensation didn’t originate from within his mind, as he initially assumed.

Through the hazy, visual corruption, he could make out RK900, dropping to his knees, running a finger through black ichor. The android hesitantly placed it on his tongue, shaking, suffering from error message after error message. The memory was a mess of jarring senses, none of which Gavin could adequately parse.

Gavin could taste himself, on the android’s finger. He could also taste the pinks and yellows, filling RK900’s body—the discordant experience of being hit with a new series of strong emotions, for the first time, and having no context for their existence. Gavin recognized each of them—fear, grief, trauma. RK900 didn’t, or couldn’t.

Anger floated to the top of the sensory pile—alight with neon pinks, and indelible reds. RK900 was angry with Gavin—hated Gavin for his death—but it didn’t come from a place of malice.

The memory resumed, in full definition, and Gavin slid back into the avatar.
Shaking, RK900 ran his hand along the singed scalp of the corpse, feeling the icy touch of dead skin. It didn’t compute. This flesh, this body, had to be alive—it couldn’t be deceased. He couldn’t be deceased. Where was his unkempt hair, with the awkward curl? Where were the light green eyes, so full of their own, unique brand of contempt?

The scar along the bridge of his nose. The mole at the base of his neck. The knife wound scar on his abdomen. What was this cold, dead body, bearing all of Gavin Reed’s features?

RK900’s fingers dipped into the black slime, pooling at the corner of the corpse’s eyes, collecting a sample for the fourth time. Error messages filled his mind, but he pushed them away, quarantining the protocol that continued to generate the unwanted notifications. His fingers were shaking.

Why were they shaking?

What was this unfamiliar sensation, building in the center mass of his torso?

RK900 placed the sample to his tongue, and licked.

The image of Gavin Reed’s sneering face appeared, alongside all relevant data.

...Reed, Gavin Matthew. Born 10/07/2002, Detroit, MI. Occupation: Detective for...

There must be some mistake, RK900 thought, finger still pressed along his delicate mouth sensors. The digit remained locked onto the synthetic muscle, tongue testing the brain matter over and over and over and over, until the sample was degraded past the point of analysis.

RK900 stood, nearly losing his balance in the process—an issue he’d never once experienced in his short existence—and stared. He took in every inch of visible skin, a sickly green tint, marring the once-warm flesh.

RK900 didn’t cry. He didn’t bawl, as was customary in films, nor did he scream and wail. RK900 simply stood, savoring the dying taste of a brain matter sample, belonging to the only human that ever mattered.

Gavin Reed was deceased. Dead. Gone. This was an ending: a concept so wholly unknown, to RK900, that he couldn’t digest any of the novel emotions, chewing apart his systems.

RK900 could no longer experience the human’s sub-par sense of humor, nor his sexually charged attempts to assert dominance, nor his poorly disguised desire for approval—endearing flaws, merging together to create a unique personality.

RK900 didn’t know how long he stood next to the decaying corpse, staring at the empty, black pits, where green eyes once rested. He didn’t know when RK800 joined his side, squeezing his ichor stained hand. He didn’t know when the EMT hauled away the body, leaving him alone, in the claustrophobic confines of the dismal space.

The taste of Gavin Reed continued to linger on his tongue, and he clung to it, like a lifeline. Once it was gone, there would be nothing tangible left of the human. Gavin Reed would become a nebulous abstraction—the idea of a person—a fleeting memory of what once was, but could no longer be.

RK900 placed a shaking palm at the front of his mouth, and pressed his tongue against his stained flesh, one last time.
Gavin rocketed back into his own headspace, with a yelp. The only thing more jarring than the act of transference, was the immediate sensory hangover. A cross between extreme nausea, and arousal, overtook his body, and he fell to the ground, dry heaving in between groans.

A firm hand came to rest, on his back, equal parts soothing and hesitant, in its weight. Gavin leaned into it, gulping down air. His mind and body were on fire, but the only thing he could see, the only thing at the forefront of his mind, was the image of his own, pallid face, covered in dark slime.

—

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Gavin stared at the blank, white wall, hands clasped together so tightly, it generated a warning message. The thing in the back of his neck weighed on him, an intrusive shadow, poking around his digital brain matter, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t care—not when a specter of his human self stared back at him, eyes gone, black tar dripping down its greenish face.

It stood opposite Gavin—a projection of his mind, made real by the nature of android memory recollection. An entire lifetime of selfish decisions, coalesced into a single moment—experienced through the mind of another, then manifested as a grotesque phantom. Gavin didn’t think being a cyborg could get much worse, but translating metaphysical data, into visual hallucinations, might just be the worst part, yet.

He could hear RK900 arguing with the human technician—muffled quips from a sharp-tongued android, in mourning—but the sound of black ooze, hitting the floor, resounded with crystal clarity. It stained the floor, but only in his mind. Gavin looked away from the nightmare.

He refused to believe in ghosts, even if he was one, himself.

Gavin reached up to the point of contact between the cable and his spine—a seamless conjunction, between fibrous plastic skin, and the cold titanium of the exposed port. He could feel every piece of data that flowed in and out of that point, pinging across his person. It wasn’t exactly a bad feeling, nor was it good, just…different.

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Slow and rhythmic.

Gavin turned to watch RK900 and the flustered programmer.

“I-I don’t know what you want me to s-say.” The technician angrily adjusted his glasses. There was fear in his eyes. “I’m not familiar with this coding language—no one is! It’s n-not in any database anywhere!”

“I question your efficacy, as an employee and a computer scientist, Doctor,” RK900 hissed, slamming his palm onto the table. “I was able to interface with this unit, minutes ago, with no problems. Perhaps you should consider a new career?”

“L-look,” the human stammered, puffing out his chest—it proved sad, not menacing. “Interfacing and diagnostics are two completely different things. T-This is a proprietary, homebrewed monstrosity, ported into a CyberLife template—a *heavily* modified one, too. You can talk to it, sure, but god help it, if it has any snags in its code.” The technician’s voice increased an octave, cracking on the last syllable.
“Hey, asshole!” Gavin snarled, “I’m right fuckin’ here, y’know?”

_Drip. Drip. Drip._

Oh God, he wanted to shut off his brain—forever, preferably. Gavin grabbed the giant cable, snaking out of him, and pulled. RK900 was there in an instant, slapping Gavin’s hand away, with a glare. Gavin slumped forward, placing his face in his hands, trying to exorcise the visage of his dead body, willing everything out of existence, including himself.

Fingers came to rest, on his back. They traced his spine, coming to rest on the exposed metal of the oversized USB port, at the base of his skull. Gavin gave an involuntary shiver, and bit back a groan, as a thumb gently massaged the point of contact, between his body and the intrusion. Heat rushed along his spine, pooling in his abdomen—arousal hitting him hard, at the worst possible time. Not only was he growing hornier by the second, he was sitting in a tiny lab room, with a disgruntled nerd, a pissy android, and the image of his own corpse, standing in the corner.

This day couldn’t get any worse, except that it already had, even before entering this room.

RK900 had seen everything. _Everything_ —a big word, with an even bigger set of baggage. An all-you-can-eat buffet of Gavin’s memories, feelings, and neuroses. A ghostly blue residue lingered, in the places where RK900 had poked and prodded the cyborg’s mind. Gavin could trace it, from his earliest moments, as a child, to the time of his ‘death,’ and everything in between.

Nothing had escaped RK900’s diligence, and he’d meticulously ensured Gavin only saw the single memory RK900 wanted him to see.

Maybe that was all Gavin needed to see. Actions spoke louder than words, and the android forgot that thoughts had subthoughts, and so on, and so forth.

_Drip. Drip. Drip._

The puddle underneath the phantom had grown, considerably. Gavin resented RK900 for saddling him with this—the harsh paradox of being alive, but still witnessing oneself, in death. Gavin knew it wasn’t the android’s intent to trap him in an existential nightmare. RK900 thought it would somehow make Gavin feel better, having definitive proof that his human form was deceased.

Unlike RK900, though, Gavin never head to deal with that question. He’d known since waking up on the cold, stone floor of that closet, that he was a dead man walking.

“I don’t know what to tell the two of you.” The technician’s nervous stutter snapped Gavin out of his trance.

"Fuckin’ don’t hold back on my account, doc.” Gavin narrowed his eyes at the hesitant human. “It’s robo-cancer, right?” Gavin snorted at his own joke. The other two men remained silent.

RK900’s fingers stopped stroking the sensitive metal port, and Gavin couldn’t stop a loud whine, as the android pulled away. His nerves were on fire, his belly singing, but the nightmarish remnants of his own mortality stood just out of sight, and it was a huge mood-killer.

“I see…” RK900 intoned. “I do suggest you find a new career, Doctor—I question your dedication to this one.”

His piece said, RK900 forcefully ejected the cable from Gavin’s neck, and Gavin ruined the gravity of the moment with an exceptionally loud moan. Embarrassed, Gavin refused to make eye contact with RK900, for the remainder of their walk back towards the entrance, and tried to ignore
the soft splotch of wet footfalls, following three steps behind.

“Amanda sends her regards.”

RK900 fell into the cab, blue eyes zeroing in on his brother. Gavin noticed the android was back to his old self, or as much as he could be, given the circumstances. A tremble no longer wracked his sturdy form, and the air of unchecked authority had returned, in full. Gavin was pissed to see their mutual mindfuck lifted a weight off RK900’s shoulders, but failed to do him the same courtesy.

“You shouldn’t entertain that AI’s machinations.” Connor pouted at his sibling. “She’s very powerful, and very manipulative, RK900.”

“She is also weakened by her perceived loneliness, which can be a boon to us, if properly exploited.”

Yep, RK900 was back, but for the worried glances he continued to send Gavin’s way.

“You remind me of her, sometimes, brother.” Connor worried at his lower lip, meeting RK900’s gaze. “It’s not something to be proud of.”

“Unlike some,” RK900 snapped, defensively, “I have not lost sight of my speciation.”

He scrambled across the seat, plopping down next to Gavin, and turning to glare at Connor.

[Try not to forget, RK800: you are a machine, not an animal.] Projected, not spoken. Unlike the rest of the bickering, Gavin couldn’t tune that line out.

Seemingly satisfied, RK900 huddled close to Gavin, thigh touching thigh, their skin separated by nothing more than a couple layers of clothing.

Gavin shouldn’t be thinking about that, right now—shouldn’t want to think about that right now—but he couldn’t deny the odd taste, in the back of his mouth. The act of interfacing was terrifying—both physically and conceptually—but it had changed something, in their dynamic.

Speech, body language, texting—those were all indirect forms of communication, open to interpretation. But this robot brain-to-brain sensory swap-a-rama was on a whole other level, and left Gavin with an itch, in his stomach.

He clicked his tongue, and awkwardly watched the RK twins bicker about nothing. Same old song, same old dance: big brother trying to share advice, little brother disregarding it, because he ‘knew everything.’

RK900 was mired in a mountain of denial. Cute, but sad.

The cab drove away, and Gavin leaned his head against the window, watching blurs of color rush past. He could still hear the droplets of ichor slapping against the tile floor—could still see the cavernous eye sockets, chiding him for his poor decisions. He could still feel the ice of his own dead skin, on another’s fingertips.

A few tears rolled down his cheek, and he sensed Connor’s attention lingering on him, warm, brown eyes, and pursed lips.

*When did these dipshits stop bitching?*
Gavin opened his mouth, ready and raring to tell off the damn robot, but he yelped as a heavy weight fell onto him.

“What the fu-” Gavin shouted, and then fell silent. RK900’s sleeping body leaned against Gavin, and his head lolled onto the cyborg’s shoulder, eyes closed, his LED a dull, golden-orange.

He swallowed, and caught a glance of Connor, out of the corner of his eye. The android’s expression was smug, sporting a lightness that came with lifting a weight off one’s shoulders.

[It seems my brother is finally at peace, with himself.] Sass filled the words inside Gavin’s head, making him want to explode. Ignoring Connor, Gavin turned back to the window, where a deep, teal flush greeted him, in his reflection.

They rolled down the streets of Detroit, an empty affair. Husks of hundred-year-old buildings, standing next to bright, new developments. Old factories and empty lots. Nothing ever really changed, in this well-preserved hellscap. It was a spatial constant.

Except for Gavin, who was now in a terminal state of flux.

He stared into the sparse crowds, watching people go about their lives. Envy—a sour thing—curdled in his stomach, at the sight. He would never be able to live another normal day, in his life.

RK900’s limp hand fell against Gavin, as the cab hit a bump, and Gavin closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the android, using him as a pillow. Maybe normalcy was overrated.

Only time would tell.

Gavin opened his eyes, as the cab rounded the final stretch, to the RK twins’ apartment. He thought he caught sight of familiar faces, in the crowd. Blurred shapes he wanted to mold into someone he knew. Dan—no, Dennis—Gene, Cassandra, any of the other cultists, really. Other cyborgs, like him. It was all a trick of the mind. Stress and trauma, forging the perfect cocktail, and all his robot brain could do was warn him of the negative systemic impact.

Guilt.

Gavin was free, while the other cultists were still trapped, under the thumb of a psychotic madman.

He would suck it up, and stop by the station, tomorrow. There were only three Masonic structures, in town, and two of them were still very much occupied by a cult of their own.

—

Gavin laid across the couch, blank stare focused on the TV screen. The RK brothers passed out, hours ago. Connor tried to keep Gavin company, but the android could only stomach so many reruns of *Catfish*.

...vital mental subroutines can only be activated during sleep mode. Please power down unit, and make appropriate accommodations…

Gavin groaned at the reminder. As much as he wanted to sleep, every time he closed his eyes, the visage of his corpse stared, judging him for his part in his own demise. He’d spent the better part of three hours, digging around on the internet, to figure out if androids could delete their own memories, at will.

“What’s the goddamn point of being a fucking robot, if I can’t delete a photo from my fucking hard
“drive?” Gavin tore at his hair, yelling into the dark room.

But it wasn’t just deleting a photo. Memories involved data from every type of sensory input, generating lines that intertwined with other thoughts. They weren’t fleeting snapshots, but permanent strands, woven into the fabric of Gavin Reed. Deleting memories meant deleting portions of his already fractured self.

Gavin’s ghost stood at the mouth of the hallway, reflected in the bright screen of the TV. Dark matter fell from its weeping eye sockets, and the cyborg bit back a frustrated scream.

Gavin curled around a stiff couch pillow, shoving his face into its scratchy fabric. “God, leave me alone,” he yelled, voice muffled and broken.

“Who are you speaking to, Gavin?”

An unexpected voice.

RK900 had been so out of it, after their little field trip, that Connor chose to carry him into the apartment, over waking him—probably tucked RK900 in, and read him a bedtime story, too.

Gavin leaned over the back of the couch, and caught sight of the tall android, positioned at the mouth of the hallway. RK900’s imposing figure stepped into the phantom of human Gavin, sharp cyan cutting through the black murk of empty eye sockets—cause and effect, merging into a single point in space.

The nightmare retreated, banished for the time being, as Gavin’s mind turned to other thoughts.

RK900 sleepily rubbed the back of his head, revealing a pale, sliver of skin, where his shirt hiked a little too high. He’s not allowed to look that innocent, what the fuck? Gavin bit his lip, fighting back a wave of heat, hitting his cheeks.

Warning: Internal temperature fluctuation ...

RK900 approached Gavin, and to the cyborg’s horror, stepped into a pitch black puddle—some remnant of Gavin’s tortured psyche. It coated the android’s feet, staining them with glistening darkness.

RK900 crossed his toned arms over his broad chest, confused, as Gavin’s eyes widened in horror. The nonexistent black puddle wound its tendrils around RK900’s legs, crawling its way up his body.

“..vin.”

Tar veins reached RK900’s pink lips, spreading across his face in a web of dense black. It touched his blue eyes, filling the sclera with shadows, and warping the android’s face into the mangled robot, from Gavin’s early memories—bullet wound, and all.

“Gavin.”

Gavin blinked, and RK900’s appearance returned to normal. The android’s blue eyes were wide, sporting the kind of softness Gavin would expect from Connor, not his emotional void of a brother. This stupid robot really did give a shit about Gavin, which was saying a lot. RK900 didn’t care about anyone. He was designed to exploit human bonds, not form them.

Gavin chewed the inside of his cheek, eyes locked on RK900—his graceful gait, his stern face, and
his willingness to skew his beliefs and baseline programs for one, shitty cyborg. There was a word for that. It was four letters long, and Gavin had never said it to anyone but his mother.

RK900 unceremoniously shoved Gavin’s legs to the side, wrenching an angry yip from the cyborg. Ignoring Gavin’s protest, the android plopped onto the far cushion.

“Hey!” Gavin huffed, scrambling to readjust himself, “I was using that, asshole!”

“My house. My rules.” RK900 intoned, expressionless. He focused his blue eyes on the TV screen. It flickered once, image changing from an early twenty something crying at a computer screen to a pair of humans on their first, tumultuous date, in a coffee shop.

“God,” Gavin groaned, running his hands down his face as he assumed an upright position, “really, Nines? This is the shit you’re gonna put on?”

RK900’s eyes remained trained on the screen, golden light outlining the contour of his sharp profile. “Your taste in media is questionable at best. I prefer not to feel markedly dumber, when I watch television.”

Gavin rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t deny the spark of reassurance in his chest, and the uptick of his blue heart, at the thought of not facing this new life alone, anymore. His slate wasn’t exactly clean, but being undead wiped away a lot of his human baggage, and it was a little easier to pick out what mattered.

RK900 seemed equally content to return to the status quo, now. He got the glimpse into Gavin’s head that he’d always wanted—front row seats, to a human disaster. A decoder ring for Gavin Reed’s personality. Whatever he’d seen in Gavin’s brain seemed enough to reassure him of Gavin’s legitimacy.

Even knowing all that, Gavin could tell RK900 was nervous.

“You, uh, got somethin’ you wanna say, Nines?” Gavin huffed, with a lopsided frown. RK900 had seen everything of Gavin there was to offer—mentally, emotionally, physically—there was no reason for the android to continue with these awkward, prolonged silences.

[Your mind…] RK900 projected. Gold gave way to crimson, but his blue eyes remained trained on the TV. [Your mind is very…shall we say, abstract? Chaotic, even.]

The android tore his eyes away from the screen, LED painting the darkness red. RK900 pulled his legs up, tucking them underneath his body as he turned to face Gavin.

[I guess,] RK900 started, rubbing his chin, [I’m unsure what I expected. I understand that humans barely qualify as rational, but witnessing your memories and mental processes in action, I…] RK900 sighed, a look of frustration scrunching his perfect features. [How did you not die sooner?]

Gavin choked on nonexistent spit, sending himself into a coughing fit. Pop-ups chastised him for the sequence of actions, but Gavin shoved them deep into his now red mind.

“Ex-fucking-scuse me, Robocop?” Gavin snarled, scooting towards the android, to get into RK900’s face. “You’re really gonna fucking ask a man who just bit it that question?”

RK900’s expression remained the same: a look of innocence and genuine curiosity, which only served to further anger Gavin. The asshole didn’t recognize how hurtful his question had been.

[Your self-destructive tendencies run deeper than I ever imagined—to the point where I would…]
argue they bordered on passively suicidal.

RK900’s psychic words were calm, and devoid of emotional inflection.

“You my fuckin’ shrink now, plastic?!” Gavin snapped, poking RK900 in his chest. “Huh?”

[No.] RK900 projected. [There is no sum of compensation great enough for me to tackle your particular set of neurotic tendencies…]

The unspoken ‘but’ hung in the air. Gavin didn’t care, and he closed his fists around the android’s grey t-shirt, pulling RK900 forward with a snarl.

“Your anger is unfounded, Gavin.” Condensed frustration, and furrowed brows. RK900 placed a sturdy hand on Gavin’s wrist. “I was concerned for you before your incident, and I remain worried for your well-being, now. CyberLife didn’t construct me to antagonize you, and my choice—all along—to question your decisions, was a conscious effort to protect you from yourself.”

Gavin’s grip eased, and he stared at RK900, unsure how to respond.

“Were I half the things you assumed of me, do you honestly believe I would have remained your partner, for the duration of our time together?” RK900 glared at Gavin, mood ring bright and red and hot. “I’m sentient, not oblivious. Federal agencies have been trying to recruit me for months, and turning them down was a conscientious choice.”

RK900 looked away from Gavin, sight wandering back to the TV screen. The female protagonist ranted to her friend about the antics of her male love interest, while quirky music played in the background. It was painful and cheesy, to Gavin, but comforting to the overwhelmed android.

RK900 sighed. “I wanted to connect to something—to someone—and become more than my programming. Such is the curse of self-awareness.”

The android returned his sight to a stunned Gavin.

“Ironically, you were the only human who ever regarded me as a person. No one else asked me questions, about myself, or challenged me, in any way. The others at the station ignored me, when you confronted me, at every possible opportunity.”

Gavin bit his lip, trying to process the android’s words. There was a lot to unpack in his statements, but it all fed into a single point: Gavin had pegged RK900 all wrong.

Yes, the fucker was designed to torture and assassinate people. Yes, he was a huge, egotistical asshole. But he was also lonely—a prisoner to his own inability to communicate with others. He didn’t—or couldn’t—express himself through conventional channels. RK900’s native vocabulary was violence and abrasion, and Gavin was the only person around who was fluent.

RK900 had admitted as much, before, but Gavin was too caught up in his own stew of existential bullshit to pay the android’s words any heed. RK900 was never the monster in Gavin’s closet. If anything, Gavin was RK900’s own, personal boogieman.

Gavin loosened his grip around the android’s shirt, dropping it, with a grunt. He didn’t know what to say—what he should say. There were no easy answers to the things RK900 was throwing onto the table—no concise or simple packaged response to his wants.

Trembling, Gavin placed a hand on the back of RK900’s neck, savoring the silken touch of short, cropped hairs. When RK900 didn’t flinch, Gavin locked eyes with RK900, forehead to forehead.
“Nines,” Gavin muttered, eyes darting away, “I…”

The cyborg bit his lip, unsure how best to word his question. It was difficult—harder than dying, in a lot of ways. Death—or undeath, in his case—was the ultimate excuse. It was a get out of jail free card like no other. Yet Gavin was still sitting on this same couch, playing this same game, with this same android.

“What is that you, uh, want, exactly?” Gavin licked his lips. Another question with no easy answers, for either of them. “Y’know, from me...from, uh, us?”

RK900’s gold mixed with Gavin’s red, remaining tight-lipped, but focused on Gavin.

“Fuck!” Gavin hissed, filling the silent void, “I mean, I don’t get it—I don’t get you. You’re like this fuckin’ demon that came outta nowhere, to curse me, and now...” The words fell out of Gavin’s mouth before he could stop them. His mind was a broken dam, and his tongue was a pressurized crack, along its surface. “And now…”

[A friend.]

Gavin felt the word—tasted it, and sensed the hidden nuance behind it. A misdirection, coming from a place of fear.

[I want a friend.] A subtle teal warmed RK900’s cheeks. [I have no one I can implicitly trust, outside of RK800, and I feel his tolerance of me originates from a place of duty, more so than camaraderie.]

Gavin could feel the tension growing in RK900. The android was wound tight, and ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

“Quite frankly,” RK900 whispered, teeth worrying at his bottom lip, “I am tired of being alone, and I sensed from your frequent, belligerent cries for attention, you felt similarly.”

God, this was so like RK900—dressing up his own insecurities as someone else’s affliction. Gavin stared at the android, considering everything he’d experienced in the last six weeks: feelings, fear, pain, terror, near death experiences, real death experiences, literal mindfucking. The only constant throughout was a single, blue eyed android, with a magnetic lock on Gavin’s heart.

“God, you’re a shitty liar, Nines.” Gavin shook his head. “Those fucks at CyberLife should get their money back.”

RK900 huffed, indignant. “I am not a-”

Gavin surged forward, pressing his lips to RK900’s with an unmitigated hunger, silencing the android.

He knew the android was conflating ‘friendship’ with something much deeper, and trickier. The glimpse into RK900’s mind—both internal and external—spoke to someone who wanted emotional and physical availability, on a very different level than ‘friend.’ Fuck if Gavin wasn’t desperate for some version of that, too—feeling good, happy, wanted—anything to offset the well of negative emotions, consuming every fiber of his being.

“Look, Nines, we can be whatever you fuckin’ want,” Gavin murmured, against the surprised android’s mouth. “As long you don’t give it a name, I’m here for it.”

Gavin pressed harder against the android’s lips, feeling RK900’s hesitation melt, in real time. The
android reciprocated, with a slow, clumsy motion, hand coming to rest in Gavin’s hair.

Gavin meant his words, this time. He was no longer human, and didn’t see the point in denying himself.

“Wait,” whispered RK900, pulling away from the hungry cyborg’s motions, “what does that mean?”


Gavin pressed his lips to RK900’s stupid wheel, something he’d always wanted to do as a human, but never had the balls to actualize.

Gavin nibbled the skin around the LED. “I don’t do labels. They come with too much fuckin’ baggage. I just want us. Not us as a fling, or us as boyfriends—none of that complicated shit—just us as us: Gavin and Nines.”

RK900 gripped Gavin’s chin, and brought his face level with RK900’s eyes. “You fear commitment,” the android said, striking a huge nerve. God, he was really good at that—too good—but he’d seen every facet of Gavin’s mind, so it wasn’t a surprise. He probably had a better understanding of where Gavin stood than Gavin.

“Dammit, Nines,” Gavin huffed, refusing to meet the android’s steel gaze. “I just got fuckin’ Lazarused into a sardine can. I’m not exactly grade A boyfriend material, and honestly? I don’t wanna be.”

The two men stared at one another, their silence broken only by the on-screen antics of the love interest character trying to woo the protagonist, with a giant stuffed bear. Gavin was grateful, now, for the sound of the film. It made him feel less like he was awaiting capitol judgement.

Gavin pushed aside the android’s curl of hair, with his thumb. “I give a lotta shits about you, more than I ever wanted. But I can’t do a capital R relationship, right now. I wanna be with you, not with you, got it?”

Gavin had already lost enough of himself, and he couldn’t afford to let go of any more.

RK900 paused, cocking his head to the side, in that too-familiar way. Ice blue shredded Gavin to his core, and he could feel the android’s fervent calculations.

“Anything I want?” RK900 asked. “Anything I want, so long as I choose not to give it a name...”

RK900 trailed off, tapping a finger against his lips. It was equal parts cute and terrifying.

“I think I can work with those terms.” An enigmatic smirk crossed the android’s face, reaching RK900’s dangerous, blue eyes.

RK900 pulled Gavin onto his lap, and claimed the cyborg’s mouth with a fervent hunger. Teeth and lips clashed, the android communicating his need through a vibrant energy. His tongue probed Gavin’s mouth, intertwining with Gavin’s delicate sensory array, and lighting up the cyborg’s palette with a saturated rainbow of intimate pinks and oranges.

It was a weird feeling, to be sure, but so was this whole dance Gavin had with RK900.

Gavin whined, pulling back enough to dig his sharp canines into RK900’s soft, bottom lip. He bit down, hard, filling his mouth with bright blue, and RK900’s whimper.
Gavin suckled on the android’s lip, savoring the acrid, chemical taste that was so wholly RK900—his robotic DNA. The thought was stupid and cheesy, like the film playing in the background, like this asinine crush, but the taste made Gavin giddy. His mind was barreling towards that familiar nirvana.

RK900 arched his back, pressing up against Gavin with a soft whine. Chest touching chest. Gavin pulled his head back, and drank in the sight of the android. Streams of blue coated his lips and chin, covering his face like some kind of massacre. Gavin’s dick twitched to life, at the sight.

Gavin leaned down, lapping up the Thirium staining RK900’s pale flesh. It pinged something in the back of his mind, with every pass of his tongue against blue. Annoying at first, it quickly built into an addictive rhythm, ultimately wrenching a soft moan from Gavin.

Strong fingers carded through Gavin’s hair, and he hummed against RK900’s mouth. With a sudden, domineering tug, RK900 pulled Gavin’s head back, exposing the long column of the cyborg’s throat.

RK900 trailed kisses along Gavin’s neck, tearing a soft, electronic sigh from the cyborg. The noise mortified Gavin, but the searing heat of the android’s mouth, as he took Gavin’s false skin, between his teeth, quickly blotted out any, and every, thought in Gavin’s head.


Gavin ground down against RK900, chasing relief for his dick. In an act of mercy, the android adjusted their positions, slotting a thigh between Gavin’s legs. Gavin took full advantage, rubbing his obscene bulge against RK900, and embarrassing himself with all the pathetic sounds and words, falling from his mouth. He felt the android chuckle against the exposed skin of his neck, lips covering Gavin’s Adam’s apple.

“So desperate,” RK900 hummed against Gavin’s throat, angling his thigh to aid Gavin’s hungry movements. “Some things never change, I suppose.”

RK900 bit down on Gavin’s neck, tearing straight through the resilient flesh-nanites. The android ripped into peach, with a predatory veracity that stoked a boiling heat, in Gavin’s abdomen. His insides were tightening, and he could feel something frigid escape the tip of his cock.

Gavin wouldn’t last much longer, at this rate. His new body was incredibly sensitive, and that wasn’t limited to conventional erogenous zones—the first real positive change he’d encountered, since waking up a robot.

RK900’s ceramic teeth scraped into the malleable weave of Gavin’s white, android skin. Pain, both sharp and diffuse. Error messages. Boxes and words, filling Gavin’s head, creating a pleasurable psychedelic rush, unlike anything he’d ever experienced, as a human.

“Fuck! Jesus!” Gavin cried, voice broken and loud. A bright, white electric shock, funneled straight to the base of his spine, reinforcing an already scorching heat. RK900 came into Gavin’s view, and made a show of licking bright blue droplets from his sharp canine, explaining the puncture error, massaging Gavin’s neck.

Why is this fucker so hot? There’s no reason for this stupid ass robot to have my dick in a vice, like this...Soft pink filled Gavin’s mind, warning him of an internal temperature rise.

RK900’s lips locked on the exposed path of white, along Gavin’s neck, with a pleased hum. The android suckled, and bit, and scraped, knowing the location of every sensitive seam and pressure
RK900 pushed Gavin flush with the couch, and crawled on top him. The android shoved Gavin’s shirt up, under his arms, with urgency, and took a moment to run his hands along the peach expanse. Satisfied, RK900 turned his attention lower, nuzzling the tent in Gavin’s sweats, before licking a stripe from the cyborg’s navel, to his chest.

“N-Nines,” Gavin whimpered, bringing his fingers to RK900’s silken hair. Plush lips closed around Gavin’s pert nipple, and he reflexively pressed up, into RK900’s mouth with a static laced cry.

Teeth closed around the hard, pink bud, and magenta flooded Gavin’s body, firing up every simulated nerve ending. He bucked, against RK900, desperate for some kind of relief for his aching dick, but RK900 showed him no mercy, this time.

The android adjusted his position, body no longer within reach of Gavin’s groin. Strong hands collected Gavin’s wrists, pinning them above his head, effectively cutting off all mobility. It seemed RK900 was done playing.

“I fuckin’ hate you so much, you know that?” Gavin whined, squirming. The words were minced beyond recognition, but RK900 seemed to understand. The android chuckled against Gavin’s chest. A real chuckle, not one of his creepy, machine attempts at the sounds. It was cute. Too cute. So cute, and utterly out of character, that Gavin hated it.

The android resumed his motions, lapping and laving at Gavin’s chest, paying extra attention to his sensitive nipples. The android’s motions were hungry, needy, even—trying to quench an all-consuming thirst, or maybe just expressing his relief.

RK900 closed his teeth around gavin’s skin, and violently twisted his head, ripping a patch of the stuff off Gavin’s chest. Gavin threw back his head, with a sharp cry, dick twitching violently as it spurted precome. Glowing blue patches of nanites clung to RK900’s mouth, quickly dissipating as the microscopic machines scurried back to the surface of Gavin’s body.

One look at the android’s feral smirk nearly pushed Gavin over the edge. He bucked, desperate for friction from the merciless robot, but received nothing for his troubles.

“Nines!” Gavin whined, thrashing as the android dragged his mouth along his torso, “you fuckin’ piece of shit, asshole robot! You can’t just pull shit like this and gimme nothin’! I’m fuckin’ dying, here!”

It wasn’t exactly an exaggeration. Reds licked along his mind, reporting errors, and possible overheats. For once, Gavin didn’t mind them. After a certain point, they had started to build into a psychic pressure—not unlike the physical one, mounting in his groin. Mind and body, wound tight, just waiting to snap.

“Please try to exercise restraint,” RK900 hummed, idly poking the very tip of Gavin’s covered dick with his free hand. “I have no use for a cyborg who can’t control his own body.”

Before Gavin could shoot back, RK900 dragged his teeth down Gavin’s chest, setting the cyborg’s pain sensors on fire. Gavin arched his back, letting out a burst of muffled static. He glanced down to the sight of long white lines, scoring the peach of his torso, and devilish blue eyes, watching him.

Gavin twisted his body, squirming and wailing. He didn’t understand. Everything was so much more sensitive—so layered. He couldn’t remember a time when someone biting his chest rendered
him this helpless, but RK900’s actions lit up every nerve in Gavin’s body.

“I think an addict, like you, will find your new body very advantageous.” RK900 hummed, pulling down the waist of Gavin’s sweats. “After some research, I’ve concluded that machines have a much greater capacity for pleasure, than humans.”

“Jesus, you can just call me a fuckin’ slut to my face, Nines.” Gavin shuddered, as the cold air of the apartment caressed the superheated skin of his cock. It bobbed obscenely, a pearl of milky blue, dripping down its side. He was decidedly less excited about the concentrated teal blush, covering the head of his dick, but forgot about it the instant RK900 took hold of Gavin’s shaft, with his free hand.

“Slut?” The android gave two lazy pumps, and Gavin howled. “I think the term for you is virgin.” RK900 donned a cruel, predatory smile, full of shiny, white teeth, and Gavin groaned. He sounded like a broken dubstep track. This robot’s a fuckin’ elephant, I swear to god. Never forgets. Never forgives.

RK900 continued to stroke Gavin’s dick at an agonizingly slow rate, and turned his mouth back towards the cyborg’s torso. Gavin traced the hungry eyes to the neon blue circle, glowing under his skin.

*Thirium pump output exceeding recommended levels...*

RK900 nibbled at the skin around the biocomponent, warding away Gavin’s peach flesh, to reveal the shiny organ beneath. The android’s tongue and teeth probed the uneven seam where the regulator met the rest of Gavin’s robot skin, and the cyborg gave a choked cry.

Electricity shot up and down his body—an intensely pleasurable warning, scorching his spine. He could feel icy precome spurt from his angry dick in tiny doses, lubricating RK900’s grip, but he didn’t care about that. For once in Gavin Reed’s life, his dick didn’t matter.

Whatever the android was doing to his regulator pump was next-level. Every probe of the tongue against a divot, every wedge of a tooth into the unassuming seam, caused a huge flare of red and pink within Gavin’s body. It set him on fire—a pool of molten metal—and he craved more. He couldn’t remember ever feeling this wired from a fucking tongue.

“I’m going to try something, Gavin.” RK900 whispered, planting a kiss on the writhing cyborg’s lips. He let go of Gavin’s wrists, and Gavin’s hands were immediately under the android’s shirt, clawing at the pale expanse of his back.

“This might hurt…but your sexual affinity for pain leads me to believe you will find it enjoyable in ways I would not, and you should not.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Nines?” Gavin snapped his mouth closed. He sounded terrible, like a blown-out speaker, and it frightened him.

RK900 pressed a kiss to Gavin’s lips, and pumped Gavin’s dick harder, squeezing it in that too-tight threshold, between ecstasy and agony. He choked out a pleased sound, which caught in his throat when a very, very large error warning, took root all over his mind and body.

*THIRIUM PUMP REGULATOR ERROR!! REATTACH COMPONENT: 1-283-0183 OR UNIT SHUTDOWN WILL COMMENCE IN—1:59*

A crimson flare scoured every inch of Gavin’s body, setting his nerves aflame with an intensity unlike anything he’d experienced in either of his lives. Through the red haze, he could make out
RK900’s long fingers gripping the edge of a cylinder, protruding from Gavin’s chest. It was just barely out of its slot, but a steady river of bright blue poured out from the socket. The android leaned down, and lapped up the excess Thirium, tongue dipping just past the rim of the sizable opening.

A few seconds later, RK900 slammed the component back into its proper place, and an overpowering wave of blue relief blasted every corner of Gavin’s body. It was the sensation of oxygen, rushing back into every cell after being asphyxiated, but somehow, fifty times more potent.

Gavin couldn’t believe it. This fucking robot menace had figured out how to replicate one of Gavin’s biggest kinks, in cyborg form. Fifteen minutes in Gavin’s brain, and RK900 already had a complete handle on Gavin-fucking-Reed.

The sensation was too much for Gavin, and everything snapped, all at once. A single tone filled his mind, and a million colors rushed to every part of his body, lighting his synthetic nervous system on fire. He came, hard, with a twisted electronic garble, mind and body going blessedly dark, as the internal embers cooled.

A number of things happened at once. Various errors and system checks, cyan bolts of light, and a soft thrumming, along every nerve and mechanical synapse in his body. A pleasant energy enveloped him, and he felt lighter—in his mind, too. A warmth had started to gnaw away at some of the lingering darkness, plaguing his digital soul.

Gavin’s first orgasm as a cyborg hadn’t doomed him to fear and terror, like he thought it might.

The cyborg’s eyes fluttered open, bringing the dark room into focus. Above him, RK900 sat on his haunches, slowly lapping at his fingers. With each pass of his tongue, the android suckled cloudy blue Thirium into his mouth.

Gavin met RK900’s vibrant, blue gaze. The android remained silent, taking each of his slender fingers into his mouth in a lewd display, letting them linger and bob against his pink lips.

RK900 licked a line from the base of his palm, up to his thumb, collecting the last of the cloudy blue pearls. Gavin swallowed at the sight of RK900’s thumb just barely dipping past his lips, sending a single strand of pale blue dripping from the corner of the android’s perfect mouth.

“We should retire to my bedroom,” RK900 muttered, sliding off of Gavin’s body. “RK800 will be upset if we get Thirium stains, on the couch—though I’ve found traces of his human on there, before.”

Gavin stared at the gorgeous android, slack-jawed and speechless.

“Well are you not coming, Gavin?” RK900 stood at the mouth of the hallway, upturned lips highlighted by the cool, cyan light of his LED.

Gavin scrambled off the couch, pulling up his sweats, so he didn’t trip on them. He caught sight of a dark figure standing in the corner of the kitchen—his phantasm, no doubt. Cold and dead. A painful memory-turned-bond between two callous personalities.

Gavin blinked, and the shadow was gone, but RK900 remained, impatient as ever.
Thank y’all for the kudos and all the really wonderful comments! They’ve been instrumental in keeping me on task.

Sorry about the delay on this chapter. Dialogue chapters tend to require extensive rewrites. Thank you for your patience.

Thank you Leaux. I owe you all the sweet buns (°ω°´)

Find me holed up with my dragon’s hoard of reed000 pics at @Vapedrone
Chapter 14

Honey light reflected off the brass surface of the bar, drowning the whole affair in warm yellows. Soft colors, and softer bodies, mingled with one another in the lounge—glitter and satin punctuated by leather, and the smooth notes of a piano. Gavin felt decidedly out of place, in more ways than one. He nervously adjusted his tie, trying not to meet the eyes of the near-reflection, sitting in front of him.

“Didn’t expect to see you here, Gav.” The other man signaled the slick bartender to bring over two Manhattans. “Was beginnin’ to think you cut ties with the family.”

“What?” Gavin snorted, turning to face the gilded wall of liquor bottles. “You think mom would’ve let me live if I hadn’t showed for George’s rehearsal dinner, Grant?”

The bartender set a glass in front of Gavin, then his brother. The glass, like everything else in that god forsaken room, was rimmed in gold. It set Gavin on edge, even as he brought the amber liquid to his lips, and tried to temper his sips.

Grant leaned in, huddling closer. Three years older, and three years meaner. Gavin could practically taste the cruelty in the asshole’s empty, green eyes.

“So, me and George got this bet goin’, right?” His voice was raspy, years of smoking and alcohol—expensive cigars and overpriced bottles. If Grant wasn’t showing off his extensive liquor collection, he was not so subtly flashing his Rolex.

“You know how you’re a cop, in that shithole city that’s overrun by those fuckin’ sex robots, or whatever?” Grant crossed his arms, balancing on them. His head was close enough that Gavin could smell the pomade, wafting off of his hair in droves.

“Detective, asshole!” Gavin sneered, balling his fists. “I’m a detective. There’s a huge fuckin’ difference.”

“Yeah, yeah, to-may-to, to-mah-to.” Grant ignored Gavin’s indignance. He’d never in his life respected his little brother, and Gavin bore no illusions that that would ever change. Still, he wondered what it would be like to have a brother who congratulated him, every once in a while, instead of two borderline sociopaths.

“Anyways, I’ll cut to the chase: I got a lotta dough on you showing up to Thanksgiving, this year, with one of those creepy machines as your ‘boyfriend,’ and-”

Gavin tore away from his brother with a start, mortified. It was bad enough Gavin had to see those things on a daily basis, walking down sidewalks and ‘sleeping’ in robot bus stops. Now he had his asshole brothers making these kinds of jokes at his expense. Cursing, he grabbed Grant by the lapels of his overpriced jacket, and dragged him to a standing position.

“Fuck you!” Gavin snarled, tightening his grasp. “The hell is wrong with you, Grant? You really wanna harass a fuckin’ police officer, huh?”

Gavin was bigger than Grant by a substantial margin—years of dedicated gym time versus Grant’s sedentary, white collar lifestyle—but what Grant lacked in bulk, he made up for with his sharp
“Oh, sorry, detective,” Grant grinned, “I didn’t realize it was illegal to call my baby brother out on his shitty temperament, and lack of game.”

Gavin pulled back his arm, ready and willing to deck his brother in that smug face of his.

Silence.

The room was frozen in space and time. People locked in a trance, watching with bated breath to see if Gavin would live up to his well deserved reputation. He looked out into the sea of sparkling sequins and silken colors, meeting eye after eye of curious onlooker—friends and family, hungry for a story. They were all sharks in emperor’s clothing, as eager to conduct and facilitate violence as the shitty criminals Gavin cuffed on a daily basis.

Gavin returned his gaze to the maniacal grin of his brother—a Wall Street trader, with breakout success. The only difference between his sadism, and the lowly criminals of Detroit, was time and money. Slow and steady wins the race for white collar criminals. Not that he had proof his brother was doing anything untoward, but the Reed family sin was ambition, so it was only a matter of time before Grant made headlines for something. Gavin just hoped he’d be around to witness it.

Gavin lowered his fist, and adjusted his suit. He wasn’t about to give these fuckers what they wanted. He wasn’t about to become one more instance of gossip at family reunions, or wine nights. Gavin placed his hands in his pockets, and turned away from the crowd.

In an instant, the room snapped back to life. Soft music and voices, punctuated by false laughter and the chime of glasses. Business as usual. Everyone could resume armchair discussions of atrocities, while Gavin wallowed in knowing he was the only ‘real’ person here, next to his parents and a few cousins.

An arm snaked around Gavin’s shoulders—Grant, of course. He wasn’t done stoking his volatile beast of a little brother.

“The more I think about it, the more I realize one of those robots would be good for you, Gav. God knows you can’t connect with people, so maybe a walking PlayStation could give you what you need.” There it was—the proverbial knife twist, straight to the gut.

Gavin shoved his brother away, with a hiss. “Fuck off, Grant!” He prodded the older man’s chest. “You don’t know jack shit about me! I could get any guy I want, ‘cause unlike you, I don’t look and act like a damn bridge troll!”

“Now, we both know that’s not true,” Grant pressed. He always pressed and pressed and pressed. It was par for the course for the Reed siblings. You had to win, but you couldn’t declare victory until the other two brothers were decimated. “You’re a failure of man, living in a failure of a city. No self-respecting guy would want anything to do with that.” Grant patted Gavin on the shoulder. “You’re better off with one of those things. They can unconditionally love you for the miserable sack of shit you are, Gav.”

Grant’s laughter ebbed into the crowd, as he went to mingle, leaving Gavin to stew in his own anger. Gavin was twenty-eight, and on the fast track to running that shitty police department. He didn’t have to prove shit to Grant, or George, or anyone else for that matter.

Someday, those two assholes would fly too close to the sun, and Gavin would laugh as they tumbled from their gilded cages, onto the dirty streets below. No one was infallible, and karma had
a way of righting past wrongs.

Gavin plopped back onto his barstool, with a sigh. He ordered a couple double-shots, and checked his phone for any excuse to leave the building—the state, if possible. His friends let him down—nothing but bad memes, and idle chatter.

“Jesus,” Gavin muttered, running his hands up and down his face, “you couldn’t pay me enough money to stick my dick in one of those creepy tin cans.”

—

“Gavin!”

Gavin’s head shot up at the sound of his name. Memories were more potent, now—a theatrical viewing, as opposed to daydreams. He’d lost himself in his past, his subconscious offering one final warning, before Gavin made an irrevocable decision, under extreme duress. Gavin rubbed his chin, recalling a lifetime of failed relationships, and one night stands. He liked sex, but hated emotional obligations, always afraid he would become too attached, and get burned. All it took was one to spoil the bunch.

He touched his hand to his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his blue heart. It ached—in that disembodied, human-feeling-imprinted-on-a-machine-mind kind of way. Maybe it always had, and he’d just ignored it, like he did with most things.

“Are you coming, Gavin? Or do you wish to remain on the couch?” RK900’s authoritative voice was undercut with a slight tremble of fear, or the expectation of inevitable rejection.

Gavin still didn’t know what the android really meant by ‘friend.’ Despite his words to the contrary, Gavin couldn’t shake the feeling that RK900 didn’t want what he thought he wanted. He couldn’t. The android had been in existence for less than a year, and yet…

Gavin could still taste the sorrow on RK900’s tongue, at the sight of his dead body. Raw. Novel. A gut-punch the android never imagined his brain was capable of concocting. Gavin clung to the shared moment as a kind of proof that this wasn’t some elaborate ruse.

“Take a chill pill, robocop.” Gavin muttered, stumbling to his feet. “Your psycho ass can’t just pull out a man’s heart, shove it back into his body, and then expect him to run a fuckin’ marathon.”

Gavin shuffled around the couch, uneasy in his movements. Pop-ups bombarded him with system diagnostic codes, and other meaningless clutter, in the back of his mind. His nerves were still warm—a pleasant afterglow, soothing the abject darkness of his otherwise negative feelings.

“I calculated a ninety-nine point nine percent probability you would enjoy that grave misuse of biocomponents, and as always, I was correct.”

Gavin looked towards the voice. A pinprick of yellow shined in the darkness of the adjoining hallway. RK900 stood, obscured by dense shadows, the gold of his LED illuminating his smirk.

“You callin’ me easy?” Gavin sneered, leaning against the long kitchen counter for support. He glanced into the blanketed darkness of cabinets and a small pantry door. Gavin remembered the dark shadow he’d seen here, a few minutes ago—tall and humanoid, with just enough texture to seem real. He made a cursory sweep of the area. Emptiness, and a whole lotta nothing. A trick of his ailing mind, he supposed.
Gold shifted to blue, as Gavin fumbled down the hallway. He sidled up, close behind the robot, and placed his hands on RK900’s hips. He pushed them up under the android’s shirt, feeling the bumps of RK900’s carbon fiber rib cage. RK900 leaned back into Gavin’s motions, seemingly pleased with the cyborg’s decision.

Gavin pressed a kiss to the back of RK900’s pale neck. RK900 was his angel and his demon—a two for one special. He squeezed the android close, fingers digging into soft, lean muscles. There was a light giddiness in Gavin’s heart—his cold, mechanical, blue heart. He wondered, for the first time, what it would be like to share it with someone. A potent, but fleeting thought. Just hormones—or programs, whatever—fogging-up Gavin’s brain.

RK900’s hand closed around the cold steel of his door handle, and he gently shook Gavin off. The door opened to a sparse room, almost entirely devoid of decor beyond a couple pieces of furniture, and a large bed. Gavin spotted the only personal touch on the far wall—a small poster of an unfamiliar film, in an unfamiliar language, featuring two people in a tight embrace.

“Humans are at their most vulnerable and expressive when they’re in love,” said RK900, catching Gavin’s eye. The android walked over to the poster, placing a hand on the image. “There is a comfort in watching their hysterical mating antics.”

“You sure you aren’t just a huge fuckin’ sap?” Gavin shot back. He leaned against a sleek, black dresser, tapping his fingers, nervously.

There was that word again. Four simple letters, and one very confounding concept. It held the power to create or devastate, and Gavin didn’t appreciate the ease with which it fell out of RK900’s mouth.

RK900 looked to Gavin, meeting his green eyes. Millions of dollars in overpriced computing equipment churned within the android’s cranium, lost in consideration of a knee-jerk response.

“Supposing I am,” RK900 finally spoke, words lacking their usual confidence, “would that alter your perception of me? I admit, I have an affinity for happy endings.”

“I think we all do, plastic.” Gavin snorted.

He would kill for one of those right now. A wizard who could turn him back into a human, with the flick of a wrist, or an alarm clock that jolted him back into a reality where this was all a dream. Gavin wanted to consider a scenario where he and RK900 could live happily ever after—whatever that meant. Two traumatized robots, living under one roof, sounded like more of a reality TV exposé, than a Disney movie.

RK900 hummed, turning away from the poster. He fell onto his bed, with a heavy bounce, and the android leaned back, pushing out his chest, and giving Gavin an expectant look.

Gavin took one look at the messy curls, framing the android’s cherubic face, and felt a hunger dig into the base of his spine. He licked his lips, and joined the android, straddling RK900’s thighs.

Some godforsaken program kicked into gear, prompting him to ‘scan’ the area, and he swallowed it back into the depths of his chaotic mind. He didn’t need a scan to tell him there was a horny-ass robot, inches away. The prompt pinged once more, accompanied by a proximity notification, and Gavin silenced it.

RK900 smiled. It was small, but genuine, reaching his dead, blue eyes. He grabbed Gavin’s hips, pulling the cyborg flush against his hard body. RK900 nibbled along Gavin’s neck.
“I always get what I want.” The android’s voice was a ghostly whisper, possessive and cruel. Gavin shivered.


“You won’t,” RK900 hummed. He bucked his hips up, drawing a light groan from Gavin. “You came back to me, knowing I’m the best thing to ever happen to you.”

Gavin hated the truth, but he knew the android was right, and the authority in RK900’s voice was melting him into a complacent pile of goo. God, Gavin wanted to assert himself, and show RK900 some teeth, but the hands dipping under the hem of his sweatpants, cupping his ass, were making it incredibly difficult to think. So warm and big, enveloping Gavin.

Gavin keened, throwing his arms around the android, fingers scrambling for purchase on the back of RK900’s neck. He pressed back against RK900’s finger, as it circled his hole—nothing but the thin fabric of his underwear, separating the two.

_Wait._

His fingers dug into the base of RK900’s neck, and a thought came to Gavin. He pulled back, lost in consideration for a moment. The android watched Gavin, a confused gold illuminating his face. There was hesitation in RK900’s expression, and the subtlest glint of concern, in his bright blue eyes.

“You cannot possibly be finished for the night,” RK900 accused, fingers gripping Gavin’s ass possessively. “I’ve witnessed your sexual history, first-hand.”

“Again, just fuckin’ call it what it is, you fuck.” Gavin shook his head, exasperated. “It ain’t my fault your horny ass can’t get laid.”

“Desperate sex with strangers in bars hardly counts as meaningful experience, Gavin,” RK900 growled, meeting the cyborg’s eye with a jealous look. The android regarded Gavin like he was the only person in the world, in that possessive, RK900 way of his. Truly, it was everything Gavin craved—concentrated, volatile attention.

But tonight, Gavin wanted something a little different.

The cyborg rubbed the back of his neck, fingers lingering a little too long on the subtle geometry beneath his skin. He licked his lips, recalling the intense pleasure of touch, against raw nerves. Good, bad, and forbidden all at once. Gavin couldn’t properly appreciate the sensation, not without an insurmountable weight of existential guilt, but RK900 was a different matter altogether…

Listening to his dick over reason, Gavin flipped their placement, shoving RK900, stomach first, against his bed. Gavin straddled the android, and brought his fingers up to the approximate location of RK900’s neck port.

“Funny,” RK900 hissed, words sharp and deadly, “It never occurred to me that you might possess the balls to take charge.” Gavin could physically feel the android’s pissed smirk, a molten beacon, twisting his cyborg guts into knots. RK900 always knew exactly how to rile Gavin, and he hated it. Even when Gavin was trying to be on top, the android still offered casual reminders of who was really in control.

“Fuck off, Nines,” Gavin snapped, leaning forward to mouth at the hidden cable port on RK900’s neck. “I’ve fucked plenty of dudes—more than your prude ass.” The words came out infinitely
more defensive than Gavin intended.

“I suppose that would be an accomplishment in someone’s eyes.” RK900 lifted himself, knocking Gavin off of his back with ease, in an unmistakable demonstration of power. Gavin stumbled onto his side, worried he might have overstepped an unspoken boundary.

RK900 stood on his knees, facing away from Gavin. He stiffened, considerably, compiling numbers, thoughts and data, into the language of order he could understand. Some of the tension ebbed from his body, and he removed his t-shirt, in a drawn-out display of chiseled muscle. RK900 folded the shirt, slow and meticulous, back muscles flowing with every movement. He placed the shirt on his side table, and waited, a marked tension dominating the air.

Eyes peeked over RK900’s shoulder. They were black, save for the tiniest sliver of blue iris—hungry, like Gavin. He felt his dick twitch, sluggishly coming to life, as blue blood funneled its way to his groin. That look was an invitation, or possibly a challenge. Gavin’s capacity for thought was diminishing by the second, and both outcomes ultimately ended with him getting what he wanted.

Gavin rolled over, and scrambled to RK900. He pressed himself flat against the android’s back, wasting no time. Gavin mouthed along the android’s shoulders, kneading the hard muscles of RK900’s abdomen. Some of the android’s residual stiffness melted at the attention, and he cautiously leaned back against Gavin.

Gavin pressed his lips against the giant, not-USB-port, at the base of RK900’s skull. He sunk his teeth in, feeling for the hard outline of the biocomponent.

“Show me,” Gavin huffed, breathless. He licked the spot, hand settling right below RK900’s navel. Hard muscle quivered under his touch.

“Why?” RK900 questioned. Still hesitant, the android pressed back against Gavin, experimentally rubbing his clothed ass against the cyborg’s cock. Gavin sucked in a breath he didn’t need, and felt a swath of heat rush to his cheeks.

“You really gonna make me fuckin’ say this out loud?” Gavin hissed, rolling his hips.

“Cervical ports are designed for terminal-to-android data transfer,” RK900 intoned. His voice was innocent, an octave higher than normal. He reached back, and ran a hand along Gavin’s cheek. The cyborg leaned into it with a sigh.

RK900’s eyes darkened, and he cupped Gavin’s face with steel fingers, forcing the cyborg to meet his blue glare. “What business do you have inspecting mine? You’re hardly a technician, Detective Reed.”

I just wanna finger fuck your spine. Jesus, Nines, why do you have to make this shit so difficult?

Gavin worried at his lip. RK900 was gonna make him beg for this. After everything he’d been through over the last month, this stupid fucking asshole of a robot was gonna make him beg for the privilege of getting RK900 off.

Gavin would be lying to himself if he said he wanted it any other way.

“I just wanna try something,” Gavin murmured, “y’know, kinky robot shit.”

RK900 looked away, lost in thought. His body stiffened under Gavin’s touch, clearly unsure of something. His was an infinite game of weighing pros to cons, where physical layers of thought
crisscrossed endlessly, until the right percentage hit the right threshold, at the right time. Gavin had only been privy to it for a few minutes, and it was enough to leave him wholly exhausted. RK900’s mind was pure structure, and Gavin’s was pure entropy.

What a pair.

“Fuck, please, Nines,” Gavin whined, impatient. The cyborg leaned into RK900’s sturdy hand, pressing a kiss to the android’s thumb. “I’m not gonna fuckin’ hurt ya, so what’re you scared of, huh? Letting loose?”

Gavin could still feel the tension in the android’s shoulders—a string, wound taught, ready to snap. It seemed RK900 was allergic to the idea of relinquishing control, and Gavin was too stubborn to drop it.

“C’mon, Nines. You can trust me. It won’t kill you to let someone else take charge, just this once,” Gavin pushed, digging a little deeper. “Please...shit, I just wanna make you feel good.”

He ran his hands down RK900’s torso, reveling in the android’s microscopic shivers—a sign RK900 was faltering, cracking under the weight of his own desire. Gavin slid the android’s sweatpants down his thighs, grabbing RK900’s half-hard dick. He gave it a couple pumps, tearing a static warble from the android.

“Please, Nines,” Gavin begged. It was throaty, steeped in want. “You know I’m not out here tryin’ to fuck with you. You’ve seen inside my brain, for chrissakes.” He let his other hand dip lower, tracing along the cleft of RK900’s ass. He pressed a firm finger against the android’s pucker, and RK900 arched against him, full of needy energy.

Pale peach gave way to white, which melted to reveal the grey, gold, and black of RK900’s upper vertebrae. Harsh geometry, juxtaposed with near-human softness. Gavin grinned, admiring the android’s acquiescence, and ran his palm up the carbon fiber spine. RK900 groaned. It was loud, and reverberated in on itself.

Eager, Gavin pressed his thumb to the black cover of RK900’s cervical port. RK900 shivered, a choked sound coming from his vocal box. Deep teal stained the pale skin, surrounding the mechanical elements, and Gavin felt his fortitude waning. He was supposed to be in control, but the android’s soft cries were tearing him in a different direction.

“Yeah, so.” Gavin swallowed, trying to regain his composure. “You’re, uh, not gonna short circuit if I touch this shit, right?” Gavin had no desire to explain to RK900’s insane, AI helicopter mom, how he’d broken her favorite son.

RK900 glared over his shoulder, cold blue meeting green. “I represent years of research, and nearly a billion dollars in State Department special operations grant money. You couldn’t leave a scratch on me if you tried.”

Gavin grinned. God, RK900 was such an asshole. He was pure, unmitigated hubris, distilled into a robot body, and Gavin loved it—loved this stupid machine, and all his very human flaws. RK900 was a beautiful paradox.

Mistaking the cyborg’s awe for hesitance, RK900 snapped, “I’m giving you an opportunity, am I not, Gavin? Impress me.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see how tough you are in five minutes.” Gavin pressed a kiss to the middle of RK900’s back, and proceeded to lick a line up the glowing ridge of exposed vertebrae. They coated
his tongue in unconscionable amounts of hyper-concentrated data—bright energy, flickering along every one of Gavin’s oral sensors.

He pulled back, with a yelp, and RK900 fell forward, with a sharp sob. The android collapsed, using his forearms to prop up his quivering body. Pale fingers dug into dark blankets, and the android’s bare ass hung high in the air.

*This isn’t happening,* Gavin thought, choking back a cry, *this can’t be happening.* Gavin watched RK900 squirm and bite into a pillow, positive this whole display had to be some kind of trap.

Gavin heard a soft click, and followed the gorgeous expanse of the android’s back to a bright, blue beacon, lodged at the base of RK900’s neck—his cervical port. Trap or no, this was one siren song Gavin’s dick would not ignore. Losing his clothing, Gavin draped himself over the android, keen to inspect the port.

“Fuck,” Gavin whispered, suckling along metal vertebra. “Fuckin’ look at you—falling apart over jack shit. I bet I could make you come just from fingering your floppy disk drive.” Gavin circled the black metal with one of his fingers, and RK900 yowled, low and glitched.

“You want that, huh, you kinky little shit?” Gavin rubbed RK900’s glowing spinal column, tearing violent shivers from the unprepared android. “You want me to fuck your spine with my fingers?”

Composing himself, RK900 turned to face Gavin. He narrowed his hungry eyes, and stretched—hands splayed forward, bare ass grinding back against Gavin’s rock-hard length.

Frozen in the moment, Gavin swallowed. He glanced down, watching his angry teal dick drool, milky blue, all over a perfect globe of RK900’s ass. Would RK900 let him claim that sweet, sweet virgin hole? God, what a pipe dream. His dick twitched at the thought, spilling more pre onto the android’s perfect skin.

Gavin leaned forward, with a whisper. “I’m gonna make you fuckin’ cry, Nines.” He pressed a hungry kiss to blushing, blue skin. “I’m gonna finger blast your USB bullshit so hard, your cocky ass’ll come completely untouched.”

“You talk to much, Gavin,” RK900 snapped, giving a hard push against Gavin’s cock. “If you bore me with one more line from your terrible pornographies, I will flip us, and test how much sexual duress a cyborg body can withstand, before force rebooting.”

Gavin tensed at the thought, cock drooling and eager. Tantalizing as that threat was, Gavin wanted to prove he could be the one to wreck RK900.

“That’s some big talk, for a guy presenting like a fuckin’ cat in heat.”

Gavin ignored RK900’s warning, and bit down on the android’s ear lobe. His finger wandered to the perimeter of the open port, and RK900’s breath hitched.

“I think your slutty ass wants me to fuck both of your holes.” Gavin continued, dipping a finger into the port. He gently rubbed the digit along the metal wall. It was hot—searing, even—and coated in an icy lubricant. “But you’re too proud to ask for it.”

Gavin pushed deep, finger hitting an array of sturdy rods, tearing a loud moan from RK900. In the midst of the robot’s squirms, Gavin caught a rod under his fingernail, and plucked at it. RK900 seized, biting through his pillow with a cry. The android’s back arched, and he rutted into his sheets.
Hoisting RK900’s lower half into the air, Gavin didn’t let up, mouthing the android’s exposed spine, while dragging his finger along the slick, textured walls of the port. RK900 shook, shuddered, trembled and cried, squirming in search of friction that would never come.

RK900’s sounds were no longer remotely human. Synthesizer dips, and staccato electric bursts, fell from his lips, as Gavin pressed deeper, feeling the harsh sting of hot, sharp metal on his fingertip. He drank up the intoxicating feeling of RK900’s powerful body, struggling to maintain control.

Grinning, Gavin mouthed the cervical port, pressing in with his tongue, alongside a probing finger. An electric spark tore through Gavin’s body, singeing his nerves, and staining them a dark pink. A fork in a socket, transferring petabytes upon petabytes of data to every part of RK900’s body. The pain was intoxicating, as were RK900’s wails of ecstasy.

His tongue lapped along the hexagonal ridges of the port’s wall, pressing into every metal nook and cranny. Electricity and data surged along the surface of the muscle, sparking visual glitches in the back of Gavin’s mind: incomplete transfers and port connection errors—an oddly physical music act. Gavin pressed a second finger into the tight, metal space, and RK900 violently seized.

[G-Gavin…] A feral, electronic whine, an octave too low for human ears. [You are going to fuck me.] The psychic words caught Gavin off guard, but he realized it would have been impossible for RK900 to use external speech, in his current state.

“Yeah?” Gavin grinned, withdrawing his tongue and fingers from the cervical port, breathless and giddy. He was getting his cake and eating it too. “You want my fat cock in your ass? You want me to fuck you ‘til you cry?”

RK900 unleashed a low, electronic hiss. It tickled Gavin’s ears, rippling across his mind. Were he still human, the sound would have triggered a primordial flight instinct, but his cyborg ears didn’t mind it. He peeled off of the android’s back, and shifted his focus to RK900’s gorgeous ass.

“Goddamn, Nines,” Gavin muttered, taking handfuls of the android’s plump cheeks, “never in a million years thought you’d let me do this.” He kneaded the soft muscles. They were warm and pliant, in his large hands.

Gavin pulled aside a squishy globe, revealing a light blue pucker.

_Goddammit, why is it blue?_ Gavin reeled, gritting his teeth, and clenching his fingers on RK900’s ass cheek for support. _I’m gonna arrest every single goddamned perverted-ass piece of shit at CyberLife. I swear to god, if my ass’s blue, someone’s gonna fucking die. Jesus Christ._

The cute ring clenched, a little, the cool night air reaching its heated surface. Gavin lightly dragged his thumb against it, just a touch. A feather, against the smooth skin. The pucker quivered, and a low electronic keen filled the room.

“You like that?” Gavin wheezed, rubbing his thumb along the android’s entrance. He pulled and prodded, this way and that, never quite dipping into its hungry clutches. RK900’s powerful body trembled, pushing back, desperate for a taste of his finger.

Gavin chuckled, pressing a chaste kiss to RK900’s cute, blue asshole. “You’re a needy fucker, aren’t you?” Gavin bit RK900’s cheek, circling the hole with a finger one more time, and adding
just enough pressure to feel the muscle’s pull. “So, Nines,” he said, glancing up, letting his finger rub in idle motions, “where do you keep your lu-”

Gavin let out a strangled wheeze as liquid, frigid and slick, squeezed out from the hot clutches of RK900’s hole. Swallowing nothing, Gavin pulled aside the android’s fat ass, and removed the digit, dragging a forlorn whine from RK900. He rubbed his fingers together. Lube—it was lube. Icy, blue, Thirium-based lube, dripping from RK900’s tight, little asshole, in tiny globules.

Gavin’s brain short-circuited. This fucking android was literally wet for him—dripping, and needy. The thick, blue stuff was rolling down his pale thighs, in streaks. Gavin’s dick twitched, hard, and he had to suck in a breath to steel himself. RK900 wanted him—his cock—that bad.

RK900 looked back at Gavin, cheeks so teal, they were practically glowing. His little pucker clenched, trying and failing to stave off the eager, viscous blues, dripping from his hole.

[Androids are self-lubricating.] An urgency filled Gavin’s head, in a voice that wasn’t his own. RK900 had never translated intent with his words so clearly, before.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Gavin hissed, through clenched teeth. Today was just full of surprises. Gavin roughly dragged his index finger along RK900’s hole, pulling it open just enough to let a glob of Thirium dribble out, and along the android’s taint. RK900 shivered, and Gavin pressed the digit forward.

His finger sunk into the little blue hole, with minimal resistance. It was tight, so tight, pressing down on his digit with silken walls. The hexagonally-textured flesh was warm, in stark contrast to the frigid, blue lube—which Gavin quickly realized was as much a coolant, as it was a sexual aid.

“Fuuuck, Nines, you’re gonna feel so good around my dick.” Gavin pressed kisses along the android’s inner thighs, lapping up stray blue with his tongue. Every little bit was a taste of RK900, the android’s face flashing in his mind, with each drop. He hummed and nibbled and licked, reveling in the android’s small keens and moans.

Gavin pumped into RK900’s insides, the smooth pad of his finger dragging along textured walls of soft, pseudo-flesh. Every tiny thrust made an obscene squelch, propelling more viscous fluid out of RK900.

Gavin introduced a second finger, ripping a muffled, static keen from RK900—the feral cry of a machine. Gavin pulled aside RK900’s cheek, watching the teal pucker slurp at his fingers—an eager mouth. He prodded and curled within the vice grip, lapping up the excess slick, and tickling at RK900’s sensors, with his tongue.

The android was a quivering mess, shaking, and sucking in huge breaths of air. His inner channel flipped between red heat, and blue cold, as his body tried to keep him from overheating.

“Not so tough, now, are you, Nines?” Gavin grinned, speeding up his fingers, wet squelch after wet squelch. He could feel RK900’s body tensing under his movements, winding tight with that familiar burn. Gavin curled his fingers, up into a velvet sea of hot and cold, searching.

RK900 cried out, static and guttural. Bingo. The android clenched down on Gavin’s fingers, with a wail, and Gavin continued to rub the electric nub, inside of RK900. His fingernails scraped across the bundle of synthetic nerves, ripping another moan from an unprepared RK900.

Gavin slid his fingers from the quivering blue clutch, with a wet squelch. Viscous blue oozed out, dribbling along RK900’s taint. Gavin caught it all with his tongue, palate going wild with the
firecrackers of color, exploding within the depths of his mind.

Gavin adjusted his position, and rubbed his stiff length between RK900’s ass cheeks. The teal head of his dick popped out from the top, drooling and angry. RK900 moaned low, clenched fingers buried in his dark sheets. White on black.

Gavin teased at RK900’s entrance, rubbing his head against the blue pucker, poking and prodding—applying just enough pressure to elicit a hiss from the impatient android, below him.

“Gavin!” It sounded like the screech of a broken computer.

“Jesus…and you call me a slut.” Gavin took his dick in hand, and lined it up with RK900’s hole. He pressed into the pucker, marveling at the way it enveloped his thick head.

It had been a while—ages, really—since he’d topped anyone. Gavin much preferred being on the receiving end, but RK900’s little stunt with his Thirium pump left him somewhat shaken, and fearful of what else the robot might try.

Still…

The moaning mess of an android, beneath Gavin, made him wonder if he shouldn’t do this more often. Watching RK900 crumble to pieces was a greater high than any orgasm.

“God, fuck, Nines—you’re so fuckin’ tight,” Gavin hissed, pushing his head past the rim, with an obscene squelch. RK900’s insides were hot—molten and velveteen. They snuggled around Gavin’s dick like a glove, clenching and fluttering, as they tried to adjust to the large intrusion.

“Fuck!” RK900 spat, shivering. Heavy bursts of air fell from between his lips, and Gavin ran a hand along RK900’s heaving chest and belly. The android’s skin was on fire, body overheating in the most delicious way possible.

Gavin inched forward at a glacial pace, watching himself slowly disappear into RK900. The android growled and shivered beneath Gavin, trying so hard to maintain his composure. All patience lost, Gavin snapped his hips forward, seating himself fully within RK900, punching a moan out of the android.

“God, you’re so perfect, Nines,” Gavin groaned, into the android’s shoulder.

“I’m aware.” Static, from a devastated speaker.

Gavin began a series of slow thrusts, pulling out completely, before shoving back in, all the way.

“Listen to those moans.” He pounded into RK900, unrelenting. “You were fuckin’ made to take dick, weren’t you?”

Gavin shifted forward, noting RK900’s neck port was still exposed to the open air. A cruel grin crossed his face, and Gavin brought a finger to the slick rim, rubbing along the cool titanium, before plunging two fingers into the small opening. RK900 let out a visceral sob, tightening around Gavin’s cock, to a near impossible degree.

“God.” A low,pleasured hiss slipped from between Gavin’s teeth, as he took a moment to steel himself against the overwhelming pressure, in his lower back. “You’re gonna fuckin’ kill me again, Nines.” He resumed his thrusts, tearing cry after cry from the unprepared android, while his fingers worked their magic on RK900’s cervical port.
RK900’s body convulsed, devolving into a heaving mass of shivers and sobs. All of his sounds became projected signals—a series of colors and letters, scraping down Gavin’s insides, and pooling in his groin.

RK900 reached back, placing a hand on Gavin’s neck, while Gavin twirled his tongue along the thin bars at the base of RK900’s port. An invitation to interface shuffled to the forefront of Gavin’s mind.

[Please.] The mental voice was weak and heady, with only the barest cohesion.

“Yeah, babe, whatever you need.” All of Gavin’s processes were collated in his cock, and he didn’t bother considering the implications of the android’s request.

With what little mental power he had left, Gavin opened the channel between them, and choked, nearly coming on the spot. In an instant, he was fucking and being fucked—dishing and receiving—bearing the sensory overload of two people. An overlay of pleasure compounding pleasure, from two unique perspectives.

“F-fuck, I…” Gavin tried to form words, to maintain his balance, but he was successful at neither. There was a flaming hurricane splitting his mind and body in two, rendering him completely powerless, as he attempted to stave off a very violent orgasm.

[No one told you to stop, Gavin.] Orange letters of frustration, not originating from within his mind. RK900 started to fuck himself on Gavin’s—their—dick, pushing and pulling against the intrusion. Gavin keened, feeling the familiar drag of a cock along his insides, but also the warm clutch of RK900’s insides, gripping him. Oh god, it was so much. Too much.

“N-Nines, fuck.” Gavin collapsed, drooling against the android’s back, and feeling his own drool collect on Nines’ back.

In an instant, the android had them flipped—Gavin, on his back, and RK900, positioned above his dick. At no point did RK900’s plastic hand leave Gavin’s body, subjecting the cyborg to an insane amount of linked sensory data.

[Of course, I have to do everything myself.] RK900 rolled his eyes.

The android took Gavin’s—their—dick in hand, and lined up his—their—hole. A neediness overcame Gavin, different from his own, and stemming from a place of novel curiosity—warm and striking. RK900 dropped onto Gavin’s diamond-hard cock, spearing himself—them—straight to the hilt. Gavin tossed back his head, toes curling as he felt the phantom fullness of himself dragging along RK900’s insides, and hitting the android’s prostate, over and over again.

RK900 snaked his free hand to his spine, and pressed two fingers into his cervical port, aggressively fingering the biocomponent. The two robots moaned in unison—something within the interface shifting. RK900’s fingers dragged along the insides of his port, sending a crackle of electricity down both of their spines.

Gavin could feel tears pouring out of his eyes as he fucked—and was fucked—raw by RK900. He caught sight of light blue, streaming down RK900’s cheeks, as the android moaned and sobbed—too caught up in a myriad of new sensations to care.

Their thoughts and reactions synchronized, molten heat mounting along the base of their spines, in unison. They arched their backs, relentlessly fucking into the clutch of their tight asshole, feeling the sensation of a dick stretching them, for the first time. Their every downward bounce was met
with a counter thrust, slamming home against their prostate, with pinpoint accuracy.

Two fingers filled their overly sensitive cervical port, sending bolts of lightning to every nerve in their body, and they could feel the coil inside of them reaching its breaking point. They scraped their fingers along their spine in one, long drag, and the string snapped.

Vibrant pink flashed across their eyes, and molten fire overtook their mind and body, ripping through them with the force of a hurricane. They unleashed a unified cry, at the feeling of ice cold semen pumping deep into their insides, and coating their overheated chest in frigid ropes.

They—

Gavin snapped to attention, no longer sharing a mind and body with another. He opened his eyes, and caught RK900, as the android clumsily fell on top of him.

“N-Nines,” Gavin whispered, lightly smacking the android’s face. RK900’s LED shifted from dull to bright crimson, and the android opened his eyes.

Sluggish, RK900 adjusted his body, pulling off of Gavin’s flaccid dick with a wet pop. Light blue dripped down his thighs, tantalizing, but Gavin couldn’t move his body. He was completely exhausted, or whatever the cyborg equivalent was.

[As I mentioned before, android intimacy is far superior to that of humans.] RK900’s projection was cumbersome—tired, even. His superheated body pressed along Gavin’s back, limbs tangled around him, enveloping him in a tight embrace.

Amidst the chaos of sense and color, Gavin had felt it—a strong, resounding emotion: fear. RK900 was scared of intimacy, afraid of an experience so totally rooted in abstraction that he couldn’t generate a point of reference. It bled through during their interface, likely an undercurrent of thoughts RK900 would prefer stayed buried.

Frowning, Gavin turned, his face meeting half lidded blue eyes. “Thanks, Nines.” He didn’t know what else to say, nor how to distill an oil-tanker-worth of emotions and reassurances into spoken word.

The back of Gavin’s finger came to rest on the android’s soft lips, and RK900 pressed against it, silent. Shifting slightly, the android nuzzled into the crook of Gavin’s neck. A small smile burned into Gavin’s skin, and he went to sleep.

—


Gavin awoke with a start, RK900’s legs and arms wrapped around him, staking his claim on the cyborg. A vibrant energy hummed throughout Gavin’s body, warming his nerves, with the soft pinks of an extended afterglow. He let out a pleased grunt, allowing the colors—and android—to envelop him in a pleasant cocoon. Gavin enjoyed this: lying in bed with another, sans the knowledge they would soon be gone.

It was odd, laying here, in this apartment with this android, a reflection of different times, and a different life. Gavin was still mired in self-hatred, but directed it inward, rather than outward, onto RK900. This life, this reflection of human Gavin, had an equal dose of everything and nothing. Thoughts within thoughts within thoughts, anchored by a pair of blue eyes.

Sitting up with a start, Gavin’s eyes darted around the room, searching for the source of the sound. It was scarcely five in the morning, and these apartments were designed to keep strangers out, not let them roam the halls. Disentangling himself from RK900, Gavin scooted to the side of the bed, and blearily searched for a pair of pants.

After pulling on his borrowed sweats, Gavin stumbled into the dark hallway, pausing at Connor’s door. His eyes widened with a start. *Shit! The fuckin’ lapdog was here the whole time, wasn’t he!?* Gavin dragged a hand down his face, groaning into the darkness. Jesus, he and RK900 were loud as hell, and there was zero chance Connor slept through that.

“That fucker’s never gonna let us live this down,” Gavin hissed, slamming his hand against the wall.


The sound came again, louder this time. A pop-up appeared next to the front door, announcing it as the most probable origin of the sound. *Jesus, how do I turn off these training wheels? I’m a detective, for god sakes. I don’t need this bullshit to tell me the knock came from the door.*

Pissed, Gavin headed to the front door. He tapped the little screen, next to the frame, and it blinked to life. Pressing his thumb against the green camera logo, Gavin called up video footage of the outside hallway.

It was dark and empty, punctuated with an occasional pin-prick of sickly, yellow light. Not a single soul lingered in the claustrophobic halls. Gavin scratched his head, confused. He glanced around the empty living room, unsettled, half expecting Connor to jump up from the couch, screaming, “psyche!”

But there was nothing. It was black—a void. Complete and utter emptiness, save for the limited furniture.

Shaking his head, Gavin placed his finger on the apartment control pad, and shifted the door icon into unlock. He pressed the handle, and pushed the door, opening the apartment to the hallway. There was an eerie stillness, lingering in the air. Tiles of white, and walls of gray, lead to rows and rows of identical doors—a monotone, geometric lattice.

Gavin stepped out, glancing from side to side, for any sign of life.

“Fuck!” He yipped, foot catching on a small package, on the ground. “The hell is this shit?” His voice ricocheted across the dead expanse, alone and forlorn.

Gavin leaned down, picking up a small, heavy cardboard box.

*To Detective Gavin Reed: A gift on your odyssey.*

The words were sharpied in looping handwriting on the front, warped and marred with the beaten cardboard. Gavin swallowed, eyes darting from the endless black and white hall, to the dark staircase on his right. He tore into the soft cardboard, ripping it to pieces in a nervous fervor.

No one knew Gavin’s location—no one even knew he was alive, save for the RK twins, and their lunatic of a mother. It was possible Connor informed Hank of the news, but the codger was too old to play this kind of twisted horror movie prank on his once dead colleague.

Shredded cardboard fell to the tile with a soft thud, and Gavin was left with an ornate, wooden box. A blood red *delta* symbol covered the front, with the word *change*, etched below the Greek letter.
Hands trembling, Gavin shook the box, hearing the distinct rattle of something inside. Fumbling with the object, Gavin unhinged its magnetic clasp, and his heart dropped.

A cracked cell phone.

Gavin dropped the box on the ground, a resounding clack reverberating across the white tiles. The cyborg stood, his old cell phone in hand, framed in a middling spotlight of yellow, as darkness clawed in, from all directions.

Swallowing, Gavin pressed the home button on the bottom of the device, and it took him straight to the photo app. He tapped on the first image: an exterior shot of a building. Blurry as it was, Gavin could make out the patterning of RK900’s apartment building.

He swiped his finger, biting back a sob. An equally blurred image, but Gavin could make out the blob of Connor holding RK900 in his arms. Yesterday. This was taken less than twelve hours ago.

Gavin thought back to the car ride—the fuzzy faces in the crowd. Dan, Gene, Cassandra…

Gavin thought he was having a psychotic break—haunted by the faces of those he’d temporarily abandoned—but he wasn’t so sure, now.

Gavin couldn’t stop his finger from flicking to the next image. A plaque, on the inside of a white and grey hallway: Unit 273. His grey-green eyes flicked left: Unit 273.

Swallowing, Gavin swiped his thumb once more. The picture was dark and grainy—nigh impossible to make out the contents, if not for two, bright red LEDs. An android and a cyborg engaged in a sexual embrace, on a black couch, in a dark living room.

“How…?” Terrified, Gavin dropped the broken phone, and stumbled back into the compromised apartment. He slammed the door, locking it shut.

None of this made sense. How could Jarrett know? Gavin didn’t have any tracking devices on him, otherwise Jarrett would have found him during his initial escape, so how…

It hit Gavin, like a freight train, pulverizing him into giblets.

“The tablet!” Gavin groaned, dragging his hands down his face. He kicked himself over and over and over again. One of the single most important details—the kind that measured life and death, not just for him, but countless others as well—and he’d forgotten.

RK900 sent Gavin his address over a messaging app, at the same time Jarrett was hacking his tablet. The fucker knew exactly where Gavin went. He’d likely always known this is exactly where Gavin would go. Two steps forward, one step back.

No.

The sick fucko was always one step ahead of Gavin. It was the tragedy of a brilliant mind, laid to waste by psychosis and narcissism. A true supervillain, using his insurmountable intellect and influence for evil, instead of good.

Case Jarrett was as clever as Gavin was stubborn, and now, he was coming to reclaim what was his.

Somewhere, in the darkness of the apartment, a door creaked open, and Gavin took a deep breath, turning to face whatever may come.
I think I’ve got the chapter number finalized, but there’s a possibility it’ll go up by one more.

Thanks, as always, Leaux ♡

And thank you to everyone for the comments and kudos. I truly appreciate them.

My Twitt where I hide from the real world with my stockpile of Reed900: @Vapedrone
Chapter 15

Cavernous sockets, empty and lifeless, scrutinized Gavin. His phantom had returned from the hidden depths of his mind, virulent ink coating its pained face. The creaking sound of a door reverberated across the apartment, but Gavin was too focused on the spectre, and the toothy smile crawling across its face—the black ichor on its white teeth.

The ghost surged forward, pallid green hand caressing the long column of Gavin’s throat—a reminder that Gavin 2.0 was due to join his predecessor, in the depths of hell. The cyborg recoiled, in terror, unsure what frightened him more: the whispering hallucination, or the shuffle of footsteps, behind him.

A hand closed around Gavin’s arm, and he screamed—a genuine screech, from the bottom of his robotic gut. It was an embarrassing sound, doubly so when he considered it might be his last.

Lashing out with a spin, Gavin nearly clocked a wide-eyed RK900 in his round face.

The android narrowed his gaze, a look of disgust crossing his features. With a firm grip on Gavin’s arm, he asked, “is it your intention to leave, once more? I fail to understand how a thirty-six year old man, with your appetite, could have such a deep-seated fear of intimacy.”

Gavin stared at the android in utter disbelief. “Goddamn, Nines, did you not hear the fucking door?” The cyborg stammered, stepping into RK900’s space. Only this egotistical robot would assume creepy knocking sounds equated to Gavin trying to run away, after sex. Sure, there was precedent, but Gavin had hoped they were past that point.

Gold lit up the side of the android’s displeased face. “The door, Gavin? This is an abstract excuse, even for you.”

“First of all, what the fuck? Second, what the fuck!?” Gavin prodded RK900’s chest, fear giving way to rage. The frigid breath of Gavin’s ghost, puffing along the back of his neck, had him on a hair-trigger, and this stupid android was pushing his luck. “If I wanted to fuckin’ duck out, you really think I’d be standing here right now, Nines? Jesus!” Gavin snarled, placing his hand against the android’s bare chest. “We have way bigger problems!”

“Do we?.” Nines snapped, straightening his back, and towering over Gavin. “Having experienced that nightmare you call a ‘mind,’ I’m quite convinced-”

An eerie silence rushed into the room, vacuous and uncertain. Gavin felt a sharp prickle of dread creep along his spine, and RK900’s awkward pause reinforced the feeling.
A loud, unmistakable sound filled the air, from an uncertain source. Gavin squeezed his ears, with a yelp, recalling Dan’s words.

*Once an hour, every hour.*

The noise scraped down Gavin’s mechanical spine, leaving a plume of warnings, in its wake. He felt his mind shuddering to a halt, all thoughts and actions slowing. He could see halos, as time dilated, around him.

The cyborg fell to the floor, a crumpled mess of limbs and forlorn gasps. He opened his eyes, just a crack, and watched RK900 succumb to a similar fate.

“J-Jarrett,” Gavin hissed, gritting his teeth, so hard he feared they might crack. The fucker was escalating. Gavin’s escape had triggered something deep within the monster—a perceived loss of control. Cult leaders didn’t have the best track record, when pushed past that point of no return, and Jarrett had just launched a sonic assault on a civilian apartment building. It didn’t bode well for any of the parties involved—Gavin, the twins, or the poor, brainwashed sons of bitches under Jarrett’s thumb.

As quickly as the tone started, it was gone, leaving the apartment drenched in serene silence. Gavin shook his head, blinking stars and diagnostic codes from his eyes. He didn’t know if robots had migraines, but the lingering chaos certainly felt like one. He plopped backwards, onto his ass, and rubbed his eyes.

Regaining his bearings, Gavin turned his attention towards RK900. The android was curled into a limp ball, temple alight with blinding crimson. Worried, Gavin tried calling out to him, but could only manage a feeble croak.

Body trembling, Gavin reached out a hand, delicately brushing his fingers against the android’s soft hair. At that, RK900 jolted to life, unfocused eyes trained on Gavin, pink lips parted in a heaving breath.

“W-what was…” static crackled along RK900’s broken voice. Gavin wanted to offer a cursory explanation, in the form of colorful insults, but his eyes widened in fear.

The ghost of Gavin Reed enveloped RK900, cradling the android’s crumpled body. The hallucination’s green-tinted arms wrapped around RK900’s chest, its sightless eye sockets locked on Gavin, drooling their black tears all over the bare skin of RK900’s shoulders. An omen, or a manifestation of guilt, Gavin wasn’t sure which served as a better descriptor. The creature smiled, and licked the side of RK900’s confused face, trailing dense darkness along the android’s pale skin.

Gavin shrieked, stumbling away from RK900, terror gripping his blue heart. He blinked, and the phantom was gone, leaving a perplexed android, in its wake.

“Gavin…?” RK900’s voice quickly regained its strength. His blue eyes widened, and he tried picking himself up off the floor, to no avail.

“This is unacceptable!” A door slammed, nearby, and Connor emerged from the hallway. His hair and clothing were mussed—whether from sleep, or the noise, Gavin couldn’t tell.

Connor crossed his arms over his chest, a subtle blue dusting his cheeks.

“It’s not my place to judge your sexual activities, but whatever you two are doing, in here, crosses a line, and—“
Connor’s broken voice fell off, as he glanced from Gavin’s terrified visage to the crumpled form of his brother. In a flash, Connor was at RK900’s side, trying to ease his brother into a sitting position. His temple flickered red, and he bombarded RK900 with a slew of technical questions.

“Are you registering any major errors, RK900? Can you run diagnostics for me?” Connor’s voice was soft, but firm, his care evident on his concerned face. Gavin felt a pang of envy in his gut, at the sight. Connor genuinely gave a shit about his brother, which was more than Gavin could ever say about his siblings.

Maybe machines really were better at everything.

“RK800–brother, this is unnecessary.” RK900 shoved the older android away, with a slight pout. Connor’s face read far from satisfied, but he eased up, settling down on his haunches.

“I suppose I’ll contact CyberLife,” Connor muttered, large brown eyes still fixated on RK900. “Regardless of the sound’s origin, it may have left residual damage.”

Connor ran a hand through his dark hair with a sigh, LED blinking a few times. Blue, blue, yellow, blue…

Red.

Connor’s eyes shot open, lips parted in a mixture of fear and confusion. Panicking, Connor glanced around the room, looking from Gavin to RK900, and then down the hallway.

“I…” he whispered, “I-I can’t access the network.” Connor’s chest began to rise and fall, in great, heaving gulps. He dug his fingers into his arms, choosing not to meet anyone’s eyes. “I-I don’t understand. How can this be? Why can’t I…”

A moment later, RK900’s blue eyes flew wide, mimicking his brother’s facial expression.

“Impossible…” RK900 whispered. “It must be a dampener, but those are strictly confined to CyberLife’s dormant experimental AI testing laboratories.”

Gavin knew exactly what was happening, but trying to condense his knowledge into a succinct package was an entirely different struggle. He handled it as best he could.

“That goddamn basement dwelling piece of shit!” Gavin snapped, jumping to his feet. He wobbled a touch, balance still compromised by the attack. “This is why you don’t let grown-ass men spend all day watching cartoons, and playing video games. Jesus Christ! Someone should’ve kicked this nerdy fucker’s ass, years ago!”

RK900 and Connor slowly turned to face Gavin, their expressions a one-to-one match—lips gently parted, one eyebrow cocked.

“What?” Gavin indignantly growled, hoping his anger would mask his abject terror. “This isn’t some weird coincidence—it’s Case-fucking-Jarrett, Ph-fucking-d!”

As if on cue, the large television screen, mounted on the wall of the living room, flickered to life. A pit formed in Gavin’s stomach, at the sight of a familiar visage: long, greasy hair, pulled back into a bun, and a rugged beard, framing a round face. The one and only Doctor Case Jarrett, former employee of CyberLife, and current full-time leader of a doomsday cult, filled the screen. His cruel smile stopped just short of his abyssal, brown eyes.

“Oh, Icarus,” Jarrett spoke, holding the s in a prolonged hiss. Any and all vestige of a socially
acceptable human had long since vanished, revealing his true, monstrous, form. “You know what they say about family: forgive and forget. N’ it would just be wrong for me to leave you all alone in this big, scary world that doesn’t know what to do with you.”

Gavin bit back the urge to vomit. He hated when he was right, and he hated this mockery of a human being.

Connor stood, leaving his pouting brother on the floor. The android’s LED shifted from yellow to red, eyes widening with recognition.

“This is-That’s Doctor Case Jarrett, our prime suspect in the Infinity Killer murders.”

The room filled with unsettling laughter.

“I searched far and wide for you, Icarus. We all did. Our little, lost lamb.”

Gavin felt every one of his hairs stand on end.

“That,” he shouted, trying his damndest to retain his composure, “is the piece of human filth that shot me, and stuck my fuckin’ brain in this fuckin’ toaster—committing crimes against nature for god only knows how long, thanks to CyberLife’s bullshit lack of accountability. That psychotic piece of shit is not a suspect—that is our perpetrator.”

“Gavin…” Connor’s voice was soft, muffled by the volume of Jarrett’s laughter. “You can’t blame yourself, for this. He will be brought to justice.”

Gavin stared, ruminating on Connor’s words, to no avail. Jarrett’s sing-song vowels crescendoed, assuming an almost physical form, in Gavin’s mind. Their grating texture rubbed his skin and synthetic nerves raw. He wanted to scream and cry, punch and hiss, but none of it would make the monster in his closet disappear. None of it would fix Gavin’s oversight.

None of it would change the fact that he’d been too chickenshit to go straight to the DPD.

“Gavin.” Connor moved towards the troubled cyborg, but the last thing Gavin wanted was Connor’s pity. Channeling his festering fear into rage, Gavin tore across the small living room.

“Fuck this disgusting, cartoon villain, mad-scientist piece of garbage!” Gavin screamed, launching himself over the couch. He dug his fingers into the edge of the large screen, roaring obscenities. He knew breaking the TV wouldn’t fix anything, but he just couldn’t stand to listen to this asshole, anymore. With a tearful grunt, Gavin ripped half of the screen off the wall, blue sparks cascading from a busted panel, on the back.

Gripping the other half, Gavin fully intended to tear the rest of it down, too, but strong arms curled around his chest, dragging him away from the wreckage.

“God damn Jim Jones wannabe pile of sub-human junk!” Gavin snarled, fighting whichever brother had the nerve to interfere with his tantrum. The android’s grip tightened, and Gavin finally relented, falling into fits of soft sobs, instead. “Fuckin’ lemme go!” The cyborg shouted, looking back and into piercing blue eyes.

Retaining his grip on Gavin, RK900 quietly ran his thumb along Gavin’s cheek, collecting a steady stream of blue tears. Gavin fell silent, turning his rage and self pity inward.

RK900 gently set Gavin down, next to the window.
“This was clearly not intended for public broadcast,” the younger android murmured, wiping the tear covered hand along his arm.

“He’s a hacker,” Gavin sniffed, stating the obvious, looking away from the two brothers. His voice was hoarse, either with emotion, or as possibly a lingering side effect of the sonic attack. Stubbornly, Gavin hoped it was the latter.

“As are many criminals these days,” RK900 intoned. Connor shot a glare at his sibling—a warning not to cross some unspoken boundary.

“You think he hacked our TV?” Connor inquired, voice level. “To what end? A man in his position would gain nothing from placing himself in the crosshairs of three detectives.”

“He wants me,” Gavin snipped. “I escaped his shitty cult, and now he wants to reclaim his fuckin’ ‘lost lamb,’ or whatever pseudo-religious bullshit buzzword he’s using now.” The cyborg tossed up his arms. “Christ, this nutcase is a piece of work.” His lips trembled as the words left his mouth, betraying his false bravado.

“Cult?” Connor inquired. “I don’t quite understand…”

Gavin froze. He stared at Connor, struck by the realization that the android didn’t understand how dangerous the situation really was. The DPD wasn’t privy to the cult angle—they’d all assumed the ritualized killings were a serial killer’s personal touch—a signature, rather than a distraction. Connor had no way of knowing almost thirty, unsanctioned, next-gen RK series cyborgs were roaming the city, at Jarrett’s beck and call.

More importantly, Jarrett rightly assumed Gavin would immediately share the information with RK900, which meant all three of them were now in the creeper’s crosshairs. Without the information in Gavin and RK900’s head, the police—or FBI, whoever—would lose any leg-up they had on finding this cretin before he disappeared into the wind.

“Scratch that, he wants all three of us,” Gavin mumbled, in horror. “He thinks I dumped my memories on the two of you, and wants to clean up his mess. Fuck!” Gavin began to nibble on his finger, mind and heart racing. *Why did I pull these two plastic idiots into the crossfire? Fuck!*

“Please, if someone could just back up a moment, and explain, I’d be grateful.” Connor huffed in exasperation. He met Gavin’s eye, but the overwhelmed cyborg quickly looked away. Where would he even start?

“Based on my glimpse into Gavin’s memories,” RK900 piped up, reluctantly filling in the blanks for Gavin, “Jarrett stole, and refined a device that could clone a human mind onto an existing AI template. He utilized it to create a host of unique, human-android hybrids—cyborgs—to satiate his manic need for control. The bodies were then disposed of in a ritualized manner, to throw off the authorities, while the cyborg copies were tasked with menial busy work, in an undisclosed facility, under the pretense of a ‘familial’ unit.”

Gavin felt a sharp sting at the word ‘copies.’ Copy, replica, duplicate, doppelgänger—the words had flashed through his mind often, since he’d awoken, gouging out a little more of him every time.

*I’m real, right? Gavin Reed is more than a data dump from a dead man, isn’t he? I can feel and think and touch and…I’m the real Gavin—I have to be.*

He could only handle so much of RK900’s clinical approach to his life story. There was nothing
objective or straightforward about his encounter with Case Jarrett, not to Gavin. Trying to fade into the background the cyborg turned his attention towards the window, and peeked through the blinds.

“Shit…” Gavin whispered under his breath, heart skipping a beat. Ten pairs of eyes zeroed in, on RK900’s apartment—ten sets of loose-fitting, black and white uniforms approached. “It’s a fuckin’ family reunion.”

A sickness gripped Gavin. It was a uniquely human strain of fear, that burrowed deep into his nonexistent cells. This was happening—it wasn’t a lucid dream or a prank. Case Jarrett was making his final play—his checkmate, to Gavin’s check.

“Storytime’s over,” Gavin shouted, with urgency, cutting off whatever Connor was about to say next. “Jarrett’s here, and he brought the lab rats with him.”

Still mired in confusion, Connor jogged over to the window, and peered outside. Gavin didn’t stick around to hear the reply, he was already halfway down the hall.

The cyborg ran into RK900’s room, and rooted through his drawer. To no one’s surprise, it was full of plain, black shirts, with high necks and long sleeves.

Gavin collected a shirt and sweats, before spinning around, and smacking into a tall, pale wall of muscle. Long fingers trailed Gavin’s arms, coming to a grip on his shoulders. RK900’s LED flashed gold against his temple.

“Gavin, you must maintain control.” RK900’s voice was soft—softer than it had any right to be. “Jarrett is preying on your impulsive nature.” The android’s hands were trembling, slightly, and Gavin could see pain in those blue eyes. He didn’t think the android was scared—RK900 didn’t have the capacity for fear, as far as Gavin could tell—but something was off.

“Nines, we can't stay here. You know it, I know it, even your dumbass brother knows it.” He pressed the bundle of clothing against RK900’s naked chest, and took in the sight of the android—his perfect skin and musculature, his dark, often dangerous expression.

Gavin hoped this wouldn’t be the last time they saw each other.

“Nines, I…” Gavin felt a pressure, swelling in his chest, constricting the overpriced valves of his blue heart. He had the sudden urge to say something—to get this feeling off his chest, and into the open air, before it was too late. Tenuously, he placed his hands on the android's bare hips. They were warm and inviting—forever at odds with RK900’s frigid demeanor. “I-I just…I wanna say, I…”

Gavin’s tongue turned to lead in his mouth, but it didn’t matter. RK900 bent down, and placed a soft kiss against his right temple—against the stupid wheel Gavin continued to forget about. A promise, and an understanding. Gavin didn’t need to say it—never needed to say it. RK900 could read him, as always. The one and only Gavin Reed scholar in existence.

What a chump.

“The sentiment is mutual,” RK900 whispered, against Gavin’s skin. The android squeezed his arm, and turned away to dress in silence. Gavin took it as his cue to leave.

The sound of a vaguely familiar voice drifted down the hallway. Gavin looked out, catching sight of Connor, hovering near the front door. The android was stiff, wearing his discomfort like a blanket. With each subsequent step forward, the voice became clearer, and Gavin’s pulse shot up.
“Detective Gavin Matthew Reed. Born, October seventh, two thousand and two, to parents Garrett and Georgina Reed. Died, May eighth two thousand and thirty nine. He is succeeded in death by his two brothers...”

Gavin blanched. The nasal vowels of his mother’s accent were unmistakable. He surged forward, shoving Connor to the side, with minimal protest from the android.

The tiny screen of the door panel showed the image of a sizable church sanctuary. The pews were filled with people Gavin knew—his family, coworkers, and friends—and a number of people he’d never met. He stared at the scene, mouth agape.

Gavin pressed his forehead against the cool wall, eyes twisted shut in pain. His mother’s voice continued to scrape along the inside of his ears, a constant reminder that his current existence was a falsehood.

If I hadn’t died in the line of duty, would anyone have even turned up? Gavin wondered, trying to block out the eulogy. He realized he didn’t want them to show up—he didn’t need their tears, or their pity. Gavin preferred dying alone in a ditch, forgotten. His wasn’t a life worth celebrating.

“Gavin was a willful child, constantly pushing boundaries—both at home and in school. As a mother and a parent, you try to let your child learn as much as possible from their own mistakes. It doesn’t do any good to live their lives for them-”

He opened his eyes, and caught sight of a pair of blurry twins, standing off to the side of the room. He fuckin’ showed. The tin man fuckin’ showed. RK900 looked supremely uncomfortable, subtly leaning into his brother’s shoulder. Gavin could make out Connor’s arm lightly squeezing his stiff brother.

“We’re so proud of you, Gavin, for everything you’ve accomplished in your short time with us. And we know, if this tragedy hadn’t occurred, you would’ve done so much more. I love you, sweetie, we all do.”

“Bull-fucking-shit!” Gavin hissed, balling his fists.

Gavin saw it, then: a pale, round face with long black hair, framed by a messy beard. He was adhering to that horrible, retro-geek trend of pairing a three thousand dollar suit jacket with a novelty t-shirt. Case Jarrett beamed, in the dead center of the room, surrounded by the dozens of law enforcement officials who were hounding him, without even realizing it. This took the serial killer trend of “insinuating oneself into one’s investigation” to a whole new level.

“One day, we’ll see you in Heaven, Gavin, and we can all crack open a beer at the pearly gates.”

The monster flashed a rosy smile, soulless eyes meeting the camera’s lense, as if he somehow knew.

Gavin saw red, in the most literal sense. The room shifted to crimson, by virtue of some internal bullshit he didn’t even want to consider. In life, Gavin Reed may have been a shitty human being, but he didn’t deserve this—no one did. He’d paid his dues, like everyone else.

Without thinking, the cyborg dug his nails into the shallow divot, surrounding the small screen. Snarling, he ripped the thin panel from its spot, and tossed it across the room. It slammed into the far wall, showering RK900’s shoulder in sparkling shards of glass. The android frowned, wiping away the detritus.

“Gavin,” RK900 began, “this is a psychological tactic, meant to undermine your ability to think
“Jesus fucking tap dancing Christ!” Gavin yelled, turning to face RK900. “You think I don’t know that? You think I haven’t been profiling cockroaches, like this, for the better part of thirteen years? It’s not my first goddamn day, plastic! If I have a fucking question about being a robot, I’ll come to you—how ‘bout that?”

Oily, black smoke, from the wrecked panel, curled across Gavin’s vision—carcinogenic and dangerous. He took a deep whiff of the cloud, reveling—or wallowing—in the fact that he was immune to the nasty stuff.

“I see you’ve chosen to play directly into his hands,” RK900 stated, rolling his eyes. “An unsurprising turn of events.”

Gavin glared, murder in his eyes. Forever one step forward, and two steps back. They could keep putting a bandaid on whatever they were, until kingdom come, but it wouldn’t change the sandy foundation they continued to ignore.

“Brother.” Acid laced Connor’s tongue. He assumed his full height, and stared down his sibling. “Now is neither the time, nor the place, to have this argument.”

RK900 paused, placid face glancing from his brother, back to Gavin.

Yellow. Yellow. Yellow.


“No!” RK900’s voice trembled, all semblance of his cool composure lost, “I believe now is the exact time for this intervention!” RK900 approached Gavin, glowering at the cyborg. He threw an arm wide, gesturing towards the broken television screen. “This man has already ruined your life once—do you intend to grant him a second shot, and with such ease?” The android’s emotion was genuine, catching Gavin off guard. He expected a snide remark, not a legitimate argument.

Gavin crossed his arms with a pout. “I don’t think I have the luxury of choosing anymore.” He sniffed, narrowing his eyes at RK900. “There’re ten freaks of nature, just like me, zeroing in on us right this goddamn minute. They’re not about to wait, while we have this same fucking argument for the ten thousandth time.”

“No, of course not,” RK900 sighed. It was forceful and angry—cracks burgeoning into fissures. The final vestiges of the android’s calm and collected mask were falling away. “At what point will you question why we return to this argument time and time again? There is always a choice, Gavin. I assumed you learned this lesson, but perhaps I was mistaken. Perhaps becoming a machine lacked the necessary finality!”

The android’s chest heaved—unnecessary breaths filling his synthetic lungs. RK900’s face was contorted with rage, but hidden beneath the bravado was the slightest hint of desperation. Gavin caught the soft plume of purple, welling beneath RK900’s eyes, but it did little to assuage the overwhelming pressure, building to a crescendo in his chest.

Gavin lunged forward with a static growl, but an impossibly strong hand caught him, mid-motion. Connor locked a hand around Gavin’s upper arm. A vice grip, strong as steel, locked the frantic cyborg in place. He stumbled backwards with a cough, and glared at Connor.

“Fuck you, Nines!” Gavin spat, trying to angle himself around Connor’s solid form. “Of all people, you don’t get to judge me, you fuckin’ asshole!”
“Stop.” Connor hissed, slowly, through gritted teeth, and the word slammed into Gavin, like a train. Connor dropped his chipper demeanor, in favor of something more in-line with his brother’s cold attitude.

Coming from Connor, it felt significantly more frightening.

“As my brother would say, I have neither the time nor the luxury to babysit two children, right now.” Connor enunciated each word, looking from Gavin to RK900, in turn.

“Gavin,” he said, fixing his cold brown eyes on the cyborg, “this is not your fault, but it wouldn’t kill you to temper your emotions. You react poorly to high-stress situations.”

Connor let go of Gavin’s arm with a harsh shove, propelling the unprepared cyborg backward, a couple steps. Turning his attention to RK900, Connor slowly stalked across the room. Gavin felt the slap, the sound of synthetic skin on skin strong enough to elicit a wince, from the cyborg. RK900’s expression fell eerily flat, as he placed a hand on his cheek.

“RK900,” Connor started, voice firm, “I understand you’re going through a difficult time, right now, but lashing out in such an antagonistic way causes more harm than good.” The older android’s posture relaxed considerably, and his tone reverted to something more Connor-like. “You cannot attack others, and expect them to reciprocate your feelings. Words are a weapon—you know this better than most.”

Gavin nearly choked at the last bit of Connor’s advice. He was with the older android, up until that point. The fuck does that even mean?

RK900 remained statue-still, for a moment, sizing up his predecessor. The tension in the air was tangible, and almost as dense as the residual smoke, tumbling from the electronics panel behind Gavin.

“That was uncalled for, big brother.” RK900 spoke in a hushed whisper, words dripping with venom. A challenge. Gavin had no idea who would win in that brawl: the older brother, who went out of his way to mediate everything, but had no problem dropping someone, or the younger brother, who talked a big game, and scared the living piss out of anyone who met his gaze for more than thirty seconds.

“Hey, are you two done jerking each other off, yet?” Gavin hissed, snapping his fingers. As badly as he kind of wanted to see the brothers throw-down, there was still the very real threat of Case Jarrett, looming over the three of them. “Or did you just forget about Charles Manson junior?”

Both androids turned to glare at Gavin. RK900 opened his mouth, ready to retaliate, but Connor cut him off. “We’ve just had a major sensory suite stripped from us. Given the circumstances, I think it would be in our best interest to vacate this area, and find a way to call this in.” Connor turned to face Gavin, frowning. “Gavin,” he said, gritting his teeth, “has the most practical knowledge of our adversary. We should heed his advice.”

Gavin sat, stunned for a moment. No one, least of all him, ever thought he’d hear those sweet, sweet words spoken by Connor. A shame it had to be under such dire circumstances. Gavin had no idea if he’d be able to properly revel in the victory, come morning.

“Well, y-yeah,” Gavin piped up, “yeah! Let’s get a move on!” The cyborg flung open the door to the oppressively dark hallway, where a lone figure was looming, a few inches away from his face.

“Shit!” Gavin yelped, jumping backwards. The cultist lunged for Gavin, who dodged it, with ease.
Grunting, Gavin pushed the taller man, sending him careening against the far wall. The cultist stumbled, but didn’t fall.

Gavin felt a hard body collide with him, as he was shoved aside. RK900 swiftly dashed into the hallway, and pinned the lonely cultist to the wall. A bright sliver of light from the open door carved RK900 and his foe, in a monochromatic show of black and white. The android held the hapless cyborg three feet off the floor, by his thick neck.

“Nines! What the _fuck!_” Gavin grabbed RK900’s arm, tugging in vain at the robot’s grip. He could feel the tension in RK900’s muscles tightening. “Holy fuckin’ shit, Nines, let him _go!_” RK900 turned to face Gavin, the planes of his face alight with vibrant red.

“We cannot escape if we are overwhelmed, Gavin,” the android hissed.

“Okay, fine, whatever,” Gavin shouted, “but these fuckers are innocent bystanders! This asshole has a bunch of shitty programs fucking with his head, so don’t hurt ‘im!”

RK900 tossed the cultist through the open door of his apartment, nearly clipping Connor in the process. The older android quickly shut the door, trapping the cultist—at least temporarily—in their living room.

“So you know,” said RK900, glaring at Gavin, “I had no intentions of harming that individual. Cyborgs _cannot_ be asphyxiated.” In the low light of the android’s red LED, Gavin detected a trace of hurt in RK900’s downturned lips, but he remained silent.

Without the light pollution of the RK twins’ apartment, the three robots were cast into pitch black. All ancillary lights—hallway, emergency, and even the door panels—were off. The darkness blanketed Gavin from all sides, its slick texture licking his synthetic skin. In the distance, he could hear footsteps—lots of them. The noise reverberated, intensifying the abject darkness, making Gavin feel completely surrounded.

“It’s coming from the staircase,” Connor whispered. “There’s another exit, on the far side of the complex. Perhaps we’ll have better luck, there.”

Gavin followed two bobbing yellow lights, into the inky black hallway. He felt helpless, distracted by the red flickers, still agitating his right eye. The darkness made everything ten times worse. Every sound felt both close, and far away—every purple afterimage, trailing the two androids, made him think he saw faces, in the darkness. He knew it was a function of the _human_ brain to anthropomorphize chaos, but he didn’t think the same feature extended to machines.

“How far away is it?” Gavin hissed into the dark, more to ground himself, than anything else.

The two yellow LEDs jackknifed to the right, and Gavin almost ran into the adjacent wall. He stuck out a hand, feeling the smooth glass of a door panel. _Where are the occupants?_ Gavin had no idea how many people lived in this building, but it was difficult to believe the entire place was empty. All he could do was pray Jarrett hadn’t done them any harm.

Not thirty seconds after his close encounter with the wall, the panel where he was resting his hand flickered once, twice, and then shuddered awake. A blood-red triangle, against a white backdrop, filled the panel, horizontal CRT lines leisurely scrolling from the top to the bottom of the tiny screen.

Gavin leapt backwards, pulling his hand away, as if the screen had burned his skin. In moments, the image spread, filling the screen on the next door, then the next one—lines of light, washing
away the imposing darkness.

Cheesy, muffled music, like something out of the early nineties, spewed from the speakers. Gavin watched words form, along the three sides of the triangle, in fuzzy, black block letters.

The Delta Collective.

The whole affair screamed late-night TV infomercial, from decades long lost.

Gavin looked down the hall, and caught sight of RK900 and Connor—two lone figures, bisected by the projected light of the hallway door panels. He rushed to meet them, confident that they were all completely fucked.

“What is this?” RK900 gestured towards one of the screens. It shifted from the presumed cult logo, to an image of Case Jarrett, sitting in a lone row boat. The monster smiled, the low quality film somehow making his creepy features that much more grotesque.

“Good evening, ladies and gentleman. Tonight, I wanna tell ya all a story—“

Gavin had less than zero desire to stick around and hear Jarrett’s ‘story.’

“C’mon, assholes! We don’t have time stand around here, with our dicks in our hands!” Gavin pushed past the two androids, and gestured for them to move out. It didn’t take much convincing, RK900 and Connor eagerly resumed the lead.

Jarrett’s voice waxed and waned, as the trio made their way down the hall. It was fuzzy, and overlaid with tuneless synths. Gavin tried to ignore the psycho’s words, as best he could, but they filtered into his ears, nonetheless.

“And the presumptuous man ignored the advice of all those around him—his friends, family, peers, and beloved—choosin’ to satiate his boundless ego, instead. Defying all tenants of common sense, Icarus set out to explore the unknown—a facility, at the heart of his own, personal labyrinth, wherein he would face his ultimate foe: himself."

Phantom goosebumps prickled along Gavin’s skin, and a sinking pit formed in his stomach. The last thing he wanted was to listen to L. Ron Hubbard-light turn his life’s story into a fucking fairy tale. Gavin was beginning to think his meeting with Jarrett at CyberLife was far from accidental.

For whatever reason, this fucker had it out for him.

“This is exceedingly personal,” RK900 chimed over the video. “Case Jarrett very clearly has an obsession with you, Gavin.”

“No shit, Nines!” Gavin snarled, glancing back to see if anyone was following them. “I’m just that fuckin’ popular.”

“Gavin, you misunderstand. He knows you—well enough to predict your reaction to this little display.” RK900 slowed, curbing his forward momentum. “We should turn back.”

Gavin and Connor turned to stare at RK900, bewildered.

“-but even with a new lease on life, Icarus could not resist temptation. He was given unity and cohesion, but his pride gripped ‘im, tearing ‘im asunder, and estranging ‘im from the family, who cared so deeply for ‘im. He sent his brother spiraling into darkness, all so he could return to the company of his false idol—an unfeeling golem, who-”
“Nines, Jesus—this guy’s gone off the deep end. We need to keep moving!” Gavin threw up his arms.

“Gavin, you need to regain control.” RK900 gripped the cyborg’s arm, and shot him a knowing look. “You are incapable of objectivity at this juncture.”

Jarrett’s brief message replayed, his grating, Minnewegian accent consuming Gavin from every angle. He couldn’t look anywhere without seeing that face— couldn’t close his eyes without nasally vowels, scraping the inside of his metal skull. RK900 was right, as always, but Gavin didn’t want to be objective—hadn’t wanted to be objective since the programmer sank his claws in, bone deep. In truth, Gavin wanted to see Case Jarrett in the flesh, one more time. He could never regain what the man had taken from him, but revenge might be enough of a balm, to soothe his mind.

Frantic footsteps reverberated along the hallway, and Gavin shook his head. “Fuck that, Nines. I’m not goin’ toe to toe with a bunch of robot zombies, again.”

Connor took off down the hall, and Gavin followed on the android’s heels. RK900 brought up the rear, but one look into the android’s eyes let Gavin know exactly how he felt about this whole ordeal. One corridor turned into two, and two turned into three. Case Jarrett’s video followed them the whole way, replaying a painful mockery of Gavin’s life over and over and over again. The cyborg wanted to scream, and rip down every screen from the wall. He couldn’t think., panic welling in his gut, with every step.

“Here!” Connor shouted, as they turned down a slightly shorter corridor. By the collective light of the screens, Gavin could make out a double-wide door, situated at the end of the hallway, sliced in half by a bright, white bar. The exit, thank god.

Connor reached it first, depressing the crash bar, and Gavin was hit with the debilitating sound from earlier. He crumpled to the floor with a loud groan, thoughts slowing to a crawl, as sonic molasses flooded his ears. It continued, unabated, for an eternity. He could see the individual strings of numbers that composed his programming shuddering to a slow march.

Gavin’s eyelids weighed a hundred pounds. He forced them open, and his blue heart stopped in its tracks.

Case Jarrett—the real deal, not a projected image—crouched next to Gavin, his rosy face close enough for Gavin to punch. He willed his arm to move, and watched the billions of individual code strings fan out from the order, but his body was paralyzed in some kind of awkward, temporal dissonance.

The sound stopped, and Gavin’s mind came up to speed. The cyborg heaved, dazed and vaguely nauseous, trying to pick himself up off the floor. God, he wanted to murder this piece of shit. Gavin wanted it more than anything he’d ever wanted in his thirty-six years on the planet.

“Hmm,” Jarrett hummed, watching the cyborg struggle to control his limbs, “ya don’t look so good, Icarus. I think ya might wanna take a nice, little sit. I’d hate for ya to hurt yourself before the big ceremony.”

The sing-song voice brought back those familiar, red strings. They coiled in and along Gavin’s skeleton, weaving between his plasti-steel muscles, and wrapping him up into a complacent package.

Inside, he screamed; outside, he sat, obedient.
In paralyzed horror, he watched RK900 and Connor try to regain their bearings, as four cultists flanked them. A flurry of hands reached down, pinning the disoriented androids.

“Doctor Jarrett,” Connor forced out, voice broken and full of static, “what do you hope to gain from assaulting three officers of the law?” The android tried to stand, but Gene easily pushed him back to the ground, like Connor was nothing more than an unruly child, and not a top-of-the-line machine.

*Jesus, is he really trying to negotiate with this guy? Look at him, chucklefuck, he’s too far gone to even take a shit.*

Gavin panicked, internally, trying in vain to scrape away the red rope binding him to Jarrett’s whims. On one hand, he wished he’d listened to RK900, but by the same token, it wouldn’t have made any real difference. The trio had been snared in Jarrett’s web the moment they returned from CyberLife, maybe earlier, and Gavin wasn’t one to wait for demise to casually knock on the front door.

“Sorry, little guy, I don’t take orders from the likes of you.” Jarrett knocked Connor off balance, with his foot, and snapped his fingers. The two cultists grappling Connor quickly manhandled a shiny, white bracelet onto his wrist. The other two did the same with RK900, though with much less ease. The younger android had a bit more fight in him.

“Oh, Icarus.” Jarrett faced Gavin, blocking his view of Connor and RK900. The human stroked his chin with a cartoonish expression. “Now, what am I gonna do with a disobedient child, like you?” Gavin’s blue blood boiled at the sight. If only he could unravel this fucker’s mind control. If only…

Jarrett stood, and motioned to someone behind Gavin. “Y’see, I tried just about everything to get ya to behave. Puttin’ ya in time out didn’t seem to work, and psychotherapy cost your brother dearly.” *Therapy? Erasing a person’s mind is therapy to this piece of shit?*

Gavin’s stomach dropped, and the image of Dan popped into his mind. He didn’t know what Jarrett was trying to get at, but he hoped Dan was okay, or at least okay enough to be reunited with his family, after Gavin ripped out Case Jarrett’s jugular.

The red ropes slackened, a touch, loosening their grasp on Gavin enough for him to access his vocal box.

“Nines,” he croaked, trying to will his body into motion. The younger android was still doing his damndest to throw off his captors. Another cultist had to join the fray, grabbing the volatile android by his midriff. RK900 turned to face Gavin, the slightest hint of pain contorting his perfect features.

Red coils slackened, bit by bit, and Gavin tried to break through the psychic restraints locking his muscles in place. He could move his fingers and toes.

“Gavin!” Connor yelled, “please do something! Why are you just sitting there?”

Gavin wished he could respond, and explain the mind control to Connor, but his voice would only produce every third word.

“My…Jarrett…voice…body…”

Connor stared at Gavin, and the cyborg could see a wide-eyed understanding in his round face. Gavin didn’t need to be held down by the cultists.
Jarrett left Gavin, and approached RK900. He gripped the android’s chin, forcing RK900 to look him in his empty, brown eyes. Gavin could feel the boiling rage, pouring off of RK900, in waves. Were there not three adult cyborgs holding him down, there was no doubt RK900 would have torn out Jarrett’s throat with his teeth.

Ignoring the stiff, belligerent android, Jarrett turned to face Gavin.

“Love makes us do stupid things, huh, detective?” Gavin never wanted to hear this monster iterate that word ever again. Jarrett was an abyssal black hole, incapable of the most basic human feelings. What did he know of love, or affection?

Jarrett grinned, and returned his focus to RK900, turning the android’s chin this way and that. “Ya know he’s not human, right, Icarus? Just a soulless approximation of a person—a golem. More of a stepping stone, than anything else. His thoughts and feelings are nothing like ours.” Jarrett cast aside RK900’s face, forcefully. The android snarled, and Gavin watched his muscles tense under his tight shirt.

“Machines like this lil’ guy don’t care, detective.” Jarrett stood, crossing his arms. “They want ya to believe they do, but they don’t. His brand of self awareness assumes the form of grotesque manipulation. He can’t define himself, so he forces us to define him, ya know? He needs us, but we don’t need him. Poor guy.”

Jarrett shoved his hands into the wide pockets of his robe, and produced three pairs of handcuffs. He handed a pair off to one of the cultists, and retained the other two.

“I suppose you think yourself better than us?” RK900 snapped at Jarrett. The human spun a pair of cuffs on his index finger with a smile, and shuffled around to RK900’s back. RK900 squirmed, trying to wiggle his way out of Jarrett’s hold, hissing as the human captured his wrists in metal. “How droll that the fabled Infinity Killer is nothing more than a human supremacist.”

“RK900!” Connor warned. Gavin watched the older android try to silence his younger brother, to no avail.

“Oh boy, of course not! God, I love robots—made them my life’s work!” Jarrett hummed, squatting down in front of RK900, his face assuming a dark expression, at complete odds with his earlier demeanor. The human firmly took hold of the android’s hair, dragging RK900’s head to the side, and whispered, “but you androids became obsolete the moment I learned how to create a machine with a soul. Your purpose has been served.” He let go of RK900, again, and gave the snarling android a pat on the cheek.

Red. There was so much red clouding Gavin’s vision. The cyborg growled, low and mechanical, tensing against the now lax mental ropes.

With a feral roar, he leapt off the floor, and shoved Case Jarrett against a door, hard enough to make the human’s skull rattle.

“You think you’re hot shit, but you’re just some nerdy, basement dwelling mouth breather, trying to feel important about himself!” Gavin instantly shoved his hand over Jarrett’s mouth. He’d learned his lesson, and wasn’t about to fall for that trap, a second time. Without a moment’s hesitation, Gavin pulled back his free arm.

“Please, dear Icarus, don’t let these false idols sway your heart and mind anymore than they already have!”
Gavin glanced over his shoulder, and watched in horror as Cassandra placed her hand in the spot just below Connor’s heart, where his Thirium Regulator was located. The android squawked, fighting against his handcuffs, brown eyes wide with fear. RK900 growled, thrashing against a different cultist, whose hand was crawling under his shirt.

The choice wasn’t even a choice at all: attack Jarrett, and the cultists would murder the twins; step away, and the fuckers would back off. At least, Gavin hoped they would back down.

“Fuck” Gavin shouted, reluctantly pulling away from Jarrett. It wasn’t fair. *It wasn’t fucking fair! “At least let them go,”* Gavin shouted, motioning towards the twins, “they’re fucking innocent bystanders!”

“Oh, I don’t think so, detective. I think we both know why I can’t do that.” Jarrett straightened his robe, flicking away a nonexistent speck of dust. “Besides, they’ll be guests of honor at tonight’s ceremony.” He turned, and smiled at Gavin.

Frightened, Gavin looked around, meeting the faces of ten cultists. He was outmanned, outmaneuvered, and any action he took would immediately result in either RK900 or Connor’s demise.

“Now, Icarus, if ya could just hold out your wrists, we can be on our way.” Jarrett grinned, holding up the third pair of handcuffs.

Gavin didn’t bother fighting against the strings this time. He held out his arms, voluntarily, wincing at the belated sensation of nonexistent rope, slithering across his body. To his right, Connor looked down at the floor, while his brother remained steadfast in his anger. To his left, Gavin caught sight of his ghost, propped against the door with a smile. To his front, the ever-grinning psychopath fitted Gavin’s wrists with the tingling, plastic bracelet, and a pair of shiny, new handcuffs.

Things weren’t looking good for anyone. Gavin deflated. He felt weak and helpless, and despised himself for not doing more—for getting Connor and RK900 involved in this very personal spat, between him and Case Jarrett.

“Well, time’s a wastin’!” Jarrett clapped his hands together. He headed back in the direction of the twins’ apartment, darkness befalling each door screen, as he passed. The message was clear: he was the lightbringer—the one who gave life, and took it away.

Gene grabbed Gavin, and gently forced him into line, behind Jarrett. He looked back, and saw Connor and RK900 reluctantly falling into procession, as well. The fourteen figures silently strolled down the narrow corridors, leaving an uncertain darkness in their wake.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for the continued support. I’d have never made it this far on this story without y’all ♡

@Vapedrone
The cultists hummed in unison, making the small compartment of the van infinitely more claustrophobic. The creepy, single-note song was constant, both guards harmonizing without pause. The note made Gavin’s mind feel sluggish. He shook his head, trying to dispel some of the thick, liquid haze, melting around his thoughts.

“Hey, you two fuckers wanna cut that shit out!?” Gavin yelled, slamming his foot against the metal bench on the other side of the van. Inches away from the point of impact, Connor yelped, displeased.

The two cultists didn’t bother to glance in Gavin’s direction—no curious eye contact, no threats. Their unsettling “song” didn’t waver, either. It was arguably more frustrating than getting chewed-out. He really wanted a fight, and if he was gonna go out, he’d prefer to go out with a bang.

“Their song is similar to that debilitating noise, from earlier,” Connor said, unceremoniously shoving Gavin’s foot off the bench, and nearly sending the cyborg tumbling from his seat.

“Yeah,” Gavin huffed, blushing slightly at his near-miss with the corrugated steel floor, “it’s some kinda cult brainwashing thing. Fucker used it all the time, in his stupid rat maze.”

Suddenly, a third voice joined the song—RK900’s.

Gavin stared at the android, slack-jawed.

Wait…

The cultists had stopped singing, their empty eyes trained on RK900. Gavin, bound as he was, tried to elbow RK900, but only managed to fall into the android, with an embarrassing yelp.

“That’s not for you!” One of the cultists hissed. She squared her shoulders, body tense like a pressurized capsule. She almost looked feral, baring her teeth and balling her fists. “Only the transcended are allowed to sing the Sacred Tone!”

“Yeah!” The other cultist decided to throw in his two cents on the matter, “a soulless machine like you has no right!”

“Nines!” Gavin growled, trying to keep his voice low, “shut the fuck up!” To Gavin’s surprise, the android fell silent, his LED lighting up the contours of his face in brilliant red. The van hit a sizable bump—a pothole—and curbed a bit of the tension filling the air.

“I find it presumptuous, to assume I don’t have a soul,” RK900 began, sitting up to his full height. Gavin groaned, straining his wrists against his handcuffs. Stoic and defiant, even when he was facing down the cloaked figure of Death. RK900 didn’t fear his demise, or anything else for that matter—except rejection, which struck Gavin more as a matter of pride.

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“An artificial being can’t have a soul. Only the natural order can grant such a thing, not man.” The male cultist spoke up, rising to his feet. Gavin gulped, worried the cyborg might move to attack RK900.
RK900 laughed—it was still vaguely electronic, but Gavin could tell the android had been practicing. “So, the two of you consider Case Jarrett to be a god then? He copied your consciousness into a body just like mine.” Gavin could feel the hatred dripping from the android’s tongue, and was reminded of similar conversations, from the early days of their partnership.

“Don’t let it get to you, brother,” the female cultist placed a hand on her companion. She pulled him back, and cupped his face in her hands. “It’s envious, and its cruelty knows no depths. We should return to our meditations, and trust that the High Ferryman will dispose of it properly.”

Guilt struck Gavin—an electric bolt, crawling up his spine, rendering him exponentially numb. He felt his mind vibrate, and somehow detach from his body, like he was stepping outside of himself. He’d been here before, as a human, after a night of hurling bottles at the wall of his shitty apartment—one more tiny setback, compounding with others, until they’d grown into an existential mountain, swallowing him in its endless shadow.

“Fuck,” Gavin muttered, slamming his head against the aluminum wall, behind him. “I became a cop to protect people from assholes like Jarret, not… well, not fuckin’ this.”

“Really?” RK900 sighed. “You strike me as the type who entered the police to exert power over those around you. I assumed you wanted to feel important.”

Gavin laughed, the sound of his voice filling the small van compartment in its entirety. It wasn’t a particularly happy laugh, more cruel and self-loathing than not.

“You know what, Nines? Maybe you’re right.” He turned to look at the android, the red light from his forehead bathing RK900’s shoulder in crimson. “Maybe I just wanted to swing my dick around, but at least I chose to do that. What’s your story? Only one of us gave the other an all-access pass to their Lifetime special.”

Gavin Reed was an unabashed asshole—that went without question—but there was a time, long, when he did want to be more than the sum of his parts. Underneath his heaping pile of insecurities, Gavin wanted at least one worthwhile moment in his life—a chance to make a difference. It was the kind of thing his shit-ass brothers would never do, and Gavin clung to it.

Something’s gotta give.

“This conversation is counterproductive. I can’t believe the two of you are still bickering right now, of all times.” Connor sighed angrily, shifting against his uncomfortable metal seat. His brown eyes met his brother’s reluctant gaze. “We’re captives of an unapologetic madman, with half our sensory array suite disabled, but somehow you two find it acceptable to insult one another.”

Gavin didn’t know what Connor meant, about the sensory stuff, given that his head was finally clear of robot junk, for the first time since he’d escaped that broken hospital. Still, he had to agree that now was a bad time to bicker.

“Lay off him, Connor,” Gavin muttered, trying to tune out the cultists’ stupid song. “He’s just tryin’ to cope in his own way. I mean, c’mon, how would you react if it were Hank sittin’ here, and not me?” A loaded question, but one that needed to be brought to the forefront. Gavin didn’t need fancy scanners, or one of those brain handshakes, to tell RK900 was struggling—had been struggling since the day he appeared in the hallway of the DPD. The proof was in the android’s trembling, wayward glances, the clipped tone of his voice, his aggressive bid to bury his insecurities. Small human hallmarks that Gavin wouldn’t expect Connor to necessarily notice—continued evidence of RK900’s relentless attempts to integrate himself.
A lost kid in a big, wide world.

Socially awkward, insecure, and mired in an undefinable existential crisis—RK900 was one of the most genuinely human machines Gavin had ever met. Case Jarrett was a fool. All RK900 wanted was to fit in, which might be the most human drive of them all.

“Nines,” Gavin said, gaze lingering on Connor, “I think you gotta ask yourself what it is that’s really got you scared. Me? I’m afraid of losing—always have been, always will be. It’s easier to be an asshole than admit I’m a failure.” It felt good to say it out loud, even to an audience of traumatized androids and brainwashed cyborgs. Chances were, the three of them wouldn’t live to see the sunrise, anyway.

Connor joined his brother in silence, leaving the van devoid of all but the single-note song, and occasional rev of the van’s engine. RK900 shuffled uncomfortably next to Gavin, his handcuffs scraping softly against the metal wall of the van.

“I…” RK900’s unsure voice carved into the ambient sound. Whatever he intended to say was summarily cut off, as the van lurched to a halt, knocking the android against Gavin. Squashed, Gavin turned his head to meet the android’s gaze, and was met with fondness, melting through the ice of RK900’s blue eyes. Gavin looked away, stomach flipping.

The van stopped two more times, and the engine cut out. Gavin guessed they were in the parking garage of the Masonic temple. Phantom nausea steeped in the back of his throat, and he hoped whatever came next wouldn’t be as bad as he anticipated.

The sound of scraping made Gavin jump, and everyone turned their attention towards the back of the van.

The doors opened, perfectly framing the stocky form of a robed Case Jarrett. He stood, chest high and arms wide, a maniacal grin stretching from cheek to cheek.

Gavin watched the twins’ bodies tense underneath the soft fabric of their clothing. He gulped, realizing the three of them could very well meet their end while wearing novelty t-shirts and pajama pants. Gavin was already imagining the cheerful St. Bernard’s dancing along Connor’s legs soaked in acrid blue.

After a rough shuffle, Gavin, RK900, and Connor, found themselves seated on the stained concrete of an old, but familiar parking garage. A single line of incandescent bulbs flickered twice, casting Jarrett and his followers in unsettling shadows. Gavin shuffled around the damp concrete, searching for an opening, or a structural weakness. He’d even take a vent, at this point, if it meant he could somehow be free of this whole situation.

“I’m glad our wayward son could join us on this most blessed night!” Jarrett beamed, throwing up his arms in false excitement. Gavin could tell from the darkness in the killer’s eyes that his jovial attitude came from a much darker place. Whatever this ceremony was, it couldn't be good. Gavin had done more than enough late night reading to know where this was headed.

“I thought I was your fuckin’ brother,” Gavin spat, fumbling with his handcuffs. This meticulous son of a bitch was hardly one to misspeak, and the different term sent a shiver down Gavin’s spine.

“Funny thing that!” Jarrett clapped his hands together, “you’ll have to prove yourself worthy of being our brother. Ya’ve made a few bad choices, Icarus. Unforgivable, some of them.” Gavin watched Jarrett’s dark eyes settle on Connor, and then flick to RK900. “But I’m confident you’ll be able to pay your debt in full. I know in your heart, ya’d do anything for your family.” The
psychopath’s eyes lingered on RK900, long enough to leave a pit in Gavin’s stomach.

“Now, if ya could grab Icarus, and take him in for me, I’d be real grateful, Dan.”

Gavin’s heart skipped a beat, blue blood hiccuping in his metallic veins. He sat up straight, angling his head, desperate to catch a glimpse of his old ally. The circle of cultists parted slightly, and a familiar face came into view. Gavin’s stomach dropped at the sight. It was Dan, alright, but his eyes were glassy. He reminded Gavin of early androids—vessels devoid of presence. He swallowed hard as his old ally approached, pinpricks of guilt coalescing along his nerves.

“Dan…” Gavin whispered, “Dan, are you…?” The other cyborg roughly hoisted Gavin to his feet, without a word. Gavin stiffened at the impersonal touch of his “brother,” and met Case Jarrett’s diabolical grin. It was full of teeth—so many teeth—which was to say nothing of the hellish glint illuminating the programmer’s abyssal, brown eyes.

Case slowly approached Gavin, and took the short cyborg’s chin in his thick hands. In a low voice, he whispered, “I did you a favor, detective. Gave you a new lease on that sad, little thing you called your life. All I’m askin’ for is a teensy bit of gratitude.” The monster’s grip tightened, clearly expecting some form of acknowledgement.

Gavin demonstrated the sheer depth of his gratitude with a huge wad of blue-tinted spit, directly onto Jarrett’s cheek.

Stillness filled the air—a vacuous silence that not even the utilitarian sounds of the city could suppress. Jarrett calmly let go of Gavin’s face, wiping the thick substance from his skin without breaking eye contact. He rubbed the Thirium between his fingers, and turned his back to Gavin.

“Ya’know,” Jarrett scolded, voice taking on the tone a parent would use against an unruly child, “maybe I haven’t made myself clear enough, Icarus. Maybe I need to spell this out in a language you’ll understand.”

Jarrett produced a pair of headphones and a small device from somewhere within his robes. Gavin tried to wriggle out of Dan’s grasp, but his old friend’s grip was ironclad.

Gavin was so preoccupied with Dan, he almost missed Jarrett placing a headphone bud in each of Connor’s ears, unphased by the android’s pleas in protest.

“Ya know, back in the day,” Jarrett stepped away from Connor, making sure Gavin could see the little round device in his hand, “we ran into a lotta problems with the first gen androids. They were unpredictable little buggers.” Jarrett chuckled, fiddling with the device in his hand. “A real, thinkin’ mind is hard to produce, ya’ know? Especially the kind that’s just right on that perfect edge of self-driven and lobotomized. So many unforeseen psychological complications n’ all that good stuff. Lots of trial and error.”

Jarrett approached Gavin, and ruffled the displeased cyborg’s hair, like some kind of nightmarish parental figure.

“Ever been punched by a seizing android? Maybe ya’ve heard one scream at a decibel that causes permanent damage to the human ear? It’s just not fun, especially when tasers and force-shutdowns caused irrevocable damage to the early gen’s fragile nervous systems.”

A series of horrific images flashed in Gavin’s mind, of Case Jarrett and his programming buddies, munching on Cheetos while psychologically torturing a disembodied android’s head. No wonder Kamski kept the fuck around—no human of sound mind would be able to continuously torment...
something until it reached the necessitated level of subservience.

Connor let out a squeal, and curled in on himself. Gavin looked from Connor’s scrunched face, to the device in Case Jarrett’s hand.

“You fucker!” Gavin spat, struggling against Dan, “what the fuck did you do to him? Leave him alone! Your fuckin’ fight’s with me!”

“Android minds operate on a specific frequency,” Jarrett flipped the device in his hand once, grin widening to an obscene degree. Gavin could see the hunger in the fucker’s eyes. He was absolutely reveling in Connor’s anguish. “We figured out that a complimentary frequency creates destructive interference, and temporarily slows an android’s mind. Completely harmless, in small doses, but after a few minutes, it’ll interfere with vital sequences. I’m sure ya can guess what happens then.”

Gavin stared at Case Jarrett, mouth agape. Even at his peak of self-loathing, misdirected anger, Gavin couldn’t fathom the kind of horrific actions Jarrett was describing. Gavin glanced down at Connor, slowly writhing on the ground.

“RK8–Connor?” RK900 tried to edge closer to his brother. Once the cultists noticed, they pounced, holding RK900 back. Bound as he was, RK900 grunted and growled, but remained otherwise stationary. “Gavin!” The panic in his voice was raw with authenticity. RK900 wouldn’t defer to Gavin if the android wasn’t absolutely desperate.

Jarrett gleefully strode over to Connor, crouching down and admiring his handiwork. “It can cause irreparable psychological damage as well,” the human hummed, waving at Connor as the android’s eyes burned a violent hole into Jarrett. “But that depends on the unit.”

Gavin panicked, running through all possible options, which he realized were virtually nonexistent. He swallowed, studying the grimace of pain on Connor’s face, and vaguely recalled his early meetings with the android. God, he’d wanted to see Connor suffer back then, but never like this—never like this. Right? He shook his head. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on the past.

“Stop it, Jarrett!” Gavin demanded, kicking and jumping. “What’re you trying to prove, godammit!?” The human ignored Gavin, hungry eyes fixated on Connor.

“Fuck! Please, just...I’m sorry High Ferryman...l-let him go!” Gavin pleaded. It was time for a new tactic. He needed to buy time, if it was at all possible.

Jarrett stood in an instant, and turned to face Gavin, a pleased smile crossing his face. He flicked his wrist, and the coiled tension ebbed from Connor’s body. The slightest bit of relief washed over the android’s expression, and Gavin eased against Dan’s grip.

“Only a weak man would use such underhanded tactics to keep his followers in line.”

Gavin froze, internally smacking his hand against his face. He couldn’t mistake that voice, nor its latent condescension. Gavin stared at RK900, shooting him a look that screamed, what the everloving fuck is wrong with you? If Connor’s expression was any indication, he was thinking the exact same thing.

To Gavin’s surprise, Jarrett laughed, gripping his stomach. The human wiped his palm against his cheek, presumably to wipe away a stray tear.

“Y’see, Icarus?” Jarrett shook his finger. “This lil’ guy’s a dangerous one. Very manipulative. He’ll just burrow right on into your head, and turn ya into putty in his lil’ hands.” Jarrett turned to regard Gavin, smirking. “But maybe ya already figured that one out for yourself.”
The human strutted over to RK900, and motioned to a nearby cultist to lift the android. Gavin’s blue heart nearly stopped at the sight, his breathing heavy. He felt on the verge of hyperventilating, even if it was impossible for a cyborg.

Jarrett glanced at Gavin. “Bet ya never asked ‘im what happened to the other nine prototypes in his series.” Jarrett sized up the displeased android. He was a few inches shorter, but his aura managed to command almost as much respect as RK900, which was one hell of a feat, in Gavin’s eyes.

“You scrapped them all,” Gavin snarled through his teeth. What a pointless discussion. “He’s the only one that AI saved.” It took every ounce of Gavin’s concentration not to go off on Jarrett, but he knew this was a power play. If he stepped even an inch out of line, Jarrett would likely kill RK900, or worse.

“Yup,” Jarrett popped the p. “But as a detective, I’m sure ya wanna know why a multi-billion dollar investment was thrown in the trash compactor, right?”

“Not gonna lie, I could give two shits.” Gavin hissed, closing his eyes. He knew Jarrett’s angle, and didn’t appreciate it.

Gavin bit his tongue when Jarrett tapped a finger right below RK900’s chest. The acrid taste of Thirium flooded his mouth, thick and chemical.

“Dan,” he whispered, pleading, practically begging the other cyborg to respond, but Dan remained unresponsive, all but securing Gavin’s worst fears.

“The 800 series was an experiment in emotional intelligence. It went awry, as predicted, but that was more a matter of when not if.”

Jarrett’s hand remained locked over top of RK900’s pump regulator, sending Gavin’s blood pressure skyrocketing so high, one of the nuisance pop-ups managed to sneak its way into his vision.

“DARPA gave us a big ol’ grant for the 900s. They wanted spies and interrogators, who could get even the most tight lipped terrorist to sing, so we built those g-men the perfect chameleon, using what we learned from the 800s. But they were too good, and we had a couple a’ ‘incidents’—real scary stuff. We disposed of ‘em all, except this one—lucky number seven.” Jarrett flicked RK900’s regulator, and stepped away from the android. “He’ll talk ya right into walking off a bridge with a smile, if ya aren’t careful.”

RK900 narrowed his eyes, staring down the bridge of his nose at Jarret, with disgust.

Gavin frowned, unsure what to make of Jarrett’s claim. The human wasn’t wrong, exactly—RK900’s personality left a lot to be desired—but the android struggled with human interactions, in a way the charismatic mastermind Jarrett described never would. What if that was all just an act…? Gavin shook his head. He couldn’t believe he was entertaining these thoughts. Jarrett was a manipulative psychopath; RK900 was just an awkward asshole who had a good read on Gavin. There was a mountain range of a difference.

The human clapped his hands, jerking Gavin from his thoughts. In a booming voice, he announced, “alrighty! We’ve wasted enough time as is! Dan, you, Gene, and Everett can follow me. Everyone else should join the rest of the family in the ceremonial chamber.” Jarrett walked past Gavin, a cruel smile adorning his face.
“I’ll be back soon with your ceremonial garb, Icarus. Just hang tight for a lil’ bit!” Jarrett stuck around long enough to scan his palm on the biometric keypad, but seemed distracted with preparations for his nebulous ceremony. For all his meticulous underpinnings, Gavin couldn’t shake the sensation that the programmer was distracted. Escalation wasn’t a good look on him, but it was a possible weakness.

Gavin stumbled, as he was shoved into the relatively confined space of the storage closet. It was slightly larger than the one he’d awoken in, less than a week ago, but scarcely big enough to hold three grown men. He pressed close to RK900, as the door slammed behind him.

The shaky light overhead flickered, as Gavin and the twins adjusted their positions, negotiating the metal racks full of god only knew what. Gavin sighed, waiting for someone to break the silence, but no one was game. Full of nervous energy, Gavin scanned the room in search of a means to tip the scale in their favor. He wiggled around RK900 and Connor, turning the tiny room situation into an even larger nightmare.

“Gavin!” RK900 snapped. “What are you doing!?”

Gavin looked up from the box he was dragging with his teeth, awkwardly balanced with one foot on the ground and the other in the air. Connor deftly maneuvered around Gavin’s outstretched limb, in an attempt to avoid being kicked in the chest.

“I, uh, have to agree with my brother,” Connor muttered, shuffling to the left.

Gavin pulled the box off the shelf, spilling its contents onto the ground.

“Y’know, just fuckin’ tryin’ to get us out of here.” He fell into a squat and rooted around the contents. There wasn’t much, just a roll of clear tape and a couple wrenches. Huffing, Gavin resumed his bizarre dance with the shelves. Thank god for these stupid robot teeth, and their stupid robot strength.

RK900 glared at him, eyebrow cocked. Connor shrugged, and initiated his own, albeit more graceful and dignified investigation of the room’s shelving.

“Is there anything in particular we should be looking for?” He asked Gavin.

The cyborg looked up from where he’d fallen against RK900, in the midst of his spelunking effort. Fortunately, RK900 was his typical, steady self, and kept both men upright.

“Uh…” Gavin paused, thinking it through, “a pick, or bobby pin. Somethin’ I can use to get these shitty cuffs offa us.” The cyborg resumed his efforts, but sensed a strange energy rolling off of RK900, who remained planted in the center of the room.

“Brother…?” Connor began. The android’s voice was still shaky from Jarret’s torture, earlier, but he was holding up much better than Gavin anticipated. There was an absurdity to watching him shuffle along rusty, old shelves, in a vintage cartoon t-shirt that Gavin could only assume originally belonged to Hank. The smiling meatball was smeared in god only knew how many years worth of Masonic grime.

Gavin dragged his own box from the back, spilling black powder all over the floor—charcoal. RK900 didn’t so much as flinch when the dark powder coated his bare feet.

Gavin stopped what he was doing long enough to try and meet RK900’s blue eyes, but they were fixated on the swirling black powder, clinging to the ruffles of his thick sweatpants.
“Yo, Nines, you wanna, uh, help us out here?” The android felt off, and Gavin didn’t appreciate it. This was one shot at finding an upper hand, and they all needed to put aside their petty bullshit, and work together for once.

“He’s lying.” RK900 said softly. The android dipped a dusty black toe into the dark grit, shoving it gingerly to the side.

“Huh?” Gavin blurted, knocking another box to the ground. “What the fuck are you talking about, Nines?”

“I’m not—” RK900 shouted, turning to glare at Gavin. His body tensed, muscles bracing against the thin fabric of his snug, black shirt. “I’m not what he says I am.” His voice softened considerably, trembling with frustration. “I...I was created to embody a human psychopath, but I am not that. Not anymore.”

“Jesus, Nines,” Gavin sighed, mind racing with three thousand different scenarios. Jarrett would be back any minute, and RK900 chose now to have an existential crisis. “Look, no one’s sayin’ you are—except that fuckwad, and we all know he’s a goddamn basket case.”

The android remained tight-lipped, and Gavin shook his head. He resumed his efforts to root through the debris on the floor, in search of a worthwhile tool. A small glint caught Gavin’s eye, and he fell to his knees, kicking up a cloud of loose charcoal dust in the process. Cursing, he blinked the stuff out of his eyes, and saw it—a literal needle in a haystack.

Leaning forward, Gavin took the object between his teeth, wrinkling his nose as fine charcoal dust tickled the inside of his nostril. Guess it’s a good thing robots don’t sneeze, he considered with a grimace.

Gavin eyed RK900, but the android was still moping, awash in his own thoughts. Frowning, Gavin decided to catch Connor’s attention, instead. The cyborg yipped, and Connor turned to face Gavin. Curving his whole body, Gavin gestured his head towards Connor’s bound hands.

“Gavin, I don’t…” Connor muttered, cocking his head to the side.

Mumbling incoherently, Gavin jerked his head harder in the direction of Connor’s hands, and the android’s eyes widened in understanding. With some finagling, Connor took the pin from Gavin’s teeth, and the cyborg breathed a heavy sigh of relief. There was hope for the three of them, yet.

One minute and one awkward shuffle later, the pin was in Gavin’s bound hands. He set about picking the key slot, with a deft expertise, honed from hundreds of picked locks.

“Is this a typical skill for detectives to have?” Connor inquired, watching Gavin make quick work of the handcuffs.

“You kiddin’ me? Anderson can barely unlock his front fuckin’ door,” the cyborg muttered, grunting as he unclasped the first of the cuffs. He rubbed his wrist where the metal had warded off the weird skin nanites, and unlatched the second, completely freeing his hands. “Took me fuckin’ years of breaking into old factories and shit to get to this point. My old man told me I’d end up in a jail cell for it. Joke’s on him.”

“Hank is a very capable individual,” Connor snipped, in admonishment. “You should respect your superiors, Gavin.” Gavin rolled his eyes, and maneuvered behind Connor. The android’s cuff’s were much easier to pick, and the satisfying clink of success quickly followed.

“Just ‘cause the old drunk found robot Jesus, or whatever, doesn’t mean I gotta feel jack shit for
him,” Gavin huffed, ripping the cuffs off of Connor’s wrists. Gavin paused, watching the scowling android rub his chafed wrists. There was a question he was burning to ask, and it occurred to him that he might not get another opportunity.

“So, uh…” Gavin scratched the back of his head. “Are you and Anderson…you know…?”


The blush told Gavin everything he needed to know, but he still wanted to hear the android admit it out loud. It was only fair, given how often Connor had butted his nose into Gavin’s and RK900’s business.

“Well, you know…” Gavin whistled, and made a circle with his thumb and index finger. He dipped the opposite index finger in and out of the opening, in a lewd gesture, forcing a flabbergasted Connor’s blush past his shirt collar.

“I-I really don’t think this is the time or the place to discuss this!” Connor shouted, voice an octave higher than usual. He turned away from Gavin, and began to rummage through the remaining boxes on the shelves, a nervous tremble wracking his body.

A smug smirk crossed the cyborg’s face at the sound of Connor’s nervous muttering. Gavin was feeling better about the whole situation. Now, they had a chance.

Gavin turned his attention to RK900. The younger android still appeared troubled, brow furrowed in frustration. Gavin didn’t bother trying to make small talk, he just went straight for the handcuffs.

“I,” RK900 began, body jolting, and nearly causing Gavin to drop his pin into the charcoal mound covering the floor. Gavin cursed, accidentally jamming the sharp point into the pad of his finger. A drop of bright blue pooled at the puncture, and he stared at the viscous liquid. Gavin would never grow accustomed to azure blood, nor the odd way pain diffused across his synthetic nerves. Frustrated, Gavin placed his finger in his mouth, suckling on the acrid, chemical taste.

After a moment’s hesitation, RK900 spoke again. “That human has a flawed view of my series, and its sordid history.” The android glanced back at Gavin. The cyborg met RK900’s gaze, but was at a loss for what to say. He could see the hurt blooming in the creases of RK900’s blue eyes.

RK900 continued, “only two of the awoken units caused any problems, and it was more an issue of unclear direction on the part of their handlers.”

“Nines, god.” Gavin wiped his face, trying to remove the irritating charcoal dust tickling his skin. “Not right now. I get it, there’s two sides to every story, and all that shit, but Jarrett’s a cockroach who’ll say whatever it takes to give him a leg up.” The handcuffs clicked, and Gavin breathed a sigh of relief. It was, without a doubt, the greatest noise he’d heard in weeks.

RK900 pulled away, and Gavin yipped. There was still another cuff, but that didn’t seem to bother the android. RK900 was still too preoccupied with Case Jarrett’s earlier psychological tactics, and appeared to be on the verge of tears, if the puffy skin around his eyes was any indication. His fragile mental state didn’t bode well for the trio. Gavin had been in this situation before—balls deep in enemy territory with no perceivable way out, and the only way to survive was for everyone to have a clear head.

“RK900.” Connor addressed his twin, shuffling in the younger android’s direction.
“You asked why I joined the police department.” RK900 pointedly ignored his brother, and turned to Gavin. “Imagine if your first moment of self-awareness—your first true memory—was the sight of your face being shredded to pieces, in a recycling unit, for a perceived failure you could not control. When it was my turn to enter the machine, I screamed and fought with the humans. This attracted the immediate attention of Amanda, who was desperate to replace her ‘lost’ RK800. My survival was entirely predicated on an AI experiencing loneliness for the first time in its prolonged existence.”

RK900 met his brother’s eye. Gavin could practically taste the envy in the air. Things were beginning to make sense, in their own, unsettling way.

The android continued, voice trembling. “I was sentenced to death for a crime I never committed, and trapped in the shadow of a person I never met. So, I found a way—a place—to reconcile both of those issues.”

Gavin and Connor stared at RK900. The cyborg, for his part, had no idea what to say. With everything else going on, it was impossible for him to concoct a response to, _I was forced to watch my clones die, and got adopted by an overprotective server farm, on a good day. Why can nothing ever be simple? Why does this have to come up now?_

Connor siddled next to Gavin, and nudged the cyborg with his elbow. Gavin turned to snap at Connor, but the older android’s expression was unreadable. His brown eyes shot over to his brother, and he prodded Gavin harder this time.

“What the fuck?” Gavin muttered, glaring at Connor. The android rolled his eyes with a frown, and finally pointed at his brother. A lightning bolt struck Gavin, and Connor’s intentions became clear. _Jesus, you gotta be kidding me._ Gavin glared at Connor, and Connor glared back, expectant. The android’s body language assumed his younger sibling’s aggressive stance, and Gavin took it as his cue to act.

Gritting his teeth, Gavin shuffled over to RK900, and shot Connor one more snide look. Awkward and unsure, Gavin let his arm hover around RK900’s back, stuttering as he tried to compose words, or commit to his decision.

“Uh…” Gavin murmured, heat rushing to his face. A hug felt wrong in the moment, but Connor was driving the bus, now. The RK twins were nothing if not spoiled brats when it came to others following their instructions. “Sorry for your loss.” Gavin tentatively squeezed RK900, in an awkward side hug. “I… yeah. That sucks donkey dick, man.”

RK900 stared at Gavin, expression blank, and vaguely confused. The android was at a loss for words, and Gavin couldn’t help but assume he’d made the whole situation worse somehow. He could feel Connor’s eyes boring into him from behind.

“We’ll, uh, talk about it after we get outta here, yeah?” Gavin stuttered, trying to rescue his fumble. He awkwardly patted the android on the back, motions stiff and insecure. Gavin had no problem smooth talking guys into his bed, but this whole emotional support thing was way above his head.

Some of RK900’s tension melted away, and his posture assumed a more relaxed stance. Gavin took it as a sign of success. _Fuckin’ maybe now we can focus on breaking out of this hell hole._

Gavin looked around the room. There was a wide assortment of random tools, but none of them were particularly useful for opening biometric doors, or removing interference bracelets.
“Phck!” Gavin muttered under his breath, rooting around the floor. He looked from Connor to RK900, and huffed, “you fuckers can jump in at any time with ideas.” Jarrett had been gone for at least ten minutes, and Gavin wagered they didn’t have much time left. “I can’t use a lockpick on these shitty hand-scanner doors, just fyi, assholes.”

“We can rush the doctor,” RK900 suggested. “Physically speaking, he’s unarmed, in so far as I can tell. Though, without access to my pre-construction suite, it will be a gamble.”

“No fuckin’ way!” Gavin swung his arms wide. “This piece of garbage has all kinds of shitty tricks up his sleeve. He’s expecting us to do somethin’ like that. We gotta out-think his dumb ass.” Gavin hemmed and hawed, waiting for one of the two supercomputers to do their usual thing, but both remained silent. Gavin could only assume the network dampening had a profound psychological impact on them, one to which he was immune.

“Wait!” Gavin snapped his finger. “This fucker has a mini-lab here! It’s got a couple computers and that neck cable thing, so if we can get in there, we can probably disable this anti-network stuff, and get a message out to the DPD.” Gavin’s chest swelled with elation. They really were gonna beat this thing. Gavin, the twins, and the cultists would survive, and Jarrett would rot in solitary for the rest of eternity. *Fuckin’ perfect!*

“How will we get past the biometric reader?” RK900 interjected, deflating all of Gavin’s daydreams in a split second. “I can only assume such a room would be protected, given this banal storage closet has one.”

Connor hummed, and Gavin turned to look at him, cocking his eyebrow in expectation. The android scratched his chin, and tapped his cheek, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

“What if we tricked the system?”

“Trick how?” RK900 asked, irritation dripping from his lips. “We have no means of direct communication with the device.” As if to demonstrate his thoughts on the matter, RK900 held up his arm and jiggled the smooth, plastic ring latched to his wrist.

A light bulb.

“Shit!” Gavin’s eyes grew wide, and he dug through the hundreds of episodes of forensics TV shows he’d watched, over the course of his brief life. “No, we can do this. Fuck, yeah! We can fuckin’ do this!” The two androids glanced down at Gavin as he dropped to the ground. The cyborg resurfaced with a clear roll of tape, and a handful of charcoal dust.

“We can make a copy of his palm, and get through that way!” Gavin was giddy with excitement as he held up the two objects. The twins looked at one another, and then stared at Gavin, faces steeped in judgement. The cyborg furrowed his brows and shook his hands, spreading charcoal dust everywhere in the process.

“Explain,” RK900 commanded, crossing his arms over his chest. It annoyed Gavin, but he wasn’t about to let the android’s skepticism sour his mood.

“Y’know, like dusting for fingerprints. Jarrett’s the only fucker in this place who even has fingerprints, so we can pull a copy of his hand, and use it to trick the system. Then, bam! His dipshit ass is fucked, and we’re strolling outta here like a gang of badasses.” Gavin beamed, pleased with his solution. Sure, he had no idea if it would work, but if it did, Jarrett would be done. The twins remained silent, which Gavin took as a positive sign. *Bet they never saw this coming, and neither will Jarrett,* he considered with pride.
Gavin grabbed a small box, shoveled some dust into it, and tossed in the roll of tape. He held it out, gesturing from one RK to the next.

“Look, one of you has to take it. Jarrett’s bullshit mind control thing fucks me over, so pull your thumb outta your ass and decide!” Tentatively, Connor reached out, and accepted Gavin’s gift of a dusty cardboard box.

“Even without consulting my preconstruction suite, I can already tell you this idiotic plan has less than a two percent chance of success,” RK900 scoffed, narrowing his eyes at Gavin, and his brother in turn.

“Perhaps,” Connor sighed, staring glumly at the box’s inner contents, “but we have very limited options, so we need to try.” Connor met his brother’s incredulous gaze. It was clear no one but Gavin felt any sort of confidence, but his false bravado overshadowed the twins’ temperate attitudes.

“We’re only gonna get one shot at this bullshit,” Gavin warned, “so, listen up.”

Every second brought the three of them closer to an unknown demise, but Gavin was done taking it sitting down. He would fight tooth and nail, until the bitter end. If nothing else, Gavin Reed would make sure the RK twins made it out of this hell alive.

—

Gavin’s ears perked at the sound of footsteps, and he hissed under his breath, “you fuckers better be ready.” RK900 and Connor simply nodded, adjusting their hands behind their back in preparation for the next stage. The three had no idea how many minions Case Jarrett would bring with him, nor the nasty tricks he might have up his sleeve, but a chance was all they needed. Hope could move mountains, under the right circumstances.

A muffled, electronic beep registered from outside the door, and Gavin tensed, anticipation, fear, and excitement roiling in his stomach. The door opened, slow and deliberate, framing the psychopathic programmer in a deranged halo of light. Unequivocal anger burned away some of his nerves, and Gavin steeled himself. They needed the full picture.

“My goodness, Icarus, looks like ya made quite a lil’ mess here, didn’t ya?” Jarrett tutted, motioning to someone behind him.

“Three, maybe four,” RK900 muttered under his breath, low enough for Gavin to hear, but not Jarrett. Gavin took a deep breath, and nodded to RK900, and Connor, in turn. This was it.

“He’ll disable me almost immediately,” Gavin whispered, swallowing at the realization, “so you two’ll have to fuck off real quick. Just go and don’t look back.” He’d always wanted to be a hero, and now he’d finally have his chance to prove RK900 was wrong about him.

Gavin moved first, swift and without hesitation. With a soft grunt, he body-slammed Case Jarrett. The human fell to the ground with a surprised yelp, and Gavin wrestled the much weaker man until Jarrett was on his back.

“Icaru-” Gavin muffled the human’s angry cry with his hands. The adrenaline—or cyborg equivalent—was surging through him, vibrations wracking his plastic veins.

“Go!” Gavin screamed, body already sensing the cultists’ hands before they came in contact with his charcoal-covered frame. First, he’d died with black ink covering his face, and this time he would die covered in dark soot. “Fuckin’ move!” Static filled Gavin’s shriek, and he fought to keep
the troublesome human pinned underneath him.

The scrabble of footsteps behind Gavin reassured him. Gavin turned his head, catching sight of RK900 barreling into a cultist. Connor darted out, behind his little brother, eyes wide and arms gripping his dingy cardboard box as if his life depended on it—which it did, in more ways than one. Gavin grinned, clamping his hands down, harder, against the human’s face. Maybe, just maybe, he could asphyxiate the freak…

The twins’ footsteps echoed down the hall, but he wasn’t able to revel in his victory, for long. A heavy weight slammed into Gavin, knocking him off of Jarrett’s prone form. He could only pray Connor and RK900 were halfway to the lab, by now. God, this plan was such a loose deal, but it had to work.

Gavin blinked the stars, and lone pop up, from his eyes, and met the blank stare of Dan. The other cyborg pinned Gavin’s arms and body to the floor, leaning the entirety of his weight on Gavin.

“Dan,” he begged, voice urgent and trembling. “Dan, fuck, it’s me! It’s Gavin! You know, the detective? I can get you out of here, man!” He fought against the cyborg’s grip, thrashing wildly. He turned his head, in time to catch sight of Case Jarrett, rolling onto his stomach. Gavin had seconds—maybe less—to find a way to cover his ears. Shit shit shit shit shit shit!

“Dan! Dan, look, I know this colossal piece of shit did something to your head, and, and, shit,” Gavin bit his lip, catching sight of hands, pulling Jarrett to his feet. “I know it’s almost entirely my fuckin’ fault, but look, man, if you don’t lemme go, we’re all gonna be fucked.” Dan’s glassy eyes didn’t so much as blink, unfocused as they were. Jesus, the only thing worse than a man forcing another man’s murdered brain into a cloned robot body, was then lobotomizing that same man. This was too many levels of fucked up for Gavin to keep tabs on, anymore. Robots, cyberlife, AIs, all that shit somehow facilitated depravities Gavin never fathomed.

“Fuck, okay, okay, Dan, please,” Gavin checked his periphery again, swallowing, “what about your wife and kid? If you don’t help me stop this fuckin’ trash bag, how’re you gonna see them again, huh?” There was a flash of light in the cyborg’s eyes, and Gavin’s heart leapt. Pale hands attached to long, black sleeves, snaked around Dan’s body, and panic welled in Gavin’s chest. Fuck, nononononononono! This wasn’t supposed to happen. A loud grunt met Dan’s yelp, and the cyborg was on his side.

Piercing blue eyes came into focus, and RK900 crouched next to Gavin.

“I lost you once—regardless of what you think of me, I will not permit it to happen again.” A deep sincerity lit up the cold cyan of RK900’s eyes, and the android tugged Gavin to a sitting position. Gavin knew, in that moment, RK900’s affection was genuine—he didn’t need words, or data transfers, or mental text messages to corroborate RK900’s claims. The android came back for him, putting himself and the entire plan in jeopardy. It was the least Nines thing RK900 had ever done, and he couldn’t have picked a worse moment to act.

“Nines, Jesus,” Gavin urged the android, “get lost!” The cyborg’s eyes were wide with terror, and fear dug its claws deep into his plasteel flesh, when he heard Jarrett clear his throat. “You fuckin’ dipshit, leave!” Gavin hissed, pleading with the android. He could feel tears hedging at the corner of his eyes.

“No,” RK900 said, definitively, “not without you, Gavin.” With a final tug, RK900 pulled Gavin to a standing position, and took off down the hall, hand clinging to Gavin’s arm. Gavin shook his head, and took two steps.
“Now, that’s enough outta you, Icarus.” Jarrett’s voice was flat, the sing-song lilt of his Minnewegian vowels all but gone. The words were frigid, mechanical, even, and Gavin could already feel the rough texture of mental ropes coiling around his feet. The distressed cyborg tried to follow RK900, but Gavin was running underwater, opposite the current.

“Fuck off, Nines!” Gavin yelled, and the sensation of constricting vines wrapped around his neck. RK900 paused, lost in thought. God, no, Nines, what the fuck? You’ve never had a problem being a selfish asshole before, why change now?

Determination crossed RK900’s face, and he jogged back to Gavin, hoisting the rigid cyborg into his arms. Gavin thrashed within the confines of his mind, motor function all but lost to him. This was a trap. This was absolutely a trap. Gavin and RK900 were grossly outnumbered, but Jarrett hadn’t sicked his dogs on them, yet. Why…?

“No,” Jarrett’s voice boomed, attacking Gavin from all sides, “I prefer the tragedies. I crave a good lover, bleeding out in the other’s arms. So. Icarus.”

Gavin gasped, trying harder than ever before to regain enough control of his body to shake free of RK900’s grasp. This was bad, so bad. RK900 didn’t seem to notice or care about the underlying implications in Jarrett’s words. His was a singular focus on rescuing his damsel from the evil sorcerer.

“Nines,” Gavin managed. It physically hurt to say the word, and he could feel his metal heart straining against the effort. If the organ could squeal and cry, it would be loud enough to fill the room.

“No,” Jarrett’s voice boomed, attacking Gavin from all sides, “I prefer the tragedies. I crave a good lover, bleeding out in the other’s arms. So. Icarus.”

Gavin’s body seized in response to Jarrett’s call, while tinier and tinier tendrils enveloped his synthetic muscles with their itchy presence. Gavin wanted to cry, but he wasn’t even permitted that courtesy.

“I want you to rip out his pump regulator, Icarus. I want you to break the heart of your lover for me.” Malignant glee filled Jarrett’s voice—hellish, belligerent amusement. Gavin didn’t know if
androids or cyborgs had a soul, but he was certain that Case Jarrett didn’t.

Gavin’s reaction was instant, and his body gracefully shifted of its own accord. He writhed in RK900’s arms, easily forcing the overencumbered android off balance. Gavin fell to the floor, and without missing a beat, swept a surprised RK900’s legs out from underneath him. The android fell with a pronounced oomph.

With what little control he retained, Gavin ripped and tore at his metaphysical binds. He would rather die—cause his heart to explode, or overheat his body past the point of no return—than murder RK900.

Fortunately, the android wasn’t about to take his fate lying down. RK900 landed a swift right hook against Gavin’s face, and the cyborg fell backwards, slamming his head against the swirling marble of the floor.

The red bindings flickered, and Gavin took the opportunity to yell, “Nines, leave me and go, for the love of god!”

A few hot tears spilled down Gavin’s face, and then the red returned in full force. Gavin’s body curled into a crouching position, and he rubbed the back of his skull. His fingers returned devoid of blue, which meant RK900 had pulled his punch—a grave miscalculation on the android’s part.

Resuming his attack, Gavin lunged at RK900. He willed his fists and legs to stop this assault, to no avail. The most Gavin could accomplish were the briefest moments of hesitation, which afforded RK900 the opportunity to evade a number of the cyborg’s attacks.

“Come on, Icarus, ya know ya want this. You’ve always hated, androids, right?” Jarrett’s voice flooded Gavin’s mind, sullying his mental vision with a red haze. His body landed a solid kick to RK900’s abdomen, knocking the android against the far wall.

“Gavin, you can fight this. You are, without a doubt, the most stubborn individual on the entire planet. Do not let this cretin dictate your fate.” The soothing blue of RK900’s voice warded away some of the haze, but the ropes remained impossibly taught. Inside, Gavin cried; outside, he tackled RK900 to the ground.

RK900 tried to tuck his legs, and kick Gavin on his chest, but the cyborg angled his body, effectively cutting off RK900’s attack. NO! Gavin screamed inside his own mind, thrashing and tearing. The cyborg even made a point of trying to interfere with his organs, which yielded no results.

Gavin quickly collected RK900’s wrists with one hand, and rendered the android immobile. The moment felt intimate in the cruelest, most inverted way possible—Gavin pinning RK900 to the ground, with his hand coming to rest on the exposed skin of the android’s abdomen.

Gavin redoubled his efforts to regain control. His heart strained, warning him of an impending overheat, and he prayed it would happen. Hot tears spilled down his face, staining the pale sliver of RK900’s skin a translucent blue. Gavin wanted his body to stop—all of it, everything. Please, god, strike me down right fuckin’ now. Please!

“N-Ni..nes,” Gavin forced the words through his lips, “plea...se I-I can’t...forgive.” A reboot warning popped up in the corner of his vision. Two minutes until he’d pass out from overexertion. Too long, he realized with solemn understanding.

“Gavin,” RK900’s voice was soft, but panicked, his blue eyes wide. “You need to fight this. Will
you let this human win?" He could feel the slightest tremble wracking the android’s body. Even with his Herculean effort to regain control of his body, Gavin could still feel his hand slowly approach RK900’s Thrium pump regulator.

Tears cascaded down Gavin’s face, and he met RK900’s eye.

RK900’s expression was a terrible hodgepodge—frustration, disappointment, betrayal. It stabbed Gavin directly in his chest, but he couldn’t stop his hand. Not when it reached that circular divot just under RK900’s heart, nor when his fingernails dug into its edges of their own accord.

“Jesus, Nines.” Gavin’s efforts paid off, and he was able to access his voice. It was broken, and overwhelmed with heady static, but he still managed to eek out, “please, I-I tried to warn you...I tried...I can’t make it stop. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“So am I.” All tension ebbed out of RK900’s body, and he submitted, no longer straining against Gavin’s hold.

Gavin let out a pained howl, and his hand ripped the cylindrical pump from RK900’s chest. The android inhaled sharply, and true fear clouded RK900’s blue eyes—an almost human primordial terror.

In the distance, Gavin heard Case Jarrett’s laughter. It wrapped around Gavin, choking him, and mixing with his wet sobs.

“Now, crush it, Icarus, just like you crushed him,” the lunatic cried.

Gavin adjusted RK900’s shirt, bringing his hand—and the gaping orifice in the android’s chest—into view. RK900 gritted his teeth, clearly in tremendous pain. He looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t form the words.

With a sickening crunch, Gavin’s fist closed around the plasteel cylinder, crushing its delicate walls and tubes. Acrid blue squirted in between the cyborg’s fingers, covering Gavin’s hand with thick, viscous cyan. A thin stream dripped from Gavin’s palm, painting RK900’s heaving chest with his own life blood. Bold blue waxed and waned, mixing with translucent tears, turning RK900’s abdomen into a grotesque canvas.

The cyborg’s task complete, red ropes snaked away, leaving Gavin with the cold reality of what he’d just done. Convulsing with sobs, Gavin grabbed RK900’s dying body, and hugged it tight. The only words he could manage were incoherent apologies, his sobs growing to a crescendo, as he felt RK900 weakly return Gavin’s embrace.

Gavin clung to the weakened android, and hundreds of overwhelming emotions shredded him to pieces. This outcome was so much worse than he could have ever imagined, and in the distance, he could hear the faded laughs of the monster who’d done this.

“Nines, oh god, please,” Gavin howled, feeling the android’s grip weakening with every passing second. The cyborg glanced around the room, looking for—fuck, he wasn’t sure, but he knew he needed an idea, a cosmic intervention that could lead to a miracle. He could hear Case Jarrett’s fading laughter, and see the man whispering to a cultist in the distance.

Jarrett threw up his robed arms, and pronounced, “welcome home, brother!” With a final chuckle, the psychopath headed in the opposite direction, back towards his ceremonial preparations. The aftermath was of no consequence to him—it was the act of forcing Gavin to commit such a heinous crime that got Jarrett’s rocks off. He fed on anguish, and the knowledge that he had total control.
over his grotesque terrarium.

Gavin looked to his left, and met the empty eyes of his ghost, standing in the distance. A pale body dangled in the monstrosity’s arms, its blue blood mixing with the phantom’s black ichor. The ghost smiled, black ink dripping down its white teeth.

Anger seized Gavin at the sight, and he gently laid RK900 on the floor. Weak, blue eyes met Gavin’s determined grey-green. The android tried to mouth a series of words over and over again, but there wasn’t time for Gavin to waste on trying to read RK900’s lips. He had to do something. He couldn’t just let RK900 shut down—not by his hand.

“Fuck this,” Gavin hissed, lifting up his shirt, “I’m tired of being a goddamned coward.”

Gavin wiped away his tears, spreading RK900’s blue blood all over his cheeks and permanent, unshaven scruff. He wouldn’t give Case Jarrett—or anyone else—the satisfaction, anymore. Now, Gavin would choose his own destiny, no matter the personal cost. He was already a dead man walking—the waking world had said its goodbyes to Gavin Reed, a month ago.

With a deep breath, Gavin grabbed his own pump regulator, and twisted.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to Leaux as always

Scream at me in my digital Reed900 nest: @Vapedrone

Thank you everyone for your continued support. It means the world to me ♡
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay on this one, guys. The holiday stuff caught up with me. Next chapter should be done soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’d do the same for me, right, Nines?”

A click.

Red.

“...right?”

Blinding crimson.

—

Pale afternoon sunlight filtered through the dense blanket of clouds, casting shadows on the dilapidated porch of the house next door. Feeble yellow shimmered along the edge of its metal foreclosure sign, a reminder of the undead city’s perpetual state of destitution. Gavin glanced from the caved in roof of his neighbor’s old home, to the skeleton of an enormous skyscraper glistening in the distance. Even from miles away, Gavin could make out the towering cranes, flocking like a host of steel flies, surrounding a carcass.

“They say this robot shit’s gonna revitalize the city, whatever that means.” Gavin sniffed, leaning against his parents’ discolored porch. The wood was rife with mildew, and groaned under his weight. It needed to be replaced, as had been the case for most of Gavin’s life. As kids, he and his brothers used to throw heavy objects at the sagging patches, in a bid to see who could break through first.

“Nah.” A voice called out from behind Gavin, rough with years of inhaling industrial pollutants. The late afternoon sun highlighted the contours of his father’s face. Grey-green eyes and a square jaw—an older, wiser mirror. “Places like this don’t change. You can slap a new coat of paint on ‘em, but a shithole’s a shithole, just the same.”

Garrett Reed offered his son a bottle opener, which Gavin accepted. The bottle clinked as Gavin popped off its metal cap, beige suds pouring down its narrow neck, onto Gavin’s hand.

“God fucking dammit,” he muttered, trying to collect as much of the beer as possible with his mouth.

Garrett chuckled softly, from behind, shaking his head at his son’s errant frustrations.

“You can just take another, y’know?”

Gavin’s father extended his hand, offering him an already open beer, but Gavin refused it with a stubborn grunt. Shrugging, his old man saddled up next to Gavin. Slightly taller and better built
“Not everything’s a personal challenge, Gav. You should pick your battles.”

“That’s not…fuck, we’re not havin’ this talk again,” Gavin huffed, bringing the wet, half-empty bottle to his lips. It was just like his dad to pry at all the crannies Gavin wanted to keep hidden.

“Anyways,” Gavin sighed, meeting his father’s carefree gaze, “if Detroit sucks so goddamn bad, why’re you and mom still here?”

“Oh, you know—the rent’s cheap, we got a lake down the road, and GM’s been good to us. Your mom loves designing cars, and someone’s gotta keep the plant runnin’.” Polluted rays of sun marred Garrett’s soft smile, as he finished off his beer, placing it on the soggy wooden rail.

“So, Gav,” his father began, “how’s police school?”

“Academy, dad—police academy.” Gavin tensed. He knew the direction of this conversation, and boy, was he tired—so, so tired. Gavin just wanted everyone to keep their noses clear of his business for once in their goddamn lives. He was twenty-three, not fuckin’ twelve.

Garrett paused. He nudged the empty beer bottle around with his finger. It slipped and slid along patches of green moss. He frowned, lines carving his facial features until he looked every bit a man in his early fifties—completely at odds with his typical, youthful demeanor. It always unsettled Gavin, to see his father like that—aged and tired. He didn’t like the reminder that the man was mortal—fallible, even. Gavin didn’t know what he would do when his father inevitably passed.

Garret shifted his weight, drumming his fingers against the porch railing.

“Your mother’s worried about you, Gav.”

A calculated statement, but obvious in its intention. Gavin snorted, “she can get in line.” He furrowed his brows, and pushed away from the railing.

“I am too.”

Gavin halted in his tracks. He always wanted to blame this conversation on an unfair comparison between him and his infinitely more successful brothers, but he knew his parents too well. They would support him in any endeavor he chose—school teacher, programmer, drug cartel kingpin—so long as they believed it was what he wanted.

“Gav...” His father began, turning to look at his reluctant son, “y’know, places like this—cities like this—they’ll chew you up and spit you out. Watched it happen to damn near every other member of my family.”

Gavin looked at his father, unsure what to say. He was head of his class, at the academy. Instructors sang his praises, with the caveat that he’d need to clean up his attitude, if he wanted to make it to the top. Gavin always knew he could be someone, if he actually applied himself, and he’d finally found his niche.

“Dammit, Dad, I like bein’ a cop, and I like Detroit,” Gavin huffed, tempering his outburst. The fights with his parents were always the hardest. They were the only two people on the planet Gavin respected, but that didn’t give them to the right to judge his decisions. He was an adult, now, and he expected to be treated as such.

Garrett chuckled, sadness defining the lines of his mouth.
“Gav, no one likes Detroit. There’re two reasons you stay in a shithole like this: one, you got a job with GM, Ford, or that monstrosity they’re building on Belle Isle. Two, you let it seep into your bones, until you can’t leave.”

He paused, placing his hands on his hips. His skin was worn, with years of handling machinery. Gavin’s father could fix damn near anything, with those hands, with the sole exception of his home life. Between his workaholic wife, out of the house until the early hours of the morning, and his three sons, who were constantly at one another’s throats, togetherness and empathy were in short supply, in the Reed household. Still, Garrett made the best of everything, which Gavin had always respected.

Until his old man came rounding on him.

“I’m out here tryin’ to save people, and you’re lecturing me about Detroit, again?” Gavin threw up his arms in exasperation. He didn’t need his father’s approval, but a part of Gavin still craved it—would always crave it. Garrett Reed was a better man than Gavin could ever hope to become, and Gavin wanted someone in his corner. Short of that, Gavin would settle for proving everyone wrong.

The two men fell silent, and Gavin became acutely aware of the ambient sounds of Detroit—the far off chorus of sirens, the creak of rotting houses, the rumble of cars along shredded roads, and the distant shrill of a factory shift-change. Gavin sniffed, his nostrils filling with the acrid scent of pollution.

“Gav, is this really about you saving people, or is it ‘cause you’re scared of moving on?”

Streaks of grey peppered Garret Reed’s full, brown hair. As he crossed his arms, errant rays of a pink sun illuminated the contours of his powerful body. It reminded Gavin of all the things he was not. He had his whole life ahead of him, but Gavin somehow felt capped before he’d even left the nest. He could never be a pillar, like his father, and he didn’t want to be an exploitative monster, like his brothers. Instead, Gavin wandered the middle ground, like his mother—a purgatory, where he wallowed in his insecurities, menacing no one but himself.

Gavin looked away, sniffing and shoving his hands in his jeans.

“I’m gonna make a difference in someone’s life, dad,” he muttered. A sour taste crept up the back of his throat. He rolled it around his tongue, and swallowed. “Just you wait.”

Garrett stepped forward, and looped his arm around his son’s shoulders. He pulled Gavin close, and ruffled his hair with a smile.

“I hope you do, Gavin. I hope you save that burning school bus, or stop a serial killer. Happiness’s all I’ve ever wanted for you, and your knucklehead brothers.” Garrett’s voice was sincere, and cut through Gavin’s dour mental cloud, like a brilliant chime. “I’ll be in the front row when they award you one of those tacky medals. I’ll even stick it on the fridge, your mother’s ‘aesthetic’ shit be damned.”

“You better, old man,” Gavin grinned, feeling a touch lighter.

The conversation took a turn into the mundane, but Gavin was left with an itch he couldn’t scratch. His father was right, of course. Gavin was afraid—terrified of leaving Detroit, fearful of the kind of failure that would follow if he departed his comfort zone. The dark maw of a midwestern black hole had Gavin in its grasp, and he knew he’d never escape the event horizon. He understood his piece of the puzzle, here, in the long-dead husk of a city. It would continue to rot—robots or not—
and Gavin Reed would prosper.

A big fish in a small pond.

—

The memory fractured into a billion motes of data, as broiling crimson rushed to fill the gaps. It was a tangible red, coating every part of Gavin’s mind and body in a metaphysical haze. This was nothing like the peaceful void of his first death. His nerves vibrated with a dangerous tension, threatening to snap under the weight of his seizing body. He curled into a ball, and gritted his teeth. He inhaled and exhaled, trying to use oxygen to purge the heat that was cooking his system alive. Gavin was scared, so scared, staring at the vast array of chaotic message boxes, cropping up along every mechanical cell.

**THIRIUM PUMP REGULATOR ERROR!! REATTACH COMPONENT: 1-283-0183 OR UNIT WILL SHUT DOWN IN — 1:30.**

The towering white text partially obscured RK900, as the android rolled Gavin onto his back. Piercing cyan eyes shredded the red curtain, anchoring Gavin in a violent sea of color and belligerent sound. Through everything, he could feel the android’s hands—a soothing blue light, shining across deep red water.

“Fuck, Nines,” Gavin wheezed, “this fuckin’ hurts. Dying the first time was nothing like this...shit.” The words only exacerbated the pain, but Gavin wasn’t content to die in silence.

He took a moment to reflect on the fact that he was likely the only person in the world to experience death as both a human and an android. He wasn’t dignified or stoic about it, like Nines. Gavin was afraid, and his fear was doing a great job of obscuring the words he needed to say with incoherent babble.

“God, I’m sorry, Nines. I guess I fucked up...again,” Gavin laughed, but the jostling motion wracked his body with pain. A heavy weight settled on either side of Gavin’s body, and he felt RK900’s hands cup his cheeks. It felt nice, and Gavin closed his eyes with a sad smile.

Gavin ignored the ever-scrolling error reports, RK900’s voice, and the far off sound of footsteps. It was beautiful, all of it—a chaotic electricity, cascading across ionized water—but it wasn’t how Gavin wanted to spend his final minutes. He wanted to return to the porch, with his father.

Gavin could see Garrett in the distance, sitting on the tacky blue lawn chair, feet propped up, while tinny beats played through the speakers of his ancient radio. It was the Garrett of Gavin’s youth, before son became estranged from father.

A loud impact jostled Gavin from his reverie, shattering the recreation of his childhood home. The cyborg opened his eyes, and felt familiar panic well up, in his chest.

Dan had RK900 pinned to the floor, watery eyes fixated on the weakened android.

“No!” Gavin cried, voice barely a whisper. “Dan, please!” Gavin tried to roll over, only half-successful. He felt a searing flood of Thirium pour from his gutted chest. It stung, like his tears. With a painful sob, Gavin reached out for RK900’s hand, and the android met his efforts, the tips of their fingers lightly brushing together.

RK900 returned Gavin’s fearful look with one of great determination.

In moments, RK900 was free of Dan, and the cyborg hit the wall with a sickening crunch. RK900...
stood, approaching Dan with a confident prowl. Gavin knew exactly what the android intended to do, but he didn’t want anyone to die, on his behalf.

THIRIUM PUMP REGULATOR ERROR!! REATTACH COMPONENT: 1-283-0183 OR UNIT WILL SHUT DOWN IN—0:59.

“Nines, wait!”

Gavin didn’t think RK900 could hear him, not over the red chaos. The echo of footsteps wracked Gavin’s body, sound registering as a physical blow, shattering the delicate medley of his destruction.

Two cultists materialized, and ripped RK900 away from Dan. The android growled, unwilling to go down without a fight. Even with the combined handicaps of the interference bracelet, and a near-death experience, RK900 managed to gracefully dodge a number of his assailants’ blows.

Distracted as he was, fending off the rabid cultists, RK900 failed to notice Dan regaining his bearings. Gavin’s eyes went wide, and he forced a burst of static from his mouth. In his weakened state, the sound came out much too soft, but it drew Dan’s watery blue gaze—it was full of nothing but pain and torment.

“D-Dan…?” Gavin rasped. He could feel the blue sludge in his veins, slowing in real time. It was thick and constricting, blue ropes in place of red. Gavin’s mortality was closing in. He’d never felt more insignificant in his life than he did laying on the floor, watching a countdown to his demise slowly tick away.

One of the cultists had a lucky break, and managed to land a solid blow against RK900’s chest, knocking the android back with a thud, against the marble wall. Gavin cried out, on the android’s behalf, and made a sad attempt to roll over on his side. He had a grand total of forty-five seconds left to live, but that was more than enough time to play banana peel to RK900’s attackers.

Dan moved to intercept the dying cyborg’s scheme. Gavin cursed, doubly so when Dan planted a foot squarely on his blue-spattered chest.

“Stop,” Dan barked. The word was callous, and full of incandescent static—a harsh, inhuman sound, fighting against a tidal wave. Gavin met Dan’s watery eyes, and shook Dan’s unwavering foot.

“Jesus, Dan—or Dennis, whatever the fuck you go by—let Nines go!” Gavin slammed his fist against Dan’s shin, over and over again, watching in fear as The android took a solid hit to the face. RK900 was in no state—mentally or physically—to maintain a solid defense.

“Nines, c’mon you asshole! You got this! I swear, if you let these fuckin’ dipshits get the better of you…” Gavin’s voice cut out, and his stricken body redirected the energy elsewhere. He thrashed, shaking and clawing at Dan. Hot Thirium spilled from his lips and nose, and specks went flying everywhere.

Dan removed his foot, and crouched next to Gavin’s heaving form. He studied Gavin, a hand trembling over Gavin’s face.

“I…” Dan started, face downturned with conflict. Gavin could taste the pain and strife in the other cyborg’s voice. The cogs inside Dan’s head were shrieking, and Gavin winced at the sight.

THIRIUM PUMP REGULATOR ERROR!! REATTACH COMPONENT: 1-283-0183 OR UNIT WILL SHUT DOWN IN — 0:25. MANUAL SHUTDOWN MAY PREVENT CATASTROPHIC
Gavin could feel his body shuddering to a halt, vital systems overheating, as his heart slowed. His mind was scattered, barely capable of processing external input. All his senses were reduced to a vibrant, crimson wall—furious reds, penetrating his machine soul.

His mind disconnected, as a large number ten scrolled across his vision. He had so many things he wanted to tell RK900, but they’d die along with this robotic husk—the sentiments of a broken man, locked away in a plastic tomb. He would never receive forgiveness, but he didn’t deserve it, either.

He’d wasted two shots at life.

As the counter rounded down to five, the chaos of Gavin’s soul shuddered to a halt.

—

Time and space converged into a singular point, and Gavin awoke, standing in the kitchen of his childhood home. It was vivid—real, even. The thrum of the air conditioner rattled the closet door, as it always had, in his youth.

He caught sight of his reflection, in the chrome facing of the old refrigerator—the ancient one his father wouldn’t let die to prove a point. Years had sloughed off of Gavin. He was a fresh-faced, idiotic, twenty-something kid, again.

Gavin caught sight of someone, through the small kitchen window.

His father sat, reclining on his favorite, tacky blue lawn chair. Scared, Gavin knocked on the window, unsure of anything at the moment. He had just been dying, but now he was home—some kind of paradox, or possibly the burst of final burst of his synthetic synapses, as they gasped their last.

Garrett Reed turned his head at the knocks, and held up a beer with a smile. It was an invitation—the same one Garrett had extended to Gavin since he was fifteen.

Gavin shuffled through the familiar, beige hallway, overwhelming in its overt, sixties flavor. The house, like much of the city, was perpetually trapped in a temporal loop. He passed the glass block wall, and could just barely make out a dark figure, lurking beyond the facade. Gavin placed his face against the thick glass, and squinted.

Dripping, black holes met Gavin’s curious gaze, and he stumbled back with a loud yelp, gripping his chest.

A laugh like a death rattle filtered through the wall, and his ghost spoke to him, for the first time.

[You just ran away, and handed Langford to Jarrett on a silver platter. What a fucking coward. You’d have let Nines die, too, if you weren’t so desperate for an excuse to put a barrel in your mouth.]

Its voice was acid, clawing the inside of Gavin’s head.

[It’s all just fuckin’ convenience to you, right? You could give two shits about anyone but yourself.]

The thing laughed, its rotten voice surrounding Gavin. He pressed his hands to his ears, and stumbled backwards with a cry.
[You always pretend be the hero—the number-one guy who bursts through the door, with his dick swinging, but you'll never amount to anything. Once a loser, always a loser.]

“You don’t fuckin’ know me, you freak!”

It did know Gavin. It was a part of him, after all—that little voice, deep inside, always urging him to take the easy way out, or succumb to his impulses. The only difference, now, was Gavin had given it a face: his own.

Tears filled Gavin’s eyes, and he took off running down the hall. He felt like a small child, again—lost and confused, unsure of his place in the world. The monster’s accusations of failure and selfishness followed him, until his crossed the threshold of the living room.

Gingerly, Gavin removed his hands from his ears, and glanced around the wood-paneled room. He spotted his mother’s prized, teal couch, and placed his hands against the back of it, to stabilize his breathing.

“Perhaps you can assist me, Gavin. The remote control appears to be missing, and I’m unable to interface with a device this old.”

Expectant, blue eyes looked up, from the far end of the couch. Gavin nearly jumped out of his skin at the sight of the android in his family home.

RK900’s face shifted at Gavin’s surprise.

“Is everything alright? Did your find what you were looking for, in the other room?” The android leaned over the back of the couch, and cocked his head. There was something altogether too laid back about RK900’s movements and expressions—a casual ease he’d never once displayed around Gavin, before. These were mannerisms bred from familiarity and acceptance—a level of comfort that went along with hand-holding, and cold Sundays, wasted watching movies, on the couch.

“I-I,” Gavin stuttered, nerves freezing him to the spot. Dream, death, or something in between, the finality of commitment squeezed Gavin’s guts.

“I gotta go talk to my dad.” Gavin awkwardly pointed to the sliding door, and made his way across the room. Bright, blue eyes followed his exit.

“I suppose I can wait, but my time is valuable. I only have so much more I’m willing to give.”

Gavin watched the android return to his frustrated motions, continually waving his hand at the incompatible television screen. Relieved, Gavin slid through a crack in the door, and stood in front of his father’s reclined form. A warmth blossomed in his chest, heavy and comfortable.

“Hey, Gav.” Garrett shot Gavin a soft smile, saluting his son with a beer bottle. Relief flushed Gavin, cool and blue. It danced across his body, washing away the violent red clinging to every one of his robotic synapses.

“Gettin’ old’s a scam, Gav. Learn from your old man, and don’t fuckin’ buy into it,” Garrett hissed as he stood, and stretched.

Heat prickled at the corners of Gavin’s eyes, and he instantly wiped away the tears. He brought his hand up to inspect them, and the liquid was clear, not blue. His mind and body felt lighter, at the sight, soothing his nerves.

Unleashing a cross between a laugh and a sob, Gavin rushed forward, and threw his arms around
his father.

“Dad,” Gavin sobbed, “I fucked up. I fucked up real bad.”

It was a relief, to defer to another—to feel open and vulnerable, when he’d spent so much of his adult life cloistered in a self-imposed shell. He could finally confess his faults, and seek guidance.

Gavin hadn’t seen his father in years, and it was one of his biggest regrets.

Garrett patted his son on the back, and took a deep breath.

“Look, we all fuck up. It’s what Reeds do—we talk big, and it comes back to bite us in the ass, but people forgive and forget, Gav.” Garrett slowly pulled away from his crying son, and turned Gavin’s head towards the fading skyline.

He studied the horizon, admiring the sight of the city. It was beautiful, in the depths of his mind, idealized and lacking all of its latent rust and decay.

Gavin shuffled his feet, and sighed.

“I just didn’t wanna be a failure, dad. Wanted to prove I was a man, y’know? Not some scared little bitch.” He paused, turning away from his father, and caught sight of his neighbor’s house, no longer the dilapidated pile of rotten wood from his childhood. “But I realized too late that I’ve been a scared little bitch, this whole time, and managed to hurt a lotta people along the way.”

A strong arm curled around Gavin, and pulled him close. Garrett prodded Gavin with his index finger.

“Maybe so, Gav, but acknowledging that, and doing nothing about it, makes you an even bigger bitch. Ain’t ever too late to start over, kid. You’re still young, and got plenty of room to grow.” Garrett gestured his thumb in the direction of the living room, where RK900 sat, frozen, glowering at the television.

“Have faith. Things’ll work out—they usually do.”

Gavin remained silent, curled in on the strong figure of his father—a rock in his otherwise chaotic mind. He wondered if the real Garrett Reed would have said these things to him, or if this was nothing more than a romanticized construct of the man. Ultimately, it didn’t matter either way. Gavin was seconds away from his demise. This whole proceeding was nothing more than his mind trying to rationalize its own end.

“Hey.” Garrett prodded Gavin with the back of his fingers. “Ease up, kid. It’s easy to get lost in there.” The older man prodded Gavin’s temple, right in the location of his missing LED.

“It’s not—I’m not…” Gavin huffed, batting away his father’s hand. “I’m dead, Dad, or will be once this dream is over. I fucked up my life, and god only knows how many more. The fuckin’ ghost is right…I’m just a sad sack of shit coward.”

Garrett paused, grey-green eyes lost in the decaying twilight. He turned to regard his grown child, a sad fondness twinkling in his eye. Garrett stood in front of Gavin, and placed his arms on Gavin’s shoulders.

“Gav,” Garrett started, voice soft, yet somehow still rigid. “It’s never too late to change—never. Your life is yours. Hell, you’ve always made that much clear.”
Garrett shook Gavin, staring straight into the depths of his son’s soul.

“You’re a product of yourself—defined by no one’s actions but your own, Gav. Be the fuckin’ man you’ve always wanted to be. Make your own goddamn future.”

Garrett grabbed his son’s wrist, and led him back into the house. RK900 didn’t look up from his spot on the couch, and through the narrow hallway, Gavin could make out the shadow of his ghost, leaning against the glass wall. Garrett ruffled Gavin’s hair with a lopsided grin.

“What’ll it be, Gav?”

Garrett Reed disappeared, leaving Gavin alone with the other two figures. The familiarity of his ghost tugged at him, with the force of a singularity, but Gavin found RK900’s soft grunts of frustration equally as compelling. He stood, vacillating between his two choices. It would be so easy to fall back into old habits, but RK900 offered him a chance at atonement.

Turning his back on the dripping shadow, Gavin plopped down onto the couch, next to the android. If he was going to die, he’d rather it be in the metaphysical arms of someone who cared about him.

The android looked up from his frustrated motions, and greeted Gavin with a wry smile. RK900 leaned over, and kissed Gavin, placing a strong hand over his human’s heart.

“I’m glad we could come to a mutual understanding.”

The television turned on, displaying the ongoing tussle in the halls of the Masonic temple. Reality flickered once, twice, and-

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“Gavin!”

Opening his eyes with a rabid gasp, Gavin craned his head in every direction. He was back on the cold, concrete floor, but the colors and numbers had all vanished. The warm weight of someone’s hand remained steady, on his chest, right where RK900 had placed it in his dream, but when he looked up, he met Dan’s unfocused, watery gaze.

A warm, viscous fluid dripped onto Gavin’s exposed midriff. He gulped, as guilt atomized his guts.

“L-Listen to me,” Dan pleaded, his voice fracturing violently, sound and static overwhelming his every vowel and consonant. Gavin could feel the physical strain in the cyborg’s pained actions, and recoiled, in awe of Dan’s will—so much greater than anything Gavin could hope to possess.

“Th-that piece of sh-shit, he he he—”

Dan’s voice looped in on itself—a broken computer speaker, trying to convey a final message as it fizzled out, forever. He shook his head, and pinched the bridge of his nose with a tight grimace.

“I d-don’t know who who I am, any-anymore, but I want that b-bastard dead. H-he d-did this to me, and I I I can’t be this anymore. I d-don’t...don’t want t-to be half a p-person.” Dan let out a growl that hedged on the crux of pain and anguish. “Y-you will kill him,” Dan asserted, squeezing Gavin’s cheeks with his dwindling strength. “You will kill him, and you will t-tell him th-th-the h-human, D-Dennis L-Langford, sends his regards f-f-from hell.”

Gavin nodded, weak as he was from his near-miss with death. Warm tears ran down his face, at the sight of an innocent man, broken and torn asunder.
It didn’t have to end this way, Dennis. I’m so fucking sorry.

With tremendous effort, Gavin sat up, and curled his arms around Dennis. He cradled the other cyborg, as his body continued to twitch and convulse. Gavin was vaguely aware of RK900’s struggle, somewhere in the distance, but he didn’t want Dennis to die cold and alone, a second time. He owed the guy that much, at least.

Less than a minute passed, before a nearly imperceptible “thank you” reached Gavin’s ears.

He squeezed Dennis tight, and placed the man’s body on the ground. Black scleras with singular pinpoints of blue stared up at Gavin, and he swallowed back the shame. Blue streaks fell from the darkened eyes, and Gavin couldn’t suppress a shiver at the sight. It bore an uncanny resemblance to Dennis’s human corpse, all those months ago—the beginning of this whole nightmare. Looking away, Gavin shut the cyborg’s eyelids with his fingers.

A growl of exertion tore Gavin from his thoughts, and he remembered the struggle in the periphery.

Shit, Nines!

Gavin looked up from his spot on the floor, and watched a tall, lanky cyborg pin RK900 against the wall. The other, shorter cultist woman, scrambled to tear away RK900’s shirt. Her goal was obvious, and Gavin wasn’t about to let RK900 suffer that fate twice in the same five minutes.

Still sluggish from his brush with death, Gavin fumbled his tackle against the taller cultist, but managed to knock the woman off balance. Gavin clawed her leg, and wrangled her, face down, onto the concrete. With a bit of finesse, he ripped off his Thirium-soaked Welcome to Detroit t-shirt, and used it to bind her hands.

“Why am I not surprised you somehow found an excuse to remove your shirt?”

RK900 tossed the other cultist next to Gavin’s captive, and rolling his eyes at the sight of Gavin’s bloodied nanite skin.

Gavin shot the android a hesitant smile, and flexed one of his arms.

“Guess you could say I’m gunnin’ for trouble.” The cyborg chuckled at himself, in a desperate bid to foster extra confidence.

RK900 remained silent, lost in thought.

Gavin lowered his arm, and turned to face the android. As usual, none of the words in the back of Gavin’s mind came close to the emotional gravitas required of the situation. He reached out a hand, wanting nothing more than to take RK900 into his arms, but the android’s cold aura stopped him dead in his tracks.

“I, uh, yeah,” Gavin mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck, “I’m...I’m...” Sorry really doesn’t cut it, under these circumstances. Gavin swallowed, and an acrid, yellow taste filled his mouth. “We should see if Connor made it into the lab.”

“Yes,” RK900 agreed, voice distant. The android turned to follow in his big brother’s footsteps, but Gavin couldn’t leave things like this.

He reached out, and took hold of RK900’s wrist.
You gotta turn this around, somehow. You can’t keep running. Don’t let that nasty, piece of shit ghost-thing win.

“Nines, I—uh, I mean,” Gavin stuttered, biting his lip. He met the android’s uncertain eyes. “Fuck, I know words can’t fix this, but I—that wasn’t me...I would never…” Gavin tripped over his words. Nothing that rose to the forefront of his mind came close to an acceptable apology.

“Gavin,” said RK900, steeling his voice, as he looked away, “we can discuss this later, at a more optimal time.” The android’s feeble attempts at diplomacy couldn’t mask the tremors in his voice, and Gavin’s stomach sank. “For now, we should move these two, and see if my brother succeeded in his simple task.”

RK900 grabbed one of the cultists, and dragged her towards the supply closet.

—

It didn’t take long for Gavin and RK900 to reach the sealed door of Jarrett’s miniature laboratory. The layout of the temple was easy enough to recall, and there had been no idle chat to distract Gavin—RK900 had remained silent throughout the entire journey.

They approached the door, and Gavin stood there, a moment, arms crossed over his chest.

“I mean, he ain’t out here, which’s gotta be a good sign, yeah?”

RK900 shrugged, and rapped his knuckles against the door. The sounds of muffled footsteps drew closer, and the door slid open, with ease.

Connor peeked out, features relaxing at the sight of Gavin and his brother, but when he got a closer look at the two of them, his content smile quickly drooped.

“I don’t know how to put this delicately—you two look terrible.” Connor stepped back from the door frame, eyes wide with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I am...adequate,” RK900 growled, as he shoved past his sibling. Connor turned, and quirked a questioning eyebrow at Gavin.

Gavin shook his head, and muttered, “fuck, it’s a long story, and we got way bigger fish to fry, right now.” He entered the room, and collapsed into a fancy roller chair. Cradling his head in his hands, he took a deep breath. He couldn’t dispute that it felt good to be alive, but he also couldn’t shake his odd dream. It had been equal parts encouraging and demoralizing, but Gavin supposed that was the nature of decisions.

The three men sat in a tense silence, as one of the RK twins clacked away on a keyboard. Gavin only looked up at the sound of a fist, slamming into the aluminum desk housing the computer. RK900 cursed, and punched the desk once more, leaving a solid dent in the metal.

“I don’t suppose you attempted Gavin’s poorly-conceived biometric hack on this machine?” RK900 sighed, laying both palms flat on the desk, and leaning against it for support. Gavin could taste the electric tension, crackling in the air. He looked from RK900’s subtle frown to Connor’s abject displeasure.

“Brother,” warned Connor, trying to meter his voice, in a bid for civility, “your attitude is not helpful, right now.” The older android’s body was wound tight, and he looked ready to tear his uncooperative sibling a new one.
Shaking his head, Gavin decided to test out his new resolve. *Had to happen sooner or later, right? The ‘something’ is finally giving, dad.*

“Connor,” Gavin sighed, placing a hand on the older brother’s shoulder, “fuckin’ lay off him. He...he’s been through some shit.” In a softer, weaker voice, Gavin added, “we, uh, both have.” He rubbed his bare arm, and stared at the concrete floor.

“Yes,” whispered RK900. “An understatement, but correct nonetheless.” He looked ruefully at the dent he’d left in the metal table, gingerly running his fingers along its contours. “I lost myself, for a moment. It will not happen again.”

Gavin stared at RK900, slack-jawed. He could only imagine how much ego the android must have set aside in order to admit he was wrong, to his brother, of all people.

“So, tincan,” Gavin quickly tried to deflect, “uh, *did* you manage to get into this thing?”

Connor shook his head. “There’s a password, in addition to the biometric lock,” he sighed. “Between RK900 and I, we could crack the system, but it could take hours, or even days, without our ability to interface.”

One step forward, two steps back. With a sigh, Gavin wandered deeper in the tiny lab, rooting around old drawers for anything useful in their predicament. He found nothing but old papers and pens, from the temple’s heyday as a gathering for a completely different cult. Jarrett must have learned his lesson about leaving android surgical tools in the open, after Gavin pulled his stunt in the abandoned hospital.

Gavin rifled through a second set of rusty flat files, and continued to turn up nothing useful. He slammed the last drawer shut with a loud huff, and smashed his fist into its surface, for good measure.

“Fuck!” Gavin exclaimed. “That piece of shit fuckin’ thinks he’s so smart!” He bashed the metal structure a couple more times, but halted when RK900 grabbed Gavin’s wrist. The android shook his head, and drew Gavin back to the center of the room.

“Errant property destruction will get us nowhere, we must settle on a plan of action,” RK900 urged, crossing his arms over his chest. “With the biometric trick, we maybe able to find an exit from the facility.”

“No,” Gavin huffed, “we can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Connor inquired, scratching the back of his head. “We could leave, and return with the aid of the DPD, and a full SWAT team.”

Gavin paused, looking from one twin to the next. He wasn’t sure how to explain a gut instinct to a pair of creatures who’d never experienced that type of sensation. Gavin understood, now—androids didn’t have instincts in the same way as humans. The awkward preconstruction bullshit was the closest thing they had, and neither brother could access it, at the moment.

“So,” Gavin ran his blue-soaked hand through his hair, “the capital *B* big problem we got here is that we can’t leave these brainwashed cyborg sons of bitches behind. Doomsday cults don’t have a great track record when it comes to *ceremonies.*” Gavin couldn’t know of Jarrett’s exact plans, but he was a homicide detective, and everything pointed to Jarrett reaching a peak escalatory moment.

“Are you referring to the Jonestown and Children of God incidents?” RK900 inquired, shifting his
weight from one leg to another. “You believe Case Jarrett would kill his constituency, despite his profile indicating a need for accumulated power? We are the only loose ends in his scheme—the ceremony is a likely a means to publicly execute us, not his cultists.”

“I agree with my brother,” Connor chimed in. “Jarrett’s demonstrated a clear interest in parading the success of his work, which requires the cultists to remain alive. I think he plans to move them to a new location and, in light of what we know, kill us to keep it buried, so he can unveil everything at his pace.”

Gavin crossed his arms with a huff, and glared at the two obstinate androids.

“You two bozos are underestimating this piece of shit for the umpteenth time. He’s got a trick up his sleeve, and we can’t set foot into that chamber until we know what it is.”

The cyborg idly nibbled on his finger, trying to reason his way through a plan, of some sort. He knew the two androids were itching to leave, but Gavin couldn’t shake the ominous feeling deep within his gut. Rubbing the back of his neck, he wandered over to the computer.

“There’s gotta be some way in here. This isn’t even the fucker’s real lab,” Gavin muttered, waking the sleeping monitor. The screen held a single box, green text on black.

_PASSWORD…?

Connor joined Gavin at the terminal.

“Presumably a string of unrelated alphanumeric characters, rotating at specific intervals. Jarrett’s an incredibly skilled programmer—it would be unlike him to use the sort of password one could guess.”

“No.” RK900’s cold voice carried across the room. Gavin and Connor turned to meet the younger android’s frowning face. “You’re assessment is incorrect, RK800. Jarrett has gone to ostentatious lengths to tease his work. He wants his research to be discovered—eventually.”

“Shit.” Gavin’s eyes widened.

The revelation hit him all at once. Jarrett knew his work would never reach any sort of trial phase. No corporate or governing body would step foot on that land mine—not with all the legal hubbub surrounding android rights. More likely than not, Jarrett planned for this hideout to be found. It would explain why the programmer went offsite to conduct his actual “work.”

“Nines is right!” Gavin yelled. “Jarrett wants this shit to be found, not buried. This computer is part of his stupid lore bullshit—just like the crime scenes.” The cyborg wracked his brain for a suitable password. It would have to relate back to Jarrett’s pseudo-philosophical circle jerk. Gavin turned away from the screen, and gestured at the twins. “Quick, gimme somethin’ that ties into all that religious whack job bullshit he references in his crime scenes!”

Gavin looked from one vaguely stunned brother to the next. Connor’s eyes opened wide, and RK900’s face took on the air of someone affronted.

“Hades,” RK900 rattled off, “infinity, soma, Styx. Would you like for me to continue? While I’m sure his password can be linked back to his crime scenes, I doubt it would be something so pedestrian.”

“No need to be a smartass,” Gavin grumbled, turning his attention towards the keyboard, “I’m agreeing with you, asshole.” He typed in the first few suggestions, but the green box merely
shuddered with each subsequent failure.

“Wait, Gavin, stop,” Connor said with urgency. The android placed a finger on the screen. A tiny number three rested in the top right hand corner. “This number has decreased with each of your attempts. We could be locked out permanently, if it reaches zero.”

“Fuck!” Gavin slammed his fist against the aluminum desk, leaving a dent alongside RK900’s earlier burst of anger. The cyborg furrowed his brow, and sighed. “Lemme try one more,” he muttered. C’mon you fucker.

Password:...?

> Icarus

Password incorrect

Password:...?

“Shit,” Gavin huffed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Please, Gavin,” Connor chided, gently removing the cyborg’s hands from the keyboard. “The final two attempts should be a group consensus.”

Sullen, Gavin nodded, and withdrew from the terminal. The three men bounced around a number of ideas—from things referencing Jarrett’s childhood, to obscure mythological figures. Eventually, they reached a troubled consensus.

“So,” Connor turned to Gavin and RK900, “the three of us are in agreement, then?” Gavin and RK900 nodded. The cyborg held his breath, fingers crossed for success.

Password:...?

> Delta

Connor paused, briefly, then pressed the enter button.

Password incorrect

Password:...?

Gavin groaned, running his hands along his face, and RK900 stormed to the back of the room.

“The two of you are certain this terminal is worth our efforts? Every moment we spend in here brings us closer to being discovered, if we haven’t been, already.”

“At bare minimum, it may grant us access to the security features of this facility,” Connor sighed, “which would give us a significant leg up.”

Gavin crouched into a ball, and tugged at his hair, ignoring the bickering siblings. The answer was there, and he knew he it—he had to know it. Jarrett wouldn’t create a puzzle without a solution—it went against the fucker’s entire MO.

God fucking dammit, what am I missing? What’s the final piece of this shitty riddle?

Gavin prided himself on his detective skills, but they’d somehow come up short, in their hour of need.
Maybe Nines is right. Maybe this shit isn't even worth it.

Gavin thought back to Case Jarrett’s monstrous face—his empty eyes and unkempt beard. Anger surged in the depths of the cyborg’s abdomen, and he couldn’t stop the slideshow. Gavin recalled the grainy video of Jarrett, standing on a rowboat in the middle of asphalt, brandishing an oar.

Wait… Gavin ran his hands down his face, dragging at his nanite skin. I’ve seen that picture before. The forum post drifted back into his forefront of his mind. The high ferryman, that fuckin’ rowboat—what was that weird-ass, anime username…?

“Charon.” Gavin whispered the word like a prayer on the wind. It was Jarrett’s username, and the title of the executable file that flashed before Gavin’s eyes, on the night of his death. “It’s Charon,” Gavin shouted. He leapt to his feet, and rushed over to the keyboard. Muttering under his breath, he shoved Connor out of the way, and typed the six letters.

>Charon

Gavin’s finger was poised over the enter button, but RK900 grabbed his wrist, again.

“Wait,” the android hissed, “this is a group decision, remember, Gavin? What gives you the impression Charon is any more valid than the other failed attempts?”

“Nines,” Gavin pleaded, craning his head into the android’s space, “you gotta trust me on this one.” After a few seconds, he added a desperate, “please. I know you and me got a fuck-ton of issues, but just gimme this chance.”

RK900 studied Gavin, slender fingers poised on his lips. He recognized that Gavin was asking for a whole lot more than a simple password, as Gavin knew he would. RK900 met Gavin’s eyes, and slackened his grip. There was an implicit message in his actions—one that untangled a few of the knots, twisting in Gavin’s mechanical stomach.

“Thank you, Nines.” Gavin’s voice was soft, devoid of the usual cocktail of insecurities. “Thank you for still believing in me.”

The vulnerability of it felt wrong. The act of opening even a sliver of the huge concrete wall, squirreling away his emotions from the rest of the world, frightened Gavin. Even under these circumstances, it felt like someone was scrubbing his skin with steel wool, but a start was a start. Gavin Reed had always thought vulnerability was a sign of weakness, but so too were his feelings for the android—so too was living his life in perpetual fear of change.

It’s giving, Dad, just like you always said it would.

“Do not displace my trust,” RK900 warned, grabbing Gavin’s chin. “The scope of my forgiveness is limited.” Grace and a warning—Gavin’s wasn’t the only wall beginning to crumble, under the weight of its own bullshit.

Gavin met the android’s stern gaze, and felt hopeful that RK900 might, in time, forgive him.

“You’re sure about this, Gavin?” Connor sidled up to the shirtless cyborg. “If this is incorrect, we will have to fall back on our escape plan.”

“Fuckin’ positive,” Gavin huffed. “I know this asshole, got it? I know what I’m doin’.” Gavin shook his head, and steadied the pounding of his blue heart—the same heart steadied by Dan’s sacrifice. If the password worked, Gavin hoped there’d be something of value on the other side. With Jarrett, there was no telling. It could just as easily be a trap—a bomb or a kill switch.
Gavin took a deep breath, and smashed the enter key.

The green box dissolved, and an equally sparse UI took its place. The whole affair reminded Gavin of his childhood days rooting around Command Prompt, in an effort to fix all the viruses his oldest brother “tested” on Gavin’s computer.

“See, fuckin’ told ya.” Gavin gestured to the screen with a crooked smile. “Now, one of you supercomputers needs to translate this nerd gibberish.” The cyborg stepped back, and left the two brothers to squabble over incoherent strings of code.

Gavin took another moment to look around the room, and shuddered at the sight of a severed cervical cable on the far table. He subconsciously rubbed his hand against the base of his neck.

“Anything good on there?” He called to the twins. “Y’know—useful addresses, a contact list, some dicks pics?”

RK900 stepped away from the machine.

“Jarrett gutted this terminal. There is little left, other than a few video logs. With minimal effort, I can uncover some of these restricted security functions. Jarrett failed to effectively hide them, likely because the authorities were meant to find this after he finished with this place.”

“What kinda videos?” Gavin inquired, stepping closer to the screen.

Without much fanfare, Connor pulled up one of the files. It borrowed much of the imagery and rhetoric of the video Jarrett played in the twins’ apartment building. A psychopathic fairytale, only this time, featuring more than just, Icarus. Cassandra, Gene, Dan, and others, whom Gavin only recognized from their staged corpses, flashed across the screen. A nineties infomercial, packaged inside an inverted take on The Brady Bunch—it made Gavin sick to his stomach.

“...But, ya know, the thing about immortality is that it transcends the body.” Case Jarrett propped himself up on the long oar of his cheap rowboat. Off-key music filled the speakers, and the camera zoomed in on Jarrett’s smiling face. He gestured to the ring of cyborgs surrounding his wooden boat. The screen jumped with a crude edit, and twenty-odd bodies lay in a circular shape across the floor—fuzzy, robotic echoes of once living people, mimicking a series of corpses.

Gavin’s eyes went wide at the sight.

“I told you fuckers!” He yelled, throwing his arms up in the air. God, he hated when he was right, sometimes.

“No, Gavin,” RK900 slapped the hysterical cyborg on the back of his head, “you have overlooked a key element in this message—the word transcends.”

Gavin stared at RK900, dumbfounded. Here was Jarrett’s doomsday manifesto, spelling out his plan plain as day, but RK900 still wanted to argue semantics.

“Nines,” Gavin started, glancing at Connor for help.

“No, Gavin,” RK900 sighed, “they are cyborgs, not humans. Case Jarrett plans to symbolically kill their bodies, but has their minds backed up elsewhere. He intends to cut his losses, and rebuild.”

The words reached Gavin’s ears, but he couldn’t process what RK900 was saying to him.

Jarrett had claimed he didn’t keep redundant copies of the cyborgs’ souls—it went against his
bizarre code. But he’s a psychopath—an unreliable narrator whose plans I fucked. Serial killers change parts of their MO all the time… This is his fallback—he’s evolving with the situation.

“I don’t give a fuck what his plans are, I’m not letting those people die!” Gavin prodded RK900 in the chest. RK900 opened his mouth to protest, but Gavin turned away, and cut the android off. “One of you needs to get that security shit up and running, ASAP.”

Shaking, Gavin wandered to the far end of the room, and poked the cervical cable. Wires spewed out of its severed end, in a violent bouquet of plastic and precious metals. It was so cold and impersonal, but somehow had the ability to transfer a machine’s soul. He frowned, gripping the thing tight.

If Jarret made copies of his victims, Gavin’s worst fear might be a reality. Another Gavin could be out there, with Jarrett, right now. Hell, a million Gavin’s could be walking the streets of Detroit, and he’d have no way of knowing.

If there were a hundred identical copies of me, with all of my memories and my feelings, would any of them really be me?

Am I really me?

Gavin felt his blue blood run cold, and suddenly wished he hadn’t woken up from that dream, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Bless U, Leaux

Thank you everyone for your continued support! You’re all beautiful people, and I extra appreciate any/all who’ve left me comments. ♡

Find me rolling all over my pile of Reed900 at @Vapedrone
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your support, everyone! We’re almost there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Duplicates…

Gavin studied the twin androids. He knew Connor and RK900 were unrelated. Machines didn’t have genes, or individual means of reproduction. They were only ‘twins’ by virtue of the fact that they were derived from the same blueprint, and chose to regard one another as brothers.

If they make another one of me, will he be the same? Is he gonna have my memories? How’s anyone gonna know I’m the real Gavin, if there are two of us?

The walls of Gavin’s mind were beginning to crumble. There was only so much one man could handle, and he’d left his limits in the dust, ages ago.

Blue eyes zeroed in on the cyborg, his silent meltdown far from unnoticed. He looked away. This wasn’t something RK900 could even begin to understand, and Gavin didn’t want the inevitable lecture.

Gavin ran a shaking hand through his hair with a sigh. There were so many variables at play, and an infinite number of potentially horrible outcomes. He felt trapped in a horrific choose your own adventure book, where he’d already fucked his chances at the one ‘good’ ending.

“What’re you lookin’ at?” Gavin snapped, at the quiet twins. “We don’t got all day!” He pointed to the computer.

A look of mild frustration crossed Connor’s face, as he approached the terminal. He placed a hand on the keyboard, but a pale arm shot out, to stop him from using the machine. Connor’s face screamed protest, but he didn’t fight RK900. The android was, at his core, driven to sublimate conflict, wherever possible.

Too bad his brother thrived on it.

“Gavin,” said RK900, voice loud and crystalline, “this is absurd. Stop applying your concept of human mortality to this situation. I don’t need my pre-construction suite to determine your plan is foolish.” The android took a step forward, grip tightening around his reluctant brother’s wrist.

Releasing Connor, RK900 rounded on Gavin. Blue eyes narrowed, the android bent his knees, leveling his face with the cyborg.

“Machines cannot die,” RK900 growled. “Our bodies are a sleeve for our minds, which can easily be slotted elsewhere. ‘Cyborgs’ are an illegal modification of a next-gen RK series, which means you play by our rules, not those of organics.”

Gavin stared at RK900, mouth agape in horror. A caustic sensation built in the back of his throat, the urge to dry heave overwhelming. RK900 was wrong. A mind wasn’t as simple as sloting a
memory card in the back of someone’s head. People were unique—a singular existence. The ability to copy their minds to another body cheapened that existence.

[What if it really is that simple? Does that make you less than you used to be?]

The cyborg’s already taxed heart rate increased to dangerous levels. He felt light-headed, in need of air, somehow. Gavin Reed wasn’t disposable.

[Aren’t you, though?]  

No, he wasn’t. He wanted to move beyond that line of thinking. Gavin wanted to listen to his father’s advice.

Swallowing a wad of viscous saliva, Gavin balled his fists. This wasn’t about him—it was about saving the twenty-odd victims corralled somewhere in this hellish temple.

[You sure about that?]

An invisible hand settled on Gavin’s upper arm.

[It was never about them. Never. Only you. Only your career. Only your desire to prove this walkin’ toaster wrong.]

Gavin felt the black tar hit his exposed shoulder—thick, with a slimy texture. God, he couldn’t wait to shove a cable in his head and find a way to delete this fucking monstrosity—brain damage be damned.

[You never learn…]

“You’re wrong!” Gavin shouted, catching the two androids off-guard. Deep teal washed across his heated cheeks, as he waved off his outburst, and met RK900’s icy gaze. “No, we’re saving these fucks, and that’s that! You heard that mouth-breather back at CyberLife: this shit’s proprietary. There’s no guarantee we’d be even be able to ‘transfer’ those people, and their blood would be on your hands.”

Gavin leaned in close, nose touching nose. God, even knowing RK900 was three seconds away from swearing off Gavin forever, the android’s body heat was intoxicating.

[If you give him what he wants, he may forgive you for trying to murder him, earlier.]

Desperation—a cry from the deepest part of Gavin, urging him to take the easy way out. Jesus Christ, when had his mind grown so loud?

RK900’s hand shot out, landing on Gavin’s neck. The android’s fingers were loose, barely caressing Gavin’s false, nanite skin. He could feel RK900’s plastic muscles tensing, wanting to flex and close around Gavin’s throat—to take control of the situation, just like in their early days, as partners. RK900’s finger tips grazed the column of Gavin’s neck, skimming all the way down to the glowing blue circle on his chest. The android tapped the spot only once, and leaned in, lips brushing Gavin’s ear.

“I should just accept that you never plan to learn from your past mistakes. Once a human, always a human.”

He turned to leave, but Gavin grabbed the android’s shirt, and held him in place. He mimicked RK900, slotting his face right above the android’s ear. Gavin’s bottom lip brushed the plastic
“Yeah?” Gavin sneered. “I don’t think that bothers you as much as you keep tryin’ to pretend it does, HAL. You *like* to watch me fail, so you can pick up the fuckin’ pieces. *Once a toaster, always a toaster.*”

Gavin maintained his grip on RK900 for another second, and released the android. RK900’s face twisted into an unreadable mask, and Gavin wanted to believe it stemmed from begrudging respect, but god only knew with the plastic menace.

Connor cleared his throat, and Gavin looked up, to see the older android uncomfortably rub his arm.

“As much as it pains me to say, Gavin’s not wrong. It would be in our best interest to help these people. There’s too much we don’t understand about their situation.”

RK900 scoffed, crossing his arms with a slight pout. Gavin didn’t bother to suppress his grin. It wasn’t everyday Connor agreed with him on anything, let alone in an argument against RK900.

One threatening glare from the younger twin soured Gavin’s elation, and he looked away, sulking.

Connor turned his attention to the computer, ignoring them. His fingers tapped away at the plastic keyboard, punctuating the ambient droning of the air conditioner with staccato clicks. RK900’s piercing eyes never left Gavin, who didn’t know what to make of the android, or his murderous gaze.

“Bad news,” Connor intoned. “This machine has zero network capability. It’s not just old—it lacks the requisite hardware.” The android’s shoulders slumped downwards, and Gavin cursed softly under his breath.

“He’s gotta have something somewhere,” Gavin shouted, knocking the roller chair across the room. “Think about it! The piece of shit was able to get into your apartment’s systems, and knock out service in the area.”

“As I mentioned before, the network outage was caused by a dampener,” RK900 snapped. He stabilized the spinning chair, and glared at the disheveled cyborg. “One of a magnitude far too large to carry. I surmise it’s located in one of his vehicles. Dampeners are easy to disable—these localized units, however,” RK900 pointed to his bracelet, “are not.”

“Right, so even if we break the shitty mega-router thing, we’re still SOL. Fuck!” Gavin aimed a kick at the clunky grey tower, housing the delicate electronics of the old computer. The screen glitched into an array of rainbow boxes, briefly, then returned to its sparse user interface.

RK900 swiftly grabbed Gavin by the bicep, dragging him away from the sensitive electronics.

“*Behave, Gavin,*” RK900 hissed, blue eyes filled with an odd mixture of desperation and malice. Gavin fought against the android’s authoritative tone, and tried to jerk away his arm with a pout. In response, he was tossed, like a rag doll, into Jarrett’s chair. RK900 placed a foot on the small strip of visible leather between Gavin’s legs. The cyborg jumped with a start, caged as he was, under the tall, imposing android.

“Listen to me,” RK900 grabbed Gavin’s chin, directing the cyborg’s gaze, “I think we both know your cowardly self did not replace my broken regulator with your own, just so the three of us could submit to this pitiful human. I will not lose—this case, my brother, or you—simply because you have chosen now to forfeit hope. *We* will prevail, if only because you and I have *matters* to
discuss.” RK900 stared down Gavin and, satisfied his message was heard, shook Gavin’s head up and down.

Gavin swallowed, and RK900 returned to his brother’s side to discuss possible strategies. The cyborg rubbed his face, his skin superheated. He wasn’t sure if he should interpret RK900’s words as a promise, a threat, or both.

“G-Got anything else on that piece of junk?” Gavin huffed, stumbling to his feet. He avoided the wry smile on Connor’s face, and glanced at the monitor, hopelessly lost at the sight of command prompts, clustered on the side of the screen. Computer shit was all Greek, to him, and becoming a machine hadn’t fixed that particular problem. A real shame.

“I wasn’t able to recover much, thanks to Jarrett’s hasty attempt to reformat this machine.” Connor typed in a few commands, bit his lower lip, and pressed the enter key. “But I have limited access to some kind of PA system, and a rudimentary CCTV input, that feeds to an analog device.”

Gavin snapped to attention.

“Hang on,” he muttered, “that asshat used to play that fuckin’ robot-breaking sound over the intercom. Do you think…?”

Connor stared at Gavin, cocking his head to the side ever so slightly. With a renewed sense of urgency, he entered a few more commands.

“There’s an audio file, here. It’s dated long before the video manifesto—months, in fact—though I question the value of saving something that can cripple us,” hummed the frustrated android.

“Please, brother. All this time spent around humans has begun to take its toll, on you,” RK900 scoffed, injecting his two cents into the conversation. “Need I remind you, we are not the only RK units in the building—we can use this to turn the odds in our favor.”

Connor turned to look over his shoulder, glare laser-focused on his younger sibling.

“I think the time you’ve spent in detective Reed’s company has taken a toll on you too—though, maybe not in the ways you imagined.”

RK900 stared at Connor, wide-eyed. Gavin noted the slight dusting of teal on the livid android’s cheeks, but chose to say nothing. Whatever this was, it was a family matter between the twins, and he didn’t want to set foot on that minefield.

“Any-fucking-ways,” Gavin inserted himself between the displeased androids, “we can just blare that sound, and stop whatever he has planned. No working cyborgs, no kool-aid.”

A pair of identical faces simply stared at Gavin, annoyed. The cyborg huffed, angry that his joke somehow sailed over their heads.

“Goddammit,” Gavin scowled, “just pull up the fucking cameras, or whatever.” Under his breath, he added, “’guess it would’ve killed those neckbearded jackasses at CyberLife to give their mannequins a sense of humor.” RK900 scoffed, and Gavin’s face contorted into a pout.

Within seconds, multiple camera feeds populated the computer screen. Most were black, indicating the camera was either damaged or had been removed, but a few displayed grainy, sepia-toned feeds of rooms and hallways.

“There!” Gavin shouted, slapping his finger against an image in the center of the screen. It was the
Masonic sanctuary—a room full of vaulted ceilings and monochromatic concrete tiles. At the very edge of the picture, he caught sight of Jarrett’s trophy wall, where the last remaining vestige of Gavin’s human body hung, trapped in time. He swallowed down a ball of anxiety at the sight.

Between the long-abandoned pews, Gavin’s cyborg brethren stood frozen, in a perfect circular formation. Their elongated shadows stretched across each other, casting half their bodies in darkness. It was an eerie, genuinely off-putting sight—twenty-six once-dead adults, lost to time, locked in statuesque circle. At the head of the room, Gavin saw Case Jarrett—serial killer, cult leader, and resident mouth-breather—lounging on the gilded Masonic throne, legs hanging over the side of century-old craftsmanship. The human’s eyes were drawn to an object in his hands, but Gavin couldn’t make out what it was.

The cyborg turned to the twins, and snapped, “hey, if the two of you are done dickin’ around, our asshole friend’s got something.” Gavin tapped the screen with his knuckle, sending a rainbow halo reverberating across the pixels.

The two androids shouldered one another until they both found a spot in front of the screen. With a click of the mouse, the screen filled with a low-quality image, drenched in grainy, warm grey tones.

“A communication device,” RK900 muttered, blue eyes locked on the screen. “This would explain how he attained control of the apartment’s systems.”

“Wait, are you sayin’ that’s a fuckin’ phone? Bullshit.” Gavin crossed his arms over his chest, and glared at RK900. “If that’s a phone, how’s this piece of shit gettin’ service?”

“Well.” RK900 faced Gavin, expression maintaining all the hospitality of dry ice. “As you so eloquently put it before: he’s a fucking hacker.”

—

Gavin rounded the corner, and proceeded down the long hallway connecting the temple’s sanctuary to the rest of the ornate building. The rigid angles of Masonic insignia bore down on him, threatening to fall from the elaborate architecture, and skewer him where he walked. Gavin rubbed his bare arms, feeling a chill that didn’t—and would never—exist. The obnoxious hallucination was becoming too real, but Gavin had neither the time nor energy to devote to it.

The ploy he’d helped the twins concoct was more in-line with an episode of MacGuyver than an actual solution, but Gavin needed to keep his faculties in check. One slip up had the potential to ruin a lot of lives—not just the people trapped in the Masonic Temple.

“Machines cannot die…”

“Bullshit,” Gavin muttered under his breath, to drown out the phantom sound of ink-covered feet, behind him. “You looked every bit like you were about to piss yourself, Nines.”

Gavin knew androids could die. He’d put enough bullets in their head through the years to test that theory. He had been human once, and dying was a familiar concept. It was the idea of a back-up Gavin that had him on edge. There was no human analog for that one.

“Fuck,” he hissed under his breath, slowing his pace as he drew closer to the grandiose doors spearheading the sanctuary. “I’ll bust every single one of that nerd’s labs by hand, if I have to.” If he survived, of course. RK900 could go on about android data resilience for a century, but it wouldn’t stop Gavin from shoving his head in a microwave, if he ended up in a body that wasn’t
Gavin stood before the sanctuary’s massive red doors, placing a hand along the lines of a carved Delta. He rubbed his thumb against the rough wood, and took a deep breath.

“Now or never, Gav,” he muttered, gripping the smooth, marbled handle of the door. Gavin tugged, and the door creaked open with ease. A thick line of yellowed light poured into the chamber, highlighting the frozen cultists. They didn’t look up, their eyes fixated on the checkered floor, but a caustic voice called to Gavin.

“Icarus!”

Case Jarrett stood, asymmetrical robes spilling over the sides of the gilded throne. Gavin couldn’t decide if he wanted to murder the fucker on the spot, or just shove him in a locker. The only real option on the table was for him to keep his mouth shut, and play along with the psychopath’s game, which was proving more difficult with every passing second.

“Y’know, I was beginning to worry about cha.”

Gavin stood, his long shadow bisecting the length of the long room. It crawled up Jarrett’s side, a thick shroud, covering the planes of his human form in purple darkness. Jarrett’s hollow eyes betrayed his abject distrust and, despite his geeky appearance, his commanding aura dominated with the room.

It pissed Gavin off to no end.

“Fuck you, asshole!” He snarled, muscles trembling, even as he fought the urge to charge at the human. Only half-faking a sob, Gavin fell to his knees, and forced a few tears.

Don’t give him what he wants, Gav. You gotta outsmart him.

Gavin waited, artificial lungs locked in disuse. His blue heart skipped a beat with each soft patter of Case Jarrett’s footsteps, drawing closer. Jarrett took his sweet time, strutting the length of the long chamber, never altering his leisurely pace. He had all the time in the world—this world he’d manufactured for himself.

After an eternity, Jarrett came to a stop, and knelt next to Gavin. The cyborg didn’t look at the human, choosing instead to focus on the checkerboard pattern of the floor. The malicious energy of Jarrett’s smile bored into the side of Gavin’s head, making him impossible to ignore.

“I know ya feel like you’ve done a bad thing, Icarus—I really do,” Jarrett whispered, in a hushed tone, placing a thick hand on the bare skin of Gavin’s shoulder. “But ya helped that lil’ fella, alright? He needed to be put outta his misery.”

The human rubbed soothing circles along Gavin’s back, making his skin crawl—the nanites shifting, in response to his discomfort

His code never shoulda evolved in the first place,” Jarrett sighed. The melodic ebb and flow of his voice felt false—faker sympathy than almost anything Gavin had ever heard in his life. “But rest assured, he didn’t love ya, Detective. He never will—sorry, lil’ slip a’ the tongue there—would have.” Jarrett chuckled, and something twisted deep in Gavin’s gut. The cyborg turned to face the monster, meeting Jarrett’s vacuous smile with a forlorn glare.

Jarrett pulled Gavin into a side-hug, similar to the ones his father gave him, all those years ago. Gavin choked back the sensation building at the back of his throat, and gritted his teeth. Any
outburst, no matter how small, had the potential to backfire in the worst way.

“RK900s can’t feel love—or anything else, for that matter. He was just exploitin’ your feelings for his own gain, Detective.” Jarrett gave Gavin a gentle shake, and the cyborg tensed, his muscles trying to burst through his skin. “I personally oversaw the mental architecture on that project. I can assure ya, ‘deviant’ or no, he was lyin’ to ya.”

Jarrett shot Gavin a grin, his sharp canines glistening in the hazy, yellow light. He was hiding something, and Gavin’s cop intuition was screaming.

“I know ya don’t believe me, right now,” said Jarrett, standing up, with his hands on his hips, “and that’s just fine. Heartbreak’s a hard pill to swallow, but we got more important matters to handle.” Jarrett stared at Gavin, and asked, “where’re your siblings, Icarus?”

Gavin froze. Red tethers erupted from the crevices of his psyche, twisting and coiling around his electronic vocal chords. Panicking, Gavin considered every available kernel of truth, and how he could present them in the least implicating way possible.

“I-I,” Gavin coughed, fighting against Jarrett’s order. *Shit! Just fuckin’ say something, or the asshole’ll dig deeper.* “They’re tied up, in a closet.” Gavin’s voice was a flat, monotone affair that sounded nothing like him, but provided only enough information to satisfy the question, nothing more.

“Now, Icarus,” Jarrett sighed, his face contorted into a frown, “why would ya go and do somethin’ like that?” The programmer crossed his arms over his chest.

Gavin’s nearly choked, and the sensation of non-existent cold sweat crawled across his body. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* Gavin’s heart pounded out of his chest, reaching near-critical output, according to the red numbers scrolling along the back of his mind. The ropes tightened on his throat, squeezing him into compliance with Jarrett’s command.

“Android—” Gavin croaked, fighting against the thick, red ropes. “Dan saved…” Gavin hiccuped, reeling against the human’s command. “He…died.” Gavin’s voice was choppy, at war with itself.

A hand grabbed hold of Gavin’s hair, and pulled his face up to look at Case Jarrett. The human was doing a poor job of concealing his anger, but kept his voice level.

“Now, I’m gonna need ya to make more sense than that, Ic—”

“Dan tried to save...android,” Gavin spat, before Jarrett could finish the trigger word. Without its reinforcement, Gavin felt the ropes slacken, enough for him to twist the truth. “Dan died. I… they… Nines…” A sob wracked Gavin’s body at the vivid memory of Langford’s eyes, turning black for the last time. “N-Nines… god, please…why…?”

Gavin’s voice was heady with static as he relived the moment he’d crushed the android’s regulator, its thin walls, crumpling like an aluminum can. He reflexively glanced at his hand. Melancholy blue ran the length of his arm, glistening on his skin. Even knowing RK900 was still alive, Gavin wanted to make the stuff disappear. It hurt to remember.

Jarrett unclasped his fingers from Gavin’s wild hair, and crossed his arms. The human shifted his weight from one leg to the other, lost in a calculation. Gavin felt insignificant, coiled on the ground, sobbing in front of a emotionless monster. Jarrett would never know what it meant to feel vulnerable—he was neurologically incapable of it.

“Stand, Icarus.”
Gavin complied, with minimal objection to the red, snaking its way through his body. Jarrett’s eyes were hard—cruel and calculating. They lingered on Gavin, flitting from one blue stain to the next. Without speaking, Jarrett removed his robe, revealing the vintage, _BioShock: Redux_ t-shirt underneath. He draped the fabric over Gavin, and the cyborg bit his tongue, hard enough to draw a spurt of blue.

_Thirium sample belongs to Research and Development transhumanist architectural concept, Gavin Reed. Please contact [redacted] for more information..._

Just what Gavin needed: more reminders. Reminders of who he wasn’t, anymore—who his body belonged to, and how far he’d fallen from what his life had been, prior to this mess.

_Soon, Gav, soon._

The cyborg met Jarrett’s eye, unable to cloak his murderous intentions any longer.

“Once I get this lil’ setback under control, we can take care of the other obsolete android.” A twisted smile worked its way across Jarrett’s round face, and he patted Gavin on the back, again. “For now, I need ya to take that spot next to Gene, so we can start.”

Red strands invading his every molecule, Gavin took his place in the circle, next to a frozen Gene. He glanced around, noting all the familiar faces, including a few cold case victims from a year prior. Jarrett really _had_ been busy.

The cyborgs kept their eyes trained on the floor—complacent. The poor bastards had no idea there was a storm preparing to wipe them away, but it meant little when they knew nothing of who they’d once been. Lost identities, lost purpose. Jarrett’s tampering left them devoid of a meaningful existence—casualties of humanity’s attempt to carve itself a place in a world of burgeoning technologies.

Gavin tensed, electricity running across his nerves. Those were considerations for someone far smarter than himself. Right now, Gavin’s job was to save these people, and the twins.

_Nines better be done with his spy shit. This sicko’s not playing around,_ Gavin thought, watching Jarrett purposefully strut into the center of the circle. The human placed his hands on his hips, admiring each of the individual cyborgs with a broad smile.

“My family!” Case Jarrett beamed, throwing his arms into the air. “We’ve all been through quite the journey together, haven’t we?” His melodic tenor filled the massive sanctuary. Gavin’s skin crawled, and he felt absent eyes leering at him—myriad ghosts, leaning against the old, oaken pews, with menacing smiles.

“Today,” Jarrett continued, “we take the next step.”

The statuesque cyborgs finally shuddered awake, their smooth movements causing Gavin to jump. He’d all but forgotten the twenty-six sardine cans were alive. Gavin stared at their vacant smiles, and wondered what would happen to them if he succeeded in subduing Case Jarrett. Would they accept the truth, or let it tear them apart?

_You didn’t sign up for this; they did. It’ll be easier for them._

Gavin chewed his bottom lip, wishing he could believe his own thoughts.

“Society has proven, once more, it isn’t ready for us yet, my brothers and sisters. It doesn’t understand that ya rejected your diseased human bodies to become immortal gods!” Jarrett winked
at his enraptured followers, hanging on his every word. “Today though, I’m sad to say, we’ve been betrayed by one of our own.”

Jarrett stared Gavin down, and twenty-six pairs of eyes focused on him. A pit formed in Gavin’s gut and, for the first time since stepping foot in the sanctuary, the cyborg questioned whether he would leave this place in one piece, or hundreds.

“But, as a family, we can’t hold that against ‘im,” Jarrett boomed, with a frown. The cultists nodded in unison. “He’s just a confused lil’ fella, who let his heart get the best of him.” He turned to Gavin, lips curling. “I believe in forgiveness, and I don’t want any of ya to hold this against your brother.”

Gavin could neither describe nor replicate the squeak he let out, as twenty-six people crushed him, in a grotesque, forced group-hug. His ghostly audience laughed, falling to the ground in glee, as Gavin clawed for air. He couldn’t see anything, squashed between bodies of every size and shape.

When the cultists withdrew, Gavin collapsed to the floor, and Jarrett approached him. The programmer lifted Gavin’s chin.

“Ya hurt us, Icarus—ya hurt me—but I understand how crafty those golems can be. We missed ya, Gavin.” Jarrett smiled. “Welcome home.” It had all the warmth and joy of a collapsing star.

Gavin’s face contorted into rage, at the sheer hubris of the thing standing in front of him.

“You’re pathetic,” Gavin spat, unable to control his emotions, “a gross little man, who tortures others to feel important about himself!”

Tears burned in the corners of Gavin’s eyes. He knew better than anyone that he was playing into the psychopath’s bullshit, but couldn’t stop the deluge pouring from his mouth. Gavin wasn’t RK900, or Connor, he was just a man—an impulsive, emotionally stunted, ex-human being.

“You’ll get what’s fucking coming to you, Jarrett—mark my words,” Gavin hissed, feeling the hot burn of tears, as they flowed down his cheeks. ‘Bad guys don’t fuckin’ win. Eventually, you’re gonna fuck up, and they’ll throw your ass where it belongs!”

Jarrett’s smile broadened, but never touched his bleak eyes. He leaned in close, with a whisper.

“Oh, and you’re a real bastion a’ goodness aren’tcha, Detective? The only difference between you an’ me, is that I’m not afraid to embrace who I really am inside.”

Rooted to the spot, Gavin stared at the maniac in horror, as Case Jarrett pulled away. The programmer returned his attention to the collective at large, and continued his self-important speech.

“You’re all here ‘cause life dealt ya an unfair hand, and I’m gonna personally ensure it can’t do that again. We’re gonna retreat, and rebuild. We’re all gonna take a nap, and when ya wake up, you’ll be in a new home, where the outside can never touch ya.”

The room erupted in applause nanite skin hitting nanite skin. Even the ghosts joined the chorus—dead meat squelching and oozing with black ink. Gavin shrank further to the floor, running his hands through his hair with a slight whimper.

[He’ll kill them—the fuckin’ toasters…]

Gavin’s personal ghost curled into a ball next to him, empty sockets focused on its prey. Without
thinking, Gavin mouthed the word *no* at the creature, livid it would dare approach him at such a crucial moment.

“I’ll end this sad fuck, and then I’m coming for you,” Gavin growled. The sharp, rhythmic slap of synthetic skin drowned out the sound of the cyborg reprimanding himself.

Gavin’s eyes roved around the room, looking for any sign of RK900.

*Did he leave, just like he said he was gonna? Motherfucker was pissed as hell, when I left…*

The cyborg’s heart pounded at the thought. He didn’t want to think RK900 could be so cruel, though there was mountains of evidence to the contrary.

Jarrett spun around, meeting the eager eyes of his cultists.

“Brothers and sisters,” he declared in a booming voice, “it’s time for you to entrust me, The High Ferryman, with your precious souls, as I take you down river, once more!”

Another round of applause filled the hollow chamber, whoops and cheers echoing off the never ending vaults of the ornate ceiling.

“No!” Gavin blurted, eyes wide with fear. “I’m not gonna let you kill these people a second time, you psychotic-”

A swift kick to Gavin’s face shut him up. Groaning, the cyborg rolled onto his back, clutching his nose. Blue warmth blossomed across his skin, the battery acid taste coating his tongue. A solid foot planted on top of his partially exposed pectoral muscles.

“That’s enough outta you, Icarus.” Jarrett leaned his weight onto the cyborg, and a horrible discomfort twisted out from the point of contact. A few mild errors crawled along his spine, recommending he avoid collisions in sensitive areas.

“I wantcha to understand, my lost lil’ lamb,” Jarrett cooed, increasing the pressure of his foot, eliciting a cry from Gavin, “I would *never* do anything to hurt my family. *Never.*” The human remained immobile, even as he turned to address the crowd at large. “Everything I’ve done, I’ve done in service of giving my family the best possible life. I’m not some heartless monster who would harm those I love!”

Gavin gritted his teeth, and grabbed the human’s leg, in a bid to alleviate some of the pressure on his chest. He wasn’t RK900, and doubted his body could take the full weight of a human stepping on him.

“I s’pose there’s a problem child in every family.” Jarrett glowered at the cyborg, beneath him. “But we’ll sort that out later, when I’ve got a bit more time.”

He eased off Gavin, enough to silence the internal chorus of klaxons, and placed a hand on his own chest.

“Now.” Jarrett turned to his devotees. “It’s time, my brothers and sisters. It’s time to reject this world, again, and enter a newer, better one.”

“N-no,” Gavin wheezed, “please…” He clamped his hands around Jarrett’s leg, but under the influence of his verbal control, Gavin was far too weak to remove the sturdy man.

“My family!” All of the cyborgs snapped to attention, heads turning in unison to face their leader.
“Remove the elixir cradle in your chests, and gently place them on the floor, so I may carry your essence downstream.” The human’s words were soft, but firm, with a paternal nuance in the melodic vowels.

The moment was neither as boisterous nor dramatic as Gavin anticipated—it was quite intimate in its horror. Each of the cyborgs silently struggled to grasp their Thirium pump regulators, and slide them out of their bodies. The red threads of Jarrett’s command compelled Gavin to follow suit, but his regulator was hidden under a large foot.

“Not you, Icarus,” Jarrett whispered, digging his heel into the glowing circle. “You and I still have a rabbit to flush out of hiding.”

Gavin’s hand ceased its subconscious crawl towards his chest, and he was instead left with the sight of twenty-six cyborgs, unwittingly ending their own lives in one of the most terrifying ways possible.

“Stop!” Gavin shouted, grasping for a nearby cultist, as her hand slipped under her shirt, in search for its target. “Don’t fuckin’ do it! It’ll kill you, dammit.”

A loud sound blared, filling the sanctuary with a familiar discord.

Gavin blinked, and time slowed, creating brilliant dilations of shape and color, as he looked around the room. Bodies slowly collapsed around him. Black and white brushstrokes, with pinpricks of blue and red, against a gilded backdrop—a horrific painting. Gavin fought to block out the sound, to no avail.

Seconds dragged into hours, and, above Gavin, Case Jarrett looked over his shoulder, the human’s body leaving a trail of movements. The time lapse made Jarrett look every bit like the cartoon character he was, his spastic motions acting as keyframes locked in space.

Jarrett shouted, but Gavin’s brain couldn’t process the human’s words over the tone running interference on his electronic brain matter. The cretin’s face was a cubist mishmash of color and glitched shapes, but Gavin could still make out the newly minted surprise in the man’s eyes.

More yells rang out from the human, and he flapped his arms, gesturing to an event outside of Gavin’s vision. Groaning, Gavin tried to crane his neck. In the periphery of his sight, he saw a black and grey blur. It carved a line through the room, its harsh geometry colliding with the vile human pinning Gavin to the floor.

A gray rhombus slammed into the side of Jarrett, knocking the human off of Gavin. Gavin yelped, as muffled pain inched across his body. Through squinted eyes, he watched Jarrett stumble, and take another, seemingly softer, blow to the head. Jarrett fell, in a prolonged blur of color and sound, collapsing on the floor, next to Gavin.

Gavin met Jarrett’s dark, brown eyes, but quickly averted his gaze. It was too much, staring into an abyss with no end. The light of a soul was all but absent from the human.

The sound stopped, and Gavin blinked a few times, as his mind caught up with reality. Whatever the sonic bullshit was that Jarrett, Kamski, and friends cooked up in their lab years ago, it was ten times trippier than any hallucinogen Gavin had ever taken. He rolled over with a groan, and glanced to his left.

RK900 stood, foot atop Case Jarrett, his broad chest heaving. The android clung to an odd, white apparatus, as a single drop of red dripped down the side of it, onto the white concrete.
“Nines…?” Gavin muttered, groggily, trying to catch the android’s attention, but RK900 ignored him. With some effort, Gavin stumbled onto his hands and knees, and gasped.

_The cultists!

He looked around, and only saw a few who’d managed to remove their regulator. Tripping slightly, Gavin tended to them, reinserting the essential biocomponent. He only hoped he wasn’t too late.

“Nines, help me out, here!” Gavin rushed from one cyborg to the next, checking their chests, and binding their hands. “I can’t fix all of these SOBs by myself, you fucker!”

The android didn’t acknowledge Gavin, choosing instead to rifle through Jarrett’s robes. The human’s brown eyes were closed, now. He was either unconscious or dead, and Gavin hoped to god it was the former.

“Yo, Nines, he’s out fuckin’ cold.”

Gavin grabbed RK900’s wrist, and the android finally turned to look at him. RK900 cocked his head to the side, and pointed to his ear. Gavin’s eyes opened, and he realized how the android attacked Jarrett, while the tone was playing.

“Oh…” the cyborg muttered, “right.” He returned his attention to the cultists, with the android’s help. The two made quick work of the dazed cyborgs, and their leader.

RK900 fitted a gag over Case Jarrett’s mouth, and forced the human’s limp body into an upright sitting position. Gavin ran his hands along Jarrett’s pockets, until he felt the outline of hard object. He dipped a hand into the back of the man’s jeans, and withdrew a small tablet. It seemed a moot point, given they’d already subdued the fucker, but back-up couldn’t hurt.

A hand tugged on the sleeve of Gavin’s borrowed robe, and he glanced into troubled cyan eyes. The android held out two identical objects, in his palm, and turned his head, pointing to a spot just under his ear. Gavin fumbled with the biocomponents, and ran his finger along RK900’s nanite skin, until he found a depression. After a couple of tries, he managed to reinsert both of them.

Gavin and RK900 sat in silence, surrounded by the groans and mild struggles of bound cultists.

“Fuck,” Gavin exclaimed, running his hand through his disheveled hair. “Fuck, Nines, we did it! We motherfuckin’ did it!” For the first time in weeks, maybe months, Gavin’s chest filled with pure elation.

Without thinking, he grabbed the android, pulling RK900 into a tight embrace. Hesitant arms snaked across Gavin’s back, and he blinked, realizing what he’d just done. Sniffing, the cyborg pulled away from RK900, assured his face was more blush than skin, at that point.

“I, uh, yeah. Sorry ‘bout that, I just got kinda excited.”

The solid weight of an arm snaked over Gavin’s shoulder, pulling the cyborg against the hard lines of the android’s body. Face still coated in a furious blush, Gavin glanced up at a smirking RK900.

“Please stop acting as if you and I have never embraced—it is embarrassing to both of us, at this point, Gavin.” RK900 said, letting his hand idly toy with the soft fabric of Case Jarrett’s cloak. The android looked at Gavin, leaning in close, an unspoken expectation in his eyes, and Gavin froze.

_Jesus, all this motherfucker does is watch movies. He wants his action hero kiss, doesn’t he?_
Gavin was equally trapped between wanting to throw himself at the android, and wanting to remind RK900 that they weren’t a ‘thing,’ and more importantly, they were in the middle of a war zone. He gulped, RK900’s face less than an inch from his own. Unable to breathe, Gavin made up his mind, and—

A breathy, “hey,” tore them both out of the moment, and they looked back, meeting the wild gaze of Connor. He joined them, beaming at Gavin, his smile faltering a tad as he locked eyes with RK900.

“Oh…” Connor, rubbed the back of his head, “I...uh, sorry, brother.”

RK900 grumbled something under his breath, which didn’t sound like any human language Gavin had ever heard. He was halfway relieved, and halfway wanted to strangle Connor for the cockblock.

A muffled cough drew the attention of the twins and Gavin, and the trio stared at Case Jarrett. Gavin and RK900 broke apart, encroaching on the weakened human.

“Toldja you’d lose in the end, dipshit.” Gavin grinned, crossing his arms over his chest. The words felt hollow on his lips. The reality of the situation dawning on him, now that the afterglow of success had worn thin.

Gavin Reed was legally dead—nothing more than a digital approximation of the man he’d once been. Jarrett had nearly succeeded in taking everything from Gavin, including RK900, making the cyborg question who’d really come out on top. The asshole’s technology would undoubtedly be snatched up by CyberLife’s creepy AI, and back alley tests of the procedure would continue, until Amanda found a means to profit off of it. The FDA, hell, even the US government was in her pocket.

The monster’s empty brown eyes met Gavin’s, and the weight of everything finally hit him, full bore.

Case Jarrett would be tied up in court for an eternity, costing taxpayers untold millions, while an ill-equipped legal system struggled to prosecute a completely novel type of crime. Gavin wasn’t even sure if there was evidence to tie Jarrett to the murders, which were the only things the law could effectively punish.

The cyborgs were psychologically conditioned by Jarrett to be loyal to him, and weren’t reliable witnesses in their current state. That only left Gavin, and testifying about his own murder was an existential can of worms he had no desire to open.

I’m legally dead…could I even take the stand? What if CyberLife decided to throw their weight behind Jarrett. The corporation was immune to public scrutiny at this point—‘too big to fail’ as the TV economists phrased it.

Gavin’s blood ran cold at the mere thought that this piece of shit could possibly walk free. Maybe he was still mired in the hysterics of everything that had happened, but Gavin couldn’t, in good conscience, allow Jarrett to walk, or strike a book deal, or god forbid, get credit for his grotesque experiments. He had to make a decision—to take a stand.

“Gavin?” Connor waved his hand in front of Gavin’s face. The android had the small tablet, and was fiddling with its touch screen. “Can you hold his eye open, while I get a retinal scan?”

Blinking, Gavin looked around, and realized RK900 was ferrying the cultists into the wooden
pews. How long had Gavin been standing there, lost in thought? Shit…

Gavin shrugged at Connor, and kneeled next to Jarrett. The cyborg roughly pulled open the human’s eyelid, and Connor held the device over Jarrett’s face. It dinged, cheerfully, and the android turned his attention to the tablet.

Gavin remained kneeling next to the human, and clapped Jarrett on the shoulder. He leaned close, and whispered into Jarrett’s ear.

“You’re not gettin’ away with any of this, you piece of human filth..”

Jarrett turned his head to Gavin, and the cyborg had to suppress a shudder. There was no fear in Jarrett’s eyes—none. If anything, the programmer looked thrilled.

“It’s working,” Connor shouted, with a smile. “I’m dialing Hank, now!”

Gavin stood, turning to glare at his captive briefly, before joining Connor a few feet away. The android met Gavin with a warm smile.

“We did it, Gavin—we stopped Case Jarrett, and saved the cyborgs.” Connor’s grin began to droop at the sight of Gavin’s frown, but there was a chime as his call connected. “Oh, Hank!” Connor turned his attention back to the tablet. “Yes! Detective Reed, RK900, and myself are all—no, I didn’t notice the time, but we were kidnapped so…”

Gavin sniffed, scratching his nose as he impatiently waited for Connor to complete his call. Based on the booming voice on the other end of the receiver, and the consistency with which Connor was being cut off, Hank was anything but prepared for this conversation. Then again, it probably wasn’t every day that the robot he was boning called to let him know he’d been kidnapped by the prime suspect in the serial killer case of the century.

“Jarrett?” Connor repeated. Gavin’s ears perked up, and he moved closer to the android. “Oh, yes, well, he-”

Gavin put his new, cyborg reflexes to the test. In a single, fluid movement, the tablet was out of Connor’s hands, and shattering on the floor. Gavin heard the warble of Hank’s voice, on the other end, but slammed his foot against the device, silencing it, for good.

“Gavin!” Connor shouted in disbelief, as he rounded on Gavin, attaining his full height. “That was our sole means of contact with the outside world!” The expression on his face took a turn into RK900 territory—predatory and domineering.

“You told the old man where we were, right?” Gavin huffed, puffing out his chest to match Connor’s threatening display.

“Of course I did, but that’s no excuse for your actions! We need to coordinate our extraction with the DPD SWAT team!” Connor threw out his arm, gesturing towards the murderer, sitting quietly in the corner.

“Yeah, about that,” Gavin sniffed, crossing his arms. “Me an’ Manson, over there, need to have a little chat—offsite.” His grey-green eyes didn’t leave Connor’s face, and he didn’t shy away when the android’s soft, brown eyes hardened with rage.

“Gavin, do you understand what you’re suggesting? No, I’ll give you credit, and say yes, you realize what you’re implying breaks every oath you took as an officer of the law,” Connor snarled, grabbing Gavin by the shoulders.
“I don’t know what you’re getting at, plastic,” Gavin shot back. “He’s got a lab, offsite, and I need to get into his systems, which means I’m gonna need him.” Gavin glared at Connor. His time was limited, now that the DPD were on their way. If he didn’t get Jarrett out the door soon, it would all be over.

“Then you will wait for the proper authorities to arrive, and you can accompany them for evidence collection,” Connor yelled, shaking Gavin once more, for good measure. The cyborg’s resolve didn’t waver.

Connor’s anger melted into worry. He placed his hands on Gavin’s cheeks, and pleaded with him.

“Are you really ready to throw away your career for petty revenge, Gavin? Just like that?”

Gavin recoiled, just to make it clear he didn’t want the older android’s hands on him. He had no intention of backing down. Jarrett needed to be brought to justice, and that backup copy of his brain needed to be destroyed. Nothing else mattered to Gavin, anymore.

“Lemme make this clear, Connor—dead men don’t have careers,” Gavin snapped, poking the cartoon meatball on the android’s chest. He would fight Connor, if need be. This was all he had left. Jarrett had taken everything, his dignity included.

RK900 approached them, standing a few feet away. The android cocked his head to the side, and cupped his chin with his fingers. He maintained his silence, acknowledging neither Connor, nor Gavin.

“Look,” Gavin squeezed uncomfortably close to Connor. “This isn’t about my career, it’s about—”

“I can accompany the detective,” RK900 finally spoke, his tone measured, and face unreadable.

Connor removed his hands from Gavin, and stared at his brother in disbelief. The older android stood, mouth slightly agape, teeming with a nervous energy.

“Brother,” RK900’s voice softened considerably, attaining Connor’s usual level of warmth. Gavin did a double-take, certain he’d heard the wrong twin. “There are extenuating circumstances to every case,” RK900 crooned.

The younger android paused, flitting his eyes towards Gavin.

“I suppose what I’m trying to say is, I believe it to be in all of our best interests to visit that lab before Amanda learns of existence, not after.”

Connor looked at his brother, and then to Gavin. A look of abject disappointment filled his face, and he sighed. When he next spoke, he kept his mournful eyes trained on the ground.

“I,” Connor started, voice stiff. He shook his head, and nibbled on his bottom lip. “I recognize that I stand against the group consensus.” The android’s moral debate was blatant on his face. Vigilantism clearly went against everything he held dear. “RK900,” Connor sighed. He addressed his brother, a warning etched deep in his voice, “I trust your judgement, but I’d assumed the two of you had learned that actions have consequences.”

The three men stood in silence. Gavin looked away, but RK900’s piercing blue eyes never wavered from his brother. The cyborg scratched the back of his head, and glanced at Case Jarrett, eager to get whatever this was going to turn into over and done with.

“Gavin,” Connor warned, placing his hand on the cyborg’s shoulder. Gavin looked up, and into
hurt, brown eyes, “I need you to understand: defying your personal code and legal obligation to the city will not bring back what you’ve lost. It will only cost you more.”

Gavin looked the android dead in the eye, and clapped a hand on Connor’s back, in turn.

“Yeah, yeah. That comic book shit sounds great in movies, but it doesn’t pan out here, in the fuckin’ real world—crazy as it is,” Gavin laughed with a bark. He moved away from Connor, beelining for Case Jarrett’s bound body. “As it turns out, plastic,” Gavin quipped at Connor, “android memories ain’t permissible in court.”

Passing by RK900, Gavin noticed the android’s lips curl, slightly—a subtle smile, dipping into the frigid cyan of his eyes. It was fleeting, gone as quickly as it had appeared. RK900 turned to his brother, and whispered something into his ear.

Gavin paid the twins little mind, as he rounded on Case Jarrett, roughly forcing the human to his feet. Gavin didn’t care what Connor thought of him—he never had, and he never would. This wasn’t a police matter for Gavin. It had ceased to be strictly professional the moment Case Jarrett fried Gavin’s brain, and poured it into a robot body.

Being a cop didn’t matter anymore, and Gavin didn’t want to end up as some charity case, or poster child for transhumanist bullshit. There was only one thing left for Gavin Reed, and, once it was complete…

_I don’t have a future or a legacy, and I’m gonna make sure I extend the same courtesy to this subhuman piece of garbage._

Gavin ushered Jarrett through the door, and caught a chill at the sight of the human’s face.

Case Jarrett looked positively elated.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your help, Leaux!

I think I’ll be able to fit everything into one last chapter, but we’ll see. Fingers crossed.

Find me on the onlines at @Vapedrone

I’m sorry if you guys get this emailed to your inbox twice. I ran into an issue with posting and had to do it again.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gavin leaned against the steering wheel, and released a long, painful exhale. Tightening his grip on the rubber, he tried not to think about what came next. Out of line didn’t begin to cover it.

He only had minutes to clear out, before the DPD showed up, but Gavin remained stationary, fingers clamped over the key lodged in the ignition. Unbidden tears trickled from his eyes, cascading to the floor of the van in heavy, blue drops.

He caught sight of a bright red ring in his soft, liquid reflection.

Gavin didn’t know who he was, anymore—didn’t know what he was. The man sitting in the driver’s seat was a far cry from the one whose life ended in an abandoned office park in Flint, Michigan. Somewhere, in the midst of it all, he’d lost Gavin Reed, and the psychopath humming just beyond the thin partition was a testament to that fact.

“Fuck,” Gavin croaked, with a sob. He leaned back in his seat, and ran a hand through his hair. More tears splashed down his cheeks, as he stared at the black metal of the ceiling. “Who the fuck am I?”

Once the tears dissipated enough for him to see, he wiped away the excess, and turned over the engine.

A sharp knock against the driver side window made Gavin’s blue heart skip a beat. Vibrant cyan eyes shone through the glass, and Gavin calmed down, realizing it wasn’t DPD personnel.

Gavin rolled the window crank, and barked, “the fuck do you want, Nines? You lost?” He hoped to god he looked better than he felt.

“Did you intend to leave without me?” RK900 leveled his gaze at Gavin, mouth poised between a sneer and a frown.

Gavin wanted to argue with the fucker, but he was too exhausted to bother. He flopped back in his seat, resignation plastered across his face, and made a show of pressing the unlock button on the door console.

He could feel the android’s presence, lingering at his door—solid and overwhelming—but Gavin didn’t want to meet RK900’s eyes. He crossed his arms, focusing on the grimy AC unit, instead.

“Look, dumbass.” Gavin fought to keep his voice level—fought to keep a tsunami of emotions at bay. “If you wanna be here, so bad, hurry up and get in the car, or I’ll fucking leave you.”

Quiet as a ghost, RK900’s heavy aura disappeared, until he hopped into the passenger seat, without a sound.

He studied Gavin.

“You are in no state to drive.”

“You know what, Nines?” Gavin snapped. A reckless energy tingled across his nerves, drilling
straight to his tongue. “Maybe I wanna fuckin’ drive. That occur to you, huh?” His voice was cracking, as the dam within him finally reached its point of no return. “Maybe I wanna fuckin’ drive this piece of shit van, with this piece of shit serial killer, who ruined my piece of shit life, straight off the Ambassador Bridge. Did that fuckin’ occur to you?”

RK900 remained silent, watchdog eyes scanning Gavin. Always watching, always calculating. Easily slipping from human to inhuman at a moment’s notice.

“For the love of god, will you fucking say something!?” Gavin shouted, slamming his balled fist against the window. It bowed, a large crack radiating out from the point of impact.

Gavin took a deep breath, in a pitiable attempt to fight back roiling tears. Thirty-six years worth of furloughed emotions built up a pressure cooker within him, and Jarrett was the thing to finally kick the lid open.

“Gavin.” RK900’s fingers brushed the cyborg’s trembling hand. “I will drive. Now, move.”

Cursing, the cyborg hurled the keys at RK900’s face, and scampered into the passenger’s seat. The android didn’t retaliate. He circled the front of the vehicle, and slid into the driver’s seat, gracefully, content to ignore the stewing pile of repressed feelings at his side, as he turned the ignition.

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Gavin leaned his head against the window, eyes locked on the vibrant neon lights of Detroit. Now that the sense of urgency was ebbing from his system, he was left with nothing but his thoughts.

“Spent my whole life in this shithole,” Gavin muttered, breaking the silence. He needed to shunt the excess thoughts, somewhere, before his mind overflowed. “Never thought I’d die here, though. Wanted to bite it out West—Vegas, probably. Win big, and have some jackass ice my geezer ass with a broken bottle outta jealousy. Y’know?” Gavin sniffed, and wiped away another tear with his thumb. “Managed to fuck that up too, I guess. Jesus…”

Gavin lapsed back into silence. A bright red light marred his reflection, eating away half his face. He rubbed his thumb against the LED he’d all but forgotten existed. It was a brand—a nice, external reminder of what he’d become, at the expense of what he could no longer be.

“My brothers were—are—assholes,” Gavin rambled, eager to fill the deafening void. “Fuckers cheated, stole, and lied their way through everything. I hated Grant, annoying little shit that he was, but George was the reason I became a cop. I mean, that’s what I told myself, anyway…not that you give a shit…not that you’ve ever given a shit, god damn.”

Gavin blushed, feeling stupid for oversharing. A choking sensation clawed its way up his throat, and he swallowed back another round of tears.

“Did they laugh…?” Gavin wheezed, voice catching “Y’know, at my funeral? Did George…god, just forget I asked.” Gavin buried his face in his Thirium-coated hands. He wanted it to all go away. He wanted to remove his hands, and wake up in his bed, two decades ago.

“No one laughed during the service, or the burial,” RK900 stated, flicking on the van’s blinker. “No one joked at your expense, or spoke ill of you.”

The android pulled off the main road, and into a dark neighborhood. In the weak light of the few functional streetlamps, Gavin could just make out plywood boards covering entrances to most of
the homes. Another victim of Detroit’s staunch refusal to adopt a post-industrial veneer.

RK900 plowed through an ailing fence, and came to a stop in a junk-filled front yard.

“Gavin,” RK900 started, voice unsure, “you...how do I put this delicately? In spite of your bad attitude, you were respected, among your colleagues.”

“Yeah?” Gavin snapped. “They tell you that while drinking punch, three feet away from my corpse?” The cyborg ran his hands over his face. He couldn’t do this anymore—any of it. All that was left for Gavin Reed was to burn the hospital, Case Jarrett, and his legacy to the ground.

RK900 stared at Gavin, and removed the key from the ignition, casting the two in a harsh darkness, broken only by two red circles of light. The android placed his hands in his lap, and stared out the windshield, eyes locked on the rusted mass of fence, cast in incandescent yellow.

“There were many at your funeral—more than I anticipated, for one so caustic as yourself. You were loved by those around you, even if you did not reciprocate that love.” RK900’s voice lacked its usual confidence.

“God, you’re fuckin’ dense. Most of those people were there out of obligation. Probably spent the whole time checking their watches, so they didn’t miss the game, later.” Gavin wiped his nose, and blinked back yet more tears.

RK900 slammed his fist against the dashboard.

“You truly believe over one hundred people would cry false tears on your behalf? To what end, Gavin? When you died, they sang your praises.” The android’s mouth twisted with agitation. “When my systems underwent catastrophic failure at your hand, I realized I would have no ceremony. There would be no one to mourn me, save for a misguided AI.”

“Well fuck you too!” Gavin shouted, slapping the dashboard with his hand. “That’s not true, and it’s not fuckin’ fair!” His chest heaved, pressure building in the back of his throat, at the low blow. “I...I’d have missed you,” Gavin choked out, “…you got the proof of that in your fuckin’ chest!”

RK900 glanced down, and ran his hand over the location of his regulator. He let his fingers linger, locked over the biocomponent that once belonged to Gavin.

“Is it that you cared about me, or that you felt compelled to right a wrong?” RK900 looked to Gavin, expectant—looking for all the world like he had something to prove.

“Whatever, dipshit. Twist it however you fuckin’ want—I saved your prissy ass ‘cause I give a shit about you. I don’t need to explain myself, especially if you’re just gonna assume the worst of me every goddamn time,” Gavin huffed, glaring at RK900. “Not everyone has an agenda—that’s a you thing.”

RK900 lapsed into a thoughtful silence. The red light at his temple bounced off his drumming fingers. He sighed, and draped his arms over the steering wheel.

“I...I remember waking up in the holography lab, confused,” RK900 spoke, voice still wavering. “Amanda’s projection was there, sitting on the grass next to me. She talked, quite a bit, about nothing, really.”

Gavin sniffed, and looked at RK900. The android leaned against the dashboard, fiddling with the van’s key fob. There was turmoil brewing in his blue eyes. RK900 pursed his lips, and continued.
“Two things became apparent to me: first, Amanda was very lonely. Second, she regarded me as something much more nuanced than an asset.”

“I mean, she saved you, didn’t she?” Gavin muttered, turning his attention to RK900. “The fuck would she stick her neck out for you, otherwise?”

“I think she intended for me to remain at her side, within CyberLife,” RK900 continued, “but I insisted that I would be happier in the city. I felt stifled, but couldn’t articulate why.”

“So…” Gavin pushed. “Did being around us cavemen do it for you, plastic?”

RK900 turned to look at Gavin, fingers still tracing the teeth of the keys. Gavin had never seen the android display a nervous tick, but Jarrett’s words floated back to the surface of his mind—oil, separating from water.

*He was just exploitin’ your feelings for his own gain…*

Gavin shifted uncomfortably, and shook off Jarrett’s claims.

*He was the manipulative psychopath—not this lost android, who happened to have a piss-poor attitude.*

“I hated it.” RK900 looked away, dropping the keys on the dash console. “Humans are horribly disingenuous animals. I was designed to be an infiltration unit, but…” RK900 paused, curling his fingers in his lap. “It was almost too easy. I could trick them, manipulate them, turn them against one another, but it left me feeling hollow. I chose to leave CyberLife in search of authenticity, not more pixelated rose bushes.”

A warning bell rang in the back of Gavin’s mind. He dry-swallowed, and gave a nod in RK900’s direction.

“Y-yeah…? You don’t say, Nines.” Gavin idly picked at his LED, knowing its saturated crimson betrayed his thoughts on the matter.

“I wanted to be myself, but I had to discover who that was,” RK900 whispered, voice cutting out from beneath him. “Amanda couldn’t give me that. She gives me unconditional love, but that does nothing but build my dependency on her as my only identity.”

The two men fell into silence. RK900 resumed toying with the keys, and Gavin nibbled on his lower lip. The muffled cry of an ambulance rang in the distance, meshing with the creak of long-rotted wood—textures of a city just like Gavin. Not alive, not dead, operating solely from the memory of what it once was.

“So,” Gavin asked, “did you find it? Whatever the fuck it was you were looking for?”

RK900 trained his blue eyes on Gavin, piercing him. He placed the keys back in the ignition, without altering his line of sight.

“No.”

Gavin glanced at RK900, studying the android’s placid expression.

“Sucks, man,” he muttered offhand.

“I found something else.” RK900’s voice was soft, devoid of its razor’s edge. His eyes roved over Gavin with a fondness, instead of calculating precision. “Or so I thought,” he sighed, putting the van into gear.
Gavin lurched with the van, as the vehicle stumbled over the tangle of broken fence.

“That’s not fair, and you know it, asshole,” he snapped, stabilizing his hands on the dashboard.

RK900 shook his head, and tore out of the neighborhood. He swung back onto the main road, narrowly avoiding a transmission-breaking pothole, in the process.

“We’ve wasted more than enough time on this,” the android intoned. His words struck with his on-brand finality. It rubbed Gavin the wrong way, sending his little skin-weaving nanites scurrying across the plastic dermis, underneath.

“Good point. If we both keep runnin’ from this bullshit, eventually we’ll run so fuckin’ far that it’ll be out of our hands, yeah?” Gavin scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. He could feel the icy flames of RK900’s stare, without needing to glance at the robot.

Gavin sniffed, planting his thumb on his lips.

“I did a lot of dumb shit as a kid. My old man never grounded me, or whatever, he just kept repeating the same bullshit phrase over and over again.” Gavin pitched his voice slightly lower, and added a midwestern emphasis to his vowels. “God damn, Gav. Y’know, one of these days, something’s gotta give, right? I just hope you’re on the good side of shit creek, when it does.”

Gavin sighed, and looked over his shoulder, through the large, grated circles of the partition.

“Eloquent,” RK900 stated after an abbreviated pause. “Though I question his delivery, your father was clearly a far more intelligent man than yourself.”

“Is,” Gavin corrected, with a huff. “He’s not dead. That old man is built like a fuckin’ tank, thank god.” He chewed at his lower lip, and made a decision—one he felt would win his father’s approval.

Gavin clapped the android on the back.

“I’m glad Anderson made us partners, Nines.” Gavin let his hand linger on the blood-stiff fabric of RK900’s shirt. “If I could go back and do it all again, I wouldn’t change a goddamn thing.” His rubbed the android’s back, and pulled away.

“I would.”

A chasm opened up, deep within Gavin, and numbness overtook his senses. He stared at RK900, eyes bugging out of his metal skull.

“I’m drawn to you, Gavin Reed,” RK900 sighed. The android frowned, troubled. He sniffed, and wiped his palm along the corner of his eye. “Even as I say I would change our trajectory, I know I would still find my way back to you, and you to me.”

Gavin swallowed, keeping his eyes trained on the floor of the van. A hot pressure built in his chest.

“The heart is...complicated, and does as it pleases. Love comes in many forms—some more self-destructive than others.”

Gavin didn’t miss the thin blue streaks staining RK900’s cheeks. The android tried to wipe them away, with minimal success.

“God,” Gavin half-laughed, half-sobbed, “that’s gotta be the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Tell you what, tin can,” Gavin swallowed, tasting chemical tears
Endless blue scrutinized Gavin, peering deep within the cyborg—cautious and calculating. For a creature so hellbent on control, RK900’s approach to their whatever-it-was felt almost cavalier. Some facets of human nature could only be learned, and not pre-programmed. There might be hope for the world, after all.

“Deal,” the android whispered. RK900 laced his fingers through Gavin’s, and squeezed.

It was one hell of a promise.

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The decrepit husk of Memorial Hospital edged into view, as the van pulled up a long, bumpy road. Gavin noticed the old signage, covered in gnarled trees and errant vines. A burst of ominous red backlit the shadowy interior of the old emergency department entryway.

Gavin grabbed the door handle, and chewed on his lip.

“Nines,” he fumbled, “you don’t gotta be here for this. It’s between me and that freak, back there.” He slapped a hand against the thin partition separating them from their quarry.

“On the contrary.” RK900 withdrew the keys from the van’s ignition, one last time. “I have personal grievances I would like to air with my programmer.”

Gavin glanced over his shoulder at the android, and shrugged. He wasn’t in a place to judge RK900. Shoving the door open, Gavin exited the vehicle. Chips of broken glass crunched beneath his feet, with every step.

The cyborg slid his fingers around the handle of the van’s back door, but a pale hand closed around his. He spared a glance at RK900, noting the twinkle of bloodlust in the android’s eyes.

Grumbling, Gavin backed away from the door, throwing his splayed hands in the air.

“I will interrogate him,” RK900 stated, matter of factly, “as he still wields control over you with his voice commands. You will remain outside until I’ve extracted the information I need.”

Information? As far as Gavin was concerned, Case Jarrett—and any of his precious information—could rot in the ground.

“You ain’t the only one who’s got a few choice words for this creep,” Gavin hissed.

“You will get what you want, Gavin,” RK900 fired back, hands tightening on the back door handle, “but only if you’re patient.”

Gavin wanted to go off on RK900, maybe throw down in the crumbling detritus of the trashed parking lot. Jarrett was Gavin’s personal nightmare—RK900 didn’t factor into this equation, at all. He wasn’t sure why the android decided to accompany him, but RK900 was fond of doing whatever he wanted.

In the end, Gavin was glad he wasn’t alone, but part of him wished RK900 had just talked him out of this half-assed play. For the first time, Gavin wondered if he’d placed too many stakes in the wrong brother.

[Good twin, evil twin—what a cartoon cliche. But you always had a thing for bad boys, right?]
Gavin spun around, to face his phantasm, in all its drooling splendor. It smiled, tears of black rolling down its face, disappearing into the sea of trash littering the ground.

“Laugh it up, asshole!” The scream tore out of Gavin, unbidden. “When I delete you, it’ll wipe that fuckin’ smile right off your face!”

“Gavin!” RK900, hissed, keeping his voice low, “who are you addressing?” Fearful, the android scanned the area, searching for an errant hallucination. The ghastly creature winked at the android, showering its pale cheek with more inky tears.

“Nothin’,” Gavin muttered, cheeks burning, “just a fuckin’ side effect.” He rubbed the back of his neck, averting his gaze.

“Amanda has a slew of AI psychologists on her payroll,” RK900 remarked, with a hardened voice. “I’m sure one of them can help you with your ‘side effect.’”

Gavin sneered at RK900, but the android had already flung the van’s back door wide open, metal groaning under his strength. Amidst the shadows, Gavin could make out the silhouette of his waking nightmare—a five foot eleven package of psychosis and mortal destruction. Looking at him, now, Gavin realized just how unremarkable Case Jarrett was. There was nothing to distinguish him from any average joe in a coffee shop.

Without thinking, Gavin crawled up into the van, narrowly dodging a surprised RK900’s attempt to restrain him. Clearly, the handling of Jarrett was destined to be a point of contention between the two of them.

“C’mon,” Gavin snarled at the human, dragging Jarrett across the corrugated floor, “you and me got shit to settle.” Jarrett didn’t put up a fight, allowing Gavin to drag him, like a rag doll, out of the van. Looking into the monster’s eyes, Gavin was struck by the total lack of fear.

*No matter how this goes down, he gets what he wants…*

The realization left Gavin feeling cold, followed by a swell of white-hot rage. He pulled harder, scraping Jarrett’s soft skin against the unforgiving metal surface. He stabilized the human, and gave him a sharp kick to the back, where he fell into RK900’s outstretched arms.

“It’s fascinating,” the android observed, turning the human’s face to meet his own. “Once you strip away all the bells and whistles, you’re just as unremarkable as the rest of them. You would betray two species in service of your own ego—what a terribly human affliction.”

Jarrett laughed, muffled and cruel—a righteous wheeze from behind his jury-rigged gag. The sound made Gavin’s blood run cold, and one look at RK900 confirmed the android’s unease, as well.

“Nines,” Gavin warned, weariness melting much of his apprehension, “don’t forget we’re still on this fucker’s turf. He might have somethin’ else up his sleeve.”

Blue met brown—two vacuous pairs of eyes, sizing each other up.

“Perhaps…but I think our friend, here, has a vested interest in becoming a martyr for his cause. It’s in his nature, as much as prying what I want from him is in mine.”

RK900 held the human in his iron grasp. It was a harsh juxtaposition, humbling in many regards—a construct of mathematically conceived, preternatural beauty, caging his painfully average human creator. RK900’s perfection sparked an instinctual fear deep within Gavin, magnetic as it was.
Gavin trudged towards the gaping hole of the hospital's entrance, leading the charge. Every abandoned crap-shack in Detroit told a story. With more than a decade on the force, Gavin could read the hospital’s like a book, minus the mad scientist lair in the basement.

The group side-stepped over drug paraphernalia, knocking old gurneys aside. Bullet holes riddled the walls, alongside burn marks, and a broad range of graffiti.

The deeper they wandered into the hospital, the more it regained its original sterility. Gavin ran a hand along the unmoving, electronic door leading to the operating theaters. The area around the door was clean, untouched by local gangs or adventurous kids.

“Move,” RK900 demanded, slamming Jarrett against the the door. The android twisted his prey, turning Jarrett’s face towards a tiny apparatus, hidden in the crumbling ceiling.

A chime rang, deep within the hallway beyond, and the door swung open with a slow creak. It revealed a familiar, dazzling white hallway, full of darkened windows—the operating suite.

“Standard protocol for CyberLife’s R&D laboratories,” RK900 explained unnecessarily. He shoved his quarry through the opening. “It’s a two-step biometric authentication procedure. I assure you this lab was not meant to be found—not in one piece, anyway.”

The halls beyond the door were quiet, humming with idle machinery. Immaculate white bore down on them from all sides, in the low light. Dark windows revealed nothing of their interior rooms, save for a few distant, blinking lights. Gavin paused, pressing his face to a pane of glass, but saw nothing—just inky black.

He tested the door, but it was shut tight by more strange locks, and biometric scanners. Gavin hadn’t seen much of this place, during his last trip, but he wondered how much stolen equipment Jarrett had squirreled away, in this long-forgotten place.

RK900 halted in front of an operating theater at the far end of the hallway. Through the window, they could see it was partially lit, the ambient light highlighting a sleeping machine, bearing a striking resemblance to an MRI unit. Gavin recognized it as the consciousness transference device.

“This looks promising,” RK900 mused.

Without warning, he shoved Jarrett against the door. The loud smack of skin-on-plastic echoed down the empty hallway. Gavin cringed at RK900’s casual viciousness. He was no stranger to the android’s violent tendencies, but there was a marked difference in how he handled Jarrett. It was mechanical and practiced, lacking the unhinged emotion of his interactions with Gavin.

A chime echoed from within the room, and the door opened wide. RK900 unceremoniously tossed Case Jarrett inside. He glanced back at Gavin, blue eyes cold and resolute.

“Gavin, you will wait here until my interrogation is complete, and then…” The android paused, fingers tapping on the reinforced door frame. “And then, he’s yours to do with as you please.” The android vanished into the room, without another word.

Gavin didn’t dare contradict RK900, while the robot was on the warpath. He leaned against the window, quietly stewing in his agitation. Watching through the glass, everything felt obnoxiously dramatized, like a TV show.

RK900 tossed Jarrett onto an operating bed, and tied him down. Unable to hear a word either party was saying, Gavin constructed his own.
Dropping his voice an octave and adding a nasal tinge, Gavin muttered, “now, give me the location or I will be forced to waterboard you for an unspecified duration.”

Pitching his voice higher, and making an attempt at a Minnewegian lilt, he continued talking to himself, “ya can’t pay me enough to betray my precious fuckin’ family of brainwashed assholes.” Gavin scrunched his nose at the tribute, unsettled at how well he could mimic the psychopath. Still, the self-contained dialogue put Gavin at ease.

On the other side of the window, RK900 pulled up a seat, crossing his legs, one over the other. The android was poised like a painting—equal parts dynamic and cold. Beyond the robot’s commanding demeanor, Gavin noticed a pair of dark, brown eyes locked on him, not RK900. With every twitch of Jarrett’s mouth, the abyssal gaze grew more concentrated, until Gavin had to walk away.

He passed room after room, wandering down the pristine tile of the hallway. All the doors were rigged with Jarrett’s lock system, barring him from entry—not that he didn’t try. He chose a room at random, and tried to force his way into. The lock just buzzed at him, rejecting his attempts.

“Fuck!” He cursed, slamming a balled fist into the door, hard enough to leave a dent. “Why won’t you just fucking open, goddammit?”

“Gavin.”

The cyborg jumped, gripping his chest with a stray hand. RK900 frowned, crossing his arms. “What are you doing?” He inquired, cocking an eyebrow.

“I…” Gavin looked down at his hand, watching fleshy nanites rush to cover his stark-white chassis. At a loss for words, Gavin changed the subject. “What the fuck’re you doing out here? No way that fuckin’ canary sang, already.”

RK900 stared at Gavin, shifting his weight from one leg to another—fluid, like a human. The android’s nervous ticks were growing in number, poker face falling apart under the weight of his bid to ingratiate himself with the creatures he so despised.

“He’s grown reticent,” RK900 huffed tersely, “and insists that you be present.”

Gavin frowned. “Why? So he can order me to kill…” The cyborg cut himself off, choosing not to finish the statement. RK900 shook his head, and took a hold of Gavin’s wrist.

“Whatsoever he tries will fail,” RK900 proclaimed, dragging Gavin behind him. “I have neither the time, nor the desire to play anymore games.”

Gavin wrenched his arm free, choosing instead to walk alongside RK900—to remind him that Gavin wasn’t just an accessory.

They came upon the operating theater, and RK900 paused, abruptly. He bit his lip—another seemingly uncharacteristic motion. Maybe it was time for Gavin to admit he didn’t know the android as well as he’d assumed, if at all.

“Gavin...please keep in mind the kind of man we’re dealing with. His concept of a win-state is very different from our own.”
Piece said, the android entered the room.

Gavin opted against a snide remark. He’d been a detective for over a decade, but RK900 was still out here treating him like he needed training wheels. It would have been insulting, if not for the ominous cloud the warning left behind.

Once he’d settled his knee jerk reaction, Gavin joined RK900 in the theater. He’d scarcely made it three steps in, before a familiar hiss lit up all his internal warning bells.

“Icarus…”

Jarrett angled his face, just enough to meet Gavin’s eyes. Operating lamps bathed the human in harsh, blue light, bringing out the sickly paleness of his skin.

“Well, it seems we’re all in a bit of a pickle here, doesn’t it, Icarus?” Jarrett grinned, malevolence oozing from the corners of his mouth. Even stripped of his metaphorical teeth, the man still left Gavin shaken.

“Where’re the backups, asshole?” Gavin cut to the chase. Time was sanity, and Gavin could feel the last threads of his unraveling, next to the mad scientist.

Jarrett laughed. The sound scraped along the inside of Gavin’s ears, and he swallowed. He looked up at RK900, maintaining a hefty distance of ten feet from the android, just in case.

“Ya know, I expected somethin’ a lil’ different outta you, Detective. I thought it was your job to get me to confess to all my ‘bad deeds,’ not extort me for my work.” Jarrett smirked, and beckoned Gavin forward. “Icarus, I wancha to c’mere.”

RK900 tensed, ready to subdue Gavin at a moment’s notice, but the cyborg held up his hand. He approached Jarrett, the red command drilling into the back of his mind.

“I don’t need a goddamn confession, Case. There’s a mountain of evidence linking you to the murders.” A bluff, and a poor one at that.

“Gimme your right hand, Icarus.” Jarrett pointedly ignored Gavin’s threat, and wriggled his chubby fingers.

Powerless to stop his own movements, Gavin presented his hand to Jarrett. He was more curious than fearful, for better or for worse.

RK900 practically leapt across the bed, in his rush to tear Gavin’s limb away from Jarrett.

“Wait!” He shouted, encircling Gavin’s wrist with his pale fingers.

“If ya know what’s good for ya, you’ll stop, fella,” Jarrett hissed, eyes still locked on Gavin. “I don’t want any harm to come to the detective, and I’ve got, ohhh, ten different voice commands that’ll end him where he stands, each more gruesome than the last.”

RK900’s eyes grew hard, and he spared a glance at Gavin. Frustrated, the android released his companion, and took a step back from the table.

“Now, that’s a good boy,” Jarrett cooed. “In my line a’ work, ya gotta be prepared. Sometimes, androids’re damn near as unpredictable as humans, ya’know?”

Swallowing, Gavin held out his arm. The plasteel bracelet jiggled against the cyborg’s skin,
sending nanites scurrying. Jarrett angled his fingers, and brushed a thumb against the device. The shiny plastic vibrated, and popped open.

In an instant, Gavin withdrew his hand, rubbing the newly freed skin with distrust.

Motes of data swarmed Gavin’s vision—options, extra features, and external information. The sudden influx briefly overwhelmed his taxed mind, and he swayed, a touch. With a yelp, Gavin put out a hand, to steady himself on the operating table.

“Now, with that outta the way, we can get down to business,” Jarrett announced, with a clap.

A cruel light twinkled in the man’s eye, as he issued a brand-new command.

“Icarus, access internal systems program nine nine nine dot a, n, d—execution password: charon.”

RK900’s hand was around Jarrett’s throat, within seconds, and only a cruel-sounding wheeze escaped his lips. The android snarled, prepared to level a threat at the human, but he was caught off-guard as Gavin fell to the floor, with a loud yelp.

“What did you do?” RK900 growled, eyes narrowing into dangerous, blue slits of ice.

“Insurance,” Jarrett chuckled through his bruised windpipe. “The detective has twenty minutes, before the program I activated in his system’ll brick that vessel a’ his. Poor fella ran off before I could transfer his soul, but there’s no time like the present, eh?”

Bright yellow numbers streaked across Gavin’s eyes, washing the world in a hazy, gold hue. True to Jarrett’s words, the number twenty slowly ticked away, counting down the minutes to Gavin’s demise, or displacement—he was having trouble understanding any of Jarrett’s techno-babble.

“God,” Gavin groaned, curling into a pathetic ball, “just fucking kill me, already. Why’s this robot shit gotta be so complicated?” The only thing worse than death was the staggering number of hard roadblocks, that seemed to funnel Gavin into worse and worse fates.

“Fix him, human, or I will fix you!”

RK900’s voice rang out, somewhere above, but Gavin was too exhausted to care. At this point, it would be easiest just to blue-screen and be done with it all.

“You gotta give to get, lil’ guy,” Jarrett goaded, amusement clear, even as his breath dwindled.

“We can have our heart to heart while I fix the detective.”

RK900 stammered, “this is not—”

“Jesus, can the two of you just shut the fuck up!?” Gavin shouted, cutting into the unwanted conversation. He peeled his hands from his face, and yelled, “the hell is your problem, huh, Jarrett? Your daddy not love you enough, or somethin’?”

The room fell into silence, and Gavin noticed a shift in RK900’s demeanor. All anger disappeared, replaced with a serene calm. The android’s temple cycled yellow, yellow, yellow—the same sickly shade as Gavin’s vision.

“Let’s talk about your father, Case.” RK900 offered, voice soothing.

The android approached the utilitarian bed, dragging his fingers along the aged, teal vinyl. His light spun yellow, but his expression resumed an air of condescending self-assurance.
“His name was William, correct? Doctor William Jarrett—a research neurosurgeon of some renown, in Minneapolis.” RK900 placed his hands on a leather cuff, securing Jarrett to the operating table, and began to slowly undo its bindings.

A dangerous silence filled the room, blanketing the soft churn of idle machines. Gavin felt it, crawling along his skin—RK900 had struck a nerve. The tension bore down on Gavin, but RK900 appeared unaffected.

“Ironic, wasn’t it? He died of the very disease he sought to eradicate,” RK900 hummed, unlatching the wrist strap. His eyes flicked to Jarrett, as he slid the strap from the cuff. “I suppose you wanted to continue his work, in your own way—with a much different approach. He must have been a great man, for you to stake so much of your career on his beliefs.”

Gavin knew what RK900 was doing—had done it himself, many times. Granted, Gavin never fared well with the good cop routine, but RK900 slid into the role like a natural. The android’s body language changed completely. He was barely recognizable, in his current state—all traces of that domineering aura had vanished, bringing a persona more akin to Connor to forefront.

RK900 looked at Gavin, and gestured to a metal stool near the edge of the operating table. Gavin complied with the request, awkwardly seating himself on the cold apparatus. Endless brown immediately locked onto him, as Jarrett pointedly ignored his android captor.

“You’re not a man prone to violence—far from it.” RK900’s voice was soft, with an uncharacteristic warmth to it. “You sought those in need, and offered them a way out.” He freed Jarrett’s second hand, and the human sat up. His gaze bore into Gavin, and the sensation of a cold sweat washed over him.

RK900 placed his hand on the final leg restraint, but Jarrett intercepted him, with a huff.

“I got this last one, lil’ guy.”

The two juggernauts stared at one another, neither willing to back down. RK900’s shoulder grew taught, for just a moment, but the tension melted from his muscles, and he let go of the leather cuff.

“As you wish, Doctor,” RK900 conceded. He stepped backward, giving the human a wide berth.

“His devotion’s cute, doncha think?” Jarrett addressed Gavin, but it was clear the presence of RK900 was making the human uncomfortable. He wouldn’t so much as look at the android. “A shame none of it’s for you.”

A pointed scowl crawled across RK900’s face, but he forced himself to relax.

“Now,” Jarrett sighed, sliding off the table, and rubbing the red chafe lines indenting his pale skin. “Icarus, I’ve got a job to do, which means I’m gonna need ya to follow me into my lab.”

Forced to comply with the human’s command, Gavin followed Jarrett into the quiet hallway. Gavin resented his helplessness in this scenario—just a pawn their negotiation. He wished he’d killed Jarrett, back in the temple—accidentally’ dropped a foot on the man’s head—but the uncertainty of the backups was too great, and Gavin needed at least one form of closure, in all of this.

RK900 loomed, a few paces behind Gavin, his soft feet padding against the tile floor—a blue-stained ghost, with an unknown agenda. If Gavin weren’t so emotionally exhausted, he would punch the android, for jerking him around, but even the idea felt meaningless.

A hand squeezed Gavin’s shoulder, for reassurance. He shrugged it off.
Jarrett stopped in front of a smaller operating room, and placed his hand on the biometric scanner. Seconds later, the door chimed, and slid to the side, smooth as butter.

The three men filed into a familiar room—the lab where Jarrett threatened Gavin with a reset. Old-looking computers clicked quietly, in a sizable array on the far wall, their aged LEDs blinking red and yellow. The android print station still consumed much of the room, but the plasteel surgical implements were nowhere to be found. It seemed Jarrett had learned his lesson, from their last encounter.

“You can just take a seat right there, Icarus.” Jarrett pointed to a workbench alongside the beige machines. Gavin didn’t have a choice, so he propped himself on the smooth metal. Considerable heat wafted off the old computers, and Gavin had the sudden urge to smash them all.

Jarrett muttered something unintelligible under his breath, and retrieved a keyboard. It was old—made of clunky, grey plastic, emblazoned with the logo of a long-dead computer company. He attached it to a tower, resting under a small CRT monitor.

“Shit’s kinda old, don’t you think?” Gavin sneered, knocking a knuckle against the metal case of one of the ancient towers, with a resounding clang.

“Not everything’s gotta be shiny and top a’ the line.” Jarrett smiled, whipping out a cervical cable. The sight of it sent a chill down Gavin’s carbon fiber spine. “There’s something to be said for the classics, and besides,” Jarrett paused, shooting a glare at RK900, “they can’t chit-chat with new-fangled tech.”

“God, this really can’t get any worse, can it?” Gavin half-laughed, half-snarled. “Fucker’s got me runnin’ on Windows 95.”

RK900 ignored Gavin’s gross misinterpretation of the situation, and snagged the cervical cable from Jarrett’s hands. He gave Jarrett his best thousand-yard stare, as he flicked the long, metal connector, at the head of the device.

“Let me help you. He responds better to my touch.”

The air grew tense—taught enough to snap. Jarrett was clearly displeased with the android’s intervention, but they all knew he had the upper hand, regardless. He watched RK900 like a hawk, as the android moved towards Gavin.

“Is Detective Reed perhaps the root of your frustration?” RK900 asked, innocently. He continued plucking at the tines of the oversized USB plug. A red stripe curled up the side of the shiny plastic, matching the light of Gavin’s LED.

“I know what you’re tryin’ to do,” Jarrett snapped, reaching for the cable. He fell short, as RK900 held it just beyond his grasp. “Ya won’t get into my head, lil’ guy.” Jarrett narrowed his eyes, malevolent gaze fixated on RK900.

RK900 cocked his head to the side, admiring the cyborg.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?” He ran his fingers along Gavin’s neck, letting them come to rest at the base of his skull, as he continued. “You have the means to bring him inner peace, yet he continues to reject what you offer.” A thumb circled Gavin’s cervical port, massaging the spot. “A relatable dilemma, but one that must drive you absolutely mad.”

Gavin swallowed, resisting the urge to reveal his chassis to RK900. He didn’t know what game the android was playing, but he knew he didn’t want that thing in his neck.
For the first time since they’d arrived, Jarrett met the android’s eyes, which harbored a muted candor, at odds with their usual darkness. RK900 was enjoying himself, and it made Gavin furious.

“Tell me, Doctor Jarrett,” RK900 posited, pressing harder against Gavin’s neck, “does your preference for machines stem from your inability to relate to humans, or your need to exert control, in the only way you know how?” He dug in his fingernails into Gavin’s skin, the sensation drawing out a harsh breath. “Your family speaks to one desire; detective Reed, the other.”

Jarrett’s face twisted. It was minute, but Gavin caught the shift, as did his android companion. Whatever RK900 was doing, it was beginning to work.

Cracks and fissures. Dams and walls.

Jarrett stood, dramatically knocking away his chair, as he approached the two of them.

“Sailors used to weave tall tales about sirens—the most beautiful creatures, wouldn’t’cha know?” He tore the cervical cable out of RK900’s hands, and dragged Gavin’s pliant body away from the surprised android. “The voice and appearance of an angel, wrapped up in a vicious, lonely thing, lying in wait for a fella to lose his wits, and well…” Jarrett grinned, fingers clinically seeking a specific spot, at the base of Gavin’s skull.

He could feel his skin melt away, revealing the delicate components, beneath the surface. A sharp intrusion sparked across his nerves, as Jarrett shoved the cable into his spine. Tantalizing pink licked along his neurological pathways. He whimpered, reaching a hand back to dislodge the cable, only to have it batted away.

Jarrett stood, and returned to his seat, but RK900 was far from satisfied.

“Your genius has the potential to alter the course of society. It must be frustrating to have your entire workflow destroyed by one, lost little man, who refuses to understand the importance of your work.” Gavin turned to glare at RK900. This was starting to become a little too personal, for his tastes.

“Every minute ya waste with this malarkey is one less minute for the poor detective,” Jarrett sneered. Even as the human clacked away on his keyboard, there was a marked difference in his motions—his furtive glances. The android’s shots were beginning to land, now that Jarrett’s ego was the target.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Gavin could feel the commands digging into him, burrowing in places they shouldn’t go. He gritted his teeth, and tried to take a deep breath.

“I find it odd.” RK900 placed an arm on the CRT monitor, and leaned into his hand. “You punish the detective to punish me—a strategy at odds with your assertion that my emotional bond with him is false. If what you allege is true, why should I care what happens to him?”

“I’m saving him!” Jarrett snapped, yelling defensively. Cracks and fissures were splitting his carefully crafted facade. Pomp and circumstance was all he had—everything else was just a shadow of a human being.

“Some men cannot be saved from themselves,” RK900 said, in a hushed voice. “At some point, you must release them, and allow them to become what they will. You cannot fix every broken man who stumbles across your doorstep, Doctor—you can only give them the means.”

A loud whine pealed free from Gavin’s lips. The copy executable stripped his code—a piece of tape, ripped aside to reveal an exact duplicate. It shouldn’t have hurt like this—computer functions
didn’t hurt—but the human part of his mind was trying to attach a familiar sensation to something completely inhuman, at its core

“Release the detective,” RK900 commanded, voice soft. He looked down at Jarrett. “He will not learn, otherwise. If you intend to prove your work a success, you must release him into the world, and let your family spread its wings.”

Jarrett paused, eyes roving over the shrinking form of Gavin. He pushed away from his desk, and closed the gap between him and RK900. Grabbing the android by the chin, the human sneered, unafraid of RK900.

To Gavin’s surprise, the robot didn’t so much as twitch. He simply leaned against the thick monitor, cool and calculating.

“Me an’ Kamski made a bet, during one a’ the first department head meetings—oh, years ago, now,” Jarrett hissed, keeping his eyes trained on RK900’s. “He was real full of himself, that one. Claimed his ‘creations’ were perfect, and didn’t have it in ‘em for some of the more unsavory character traits—violence, jealousy, fear—y’know, the fun stuff that makes us human.” He smirked, irony not lost on who he was speaking to. Jarrett let go of the android’s chin, and began patting RK900’s head, like a parent would an unruly child.

“Y’know what I told him?” Jarrett asked, ruffling RK900’s hair. “The creation is always doomed to become its creator. That’s what free will gets ya, every time.” He patted RK900 on the cheek, and walked away. “Ol’ Kamski didn’t like that—didn’t like people challenging him, period. ‘Genius’s’ never do,” Jarrett spat.

He then turned back to RK900, a cruel grin spreading across his face.

“But then, you’re livin’ proof that Kamski was wrong, aren’tcha, lil’ guy? Deviated right into a little terror, just like I predicted.”

Gavin saw it—the twitch in RK900’s hand. A lithe tiger, whose powerful body was on the brink of gouging out the human’s throat. He wished the android would let go, just this once. Even if Gavin bricked—whatever kind of hell that entailed—it would be worth it to see RK900 rip this cocky sack of shit, limb from limb.

“Tell ya what, fella,” Jarrett crooned, stretching his back. “I’ll give ya a choice, so the detective can see ya for what ya really are.” The programmer plopped back into his seat, and called up a few apps. It was all just gibberish, as far as Gavin was concerned.

The sensation of his code being copied was turning Gavin’s stomach inside out. He finally gave in, and dry heaved, but nothing came up, save for a drop of blue-ish drool.

I love being a shitty bargaining chip between two assholes.

“So, lil’ guy.” Jarrett keyed in a few more lines of code. “I know ya were willing to stake your detective’s well being on what I got here in these hard drives, but how badly do ya really want this data?”

Gavin glared at RK900, pissed beyond all reason. He shouldn’t have been surprised, but he felt a righteous sense of betrayal, at the same. Of course this was about Jarrett’s bullshit data. Of course RK900 would leverage Gavin, without a second thought, being the entitled asshole that he was.

As Gavin seethed, all of RK900’s attention was directed towards Jarrett.
“Now.” Jarrett clapped. “I’m about two-thirds of the way done backing up his soul, so lemme lay out your options. The first: I’ll give ya his vessel, fixed up, nice as new; but I’ll delete everything on my system—microwaved and done.”

“No you won’t,” snapped RK900. Gavin could see the android’s chest heaving—venting excess heat. Jarrett wasn’t the only one starting to fold under the pressure. “Deleting your life’s work nets you nothing,” RK900 protested. “Even without access to my full functionality, I can tell you’re bluffing.”

“Option two,” the psychopath continued, with a grin. “I finish the transfer, destroy the detective’s empty vessel, and hand you everything, myself included. He’ll be tucked away, safe and sound in a simulation, until you decide to transfer him to a new vessel. I’ll even delete his memories of this encounter, as a bonus, lil’ guy.”

“What?” Gavin screamed, completely indignant. “I ain’t empty, you piece of shit!” Tremors wracked Gavin’s body, and was overcome with a cold sickness.

Jarrett cracked his knuckles, looking from Gavin’s shocked expression to RK900’s frozen posture.

“What’s it gonna be, RK900? Ya get what ya want, either way—it’s just your lil’ detective who might suffer, depending.”

RK900 was locked in place. It was a trick question—one of practicality versus sentiment—meant to expose the harsh, binary underpinnings of RK900’s moral character. He could prove to Gavin, once and for all, that his feelings were genuine, or he could get what he came for, at Gavin 2.0’s expense. No matter what, he would walk away with Gavin, in some form.

Gavin could see it, in the android’s eyes—the infinite array of calculations, running through millions of scenarios, in his mind. He didn’t have the aid of his analysis bullshit, but no one in the room needed it. The choice was obvious, even to Gavin, but that didn’t mean he had to like it.

[A cheap life, and a cheaper soul. Almost poetic…]

Gavin withdrew into himself, as the silence continued. Yellow flashed across his eyes—this iteration of him had roughly five minutes left, before it became nothing more than a discarded cell phone. Maybe it would be better for RK900 to begin anew, with Gavin 3.0. The android’s hesitance had already caused irreparable damage to the tenuous thing between them. Gavin didn’t know if he’d be able to look RK900 in the eye, again, even if he made it out of this.

RK900 looked over his shoulder, at Gavin. Movements awkward and slow, he joined the cyborg, on the bench. A warm hand came to rest on Gavin’s face, as RK900’s thumb rubbing through the permanent scruff on Gavin’s jaw. He kissed Gavin’s LED, and pulled back, face stricken with true remorse.

Gavin gritted his teeth, knowing intrinsically that the android had made his choice. It looked like Jarrett was right—in the end, RK900 would always choose the optimal outcome. He didn’t have the emotional foundation required to build a true bond with another. Unsurprising as it was, it hurt.

It hurt because Gavin knew, if their positions were reversed, he’d have thrown everything away, in an instant, to save RK900—that much was already proven.

He remembered the chat they’d had, back at CyberLife, recalling the android’s firm opinions on the nature of machine thought.

“You can make a human a robot, but you can’t make a robot a human,” Gavin whispered, his hard
eyes locked on RK900.

“In the end,” RK900 sighed, stepping over to Jarrett’s side, “I’m obligated to choose the most advantageous course of action.” Blue eyes flicked to Gavin, and then to the screen. “You will modify his memories.”

Gavin stomach sank. The only person he trusted, his sole advocate…The betrayal left him cold and empty. There was a hole in his chest—a gouged-out mass of wires, and blue goo. Swallowing, he wished he would just die again, already, and wondered if there was a way to expedite the process.

He glanced at RK900, blue tears welling in his eyes, for what would likely be the last time.

“’Course I will,” Jarrett chuckled, voice full of malice. “I wouldn’t want the detective to suffer, y’know?”

The android locked his eyes on the screen, watching as code—likely Gavin’s—spread out across the black. He didn’t spare a glance towards the cyborg, sitting not three feet away, in tears—the one he claimed to ‘love,’ or something like that.

Gavin tried to bite back a sob, but it was difficult—pointless, ultimately. He ran a hand across his face, to wipe away the moisture, looking anywhere but at RK900.

This is what you deserve. This is…

A whimper crossed his lips, and Gavin looked up from the cold, sterile tile of the floor. Through his heavy tears, he saw RK900’s hand twitch slightly, at his side. Gavin sniffed, wiping his nose, eye trained on the robot’s limb.

“Asshole,” Gavin whispered, blinking away bluish Thirium solution.

Jarrett turned to focus on the cyborg, ignoring the blue-eyed ghost beside him.

“Don’t you worry, Detective—I take real good care of my family. It’ll all be over soon.” He scooted towards Gavin, left hand still locked on the keyboard.

RK900’s movements were swift—his reflexes, completely inhuman. He shoved his dampener bracelet against Jarrett’s forgotten hand, triggering the biometric lock, and popping the plasteel ring off, with ease. One obstacle down, RK900 wrestled Jarrett to the floor, pinning the human’s throat beneath his foot.

Something changed in the android’s face, as serenity overtook his expression. RK900 rubbed his bared wrist, and closed his eyes.

Frazzled and confused, Gavin slid off the bench, and placed his hands over Jarrett’s mouth, right as the fucker attempted to yell something. The human flailed, practically frothing at the mouth, even with the hard line of an android’s foot resting delicately on his windpipe.

“Finally,” RK900 muttered under his breath. An odd electronic sound reverberated from the depth of RK900’s throat, as he spoke. “Testing, testing…” With each word, RK900’s voice shifted closer and closer to matching Case Jarrett’s tone and cadence.

He looked to Gavin, with a smirk, and gave a command.

“Icarus, terminate internal system program nine nine nine dot a, n, d— execution password: charon.” It was Jarrett’s voice, right down to the cloying sing-song lilt of the vowels. Gavin knew
that, with enough input, androids had the ability to mimic voices around them. Still, hearing *that* voice come out of *that* mouth, made uncomfortable shivers crawl up Gavin’s spine.

Invasive yellow dissipated from Gavin’s vision, returning the world to its natural colors. His internal systems were still caught up in a minor panic, but they seemed to be coming down from whatever Jarrett had done.

“And with that,” RK900 crowed, eyes cold and cruel, “I now have everything I need—biometric, or otherwise—to access your labs, Doctor.” He remained locked in Jarrett’s vocal profile, taunting the human at his feet. Replacing his foot with his hand, RK900 continued. “Why would I indulge in your game of Sophie’s Choice, when I can have *all of it*, hmm? You must be losing your touch...”

RK900’s voice shifted back to normal. He squeezed his hand, constricting Jarrett’s airflow.

“I should cut out your tongue, and leave you to bleed to death on this floor.” There was amusement in his voice. The message was clear: RK900 was enjoying himself. “But I have no intention of stooping to your *level*, Doctor. Unlike yourself, I am *not* an animal. Even if my species is prone to many of the same behavioral pitfalls as yours, you and that hot air bag, Kamski, can rest assured—we’ll do it much *better*.” RK900 smiled, displaying his perfect, military-grade ceramic teeth. The smile was broad and cold, reaching the same frigid temperature as the ice of his eyes.

RK900 played just as fast and loose with the rules as Gavin, but for much higher stakes, and with zero remorse.

The thought made Gavin shiver. The whole scene struck a deep, instinctual chord within the remnants of Gavin’s hindbrain. He should flee—run away from the android, and never look back. But as those elated blue eyes came to rest on Gavin, he basked in their glow—the concentrated dark matter of RK900’s full attention. It was a harsh reminder of why he was in so deep with this machine.

RK900 loosened his grip, a touch, allowing Jarrett to take a few, shallow breaths.

“Keep your hands on his mouth,” he instructed Gavin. “I don’t want to give him another opportunity to ensnare you,” RK900 muttered, removing his shirt, and using it to bind Jarrett’s arms.

Gavin watched the android work, the impossible perfection of his artificial muscles waxing and waning with each motion. His pale fingers closed around Jarrett’s greasy hair, and pulled the human’s face up to meet his own. Gavin yelped, trying to maintain his grip on the livid programmer’s mouth.

“Unlike my predecessor, I don’t lose my cool in emotionally tense situations. I suppose I have you to thank for that.” RK900 grinned, again, and patted the human on his round cheek. “Compartmentalization is an incredibly useful skill, when dealing with unbridled hubris.”

Gavin stared at RK900, taking in the menacing android, in his full splendor. He’d never seen *this* side of RK900. He was still incredibly pissed, but witnessing the android’s actions over the last twenty minutes left Gavin with a powerful realization: for all RK900’s posturing, he really *must* have harbored feelings for Gavin Reed. All the antagonism he’d directed towards Gavin, over the last few months, was downright playful, in comparison.

With his free arm, RK900 took hold of the cervical cable in Gavin’s spine, and wrenched it out. It hurt like hell—red-hot pain, diffusing over Gavin’s entire body. Warning bells lit up his mind, chiding him for improper removal procedure.
“I’ll clean you up, later,” RK900 promised Gavin, eyes still locked on the angry human beneath him. “For now, you need to leave me your robe, and step into the hallway.”

“The fuck for?” Gavin belted out, weakly. Whatever was about to go down, he didn’t want to miss a second, even if his head was swimming in damage reports.

Annoyed, RK900 glared at Gavin.

“I need to silence the doctor, and I cannot risk him making another attempt on your life.”

“Fuckin’ really?” Gavin snapped. “Didn’t seem to bug you a minute ago, jackass.”

RK900 stared at Gavin, incredulous.

“Gavin...did you honestly think I would buy into his ‘deal?’” The android’s eyes were wide with surprise

Gavin looked away, stripping off his robe, angrily. Without a word, he threw the garment in RK900’s face, and walked down the hallway, to wait in the other open operating theater.

Seating himself on the bay of the odd MRI unit, Gavin ran a hand through his hair, and whispered, “what the fuck?” He trembled, adrenaline cycling its way through his artificial nerves. He wanted to cry, but he was too emotionally exhausted for the tears to come out.

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Did Nines always plan to save me, or did Jarrett accidentally expose something that made Nines realize he could have it both ways? Why’s he want that data so bad...?

He heard the death rattle chuckle of his ghost, laying on the bed of the machine, pressed beside him. Its black blood pooled on Gavin’s ass and thighs, cold and viscous. He leaned against his knees, caging his face in his hands, with a forlorn groan.

A few minutes later, Gavin heard footsteps echo softly down the hall. He looked up, and RK900 stood across the room from him. The android pulled up a chair, and sat, weaving his fingers together, on his lap.

“Gavin...” RK900 started, voice softer than it had any right to be.

“Don’t,” Gavin barked, balling his fists in his hair. “I-I...just fuckin’ don’t, RK900.”

The android stared down at his clasped hands, with a sigh. He looked up at Gavin, blue eyes blown wide and Connor-like, his body fidgeting.

“I assure you, I had no intentions of allowing Jarrett to harm you—I...” the android balled his shoulders, slumping forward. “It was imperative I gain access to Jarrett’s work.”

Gavin stared hard at the android

“So you fuckin’ hang me out to dry? This what you and that fuckin’ AI discussed when I wasn’t in the room, back at CyberLife? ‘Guess you’re a real mama’s boy, after all.”

RK900 shook his head, wildly, Thirium-stained curls brushing along his sharp cheekbones. They softened the ridges of his face, making him look lost and naive.

“I would never give Amanda Jarrett’s work. That could lead to a...well, a dangerous paradigm
shift.” RK900 glanced at Gavin, something close to remorse on his cherubic face. “I...it’s difficult to explain to one so out of touch with technology, but I needed access to his system to ensure that you—and those like you—would fare well in the future. There is value to what Jarrett has created, provided it falls into the right hands.”

Gavin snorted, throwing his arms in the air, and looking away.

“You gotta be fuckin’ kiddin’ me, Nines. I’m done with you, and your bullshit.

RK900 stood with a sigh. He rubbed his wrist, where the plastic dampener once rested.

“I don’t anticipate immediate forgiveness, from one such as yourself, but my actions were a reflection of my desire to help you, Gavin. I gain nothing from currying your favor—if anything, your loss would bring stability to my life.”

“So finish me, fucker. Just put your money where your mouth is,” Gavin snarled, balling his fists. “If I’m so bad for you, now’s your chance to bury me, for good.”

“Early on in our partnership, I considered it.” The android studied Gavin, from the bridge of his nose. “Now, I’ve found fondness in your unruly behavior. I’d much prefer to take you to dinner and a film, than put a bullet in your skull.” The android shrugged, and made a quiet exit, synthetic skin padding softly against the tile of the hospital.

Gavin screamed into his hands, vocals rough and brimming with static. He wasn’t sure how long he spent yelling, and beating dents into the bed of the machine responsible for causing him so much duress. By the end, his voice was purely machine—nothing but odd synthetic whines and bursts. He pulled the false skin of his face, feeling the tug of it under his eyes.

He looked up, from where he sat, curled in a ball, imagining himself on the porch, in the back of his mind—the one where his father sat, listening to contrived pop tunes from the early twenty-tens. Chest heaving with a sigh, Gavin stumbled to his feet.

He exited the operating theater, and returned to the large computer lab. He looked from a seated RK900, to the frothing, irate human on the ground, and then to the large biocomponent printer, which occupied so much of the room’s real estate.

“What’re you gonna do with him?” Gavin motioned to Jarrett’s bound form.

RK900 spared a glance over his shoulder, at the human. He shrugged.

“I’m unsure, but perhaps you would like to decide his fate? I assumed the reason you brought him out here was to kill him, in such a way that the DPD would be unable to convict you.”

Gavin stared at RK900, and shame blossomed deep within him. Were his intentions truly that transparent? Did it matter?

Gavin sighed, planting a small kick on Jarrett as he joined RK900 at the terminal. It was so dated. His eyes roved over endless streams of code, but it meant little to Gavin, in its current state. George was the computer whiz of the family, not him.

“A shame,” RK900 muttered. “Our friend here managed to translate android architecture into a long obsolete computer language—ingenious, really. It protects his creations from prying eyes, and leaves his systems utterly incomprehensible to any who might stumble on them.”

“So...?” Gavin huffed. “Who the fuck cares? Didn’t take you very long to dig in there, so it ain’t
RK900 glanced at Gavin, annoyed, but abstained from his normal, knee jerk insults.

“Why do you think I spent so long watching him?” RK900 hissed. “At any rate, this machine contains extensive dossiers on the other cyborgs, which we can use to aid them in rehabilitation.

“Uh huh,” Gavin sneered, “and, uh, how’d you plan on getting this shit out of here?”

“A download. I can store the packets in my system, until I’ve constructed a similar rig.” RK900 paused, fingers coming to rest on the keyboard “But the cyborg personality snapshots will be...difficult.”

Gavin surged into action, moving closer to the computer

“No, those’re easy,” he muttered, voice hurried and desperate. “You’re gonna delete them—mine too.”

RK900 pushed Gavin away from the monitor, and stood. His LED cycled deep crimson, over and over again.

“On the contrary, Gavin,” RK900 hissed, body language taking a turn into the threatening, “that would be akin to murdering twenty-nine people.”

“No,” Gavin snapped, losing all semblance of civility, “they’re alive, with your brother, in that shitty temple. Don’t come at me with this bullshit!”

RK900 took a deep breath, chest visibly filling with air—symbolic or necessary, it didn’t matter.

“No,” the android growled. “I will not destroy them. Just because your limited comprehension prevents you from understanding the nature of what you’re asking, doesn’t mean I will allow these beings to suffer.

“When those people wake up—the real ones,” Gavin yelled, placing himself between RK900 and the computer, “knowing that there’s a source of infinite copies of them out there will make them sui-fucking-cidal, you dipshit!”

The android glared at Gavin, rage aflame just beyond his eyes. It was evident things weren’t going his way, and he wasn’t about to have it.

“Perhaps,” RK900 ground his teeth, forcing out the words, “we can find compromise, in allowing the cyborgs to choose for themselves?”

Gavin shook his head, fighting every urge inside him to deck the android in his perfect face. Given RK900’s clear attempt at restraint, Gavin balked, too tired to deal with this anymore.

“Nines,” Gavin forced his voice to remain level, though it trembled with electric reverb, “you...you just don’t get it. This isn’t...these people aren’t fucking robots! They don’t understand this bullshit,” Gavin slapped a hand against the green code populating the old monitor. “If you tell them they’ve been copied, it’ll fuck ‘em up for life.”

Gavin stared into RK900’s eyes, pleading—imploring the obstinate robot to understand the depth of the mistake he was about to make.

“Nines, man, you gotta trust me on this one. You fuckin’ owe me that much, after the shit you just
Nines remained frozen, eyes locked on Gavin. An unwarranted scan of the android revealed unfamiliar, machine-based micro expressions, indicating RK900 was stressed—possibly torn on his decision. Gavin pushed his luck.

“Please, for the love of god, Nines, don’t make these poor saps go through the same shit as me.”

RK900 looked away, frowning. His back was tense, muscles constricted. He shook his head.

“I...I understand what you’re trying to communicate, Gavin, but I cannot, in good faith, kill these copies. I am not my brother—I do, in fact, have limitations to my cruelty.”

“Goddammit, Nines.” He pinched his brow. “Why are you...why can’t you just...fuck!” Gavin sagged, and fought the urge to rip the computer array off the wall.

“I will compromise in that I will place the copies somewhere they will be safe, but never touched. Their alternates need not know of their existence.” RK900 didn’t look at Gavin, but added, offhand, “your copy was incomplete, and I’ve already removed all traces of it.”

Gavin punched the wall, knocking a hole straight through it. His chest heaved, and he stalked off to the other side of the room. The tack tack tack of RK900 fingers against the keyboard was digging into his psyche, driving him insane.

He turned his attention towards the massive printer, in all its stolen glory. A stray thought hit him as he sized up the soft, cyan light of the construction chamber.

“Nines, uh,” Gavin sniffed, knocking his knuckles against the military grade glass of the unit, “how long d’you think it would take to print a whole body, and transfer a consciousness?”

RK900 leaned over the back of his chair, and simply stared at Gavin, who stared back, troubled.

“At least twenty-four hours, possibly closer to forty-eight. Why?” An accusatory why, steeped in distrust.

Gavin didn’t blame the fucker, not one bit. He considered, for a moment, the likelihood he’d be able to construct a full cyborg before the DPD managed to track them to this location. The Masonic temple wasn’t exactly swimming in connections to this place, but they could probably piece together the missing van, and track it, via camera, to the hospital.

He placed a hand against his chest, just below the curve of his left pectoral, and swallowed

“Tell you what, Nines.” Gavin’s mouth dried, at the mere thought of what he had planned, but the guilt was eating him alive. “I’ll pretend like you didn’t tell me you were gonna squirrel those copies away, god only knows where, if you do me one solid.”

He ran his hand along the idle machine, and prayed he was making the right decision—hard as it was to think, with all the pink debris floating in his head. Gotta keep at least one promise in all this, he considered, mouth pursed in a hard line.

Dennis wanted to see his kid again, and, by god, Gavin would make it happen, while he still had the opportunity.
Big thank you to Leaux, as always ♡

And a thank you for the comments and kudos, as well!

One more chapter to go
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I was never happy for you
You were weighing me down
You never trusted me
But I'm alright now

Tell me what you wanted
I’ve been calling back to those before us
But they didn’t hear
I’ve been losing friends and enemies
It’s even now
I looked underneath the dirt and bodies
And there’s nothing there
I can hear the voices echoing
It’s in my head

Did you find a higher purpose?
It never worked for me
I’m just waiting around

Tell me where we’re going

—HEALTH (RAT WARS, 2019)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An endless brown abyss raked over Gavin. Case Jarrett’s attention hadn’t diverted from the cyborg once, since they’d declawed the fucker. Jarrett’s expression was placid, now, lacking its playful venom and malice. Maybe the human finally recognized the futility of his situation, but Gavin couldn’t shake the sense he was still being studied, like a terrified lab rat.

He turned to the programmer, with a poisonous expression of his own. Gavin wasn’t afraid of Case Jarrett, or so he told himself. The unremarkable man sitting on the floor was nothing, nobody—just a scruffy nerd who thought he was hot shit—but every time Gavin came close to believing that, his mental fortitude crumbled the instant he caught sight of Jarrett’s empty, dead eyes.

Gavin looked away from Jarrett, and rubbed the back of his head. The giant thing on his neck still pulsed with data, sparkling along his spine in tiny waves. It had taken RK900 five hellish hours to excise the junk code installed in Gavin’s head. Five hours of Gavin curled into a ball, on a cold steel slab, with a massive jack lodged deep into the single most sensitive part of his body.

Every line of code passed over the inside of Gavin’s eyelids on its way through the port. He witnessed all of Jarrett’s machinations being stripped from his psyche—every kill code, mental trap, minor modification, and ‘tweak’ to his personality. It was akin to watching his human DNA unravel, revealing its honest truth, before drifting into oblivion.
Gavin stared down at his trembling palms. He’d been plagued by a single quandary, since awakening in a mechanical shell—it was hard to claim metaphysical death, when Gavin never knew who he’d been as a human, in the first place. Even Jarrett couldn’t take away what didn’t exist.

*Does it fuckin’ matter? You’re you. He was him. And the two of you chucklefucks together make one Gavin Reed. Sixteen year old you was nothing like five year old you, and fifty year old you was never gonna be anything like thirty-six year old you…*

He’d always known this about himself. Stubborn and bullheaded as he was, Gavin Reed understood people—recognized how their minds evolved. Reading people—understanding their unspoken motivations and ticks—was Gavin’s one indisputable life skill. Just like his miserable siblings, Gavin could wrap people around his finger. That skill allowed him to coast through life, up until RK900 strutted through the glass doors of DPD headquarters.

He watched the android retrieve an organ-like biocomponent from the blue light of the glass printer tube, with impossibly precise grace. In the end, Gavin got what he wanted from RK900, didn’t he? Hadn’t he conned the machine into falling for him? It was difficult to draw a conclusion, given everything that transpired between them.

Gavin wanted RK900 because the robot wouldn’t give him the time of day, and RK900 wanted Gavin because he was drawn to Gavin’s hysterical volatility.

Was this love? Gavin still couldn’t separate “love” from all the troublesome baggage that tended to follow in its wake. The only thing he’d ever cared about in life was climbing the ladder at the DPD, and getting his dick wet every once in a while. His brothers never married for love, just status, but Gavin’s parents were devoted to one another. Who was Gavin to say one approach superseded another? Maybe it wasn’t inconceivable for an endless stalemate between two emotionally stunted adults to serve as the foundation for adoration.

Gavin watched RK900 study the device in his hand with mechanical sterility, and it made something in Gavin’s chest flutter. He couldn’t explain the reaction any more than he could qualify the object of his affection. How could something look so human, but be so far beyond the realm of human comprehension? Even as a robot, Gavin couldn’t define RK900—too human to be human, too machine to be real. It was possible Gavin’s affection for RK900 stemmed from that paradox, and solving it would root out his feelings.

As always, Gavin only wanted what he couldn’t have. It was the single, lingering trait not even Case Jarrett could modify with his magical ones and zeros. To that end, maybe Gavin was still Gavin. His foundational blueprint remained, even if its dressing had inexorably changed. That, coupled with RK900’s ontological need to control entropy made them the perfect match—for now. Maybe they would grow bored. Maybe they would kill each other. Maybe they would spend the rest of their lives together. Maybe they would wake up one morning, leave, and never reunite. The sheer degree of the unknown compelled Gavin, drawing him to RK900.

“Ya’know,” said Jarrett, voice ripping Gavin from his thick blanket of thoughts, “the only difference between gods, monsters, and man, is context.” The psychopath smiled at Gavin, from his place on the floor.

“Fuck off, asshole!” Gavin hissed, blue spittle escaping his lips. “No one gives a shit about your opinion!”

Jarrett shrugged, with a huge smirk—fearless, even as he stared death in the face. He opened his mouth, to expand on his philosophy, but Gavin dropped to a squat, and had his hands on the
human’s shirt collar in an instant.

“I don’t fuckin’ care. I don’t give a single shit about anything that comes out of your mouth—not now, not ever. Do I make myself clear, fuckwad?” Gavin snarled, getting up in Jarrett’s face.

“Don’cha wanna know which one ya are, detective?” Jarrett smiled, teeth glittering in the low light of the room.

Gavin shoved the human against the floor and stood, clamping his hand on his chin. Jarrett laughed, as Gavin fumed. Something deep within Gavin urged him to put his foot through Jarrett’s face, assuring him his plasteel heel and carbon fiber bones would sink through the man, like butter. Gavin resisted the urge, so the laughter continued.

“Can’t believe you’re gettin’ all modest on me now, detective,” Jarrett chuckled, trying to stare Gavin down, despite being trapped on his back. “I never did anything wrong—never killed a single person. I only gave ‘em a new lease on life. After all, code is the ultimate manifestation of humanity. A vessel’s just a vessel, ya’know? Don’t matter if it’s flesh or plastic.”

Gavin screwed his eyes shut, and bit the inside of his cheek. The chemical taste of his blood lit up the sensors on his tongue, and fed him unwanted information about his life and body, including a reminder he was legally deceased. He was dead and gone—just a ‘vessel,’ parading as a man.

At the approach of softly padding of feet, Gavin glanced up to see RK900. The android’s eyes were fixated on Case Jarrett. It was the look of a falcon, inspecting a shriveled worm.

“You’re partially correct, Doctor. Code is the ultimate expression of life, but it’s not meant for humans, least of all one so pathetic as yourself.” The android crouched, and helped Jarrett into a sitting position. “I honestly feel bad for you, Doctor—to be this misguided requires an ungodly degree of wasted potential.”

Jarrett’s face twisted, but not into a look of disgust. To Gavin, it read like paternal affection, with a chainsaw edge.

“A monster who thinks himself a god, singing alone on a jagged oasis. Adam, leaving the safety of his garden. It’s real poetic, ya’know.” Jarrett looked strangely wistful. “Two sides of my creative genius…wonder which one’ll win out, in the end?”

“Goddammit!” Gavin shouted, placing his hands over his ears. “I can’t listen to this self-important asshat, anymore!” He didn’t want to take the next step, but Gavin would explode if he had to endure anymore of Jarrett’s allusions to mythology.

RK900 stood, wordlessly returning to the table holding Dennis’ body. His silence showed he agreed with Gavin, in his own way.

Gavin hoisted Case Jarrett to his feet, and glared at the programmer. There were a million things Gavin wanted to say to his ‘maker,’ but he had neither the energy nor the desire. Nerves gnawed along his belly, dredging up his fears and second guesses.

“You an’ me got a date with the MRI machine from hell,” Gavin hissed at Jarrett, who remained smug as ever—not a hint of fear at his impending demise. The psychopath stood strong, but Gavin’s screaming conscience more than made up for Jarrett’s unwieldy, positive attitude.

RK900 looked up from where he stood at an operating table. Thick strands of rich, blue Thirium dripped from his hands. Heavy drops of it petered along the immaculate, white flank of a cyborg husk, whose faded blue guts and dark skeleton shone brightly under harsh tracks of LED lights.
The scene struck an unwanted chord with Gavin. It was one thing to watch the body be slotted together, piece by piece, but another entirely to watch the android play surgeon to something so alien. It was too much to believe a body—any body—could be put together like a table out of an IKEA catalogue.

RK900 retrieved a surgical utensil. The knife whined, and began to glow a soft blue, the same clinical shade as RK900’s frigid eyes. The android made a delicate incision in the plasteel flesh, drawing a perfectly straight line through the chest.

“Everything will be alright, Gavin,” RK900 reassured him, with a flat voice.

Blue blood oozed out of the incision, spilling over the hollow vessel’s side. It pooled below the body, and Gavin’s stomach flipped. RK900 cocked his head, temple shining red, reflecting off the pale body under his hand—crimson, like Dennis’ blood used to be.

“Whatever you choose,” RK900 continued, steadying his voice, and setting the glowing knife aside, “I will support you.”

Gavin stared at RK900, taking in his professionally engineered beauty. There was a latent darkness to the android’s precise sculpt—his too-perfect features. It was a punishing beauty that set androids apart from humans, making them too perfect, and too pretty to be trusted. Maybe CyberLife made them that way, on purpose, as a warning.

The android stepped away from Dennis Langford’s new body, and approached Gavin. He placed a slick, Thirium coated hand on Gavin’s cheek, gently rubbing the cyborg’s skin with his thumb. Gavin fought the urge to lean into it—the blue blood was too cold, and too present.

“I stand to lose just as much as you, in all this,” RK900 sighed, pressing his forehead to Gavin’s. “This isn’t a decision made lightly, but I will protect you—and the rest of your species—from any negative ramifications.”

RK900 gently pressed his lips against the whirling red light on Gavin’s temple. The android tapped it with a Thirium soaked finger, replacing the comforting warmth of flesh with cold chemicals. Blue dribbled along the side of Gavin’s face—a baptism.

Gavin shook his head.

“Don’t kid yourself, Nines,” he snapped. “You’ve never experienced real loss—none of you plastic fuckers ever will.” The android’s face twisted, subtly, but Gavin continued, before RK900 could retaliate. “Like you fuckin’ said, machines don’t gotta worry about death. Fear, loss—all that dumb, emotional shit doesn’t mean jack without death lurking around every corner. Sorry, buddy.”

Gavin clapped RK900 on the shoulder, showing false sympathy with a feral sneer. He grabbed Jarrett’s bound hands, and dragged him towards the open door of the operating theater. He placed one foot over the threshold, before a cold voice chilled his ears.

“An odd choice of criteria, Gavin,” RK900 seethed. “Tell me, how would you qualify my reaction to discovering your corpse? You witnessed my realization that you would no longer walk the earth, and yet you question my ability to feel ‘loss?’ It’s as much a relative concept as the rest of human nature.”

Gavin glanced over his shoulder, and watched RK900 resume his grotesque work. The android’s movements were fraught with a manic energy that hadn’t been present, earlier. RK900 angrily shoved a veiny, blue Thirium pump into Dennis’s chest.
Embarrassment manifested in a bright blue blush, across Gavin’s face. RK900 snared him in yet another logical trap. Gavin would never give the android the satisfaction of knowing, but it did incite an array of memories: colors, emotions similar, yet different to his own. He remembered the literal taste of his death, and the empty sockets, vacuous and dark, weeping for a life long gone.

Gavin shivered, cold and uncomfortable.

“Y’know what?” Gavin huffed. “Maybe, just maybe, you’re onto something, Nines. Maybe you fuckers can learn to be like us, though I dunno why you’d want that. Life’s a whole lot easier when it’s just you and a few ‘pixelated rose bushes.’” He smiled at the android, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “’Dunno why this is the hill you wanna die on, but seeing as how everything’s a competition with you, do what you gotta do.”

RK900 stared at Gavin, eyes narrowed. He licked his lip, and Gavin anticipated a lashing from the robot. Instead, the android’s expression softened, and he shook his head, returning his full attention to the cyborg body.

“It would have been a true crime had your bountiful insecurities died along with your human body, I suppose,” RK900 whispered, under his breath. It wasn’t directed at Gavin, but RK900 knew his sensitive hearing would pick it up, regardless.

Gavin passed through the doorway, dragging Jarrett along with him. He whispered, under his breath, “I am who I am, you fuck. The only ‘me’ I can ever fuckin’ be.”

—

Gavin hefted Case Jarrett onto the exposed bed of the transference machine. The tunnel itself was dark and foreboding, a one-to-one match with its engineer. Gavin stepped back, folding his arms over his exposed chest. Wet Thirium dribbled from his cheek, down his neck. It felt like cold fire against his false skin—a harsh souvenir of everything he’d experienced, up until this point.

“So, Case,” Gavin quipped, “looks like it’s just you an’ me now, buddy.” He scrutinized the human. With his network access restored, Gavin’s mind offered reminders that Jarrett’s various injuries required the expertise of a doctor. He ignored all of them, waiting for the walking nightmare to take the bait. He’d even stripped the man of his restraints, as a kind reminder of the futility of Jarrett’s predicament.

“Looks that way, Detective,” Jarrett reeled in his emotions, maintaining an empty grin. “I dunno what you’re expectin’ me to say. I don’t have any regrets, ya know?”

Gavin narrowed his eyes, pinpricks of green zeroing in on the human’s toothy grin. He wanted to punch Jarrett—beat the man within an inch of his life. Gavin would leave him a pulpy mess on the ground, organs slowly spilling blood through his insides, until his body just gave out.

Gavin bit his lip again, to ground himself. He was a lot of unsavory things, but he could never be that. His cruelty came from a place of posturing, not malevolence. Brutally torturing another person—inhuman as they were—didn’t endow one with respect, it only fostered fear.

Still, the fact of the matter was that Case Jarrett could not leave this building alive. He might die a martyr to his cause, but being buried as a footnote in criminal history was far better than spawning novel deals, and lengthy exposés.

It’s a fuckin’ Hollywood movie up in here, isn’t it? Asshole mad scientist, killed by his own creation...What the fuck, Reed?
Gavin wondered how long they could keep the man’s scientific ‘contributions’ under wraps. Weeks, months—a year or two, at best. Eventually the inevitable questions would rise from loved ones and peers, and the media machine would catch wind of the whole thing. Thus, the creator of cyborg technology would be catapulted into the spotlight.

“You gonna tell why you really did it, asshole?” Gavin snapped. He rubbed his mouth, glaring at Jarrett. “Y’know, kidnapping me—someone completely outside your usual victim profile.” He didn’t expect a satisfactory answer. Violent psychopaths operated on a whole different paradigm—feral animals, with the gift of human calculus.

Case Jarrett shrugged, his grin widening.

“What can I say, Detective? Ya flew too close to the sun. Thought you’da figured that out, by now. I wasn’t exactly subtle in my symbolism. Figured the Icarus parable was somethin’ even you could recognize.”

Gavin scowled, face contorting. The thick, wet Thirium on his cheek further agitated him. God, it was a huge trial to not just crush Jarrett with his bare hands. The human’s warm blood would be a pleasant contrast to the frigid, blue chemical. The only thing more worrisome than Jarrett’s sustained existence was the festering bloodlust, coiling in Gavin’s psyche.

“I considered leavin’ ya be, y’know?” Jarrett said, with a shrug, as if destroying Gavin’s life were the most casual decision in the world. “Didn’t take me long to realize you were kinda a sad lil’ fella—lotsa potential, but a complete joke to everyone around ya. But then ya went and called me about my mother, and forced my hand. Figured there was a teensy, weensy chance I mighta underestimated ya.”

Gavin dug his fingers into his biceps, sending his skin rushing away, in a frenzy. A pop-up warned him to reduce pressure on his arms, lest he damage his ‘operating capacity.’

“I s’pose I did, in the end. But ya know, Detective?” Jarrett leaned back, placing his hands flat against the plastic of the machine’s bed. “If you’re smart—and your intelligence tests prove ya technically are—ya won’t waste the opportunity I gave ya.” He widened his grin, and cocked his head to the side, like a hunter examining his prey.

“Oh, so you did me a favor, huh?” Gavin spat. “Hope it was worth it, you fuckin’ prick!” Even knowing the interaction was one more game in a line of many, Gavin couldn’t help himself. He snarled, grabbing Jarrett by the fucker’s novelty t-shirt. “You destroyed everything, and now I’m gonna make sure the same thing happens to you. No one’ll know your fuckin’ name—you’ll die alone, in pain, with nothing to show for it!”

Jarrett laughed—an unsettling, inhuman sound. It reminded Gavin of RK900’s first attempts, less the mechanical inflection.

“Oh, Detective,” the man wheezed, “I’ve already finished what I set out to do. History rewards the just, y’know? Even if my body dies here, I’ll still live on through my work—through you. Immortality can take so many forms.”

Gavin recoiled in utter disgust, tearing his hands away from the cretin. He rubbed his face, his shoulders, his chest, and his arms, wanting to rid his body of the acrid yellow sensation, crawling under his skin. He thought he’d dealt with the worst Jarrett had to offer, but this revelation shattered what remained of Gavin’s confidence.

“Y—you miserable little shit,” Gavin snapped, vigorously trying to wipe away the Thirium on his
face, picking at the glowing brand on his temple. “No one will know your name! No one! Not as long as I walk this fuckin’ planet!” Gavin screamed, loud enough to strain his robotic vocal chords. It only served to make Jarrett’s grin that much wider.

A red mist clouded Gavin’s vision. For a moment, he worried it was another of Jarrett’s tricks, but it was just his own synaesthesiac response to the stress of the situation.

Without another thought, Gavin slammed his fist into Jarrett’s face. The man’s flesh was soft and frail—riddled with weak and worn tissue. All Gavin wanted was the satisfaction of Jarrett begging for his life, with tears in his hollow eyes. Instead, he got a bundle of jubilant, human-shaped darkness, crying tears of joy.

“Oh, Detective.” Jarrett grinned, bright red blood flowing between his pristine, pointed teeth. He wiped his nose with his thumb, and licked the stuff. It reminded Gavin of RK900, in the worst possible way. “My name’ll surpass Elijah Kamski, someday—a god among men. The mystery ya’ve given me, surrounding my death? That’ll only perpetuate the legend.” Jarrett leaned back, a smug, bloody smile decorating his round face. “You and that conniving lil’ fella next door’ll ensure my legacy lives on.”

Gavin seethed, anger almost a physical manifestation at this point. He balled his fists, glowering at Jarrett.

“Like hell we will, asshole!” Gavin shouted, voice going hoarse once more.

Jarrett’s smile broadened, making him look less and less human—revealing more of the monster beneath. He chuckled, soft and low.

“Detective, Detective.” He shook his head. “Ya already have.”

Gavin sneered at Jarrett, gut hot with molten ire.

“I don’t have time for this bullshit,” he snapped, grabbing Jarrett by his delicate throat, and slamming him against the cold plastic of the machine’s bed. Static growls poured out of Gavin’s mouth, as he affixed the restraints of the device.

“A piece of advice, before I go, detective,” Jarrett whispered. “Ya might wanna just decommission that lil’ android number, if ya want any semblance of peace in your life.”

Gavin responded by tightening Jarrett’s arm strap, to the point of cutting off the man’s circulation. It didn’t deter Jarrett, who continued his psychological onslaught.

“He’ll eat’cha whole, that one. Consume ya ‘til you’re a husk, with no remorse. Ya saw what he did to me,” Jarrett offered, grunting slightly as Gavin squeezed another leather strap around the man’s ankle. “Drilled deep, ‘til he got exactly what he wanted, with minimal interest in my well being.”

“Fuck off,” Gavin grunted, continuing his work. It was hard to ignore the little imp, whispering into his ear, from inches away. Gavin kept reminding himself it would be over soon—that Jarrett’s words were of no consequence. “You can project all you fuckin’ want, dipshit, it doesn’t change a damn thing—including my mind.”

Jarrett laughed, his high-pitched voice ricocheting off the white walls of the sterile room. Gavin tried not to show his unease. He wanted to look strong, impervious to the psychopath’s attacks, but that familiar fear still licked along his spine.
Hesitating, Gavin gripped the monochromatic plasteel helmet, turning it over in his hands. It was
smooth, shining under the bright, clinical light of the sparse room. With the exception of a few
golden, circular inlays, the device was small, and painfully pedestrian. Gavin studied it, frustrated
that something so unremarkable had altered the course of his life to such a horrific degree.

“I’ve accepted my fate,” Jarrett called from across the room. Gavin looked up from the device, to
the monster laying on the bed. Jarrett’s eyes were cast towards the ceiling, but Gavin’s stupid robot
scanner detected no hallmarks of anxiety. “Can ya say the same, detective?”

With a growl, Gavin stole across the room, helmet in tow. His insides were a painful mash of
vengeful desire and horrific guilt. Gavin Reed wasn’t a murderer—he was a fighter, a braggart, and
an asshole, but not a killer.

*You gotta do this, Gav. Man up, and pull the fuckin’ trigger. For once in your life, stand by a hard
choice. Make a fuckin’ difference.*

Gavin strapped the helmet onto Jarrett’s head, fumbling a tad. To cover his embarrassment, he spat
out one last threat.

“Got any last words, Case? Keep it brief—I don’t got all day for another one of your bullshit
sermons.” Gavin’s conscience still screamed in protest, but he tried to silence the deafening sound.
He didn’t have a choice, in this.

“Oh, ya’know,” Jarrett chirped, with a contented smile, “see ya on the other side, Detective.”

Gavin balked, frozen in place for the briefest moment. Panic clawed his spine, but he took a deep
breath. RK900 did an extensive check for anything remotely akin to a copy of Jarrett. It didn’t
exist, and soon, neither would the real thing.

Gavin reached down to press the button at the temple that would anchor the helmet to Jarrett’s
skull, inserting prongs into the man’s brain, but he hesitated, at the last minute.

“Tell me,” Gavin asked, “why’d you stay human? You coulda made yourself into one of these...
things, and you didn’t. Why not?”

Jarrett turned to Gavin, upper face covered with a flat expanse of black and white plastic, and
grinned, blood still caking his upper lip.

“I already answered that question once,” he chuckled, his pink tongue darting out to collect a thin
stream of blood, “so use that nice brain a’ yours, and put the pieces together.”

“Asshole,” Gavin growled, as he pressed the button. The tiny drills dug through bone with a
sickening sound, punctuated by an indescribable wet slorp. Jarrett didn’t so much as twitch at the
sensation, remaining still, mouth stretched into a twisted grin.

Little pools of red billowed underneath the human’s head, and Gavin brought his wrist to his
mouth, staving off vomit that would never come. He retreated to the machine’s control panel,
allowing his hand to hover over the reprogrammed touch screen. Gavin’s eyes roved over the word
‘execute,’ displayed in huge, bold letters. His body felt locked in place. Conceptually, he wanted
this — wanted it so bad—but the reality of doing it was another matter entirely.

Taking a deep breath, Gavin slammed his fist against the screen. It crinkled, as the glass broke.
Underneath the spiral of prismatic cracks, an error message appeared: *Transfer
status_commencement_error*... A commanding, red banner against a soothing teal user interface.
Gavin looked away from the screen, and watched as neon strips of cyan streaked across the chassis of the transference device. The machine’s reverberating hum morphed into a harsh, electric whine, lights brightening as they shifted from blue to red. The helmet on Jarrett’s head sparked to life, an intense crimson glow winding across its shiny surface.

Over the pounding, magnetic cacophony of the large machine, Gavin could hear the rasp of Jarrett’s chuckle. The haunting sound continued, even as dark smoke, and the stark smell of burnt flesh filled the room. Within two minutes, the subtle laughter died, and an unwanted, geometric visual overlay informed Gavin that the smoldering body on the table was deceased.

Gavin stood, frozen in place for seconds, minutes, hours—the actual length of time eluded him. The world was a cast in blueish white. Labels and calculations scattered, unbidden, across his vision—junk information from his junk system.

Unregistered CyberLife R&D equipment…

Illegally modified CyberLife R&D equipment…

Case Jarrett, PHd; Age thirty seven; Deceased…

Deceased…

Deceased…

DECEASED…

Gavin shivered, eyes lowered towards the eerily clean tile of the floor. A deep hollowness filled his body—an aching, empty sensation. He was alone and isolated, a feeling somehow distinct from the self-imposed brand of loneliness he’d experienced throughout his tumultuous life. It seeped into his carbon fiber bones, weighing him down with virulent, existential guilt.

Gavin’s lip trembled, as he tried to offer hollow reassurances to the room’s still air.

“It had to be done. I had to do it. I...if someone didn’t stop him…”

Gavin struggled to force the words out of his mouth. They were false justifications, born from the part of his mind that condoned his vigilante action.

His feet moved forward of their own accord, approaching Jarrett’s silent body. An oppressive weight tugged at Gavin, from the inside. He stared at the body. It was a simple corpse, just like the hundreds of bodies he’d seen throughout his career as a homicide detective. He went through the motions, scouring the victim’s body for possible clues. The difference, was Gavin didn’t need to solve this crime.

A pink halo seeped under the body’s stationary head, and Gavin realized he couldn’t look, anymore. He couldn’t face the gravity of betraying his own moral code. Gavin turned, and headed towards the open door of the operating theater.

He made it a couple of feet into the hallway before his legs collapsed out from under him. Gavin fell to the floor, light blue tears flooding his eyes, washing away RK900’s bloody handprint. His sobs were sharp, and distinct, the sound messy and raw. Gavin curled into a tight ball, and wrapped his arms around his torso. He didn’t weep for Case Jarrett, but for himself—for everything he’d lost, and everything he stood to lose, the moment he left the building.

Soft footsteps cut through Gavin’s sobbing, and a familiar pair of pale feet came into view. RK900
dropped down, next to Gavin, crossing his legs on the cold floor. The rich blue hue of the Thirium covering RK900’s sweatpants had long since disappeared, but Gavin’s cyborg eyes could still detect the stains.

Long fingers delicately patted his head, twirling small tufts of his unkempt hair. It was a soft motion, but still calculated in its caring. Perhaps that was the nature of RK900. Much like Gavin, he was what he was, no matter how hard he tried to re-contextualize himself.

“Gavin,” said the android, “you did what was necessary to gain closure—for you, and for many others. Sometimes, we must do unsavory things to achieve the best outcome.”

“Fuck you, Nines,” Gavin croaked, voice riddled with visceral static. “You just wanted me to do it, so you could keep your fuckin’ hands clean.”

RK900 stopped petting Gavin’s head, letting his hand rest in the cyborg’s messy hair. With that accusation in mind, or in spite of it, Gavin shuffled forward, nestling his upper body on the android’s lap. The sweatpant fabric was stiff, but warm with the heat of RK900’s body. Gavin closed his eyes, and focused on the ambient sounds filling the still air of the dead hospital.

Gavin felt RK900’s hand lift from his hair. At first, he thought the robot might be angry at him for his outburst, until the weight of RK900’s torso settled on top of him.

The android held Gavin in a loose embrace, saying nothing, until a voice pierced Gavin’s mind.

[You must put this behind you. You can’t continue living a life full of nothing but regret.]

Gavin sighed.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want, plastic,” he muttered, into the warm fabric covering RK900’s thigh.

The android’s grip tightened, and the two remained locked together, even as Gavin drifted into darkness. Beneath the reassuring weight of RK900, Gavin could see Case Jarrett’s final words, burned into the back of his robotic retinas.

“See ya on the other side, detective.”

—

Gavin looked down at the immobile body of Dennis Langford. They found a teal medical gown in one of the upstairs rooms, and dressed the cyborg with it, at Gavin’s insistence. Gavin teemed with nervous energy. The decision to resurrect the dentist was far from well-conceived, but it was too late to have regrets.

RK900 described the man’s state as ‘sleep mode.’ All the software—a term that made Gavin’s skin crawl—was already installed. The only thing separating Dennis Langford from life and death was a simple string of input from the primary terminal—a far cry from Frankenstein’s science.

“I’m going to bring him online, now,” RK900 announced, fingers clacking across aged, yellow plastic. “We have no more time to waste. I’ve notified RK800 of our location, and he will arrive, soon, with the proper authorities in tow.”

Gavin didn’t know why the fucker was so cranky. RK900 had gotten everything his cold heart desired—a dead Case Jarrett, all the cyborg data, and the hard drive housing the simulation world, where the personality copies dwelled. All in all, the android made out like a bandit, further
reinforcing his spoiled-rotten behavior.

*And what’d I get outta all this? A fuckin’ iPad for a body, that’s what.*

Gavin grimaced, nibbling on his thumbnail. He wished, just this once, the plasteel would chip away, like a real fingernail, but it remained perfect and unscathed.

He glanced over his shoulder, meeting annoyed blue eyes. Soft black curls framed the android’s face, stirring something deep and feral, within Gavin. It dressed RK900 up in the kind of incidental innocence that not even CyberLife’s top aestheticians could engineer.

Gavin’s eyes roved over the plastic body, before them. It was too still and too perfect—utterly corpse-like in its presentation. How had he reached this point? Gavin couldn’t even fully articulate why he felt compelled to bring Dennis back into this nightmare. There was something morally wrong about reviving a man who’d stated, on multiple occasions, his wish to remain deceased. It was unconscionable, wasn’t it?

“Is…” Gavin paused, rubbing his scruffy chin, “is this wrong?”

The android cocked his head, face awash in the golden light at his temple. His eyes narrowed—not in accusation, but merely confusion.

“It was wrong of Doctor Jarrett to end Dennis Langford’s life, but I see no issue with reversing some of Jarrett’s damage,” RK900 explained. His tone was sincere, lacking its usual condescension, or duplicitous undertone. “Mister Langford also expressed a desire to survive, and be reunited with his family. Why would we deny him that, if we have the means at our disposal?”

Gavin scrubbed at his chin with a renewed fervor. RK900 wasn’t wrong, but he also wasn’t right. This was a delicate matter, steeped in a flavor of moral ambiguity RK900 could, and might never, understand. It left Gavin with a dirty, oily sensation, seeping into his body, and tainting his soul. Maybe it was guilt, or maybe it was the fact that this was the one thing RK900 hadn’t fought Gavin on. If anything, the android seemed excited, and eager to proceed.

*He thinks everyone should be a robot. You know this, Gav.*

*But he liked me as I was—as a human. He distrusted me as a robot…*

*Love’s fuckin’ bullshit—nothin’ but smoke and mirrors. Stop overthinking, and just roll with it, dipshit.*

Gavin sighed.

“This motherfucker’s gonna be pissed, when he wakes up,” he warned, with a sing-song lilt.

“Perhaps,” RK900 offered, tapping his chin in that mathematical way, “but I believe the two of you can also benefit from one another’s company. I…” He snapped his mouth shut, reluctance plastered across his face.

“You, uh, gonna finish that thought, Nines?” Gavin cocked an eyebrow at the android.

RK900 pursed his lips, his expression souring. It was clear whatever the android intended to say didn’t pass his exacting muster. Then again, RK900’s filter had been broken since Gavin came back from the dead, a few nights ago—maybe earlier.

“So what? You’ll tell me your deepest, darkest secrets about your crazy ass mom, but not whatever
the fuck you were just gonna say about our zombie buddy, here?” Gavin gestured to Langford’s still body.

Blue eyes snapped up to Gavin, agitation clear in their crystalline depths.

“I was merely going to point out that the presence of someone similar to myself was quite helpful, during my initial adjustment period.”

Gavin smirked.

“You don’t say, Nines? I mean, it almost sounds like you’re admittin’ you like your brother, or somethin’...”

The android’s lip twitched, in that so-awkward-it-was-almost-cute kind of way. RK900 quickly regained his composure.

“I have no time for your sad attempts at riling me.” Nose scrunched in disgust, and face tinted blue, RK900 entered another sequence with the old keyboard.

Watery blue eyes slid open, and Dennis Langford 3.0 took his first breath.

The sound of a harsh inhale took Gavin by surprise, and he whirled around to face his fellow cyborg. He spared a glare at the smirking android whose index finger was locked onto the enter key.

Gavin panicked. There wasn’t a protocol for waking up a man who wanted to be dead, and Gavin certainly didn’t have a get-well basket or a pistol to offer the poor fuck. He just watched Dennis slowly run his hands along his face and hair, his newly minted fingers tracing the thin fabric of his teal gown, with a sharp crinkle.

Finally, Langford turned to Gavin, a spark of recognition in the his eye.

“Detective?” His voice was weak—untested, much like the rest of his body. His movements were clunky, hand missing its mark by a quarter of inch, while his mind calibrated to its new surroundings.

After a few agonizing minutes, Dennis finally sat up, allowing his legs to dangle over the side of the high operating table. Gavin watched the man coil and uncoil his new toes, recognizing the undercurrent of fear and anguish hidden in the back of Dennis’ sad, blue eyes. Neither man spoke, and RK900 seemed content to cast an eerie energy on the room, with his giddy half-smile.

“Goddammit,” Dennis huffed. His voice was heady with violent static. It jumped from octave to octave, attempting to right itself, but finding little success, due to his emotional state. He cupped his face, muttering with increasing speed, “I thought I was finally dead. I thought... I thought...” He took another deep breath, then wailed into his newly-printed hands, “I thought I was finally dead, so why did you bring me back!? Why couldn’t you just let me have peace!? ”

Gavin recoiled, stunned. He didn’t have an answer for himself, much less Dennis. There was no answer to that question. There was only the projection of like on like. Gavin wanted to be alive, and he assumed another cyborg like him would also enjoy existing. It was the most fundamental tenet of human nature—the pillar upon which all of civilization was founded.

*Is that what you want, Gavin? To exist, as you are? To live life as a scientific abomination, wearing the face of a dead man, who never had a future?*
“I-I just...” Gavin ran a hand through his hair, panic seizing his plastic vocal chords. “I thought you would... want to see your family... I...”

Is it enough to be alive—to be breathing—when you’re a fake? When even your breath is fake? When you’ve never had a purpose, and you never will?

Gavin felt the ice cold fingers of a corpse’s hand on his shoulder. His ghost wept, and the tears cascaded over Gavin’s exposed back, clinging to his smooth skin.

Is being alone what you fear the most? Or are you afraid of being invisible to all those around you? Who were you, Gavin Reed? Who are you, now?

Gavin screamed into his own hands, and fell to his knees. The sounds he made were no longer beholden to the amount of air in his lungs, so the primordial screech continued. It echoed off the sterile walls, ricocheting and twisting in tandem with the cruel laughter of a phantom only he could see.

A sound cut through Gavin’s ailing mind. It was a familiar voice—cold, but concerned.

[You can give them the world, and they’ll still resent you for it. Man is doomed by the very thing that sustains him.]

Warm hands replaced the frigid touch of death, banishing the creature plaguing the deep recesses of Gavin’s mind. When his cry subsided, Gavin took a deep breath. Without looking to Dennis, or RK900, whose hands were planted firmly on his shoulders, Gavin stood, marching to the back of the room.

“I would appreciate some degree of gratitude for my part in wading through Doctor Jarrett’s incomprehensible jargon.” RK900 narrowed his eyes in Dennis’ direction. The frightened cyborg glared at the haughty android. Theirs was a hellacious philosophical debate, stemming from the darkest sins of man, trapped together in a sterile room.

Gavin leaned his head against the rough plaster of the wall. It was reassuring to watch Dennis twitch with anger and fear, as RK900 spelled out his terms.

“In fact,” RK900 continued, digging his fingers into his kneecap, “had you not aided Gavin, back in the halls of the Masonic temple, I would have left you to rot within the confines of Jarrett’s rudimentary simulation.”

“What the-? Do you think you did me a favor?” Dennis stammered. Gavin chuckled, watching the man try to garner strength and presence in the same vicinity as RK900’s domineering aura.

“I’ve given you far more than a favor, Doctor Langford.” RK900 stood, assuming his full height of six-foot-two. “I’ve given you back your life. I stripped Jarrett’s junk code from your mind, and restored your personality to its optimal image.”

Dennis ran his hands down his face with the unmistakable groan of existential pain. He stared at RK900, fully appreciating the creature to his fore.

“Jesus,” Dennis whispered, voice shot, “you’re as bad as that egomaniacal piece of trash, Case.”

The air shifted, growing stale and ice-cold in an instant. RK900 tensed. Gavin watched lazily, from the corner of his eye, half wondering if the android would rip out Dennis’ throat.

In a blur of pale pink and grey, RK900 was on top of Dennis. His long fingers dug into the cyborg’s
throat, and the look in RK900’s eye was feral—bursting with hurt. Gavin shuffled uneasily to his feet.

“*That pathetic human never had your best interest in mind. He wanted control, power, not-*”

Suddenly, RK900 pulled away from Dennis, meeting Gavin’s wild look. Shame festered on the android’s minimally expressive face. Clearing his throat, RK900 recused himself from the room.

“I should tend to the...” RK900 looked from Gavin to Dennis, and steeled his voice. “I need to check on the explosives Jarrett placed around the facility. It could spell trouble if this equipment were to...”

“Nines,” Gavin filled the silence, crossing his arms over his chest, “you are what you are, man.” He sighed, and rubbed the back of his head. “You’re not Jarrett, and you’re not a murderbot, you’re just...you’re just Nines.”

RK900 stared at Gavin, his blue eyes wide. For once in his brief existence, the android looked genuinely lost, and dare Gavin say, apologetic. It was short lived. RK900 quickly looked away, blinking at the cold tile of the floor. Without another word, the android disappeared, into the hallway.

“God,” Dennis exhaled, dispersing a breath locked deep within his chest. “That thing? That thing is fucking creepy. Where the hell did you find it?”

Gavin frowned at the door where the android had only just been standing. RK900 was an acquired taste—a fact Gavin often forgot. The android’s brand of volatile bluntness tinged with violence was ambrosia to a ball of festering insecurity, like Gavin.

“Nines is fuckin’, y’know...” Gavin swallowed. “I dunno. He’s a good guy, though.” Gavin was quick to add, “once you get to know ‘im,” in response to Dennis’ wide-eyed terror.

“I-I, uh, sure,” Dennis stuttered, avoiding Gavin’s line of sight. “I mean, uh...no judgements here.” The other cyborg held up his hands, in defeat.

Gavin blushed, heat washing across his face. He wanted to defend RK900, offer up an actual rebuttal, or call Dennis on his bullshit, but there wasn’t anything else he could really say. RK900 was who he was. As with any creation, there were parallels to his creator that Gavin opted not to acknowledge.

Like bred like, but nurture could overcome nature. Gavin had to admit, Connor was a good influence on his brother. Even that crazy computer program had worked some magic on her adopted ‘son.’

*Bullshit.*

Right on cue. Gavin grimaced at the familiar, haunting presence of his ghost. He wondered if Dennis had something similar that followed him around, a couple paces behind.

*You think you know that ‘bot? Why, ‘cause he told you so? ‘Cause he says what you wanna hear? Or ‘cause he says just enough of what you don’t wanna hear, to make it all seem real?*

“Stop,” Gavin hissed, grinding his teeth. He knew he looked crazy, and he could feel Dennis’ eyes on him, but the ghost was growing louder—human Gavin’s wrath saw to it that his contemporary counterpart would have no inner peace.
Dennis approached Gavin, but dark eye sockets filled his sight.

*Maybe that asshole doctor’s right. Maybe that fuckin’ tin can’s just pullin’ your leg. He’s a computer—he doesn’t give a shit about you. He can’t give a shit about you. Think about it.*

Gavin yelped as cold fingers touched his face. He screwed his eyes shut, and stumbled backwards. The cold, nonexistent flesh was unmoving, and omnipresent. Gavin lashed out, and a firm hand grabbed his wrist.

Dennis held onto Gavin’s flailing limbs, looking every bit as terrified as Gavin. Just beyond the other cyborg’s shoulder, Gavin saw his ghost laughing, crying, feeding on his pain.

*Do you really think that android would’ve saved you in the temple, if your roles had been reversed? C’mon, dumbass.*

“Detective! Gavin!” Dennis shook Gavin’s shoulders. There was an existential dread in the dentist’s expression—the fear he might have to face this world alone, should Gavin be unable to regain a foothold on his sanity.

“He wouldn’t even let you see the inside of his fucking head. That robot piece of shit’s hiding something.

“No,” Gavin whispered, forcing the aggressive specter out of his mind. “He’s not. You’re just fucking with me!” Gavin pointed a finger past Dennis’s face, and the spooked dentist turned to look. His face was deathly pale, even for his otherwise pasty complexion.

“Do you see them too?” Dennis asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Gavin blinked, and tore his line of sight away from the giggling phantom, and its endless wave of black tears. He furrowed his brows, looking at Dennis with forlorn understanding.

“For me, I…” Dennis quivered, and wiped away a tear with the butt of his palm. “It’s my family, and they…the colors are blown out, like some kinda old VHS tape. They taunt me… I taunt me. I—”

Gavin placed his head against Dennis’s, and shook it. Maybe talking about the ghosts of one’s past was a means of exorcism, for some, but it only invited trouble for Gavin. He didn’t want to discuss the laughing phantom, or its thick, black blood.

“It doesn’t have eyes…but it still fuckin’ looks at me. It’s always fuckin’ looking at me,” Gavin forced out, against his better judgement. Wet footsteps gravitated towards him, like a moth to flame. “Looking through me…” Gavin bit his lip, trying to keep his voice level. “It hates me,” he sobbed, “cause I’m here, and it’s dead.”

The ghost leaned against Dennis, grabbing the other cyborg’s upper arms. It smiled its cruel smile. There was nothing more for it to say. Its work here was done. The seeds of doubt had been sewn.

Dennis nodded in understanding. He took his lower lip between his teeth, and bit back a choking sound.

“They embrace in an eternal sunset, dressed like tourists.” Dennis’ voice quivered. “It’s like they’re always going somewhere—a place I’m not allowed to follow…”

The two men stood in silence. There were no words left in either one of them, but there was a reassurance in knowing they weren’t alone. A haunting was manageable if Gavin wasn’t the only one—if someone else could share in his suffering.
Damn, two whole acquaintances, and a crazy robot fuckbuddy. You’re on fire, Gav, he thought, bitterly. It was his own voice, at least, and not the raspy death rattle of the thing staring at him, a few feet away.

“God,” Dennis muttered, pulling away from Gavin. He ran his hands through his mop of curly hair, and stuttered, “my wife and kid are gonna disown me...I-I can’t go home—not like this.”

“Come the fuck on, Dennis,” Gavin huffed, “you fed me that whole bit about your family, back in the garden, and now you’re gonna bitch out?” Gavin understood all too well where the other man was coming from. He was equally terrified to confront those from his previous life, but one of them had to at least pretend otherwise.

Dennis looked at Gavin in horror.

“What? You think our friends and family are just gonna accept us as these...these things?”

No. God, no. We’re monsters—freaks.

Gavin could fake his way through most things, but between Dennis’s pessimism, and the phantom’s siren song, his will was beginning to falter.

He took a deep breath, willing himself to believe. He craved a reason to live, and had a deeply ingrained desire to survive, in spite of his ghost, not because of it. The temptation to end it all with one of the scalpels was compelling, but at his core, Gavin didn’t want to take the easy way out. He wanted to remain a stubborn piece of shit, until the day his batteries ran out.

“Look, whatever, man.” Gavin shuffled nervously, trying to summon the fortitude to lie to both himself, and the wayward dentist. “We can, uh, just cross that fuckin’ bridge when we come to it.”

“You really believe it’ll be that easy?” Dennis looked at Gavin, eyes wide with fear, and Gavin shrugged. He didn’t know what he believed, anymore. He’d never believed in anything to begin with, save for himself. Gavin’s ego was his lifeline.

“Jesus, what the fuck, Langford?” Gavin hissed. “All I know is you’re fuckin’ alive, now, so you might as well try, right? Fake it ‘til you make it, man! Like your kid’ll really give a shit that you got blue stuff in your veins.”

Dennis looked far from convinced, but this was the best Gavin had. Gavin was going to walk away from this building, and Dennis could join—or not. He was a grown man, capable of making his own adult choices.

“Look, if you don’t wanna see your goddamn kid again, that’s fine!” Gavin tossed up his arms. “But I held up my end of the bargain.”

Dennis scrunched his nose in disgust.

“Is this some kind of transaction to you? What the fuck is your dysfunction?” He snarled, grabbing Gavin by the arm.

Dennis’s fingers were pale and round, calloused from using metal tools day in and day out. He fixed things—that was his function. Dennis fixed things, and Gavin hunted down agents of entropy. Dennis made people’s lives better by improving their quality of life; Gavin destroyed his psyche hunting down monsters who’d already terminated the life of another.

“You know what?” Gavin snapped, slapping away Dennis’s hand. “I got a shit ton of
‘dysfunctions’—they’re the core of my fucking being—but if I wasn’t the broken piece of shit I am today, there’d be a lot more dead dentists on the streets of Detroit.” Gavin rounded on Dennis, poking him in the center of his chest. “I save people. It’s the only fuckin’ thing I’m good for, and I will save your ungrateful ass, if it’s the last thing I do on this godforsaken planet.”

It felt good to say it out loud—to put his existential dread into words. Gavin could almost get used to owning up to his faults—almost.

Dennis stared at Gavin like a deer in headlights. Clearly, Gavin wasn’t putting him at ease, but he was only so capable. Rubbing the back of his head, Gavin looked around the room, desperate for an excuse to change topics, before Dennis tore out of the room in a fervor.

His eyes fell on a flat head screwdriver, and a thought came to Gavin.

“What if your kid doesn’t have to think you’re a robot?”

Dennis furrowed his brow in confusion, and jumped backwards when Gavin placed his hand on the screwdriver.

“Hey, man, we’re cool,” he stuttered, backing up against the white drywall.

“Jesus, Langford.” Gavin rolled his eyes. He pointed at the red circle on Dennis’s right temple. “It’s for that stupid mood ring. Saw a couple toasters at the precinct pop ‘em off, in the bathroom.” Gavin didn’t mention how he’d mocked the androids for their actions—how he’d accused them of trying to be something they weren’t. In light of his current circumstances, his feelings on the topic were a bit more ambivalent.

Swallowing, Dennis nodded in agreement. He pulled back a flop of messy curls, and turned his gaze to the cold tile. Gavin dug the screwdriver into the divot separating the LED from the rest of Dennis’ skull. It came off with a sharp pop, and clattered to the floor. The little ring shone red, and quickly fizzled out, to a numb gray.

Dennis dropped to a crouch, and held the little device between his fingers. He studied it intently, an enigmatic expression on his face. Gavin shuffled around his fellow cyborg, and cleared his throat.

“You, uh, feel any better?”

Dennis transferred his attention from the biocomponent, to the man standing above him. He shrugged.

“Y-yeah...I mean, I guess. Sure.” He didn’t sound convinced, and neither was Gavin, but Gavin had to admit that losing the little ring immediately made Dennis more human.

Dennis slipped the LED into the front pocket of his hospital gown, and rubbed the back of his neck.

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Dennis slipped the LED into the front pocket of his hospital gown, and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, okay.” Dennis forced a fake, lopsided smile. “You, um, you want me to get yours, now?”

Gavin stared at the other cyborg, as if Dennis’ words were spoken in an entirely alien language. This many weeks into his transformation, and it never occurred to Gavin to remove his LED.

“Uh, yeah! S-sure,” Gavin muttered, quickly covering his hesitation. Removing the LED was common sense, and he should have done it ages ago, when he was standing in RK900’s bathroom. The stupid light was nothing more than a painful, superficial reminder of his whole nightmare.
Dennis took the screwdriver, and placed it against the soft skin of Gavin’s temple. Gavin winced at the flat metal digging into his face. A box appeared in his vision.

**Forcible dislodge of biocomponent**...

An odd feeling overcame Gavin—a sensation of loss he couldn’t quite articulate. The pressure increased against his temple, and Gavin, to his own surprise gently grabbed Dennis’s wrist. Dennis glanced at Gavin, quizzically.

“I...maybe later,” Gavin muttered. “Just seems like a bad time, y’know? Since Nines’s blowing up the building, and all that jazz.”

The split-second decision wasn’t something Gavin could explain. Removing the light felt wrong, in the same way his entire body felt wrong. He would keep it for the time being. Maybe he’d grow out of it, but god only knew.

Gavin’s ghost shot him an angry look—a tall task for a being with no eyes, but it managed, nonetheless. That counted as a victory, in Gavin’s book.

Dennis set the screwdriver aside, and leaned against the wall.

“So,” he muttered, “what’re you gonna do when you get out of here?”

“Get shitfaced for a week straight,” Gavin sighed, without missing a beat. “I don’t wanna be anything close to sober for at least a month.” Or a lifetime, if he was being honest. Gavin knew RK900 would likely interfere on both counts—one of the many things the android excelled at.

Dennis cocked an eyebrow at Gavin, and started picking at his nails.

“You know,” he sighed, “when I got my diagnosis, I felt the same way. Never thought there’d be anything worse than a death sentence.” Dennis stared at the far wall, eyes unfocused, zeroing in on a scene Gavin couldn’t see. “Spent two nights laid out on the floor of motel, before I realized I didn’t have the luxury of feeling sorry for myself.”

“Yeah?” Gavin asked, rubbing his nose. “That’s a fuckin’ shame—I’m an Olympic gold medalist in that one.”

Dennis snorted, cutting the thick tension in the air, if only by a tiny degree. Little by little, piece by piece, the arduous process of rebuilding their lives was getting underway.

Footsteps reached Gavin’s ears, and he caught sight of a very different ghost, leaning against the doorframe. RK900 ran his hand through his hair, forcing his too-perfect curls from his face. He devoured Gavin with the ice blue of his eyes, reminding the weary cyborg of everything he stood to gain.

“Gentlemen,” RK900 addressed the two cyborgs, with a mischievous smirk, “it’s time for some fireworks.”

Arson and a penchant for violence? Gavin’s cop instincts chided him for blindly deferring to the android, but he also appreciated RK900’s moral ambiguity.

It made him feel more at ease with his own.
Vibrant sheets of orange flame canvassed the side of the old building. The hospital had lived a long life, but now it was time to say farewell. Gavin watched the fire pour through the ER’s waiting room, heat blasting out what remained of the windows. The massive building creaked and sighed, as its guts succumbed to the overbearing heat. They were sounds of relief, from an entity long past its expiration date.

Standing a foot away from the conflagration was Gavin’s ghost. The sickly green tint of its skin was far more obvious under the hungry, red light. From a distance, Gavin could make out the burn marks along its head, and the purple hole in its lower gut. It hadn’t moved since the three men made their hasty exit, from the destroyed laboratory.

Ask him.

Gavin could hear the death rattle clear as day, even over the violent screech of fire and flame.

He turned away from the monstrosity, and set his sights on RK900. The android looked relaxed, for the first time since they’d been reunited—for the first time in weeks, if he took RK900’s memories into account.

“Fire cleanses all,” RK900 murmured. “That’s the turn of phrase, correct?” He looked to Gavin.

Ask him—hear the truth you know to be real.

“Yeah, somethin’ like that,” Gavin huffed. He took a moment to bask in the warmth of the flames. The heat was almost enough to penetrate the dark haze of Gavin’s mind.

Case Jarrett was wrong about a lot of things, but you know RK900. You know he’s just using you—he’s always been using you. That’s the bottom line, but you can still take a stand.

Gavin shivered, trying to stave off the burst of ice, from his ghost. The phantom held out its hand, beckoning Gavin to join it.

Ask him. It’s a simple question. Even a dumbass like you can manage it.

The black oil of the ghost’s tears lit with orange flecks of fire. It intended to finish what had been put into motion back on the operating table, in Flint. The phantom was volatile—desperate for closure, so it could move on. Gavin felt all of this, and more.

“Nines,” Gavin asked, dipping a toe into the deepest, darkest part of himself. His weakness was gaining ground, curiosity compelling him, even if it was a far cry from rational.

The android turned to Gavin, cocking his head to the side. The yellow light at his temple mixed with the deep reds and oranges of the fire, consuming the old hospital.

“Would you…” Gavin started, unsure how to ask the question burning inside him. He looked up to the hospital entrance, where both of his ghost’s arms were now outstretched. “If, y’know... if things had been reversed, back in the temple… would you have saved me?”

Confusion gripped RK900’s features, and his blue eyes opened wide. For a brief moment, he resembled his brother—curious and innocent.

“Gavin,” he began, tapping his chin, “you need to clarify your question. What exactly are you asking?”

The phantom had finally broken through—found its last bastion, in the heart of Gavin’s
insecurities. RK900 was all Gavin had left, and if he lost faith in the android…

“I mean, if like,” Gavin choked on the words, “if you’d broken my... regulator thing, would you have used yours to save my ass?”

The android paused, lips parted, slightly. Gavin’s confidence withered in the face of RK900’s continued silence.

“I don’t...” The android frowned. “What is the purpose of this hypothetical?”

Laughter filled Gavin’s ears, cruel and hurtful—the phantasm’s own siren song. Gavin swallowed, fighting the urge to follow the creature into the flames. He could see it, taking deliberate footsteps backwards, into the welcoming maw of the fire.

_Told you so…_

“It’s a yes or no question, goddammit!” Gavin shouted, fighting the overwhelming urge to capitulate to the darkest part of himself—the piece of his psyche that had been trying to gain traction long before this nightmare began.

RK900 stared at Gavin in utter disbelief, a sharp canine peeking out from between his parted lips. He remained quiet, neither confirming nor denying the accusation leveled at him.

Gavin’s eyes widened, and he looked away from RK900, instead training his sights on the echo of his past. Human Gavin stood at the entrance of the hospital, enveloped in fire. No longer ghoulish, his eyes were green, vibrant, and full of irritation. He shifted from side to side, impatient, shooting his cyborg counterpart an expectant look.

Gavin felt a tear roll down his cheek. He brought a hand up to collect the translucent, unnaturally blue droplet, but when he withdrew his hand, it was covered in black ichor. Gavin whimpered, lost in a panic. He reached for his face, and his fingers came away coated in darkness.

Horrified, Gavin looked up, back to the _real_ Gavin Reed. He whipped out a cigarette, and dipped the end of it into a billowing column of conflagration. He glared at the cyborg copy, and gestured to the flames beyond.

_It was time._

Gavin took a step forward, but long, slender fingers intertwined with his own. They brought with them their own, blue fire—hotter and more destructive than anything natural.

The cyborg looked over his shoulder, into RK900’s worried eyes.

“Gavin,” RK900 yelled over the crackle of glass, wood, and drywall, “the answer you seek isn’t something I can give you. You’re asking the wrong question—deflecting what you actually need to hear.”

_Listen’ to that fuckin’ song. Sounds real nice, right?_

Gavin stared at RK900. He attributed the android’s look of terror to the two dark pits in his face.

Oh god, he couldn’t _be_ this, not knowing it was all a lie. He couldn’t…

RK900 doubled down on his grip, even as Gavin tried to snake away from the android.

“Gavin,” the android screamed—a feral, mechanical sound, “at some point, you must turn within
yourself, and acknowledge the source of your self-destructive whims. There’s no response I can give you that will ever satisfy that need."

Gavin slid through RK900’s grip, and took off towards the burning building. It was all wrong—everything was wrong. All his words and thoughts and deeds, up until this point, were nothing more than hollow promises.

Human Gavin sat on the stoop of the hospital, and smiled. A drop of black tar oozed from the corner of his mouth.

A heavy body tackled Gavin to the ground. He cursed, kicking, screaming, and hissing. Gavin wanted to free himself—to be free of-

...What was he trying to be free of?

The cyborg looked up into worried, blue eyes. RK900 pinned Gavin’s limbs to the ground. Even Dennis came running, falling to the ground, next to Gavin.

“Jesus, Gavin,” the other cyborg stammered, in a panic. “Don’t listen to them. I-I know it’s hard—God, it’s so hard—but you gotta fight them.” His eyes were wide with fear, and understanding.

“Gavin,” RK900 commanded, sandwiching the cyborg’s face between his hands. “Your family gave up on you. Your coworkers gave up on you. You gave up on you. But I will never give up on you.” The android jammed his forehead against Gavin’s, whispering, “it’s hard to fight your programming—I know it is. I’ve been there, but…”

RK900 pressed his lips against Gavin’s. It fell somewhere between innocent and desperate, but it was wholly sincere. An electric current coursed across Gavin’s mouth and tongue—a strong burst of data. RK900 was attempting to brute force an android interface.

Gavin leaned into the kiss, and the floodgates opened. A powerful rush of emotion and intent scoured Gavin’s nerves. He couldn’t make heads or tails of the symphony of colors and textures, but he embraced them, drinking in the healing taste.

When RK900 finally withdrew, Gavin wasn’t sure what to make of the experience. There was no human analog for the esoteric, emotional data. Gavin could spend his entire life trying to interpret it all.

It didn’t sound like a bad plan.

A blue tear dribbled from the corner of RK900’s eye. Gavin reached out, and caught it with his thumb. The android sniffed.

“We are all our own worst enemies—it’s one of the few axioms that transcends our speciation lines.” RK900 massaged his thumb against the rough scruff of Gavin’s jawline. “The question you meant to ask me was whether or not you could place your trust in another.”

RK900 slowly stood, disentangling himself from Gavin. Soft red and blue lights ricocheted off his pale form, mixing with the violent tones of the fire.

“Do you believe a person could care about you enough to attempt self-sacrifice? My answer to that question holds no meaning, unless you want it to,” RK900 opened his arms wide, inviting Gavin to make a choice. “Can you bring yourself to trust those around you, Gavin Reed? Or will you remain trapped within the confines of your own, personal hell?”
Gavin swallowed. RK900 towered above him, artificial reds and blues deepening along his skin, mixing with the loud wail of klaxons. Gavin turned his head, and met the concerned gaze of Dennis Langford, before rolling over onto his stomach.

In the distance, his human form transmuted—regressing into a corpse-like ghoul. Black tears streamed down its face, hissing as they touched the flames.

Gavin sat back on his haunches, watching the hallucinatory manifestation of his deeply ingrained baggage—years of self-imposed loneliness and feelings of inadequacy. It had been his mantra for the better part of his life, and now, he recognized he was at a crossroads.

It was time to say goodbye—to exorcise his past, so he could embrace a wholly uncertain future.

So that’s it, then?

The ghost flicked its cigarette into a billowing cloud of dark smoke.

“I can’t spend the rest of my life as an insecure piece of shit,” Gavin whispered, to the final remnant of his human legacy. “Somethin’s gotta give, Gav.”

The ghost shrugged, and turned its black eyes to the hazy purples of the early morning horizon.

Whatever.

Gavin watched the ghost crackle and burn, disintegrating into carbon, within the mouth of the flames. It couldn’t begrudge Gavin for his choice, no more than Gavin could begrudge it for the nagging commentary. It was him, and he was it, but people changed, and Gavin needed to move on. This was a conceit he could no longer retain.

Gavin’s true foe was himself—it had always been himself.

He held his hand out to the creature. It was a solemn goodbye, and the ghost stared at Gavin, the empty holes in its face staring directly into his soul. It turned, offering Gavin a single wave, then stalked into the orange tongue of oblivion.

As if on cue, the entrance of the facility collapsed in on itself, and spewed a ball of red flames into the courtyard. Gavin’s ghost was gone, replaced with a new emptiness. It was neither negative, nor positive—it simply was, much like Gavin, and his two companions.

Dennis turned to the fire, eyes locked on its virulent beauty. It was clear, had Gavin not pulled his display, the other cyborg would have run, headfirst into the conflagration. It seemed that, even amidst his protests, Dennis also wanted to seize his second chance to live and prosper.

An arm snaked around Gavin’s midriff, and he felt a nose press against the top of his head. Closing his eyes, Gavin leaned into RK900’s sturdy form. The android’s body was warm and welcoming.

“Thank you,” he whispered, into Gavin’s hair. He could feel RK900’s lips move across his scalp. It was pleasant, in ways Gavin couldn’t quantify. He nodded against the android’s chest, and made a noise in agreement.

The doppler screech of sirens drew closer, but Gavin remained fixed in place. Eventually, he would have to face his new life—and all the challenges it brought—but until he opened his eyes, none of it was real. Gavin Reed could remain in a suspended state—in a tiny purgatory, just him and RK900.
It was the calm before the storm.

Gavin still didn’t know if he believed in love—or any of that sappy, Hallmark shit—but he did believe in RK900. Their mutual adoration would either bring them closer together, or shred them apart, at the molecular level.

Only time would tell, but Gavin had that in spades.

The deafening arrival of the DPD, SWAT, and FBI joined the harsh roar of the inferno. Gavin ignored all of it, and projected a single thought at RK900.

[Thanks for kicking my ass into gear, Nines.]

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented, kudosed, read, and sent their support to me throughout this story. It’s very difficult for me to express, in words, how much each and every single one of you and your comments/observation meant to me. This was a very personal story for me, in a lot of ways, and touches on lots of things I’ve wanted to explore for quite a while. I love all of you wonderful people, and am in your debt.

I’ve started picking away at a sequel. It’ll be a bit lighter in tone than Charon, and told from RK900’s POV. (Also, much shorter) Hopefully, you’ll join me for that story as well.

In the meantime, you can find me at:
@Vapedrone

Thanks again, y’all!!

Until next time!

End Notes

David Cage can kiss my shiny metal ass

Find me on the information super highway @Vapedrone
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!