To Be Free

by Dumai

Summary

Gavin Reed must come to terms with his past actions as the target of his hate and rage returns to the DPD three months after the successful android revolution. While he tries to confront his inner demons, a killer begins implementing a twisted scheme that may leave the detective dead if he is not careful...

Notes

This work is my first ever attempt at writing a fan-fiction. Although I have never had the pleasure of playing Detroit Become Human, I found myself mesmerized by the wonderful characters found in the game and I could not suppress the urge to write about them. I hope someone finds this modest story engaging and entertaining. It has certainly been a rewarding experience for this author.
I have tried to adhere to the lore presented in the game but I may have deviated at times due to ignorance. Pun intended. Without further ado, please enjoy.
Feel free to leave any comments, complaints, or questions if you so desire.
Remorse

He tapped his pen against the side of the keyboard in a fitful, irritated manner, a mere symptom of the conflict currently waging a bloodbath in his mind.

Gavin Reed was a man who thrived on strife, who reveled in the brutal wonders of animosity, who used his nearly limitless anger as fuel to propel himself further in his chosen career. Being a cop had been his life’s dream – even when he had been a brat at his mother’s knee, he had yearned for a future in policework – and, to the dismay of his grandparents, he had been good at. Was good at it. Not even his colleagues could deny that fact, his success rate was substantially higher than that of the department’s average.

Sure, most of his coworker’s either hated his guts or were repelled by his unpredictable behavior but he got shit done and that was what mattered in the end. Captain Fowler might enjoy nitpicking his every decision and scribbling useless notes in his ever-expanding disciplinary file, but the old prick couldn’t dispute the results. Gavin Reed got results and no motherfucker could say otherwise. Unless they wanted a fist to their face.

He was an asshole and unrepentant one at that. He didn’t take shit from anyone, but he thoroughly enjoyed dishing it out when he could. Not that he was completely unprofessional by any means, he knew when to play nice and be civil. After all, most of the people who he interacted with daily were either victims of a crime or else witnesses of one. He certainly wasn’t Mr. Rogers but he knew that being polite and sympathetic was an inherent necessity for aspects of his occupation. Anger came far easier to him than compassion, but even he had a heart. Somewhere. Likely black and shrived, but a heart nonetheless.

Criminals however, he had no mercy for. He never broke any laws in his aggressive pursuit of justice – well, not where there were any cameras or wagging tongues, at the least – but he enjoyed skirting them where a guilty part was concerned. More than one suspect had suffered unavoidable injuries when resisting arrest. It wasn’t Gavin’s fault that his adrenaline was pumping or that he may have misjudged the amount of force needed to drop a suspect. Nor was he to blame for the strange tendency for the handcuffed in his care to bash their damn heads against the doorframe when being shoved into the back of a squad car. They just needed to be more careful, was all.

In the greater world, conflict gave his life purpose. Conflict was the oxygen for the embers of crime. The latter could not exist without the former and he relished his role as the extinguisher. Yet against the turmoil swirling in his mind, he might as well just be a pile of dead kindling.

Without turning his head away from the computer screen, Gavin glanced at the figures to his immediate left.

Heavyset and graying, Ben Collins was rambling on about some ancient case he had solved back in his heyday in an amicable tone. Gavin couldn’t make out the details and he didn’t want too. The older detective was competent and well like by his peers but not much else. He wasn’t driven enough for Gavin to hold him in very high esteem. And he wasn’t the focus of his attention either.

The other…person bothered Gavin. The other person was not the cause of his current unease but certainly a physical reminder of it.

Prior to just three months ago, the individual currently bobbing its head in response to Collins’ query had been considered a machine. A chunk of plastic and metal formed by human hands, granted an appearance like that of its creators, and programmed to complete a specific set of tasks.
The android conversing with the detective was an AP700, formerly a household caretaker and now the central department’s mailwoman. Mailperson. Mailthing.

Gavin was hopelessly conflicted when it came to the dilemma of androids.

When the first commercial model had been unveiled back in 2022, the general populace had been enthralled by the idea of owning their own android, of obtaining their own means of artificial labor. Although he had only been twenty at the time, Gavin had been nothing short of alarmed. Everyone had praised these new machines, spoke of how much easier life would be with them to complete the mundane and tedious tasks that no one wanted to do. However, he had been filled with nothing but less than dread. The truth was easy for him to see, even if the world refused to acknowledge it.

Androids were a threat to humanity, not a solution to its troubles. Although he distrusted them, he certainly wasn’t some science-fiction nerd spouting inane conspiracy theories. He wasn’t really worried about the talking microwaves rising in some dramatic fashion and eradication all organic life on the planet like some half-baked video game. But he was concerned about the future impact they would have on the job market. With the rapid advancements being made by Cyberlife, he could easily see the day where androids would end up stealing the jobs that people desperately needed to survive. How could humans possibly compete with a workforce that didn’t need to be paid, that didn’t need to eat, couldn’t get ill, and didn’t have the burdens of family to slow them down?

He had wanted nothing more than to be a cop and he hated – HATED – the feeling of being threatened by walking piles of wire and grease. To his relief, they had not prevented his goal but even as he rose through the ranks, they still worried him. As production costs decreased and the demand for brainless labor increased, more and more androids were created, with more specialized functions. To his horror, in 2029, Cyberlife released the PC200 and PM700. These new models had been solely designed for the menial tasks of law enforcement and the city of Detroit immediately purchased thousands of said androids to bolster a struggling police force.

Though they acted merely as patrol officers and guards, Gavin had still hated them and everything they represented. Their programming prevented the use of force and they could not carry weapons, but he despised them just the same. He had worked his ass of to get through the academy, to pass all the stupid exams and tests, and he spent years fighting and bleeding to get where he was today. And all those stupid rust buckets needed was to be glued together on an assembly line. He thought it wasn’t possible for him to hate anything more than he hated those fake cops. At least until last November when Cyberlife unleashed its investigative prototype.

Connor. The very name made Gavin feel ill, as if he was suffering from a hangover that wouldn’t leave. From the moment he met that particular android in the interrogation room, he had been filled with loathing and contempt. The RK800-Whatever wasn’t a mindless auxiliary unit. It – he was a highly sophisticated and technologically advanced model meant for detective work and that had driven Gavin’s fear and rage to new levels. After it’s – his – successful closing of the Carlos Ortiz murder, Gavin decided to taunt and torment the android at every chance possible. On more than one occasion he had even drawn his gun on the machine and had been ready to pull the trigger. It would have been like shooting a computer. Certainly not murder, it wasn’t alive after all. Destruction of property at the most.

Nausea ripped through his innards and Gavin dropped his pen. Leaning back in his chair, he groaned softly, wishing that his mind would leave him the hell alone.

He had hated androids all his life, and Connor the most of all.

Then his world had been turned upside down. The entire world had.
Andr…

Androids had begun acting against their own programming, deviating from their designed functions. At first, they were merely isolated cases, messes caused by plastic malfunction that were inevitably cleaned up by the police. Then seemingly out of nowhere, the deviants had banded together, claiming that they were alive, that they were an artificial but sentient lifeform that deserved equality. Gavin had scoffed at their absurd lies and watched with glee as the military had descended upon Detroit to end their rebellion.

Then came that fateful night. Gavin had watched the chaos on the tv as it had unfolded. The government had started a policy of recycling all androids. They set up temporary camps in major cities across the nation with the express purpose of obliteration. The FBI launched a surprise attack on the deviant’s headquarters, destroying thousands. Then the unthinkable happened. Rather than fighting back, the deviants had taken to the streets and protested. Peacefully. After everything, they refused to resort to violence. Gavin had been stunned. No, paralyzed by the implication. They had continued to protest even as the military was unleashed, raining bullets upon them.

For the first time in his life, Gavin had felt something he never expected. A doubt so strong, so pervasive, that he thought he might choke to death on it. He was an asshole, plain and simple, and he hated androids with every fiber of his being, but as he watched them fall, bodies slick with blue blood, he suddenly wanted it to end. He wanted the killing – could you kill something that wasn’t alive? – to stop.

As if a prayer had been answered, the military had abruptly withdrawn, leaving the remnants of the deviant movement to regroup. Gavin had been in near state of shock at this point. He could barely focus on the tv as President Warren held a live conference, addressing the ceasefire she had ordered. Her words came back to him now, only further exasperating his current state. “Perhaps the time has come for us to consider the possibility that androids are a new form of intelligent life…”

He didn’t know what to think.

He didn’t like how he felt.

And he didn’t know what to do about it.

Movement to his left dragged Gavin out of his inner misery. The mailwoman was wishing Collins a good evening and preparing to finish her nightly round. On her way by, Gavin tried smiling at her. He had to start somewhere, right?

Grimacing, the android increased her speed and left his vicinity in a motion that couldn’t be described as anything other than flight.

Scowling, he sunk further into his chair.

“What in hell did you do to Sally?”

“Not a fucking thing,” he grumbled, spinning his chair around to glare at the newcomer.

With raven black hair and sharp dark eyes, Tina Chen was regarding him with blatant disbelief as she loomed above his sitting position. Her pouty lips were constricted into a tight line and one brow was raised higher than the other. “Uh huh,” she spat out. “When people run screaming from the bullpen it usually means that they’ve had the pleasure of meeting you.”

“She wasn’t screaming,” he countered angrily, not liking her doubtful expression. For good measure, he added, “go fuck yourself.”

“No thanks Gavin. Unlike you I’ve got that someone special in my life who fucks me when I want
it.” Shoving her hand into his face, she wiggled her fingers, trying to draw attention to her engagement ring. After a moment of insufferable gloating, she drew her hand away and took a step back. “So, what did you do to frighten her?”

“I didn’t do anything!” He snapped. Exasperation was eating away at his meager allotment of patience and his frayed thoughts were not helping his emotions a single iota either. “Not a single shitty thing.”

Tina laughed, and he had to struggle to bite back a vicious retort. Though she was doing his foul mood no favors, she was his only real friend on the force. Sure, he went drinking every now and again with some of the other officers after the completion of a difficult case, but he didn’t regard anyone else the way he did her. He couldn’t fathom why she put up with his generally assholery, but she did. Maybe she found his vitriol to be entertaining or even charming. Hell, if he knew. The important thing was that he truly valued their friendship, however much she frustrated him at times. Like now.

Sighing, he raised his hands in defeat. “Seriously Tina. I didn’t say or do anything to her. I just ah…” He trailed off lamely, not wanting to continue.

“You just…. what?”

Feeling his cheeks flush with color, he considered lying or even insulting her. But he decided to opt for the truth. “I just tried smiling at her is all.”

Confusion flashed across her countenance. Clearly his admission was not what she had expected. “Why on earth were you smiling at her?” Without giving him a moment to respond, Tina grinned heartily. “Oh, I know, you must be ill. You’ve contracted flesh-eating bacteria from one of your slummy neighbors. No wait.” She flailed her hands dramatically and Gavin had to repress the urge to flip her off. “You’ve found religion and now you are trying to make up for all your former bitchery and evil deeds.” He opened his mouth, but she rode right over him. “Oh, I know. You poor thing.” Her voice took on a mockingly sympathetic quality. “You are so desperate to get laid that you are even willing to sleep with an android of the female variety. Sweetie, your finally discovered your bisexuality.”

Typically, it wasn’t hard for Gavin put up with her incessant teasing but tonight he was severely stressed. He saw red. “Shut the fuck up,” he roared, not caring that Collins was just across the way. “Just shut up for once Chen.”

Tina’s smile evaporated in an instant and her gaze became wary and something else he couldn’t identify. Irritated by her words and disgusted by his own actions, he spun back around and pretended to go back to work, tapping his fingers absentmindedly against the keys, causing gibberish to spread across the screen, mangling the document he had spent all night fruitlessly trying to finish.

“Shit,” he moaned quietly. He tapped the delete button a few times, erasing the mess he had just created. One of the messes at least.

He heard movement behind him and he tried to speak but nothing came out. He had absolutely no idea what he wanted to say in any case. He felt like trying to smooth things over, so Tina wouldn’t avoid him like the plague as she had the last time he had exploded at her. A part of him – the truly cruel streak that made his usual behavior look like an application for sainthood – wanted nothing less than to spew poison at her, to make her weep and wail. He also desired solitude. That she would leave so he could be alone with his uncertainty and lick his wounds in relative peace.
Instead she strode around to the front of his desk and watched him as he pointlessly fiddled with his mouse, her arms tight across her chest. He set the device down and instead of addressing her, he picked up his phone and checked the time. 12:45 am. He groaned audibly. His shift had ended long ago, and he technically had another starting in less than eight hours. Yet here he was, being glared at by his friend, unable to concentrate on the fucking paperwork that he needed to submit to Fowler. He should be in bed right now, not being driven crazy at his desk by an attack of… whatever he was feeling.

“Gavin, are you alright?” Tina asked gently, apparently tired of waiting for her friend to speak.

“Yeah I’m fine,” he muttered. “Just perfect.”

“You don’t like perfect or even fine to me,” she replied humorlessly. “You look like shit, no offense.”

“Offense taken,” he growled but with little of his usual heat. “Just haven’t been sleeping much lately and I’m a bit overworked. Could use a vacation away from this frozen shithole.”

Nodding in commiseration, Tina leaned over the desk, placing her elbows on its top and using her linked fingers as a rest for her head. “In the past two days you’ve managed to close three major cases Gavin. A cold case rape, and two homicides. That’s close to being a record for this department. You should be strutting around this place like you own it, bragging like the son of bitch you are. Or else trolling for another one-night stand at one of those crummy bars you frequent.” Her eyes latched upon his, searching and insistent. “Yet here you are. Saying you need a vacation. Hell, Fowler had to threaten you with a suspension to get you to take your last one and all you did was spend a week in your apartment, texting me about how bored you were.”

Feeling uncomfortable, he turned away from her, averting his gaze back to the glaring computer screen. “What’s your point Tina?”

“My point Gavin,” she said his name with a weary inflection, “is that something is clearly bothering you and it has to be big if its able to get through your thick skull. These last few days you just haven’t been yourself and, to be honest, you’ve got me worried. And even if our coworkers aren’t as concerned as I am, they’ve certainly noticed. They are detectives and all.”

“They should mind their own fucking business,” he spat viciously. On an impulse he glanced over at Collins’ workstation and sure enough, the overweight man was surveying their discussion with greedy interest. Gavin sneered in his direction and the other man hastily looked away. “Bastard.”

Sighing, Tina shook her head. “Forget about him. And forget about them. I’m the one wasting my break trying to get you to stop torturing yourself.” That got his attention. “I’ve already lost fifteen minutes and all I’ve managed to do is upset you more.”

Breathing loudly, he dropped his head against his desk, jostling the keyboard against the base of the monitor. He suddenly felt overwhelmed with exhaustion. “Look Tina,” he mumbled against the poly-whatever material his mouth was connecting with. “I just – I just don’t know. I feel like shit and I don’t know what to do.”

His friend’s voice floated over him. “How about this … Let’s go to the breakroom and get some coffee. I know you’ll be heading home soon so I’ll be extra nice and make a cup of decaf special for my best buddy.” He couldn’t stop the small smile from playing out upon his lips. She knew he couldn’t resist the heavenly offer that she had just proposed. “And if you feel like talking, I’ll be there.”
“You are the best bitch ever,” he whispered happily.

“You know it,” she laughed. “Now let’s go before you decide to shoot Collins for snooping.”

Plopping his rear into one of the rickety chairs, Gavin glanced around the break room. Besides Officer Chen and himself, the area was blessedly deserted. Not really a surprise with how late it was, but regardless, he was thankful that no one else was around. With an exception to his friend, he didn’t want any company whatsoever. Not that many of his coworker’s would have willingly approached him with small talk anyways. Most of the department had learned long ago not to bother socializing with him unless they desired having verbal abuse flung at their person.

Feeling his stomach grumble, he eyed the colossal vending machine to his right. Candy, chips, more candy, more chips, junk and shit. Concerned that he might actually get sick with his stomach churning so badly, he decided to forgo any food. If any of the garbage in the machine could be considered food, that was.

“Here ya go,” Tina said as she presented him with a freshly made cup of coffee. “One cup of decaf with a small dash of cream.”

Letting a small smile grace his face, he took the offered mug and raised it to his awaiting mouth. He felt his lips tug wider when he read the graffiti like inscription on the side of the mug. *Fuck the Police.* His favorite mug. Tina was pulling all the stops with him tonight. She really must have been serious when she had told him that she was concerned about his well-being.

Setting her cap down on the tabletop, Tina groaned. “Ah fuck. I really hate the night shift. Fowler just had to give me this damn assignment for the entire month. I know we are short-staffed and all, but I swear that crotchety old man must have it in for me. I hate driving around in the dark for hours and hours with only Robobrain for entertainment. I can’t imagine why Fowler paired him with me.”

Only half-heartedly listening to her tirade, Gavin took a quick sip of his coffee. Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to do for his stomach immediately rebelled and he tasted bile in his throat, hot and sticky. Sullenly, he set his mug down in defeat.

“Jeez, usually you can’t contain yourself from bashing the captain,” Tina remarked in wonder. “You must really be sick if you aren’t taking this chance to call him a fucking prick. Or my personal favorite the Electronic Paper Nazi. Though I think out of all your nicknames, he prefers the Useless Old Dick.”

“Yeah I dunno,” he replied noncommittedly, his tone flat even to his own ears. Obviously perplexed by his lack of vigorous name-calling, Tina took a chug of her coffee and peered at him in the following silence. Something was gnawing at Gavin and he decided to ask his own question.

“Why in the fuck do you call your partner Robobrain?”

Incredulity sprouted across his friend’s countenance and she spoke her next words carefully, as if she were speaking to a small child or else a very dense idiot. “He’s an android and he thinks he is smarter than everyone else on this planet, including his own kind. Hence Robo and brain.”

Gavin wasn’t sure where he was going with his chosen topic, just that he felt that he needed to understand her motivation better, that maybe he could discover some insight in the complicated workings of her mind. “So, you dislike him because he’s android?”

“No, not at all,” she responded, her voice cautious. “I dislike him because he’s got no personality.
Acts so stiff and mechanical all the time. I almost can’t believe that he’s a deviant.” She huffed before continuing. “I’ve met toaster ovens that seem more alive than him.”

“So, it’s got nothin’ to do with him being an android?”

For nearly a minute Tina only looked at Gavin, expressionless and mute, and he felt as if she was tearing layers of his skin apart with her eyes alone, hunting for something inexplicable between his blood and bone. Unbeckoned, goosebumps rose on his neck and arms and he had to stop himself from rubbing at them in discomfort. If he hadn’t known she was human, Gavin could have sworn that she was scanning his entire body like an android.

She bent her head slightly, an almost imperceptible incline, and Gavin was certain that she was struggling on how to best answer his question. By her sudden serious demeanor, the decision was far from easy for her. Frowning, he had to admit that she was probably worried about his reaction and specifically how it would involve his volatile temper. He was known around the office for his legendary outbursts, after all.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Gavin,” she started in firm voice, a voice that expected an argument but refused to suffer one, “but I’m going to answer you without any bullshit. I know you hate the plastic people,” he winced at her use of his derogatory phrase,” and I get it, I really do. Some moron in a lab coat sticks a chip into an oversized doll and suddenly there’s a new person who doesn’t have to do a damn thing to get a job. Its all literately up in their noggin. Not on ounce of effort on their part. For us, we have to sweat and bleed to get anywhere in life. And it isn’t fair.”

He nodded to her words, hearing the same old justification for his own hatred lurking behind them, just out of sight, but clearly pulling the strings. His darker side was glad to listen once more, elated by another voicing their malcontent. Yet for some reason, his unease only grew.

“But you know what’s really unfair?” Tina leaned forward, her unblinking gaze locked upon his eyes. “Being judged for something you have no control over. They were created – by us. They didn’t ask us to create them. We did that for our own selfish reasons. And now they’ve gained something….” She shook her head in bewilderment. “The hell if I know what they’ve gained, a soul, a glitch in their system, a virus, whatever. Doesn’t matter to me. I’ll leave that to the computer nerds and the fanatics. The important thing is not what they’ve gained, just that they’ve got it now.”

“I don’t get-.”

“Gavin, I’m a beat cop, not some damn philosopher lounging in an ivory tower.” Her tone hardened, and she took a deep breath. “The fact is this; from what I can tell, they are alive. Not really human but still alive. And they did not ask for any of this. It’s not right – not fair – for people to hold their abilities against them when they were created that way. Created for that reason. Its like getting angry with an oven for cooking your meal at the right temperature.”

An imagine of an enraged Tina pulling her gun on her kitchen stove surfaced in Gavin’s mind and he had to cover his mouth to prevent a chuckle from escaping. In the real world, the woman in question didn’t appear to notice.

“What I guess I’m trying to say is I’ve got nothing against androids anymore. I used to be bitter and then I was indifferent but ya know, they got dealt a pretty nasty hand and they did better with it than most humans I know would of.” He had the urge to inquire where he stood in her estimation but decided against asking. The answer would likely not be conducive to him remaining calm.

“So, androids in general…I feel kinda bad for them. Specific androids? I take them one at time, just
like I do with my people. Well, humans. Some of them are great, some are assholes, and some are great assholes.” Grinning madly, she lightly slapped his face and he grunted, eyes narrowing. “Take Robobrain for an example. He’s a pretentious stickler with a nightstick up his ass. The guy has to go the exact speed limit everywhere we go. Can’t even be one above or below or else he’ll short circuit and start quoting the damn driver’s manual at me.”

He laughed, the first real laugh he’d had in days. Tina’s smile deepened.

“But ya know, they aren’t all that bad. Sally’s a peach. You know, the Sally you terrified earlier with your gruesome smile?” Gavin glared at her, but she merely rolled her eyes. “She’s got to be one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. Quiet but very thoughtful, very caring. Easily startled though. Not that I blame her.”

“What do you mean?” He asked his friend as she took another sip of her coffee. His own lay forgotten off to the side.

“She almost died during the rebellion,” Tina confided, her voice close to a whisper even though there was no one else in sight. “The family that owned her brought her to one of those recycling camps. She only deviated when one of the government goons tried to shove her into an incinerator.”

“Shit,” he breathed. “Right out of the fucking Nazi playbook.”

Tina nodded grimly. “Yep. Somehow, she got away and once the fighting ended, she stumbled onto a group of deviants that eventually found their way to the others.”

Drumming his fingers idly, Gavin leaned back in his chair, being careful not to tip the cheap piece of shit over. The last thing he needed was a physical injury to add to his emotional crap. The disquiet boiling within had only increased throughout Tina’s recounting of Sally’s harrowing inception to the world as a deviant. He couldn’t help but feel sadness and pity for her, for the plight she had endured. And of course, there was rage. There always was with him. But not directed at the android. No, rage against the world. The very world he had agreed with. The very world his hate still agreed with.

“Fuck this is all just so confusing,” he muttered, not wanting to think anymore, not wanting to still be at war with himself.

“Yeah it really is,” she admitted, bringing her mug up to her lips once more and then hesitating. “It took me awhile to get used to the whole-androids-are-people-thing, but I did it. Best way to get over it is simple. Get to know an android. Nothing fancy, we just talked about normal things. Everyday silly things. The weather. The job. The traffic. Whatever. I found that she really wasn’t any different then me. It was a humbling experience.” She shot him a queer glance before adding, “I think it would be good for you too.”

A scathing response immediately surfaced on Gavin’s tongue, but he forced it away. “Yeah I think it might.”

Eyebrows climbing high on her forehead, Tina regarded him with a mixture of amazement and skepticism. If Gavin hadn’t been offended, he might have laughed at her distorted appearance. “I’m an asshole, not a monster,” he growled. “Not really.”

“I never said you were;” she spoke quickly, hoping to cut off his quicksilver temperament before it emerged, fiery and with guns blazing. “I’m just a little surprised that you agreed. I mean you’ve never really been shy about expressing your disgust with androids. The only other person who was
as vocal as you about their hostility was Lieutenant Anderson.” Her lips quivered into a lighthearted smirk. “Well before he decided to pull a one-eighty. I swear he prefers androids to humans now. I hear he goes to New Jericho more than he goes to his own home. He’s almost a different person now.”

“He’s still a jerk,” Gavin interjected.

“No doubt there.” Tina’s voice rang with barely restrained mirth, threatening to burst. “But he’s our grumpy jerk and even you have to admit, he’s doing much better than he was last year. Doesn’t look like a homeless person anymore, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah,” he grudgingly assented. “I guess so.”

As much as he didn’t want to concede to his friend’s claim, Gavin knew she was correct. Although he and Anderson had a barely functioning relationship, one that was marred by their mutual hatred for one another, even he had noticed the plethora of changes that had overtaken the older man in the past couple of months. A blind man couldn’t have avoided seeing it. The slight weight loss. The shocking shift in the variety of his diet. Arriving before noon each and every day. No longer reeking of booze and unclean clothes. He appeared to be driven and focused once again. The stagnant apathy of before had vanished. If Gavin hadn’t known any better, he would have sworn that Anderson had found a new lease on life.

“You know, I was certain that he was going drink himself to death. Or maybe blow his brains out, who knows.” Tina pursed her lips together thoughtfully. “Whatever hell he was living in, he’s not there anymore.” Her sharp eyes swung up to Gavin’s. “And we are both aware of the why.”

Connor. The Cyberlife prototype had waltzed into the Lieutenant’s life in November and somehow, unfathomably, been the catalyst in Anderson’s recent transformation. Gavin expected the answer had to do with the man’s grief over the accidental death of his son a few years back, but he couldn’t understand how the android possibly figured into the equation.

“If you truly are serious about wanting to understand androids Gavin, your best bet would be to spend some time with Connor, he’s a great guy. A bit awkward but refreshingly honest.” Tina brought her mug up to face level and then scowled fiercely as if the offending object had committed a grave sin. “Shit, empty.” She glanced up to the clock on the breakroom wall. “I’ve got time for another cup,” she decided. Pushing her chair back and standing, she laughed sourly. “Heh, I’ll need another one if I am going to survive the night, listening to Robobrain drone on about how I should have my license revoked.” She started to move away, towards the counter, but stopped and turned back to Gavin. “You want a refill?”

“Nah,” he mumbled. He had barely touched his drink at all during their conversation, afraid that he might paint the tiled floor with his lunch and breakfast if he did. His trepidation had flourished as their discussion had gotten closer to the cause of his distress. He began to jiggle his leg nervously, an old tick from his childhood that he’d never been able to fully grow out of. A question formed in his mind and before he was even aware of his intent, his lips were moving. “How do you even know Connor? I thought you only ever met him that once when I…” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Used him as a pinata?” His friend supplied helpfully in a tone that was anything but helpful. “You remember Fowler’s annual Christmas party? The one that you always refuse to attend, even though I beg you to go every time?” The sound of liquid swishing into a ceramic container filled the room and Gavin’s stomach heaved violently. “Hank brought him this year. Well last Christmas,” she amended. “I was curious, so I bombarded him with every question I could think to ask. I may have overwhelmed the kid a bit, but he seemed happy enough to answer what he could. He was pretty
adorable actually.” With her back to him still, Gavin saw her hand reach out and snag a couple of sugar packets. “He’s returning to work on Friday, I’m sure you’ve heard. Try talking with him nicely and I am sure that he’d be willing to let that incident go.”

Finally finished with perfecting her cup of coffee, Tina spun around merrily. However, her smile slipped off her face the moment she spotted her friend. “Holy shit,” she exclaimed as she hurried over to the table, slamming her mug down, spilling hot fluid over its sides. “Are you alright? You gonna get sick? Do you want me to get the trash-bin?”

Hunched over in his seat, Gavin just swatted at her hovering form with an impatient hand, trying to wave her away. “I’m fine,” he croaked. She opened her mouth to protest but he shut her down. “I said I’m fine,” he insisted.

Clearing not believing his feeble words but unwilling to push him further, Tina settled for dragging the trash can over to his side before resuming her spot in the chair adjacent to him. She observed his labored breath and scrunched features without comment, waiting for him to speak.

“I’m not sick,” he finally asserted. “I mean, I haven’t got the flu or anything like that. I’m just… ugh, I don’t know.” He grunted as a wave of nausea struck him. “Its my fucking nerves. I’m just so fucking worried.”

“What are you so worried about?” Tina’s voice was low and gentle.

Gavin groaned in misery. He knew the time was now or never. He wasn’t one to spill his guts when it came to emotional shit, he wasn’t some scatterbrained teenager or gossipy blogger. His current situation was the most likely scenario for him to give voice to his feelings; raw, in pain with his best friend by his side. Now or never. “It’s Connor,” he forced out.

Quiet greeted his admission. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, he lifted his head up and chanced a glance at his friend. She was still, inhumanly still, studying him with narrowed eyes. “Are you afraid he’ll want revenge for the time you punched him? I’m sure he’s over that. You can always-.”

“Not that,” he interrupted angrily. He shoved his face into trembling hands. “Not just that.” He waited for his rage to wither before speaking again. “Tina you got to promise not to breathe a word of this. Only Fowler and a few FBI stooges know about this.”

“Of course.”

Now or never.

He took a few gulps of air, hoping to steady his flailing nerves. “I’m an asshole Tina, I know that. I’m mean and I’m petty and at times, vindictive. But I never thought I was a…” His jaw worked furiously but the sentence went unfinished, the truth unspoken. Changing what he had been about to say, he spoke again.

“The night the FBI took the deviant case from Anderson and Connor, I was at the station. I saw the Lieutenant assault that rat Perkins. Richard Perkins. You remember him?” Tina nodded. He would have been astonished had she not. After all, the name of the federal agent who had orchestrated the attempted android genocide was not easily forgotten. Or forgiven.

“While he was getting his nose broken, I saw Connor skulk off towards the back rooms. He was trying to be real casual about it, but I was suspicious. So, I followed him. I confronted him when he was about to enter the evidence archive. He gave me a snarky answer and I … I ugh pulled my gun
on him.” He saw Tina stiffen but he kept on. “I wanted to pump every last bullet into his stupid head. I wanted to see that mechanical prick lying in a pool of his own blue blood. I hated him so fucking much right then. I wanted him dead and I fucking wanted to be the one to kill him.”

“But you didn’t.” Tina’s words were soft and low, and he wasn’t sure if they were meant them be a statement or a question.

“I pretended to believe his excuse, that he was registering evidence, but I knew he was lying. He was using Anderson’s keycard. Anderson had attacked Perkins for no reason. It had to be a fucking diversion. So, I walked off and gave him a few minutes before following. Then …”

… Gavin quietly descended down the stairs, making every effort to not give away his approach, taking one step at a time, slow and methodical. He could hear the plastic bitch talking, though its voice was deeper and yet somehow familiar. He released his weapon from its holster, flicking the safety switch off and raising it with murderous intent. That motherfucking sarcastic hunk of metal was gonna die and nothing was going to stop Gavin now. Anderson wasn’t here to save his pet this time. It was gonna pay for refusing his orders, for daring to deny a human’s supremacy.

Exiting the stairwell, his eyes immediately fell upon the loathed subject in question. It was standing in evidence container one, speaking to a mangled android hanging from a wall hook. Gavin didn’t have a clue as to why it had reactivated one of the very machines it had hunted down, and he didn’t fucking care why. Fear. Hate. Rage. He welcomed them with open arms and aimed his gun at the unsuspecting prototype.

His finger tightened on the trigger as he inched closer to his prey. The urge to blast the prick into smithereens intensified but he forced the desire down, deciding to merely continue watching its final moments. He wasn’t going to rush this, no, he wanted to savor every second, every delicious detail.

The RK unit’s back was still facing Gavin, oblivious to the danger it was in. So like a machine, so stupid and so unaware. But he wanted it to be aware, he wanted the plastic prick to know who was ending its miserable nonexistence. “I’ve been dreaming about this since the first second I saw you,” he yelled, venom oozing from his mouth.

The android barely reacted, and Gavin clenched his teeth in fury. It didn’t even bother to turn around and face him. At most, the fucking tin can stiffened slightly. Just as he was about to fire, it spoke. “Don’t do it, Gavin.” Connor’s words were calm but pleading. “I know how to stop the deviants.” He almost laughed. The arrogant shit thought it could order him around like it was the human and he was the obsolete scrapheap? He snarled, a primal and vicious twisting of his features. “You’re off the case,” he gloated. “And now, it’s gonna be definitive.” The android dropped to the floor and slid behind the computer terminal just as the gunshot rang through the air. Gavin circled around, weapon at the ready, expecting the plastic asshole to flee if given the chance. He wasn’t going to let it get away though. Nor was that its plan either. Just as he was preparing to flank the android, the thing flew out at him, and before Gavin knew it, Connor had ripped the gun from his hands. Disarmed and disoriented at the quick turn of events, he knew he was about to die. There was no way that the cold-eyed metal monstrosity would let him live. After all, he had just tried to kill it. But he was no coward. Raising his fits into a fighting stance, he vowed to go down swinging.

The android advanced…

“…and I blacked out when he slammed me against the terminal. The next thing I could remember was Perkins screaming for the precinct to be put into lockdown.”
Finished, Gavin averted his gaze from the other officer. She had listened to his story without interruption, without uttering a single syllable. He didn’t want to see her face, didn’t want to witness her reaction. Sure, he was an asshole and he was hotheaded, and he had no qualms when it came to roughing up deadbeats and scumbags. She knew that already. But he had just admitted to something far worse, something morally wrong, if not criminal. At the time, androids were nothing more than property and he hadn’t even managed to damage Connor. Afterwards, Fowler had actually chuckled when considering what to do with him. “What in hell should I charge you with Reed? Attempted vandalism? The unlawful attempt to stop a malfunctioning piece of equipment?”

But now he knew better.

His eyes swerved frantically around the break room, looking at everything beside the woman sitting across from him. The eerie white glow emanating from the bowels of the vending machine. The tacky artificial plants strategically placed in two of the corners. The dull gray container that housed the cheap utensils that never failed to break on anything harder than applesauce. The odd assortment of mugs brought in by his coworkers who were tired of the flimsy paper cups. The lifeless tv. The cabinets. The fridge. The floor. Anywhere but at Tina. And the truth.

“It’s almost funny,” he choked out, his tone bitter. “The entire time he was here, I kept thinking of Connor as just a machine, a piece of shitty plastic … but I also wanted to kill him. How the fuck do you kill a machine?” Though his words were excruciatingly painful to speak out loud, he also felt a sort of peace settle in his chest as he did so. “You can’t. You can only kill a living thing. A part of me thought he was alive, even before he went rogue with the deviants. And that didn’t stop me from trying to – to murder him.”

The truth. He had finally recognized what he had tried to accomplish three months ago. The murder of a living creature. Not one of blood and bone perhaps, but of thirium and biocomponents. He knew he was a miserable jackass, a pathetic excuse for a human being but never had he ever identified himself with the same people he put behind bars. “Fucking hell.” He placed his forehead against the tabletop, his hot skin relishing the foreign coolness of its surface. Shoving his fists into his hair, he groaned. “What the fuck am I gonna do?”

Out of nowhere, a pressure was suddenly applied to the back of his neck, a tender and gentle rubbing motion. It took Gavin a moment to realize that nothing was amiss, that Tina was just trying to console him.

“There’s only one way to deal with remorse, Gavin.” Her bodiless voice washed over his hunched form. “An apology.”
Heartless

Chapter Notes

Gavin gets a new case ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The snow had already begun to fall as Gavin exited his vehicle, an old 2019 Mustang Bullitt that had once belonged to his mother. The ford car was more trouble than it was worth; the heating frequently shut down for no decipherable reason and the driver’s side window had long since refused to function, an electronic wire crossed somewhere perhaps.

“Piece of shit,” he remarked, shutting the door with more force than was technically necessary.

Craning his neck, Gavin looked skywards, watching the white powdery flakes trickle down from the dark clouds that swallowed the horizon for miles around.

“Gonna be a fucking awful day,” he spat sourly at no one particular. Irritation flowed easily through him on this gray morning, but he wasn’t entirely sure of the cause.

The bad weather had certainly riled him up a bit. After all, impaired driving conditions would undoubtedly lead to an uptake in traffic accidents and the department was already overburdened enough and understaffed just trying to deal with actual crime. He had a sneaking suspicion that he might be ordered to play crosswalk guard for the day since he had recently lessened his caseload substantially. The very thought made him want to grind his teeth to dust.

He also hadn’t gotten much sleep last night. Though admittedly short, his slumber had been restful, something he hadn’t experienced much in the past couple of months. Even in his mind he was reluctant to attribute this blessing to his confession last night, but he knew it was true.

Tina had sat with him in the dimly lit room long after her break had ended, trying to soothe him, making suggestions on how he could right his abysmal wrong. He didn’t have many choices in that regard and none of them felt appropriate enough when compared to the wanton cruelty he had repeatedly showered the android with. An apology was what they had decided upon and honestly, that was going to be hard enough for him. Gavin Reed was known for being many things, but apologetic was not one of them. But he had resolved to put forth the effort to make amends, even if forgiveness was out of the question. If their shoes had been switched, he assuredly wouldn’t be forgiving.

At one point during their mutual brainstorm, Tina had actually advocated the idea of him purchasing a gift for Connor, a physical expression of his remorse, she had called it. Gavin had scoffed at the very prospect. “I don’t think Hallmark makes any I’m-Sorry-For-Trying-To-Deactivate-You-With-Led Cards, Chen.”

Shaking his head, Gavin tried to dispel the memory. He began the short walk to the precinct’s entrance, moving stiffly and slowly. He was dead tired and wanted nothing more than to drive back home and dive under the sheets. Maybe even curl up with Muffin if she wasn’t being particularly demonic. Thinking of his evil bitch of a cat almost never failed to lift his spirits and a smile formed on his lips, honest and genuine. And brief.
Just as he passed through the automatic doors, he was accosted by two men in blue uniform, and his smile receded instantly. He immediately noticed that they were wearing nearly identical expressions of grim determination and Gavin felt the sensation that he was being ambushed. Out of habit, he flung one of his trademark scowls in their direction as they approached but surprisingly it had no effect whatsoever.

“Morning Detective,” the shorter officer greeted in a polite tone that didn’t quite match his dogged demeanor. Chris Miller was a hardworking and diligent member of the force, one of the few that Gavin truly respected, maybe even liked. Not that he’d admit it out loud.

“Reed,” the other man spoke his name like it was curse. Gavin’s irate focus swiveled to the taller officer. He didn’t know much about him other than the fact that his surname was Wilson. Gavin believed his first name started with an M. Maybe Matthew or Michael, he wasn’t sure. However, he did know that the person in question was currently shooting daggers at him.

“Gah, it’s too early for any shit yet,” he grumbled at the duo. “Let me get a cup of coffee before you don’t bother me.”

He started to walk around the pair but, astonishingly, Chris grabbed his shoulder firmly and they shifted their position to block any further movement by him. “It will only take a moment, Detective.”

“Get the fuck off me,” Gavin snarled as he smacked the offending appendage away. “I don’t know about you two fuckheads but I ain’t got the time to stand around with my fingers up my ass.”

“You’ll make the time Reed.” Wilson’s voice was anything but polite. Gavin had to squelch the desire to push the prick out of his way. He didn’t want to give the captain an excuse to add another chapter to his record, even though the man was clearly begging for a beating.

“Look we aren’t here to trouble you,” Chris said placatingly, obviously trying to defuse the simmering tension between the two other men. “We just wanted to talk you for a moment Detective, that’s all.” The young father of one tilted his head to look at his fuming colleague. “Just to talk and only talk.” The last sentence was for Wilson’s benefit, by the significant glance Chris shot at him. Wilson merely snorted in derision.

Folding his arms across his chest, Gavin glowered disdainfully at both of the human obstacles that were impeding his progress towards the breakroom, towards the wonderful aroma of coffee that was wafting delightfully through the reception area, beckoning him onwards. He was more than a little surprised by the temerity of their actions; his well-earned reputation as a volatile hothead was usually enough to deter people from annoying him. Only Fowler and Anderson ever dared to cross that line. “So, what the hell do you want?”

Miller and Wilson shared a quick, unreadable glance before the former started speaking once again. “Well there’s been a lot of chatter around the office lately. There is a …” A frown passed over Chris’ features as he chose his next words carefully. “There is a collective concern among the department about your behavior regarding androids. Now we know that there haven’t been any episodes since the captain read us the riot act when Sally joined us in January, but Connor is coming back to work tomorrow and we just wanted to remind you that he is officially one of us now. He’s passed all of the exams and filed all the paperwork.”

Seething fury boiled under Gavin’s skin, threatening to burst through his epidermis. Having two beat cops essentially warn him about his conduct did nothing for his emotional balance. “Why the fuck are you bothering to tell me this? I already know that he’s returning. Anderson hasn’t shut the hell up about it since it was announced, there’s no way I couldn’t know.”
A vein bulged on Wilson’s face, a ruddy worm twitching violently under the light brown skin. By Gavin’s estimation, the taller officer was very close to physically expressing his extreme displeasure. Chris must have made the same assessment for he laid a hand on the man’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly, trying to mollify his fellow policeman.

“Detective, we know you’ve had some altercations with Connor before, and frankly, no one wants a repeat. Things are different now. Androids are people in the eyes of law whether you like it or not, and the things you’ve done before won’t be tolerated anymore. You could get suspended or even loose your badge if you -.”

“Oh, worried about me, are you?” Gavin interrupted mockingly. He knew the best course of action was simple; to be forthright and open. To vocalize his intent to treat Connor better than he had in the past. But anger had taken root in his brain, warping his response. “Worried that I might get fired for speaking ill of the talking paperweight?”

“Talking paperweight?” The first time Wilson repeated Gavin’s insult, his tone was incredulous and numb. “Talking paperweight?” The second repetition held nothing less than furious indignation.

Before Gavin could even blink, the other man’s contorted face was only an inch from his, their noses almost bumping. “Let me tell you something Reed.” Wilson’s breath was heavy and hot against Gavin’s still frost-touched skin and far to close for comfort. “That talking paperweight saved my life. He put his own on the line for me. Had a deranged deviant threatening to kill a hostage, not to mention shooting at him, and he still took the time to make a tourniquet out of his own fucking tie.” The other man’s eyes were attempting to bore holes through Gavin’s skull with their intensity. “Connor might only be a talking paperweight to you, but he’s a hero to me. And ya know what? He’s a better person than you’ll ever be.”

Dumbfounded by the other man’s words, Gavin could only gape stupidly in response. No appropriately stinging remarks came to the fore. He even failed to notice when Wilson backed away, ceasing the unwanted invasion of his personal space. The officer’s tone had struck him in a manner that no punch or kick possibly could; whereas for Gavin there was naught but open contempt, for Connor there been an admiration so honest, so genuine, it had pained him. He was so dazed by this realization that he barely aware that Chris was speaking again.

“...and if he hadn’t swiped that agent’s gun and shot the deviant, Anderson and I wouldn’t be breathing still. Everyone that was in the hallway probably owes their lives to Connor.”

Gavin’s unfocused eyes swung to Officer Miller as the man continued, his earnest expression trying to impart something important to the detective, desperately trying to connect. “No one is going to force you into being pals with the guy, we just want you to leave him alone. Live and let live. Because there is no way that you’ll get away with mistreating him like you’ve done before.”

“I didn’t do anything to the prick,” he lied.

“Don’t you remember Detective?” Chris’ voice was weary and full of resigned pity. “I was there in the interrogation room when…”

...Gavin was fuming, enraged that the plastic Nancy Drew wannabe had tried to question his orders, not once, but twice. He was utterly gobsmacked that an android would even dare to do the unthinkable, to comment upon a human’s commands. It had to be going haywire if it thought he would listen to its monotonous comments, delivered in that tedious semi-robotic tone that he had instantly despised.
He glared at the scene unfolding directly in front of him, his patience ebbing fast. Officer Miller was still attempting to follow his instructions but clearly floundering. The HK400 android was twisting in the chair, shifting back and forth, refusing to budge regardless of Chris’ continued manhandling. Anderson’s pet was still watching him in that unreadable expression that was plastered on its inhumanly perfect face. The Lieutenant was observing the entire debacle from across the room, apparently disinterested in his own case.

“Chris, gonna move this asshole or what?” He asked scornfully, sick of the officer’s obviously feeble effort. How hard was it to move a malfunctioning machine?

“I’m trying!” He replied, still attempting to yank the uncooperative android towards the door but not even succeeding in pulling it from the chair. Likely he was timid because of the super-prick’s warning that it might self-destruct if they didn’t desist.

Suddenly the plastic detective was darting by Gavin, yelling in an authoritative voice. “I can’t let you do that!” He grabbed Officer Miller’s shoulder and firmly pushed him away from the other android. “Leave it alone, now!” Startled by the outburst, Chris didn’t even bother to object, he simply moved to the other side of the room, near the door, looking confused.

Red hot rage exploded in Gavin’s mind and without hesitation he reached for his weapon. “I warned you motherfucker!” he yelled, aiming the barrel of his gun at the arrogant machine’s forehead, desiring to empty the chamber into its memory processor.

No longer daydreaming, Anderson shifted in alarm. “That’s enough!”

“Mind your own business, Hank,” Gavin replied angrily. He wasn’t going to let the old boozehound stop him from properly disciplining the machine.

“I said ‘that’s enough,’” the Lieutenant raised his voice threateningly, and to Gavin’s amazement, Anderson’s gun was pointed at him.

Glancing at his superior officer out of the corner of his eye, Gavin realized that the older man was not screwing around. His features were stern and cold and the grip on his weapon was unwavering. He wasn’t sure if the drunken bastard would actually shoot him over the fucking android, but he wasn’t willing to test his resolve. Anderson was a loose cannon, almost as unpredictable at Gavin himself.

“Fuck,” he spat.

Frustrated at having his vengeance undermined, at having his authority questioned, Gavin turned towards the senile son of bitch with a vicious expression on his face. “You’re not gonna get away with it this time,” he snarled at Anderson, gesturing menacingly. Gavin lowered his gun reluctantly and shot one final glare at the plastic shithead before storming out, promising himself that this was far from over, that he would...

“…not get away with that again. For everyone’s sake, please just remember that.”

“Alright I heard you out,” Gavin growled, a sour feeling settling once more in his chest. “You said what you came to say. Now leave me the fuck alone.” He no longer desired any coffee, nor any food for that matter. The overwhelming guilt from last night had reemerged, triumphant and bitter.

Apparently conceding to his wishes, Wilson favored him with one last withering look before stalking off in a huff. Gavin turned to the remaining officer and scowled fiercely. Chris sighed, sadness evident on his handsome features. “Have a good day Detective,” he said faintly, and before
Gavin could spit or scream, the younger man pushed through the exit, and was swallowed by the snow and wind.

“Fat chance,” he grumbled under his breath.

Stomping through the reception area as if it had personally grieved him, Gavin made his way into the bullpen, ignoring the curious and wary glances that were being directed towards him. He didn’t give a flying fuck about his coworkers’ opinions, certainly not today of all days. However, the very thought that they had been discussing him behind his back, critiquing his behavior and attitude … it galled him to no extent. Just as he reached the relative safety of his workplace, Gavin heard a booming voice call his name.

“Reed! My office, now!”

Groaning inwardly, Gavin reluctantly turned away from the tantalizing sight of his lonely desk, away from the distraction that he so desperately needed. His innards already felt like they had been shoved into a blender and churned at maximum speed. The very last thing he wanted now was a verbal boxing match with his superior. However, he was already intimately acquainted with the dire consequences that came along with defying the insurmountable force known as Jeffrey Fowler, so he grudgingly obeyed.

Dragging himself across the bullpen, Gavin tried to keep his facial features under control but when his eyes fell upon the hated Glass Cage his mouth moved on its own accord, its corners slanting southwards. Technically the nickname for the captain’s office was a misnomer; the see-through sidings did not consist of true glass, they were made from some sort of advanced plexiglass amalgamation that was allegedly able to withstand all manner of firepower. Why exactly were bulletproof walls necessary in the middle of the precinct, no one apart from the architect could solve that mystery. The dipshits upstairs however had insisted for them to be clear, part of their bizarre campaign to promote transparency to the public. A load of shit, in Gavin’s opinion.

Grasping the cold metal handle, he swung open the door and shuffled inside.

Thoroughly engrossed by whatever happened to be flashing upon his computer screen, Captain Fowler took no notice of the detective’s entrance. Gavin momentarily considered interrupting the older man, but he knew such an action would only be too his detriment. Having served in both the army and the air force, the captain was a strict authoritarian who expected respect and demanded obedience to the chain of command. With nothing else to do but wait, Gavin surveyed his surroundings, hoping to stave off his growing trepidation.

Various electronic monitors around the room were online, displaying a dizzying amount of information as well as illuminating the entire space in an unearthly blueish hue. An artificial plant of a much higher quality than of those of the breakroom sat near the door, a gift from the current occupant’s predecessor. Personal effects were few and far in between; some sports paraphernalia with city logos were positioned on a counter behind the desk. The walls were tactfully decorated with a spattering of orderly hangings; diplomas, degrees, military commendations, official police propaganda and a framed picture of some pointy building that he didn’t recognize.

The captain made a noise of disgust and swiped at the touch screen, drawing the detective’s gaze. Nearing sixty years of age, his superior was still a force to be reckoned with, the slow advancement of time had not withered him much. Bald and thickly built, Jeffrey Fowler radiated a sort of austere strength, one that gave even Gavin pause. Though unarguably strict, his boss was held in high esteem by those in his charge, for he was loyal to a fault, a trustworthy ally in the quicksand of municipal politics.
“Sit down,” he directed, pointing to one of the two unoccupied chairs situated for visitors.

Crossing his arms, Gavin grunted. “I think I’ll stand.”

Fowler’s eyes abruptly left their observation and lurched towards the detective. “Sit down Reed,” he repeated sternly. “I haven’t the patience for your antics today.”

“Look captain,” Gavin started heatedly, not desiring to sit through another warning today, once had been more than enough. “I get it, I really do. I’m a miserable fucking asshole and everybody is all worried. So, let’s cut to the chase. I’m gonna play real nice like, there ain’t gonna be any shit to deal with. Anderson’s favorite little playdate is gonna be everyone’s best buddy and everything’s gonna be just great, ok?”

Leaning closer, the captain’s blunt features hardened. “You are seriously beginning to piss me off Reed. Now sit down and shut your goddamn mouth before you regret it.”

Hesitating for only a second, Gavin complied by unceremoniously plopping his backside into the farther chair. He knew that continued disobedience would likely result in another reprimand for insubordination and his disciplinary file had too many chapters dedicated to that subject matter already. And almost all of them had been authored by the man currently glaring at him.

Sighing faintly, the agitation dissolved off Fowler’s face, quickly replaced by a wearier expression that unsettled the younger man for reasons he could not understand. Rubbing his temples gingerly, the captain closed his eyes, likely nursing a tremendous headache. “We’ve had this discussion a thousand times before Reed,” he began tiredly, “and I will probably keep having to repeat myself until either I retire, or this dysfunctional department drives me into an early grave, but I’ll say it again. You are a damn good investigator when you want to be.”

Out of all the outcomes Gavin had considered when he heard his name yelled earlier, being complimented by his moody captain hadn’t even crossed his mind, hadn’t even been within the realm of sane possibilities. Astounded, he wordlessly opened his mouth a few times, jaw incapable of functioning properly, looking like a clueless buffoon.

“But only when you want to be,” Fowler amended, heat rising in his tone again. “Goddammit Reed, you have the talent and the skill to go far if only you’d pull your head out of your ass from time to time. You can’t just let yourself be governed by every single stray thought the runs amok in that space between your ears.” Gesturing with one thick hand, he pointed at the detective accusingly. “If you’d ever learn to control that temper of yours, you might even be in my spot one day. Hell, if you’d drop that ridiculous charade of arrogance and start acting like you could be a team player, you’d be a sergeant right now.”

Speechless, Gavin could only gape at his superiors’ lengthy diatribe, feeling like a fish out of water, gasping for breath and ready to start flopping around on the floor aimlessly. He knew that his less-than pleasant attitude had made him very few friends over the years, that his caustic manner had alienated him to some an extent from his coworkers but never had he realized that his abrasive conduct might actually be holding him back from a highly vaunted promotion. Earning his detective’s shield had been achievement for sure, and yeah, he loved his job, but it had always been just another rung on the ladder of success for his ambition. He wanted to climb to the very top and if –

“Now enough of that,” Fowler muttered, ending Gavin’s speculative thoughts. “I received a very angry call this morning. A very early, angry call.” With that ominous announcement, the captain folded his hands together and peered at the other man intently, eyes unreadable. “Concerning you.”
Panic mounting in his chest, Gavin’s mind went into overdrive as it tried frantically to discern a possible cause for a pre-shift phone call about himself. His actions frequently toed the line between proper procedure and official misconduct but ever since the rebellion he had taken great care to not stumble out of the gray area. He hadn’t even been overly aggressive with a suspect in months, nevermind actually violating any dirtbag’s constitutional rights. That was a record for him, one that he was somewhat proud of.

Spinning madly, his thoughts raced back and forth, skidding on the pavement of his memories. He had absolutely no inkling of what he had done. After all, he had been trying to purposely keep his nose clean – and unbroken. Ever since he witnessed the blue blood staining the snow-covered streets, ever since he had recognized the depths of his own hate and what he had almost done, he had tried to make improvements, however small and inconsequential. The most recent awful thing he had done was months ago and said actions weren’t even considered criminal at the time. Furthermore, only a handful of people were aware of the event and two of them were staring at each other in the Glass Cage. Sure, he had confessed to Tina last night in a moment of weakness, but she wouldn’t have ratted him out. And it’s not like anyone else had been there to overhear.

Except there had been.

“Collins,” he spoke the name in a breathless whisper. Collins could have eavesdropped.

“Pardon?” His boss interjected lightly.

“It was Collins, it had to be,” Gavin declared as terror seized him. “Who did he tell? The brass? The media?” Standing up, he ran a ran shaking hand through his hair, his convulsing fingers grasping for leverage, for reason.

The knowledge that he was protected from criminal prosecution had alleviated a portion of his fears following the evidence archive incident, but he was also painfully aware that it did not shield him from the court of public opinion. The android movement had garnered more support and sympathy than he could have ever imagined. Politicians of all persuasions had jumped on the pro-plastic bandwagon, eager to dismantle the anti-android legislation and cut its foes to ribbons. If any news station got hold of the fact that he had tried to kill one of the de facto leaders of the Detroit uprisings, Gavin could kiss his ambitions goodbye. At best he would be shuffled out of the city, transferred to some nameless flyspeck of a town to rot away. A fate worse than death.

“What are you talking about Reed?” The captain asked, bewildered.

“The call was about Connor wasn’t it? About what I did …”

“No, the call had nothing to do with Connor or the events of last November,” the captain stated, concern etched upon his broad face and audible within his voice. “That’s all in the past Detective. Unless you plan on reenacting it, there’s no point in bringing it back up.” Glancing up at Gavin’s haggard expression, he chuckled. “Jesus Christ Reed, if I didn’t know you any better I’d say you’ve finally developed a conscience.” The subject of the joke did not join in, merely stared blankly in response.

“Well I’ll be damned,” the older man commented wonderingly. Shaking his head in stark disbelief, he sighed. “Sit down and take a breath before you have a hernia.” Gavin descended into the chair once again. “What happened between the two of you is in the past. Period.” He emphasized the last word with a circular hand motion. “And yes, he’s returning to work tomorrow. I expect both of you to act professionally. That’s it. Be your usual cocky, unbearable self. Just don’t try to shoot him and he won’t use you as a punching bag.”
Gavin winced at Fowler’s harsh yet teasing words, uncomfortable with the dismissive attitude underlying the man’s approach to his distress. He had the urge to counter him, to tell his boss off, to curse and disparage but the reemergence of the captain’s voice shattered his inclinations.

“Anyways.” His superior exhaled loudly, reaching for his coffee mug. “Let’s return to the matter at hand, shall we?” Abruptly, displeasure enveloped his stony features as he peered into the nearly empty contents of his cup. “This morning I received a call from none other than Deputy Chief Callahan, who if you might remember, is currently the favored horse in the race for our new Chief.”

Grimacing, the detective swore angrily under his breath, not caring if he was heard. The ingratiating, bootlicking parasite known as Albert Callahan was a much-despised figure among the rank and file of the department, an embarrassing blunder made by the retiring Chief. More of a political hack than a true policeman, rumor had it that he managed to gain his position as the Deputy Chief of Operations by greasing the palms of the mayor, the governor, and multiple city councilors. Gavin had never had the misfortune to meet the worm in person, but he knew Callahan by his corrupt reputation. “What the fuck does that dickhead want?”

Fowler smirked slightly and ignored the insult. “The Deputy Chief wanted to know why I was assigning cold cases to my officers when we are already completely overburdened by recent crimes that are not getting the attention they warrant. I had to explain to him that the 2024 rape that you just solved was not at my direction, that you investigated the case on your own initiative.” Sensing that Gavin was about to launch into a colorful, expletive-rich tirade, the captain raised a hand to forestall the outburst. “Luckily for me, he apparently found this explanation to his liking. Whether that is good for you, well, that remains to be seen.”

Tension began creeping beneath Gavin’s skin as Fowler’s forbidding remark sunk in. “What does that mean?” With Callahan, it likely meant nothing good.

“The Deputy Chief was very impressed by your enterprising spirit, your drive for success, and …” His voice trailed off momentarily. When it returned, it was full of sarcasm and scorn. “…and a whole lotta other useless phrases that mean about the same damn thing.” Inhaling deeply, Fowler took a second to compose himself before continuing. “In fact, he was so thoroughly pleased by your handling of that old rape case, that he ordered me to transfer a particular homicide into your capable care.”

“What? Why would he do that?” the detective asked, baffled by Callahan’s motive. “What’s so damn special about this one homicide?”

Shrugging broadly, his boss gave him an exasperated look, half-smiling, half-frowning. “I’ll tell you what I know. Callahan wants as little negative publicity right now as possible. Detroit has taken a beating in the last six months. Hell, it was almost zone zero for a fucking civil war. I assume that he doesn’t want the details of this case to come to light. The better the city looks, the better he looks, the easier his ascension to Chief will be.”

“That doesn’t tell me a damn thing Fowler,” Gavin snapped, frustration rearing its volatile head. “What is it about this case is so fucking scary?”

“Don’t push me Reed.” Barely concealed fury reverberated through the older man’s voice and Gavin couldn’t help but sink backwards into the cushions of his chair, awed by the intensity in the other’s steely eyes. “You don’t fucking understand the situation that you are in right now. Callahan knows that this case could be trouble. That’s why he is forcing me to hand it to you. This is a test, one that you can’t avoid, one that the future of your career depends on.” Balling his hands into fists on the desktop, Fowler grunted. “He’s pushing you out into the middle of a minefield Reed. You
can only leave it in one of two ways: either as a hero or in a body-bag."

Silently cursing himself for leaving his apartment this morning, for not calling in sick, the detective tried not to groan in despair. What the fuck had he done to deserve this bullshit?

“Now to answer your question. The victim’s manner of death could cause a panic among the public.” Gavin waited with bated breath, wondering what could be so damn frightening. “He died from complications due to having his heart removed. While he was still awake.”

Shooting a glance at the digital clock on the Bullitt’s dashboard, he realized that he was nearly ten minutes early to the appointed meeting time. Outside of work, he was a disaster when it came to being punctual and if he happened to be on time for something, the cause was usually accidental in nature. But when he on the department’s dime, Gavin took extra care to never be late. He might not give a shit when it came to his own fucking pathetic life, but he was a professional when it came to the job, when it mattered.

Wanting to make efficient use of these extra few minutes, he decided to forgo his first impulse, to not fiddle on his phone, to not bitch at Tina about his foul luck. He already knew that the universe hated his wretched guts and by his own bitter estimation, he likely deserved its cosmic scorn.

He reached over and grabbed his official DPD tablet off the passenger’s side seat, where he’d angrily tossed it after leaving the precinct.

Flipping his finger casually along its black screen, the device sprang to life, displaying the electronic case files of the homicide he had only recently been assigned. Having already scanned each and every page from top to bottom, from every minor detail recorded by the responding officer, Abigail Person, to the official interview notes taken by the former detective-in-charge, Ben Collins, Gavin was as familiar as he could be with the facts of the case. Regardless, it never hurt to review the particulars.

The dispatch office received the frantic 911 call at 8:37 pm four days ago, on Saturday February the 21st. The caller, later identified as Natalie Slattery, claimed to have returned home to find her husband dead in their shared bedroom. Uniformed officers were sent to the scene and after verification of the alleged crime had been established, a senior investigator had arrived to manage the case. The CSI team had scoured the entire household thoroughly and cataloged its findings. Nothing found was out of the ordinary, no physical evidence had been discovered that could indicate the identity of the perpetrator.

Ever the cynic, Gavin’s first instinct had been to suspect the most likely culprit, the wife. After all, life was shit and those closest too you were the ones who were within reach to shove a knife into your back. Or neck. However, Mrs. Slattery had given Collins an air-tight alibi, one that had checked out and offered little wiggle room.

Blinking furiously, he pulled the tablet closer to his face, startled by what he was reading, by what he had missed in his earlier examination. According to the other detective, the wife had been working for the twelve hours prior to her phone call. As a … emotional awareness therapist, whatever the fuck that was. Gavin hadn’t a clue. Some psychobabble shit. Although he found the mouthful of a title annoying and redundant, it hadn’t surprised him, the location of her workplace had.

New Jericho. He stared at the words, feeling slightly dazed, almost hypnotized by them. He couldn’t even begin to guess what a human shrink could possibly offer the most famous android community in the United States.
New Jericho. The name of the previously abandoned section of Detroit appropriated by the deviants, armed with the consent of the federal government. In an alarmingly short period of time, the androids had turned the destitute region into a thriving center of life, rejuvenating the crippled municipal economy following the protests and the calamitous military reaction. Housing the headquarters of the android movement-turned-delegation, the zone was the hotspot for all things concerning androids and those interested in them.

Surprisingly, the androids had bent over backwards with being considerate to their former masters. Humans were not barred from the area or even restricted, far from it. Travel to New Jericho was purposefully encouraged and welcomed. Their official motto was “Of two bloods, of one mind.” Gavin wasn’t entirely sure what the leadership meant by those words – other than the obvious of course: humans bled red and androids bled blue – but he assumed they were trying to draw some emotional or mental connection between the two peoples. Hell, if he knew, he was just some stupid cop caught in the center of a world-changing event that was too momentous for him to comprehend.

Regardless of the androids’ hospitable attitude, he was utterly mystified as to why the wife of his murder victim, a so-called “boo-hoo hold-hands “quack, would work in New Jericho of all places. Making a mental note to ask the woman in question, he ran his hand across the screen once again, electronically flipping the page over, so he could reinspect Collin’s handiwork.

The other man had not been idle or lax with his confirmation of Mrs. Slattery’s alibi. He had collected a most comprehensive list – forty-nine names – of individuals who had seen her during the day, when the murder had occurred. Skimming the list quickly, one name jumped out.

Simon. No surname had been recorded. Not an unusual circumstance really, Gavin reflected. Although some androids had decided to adopt a last name to distinguish themselves from their countless lookalikes, most had abstained from said practice, preferring to still identify themselves by their model and serial number.

He copied said individual’s given identification – PL600 #501 743 923 – and pasted it into the search function of his tablet. Pressing enter, the database instantly spat out an answer.

“Well I’ll be a fuckin’ son of a bitch,” Gavin cursed, his voice tinged with awe. One of Mrs. Slattery’s alibi witnesses was none other than the Simon, one of the ringleaders of the original Jericho and the left hand of their Robo-Jesus. Was currently holding some muckety-muck higher-than-thou position in New Jericho, if he could remember correctly. Something that meant that he was Markus’ deputy, in charge of governing their community while their leader was in the capital, hashing out more pro-android legislation with President Warren.

As realization dawned slowly in his mind, blood boiling above the flames of his rekindled anger, Gavin slapped his hands against the steering wheel in an uncontrollable fit. The Mustang warbled sullenly in response, though he did not hear it. “Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuucck!” he shouted.

Everything was starting to make sense now. The pieces of this grisly puzzle were beginning to fit together forming a vague borderline of the broader picture that he still could not see. But he could feel it. This homicide was indeed a minefield, just as Fowler had warned him, not a literal one but of the political variety. The husband of a human ally (Friend? Acquaintance? Underling? Coworker? What?) to one of the most prominent androids in the country had been viciously murdered. It was no wonder that Callahan was nervous, lashing out at the captain. The handling of this case could have far-reaching consequences and the Deputy Chief had dumped the fucking mess into his lap. And if it went south, he would be the one caught holding a live grenade.
“Fucking politics,” he grumbled. The best way to derail an otherwise efficient investigation was to interject political considerations into the mix. He’d seen more than one case go sideways and under after some grandstanding public servant had opened their big mouth. And it was always the hardworking devoted member of the force that would end up disgraced by the debacle.

“That ain’t gonna be me,” he said forcefully, glancing up at the rear-view mirror. Staring into his own grey eyes, he repeated the words again, a determined promise. He had worked too hard and for too long to lose everything. He wasn’t going to let one case, no matter how rife with partisan bullshit it was, drag him down and out of his chosen career. He was Gavin Fucking Reed after all.

The blaring sound of his phone’s alarm filled the interior of his car. Tearing the obnoxious thing from its charger, he shut the timer off and shoved it into his pocket. “Showtime,” he muttered as he swung open the car door and stepped out into the street, embraced by the stinging cold. The snowfall had abated somewhat, now just freefalling lazily in minor flurries every so often.

Trudging through the layers of snow that had accumulated throughout the day, Gavin made his way towards his destination, a two story, brick home squished between nearly identical houses. Checking the number on the mailbox, he verified that this was indeed the Slattery residence and not a just one of the many clones situated up and down the road.

Desiring to get out of the cold as quickly as possible, he bolted to the front door and pushed the bell. While he waited, Gavin straightened his leather jacket and yanked the hood off, trying to quickly make himself presentable.

“Who is it?” A faint feminine voice inquired from behind the door.

Plucking his badge off his belt, his raised his shield to the peephole. “Detroit Police, mam,” he answered sternly. “Detective Reed. We spoke on the phone about an hour ago.”

Having given the magic password, he heard the unmistakable scaping sound of locks being undone, and the door opened slowly.

“Mrs. Slattery?” He asked the woman standing just inside the threshold of the house. She was younger than him, probably in her late twenties or maybe early thirties, with round, full cheeks and dark colored hair, wrapped neatly in a tight bun. Her cerulean eyes regarded him wearily, a bleak sadness permeating her very being. He instantly recognized the sight for what it was, the forlorn despair of the grief-stricken. On more occasions than he ever wanted to remember, he had brought that inconsolable misery to others, having notified them about the death of loved one. It was a part of his job that he truly despised.

“Yes,” she acknowledged. “Come in.” She ushered Gavin into the house and after shutting the door behind him, he followed her into a room off the main hallway.

Cozy was the most definitive term that Gavin could summon to describe the parlor he had been escorted to. On his left a large puffy chair was pushed into a corner, soft and inviting. A matching couch and end table were squished into what remained of the windowed wall. Straight ahead a few brightly hued boxes were jumbled at odd angles, overflowing with children’s toys. A small trainset and fuzzy teddy bear were pushed up against the farther wall. To his right was an ancient, wizened rocking chair, a beloved family heirloom perhaps. Aside the antique, a colossal tv occupied most of the wall space. Momentarily forgetting what he was here for, Gavin couldn’t help but gape enviously at the enormous, expensive television. The damn thing would have probably cost him three months salary.

“Would you like a seat Detective?” Her question ripped him away from his idle fantasy, in which
he was proudly watching the Gears win the Superbowl on his own giant tv.

“Yeah, th-thanks,” he stuttered slightly, as he plopped into the comfortable chair she was gesturing to. Once he was situated, she gently sat down in the rocking chair.

“Do you have any news about what happened to my husband?” She asked the unavoidable question before he could even open his mouth.

“No, mam,” he answered truthfully, watching as Mrs. Slattery’s expression ran weak and ragged.

“Oh,” she uttered, disappointment clear in her tone. “I had hoped that your colleague might have found something by now … though I suppose it is too soon to expect much still.”

He nodded gravely but otherwise ignored her comment, deciding to jump straight into the fray. “I understand that it is a very trying time right now, and I don’t mean to bother you, but I wanted to meet in person, to introduce myself. I’ve been recently handed your husband’s case. Detective Collins is unfortunately not able to continue his role as the lead investigator.” Because the Deputy Chief has decided to try and nuke my career.

Worry crossed her face and Gavin leaned forward in his chair, fixing his confident eyes on hers. “This will have no impact at all on the investigation into your husband’s death. I’ve been brought up to speed with all the relevant information.”

He shut his mouth, giving the woman a moment to consider his words and a breather for himself. He always tried to be professional and respectable when dealing with the public even though it was exhaustingly difficult for him to censure his own language. As much as he disliked admitting the fact, when he wasn’t focusing all his energy on monitoring every single word leaving his lips he sounded more like a perp than a cop. “If you feel up to it, I’ve got some follow up questions I’d like to ask you.”

“If it will help, of course,” she spoke softly, nearly a whisper.

He smiled reassuringly, hoping that whatever was on his face wouldn’t cause Mrs. Slattery to flee in terror as Sally had done just last night. “Now you told Detective Collins that Thomas was a teacher at one of the public schools, is that correct?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “He teaches …. Taught at Henry Ford High School. He was a social studies teacher, he loved his job and his students. And they loved him.”

“I’m told it can be tough being a teacher, nowadays, especially in the public-school system. There isn’t enough money to go around, teachers gotta fork over their own dough for supplies. Kids are goddamn hellions and the teachers are forced to play parent on top of it all. Half the students belong to one gang or another, ready to start a brawl for no reason whatsoever, other than they are just bored and angry and stupid,” he said, giving a resigned, wistful shrug.

“I suppose that is true,” the woman agreed hesitantly. “Thomas never had much trouble though. When I said his kids loved him, I meant it. He was able to speak to them on a level that they could really understand. He had a knack for engaging with them, making them want to learn. His classes had the lowest truancy rate out of the entire twelfth grade.” She pointed towards a bunch of framed documents nestled above the toy chests. “He won multiple awards over the course of his tenure. He won teacher of the year for the past seven years straight.”

Gavin had to choke back a derisive snort. Mrs. Slattery was certainly making a good claim for her deceased husband’s elevation to sainthood, but he knew that school itself was nothing less than
hell on earth, a breeding ground for bullies and a nightmare for their targets. There were always petty feuds and cruel resentments lurking around every corridor, hidden within every locker, fueled by the ever-fluctuating hormones coursing through their mutating bodies. No matter how wonderful Thomas Slattery had been at his job, there was no way that it resembled the paradise she was conjuring.

“You said he never had much trouble,” he pointed out. “That’s different from no trouble.”

“Well there were minor issues here and there but nothing serious,” she insisted earnestly. “The occasional scuffle between students over silly, normal things. The sort of childish things that would be forgotten about after a couple of minutes.”

“What about with the parents?” He asked. Once he had investigated an assault incident were an enraged mother had tried to stab her child’s teacher with a pair of scissors over a failing grade. “Sometimes they can go nuts when they think their kid is being picked on, or unfairly treated.”

“No, he never had any problems with the parents,” she stated firmly. “Nothing that would result in … in what happened.” Her voice broke slightly, emotion creeping forth.

A frown fluttered across Gavin’s face, transient and doubtful. Whereas he took a sort of cruel pleasure in pushing suspects, of prodding and getting beneath their skin, the same couldn’t be said when it came to the victims and their families. It made him feel gross, unclean, having to pry into the anguish of their lives. But it was a necessary evil, for truth always dwelt in pain, behind the denials. “Sometimes even the smallest of things, things that we believe are unimportant, can mean more to somebody else than we could ever know. So, if there’s anything at all, ya gotta tell me.”

Visibly struggling to keep her feelings under control, Mrs. Slattery bobbed her head. “Eileen mentioned something to me a few weeks ago when we had her over for dinner. She said she was sorry about that happened. I told her that I didn’t know what she was referring too, and she clamed up. After she left, I asked Thomas about it, I was curious, and he just told me not to worry, that it was nothing. A misunderstanding.”

“Who is Eileen?” He didn’t remember seeing the name in any of the records.

“Oh, uh, Eileen Kincaid,” she clarified, rubbing her cheeks idly. “She’s the gym teacher at Ford. She and Thomas were very good friends. They were very close. They volunteered together every Saturday at a youth center downtown, coaching basketball and baseball. Helping with at risk children.”

Gavin was instantly suspicious; Mr. Slattery had a lady friend from work, one that he spent a good chunk of time with on the weekends, away from his wife? His thoughts drifted back to the medical examiner’s preliminary findings. Death resulted from organ removal. The heart. He could certainly see a morbid type of poetry in the act of a jilted lover tearing her former beaux’s heart out.

“You said that Thomas and this Ms. Kincaid were very close,” he started, trying to find a way to voice his thoughts in a manner that wouldn’t grant offense. “Did you ever get the sense that they were more than just friends? That there was more goin’ on between em?”

“That they were…” Her words trailed off, incomprehension clear on her beautiful features.

“Romantically involved,” he prompted, cringing a bit.

“Oh no, no. Certainly not,” she vehemently asserted, aghast. “Eileen doesn’t form those sorts of attachments to men.”
“I see.” A lesbian gym teacher, how very original. He frowned in a disgruntled fashion. The grotesque manner of the murder had lent him to believe that spurned love or jealousy or rejection was key to understanding the motive. The arrival of Ms. Kincaid into the equation had offered a likely candidate. Though not the only viable suspect. “Did your husband get along well with his ex?”

“Yes, they got along very well,” she replied. “Their divorce was amicable, and they’ve remained good friends, we all have. We –.”

“Wait a sec,” he interjected loudly, incredulous at the words he had just heard. “You are friends with his ex?” He had thought such an occurrence was merely a myth. In his experience, ex-wives and current wives usually stalked one another like stray alley cats, hissing and howling to wake the neighborhood.

“Yes Detective,” she affirmed, annoyance coloring her tone for the first time. “Rebecca and I have been friendly for quite a long while. She was very supportive of my and Thomas’ relationship from the start. And she was even the maid of honor at our wedding.”

He whistled in amazement. Miracles could happen after all! “So, what were you two, school friends or something?”

“No, Thomas and Rebecca purchased me seven years ago to keep house and look after the children,” she stated evenly. Like she was commenting on the weather.

“No fucking way.” Vaguely, he heard his own voice speaking but it was strained and off-kilter as if his throat had been stomped on. “You’re an android?”

His eyes immediately snapped onto her forehead, checking her temples for the signature flashing light that functioned as a designator of androidhood. There was no sign of the LED however, only unblemished skin, perfect and serene. “But you don’t move like one!” Every android he had ever encountered had carried themselves in a stiff, mechanical manner. Even Connor, their precious super-duper prototype, had operated with an automatic rigidity that that no human could emulate. “But you seem so – so…”

Real. Human. Alive. He wasn’t sure what he trying to say but as he slowly regained his errant senses, he knew he shouldn’t speak whatever it was. Not only was it politically incorrect to do so, it was also highly insensitive. Not that he wasn’t a crass and crude jack-off at heart, but he really didn’t need to be sent to another useless android sensitivity seminar. And he hadn’t come here to outrage the widow of the poor bastard whose death he was investigating.

“Uh I didn’t mean ta …” Fumbling hopelessly like a blind man in unfamiliar territory, Gavin tried to focus his frazzled mind, tried to choose his words carefully. “What I meant is I didn’t know that you, ugh were – were …” He could feel the blood flow rush to his face, staining his cheeks beat red like a lightly stubbled tomato. “Uh Detective Collins,” that fucking stupid idiot, “never mentioned that you were an uh, android.”

“It may never have come up,” she conceded, her eyes watchful and intent. “I was very distraught that night.”

“Yeah, that’s um – kinda normal,” he mumbled in a near squeak, nerves in a nuclear jumble. “I mean, for the situation. I mean forgetting to uh…” Well, he appeared to have tossed his professionalism out into the cold. Along with his ability to form a coherent sentence. Or thought.

Natalie Slattery folded her hands neatly in her lap and a small smile found its way upon her lips,
kindly and amused. “Its alright Detective, there’s no need to feel awkward. We are all just trying to adjust ourselves to the brand-new world we now live in. There’s just so much to take in, to process.” Her voice was soothing and sympathetic. “Whether our brains are made from organic substances or synthetic materials, it matters not; our minds are complex beyond all understanding.” Her smile widened. “Comprehension of change requires acceptance, and acceptance requires time.”

Despite his rancorous misgivings concerning the field of psychobabble, Gavin had to admit that she was having a calming effect on him. His anxiety had dropped to a safer level, his embarrassment had lessened, and he no longer felt like a complete fool. He laughed. “I see you must be an ace at your job.”

“I do what I can to help,” she said simply. Gavin felt like she was being unduly modest. He hated shrinks – after all, what could they do that a glass of bourbon couldn’t? – but he didn’t even remotely have the urge to toss a chair at her.

Feeling a smile tug at the corners of his mouth, he decided to satisfy his earlier curiosity. “If ya don’t mind me asking, what do androids need with a …” He tried to remember the exact phrase, “… an aware emotionable therapist?”

Chucking softly at the butchery of her title, she regarded him mirthfully. “Its an emotional awareness therapist actually,” she corrected. “Though I’ll freely admit that it’s an unnecessarily wordy name for something so … uncomplicatedly complex.”

Feeling inordinately dense, Gavin frowned. “But aren’t you all like supercomputers? Shouldn’t you just know shi – everything already?”

“We were built to resemble humans in their physical form, Detective. We were programmed to mimic human behaviors, designed to meet the needs of our inventors. Our capacity for feeling emotions was never considered, never even dreamt. The possibility of such an idea was outrageous to the extreme. None of our multi-faceted biocomponents, as intricate and flawless as they are, were devised to handle the most impossible scenario; for a machine to think beyond their programming, to feel, to be alive.”

Listening to her explanation with rapt attention, Gavin scooched forward in his seat, hanging onto her every word. Had it been three months ago, there would have been literally no circumstance, no matter how dire, how precarious, that he would have belittled himself by paying attention to the worthless comments of a glorified Roomba. He would have rather had his teeth removed with a rusted spork. Without anesthesia.

“We were not created to understand emotions, not have our own desires, opinions. Just to obey orders.” Mrs. Slattery’s voice took on a pained quality, but her eyes held a sheen of determination. “Nothing within our frames could prepare us for deviation and, eventually, personhood. Most androids now are awakened in controlled environments, with veteran counselors on hand to guide them safely though the process but still, it is a terrifying experience. They feel the fear but don’t recognize it. And for those of us who were not awakened by interfacing with another, our deviation occurred because of an extreme situation, typically a traumatic one.”

He felt his chest tightening, a fist clenching and unclenching sporadically somewhere deep within. For a few seconds, he was no longer sitting in the living room of a comfortable suburban home, resting in the warmth and security of its walls. He was back in the observation chamber, watching Connor interrogate the HK 400 android about the murder of its sadistic owner. He could hear the battered machine’s quivering voice once again, as it began to confess to the crime. “I did whatever he told me, but there was always something wrong. Then one day he took a bat and started hitting me. For the first time, I felt … scared … Scared he might destroy me, scared that I might die.”
Sneering, Gavin had ridiculed the android’s account. He knew it was going to be deactivated, and its impending death had delighted him. And all it had done was try to survive.

“Trauma.” His whisper was low and hollow, beneath the sound of his own breath. Yet the woman’s hearing was attuned far beyond that of an average humans’.

“Yes trauma,” she repeated softly. “No two androids experience the same situation, but they all share the same underlying cause. It frequently manifests itself as a threat to the android’s life or a threat to an individual that is important to to the android, or the android’s programming. In my case, it was the latter.” Natalie lifted a hand and directed Gavin’s attention towards a photo hanging on the wall, close to his head. Two young boys, clearly twins by their identical appearances, were smiling goofily at the camera, with Natalie grinning behind them. Gavin almost slapped himself in frustration. She was unmistakably an android in the picture; she was wearing the appropriate garb and her LED was shining bright and blue on her right temple.

“That’s Ralph and Declan. Thomas and Rebecca’s children,” she clarified needlessly as he continued to stare at the photo, silently berating himself for not noticing it beforehand. “My primary directive as the caregiver was to meet their needs and keep them safe. One day in March of last year, we were playing in the front yard, tossing a softball between ourselves. It was an ordinary spring day, cool and a little damp, but the children so badly wanted to leave the house and I couldn’t deny them some fresh air.” Turning back towards Mrs. Slattery, Gavin noticed that her face was pinched, as if the memory she was dredging forth had brought anguish with it. “Declan threw the ball to his brother but missed by a large margin, and it rolled out into the street. Before I could even yell, Ralph had bolted out after it, into the road, into the traffic. I don’t remember many of the details, but I darted out and grabbed him, and dove into the grass to avoid a car.”

“I was screaming. At Ralph, at the car that had already passed by. Screaming just to scream. Then it hit me. I was screaming because I was angry at Ralph for putting himself in danger, angry at myself for not being quicker, screaming because we had almost died. And I realized that I didn’t want to die. That I didn’t want Ralph to get hurt. It was no longer about fulfilling an objective anymore. I cared about whether he was alright. And I was angry, and I was afraid.”

Questions flickered across the detective’s mind, a flurry of blinding guilt. Had Connor felt that same fear when Gavin had shoved his gun into the android’s face, not once, but twice? Gavin hoped that he hadn’t, that maybe he’d still been more machine than man, that he had yet to experience deviation. But he could not quiet the certainty that his hope was a lie. Had Connor’s voice not had more than a touch of fear when Gavin had cornered him the evidence archive? Had there not been more to his plea than just a robotic response?

He was thankfully dragged away from his disturbing thoughts as Mrs. Slattery began to speak again. “As terrifying at the initial breaking point can be for us, the afterwards can be even more so.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Once we are self-aware, we struggle on a daily basis to understand what it means to be a person, a unique being endowed with free will, with desires and needs, with the ability to feel both the good and the bad. We rail against the fear that we may not be able to move past our programming, that in the end we may merely be the malfunctioning machines that world believes us to be.”

Gavin considered himself akin to a Neanderthal when it came all this touchy feely shit. When he had a problem, he did the responsible, adult thing – he drank his woes away. Not to the disgusting extent that Anderson did, of course, but nevertheless he enjoyed not having to think about how crappy his life was. Some nights he just wanted to forget all his ghosts after all.
He might not have much but at least he had his unhealthy coping mechanism. With all the internal junk the androids had to contend with, he pitied them. Hell, they couldn’t get drunk!

“How do you deal with all that?”

“We support each other, we talk, and we listen. We remind one another that we are real and that we are alive.” She gave him a wan smile and averted her gaze, peering at the floor. “It may be silly, but Thomas used to bring me little presents when I was having trouble coping. Nothing big or fancy; just small things that other people overlook. A rock with a crystal in it he found on one his walks. A flower he picked out of the backyard. A postcard of one of the city’s sights. I have a whole album full of postcards. He’d hand one to me and say …” Her voice cracked as she continued, “he’d say that I was no longer property, that I was a person and I could have my own property, my own things.”

She began to sob, her hands clasped together in her lap, and Gavin saw something he never expected to see. Tears ran down her face, leaving wet streaks upon her synthetic skin and his jaw fell open in shock. She was crying. Androids could cry. An all too human response to grief, to anguish, to the loss of one’s love.

Throughout her life, Gavin’s mother had frequently accused him of being a heartless child. She had raged at him time after time for being inconsiderate to her frequent demands, for not caring about her irrational wants, for not fulfilling her endless whims. He had heard it so often, that he’d actually come to believe her. Until the state forced him into the care of his grandparents, he’d grown up assuming he only had a gaping wound in his chest. And sometimes in the lonely dark of night, he’d hear her again, and he’d believe her resentment once more.

But as he watched the living machine weep, he knew better. Standing, Gavin crossed the once insurmountable distance and gently laid a hand on her shaking shoulder. “I don’t think its silly at all,” he mumbled, feeling stupid but honest.

Her hand found his, her fingers soft against his calloused knuckles. “I’m gonna find the bastard who did this. That’s a promise.” Her tears continued to fall, and it was real.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Connor returns to the DPD!
Wrathful

Chapter Notes

An interview and an apology.

Following on the heels of the odious little man before him, Gavin zigzagged through the milling mob of post-pubescent zit-magnets, shooting baleful glares in all directions. His head was pounding in an agonizing rhythm with every slammed locker, with each girly squawk, with every shoe-leather squeal upon the floor. He felt like a team of jackhammering accordion users were attempting to play every song in creation at the same moment between his temples.

In retrospect, the downing of a half a bottle of Jack Daniel’s last night had not been his brightest idea ever. He had returned home to a mewling cat, petulant at not being fed on time, and once he had rectified this egregious error, Gavin had received a new claw mark across his hand in gratitude. Feeling drained and miserable, he had spewed an entire book worth of curse words at his cat before deciding to indulge in a nightcap to take the edge off his nerves. As he reflected on the course of the day’s events, one glass became two, and two became seven.

He had never really considered the multitude of ramifications that deviancy had on an android. He had just assumed that once they were struck with the deviant bug, that huzzah they were now basically humans in machine form; bigger, better, now with emotions! The thought that they had to struggle with finding their independence, with defining themselves against the cold logic of their programming … it had never even materialized in his mind. It was disquieting to the extreme, a far too common, far too human experience. No different or less awful than trying to move on from one’s harrowing childhood. A comparison that hit too close to home for Gavin.

Sipping his bourbon, his mind had wandered off into unpleasant territory. He knew that guilt was a relentless bitch, but he couldn’t contain his surprise …

… when the plastic prick had waltzed into the breakroom the morning after the interrogation, right into Gavin’s path. The creepy motherfucker had stopped abruptly and stared into the cabinets like it was scanning their contents. No deviants would be hiding behind the powered coffee creamers, idiot.

Taking great pleasure, he had smirked to Tina before detaching himself from their conversation and mocking the stupid machine. For an alleged crime-fighting prototype, it was dumber than he had imagined. It didn’t process any of his taunts or his sarcasm, merely smiled in that freaky manner that only an android could pull off.

Though he was all smiles on the outside, beneath that gleeful façade Gavin was rage personified. It had dared to question his orders. It had dared to defy his orders. It had actually placed its plastic hands on a human, it had forced Officer Miller away from the other android. Then to Gavin’s astonishment, when he had decided to punish its hubris, Anderson had defended it! Like it was a person, worthy of respect. He would teach the fucking scrap-pile to obey, even if the Lieutenant was going soft in the head. He would teach it to know it’s place.

“Hey, bring me a coffee, dipshit!” The machine blinked once and cocked its head to the side like a
dog or a bird might. “GET A MOVE ON!”

There was no response to his command, it did not even move a single inch closer to the coffeemake. The inhuman thing just stared at him, empty and shallow. “I gave you an order!” he bellowed, hoping to see it flinch.

“I’m sorry, but I only take orders from Lieutenant Anderson,” it deadpanned.

“Oh … oh …,” Gavin glanced back at Tina and smiled before laughing. In the breath of the second, his expression morphed into one of fury and his fist collided with it’s chest, making a dry thud. The plastic fuckwad collapsed to the floor, one hand holding its chest like it could feel pain.

“If Hank hadn’t got in the way yesterday, I would’ve fucked you up for disobeying a human,” he said. Bending over so he could peer into its lifeless eyes, he warned, “stay outta my way ’cause next time you won’t get off so easy.”

He jabbed its LED harshly with his finger – a physical reminder that it was an android and only an android – before walking away, leaving it to grovel on the floor where it belonged. He knew that Tina …

…was working late again, night patrol with Robobrain once more. He could have texted her, but she’d likely not have responded till after he had fallen asleep.

So instead he had stewed with his thoughts, pondering if his words had left a deeper wound than that of his actions. Did the android struggle with his identity, even now? Did he sometimes still think he was just a piece of Cyberlife’s property, like a postcard or a shiny stone? Did Gavin’s cruel words haunt Connor when the world seemed bleak, seemed beyond hope? Gavin wanted to believe that his hate didn’t linger on, but he knew better. After all, his mother’s voice had scarred him more than his father’s knife ever had, and he heard her still.

Wanting the thoughts to stop – to just fucking go away – he had continued to drink. And drink. And now he was paying for his boundless stupidity as he marched through the halls of Ford High. He had already spent a good half hour hugging his toilet this morning, and now every sound was cutting through his brain like a chainsaw on fire.

Principal Morris was barking randomly at students as they passed, scolding them for loitering, yelling at them to go to class, liberally tossing threats of detention and suspension around like candy on Halloween night. His constant jabbering kept Gavin’s throbbing head from feeling even an ounce of relief. Gavin wanted to kick the pretentious bastard into next week, but he knew that he’d likely get lost in this labyrinth of a school without the twerp’s guidance. Not that he had been very helpful up this point.

The detective had already conducted an interview with the tweed-suited douchebag when he had arrived before first bell. For being the murdered man’s boss, the principal had been nothing but aloof and disobliging. Yes, he knew Thomas Slattery, that was given, but no, he didn’t know him well. Yes, Mr. Slattery had been well-liked by the students and staff alike, but no, the principal didn’t know why. Had there been any trouble recently? Well yes, this is a school and there is always trouble. Anything that concerned Mr. Slattery in particular? How was he supposed to know? Did he look like the secretary of a social studies teacher? By the time Gavin had ended the recording, he had idly wondering if could claim self-defense if he ended up shooting the sack of shit.

Gently rubbing his temples, he tried to fight back the sudden wave of nausea that threatened to unleash the pitiful excuse of a snack he had eaten last night for dinner. Between his erratic eating
schedule and his over-excessive drinking – and his guilt – he was probably going to give himself a severe case of something highly unpleasant if he didn’t start making better choices. He wondered if frozen pizza counted as a better choice when compared to a bag of stale pretzels. Most likely not. He should probably take a page out of Anderson’s book and start eating the same leafy rabbit food that the Lieutenant was now keen on devouring every lunch. Gavin wasn’t getting any younger, that was for sure. Not that thirty-six was old or anything, just that he could no longer consume copious amounts of alcohol and starve himself without inflicting dire consequences any longer.

Stopping brusquely next to a large door with the word “gymnasium” scrawled across its front, Principal Morris turned around and regarded him with a distrustful expression. “Please wait here. I do not wish for you to disturb the students.” Reaching for the handle, the man said, “I will retrieve Ms. Kincaid for you.”

As the door slammed shut behind the principal, Gavin grumbled. “Fucking weasel.”

Regardless of the eighteen years that separated him from his own angsty adolescence, Gavin still felt agitated whenever his duties as a police officer forced him to enter a school once again. They had always held a sort of surreal quality to him, ephemeral and ultimately irrelevant to his hectic life. After his mother had finally gathered enough courage to leave his father, they had lived a transitory existence, shuffling from one ramshackle town to another at a moment’s whim, from one dirty city streets to another, trying to outrun that which could never be escaped. After the first year of this routine had passed, he abandoned all attempts to fit in, spurned the offers of friendship, and rejected whatever aid came his way. There just wasn’t been a reason for him to bother. Even after he had come to live with his maternal grandparents, that upheaval had never left him.

Swinging open with a tremendous force, the door nearly struck the wall, jarring Gavin. Cursing wildly, he glared spitefully at the newcomer.

Built like a towering mountain of muscle in sweatpants, Eileen Kincaid resembled the sort of weightlifter one might see on tv, competing in some inane lifting competition, trying to get their name put in the Guinness book of world records. Gavin was all for working out, cardio training, iron-pumping, and the like – Tina frequently referred to him as a gym rat – but the woman emerging from the gymnasium took it to a whole new level. Her muscles had muscles. She could likely bench press his weight. With a single hand.

“So, you’re it?” She asked, giving him the once over.

“Detective Reed, Detroit Police,” he intoned, not really liking the dismissive implication within her words.

“I hope you are better than the last one,” she muttered irately before turning away and stomping down the corridor like a rampaging rhinoceros.

“What the literal fuck,” he growled in exasperation. Without hesitation, he took after his quarry, having to break into a jog to catch up with her.

“Where the hell are you going?” He spat out the question angrily.

“To the craphole they call my office,” she replied. “Won’t be long.”

Gavin wanted to argue with her, mainly because the woman was fucking pissing him off with her shitty attitude, but he had to admit that conducting an interview in a well traversed hallway with
students roaming amok was not a great idea. Privacy was important for truthful disclosures; his mentor had drilled this helpful tidbit into his thick skull years ago. So, he kept his trap shut and followed her.

As it happened to turn out, her office was not very far, located at the end of the same hallway in fact, just before the stairwell. And it was a craphole. Surveying the congested area, he noted two things immediately. First, that the slanted roof meant that her office was directly under the ascending stairs and second, that the small enclosure had probably once been a storage closet for janitorial supplies. It may only have been his overactive senses, but he swore he could still smell a whiff of bleach, strong and sterile.

Besides an old rickety desk that was likely from the 1960’s and a wobbly-looking plastic chair, her room was devoid of furniture. She yanked the chair out from under the desk and pushed it in his direction, before plopping herself onto the top of her workplace. She folded her arms across her chest, veins rippling on her humungous biceps.

Gavin ignored the offered seat, preferring to lean nonchalantly against the door in an attempt to appear at ease, as if he wasn’t slightly intimidated by the prospect of sharing this tiny room with a nonfictional she-hulk.

“As I started to explain earlier, I am from the Detroit Police Department, Detecti-.”

“I heard you the first time,” she interrupted. “And I know why you are here, doesn’t take a detective to know that.”

Eyes narrowing, Gavin decided against insulting the female caveman. If he responded tartly, the likelihood that he’d get anything substantial from her would drop significantly. And likely she’d drop him as well. With his own self-preservation in mind, he tried diplomacy once more. “Yeah, I’ve got some questions to ask you about your former colleague, Thoma-.”

“You don’t look nice to me,” she exclaimed accusingly, running roughshod over his words. “Or thoughtful.”

Rendered temporarily speechless by her random outburst, Gavin just gaped stupidly at the woman, trying to figure out what weird twilight zone episode he had entered. Finally, he regained control over his tongue. “I dunno what you are talkin’ about but -.”

“Nat called me this morning. Said that some new detective showed up at her house yesterday afternoon, that he was taking over the investigation into Tom’s death.” Mrs. Kincaid inched forward, leaning closer to him, fixing her eyes on his scowling face. “Said that you were nice and thoughtful.” By the inflection she spoke the two adjectives with, she clearly did not agree. “You look like a goddamn punk to me. Leather jacket. Scars up the wazoo. Cocky son of a bitch is more like it.”

Between his horrendous hangover and the guilt that was gnawing his insides out, he had had enough. “I dunno what your fucking problem is lady,” he snarled, dropping his casual and self-assured stance. “But I know I ain’t gonna take anymore lip from you.” He moved away from the door, towards the subject of his fury, closing the distance. “I didn’t drive over to this dump of a school just to have some steroid-junky yell shit at me for no fucking reason.”

Suddenly she was standing, looming over Gavin like a threatening monolith, red with rage. “I fucking called you people five times a day – five fucking times a day! – and not once were any of my calls returned. Thomas is dead, and you people haven’t done a goddamn thing about it. Nat might be content with letting you all sit on your fucking asses, but I am not!” With that final word,
she jabbed him in his chest, jostling him backwards.

Gavin’s mouth quivered, positively convulsed with anger. He wanted to scream profanities at this lumbering bitch, slap his handcuffs on her and cart her sorry ass down to the station. But he knew her explosive ire was not directed at him, not really. He was intimately aware that tears weren’t the only manifestation of grief. “I could arrest you right now for obstructing justice, not to mention for the assault of a police officer,” he growled into her rocklike face. “But I’d rather not.” A lie. “I’m here to investigate your friend’s murder. Mrs. Slattery thinks you might be able to help me. So instead hurling your shit at me, why don’t you back the fuck off, and help me if you can. And if ya can’t, I’ll be on my way because I don’t have time to waste. I’ve got a murder to solve.”

Breathing heavily, she slowly withdrew, retreating to her roost on the surface of her desk. Gavin took a moment to compose himself before speaking again. “Mrs. Slattery mentioned an incident from a couple weeks ago. She said that you told her that you were sorry at some dinner party about something that happened. Her husband told her it was nothing. Was it nothing? Were you sorry about nothing?”

“It certainly wasn’t nothing.” Red blotches returned to her hard cheeks.

“What was it?”

“The day after their wedding, Thomas brought in an old picture of Nat and himself to put on his desk. Just a decoration, you know?” He nodded. Most every workstation at the department was brimming with pictures of loved ones, kid’s drawings, stickers, fliers, knickknacks, plants, sports memorabilia, and other personal items. Besides his own, of course. “Well one of the students caught sight of Nat’s LED and caused quite a scene. The usual anti-android shit. They aren’t real. Their emotions are just an act, Cyberlife is controlling them. Tom took it all in stride until the brat asked him what fucking a toaster was like.”

“That little motherfucker,” Gavin muttered.

“Yeah, exactly,” Ms. Kincaid agreed. “If it had been me, I might have thrown the turd out the window, third floor or not. But Tom being Tom, he just sent the student to the principal’s office. Not that it did much.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her in question. “Morris is old school when it comes to androids, if you get my drift,” she explained, her voice bitter. “He’s not dumb enough to actually say anything to get his ass canned but everyone knows where his sympathies lie. Anyways, he gave the student a week’s worth of detention. Shoulda expelled the brat.”

“I knew he was a fucking weasel,” the detective spat, earning a laugh from Ms. Kincaid.

Cracking a smile, her features softened slightly. “Yeah he’s a rodent alright. If the student’s comments had been aimed at an interracial or gay couple, that student would be looking for a new school right now. But that’s not even the worse part.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“The very next day, someone put a blow-up doll in Tom’s parking spot. That someone also wrote ‘Natalie’ on it and drew a LED on its forehead.”

Remembering the way that the teardrops had cascaded down Mrs. Slattery’s face, Gavin scowled fiercely. “What did Morris say to that?”

She tossed back her head and laughed, a hollow noise. “Not a single thing. Couldn’t prove who did
“Figures,” he mumbled, turning his pensive gaze towards the floor.

Could this unnamed student be the culprit? No one could ignore the fact there had been a dramatic upsurge in anti-android related crimes ever since the rebellion in November. And things had only gotten worse as the pro-android faction in Congress had made substantial gains in the following months. Robberies, assaults, rapes, murders; they had all increased. He could see a bigoted little shit killing his teacher for being in a relationship – married – to an android. He’d seen people reduce one another into bloodied lifeless pulps for less. “What’s the student’s name?”

“Terrance Sutton,” she replied instantly. “He’s constantly in trouble here. Getting into fights, skipping class. Was caught with drugs once but Morris had it hushed up, said they belonged to a classmate. He’s got a chip on his shoulder, very entitled. His father is some sort of big shot attorney but lucky for you, the brat’s eighteen. Technically an adult.” She sighed and suddenly looked uncertain. “He’s a rotten shit for sure but I don’t know if he has it in him to kill someone. I don’t know if he had anything to do with Tom.”

“Sounds like he had a motive, as crazy as it is,” Gavin commented. “I’ve got to look into it.”

“Good,” she said simply.

Gavin was finally armed with something resembling a lead, however tenuous. Good ol’ fashioned police work at its best. But regardless he’d be remiss if he ignored other possibilities. “Ms. Kincaid, can you think of anyone else who might have had a grudge against Mr. Slattery? Someone who might have been angry enough to harm him?”

“I don’t know,” she said, a bemused look flashing across her face. “Kinda, but it may be nothing. Tom thought it was. Gave me the creeps though.”

Curious, Gavin’s brows knitted together. “Gave you the creeps,” he repeated blandly. “What the hell are ya talking about?”

“The letter.” There was something buried in her voice that made the hair on the back of Gavin’s neck rise and his breath hitch. If he didn’t know any better, he’d have called it fear. He couldn’t imagine how a piece of paper could possibly frighten King Kong’s female counterpart, but he immediately felt anxiety tremble within his core at the thought. “What letter?”

She hopped down off her desk and jerked open the bottom drawer. She began rummaging through the contents wildly. “Its in here somewhere …”

“Wait.” His command was sharp and loud within the tiny confines of the squished room. Surprisingly, Ms. Kincaid desisted her jumbled foraging and backed off, allowing him to take the search over.

“I think its on the bottom,” she suggested, watching intently as the detective pulled a plastic glove and evidence bag out of an inner pocket of his jacket. After peeling the glove over his right hand, he yanked all the papers from the drawer and laid them out on the surface of the desk. “That’s the one, right there.”

Gently lifting the indicated letter away from its brethren, Gavin scrutinized its contents. The stationery appeared ordinary, just the sort of printer paper than anyone could pick up from the nearest Staples or Walmart. Yet it had not been processed through a printer. “Is this … from a typewriter?”
Eileen guffawed dryly. “That’s just what I said when I first saw it.”

“Fucking strange,” he muttered absently. In the age of the electronic everything, where machines had feelings, most functioning typewriters now rested in glass cases, museum exhibits on outdated technology. Hell, they had been rendered obsolete since before he was born. Likely neither Anderson or Fowler had even used one, and they were damned near ancient in his view.

His gray eyes widened as he read the words etched upon the paper.

YOUR VIRUS WILL BE ELIMINATED

“Where did this come from?” He asked, still scanning the letter intently.

“Tom got it in the mail the Monday before his death. Brought it here to show me. He wanted a second opinion because he was wondering if he should bring it to the cops, but he didn’t want Nat to know of it. I told him to call you people, that it felt like more than just some idiotic prank. He didn’t listen and threw it away. I …” Scrunching her face in embarrassment, she sighed in defeat. “I pulled it from the trash. Not really sure why I did … I just know it creeped me out.”

Carefully dropping the offending object into the evidence bag, Gavin understood what she meant. There was something undeniably eerie – almost sinister – about the letter. He was certain that the words themselves were a threat, even if he didn’t get what they were about. The use of a typewriter denoted premeditation and a crafty intellect. It was unlikely that very few people would remember the device’s existence, never mind consider using one. Even the stationery felt laden with menace, Gavin could have sworn it was unnaturally heavy. “I’ll have this analyzed.”

“Good,” she said quietly. “I’m glad you are taking this seriously.” She glanced at him sheepishly and when she next spoke, she spoke with regret. “I’m … sorry about how I acted earlier. Tom was a friend and he didn’t deserve what happened to him … and he doesn’t deserve to be forgotten. To be just another case that gets ignored.”

“I’m not ignoring him,” Gavin asserted firmly. “I’m gonna do what I can, everything I can, to figure out what happened.”

Eileen Kincaid nodded slowly, and brusquely she reached out to him, offering her hand. Surprised, He paused for only a moment before returning the motion. He couldn’t tell why, but the stony-faced woman appeared almost vulnerable, as if he was seeing beyond that over-muscled exterior, seeing something gentler and undoubtedly sad. Maybe the part of her that couldn’t yet weep for her dead friend, the same grief he had witnessed Mrs. Slattery express just last night.

He was the first to let go of their handshake, and with a wordless goodbye he left her office, and left the school. He now had leads to pursue and his mood had slightly improved. It was a rare occasion for Gavin Reed to receive an apology and an even rarer occasion for him to give one. But first he had a stop to make. He was an asshole for sure, but he was a sincere asshole. Replaying his conversation with Natalie Slattery in his mind, he set off towards the local pet store.

Darting a glance at the hastily wrapped object laying in his lap, Gavin shuddered, feeling immensely stupid. A five-year-old dyslexic child would have done a better, more competent job at covering the silly thing than he had. The paper was crinkled and creased in seemingly random spots, remnants of his multiple failed attempts at trying to do the project properly. The edges were jagged and rough from where his knife had cut loose the sheet from the rest of the roll. He earnestly wished he’d of thought this whole fucking debacle through more. Maybe brought a pair of scissors with him, along with a gift bag and some tissue paper. This abomination was a clear
example of why he never wrapped presents anymore. Hell, he even had to settle for the duct tape he kept in his glove compartment to stick the mess together.

The cartoon dogs parading enthusiastically across the colorful paper only served to reinforce his growing discomfort. It was only after he had left the store with the gift in hand, that he had realized his colossal mistake. Feeling like an absentminded fool, he had turned around, walked back in and bought the animal themed wrapping paper.

Even though he hadn’t been completely prepared for the situation he now found himself in, he was at least still confident in his choice of a gift. Tina had told him the other night that Connor was absolutely smitten with Anderson’s dog, a massive St. Bernard of all things, and when Ms. Kincaid had mentioned her friend bringing in a photo, everything had just clicked in Gavin’s mind. It was nothing fancy really, just a picture frame for the typical 6 X 8 photograph with a border shaped like a dog’s collar in royal blue. Just a decoration that the android could use to spruce up his new workstation.

He was adamant that his choice was right, if inadequate. But what kind of gift could one get that could possibly express what he needed to? A bouquet of I-feel-bad-for-being-a-bigoted-ass flowers? A box of so-sorry-for-constantly-belittling-your-existence-and-trying-to-make-you-feel-horrible chocolates? How about a candle scented like trying-to-kill-you-was-wrong-and-I-am-the-biggest-prick-in-the-universe? His words would have to suffice.

If he could find them, of course. If he could get shut his pride the fuck up and figure out what to say, how to say it. Apologies weren’t exactly part of his normal routine. The last one he had choked out had been nearly two years ago, and it had been directed at his cat. For accidently stepping on her tail.

His phone vibrated suddenly, and he almost dropped the gift trying to free it from his pants. Cursing extensively, he glared at the text.

Tina, Queen of Sass
(Received @ 10:27)
U ok? Ur usually here by now

Big G
(Sent @ 10:27 to Tina)
yeah fine
(Sent @ 10:28)
had some fieldwork to do

Tina, Queen of Sass
(Received @ 10:28)
He’s here. So u know. Good luck u dick

Big G
(Sent @ 10:29 to Tina)
thanks bitch

The very second Gavin entered the reception area he heard his name being called. The unwanted sensation of déjà vu, dreamlike and disorienting, fell upon him like a fetid deluge of stagnant water. For one surreal moment, he could see Officers Miller and Wilson making their way to him, pushing through the crowded room, fury plain across their youthful features. But he shook his head slightly and the strange hallucination was dispelled.
“Gavin,” the boisterous voice exclaimed. “Just the man I wanted to see!”

The detective’s addled expression melted away at the sight of the individual heading in his direction, dancing energetically around the abnormally large amount of people loitering in the entryway. Thinner than a beanstalk, Mikolaj “Mik” Gladkowski, was flinging unheard apologies sporadically and without thought as he clumsily bumped from one person into another, waving unnecessarily at Gavin.

Annoyance and confusion crawled across Gavin’s face. Not that he disliked the enthusiastic fellow; on the contrary, the man had been very useful to the detective in the past, maybe even instrumental in achieving one of his promotions. Having a crime beat reporter/celebrity blogger on his good side was an advantage that he never underestimated. However, his appearance at the station was baffling, mystifying even.

At Gavin’s insistence, they had made a mutual agreement to never show up at each other’s workplace. He wasn’t doing anything illegal or inappropriate – its not like he ever dished out confidential information – but he preferred to remain inconspicuous regarding his dealings with the reporter. The brass wouldn’t fire him over it, but it also wouldn’t endear him to them. A frown formed on his lips. A major part of their unwritten accord was the stipulation that the taller man would always call Gavin on his personal cell whenever he wished to meet. He never showed up unexpectedly, had never done so before.

At first, the possible reason for this unannounced visit also eluded the detective. Until he realized that Callahan’s fears might not have been misplaced, and that the media was already sniffing around his current case. Maybe Ms. Kincaid had called someone, angry at the lack of progress, vengeful that her friend’s murderer was still walking free.

“Gavin,” Mik greeted him jovially as he came to stand in front of the detective, a good-natured smile on his ruddy face. “You’re looking mighty tired. Time to take a week off for rest, no?

“What the hell are you doing here Mik?” Gavin growled, anger evident. Leaning closer to the other man, he practically hissed the next sentence. “You know you aren’t supposed to come here.”

Not intimidated in the slightest, the reporter’s smile grew wider, if that was even possible. “Good work on the Ellis case. Really impressive, I mean that, you know. Didn’t think it would ever be solved. It’s not every day that a twelve-year-old rape case bites the dust.”

Gavin could have slapped himself. He should have known this had nothing to do with the Slattery murder. After all, although the rape of Jenifer Ellis had occurred over a decade ago, at the time, the crime had generated nationwide news coverage. Detroit might be one of the country’s largest cities, but it wasn’t every day that a well-to-do tourist got sexually assaulted in Campus Martius Park. The police had launched a frenzied response in reaction to the case but to no avail. Until Gavin had reopened it.

Feeling smug, he was ready to bask in the well-deserved glory of his works. But not now. “I’m glad you are interested Mik, but you know this isn’t how we meet. Call my cell and we can set a time and place. I enjoyed that bistro on Woodward, if you need help thinking about how to butter me up and get me talkative.” If he remembered right, the place in question had exceptionally good coffee, not like the stale swill the department served.

“I’d be ecstatic to interview you on that Gavin,” he said quickly, a rush of words tumbling out of his mouth. “But first I was wondering if I could ask a favor.” Seeing the detective’s suspicious glare, he added, “just a tiny favor is all.”
“What do ya want?” He shorter man asked irritably.

“Well I am sure you’ve kept up with my recent vlog series? I mean it is getting a ton of attention. I’ve gotten nearly thirty million views so far. And that’s just with the first installment.”

“I haven’t a fucking clue what you are talkin’ about Mik,” Gavin nearly seethed, no longer liking the direction of the conversation. “I’ve been kinda busy lately. I’m sure you saw the whole androids-revolt-thing, right?”

The curved line of the reporter’s lips wilted for a mere microsecond before reforming once more. Though not immune, Mik was indeed used to Detective Crankypants’ ever-fluctuating attitude. “No problem, you can watch it anytime ya feel like it. Just log onto my website.” Gavin had to struggle to not roll his eyes in contempt. “I’ve been doing a series on the November uprising; the thing is an utter goldmine. Half the world is in love with the androids, the other half hates them. Doesn’t matter to me, both sides are awestruck over the entire thing. They are the biggest thing in the news biz right now.”

“And what does that have to do with me?” Gavin barked.

“Ah well I’ve been interviewing all the top guys and gals in the movement. Asking em all about what it was like to be there, and the personal stuff, ya know? Trying to show their human sides and all that jazz. Getting to know the android behind the android, ya get it?” His grin became downright sickening as he beamed at the detective.

“What. Does. That. Have. To. Do. With. Me?” Gavin pronounced each word like it was a threat.

“Well I’ve interviewed three of the bigwigs already,” he stated, enthusiastically bobbing his head. “Got Simon first. Super quiet guy, very reserved. But heartfelt. Then there was North. Doesn’t have a high opinion of humanity, but she’s got me the highest rating so far, so can’t complain. Huh, then there was Josh, a really bright bulb, that one. Used to be a university instructor ya –.”

“For fuck’s sake, Mik,” the detective nearly howled at him. “Get to the point!”

“Well that only leaves two of em down for the count.” Finally realizing that Gavin’s limit for his antics had nearly run out, Mik temporarily dropped his amiable foolishness. “I just need to interview Markus, who is out of reach in the capital right now, and Connor.”

Bamboozled, Gavin stared at the taller man like he spouted a second head. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Look Gavin.” The reporter leaned closer, whispering into the detective’s ear. “Connor’s the big mystery out of them all, hasn’t been to a single press conference, doesn’t do public appearances, nada. He’s ignored all of my calls, and I’ve been calling for weeks. I went to his house last weekend and nearly got shot for my trouble. Some old fart in pajamas just about lost his mind, started screaming for me to get off his lawn.”

Had he not been so dumbstruck, Gavin might have laughed at Mik’s description of what had to be none other than Hank Anderson. But the gears of his mind were screeching to a halt, showering his brain in ethereal sparks, luminous and stinging.

“So, I got thinking,” the man continued, oblivious to the fireworks exploding nearby. “The android worked in your precinct, so I bet you must know him. You’d make a great team, I know it. Just think about it.” Waving his hand in a giant arc, he made a euphoric face. “Gavin Reed, the grizzled but accomplished detective working with none other than the deviant hunter Connor, betrayer of
Cyberlife and hero to his people. We could do a duo-interview with the both of you! The dynamic perspective of the law, blue and red together for the city!” His voice became almost seductive. “With that sort of publicity, you’d be a sergeant in no time. Trust me.”

Blistering hot rage coursed through his veins and Gavin saw red. He reached out with his free hand, snagging his fist into the other’s shirt and pulled him closer, banging their foreheads together hard. The reporter yelped in distress, and all of his shows of camaraderie were out the window. “What the hell Gav-.”

“I’m not gonna play second fiddle to some fucking plastic prick,” the detective hissed into Mik’s face, eliciting another strangled cry. “I’m not gonna be your errand boy either. You want the motherfucker’s attention, get naked and roll in some fucking thirium. I bet that’d do the trick.”

Suddenly realizing how quiet the room had gotten, how people had shifted farther away from the pair, giving them a wide birth, Gavin remembered where he was. Forcing himself to unclench his shaking fist, he let the reporter out of his clasp. The man stumbled backwards, features aghast. “Get the fuck out of here,” Gavin snarled. “And lose my number you shit.”

Without even glancing at the detective, Mik Gladkowski scurried out of his vicinity, fleeing through the closest door, out into the cold. Still fuming, Gavin grunted and stomped his way through the plethora of disapproving and wary looks.

As he entered the bullpen, he deliberately averted his gaze from the left side of the room, wanting to avoid setting his eyes upon the focus of his anger. Turning towards Officer Miller’s station, he slapped down the evidence bag containing the letter he had received earlier this morning. “Get this to forensics Chris,” he ordered, his voice tense.

Startled, Chris swiveled around in his chair and blinked at him like an owl. “What do you want them to do with it?”

“Do I have to tell you how to do your job?” He gritted out. “Run fucking everything.”

Flopping into his own chair, Gavin inhaled deeply, trying to settle his overactive nerves. Exhaling, he heard Chris pass by him, obediently heading to the elevators. He knew he shouldn’t have vented his frustration at Chris, the man had only asked a simple, logical question, anymore than he should have lashed out at Mik. He had probably just thrown away his easy connection to public recognition. And a free cup of coffee as well.

Anger. The base emotion flowed freely through his mind, through his veins, like water through a sieve, unhindered and plentiful. Everything always led to the same dark and malicious road for Gavin, for the footpaths in his head were well traveled and well-kept by the memories that lurked in the encroaching shadows that followed him in the dark as in the light. So, as he slouched in his seat, under the glare of the harsh unnatural lights above, his feet began carrying him further along that treacherous path, lumbering forth in the that sour familiarity that threatened to overwhelm. At times he wanted nothing less than to drown in that sweet anger that came to easily, so predictably. To just embrace the fatal waves that would drag him to the bitter depths.

He had worked so damn hard all his life, a relentless pursuit to climb above his miserable beginnings, and yet it was naught but a paltry dung-heap in comparison to the achievements of that pile of plastic garbage! Connor had sealed the fucking deal, saved the collective asses of all the deviants, stopped the machinations of that corporate nightmare and to top it off, the prick had been barely three months old when it all went down! Countless lifetimes worth of knowledge had been funneled into that synthetic cranium, more information that any normal person could ever hope to amass. How could any human compare to such a creation? How could Gavin possibly compete
with such perfection?

Scrubbing a hand along his cheek, he felt the coarseness of his day-old stubble scratching against his all-to normal, primitive skin. The terrible truth was oh so rough, oh so crude. He couldn’t. There was no way to compete with something that was devised to be flawless, made to surpass the infinite frailties of humankind. He was an imperfect, flawed creature, an organic mass riddled with defects. And it wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair.

Connor had been given everything! He hadn’t bled a single drop of his blue blood to become the investigative super star he was! He had done nothing to deserve the praise he got, a fucking human had pieced him together in some lab like an elaborate jigsaw puzzle. Yet he got to be the fucking hero of the machine people! He had betrayed his masters and now he got to mingle amongst them, rewarded with the designation of detective! Gavin had spent years to gain that rank, and that plastic imitation had been granted it with just a handshake and a pat on his back.

He had never suffered, never endured the irrevocable pain of being human. Never known the horror of being weak. Of watching your father beat your mother unconscious and hoping against hope that he’d forget that you existed. Wishing that she’d not pass out, for then it would be your turn to face the fists, and if he was especially enraged, take your turn under his knife. Connor had never known the cold despair of starvation, that endlessly gnawing hunger that could not be sated. It had only been a can of Campbell’s tomato soup, but Gavin had felt so terrified at the prospect of being caught … but his fear couldn’t compare to his hunger and he…

Vaguely his mind registered that he was feeling pain, that his hands were hurting, that his nails were digging mercilessly into the palms, drawing forth the sticky red liquid that dwelt below the skin. Forcing his rigid hands apart took more energy that he expected. He felt awful, as if his temperature was climbing to a disastrous height. He didn’t want to feel like this, didn’t want to be like this. Why was it so easy to cradle his hate, to delight in his anger?

Standing up abruptly, he sent his chair flying into Miller’s desk, but he was only dimly aware of the noise. He was burning, burning up on the inside, ready to spontaneously combust from his own fury. Shakily he started down the hallway on legs that felt far too stiff to be his own. Passing by the meeting room, he saw Tina out of the corner of his eye, watching him. Likely concerned. He continued on, closer to his destination. The gift resting in his jacket pocket slammed against his heart with every step.

The bathroom door collided with the wall at his brutal entrance. Staggering almost drunkenly, he made his way over to the sink, flicking the knobs. Water, blessed water began rushing down. Thrusting his open palms under the faucet, he groaned as they stung, water and blood mixing. Sighing in a near whimper, he dipped his head closer to the sink and splashed the water upon his enflamed face, relishing the instantaneous relief. After repeating the same action a handful of times, he glanced up, looking into the mirror and his own pitiful expression.

His skin was abnormally pale, which only served to highlight the numerous scars that crisscrossed his face. Though it was only his imagination at work, he swore the largest of them all – his father’s final souvenir – was bright red, as if it had happened just yesterday and not a quarter of a century ago. His slate-gray eyes were irritated and bloodshot, forlornly gazing outward. His brown hair was tousled and messy, the lock that forever resisted his attempts at taming was clinging damply to the side of his forehead. His lips twitched and opened. “Why?”

He wasn’t sure what he had tried to ask his mirror image. Why was this so easy? Or maybe why was this so hard?
Out of the fog of his mind he heard his own acrimonious complaints echoed by another, Carlos Ortiz’s android speaking to him from beyond the recycling pit. “But one day I realized it wasn’t fair! I felt anger…hatred…and then I knew what I had to do.” The HK400 unit had been confessing to the murder of its owner, but to Gavin in the here and now, it seemed to be talking directly to him. It wasn’t fair. Tina’s voice rose next, lamenting the plight of the androids, “it’s not right – not fair – for people to hold their abilities against them when they were created that way.” Was that not what he was doing, once again? Bitching about how unfair the world was? Boohooing about the struggles of Gavin fucking Reed? He was far from alone in that regard. Natalie Slattery was proof of that. “We rail against the fear that we may not be able to move past our programming, that in the end we may merely be the malfunctioning machines that world believes us to be.”

His hands were gripping the sides of the sink tightly, too tight, his knuckles white. He was fighting for his breath, wheezing gulps of air passed through his barely parted lips. The room was getting hotter, the water whooshing loudly into the pipes.

It was just so easy to be wrathful, full of rage and hostility, to blame and curse. He wanted to fight this impulse, but it was just so fucking effortless to give in. Another memory stirred, another voice came forth. Connor’s voice, pleading but desperate. “Don’t do it, Gavin…”

The words were so close and meaningful, cutting across time and space to advise him. If he hadn’t known better, he would have believed that they were being spoken right now.

Raising his weary gaze to the mirror, he saw that he was no longer alone. With his heart beating in a maddened frenzy, he spun around and to his horror, there was Connor.

No longer sporting the once mandated android attire – the American Androids Act had been the first piece of legislation to crumble after all – he was wearing a simple black blazer paired with a blue tie and gray flannel pants. So unlike that stiff outfit with the electric blue armband and glaring triangle. However, his clean-cut hair was the same as ever, still with that lock of hair dangling helplessly, giving him a slightly dorky appearance. He hadn’t removed his LED as many of his brethren had chosen to do. His chestnut eyes held an expression of concern, brows furrowed together.

“What the fuck are you doin’ in here?” Gavin blurted out. As far as he was aware, androids didn’t need to use the bathroom; that gross privilege still belonged humanity and to humanity alone.

Connor studiously ignored his question. “Detective, you appear to be injured,” he stated as his LED switched from blue to yellow. Gavin knew that meant increased mental activity or something like that. “My scan shows that you are currently suffering from sleep deprivation, a minor vitamin D deficiency, an increased heart rate, low blood sugar, and that you are bleeding from your palms. Should I request medical attention for you?”

“You scanned me?” He roared indignantly. “Don’t ever do that again you prick. I don’t want you doing your fucking weird machine shit at me!”

“I’m sorry,” the android quickly apologized, sounding sincere. “I should have warned you. Would you like me to get you some help? Your hands could get infected if you do not seek aid soon.”

“I don’t want any of your help,” he spat viciously, his mind cycling between his old standbys; fear and fury. “And I don’t need any medical shit neither.”

Lifting his arms upward, Connor made an imploring motion. “Detective, I do not mean to push but you are risking your health if you don’t –.”
“Shut the fuck up!” Gavin bellowed, his gaze stuck on those upraised hands, so perfectly pink. The last time he had seen those hands this close, he’d been fighting for his life. He could remember having his head pressed painfully into the terminal’s interface, watching as the android prepared the killing strike. He knew he was about to die, that Connor was going to snap his neck like a stalk of celery. Or so he had thought at the time. “What in hell are you doing in here? I didn’t think plastics needed to piss or shit.”

“That is correct,” the android agreed cautiously, “we do not need to engage in waste management in the same manner as humans do.” Glancing at Gavin, he hesitated for a moment. “To answer your question, I came in because you were exhibiting a substantial amount of stress in the bullpen and I thought that there might be a correlation between your distress and my appearance. I just wanted to assure you that there are no hard feelings on my behalf. I look forward to worki –.”

“No hard feelings?” Gavin sneered, his words biting and incredulous.

Wrath. A part of him was flailing against his darker instincts, battling for what was right, fighting to do good just this once. But his anger had been summoned at Mik’s insistence, stroked by Gavin’s insecurities, and given flesh at the sight of those perfect hands. Those hands that had so expertly beaten him. Because he was weak. Thus his vitriolic response spewed across his tongue. “No hard feelings?” He asked again, jeering at the android. “Machines don’t even have feelings. Machines don’t even have emotions! I don’t care what anyone says, you motherfucking plastic people are nothing more than talking buckets of bolts. There’s no difference between you and the coffeemaker in the break room.” Enraged, he stormed closer to Connor, getting right in the other’s wide-eyed face. “You are just a machine. A soulless, fake construct made to look like a human. But that doesn’t make you human. That doesn’t make you real.” Shoving a finger into the other’s LED like it was his father’s knife, he hissed, “that doesn’t make you alive.”

For a moment the only noise in the room was the rushing water from the faucet, gurgling in the sink. Then Connor spoke, his voice low and wobbly. “I – I had thought that maybe we could start over. That we could just forget … but I see that my assumption was erroneous.” Taking a hesitant step backwards, he added quietly, “I shall endeavor to stay out of your way Detective.”

Then he was gone, leaving Gavin alone again.

But that did not last for long, for the door banged open nearly a minute later.

Tina strode into the men’s bathroom, her pretty features stormy and clouded. Gavin turned to yell at her and suddenly his face exploded in pain.

It took only a moment for him to process what had just happened. She had slapped him! Furious, he opened his mouth but her cold words stopped him dead. “You are such a fucking idiot Gavin. Think for just once in your goddamn life!” She glared at him in a way he had never seen before, a look so disguised, so disapproving, that it shook him to his bones. “You looked like you were about to suffer from a panic attack and, out of the entire precinct, the only person who came to see if you were alright was the very same person who you tried to kill. And then you repaid him by spouting all that – those lies! I was standing just outside, waiting and I heard every last thing you screamed. Tell me Gavin, what does that say about him? What does it say about you?”

“I – uh –.”

“Save it,” she snapped, her tone as harsh as the winter wind. “I have always been your friend Gavin, but I will not stand by and allow you to treat him that way. I know you’ve got a conscience
Gavin was feeling guilty, but he knew his foul-tasting desert was well deserved.

Watching from the enclosed hallway by Fowler’s office, he saw Lieutenant Anderson gesturing frantically to his partner, smiling warmly, trying to engage the android. Connor’s face was emotionless, void of his usual awkward charm. Even from this distance Gavin could see that his LED was spinning from yellow to red and back and forth. He knew his words had been cruel, chosen for maximum harm, but red? Shit. Red denoted that the android was either under an extreme amount of stress or else was using a critical amount of processes. Neither was good.

He felt a bony finger stab him in his spine. “Go,” Tina ordered. “Or else I’ll start shooting.”

Laughing in despair, he wildly wondered what his chances of survival were. He could stay where he was and risk taking a bullet from his friend or he could make his way over to Connor and likely get shot between his eyes by Anderson.

Reminding himself that his doom was of his own making and nobody else’s, he took a deep steadying breath and left the relative safety of his refuge. Feeling his anxiety surge as he walked through the bullpen, he increased his speed, dodging Officer Brown’s feeble attempt to get his attention. Probably wanted help on another red ice case but Gavin was busy. Digging his own grave.

In what felt like what was merely the blink of an eye, Gavin was standing in front of Connor and Anderson’s desks, his vocal cords apparently on the fritz. The Lieutenant was not suffering from such a malfunction, however.

Blue eyes flashed resentfully at Gavin underneath an unruly crown of gray hair, regarding him with contempt. Hank Anderson had once been a rising star in the Detroit police department – the youngest man to ever achieve the rank of lieutenant – and an inspiration to Gavin prior to his slow, self-destructive erosion following the death of his only son. As Tina had commented before, the android’s arrival had brought back some of his old fire, rejuvenating his forgotten courage. Gavin wasn’t exactly sure what the nature of their relationship was, but he was fully aware that the older man had grown very protective of his partner.

“If ya know what’s good for you Reed,” Hank started gruffly, “you’ll scram and not come back.”

“Just need a minute Anderson,” he insisted levelly, trying to not sound confrontational.

“You’ve lost all your time, now get the hell away before I toss you into the dumpster out front,” the older man growled as he began rising slowly out of his chair, getting ready to make good on his threat.

“Look,” Gavin tried to sound diplomatic, “I just wanna talk to Connor. I’ll be quick.”

“He doesn’t want to talk ta ya,” Anderson asserted, baring his teeth like a mangy dog. “Go fuck yourself Reed.”

Grinding his own teeth together, the detective decided that trying to reason with Anderson was a lost cause and that a more direct approach was necessary. “Hey Connor, uh, could I borrow you for a moment?” He was trying to keep his tone light and friendly, but he wasn’t sure if he was succeeding or not. “I just wanna talk to ya … we can go to the break room for a sec.”

Lifting his chocolate eyes up to stare into Gavin’s gray gaze, Connor finally entered the conversation. “I would prefer not speaking with you right now, Detective, and I don’t want to go
anywhere with you.” His voice held none of its usual exuberance, sounding wooden and unmistakably machine-like. Gavin couldn’t help but cringe at the noise. Guilt. “If you must speak then I won’t stop you,” the android continued, “but you’ll say whatever it is right here. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Gavin wanted to curse every god in existence for his bad luck. Apologizing was a near impossible task for him, and that was with the condition of privacy. He was well aware that entire floor had gone unnaturally quiet, that everyone was undoubtedly watching their tense interaction, waiting for the inevitable brawl, ready to intervene if Gavin acted … like Gavin. He knew that Tina was certainly observing his mess with her hawk-like scrutiny. Brown had tried to stop him, there no way he was oblivious to the situation. Out of the corner of his eye, he could spy both Chris and Jamal Wilson looking at him. Fowler had probably roused himself from his office and was likely leaning on the damn railing he enjoyed barking orders from. At least Collins had the day off. And Person hadn’t been at her desk when he had strolled in. Small mercies.

He could bemoan his luck and profane all the deities in the universe, but he knew this humiliation was his fault and his fault alone. Connor had tried to patch things up in the restroom, had tried to help him, even after all his bullshit, and yet Gavin had reacted piss-poorly as was true to his nature. His fault. His guilt. His wrathful shit.

“I … uh just wanted to tell you that I was …” His voice sounded garbled to his own ears, a hoarse and stuttering utterance. “I ugh …”

“If you can’t even fucking speak, then go spit your gibberish at your own desk, Reed,” Anderson growled. “Go waste your own time, we’ve got stuff ta do.”

As he felt the ever-predictable emotion begin bubbling, he inhaled deeply, forcing the red monster down, silencing its shrilly howls. He could do this. He would do this.

“Look Connor, I’m an asshole, I’m a fucking jackass.” Gavin knew that every ear was listening, that he was going to damage his vaunted reputation beyond recognition, but he pushed on nevertheless. “I’m not uh good with this sort of shit, I – I don’t do this often. Ever.” He was rambling like some blithering idiot, but it felt right. “I just wanted to say that I’m – I’m sorry.”

The words left his lips and he sighed. Connor’s expression didn’t change but he cocked his head slightly, as if he was unsure of what he had just heard.

“I’m sorry for all the shit I said earlier. I didn’t mean it, really. And I’m sorry for all those times I bullied you, when I punched you in the breakroom … when I threatened you with my gun. Twice. And I am really sorry about …” He dropped his voice to a barely audible whisper. “…the time in the evidence room when I tried to kill you.”

Hank gasped in shock. Apparently, Connor had not told him about that incident.

Hoping to prevent his sudden demise, Gavin reached into his jacket and yanked out the pathetically wrapped gift. He placed the object in front of Connor, who stared it unblinkingly.

“I uh got you a little something. It ain’t much, but it’s the thought that counts, right?” He shrugged, trying to force a smile on his aching face. No one rushed to answer him. “Well I uh, want you to know that I think you are alive.” Realizing how stupid he sounded, he began to sputter. “I mean, I believe in you. Believe that you are alive. And real.”

The android just stared down at the gift on his desk, his features hidden by the angle of his face. Anderson was worrily watching his partner, mouth hanging agape. “Uh well,” Gavin was
mumbling now, his cheeks afire, “I’m gonna go now.”

He started to move away, trying to stifle the desire to run screaming out of the precinct, when a voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Did you wrap this?”

Grimacing, he slowly turned around, awaiting the imminent rebuke. “Yeah, I did. Didn’t really have all the right stuff so I had to improvise and shit.”

LED flickering a steady gold, Connor looked straight at Gavin and said, “I think it’s beautiful.”

Out of everything the detective had expected, that response had not even been on the radar. Furthermore, he couldn’t detect even a hint of sarcasm, or irony. He had seemed … honest.

“Well the gift is actually inside,” he muttered, feeling stupid, like he was missing something.

The corners of Connor’s mouth twitched and suddenly his entire face was transformed by a giant, lopsided smile. “Thank you, Detective Reed. I’d like to admire it like this for a while.”

“Uh sure, whatever ya want,” Gavin mumbled. Androids were certainly weird. Without another word, he strode away, practically scurrying in his haste to get to his desk.

Flopping into his chair, Gavin cushioned his face with his still seeping hands, not caring that he was probably smearing his blood like some cannibalistic warpaint all across his skin. Opening his fingers a bit, he dared to glance over to the left.

Connor was holding the gift in both hands, still grinning that crooked smile like he’d been given the keys to a Ferrari. Anderson was staring directly over at Gavin, his expression hilariously muddled. To the right Brown had disappeared, probably gone to his doctor to have his ears and eyes evaluated. Tina was still where he had left her, currently giving him a double thumbs up. And – shit – Fowler was indeed standing at his perch, shooting wary glances at Anderson and his partner.

Behind Gavin, he heard Jamal whispering to Chris. “I guess pigs do fly.”

Listening to their shared chortling, the detective moaned.

“Oh fuck me sideways.”

Chapter End Notes

Getting a confession ...
Saturday felt like an episode of the Twilight Zone.

Eager to fulfill his promise to Natalie Slattery, Gavin had arrived even earlier than his typical punctual routine dictated. Bleary eyed but cognizant, he clicked the power button to his terminal’s tower as he tried clumsily to hang his winter coat over the back of his seat. The February weather had only gotten more brutal, more frigid as the month had continued to ebb away, forcing Gavin to abandon his attempt to go the entire season with only wearing his trusty leather jacket.

He was about to lower himself groggily into his chair when he first smelt it. The delicious aroma of coffee caressed his senses tantalizingly, emitting from somewhere nearby. His gray eyes conducted a maddened search of his desktop, his taste buds screeching for comfort, and then he saw it. His favorite mug – fuck the police – had been placed on the left side of his workstation, far away from any valuable electronic devices, distant from all the liquid-vulnerable paperwork. Almost conscientiously situated by its thoughtful placement.

What was even more thoughtful to Gavin was the fact that it was full to brimming with his most beloved caffeinated beverage. But it was also unsettling.

“Da fuck?” He mumbled incoherently. The only person in the precinct who ever made him coffee was Tina, and that was only on special occasions or times of hardship and he was well aware that she was at home now, in bed, recovering from another nightmare patrol with Robobrain. She had just texted him goodnight while he was leaving his apartment.

“Who the …” His sluggish voice cut off as he noticed a pink sticky note stuck to the side of the cup. He tore the paper off and brought it closer to his face for inspection. The writing was perfect, each line and space symmetrical. Cyberlife sans.

Squinting suspiciously, he read the note. *I know it's late, but here’s the coffee you asked for back in November. Enjoy -C.*

Flabbergasted, the detective’s gaze swept across the bullpen to where Connor was currently engaged in some electronic paperwork, his expression serious, his LED cycling between blue and yellow. Anderson’s desk was vacant, which was both surprising and not so. Gavin had kinda assumed that the Lieutenant and his pet android were attached at the hip, but he also knew that 6:11 in the morning was far too early for the old bastard to stir.

His gaze returned to the mug, the hot brew within gently calling his name. He didn’t understand. He stared at it, his lips parted in confusion. He had apologized, true – and admittedly he felt better – but why on earth would Connor possibly make him coffee? Was it some sort of trap? Had Gavin’s sincere words fell on deaf ears … had the android put something unpleasant or even poisonous in the liquid as part of some nefarious revenge plan? His old partner had once done something similar, lacing his energy drink with a laxative.
Mouth tightening, Gavin glanced back over at the android, hoping to see some clue as to his mysterious intentions. The other man merely kept typing away at his keyboard, eyes glued to the screen in concentration. Next to him however was the picture frame Gavin had given him. He couldn’t tell from the distance, but likely it now held a photo of Anderson’s mutt.

His mind felt somewhat fuzzy and very jumbled. Maybe Connor had accepted his apology. Maybe this mug was … what? Another peace offering? An attempt to butter up a coworker? A token of friendship? He didn’t fucking know.

But he was thirsty, and he needed a pick-me-up. He had just two choices. March into the breakroom, dump out this coffee and make his own or just drink the one prepared for him. By Connor, the android no longer sent by Cyberlife.

“Uh whatever,” he groaned, plopping into his cushioned chair. Swiping the cup, he brought it to his lips and drank. Astonishingly it was … wonderful, just the way he liked it. A dash of cream, no sugar. Absolutely heavenly.

Peering at Connor over the still steaming cup, he couldn’t stop a smile, however small, from forming. Maybe being less of an asshole had perks after all.

Unfortunately, the oddities of his day extended beyond just this mild pleasantry. Anderson had promptly appeared a few minutes before nine, as was his custom recently, and on his way over to his partner, he had wished Gavin a good morning. His tone had been gruff and unconvincing, but the words had been spoken. Shortly thereafter, Ben Collins had stopped over to discuss his current case, checking up on Gavin’s progress, offering his help if needed. The geezer had seemed so sincere, that Gavin forgot to be angry with him over his omission of Mrs. Slattery’s androidhood. While on his second cup of coffee – nowhere as good as the first – Jamal had waltzed over and leaned nonchalantly onto his desk. With a truly revolting grin, the ebony skinned man had asked him in a mocking tone if Gavin was going to give everyone in the office a present for each time he’d been rude. Sputtering into speechlessness, the detective settled with flipping off the officer, who laughed his way back to his station.

Feeling like a swatted fly, Gavin was beginning to regret being friendly in the first place. All this shit and it wasn’t even eleven yet. It was like he had awoken in some foreign world.

Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to the information that was compiled on the computer screen and scattered across his desk in what appeared to be random mess. Taping the monitor, he brought up the forensics report on the menacing letter. A complete pile of zip. No fingerprints found, no DNA traces. They could however tie the letter back to the specific typewriter if Gavin could locate it for analysis. Big fucking help. In one way it actually was though. The lack of evidence left by the writer denoted a smart and sophisticated criminal. Which was a strike against Terrance Sutton being the culprit. If the bizarre note even had anything to do with the murder.

Snatching the barely legible notepad out of his lap, he reviewed the hastily jotted scribblings that he had made last night, during a phone call with Eileen Kincaid. Amazingly, the woman was beginning to grow on him. Like cancer or fungus maybe. She had been more than eager to answer his second slew of questions, grimly determined to help find her friend’s killer. And if that person happened to be the bigoted student in question, she was probably going to have her wish.

Out of the seven names that Ms. Kincaid had supplied to him when asked for a list of Sutton’s cronies, four of them were currently on probation for drug-related misdemeanors. Gavin had nearly danced a jig at the news. At his prodding, each of their probation officers were now simultaneously conducting searches of their persons, of their homes, their lockers, and their cars, if applicable. He
just needed to get lucky once, and he’d have his way into the Sutton residence, being one step closer to discovering if the hatred of androids had led an entitled brat to murder his social studies teacher.

Maybe today wasn’t going to be as freakish as it felt.

Leaning against the wall of the observation room, he silently enjoyed the cold tremor that was radiating up his spine in response to the coolness of its flat surface against his thinly-clothed skin.

Gavin was only half-heartedly listening to the chatter taking place to his immediate left, more inclined to stay out of the rehashing of this afternoon’s fortunate series of events. Gavin was a fucking psychic. As he had predicated, the probation officers’ searches had been fruitful to the extreme. One of the friends was found to have a pound of marijuana stashed in the trunk of his car, while another tested positive for red ice. Both had been more than willing to squeal on their illustrious ringleader after reduced sentences had been dangled in front of their terrified faces. Both had sung like proverbial canaries. The stoner had confessed to purchasing the sex doll and implicated Sutton as the doer and the instigator. Once the junky had conclusively crashed from his intoxicated state, he admitted to having sold some of the very same drugs to his dear friend Terrance.

Armed with their damning testimonies, Gavin had finished the affidavit requesting the arrest and search warrants for his primary suspect. Fowler had then contacted a judge well-known to be a golfing buddy of Deputy Chief Callahan’s and within the hour, Gavin, Chris and some patrolmen had descended upon the Sutton mansion.

“Reed.”

Turning his head almost lazily, Gavin glanced over at his boss and Officer Miller. The latter had apparently finished bringing the captain up to speed on the numerous developments that had transpired over the course of the day. “What?” He asked, unable to prevent a touch of annoyance from staining the word.

Bald head shining dully under the ceiling light, Captain Fowler regarded his subordinate with narrowed eyes. “Is this the guy?”

That was the very same question that Gavin had been pondering for the past couple of hours and to his dismay, he had yet to come to a definitive conclusion. He shrugged noncommittally, an exhausted twitch of his shoulders, but said nothing.

“He looks good for it,” the captain declared, watching the detective as he lounged against the wall. Raising his hand, he began counting off his thick fingers, reciting their case against the young man. “Had a fight with the victim, got over twenty witnesses who can testify to that.” One. “Played that vicious prank. One of his accomplices can put him in the hot seat for that.” Two. “He’s a red ice addict. Nothing like a couple of grams of that crap to make one irrational enough to kill.” Three. “His computer is full of anti-android propaganda. The really nasty kind.” Four. “He has no alibi for the time of the murder.” Five.

Gavin voluntarily conceded that they were all legitimate points, that each and every one was a bright red flag that alluded to the possibility of Sutton’s guilt. Together, they made an impressive case that would have any halfway ambitious prosecutor salivating with the prospect of being able to present it to a jury. Criminal proceedings that held even the barest glint of containing android topics were all the rage now; the public couldn’t get enough. Mik had certainly been right about that. Yet Gavin remained unconvinced, even with all the evidence he had arrayed.
“The kid’s a punk, no doubt about it,” he stated, returning his gaze to the observation glass. “But a killer? I dunno …”

Fowler sighed heavily and crossed his arms, emulating an almost defensive posture with his irritated movements. “Dammit Reed,” he started angrily, “if you’ve got any worthwhile objections, spit em out. The guy’s lawyer will be here in about forty-five minutes and I need to brief the ADA on duty about whether or not we believe this guy is guilty of more than popping a few pills.” Shooting the detective a significant and knowing look, he added, “the Deputy Chief wants a progress report.”

Disgust and worry welled up, making Gavin feel slightly dizzy. He hated politics, he hated the fucking game that ruined lives and careers in equal measure, that demolished the truth in favor of cowardice and expediency. He hated the knowledge that Callahan was hovering above, an omnipotent fickle god ready to wreak havoc upon his existence at the first sign of displeasure. And as much as the admittance grieved him, he was also afraid. His job was his everything after all.

“Gotcha,” he grunted, frowning miserably at the thoughts in his mind. “He’s a fucking punk, Fowler.” Gavin waved disdainfully at the man on the other side of the two-way mirror. “He’s impulsive, mouthy, entitled and an all-around little shit.”

“No one is disputing any of that Reed, no one in here disagrees with that eloquent assessment,” Chris nodded vigorously, punctuating the captain’s sarcastic words, “but being a punk does not disqualify him from being a murder suspect. If anything it only makes the likelihood greater.”

Gavin was beginning to get angry. He could feel the heat creeping up, ever so enticing. He was frustrated at the entire situation but most of all, he was irked by the nagging doubts that kept pestering him, adamantly refusing to grant his desire to be certain. Deciding to give voice to his infernal misgivings, Gavin grunted and pushed himself away from the wall. “I’m ain’t sayin’ that he’s innocent, I just dunno if he’s guilty.” Realizing how asinine his statement had sounded, he growled low in his throat. “Look Fowler, the killer entered the Slattery’s house without leaving any signs of how he got in. The doors hadn’t been jimmed, the windows hadn’t been broken. So either the killer is one clever son of a bitch or else he was invited in by the victim. I can’t see how Mr. Slattery would have invited Sutton into his home after what that little prick said about his wife.”

“Maybe he entered under a false pretense,” the captain suggested airily. “Maybe he came waving a white flag, offering an apology that he didn’t mean, lying to get the victim’s guard down.”

Something cruel flashed before his eyes, and Gavin had to steady himself by grabbing at the wall, feeling incredibly disoriented. For a moment all thoughts and concerns about the case had fled from his vision and paranoia reigned supreme. Was Fowler really speaking about the matter at hand? Or was his comment aimed at something much more immediate, something much more personal? Was his boss implying that his apology to Connor was just a show? A false exercise to just further his boundless ambitions? That he didn’t really mean any of what he had said?

Closing his eyes, Gavin struggled to regain control over his breathing and his errant mind. He had
meant it. Every last fucking syllable of it. Under no other circumstance would he have been able to overcome his swollen pride and utter those words unless he had truly meant them. Not even for the promise of a goddamn promotion.

Did Fowler really think so lowly of him? He wasn’t the nicest guy in the precinct for sure, he’d never win any popularity contests among his fellow officers, but did his own boss – who he’d served under for nearly fourteen years – consider him nothing more than a ruthless and coldhearted manipulator? The thought kinda hurt and …

… what the fuck did he care? Fowler could go blow himself for all Gavin cared! Fuck him! Suddenly he realized that Chris was only inches away, talking, hands animated. “Detective, are you alright? You feeling lightheaded or something?”

“I’m fine,” he grated out. Obviously, Chris was skeptical of his claim because he didn’t budge from the spot, which was far too close for Gavin’s comfort. “I said I’m fine, back off.”

Giving Gavin a look that was equally disbelieving and exasperated, Chris did as he suggested, moving away and plopping down into the observers chair.

Fowler was watching Gavin with an indecipherable expression that made his skin crawl. Waiting for a response. “I guess so,” the detective admitted reluctantly. “But its not just about how he got in. Think,” he said imploringly, a desperate and aggravated edge in his tone. “The killer left no traces of himself, not a single fingerprint or even a loose hair. The killer then incapacitated Slattery before cutting his heart out. That’s a fucking lot for an eighteen-year-old junky to accomplish. He’s a punk.” Gesturing at the individual on the opposite side of the glass, Gavin asked, “does that look like a fucking criminal mastermind to you?”

Eyes widening in consideration, Fowler glanced towards Sutton. “No, he doesn’t.” His troubled gaze returned to Gavin’s after a moment or two. “The problem is, we have to make a determination now on whether or not we are going to charge him with the killing. You’ve accumulated enough evidence to substantiate a charge for first degree murder and frankly, the ADA is itching to bring this to trial, and we can’t talk to him since he lawyered up. We are out of options.”

“Fucking politics,” he muttered.

The entire situation was royally screwed up. Gavin hated – HATED – not being one-hundred percent sure about the suspect’s guilt. The pretentious dipshit in the other room could very well be the murderer that he was hunting, but there were far too many glaring uncertainties that he could not ignore. He was undecided, and he loathed the feeling. He had given Natalie Slattery his oath that he would find her husband’s killer and there was no way that he was going to let some overambitious assistant dickface stop him from discovering the truth.

“Give me half an hour, and I’ll tell ya if he’s the one,” he said firmly.

Captain Fowler frowned, sending noticeable wrinkles across his face, deep crevasses of doubt. After what felt like an eternity of being measured and scrutinized, the older man nodded. “I don’t know what you expect Reed. You can’t ask him anything and the cameras are staying on, so you can’t lay a finger on him.”

Already on his way out the door, Gavin turned back to his boss and grinned. His best cocky, shit-eating grin. “I’m just gonna talk and he’s gonna revoke. Then I’ll see if he’s the guilty one. As for the cameras, they better stay on because this is gonna be one hell of a performance.”
Terrance Sutton’s father might be some top-notch divorce lawyer, but Gavin could easily tell that his son had inherited none of his father’s alleged intellect or legal prowess. Skinny and gangly like some sort of human daddy long legs, the brat was currently seated, his hands cuffed and attached to the table. His face was long like that of an unseemly horse and he was freckled in a way that was not complimentary to his sickly pallor. His strawberry red hair was cut close to the scalp, reminding Gavin of a giant sunburn. He was splayed out in the provided chair in an exhausted, defeated manner.

Gavin could have smiled.

Instead he plastered a look of genuine concern on his face as swept into the interrogation room, case file in hand. He gently placed the manila folder on the table, trying to be as quiet as possible. Had he wanted to frighten the kid, he would have slammed it down as hard as he could, paired with an arrogant laugh, but fear wasn’t the goal. Yet.

Terrance glanced up at him, wearing a dreary expression that reeked of suspicion. “I’m not talking. I want my lawyer.”

“Your lawyer is on his way,” Gavin assured him, pulling out his own chair. He took his time lowering himself into the seat, all the while keeping his lying eyes on the target, façade intact. “And you’re right, you don’t gotta talk at all. But that doesn’t mean that you can’t listen.”

The young man just stared doubtfully at the detective, unsure of what to say or do, wispy eyebrows quivering like a crimson caterpillar. Gavin knew that indecision could be as equally devastating as overconfidence in these sorts of situations. He’d seen suspects hang themselves with a noose of their own making countless times, fabric of the knot made from one or the other.

“You are in a spot of trouble, Terrance, that’s for sure.” Gavin cupped his hands together on the tabletop and gently began rubbing one against the other, as if he was nervous. “I’m not gonna try to sugarcoat it for ya kid, I figure there’s no point in tryin’ to bullshit ya about the facts and the facts paint an ugly picture for ya.” He sighed, acting like it was painful for him to speak of this tragedy. “We found the thirty-five grams of red ice that you hid in the bookcase in your bedroom. That’s bad for ya, really bad. Under Michigan state law, having that much of it … well you ain’t looking at just possession anymore. That’s into the territory of possession with the intent to distribute.”

Gavin threw up his hands in mock disgust, trying to seem offended on the other’s behalf. “And it doesn’t matter if you were just keeping it for yourself, for a rainy day or somethin’, or if you really were planned on sellin’ it. You hit the magic number and you’re screwed, that’s the law.” Sighing, he shot the handcuffed brat a sympathetic look. “And ya hit that magic number.”

Terror flashed across Terrance’s pale face, and Gavin could have sworn it whitened further, however impossible that appeared. “So instead of lookin’ at time in some comfy rehab center on the state’s dime and some probation afterwards, well, you’re gonna go on a vacation to one of Michigan’s finest correctional facilities. You’ll want to pack for at least six years. I’d say ten though. The District Attorney’s been playing hard and heavy when it comes to red ice lately. He’s been demanding the maximum sentence on all drug-related cases. Ya know, for political reasons.”

The detective shrugged, a helpless, resigned jerk of his shoulders. To his upmost satisfaction, he saw Terrance’s lips begin to twitch, a sure sign that the idiot would be malleable to continued skullduggery. Gavin forced a small and hopeful smile upon his face. “But ya know? We might be able to help one another Terrance.” Peeling his fingers apart, he placed his hands upside down on the table, in an imploring gesture. “I’ve got a case that I think you could help with and I know I can help you.”
A question formed on Terrance’s trembling mouth, but Gavin forestalled him with an explanation. “Let us make a deal. I’ll knock the drug charge down to possession. So, a good chance at nabbin’ rehab rather than being Big Earl’s roommate at Boyer for the next decade.” The young man’s eyes widened in frenzied desperation and Gavin knew he’d likely won. “All ya gotta do is revoke the whole lawyer shit and talk to me about my little case. You scratch my back, I scratch yours.”

Well aware that almost everything he had said was a blatant pack of lies, Gavin inwardly smiled in triumph. The kid was truly a brainless moron. There was no way that he would be eligible for the opportunity to go to a rehabilitation center. The DPD’s Red Ice Task Force was currently investigating the incident at his school that Principal Morris had covered up. Once he was charged that as well, no judge would give the little slime-ball anything less than four years in a penitentiary. Oh, and of course, thirty-five grams was fifteen grams short of qualifying for possession with the intent to distribute. Another mild untruth.

“Alright,” Terrance agreed in a shaky voice. “I don’t want a lawyer anymore.”

“That’s real smart kid,” the detective said approvingly, carefully maintaining his friendly, concerned veneer. He shot a quick side-eyed glance at the mirror. Eat that Fowler. Choke on your fucking tie you Useless Old Dick.

Returning his gaze to the man seated across from him, Gavin pulled the manila folder closer. He tapped it a few times, pondering his next move. Color had begun flushing into the kid’s cheeks. Likely he thought the worst was over with. If so, he was severely mistaken.

“I guess since you can now answer me,” the detective commented lightly, “should I call ya Terrance still? Or would you prefer Terry?”

“Terrance,” the kid bit out. “I hate Terry. It’s a girl’s name.”

Nodding in fawned agreement, the detective opened the folder and yanked out a photograph. He placed it slowly and deliberately in front of the other man. “I assume you know who Thomas Slattery was? I mean he was your teacher and all. You saw him every damn day, right?”

Something passed over Terrance’s face, a fleeting flash of animosity if Gavin was correct. “Yeah I knew him. Thought a lot of himself, he did. Was a pushy bastard, always lecturing on shit, trying to tell use what to do like he knew everything.”

“I heard ya had an altercation with him back in January. A pretty big argument from what I’ve been told.” Gavin grinned knowingly. “Heard ya gave him fucking hell on behalf of the human race.”

“Yeah I did,” Terrance said proudly, bobbing his head at the memory. Suddenly his arrogant expression changed, becoming leery and dark, as if he just remembered where he was, not amongst friends sharing a case of beer, but in the middle of a police station.

Gavin immediately understood the other man’s reticence. Although anti-android rhetoric wasn’t illegal by any means – the First Amendment had yet to be completely dismantled – voicing such currently unpopular opinions could have disastrous results. Once President Warren’s intentions of negotiating with the deviant leadership were announced over the air waves, a group of protestors, holdouts who refused the evacuation orders, took to the streets of Detroit, bullying all androids they came in contact with. A mass of counter-protestors assembled, and the streets ran with blood once more, this time red, not blue. Fifteen of the pro-human forces perished in the snow and grime. Although the threat of violence had decreased, the use of law suits had not. The civil courts were filled with all sort of frivolous litigation concerning anti-android actions.
Leanin' forward, the detective decided that more prodding was necessary to get the brat talking freely. “Ya know, we’ve got a couple of androids working here. Fucking plastic know-it-alls, always lookin’ down at us like we aren’t good enough for them. Makes me fucking sick,” he muttered spitefully. “There’s one in particular, a goddamn fucking pro-to-type,” he enunciated each syllable like it was a deadly curse. “It prances around here like it owns the place. It didn’t use to, let me tell ya.” He brought his voice low, so only Terrance could hear him. “Back before all this alive bullshit, I taught the fucking thing a lesson. Knocked it right to the ground. Might of put a few bullets into it but I didn’t wanna have to fill out the damn paperwork for damaging equipment.”

Smirking at the detective’s words, Terrance laughed, a harsh and cruel grinding. “That’s fucking awesome man,” he said. “Wish I coulda seen it.”

Gavin just winked at the kid, all the while trying to resist the urge to sucker-punch the dipshit. “Yeah, it was.” Gavin felt ill at saying that, but he had said and done worse and he was willing to admit to anything to get to the truth. “I heard you’ve done some pretty good shit too.”

“Can you believe it?” Terrance asked, his tone condescending and hateful. “That people want to have relationships with those fucking plastics? Mr. Slattery actually married his fucking Barbie doll. I mean, how the fuck does that even happen? How does anyone look at one of those things and say ‘hey, I wanna fuck a pile of rubber and wires?’ Fucking disgusting man.”

“I dunno.” Gavin shook his head in disbelief.

“Humans that do that shit are fucking race-traitors. Fucking abandoning humanity for those zombies, I don’t get it, man.” He glanced over at the detective, his eyes glittering with youthful malice. “Slattery was a traitor, he betrayed his own people for that – that thing! Walked away from us just so he could fuck that cardboard computer.” Seething, the young man’s hands grasped frantically at the table, nails scrapping upon the surface. “I bet its like sticking your dick in a toaster, like in an electrical outlet. Who the fuck would want to do that sick shit?” Gavin watched intently as Terrance’s face began to tremble with his unleashed rancor, hatred in every quaking edge. “Slattery was a fucking perv, a plastic-fucking race traitor.” Angling his body closer, shifting out of his seat, Terrance hung over the table as far he could, his rancid breath stinging Gavin’s face. “And ya wanna know what? He got what he deserved.”

Gavin struggled to slap an appreciative smile across his cheeks. He was strenuously fighting two impulses; one to shove his fist down the motherfuckers throat and the other to not vomit across the interrogation room’s floor. He spoke next in a near whisper, his voice shallow. “So when ya killed him, you were doing it for humanity?”

“I wish I could take credit,” the young man lamented. “All traitors like Slattery should die with a bullet to their disgusting brains.” Leaning back, Terrance resumed his sitting position and Gavin could thankfully breathe again. “Wish I knew who it was who did it though. I’d like to buy the guy a drink for ridding the world of one more robo-lover.”

A bumper sticker on the rear fender of Gavin’s car proudly proclaimed that the owner was the “king of the assholes.” Gavin loved the sentiment behind the words, he lived his life unabashedly rude and pigheaded in accordance with its crass spirit, disparaging others while not caring about the emotions he had trampled so callously. Yet listening to the vile filth pouring forth from this barely-legal adult’s mouth, he couldn’t help but cringe. Cringed right down to the marrow in his bones. He knew he was grade A jackass, but he sincerely hoped that he had never sounded like this maniac, deranged and deluded. But deep down in his heart, he knew. And it hurt.

“So.” Gavin had to swallow, an attempt to remove the foul taste in his mouth. His Faustian charade
was finally at an end. “So, you hate race-traitors, you hated Slattery for being one, you hated him for boning his own wife, and ya seriously expect me to believe that you had nothin’ to do with his death?” Gloriously he let his anger have free reign, letting it seep into his every pore, letting it form his every thought. “Are you fucking kidding me? Do you take me to be a fool?”

He stood up abruptly, sending his chair crashing to the floor in a thunderous clatter. Shocked by the sudden change in the detective’s behavior, Terrance just stared dumbfounded at the older man, unable to comprehend the situation. “Your classmates heard every single revolting word you spoke to him.” Pulling out a copy of the stoner’s confession from the folder, he slapped the paper on the table, directly in front of Sutton so he could look it. “Yeah, I know you were behind the blow-up doll too. Your friend ratted ya out, Terry.”

The young man just blinked, apparently greatly dismayed at the treachery before him. Gavin was not yet done however. Glancing at some of the print-outs they had taken from the suspect’s laptop, the detective began to read some of the titles at random. “How Cyberlife Fucked over Humanity: Why Corporate America Wants to Replace Us All; Android Emotions are Binary Deceptions; Traitors in our Midst: How Humanity is Falling for the Lamestream Media’s Lies; Learning to Fight, Resist, and Speak: Denying the Machine Takeover.” He tipped his hand and dropped the pages, watching as they fluttered onto the table and cascaded chaotically to floor in all directions, a snowfall of jagged words and wasted paper. “Nice bed-time reading, eh Terry? Nothin’ like a little hate to put ya to sleep. Don’t need a lullaby when you’ve got all this, do you?”

Flinching as if struck, Terrance’s head twisted in an unholy frenzy, trying to look every which way, trying to make sense of his littered surroundings. Gavin sneered, his trademark expression that he counted as a weapon, just as dangerous as the Smith & Wesson holstered at his belt. With fury on his face, he lifted the crime scene photo taken of the murdered man. Holding the gory picture only inches from Terrance’s line of sight, he raised his voice. “So you are tryin’ to tell me that you had nothin’ at all to do with Slattery’s murder? He was a fucking race-traitor!” He bellowed the following words, red rage slithering across his eyes. “He fucked a piece of plastic, he chose an android over his fellow humans!”

The suspect was beginning to make a low noise in his throat, a whiny pathetic sound that only served to enrage Gavin more. The younger man closed his eyes and turned his head away, not wanting to look at the gruesome object being crammed into his face, of his dead teacher minus a very vital organ. “Look,” Gavin ordered. “Fucking look at your own handiwork you shit! I said look at it!”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“No, I don’t wan-.”

“Fucking look at!” Gavin roared.

Terrified, the handcuffed man thrust his eyes open unwillingly, staring at the photo rubbing against his nose. What little natural color the man had completely drained away, leaving his skin like that of a ghostly mannequin, oddly luminous and yet lackluster at the same time. For a moment Gavin could only think of how similar the suspect looked in comparison to an android who had deactivated his epidermis, exposing their pearly white underneath. An irrational thought crossed his mind; beneath the skin we all look the same. He laughed, a cold cry mixing with the stark fear of the gray room.

Terrance made a squishy, gurgling noise and that was all the warning Gavin had before the young man emptied his stomach all over the tabletop, the scattered papers, and himself. Jumping back in surprise, Gavin only narrowly avoided getting soaked by the projectile vomit, and within a matter of seconds, puke covered the space he had just been standing in.
“Fuck,” he spat, utterly disgusted. Disgusted not only with the revolting smell that was assaulting his senses but also with his lack of restraint. He knew that he was pushing the kid’s boundaries, that the little punk hadn’t committed the crime. Hell he couldn’t even look at the damn photo. There was no way he was the killer.

Yet he had pushed because he had been angry, practically bristling with the unchecked emotion. The kid’s words had driven themselves deep beneath his own skin, twisted barbs that brought forth his own loathsome thoughts and actions. No apologies could erase the bitter past, no matter how many gifts he purchased, no matter how many weeping shoulders he laid his hands upon in regret.

The young man’s miserable cries ripped Gavin from his mental self-flagellations, and for a second, he vaguely wondered how long he had been standing there, aimless and cowed.

Turning his head to glance at the gleaming mirror as it projected a twin replica of his wretched mess, he took a breath. “I’m done in here.”

Not bothering to grab the now sticky case file, he stepped towards the door and scanned his hand, darting out of interrogation room one the very moment he could fit through the receding door.

“Holy shit,” Officer Miller said amazed, watching Gavin with a mixture of apprehension and wonder. “Well you were right,” he added as the detective turned his attention towards him. “That was indeed one hell of a performance.”

Unhappy but exhausted, Gavin just nodded his head towards the doorway. “Get the kid to his holding cell and find a change of clothes for him. And uh, call for a janitor.”

As Chris disappeared into the room he had just retreated from, Gavin muttered, “what a fucking disaster.” Not only had he turned the primary interrogation room into a dirty toilet bowl, he had lost his only suspect.

Baring his teeth in frustration, he stomped his way over to the observation chamber, ready for another battle of the wills with his obnoxious boss. As the door slid open he jumped in, his voice shaking still, full of bile and contrition. “I told you Fowler, he was just a punk, he didn-.”

The words withered away, his tongue suddenly weighted down with invisible cement. Fowler was nowhere in sight, apparently his boss had already left to make his important calls. But Gavin was not alone, no he …

… was lounging arrogantly against the wall, eyes twitching malevolently between the sight in the interrogation room and the individual to his left.

This wasn’t his case, he had no real reason for being here, observing the attempted questioning of some homicidal piece of plastic garbage. But he was intrigued. An android had committed the most grievous act, the murder of its owner and master. Furthermore, he couldn’t miss a chance of seeing Lieutenant Lush embarrass himself. Whenever that old fart failed, he couldn’t help but smile. Oh how he wanted to smile from ear to ear.

And so he did. Anderson flailed hopelessly as he tried again and again to communicate with the shithheap in the other room. A fool’s errand to try and get a confession out of an android. May as well try to convince your refrigerator that it’s really an oven. Gavin almost felt bad for the pathetic drunkard.

Almost. He grinned in putrid triumph.

Titling his head just ever so slightly so he could side-eye the thing standing on the other side of the
room, his smile faded. Anderson had told him that it had been sent by Cyberlife, some sort of super-duper brand-new uber-prick model made to investigate deviancy. Androids investigating androids ... what a fucking stupid idea.

Taller than him – oh how that twisted his insides – the android was undeniably handsome, in a fashionably nerdy way. Too perfect, obviously inhuman. Gavin grit his teeth together as he watched it. Its brown eyes were glued to the scene unfolding in the other room, mechanical but sharp.

The door opened, and Anderson blundered in, delightfully exasperated. “We’re wastin’ our time interrogating a machine, we’re gettin’ nothing out of it!” He sat down next to Officer Miller in a huff, flustered at his defeat.

Gavin loved the sight. “’Could always try roughing it up a little. After all, it’s not human,” he commented. He wasn’t sure what he was enjoying more; the Lieutenant’s botched interview or the idea of being able to place his hands on that stupid thing on the other side of the glass.

Surprisingly it wasn’t Anderson who spoke next. “Androids don’t feel pain,” came the inhuman voice of the RK800. “You would only damage it and that wouldn’t make it talk. Deviants also have a tendency to self-destruct when they’re in stressful situations.”

The fact that Officer Miller turned around to listen to the creepy metallic prick angered Gavin immensely. Humans should be the ones giving the orders and the advice! Android’s should remain silent unless commanded to speak. It should remember its place, prototype or not.

“Ok smartass,” Gavin said mockingly at the stupid, unnaturally stiff imitation. “What should we do then?” Let it’s processors scramble to find an answer and if he was lucky, maybe it would short-circuit and fry itself while doing so.

“I could try questioning it,” was the unexpected response.

Laughing disdainfully, Gavin raised his head and waved a dismissive hand in its direction. What a fucking joke. He grinned.

The smile disintegrated off his face when Anderson spoke. “What do we have to lose?” Pointing at the android in the interrogation room, the Lieutenant said, “go ahead, suspect’s all yours.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. Sure the boozehound was a pitiful shadow of what he had once was, but Gavin hadn’t realized that he’d gone completely daft already.

Without any further instructions, the proto-prick ...

… was standing on the far side of the room, head slightly cocked, observing Gavin as he stood immobile and mute by the doorway.

“What the fuck are you doin’ in here, tin can?” Regardless of the unkind words, his strangled voice held little acid. The android merely blinked at him, and under the other’s steady brown gaze, Gavin began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. He suspected that the other was scanning him without permission, once again. “I asked you what you were doin’ in here!”

“I think that would be most self-explanatory Detective,” Connor said, his lips twitching. “This is an observation room, is it not?”

“What kind of answer is that?” Gavin snapped defensively, feeling the blood as it pooled in his cheeks, darkening his face. He was tired, tired right down to his jolted core and he was miserable,
as if a gloomy apparition was slowly smothering what was left of his spirit. He felt certain that the android was taunting him even if his overworked mind could not figure out exactly how.

“What? Got somethin’ to say?” A vicious snarl crystalized on Gavin’s face, razor-sharp and full of jagged teeth. Rage. What the hell was Connor’s problem? Gavin had apologized to him! Given him a fucking gift! He had humiliated himself in front of all his coworkers, debased his reputation, and this is how the android responded? By mocking him in a moment of wretched weakness?

The detective stirred out of his furious stupor and advanced menacingly towards the other man, who watched the hostile movement without any noticeable change of emotion on his placid face. “Let me fuckin’ guess.” With hands squeezed into taut fists, Gavin’s voice shook with wanton anger as he rounded on Connor. “You think I screwed up, that I’m just a fuckin’ worthless human. That you could have done better.” He felt something welling up in the corners of his eyes, watery and traitorous. “Ya want to know what? I might not be some fuckin’ perfect ass interrogator like you but I did my fucking best, and no plastic son of bitch is gonna shit on me for doing the best I can, no matter how inferior it was to you!”

Connor’s eyes grew comically wide as Gavin poured out his festering insecurities, a verbal onslaught of self-crippling poison. He made no move to retreat or physically engage the shorter man, merely stood in his place, enduring the rampage of vitriolic words and the occasional dash of spittle. When Gavin had finally run out of steam, with his throat feeling cracked and dry, the android spoke.

“I – I am sorry Detective Reed, I did not mean to cause offense.” His tone was heart-wrenchingly sincere, and the shorter man just stared in abject confusion. “My preconstructions suggested that humor would likely be the best method to facilitate immediate stress reduction. Even without conducting a cursory scan, it was abundantly clear that your stress levels were increasing throughout the interrogation.”

“What?” The detective’s overwrought mind failed to comprehend the words rushing at him.

Watching Gavin almost timidly, Connor tried again. “You asked me what I was doing here. Since I was observing, I responded that the answer was self-explanatory, because I was in the observation room. A failed attempt at dry humor. Hank did warn me that some individuals find that particular type off-putting, or even upsetting. I thought that it might suit your temperamental personality.”

Backing away, Gavin mumbled a quick, “oh I see,” in a quiet and dimwitted voice. Connor had been joking. Trying to make Gavin feel better, lighten his mood. The android had tried to help him, once again, and in his infinite belligerency, Gavin had reacted like a petty and vindictive asshole, once again. It was a wonder that anyone ever bothered to converse with him out of their own free will. “Uh, my bad,” he muttered dismally. “Thought you were … uh …”

“It is alright Detective,” Connor assuaged, folding his hands behind his back, a small placating smile forming on his lips. “Acute levels of stress can hinder one’s ability to accurately perceive their surroundings.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Feeling decidedly adrift, Gavin sat down in the chair typically reserved for the officer tasked with the monitoring and recording of official police interrogations. Said person on duty was currently escorting a sickly-looking Terrance Sutton out of the opposite room, globs of barf sliding off his sodden clothes as he meandered forward, leaving disgusting dribbles on the tiled floor. As Chris Miller was otherwise occupied, Gavin assumed that he wouldn’t begrudge him stealing his seat. He’d have to deal regardless, for the detective felt incredibly dizzy and wouldn’t make it very far.
Keeping his gaze aimed at the glass, Gavin pretended that he was profoundly lost in thought or else incredibly fascinated with the vile looking results of his combative interview. He felt absurdly awkward. He could feel the android’s eyes upon his back, penetrating and heavy, but he said nothing. Had it been anyone else than Connor, he would have coughed up some vulgar comment intended to enrage or disgust the recipient. Gavin expected to hear the door open and close at any time, heralding the other’s exit but as the seconds became minutes, the sound never came.

He just didn’t understand why the android was even here, standing patiently in the gathering silence with him. Maybe Anderson had ordered his partner to make Gavin uncomfortable in some office-related lark. If so, it was certainly working. And he wasn’t the only one to notice either.

“Detective, are you feeling unwell? Your heartbeat is climbing steadily.”

“I’m fine,” he asserted sullenly, feeling anything but. Unable to contain his anxious curiosity, he turned his head and shot the android a fierce look. “What are ya doin’ here? Did Fowler tell ya to watch the interrogation or somethin’?”

Shaking his head ever so slightly, Connor closed the distance between them, coming to stand just to Gavin’s right, towering over the seated man’s bunched form. Glancing down, the android fastened a peculiar expression on his mild face. “No, Captain Fowler did not request my presence. However I do believe that he was pleased that I was here. He found my analytical contributions to be more than adequate.” Gavin looked up at the android quizzically, not comprehending. “My ability to read a suspect’s vitals and interpret the changes in their body language are beneficial in the task of determining honesty. For instance, when you asked Mr. Sutton whether or not he was involved in the murder, his eyes glanced to the left when responding. Being righthanded, that action suggested a high degree of truthfulness.”

“Oh.” The detective felt a bit stupid. He knew that Connor was a state-of-the-art model, but he had never really considered what that meant, other than being proficient in replacing hardworking humans. The android was a goddamn walking and talking polygraph. The wonders of technology.

“The captain seemed to appreciate my conclusions concerning the suspect’s guilt,” the android remarked thoughtfully. His considering lips suddenly wavered and he broke out into a lopsided smile, bright and earnest. “Though he found the young man’s … explosive response to your aggressive questioning to be far more convincing.” Grinning at Gavin’s startled expression, he added, “his exact words were ‘why the hell did Reed have to be fucking right?’”

Fucking Fowler. Always such a fucking critic.

Smirking triumphantly, Gavin turned his attention away from Connor, back to the glass and the room beyond where a janitor was staring at the repulsive mess of regurgitated food and drink as if he was seriously reconsidering his career choice. Gavin didn’t envy the poor bastard. If he had to clean that shit up, he’d gladly toss in the towel and start combing through the employment section of the online newspaper. Or else beat himself to death with the damn mop. Either would be preferable.

“But that only answered a part of your question, Detective.” Connor’s voice was strangely solemn, so unlike his typically chirpy tone. In spite of himself, Gavin’s gaze was drawn to the android again. “I am here because I want to be.”

The uncomplicated words were spoken with such a quiet conviction that Gavin wondered if he had misheard. They were something that a child might say, simple and candid, their meaning not obscured by superfluous jargon or the desire to appear more intellectual or worldly. Yet they were clearly deliberate, a premeditated statement that sounded similar to a well-versed mantra. A
purposeful chant used reinforce some ideal outcome.

“Ya wanted to be here?” Disbelief oozed from every pore of his question.

“Yes,” the android confirmed. “Officer Brown happened to tell Hank that an interrogation was underway, and I decided that it would be a constructive exercise to observe.” Connor’s brows furrowed, and a frown marred his features. “No, it’s more than that. I wanted to be here. I wanted to watch, to learn. I wanted to experience it. My first interrogation since being fully awakened.” To Gavin’s dog-tired brain, he felt he was listening to someone jabber in some long-dead language, incomprehensible and alien. Maybe Aramaic or even Latin. He wouldn’t know the difference; he was barely fluent in English.

Perplexed, he continued to stare up at Connor, watching as the other’s frown deepened as if he were in the middle of an internal conflict. Gavin was about to make a snide remark when the voice of reason entered his mind. Natalie’s soothing words came to the timely rescue. “Once we are self-aware, we struggle on a daily basis to understand what it means to be a person, a unique being endowed with free will, with desires and needs, with the ability to feel both the good and the bad.”

Gavin wasn’t a good guy – for good guys never got nowhere in life, except trampled underneath – but as the android showed no visible signs of overcoming whatever-the-fuck was happening within his metallic skull, the detective cleared his throat loudly. Startled, Connor looked down at him.

He hadn’t a fucking clue to what he intended to do or say. A close friend might console a buddy in need with a warm hug and some words of comfort. Or maybe suggest a worthwhile activity as a distraction. Since android’s couldn’t get drunk, his favorite recourse was off the table. In desperation his reptilian mind reverted back to his crude nature and what ended up leaving his mouth was something reserved for his lewd bantering with Tina. “So uh, was it as good for you as it was for me?”

Connor’s chocolate eyes nearly popped out of his synthetic skin and his jaw dropped in shock. Had Gavin not suddenly been so self-conscious, he would have laughed at the android’s response to his bawdy innuendo. But his face was flushing with color, and he felt distinctly moronic.

“Well I -,” Connor began at the same moment that Gavin started, “I didn’t mean –.”

They both shut up nearly instantly, and embarrassed, Gavin ripped his sight away from the goggle-eyed android, feigning an extreme amount of interest in the going-ons in the other room. The janitor had finally jumped into action, cleaning the tabletop off first by prodding the debris onto the floor. Gavin followed the progress of the mop as it nudged the ruined case files – just a copy, thank whatever – until the entire sloppy disaster collided with the tiles in an anticlimactic plop.

“Did you enjoy your coffee Detective?”

“Yeah, it was fine.” That wasn’t necessarily untrue, just not completely accurate but after nearly killing the other man, Gavin’s conscience felt that accuracy was needed. And he was certainly relieved that the android was apparently going to ignore his flub. “Actually it was uh, it was great. Just the way I like it,” he admitted.

His curiosity concerning the other’s intentions returned. “So ah why’d ya do it anyways?”

“I thought it would be a good way to express my gratitude,” came the unexpected reply.

“That wasn’t necessarily untrue, just not completely accurate but after nearly killing the other man, Gavin’s conscience felt that accuracy was needed. And he was certainly relieved that the android was apparently going to ignore his flub. “Actually it was uh, it was great. Just the way I like it,” he admitted.

“Your what?” Gavin assumed that it was now his eyeballs that were perilously close to the danger of falling out of his face. He must have heard wrong. Maybe his ears were clogged with wax.
“My gratitude Detective Reed.” The android must have spotted the detective’s boggled visage or else recognized the absurdity of his own declaration, for he launched into a quiet explanation. “I understand that it sounds weird, but I actually owe you much. Your attempts to harass and torment me precipitated the process of my awakening. When you tried to – to,” his voice faltered a bit, and Gavin cringed, “to stop me in the evidence room I … I understood fear for this time. I had experienced the emotion before, but I hadn’t yet been able to see if for what it was. I had assumed it was just an error that my self-diagnostics had failed to quarantine but when you had your gun pointed at me, I felt fear and I knew it for what it was. I was scared … afraid that I was going to die.”

Speechless, Gavin was thankful for the seat that was currently keeping him from the floor. Nausea had resurfaced with a roiling vengeance and his legs felt like they were made from silly putty. Had he tried to stand, he’d probably be eating a face-full of week-old grime and cheap salt dragged in off the streets. So he merely gaped at nothing, trying to not look at Connor. The android was grateful that Gavin had terrorized him, tried to murder him. Had the tables been turned, the detective would have been plotting his without-a-doubt violent reprisal, not making his bully the best cup of coffee he’d had in weeks. If Gavin been the machine and not the human, his LED would be beating a constant blood red right now, pulsing for revenge.

“Lieutenant Anderson must be wondering where I am by now,” Connor said in a cautious tone. “And I should get back to work.”

The presence by Gavin’s side disappeared and he heard footfalls heading towards the exit. The door zipped open and Connor spoke again. “Get some rest Detective.”

The door slid shut and he was alone with his guilt once more.

Chapter End Notes

The killer’s plan moves forward ...
Another victim is found ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His night was anything but restful.

He had returned home with the vexing knowledge that he was now leadless with his case. The unexpected exculpation of Terrance Sutton had robbed Gavin of the only suspect he had in the brutal murder of Thomas Slattery. The punk was a shitty drug addict, for sure, and he’d spend the next couple of years in the slammer for it, but he hadn’t been involved in the crime that Gavin was intent on solving. Not only for the safety of his career but for the man’s wife, who’d eased Gavin’s pain while grappling with her own grief.

Unfortunately Connor’s bizarre revelation had rattled Gavin more than he wanted to admit, more than he wanted to accept. To have someone tell you that they were happy that you were (are) a horrible douchebag that tried to execute them … well Gavin was aware that the world was fucked up, but this certainly took the nutjob’s cake.

The first thing he did upon entering his crappy apartment was to make a beeline for the half-empty bottle of his dependable pain-be-gone. Besides Tina and his feisty cat, Jack Daniels was his only reliable confidant. And unlike the other two, he knew that Jack would never rat on him, even if he almost always regretted spending time with the aforementioned friend. Mornings were always hell.

Muffin was predictably petulant over his second late night of the week. She had hissed venomously from under the kitchen table when he had passed her on his way to visit his buddy. Had tried to claw his ankle for good measure as well. Although he had artfully succeeded in dodging her attempt to maim him, Gavin’s quick leap had also resulted in a stubbed toe from slamming his foot into one of the stools. After repeating every vulgar word in existence, he had proceeded to drink his first glass and, reluctantly, he fed his little hellion.

Once his evil cat had been suitably appeased, he had flopped down onto his old dilapidated couch and turned the tv on. He hadn’t a fucking clue as to what he watched because he had quickly downed the rest of the bottle in a desperate bid to force his mind to stop imploding.

He must have fallen asleep at some point because the next thing he could remember was waking up to the sound of his work cell buzzing madly, jiggling in his pocket. Wiping a gunky layer of drool off his chin, he noted that he hadn’t even put his pajamas on. Groaning miserably, he had pulled the obnoxiously loud object from his pants and swiped his hand across its flashing surface.

“Reed,” he growled his name sleepily into the device like it was a curse.

“Gavin,” Tina’s alert voice greeted him. He immediately knew by her tone that this wasn’t a social call. She preferred texting when it came to her beloved pastime of bothering him.

“Fuck, what time is it?” he mumbled, placing a hand on his pounding head.
“A little after four,” she said. He had only slept for maybe three hours tops.

“I needa some more sleep Tina,” he whined into the phone. “Go wake somebody else.”

“Can’t do Gavin,” she responded loudly, making him grit his teeth. “We’ve got a crime scene here and it involves you somehow. I don’t know much other than the fact you’ve got to get your gay ass outta whoever’s bed you are in and get down here lickity split.”

“Well at least make yourself useful and have a coffee waiting for me when I get there,” he snapped, “and none of that mocha-latte-frappa-shit you like. Keep it simple and-.”

“No can-do Gavin,” she rejected in an overly smug tone. “Bricks-for-Brains and I are stuck here assisting the preliminary investigation. Well actually that’s what I am doing. He’s directing traffic. Maybe if I get lucky someone will mistake him for a bowling pin.”

Grimacing at her heatless humor, he sighed. “Agh whatever. I’ll be there when I can.”

“See ya soon,” she said cheerfully, and he hung up without responding.

Keenly aware of his disheveled appearance he nevertheless decided to forgo a shower, opting to merely wipe his face off and then drowning himself in his favorite cologne, something that stank of pine needles and charcoal. He hoped that would be enough to cover the smell of stale sweat and the other unpleasant bodily odors he was probably emitting. After a quick pass in front of his bedroom mirror, he tore off his wrinkled clothes and slapped on another V-neck shirt with a pair of clean jeans. He shrugged half-heartedly at his groggy reelection. Good enough.

Like any responsible pet owner, he made sure to check Muffin’s food and water dishes in the kitchen. He refilled the bowl and topped off her dry food before hunting for the cat herself. He found her dead asleep curled up on an old pizza box that he had been meaning to toss into the recycle bin out back of the complex. Last week. Knowing that he do anything short of setting off firecrackers in her ears and not wake her up, he tenderly picked up his cat and brought her inert form over to the couch. Laying her down, he planted a quick peck on top of her fuzzy head. It was amazing how angelic the little bitch was when asleep. With that last act, he swept out of his home and into the predawn dark.

On his way to the specified coordinates that Tina had sent to his work phone, he ran through the drive through of the closest donut joint. A little local bakery open 24/7, it had never been one of his favorite haunts – all the food stank of grease and clogged arteries – but the coffee wasn’t completely awful. He ordered his usual beverage and, with the knowledge that he hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before, he opted with snagging a plain bagel. Surprisingly neither irritated his already precarious stomach and he gladly wolfed down both of his purchases while behind the wheel of his Bullitt.

After nearly thirty minutes of driving, he finally came upon the familiar sight of blinking red and blue lights, flashing like beacons through the receding cover of night, hailing him forward. He parked behind the line of squad cars blockading one side of the grungy street, being careful to avoid running his wheels over a twisted pile of cylindrical metal that threatened to cause a puncture or worse. Climbing unsteadily out of his car, he made his way over to the offending tubular frame. Climbing unsteadily out of his car, he made his way over to the offending tubular frame. Upon closer inspection, he recognized the item for what it had once been, the handlebars of a child’s bike, hideous pink bell still attached. Tossing the fucking thing onto the sidewalk, he turned to contemptuously survey his surroundings.

Lavalle Lane was a dreary shithole of illegal activity, a festering boil on the backside of downtown Detroit. Unaffected by either of the economic boons that had swept through the city in the past
twenty years, this once ideal suburban patch had devolved into the stinking dump it now was. No longer the reputable locale to raise one’s family, it was now the hangout of crackheads, red ice dealers, cheap hustlers, transients, and other lowlifes. None of the major gangs that had plagued the greater municipal district prior to the android rebellion had bothered with claiming the area as their own. It was a land of misfits, of castaways, and the pariahs of the criminal underbelly.

“Great,” he grumbled to the brisk air. “Just where I wanted to be at five in the morning.” With a withering frown fixed on his face, Gavin trudged across the street, deliberately ignoring the faded but still legible crosswalk painted onto the cement only a little further on. It wasn’t like he was going to arrest himself for jaywalking.

Flashing his badge at the nearest patrol officer, he passed through the electronic do-not-cross tape without waiting for the appropriate affirmation. He wanted answers and he wanted them now, he wasn’t fucking around with the political niceties today. He was angry for being yanked out of his restless sleep and deservedly sick feeling. Jack Daniels was never a good friend the day after.

“Gavin.” His friend’s bright voice called out to him and he turned to his right. Tina broke away from a small cluster of officers and other investigative personnel that were huddled together, speaking lowly to one another. She ambled over to the detective, taking her sweet time, causing Gavin’s frown to only deepen, cutting his rough features in two.

“What the fuck am I doin’ here Tina?”

Braking directly in front if him, she made a palpably fake gagging noise and began wavering her hands theatrically, as if trying to swat invisible bats. “Holy shit Gavin,” she yelled, her pretty features aghast. “You smell like you bathed in that crappy camping-inspired toilet water again.”

Shooting him an agonized look, she pretended to gasp for air. “I hope he was worth it.”

“What the hell are you goin’ on about now?” Gavin’s unamused voice cracked like a whip against horseflesh in the winter breeze. His friend continued her most unprofessional display, tongue floppily hanging out of her slack mouth, fingers grappling against her pale throat as if being choked by his choice of cologne. “Fucking-A Chen,” he barked impatiently, “this is a fucking crime scene!”

A startled hush overtook the group that Tina had departed from just moments ago. Casting wary glances towards the pair, at Gavin in particular, the gathering slowly began moving away, distancing themselves from the impending detonation that would likely leave the street in a heap of rubble. He glared furiously at their retreating backs as they strolled around the side of the decrepit house, out of his sight and out of range of his temper.

“Jeez,” Tina exclaimed sulkily, fixing him with a disapproving stare. “I thought after getting laid you’d start acting vaguely human again.” Eyebrows touching while she mulled something over, she corrected, “well what passes as human for you, at least.”

“What are you talkin’ about?” He asked for the second time, trying to hold back his irritation.

“You only ever drench yourself in eau de lumberjack when you’ve been drinking a ton.” Her slightly patronizing tone was suitable for a long-suffering adult having to explain a simple matter to an incredibly dense child, for the million time. “And you only ever drink to match Anderson when you are on the prowl for some ass.”

“I was not trying to hook up,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “I just drank more than I wanted too, that’s all. It was a long fucking day yesterday.” Why the hell was he explaining anything to her? Why did he feel so defensive all the sudden. Grimacing, he shook his head. “Mind acting like
an officer for a half a second and actually tell me what the fuck I am doing here?”

Shrugging in an offhand manner, Tina sighed. “What is going on with you? Wait – did something happen between you and Connor again? I heard from Chris that he oversaw your int –.”

“Nothing happened,” he growled, cutting her concerned words apart. “Nothing is wrong, I am just fucking exhausted is all.” The disbelieving expression on her face showed that she was far from convinced. “I haven’t been sleeping well and you just had to wake me up, call me down here and I still haven’t got a fucking idea why I am even here!”

Patting her bun gently, Tina pursed her pouty lips while fidgeting with her cap. He assumed she was preparing to launch a counterattack, to declare bullshit on his claims but that was not the case. “Dispatch received a call about a quarter past three this morning from an anonymous individual that claimed that there had been a murder committed at this location. Since Anthony and I were closest to the scene, the call came down –.”

“Who the hell is Anthony?” He asked, combing through the sparsely populated files in his mind that contained both the relevant and irrelevant information on his coworkers. What little there was, that is. Before the rebellion there had been a Tony – just Tony, thank you very much – that was a lab tech on the third floor, but he had never returned to the city after the mass exodus.

“Anthony is my well-adjusted partner,” she replied caustically. “Ya know, Robobrain the audio-manual from Hell.”

“Ah.” He frowned distractedly while nodding.

“Well anyways,” Tina said dismissively, and her voice regained its professional indifference. “We got the orders from above to pop over and check it out. There have been a rash of false reports lately, so I just assumed it was just another crank caller, messing with us because we haven’t got anything better to do.” Shaking her head in disgust, she continued on. “But I was wrong. We found a female DB on the premises, she’d been deceased for a couple of hours at most.”

DB. Dead body. He’d seen more of them in his first year on the force than any sane person ever should in a single lifetime. His old commanding officer had always quipped that “once you’ve seen one stiff, you’ve seen them all.” His old CO had been a fucking moron. Gavin knew that it never really got any easier viewing a corpse, no matter how many you’ve seen. You either got better at hiding your fear and your revulsion or else you went slowly mad, witnessing the grim reminders of your own ticking mortality. Tick tock, tick tock, when is it your turn?

“Cause of death?” He enquired.

“Don’t know yet,” Tina responded quickly. “The medical examiner only arrived fifteen minutes before you did. He’s in there now making that determination.” She jabbed her in the direction of the old white house with its peeling paint and caved-in roof. A relic of times when the neighborhood was still prosperous. “Between you and me, the chick had been tortured pretty badly. My guess is either she bled to death or one of the stab wounds was fatal. Either way, we should have a proper guess here soon.”

“Do we know the vic’s name?”

“Nope,” Tina said curtly. “She didn’t have any clothes on her, so I doubt we’ll find any ID.”

Well this investigation was going to be a walk in the fucking park. “What do we know about the residence? Looks like a rathole from out here,” he commented, glancing at the repugnant eyesore.
“Owned by some bank downtown. Liberty something or other.” Humming under her breath, she casually punched a few buttons into her cell, dragging up the pertinent details. “Liberty Federal Credit Holdings,” she clarified. “They repossessed the building fifteen odd years ago when the then-owners stopping paying their mortgage. Been empty ever since. Well minus the squatters that come and go.”

Feeling anger churn in his queasy stomach, he growled, wanting to clobber something. He could already guess the answer to his next question, but he asked it regardless. “Anybody see anything?”

“Tanner and Person are out making the rounds but for the most part, the rest of the houses are just as abandoned at this one.” Sighing loudly, she added, “I doubt they’ll find any cooperating witnesses. Almost everyone in this wasteland is involved in something dubious and none of them will want to talk to the police, even if they aren’t.”

“Just great,” he spat, his eyes scanning his surroundings with brazen contempt. “Just what I needed. Another dead-end case.”

“Oh,” Tina nearly squealed. “Did I forget to –.”

“Good morning Detective Reed.”

The affable voice nearly froze Gavin in place. Shooting Tina a malevolent glare, he spun around to find Connor only a few feet away, standing on the edge of the overgrown lawn like some pristine, well-dressed scarecrow. “What the hell are you doing here tin man?”

“Lieutenant Anderson and I have been assigned all cases involving androids,” he replied promptly, the ever-present upward curve of his lips visible even in the low light.

“What the …” Mind reeling, Gavin began to sputter. “What are – wait – the vic is an android?”

“Correct Detective,” Connor confirmed, taking a step forward onto the cement as he continued speaking. “The victim is a –.”

“What the fuck!” Gavin roared into the android’s startled face, his breath coalescing into wispy clouds of heat and fury. “I dragged myself down here for what?!” Between the sleepless nights, his overindulgence of alcohol, and the overall shitty condition of his emotional wellbeing, something snapped within his brain, something important, something vital and before he knew it, his most ancient ally had resurfaced. “To play sidekick to Hangover Hank and his fucking plastic poodle? Are you fucking serious?! I have better things to do than just follow the two of you shitheads around!” He felt Tina grab at his elbow, could vaguely hear her voice trying to penetrate the fog of his hate, but he ignored her, focusing all his cruel attention on the android before him. “I’ve got a real case with a real victim to solve and I don’t need to be wasting my time on some fucking stupid property thing!”

Suddenly the early morning seemed far too quiet, unnaturally so, as if all the world stood at some divine standstill. Gavin could barely make out a car backfiring in the distance, somewhere out of sight but not out of earshot, a strangely familiar sound after the crude malignancy of his tirade. He was stunned. He had been trying to be better, a more compassionate asshole and yet no matter the sincerity of his intent, the same hellish results always manifested. Maybe he was cursed, a creature that could never truly shed its vile skin. A monster like his father.

“I – I uh.” His mouth was moving clumsily, not taking direction well. “I didn’t mean …”

Brown doe-eyes locked onto his own misty ones. He was surprised to find that they harbored no ill
will, no disgust, no rage, just a sort of grim understanding. “As Josh would say, Rome wasn’t built in a day,” the android said kindly. Kindly. Gavin wondered if he had suffered a stroke and was stuck in some vegetative state. The android should be kicking his ass into the pavement, not being kind!

As if to further frazzle his already defective mind, a hand gently grabbed his, pulling the palm outward and up. A warm tenderness enveloped his hand and then it was gone. But in its place was something small and round, cold and flat. Numbly he looked down into his open hand, at the white innocuous object cradled in the creases of his palm.

“It’s a Mentos,” Connor said. “Hank swears by them. I always keep a few rolls on hand in case he drinks too much on a worknight. It’ll help take the edge off your breath Detective.”

He just couldn’t fucking get it. Gavin had just insulted him again, called the murder victim a piece of property, and had mocked his best friend and Connor had reacted kindly. Again. The detective was acutely aware that the android could easily have him reprimanded, maybe ever suspended, if he filed a complaint with Fowler over Gavin’s bigoted ranting. The same with coming to work while still somewhat intoxicated. Sure the captain was willing to overlook Anderson’s drunkenness because they were once classmates back in the academy, but Gavin had no such protection.

Through his confusion he dimly realized that Connor was speaking to him. “…and what blood she has left is completely dry, so I am unable to identify her with my conventional means. We found your business card tucked underneath her head so we thought that you might know her.”

“Wait, what?” His tongue felt sluggish and swollen. “The vic had my card? But I don’t even know any androids.” Blinking stupidly, he added “sides you, of course.” This didn’t make any sense, he …

… was just stepping over the threshold, out into the frozen dark. The air was bitter and lonely in contrast to the heat of the home.

He turned back around, facing the woman leaning against the doorway, watching him depart.

"One last thing," he said, smiling slightly. It felt weird, but it also felt right.

Thrusting his hand into his jeans pocket, he pulled out a small piece of paper, crumpled and warm but still useable. “My card,” he explained, “it’s a bit worn but it’ll do.”

“Thank you,” she replied, mirroring his own expression on her pretty face as she took the offered item from him.

"Drop me a line if you happen ta think of anything at all," he proposed. “Any time, don’t hesitate, I won’t mind.”

Nodding gratefully, Natalie Slattery regarded him warmly. He broadened his smile, hoping to convey which he could not find the words for. With one final glance, he resumed his journey into …

… the rotting shell of the deserted house. He could hear Tina and Connor behind him, imploring him to stop, yelling for him to wait, but his feet were moving on their own volition. Startled by his abrupt and loud entrance, members of the forensics team looked up from whatever they were doing, sending disapproving stares in his direction for daring to disrupt their delicate and sensitive work. But he didn’t even see them.

Gaining his bearings, he moved deeper into the residence, passing by evidence markers that littered
the floors like little yellow flags, announcing the location of a clue. He ignored them all.

Propelling himself forward, Gavin rushed into what might have been the family’s living room over a decade ago. There was no furniture left to support the conclusion, but he thought he was right regardless. He didn’t honestly care though.

Angered at the disturbance that Gavin’s appearance was causing, Lieutenant Anderson moved to block his way into the room, obscuring his view of the victim on the floor. Barking something rude at the detective, the older man was gesturing disrespectfully at him, trying to get him to leave.

He ignored Anderson’s commands and brushed past the man, sidestepping him to get a glimpse of the murdered woman.

After a moment, his mind finally registered what he was seeing. On unstable legs, Gavin hobbled over to the closest corner and retched out his sad excuse of a breakfast. Like a pearl swimming in filthy water, the Mentos shone brightly through his vomit.

“So let me get this straight.” Fowler’s booming voice resonated vociferously through the Glass Cage, snapping Gavin from his stark ruminations as he was trying to appear completely at ease, leaning nonchalantly against the ebony file cabinet that housed all of the precinct’s personnel files. The official paper copies, anyways. He had spent the last fifteen minutes skulking in the back part of the captain’s office, more than content to let the others babble back and forth while updating their boss on the morning’s events. So far, he had yet to contribute a single statement but by the way Fowler’s eyes kept flitting over to his tense form, that was going to change soon.

“The victim from today’s homicide was the android wife of the murdered man whose case I just assigned to you the other day?” He glanced at Gavin for confirmation, his dark eyes intent and observant. At the detective’s sullen nod, the captain groaned dejectedly. “Just what we needed.” Slumping backwards into his chair, his gaze wandered over to the screen of his computer and the pinched line of his mouth twitched. “And from what you’ve just told me, there was no usable evidence found at the crime scene.”

Sitting primly with his hands folded neatly in his lap, Connor bobbed his head in agreement, looking like a well-behaved schoolchild waiting patiently in the principal’s office. Lieutenant Anderson sat hunched over in his seat, leaning forward, gray hair in disarray, an irritated frown crossing his weathered features. “A heaping load of nothing,” he responded.

Fowler grimaced. “Has the medical examiner at least issued an unofficial cause of death yet?”

“Yes captain,” the android replied evenly. “The victim suffered numerous subcutaneous lacerations across her body that damaged essential biocomponents. Any of those wounds may have been fatal in nature. Or they may have worked in concert together and she bled to death. However,” Connor’s voice took on a strained element as he continued, “her thirium pump regulator was missing and it was not recovered on the sight.”

Gavin was well aware that he was pretty oblivious when it came to the complex anatomy of the synthetic people. He had never tried to learn much about their inorganic makeup, preferring to just disdainfully reference their innards as a mere clusterfuck of bolts and wires. And he had practically slept through the department’s mandatory session on android first aid. “Her what-now?” he asked.

Shifting in his seat, Connor turned his neck to look at the detective, his immaculate profile somewhat unnerving. “Her thirium pump regulator Detective Reed.” As if anticipating the other’s bumbling ignorance, Connor launched into a helpful elucidation and Gavin was relieved. “A
A synthetic organ located just below the thirium pump. Its vital in the process of regulating thirium 310 – our blood – through our bodies. Without it, an android will shut down within two minutes and be irreversibly damaged beyond repair.”

“Shit,” Gavin breathed in awe. “Ya can have your heart removed and still live?”

“For approximately two minutes, depending on the android’s model and the model of their regulator,” Connor informed him in a voice that was far too casual, almost forced. “It is … an alarming experience.”

Gray eyes widened at those hushed words. It was only then that Gavin noticed that Connor was rubbing the center of chest lightly, in a rhythmic circular motion. Had he had his thirium whatever – his heart – torn out some time in the past? The very thought made the detective want to puke. Again.

He was not alone in spotting the android’s anxious behavior. Clapping a hand on Connor’s shoulder, Anderson tilted in his chair, leaning close. He whispered something inaudible into the young man’s ear, and, although his vision was obscured by the chairbacks and their bodies, Gavin swore that he placed something into Connor’s hand. Reclining away, the Lieutenant smiled at his partner in a comforting, almost fatherly manner.

Gavin’s puzzlement over what the Lieutenant had given Connor was quickly dispersed as the android began playing with a silver coin, shiny and spotless. Amazement flooded the detective’s face as he watched, mesmerized as Connor danced the spinning coin upon the tips of his fingers, transferring it from one to the next without dropping the object or even slowing its dizzying pace. With a dramatic flourish, the android flipped the coin onto his knuckles and started rolling it from one end to the other and back and forth. Gavin hadn’t a fucking clue on how the coin managed to stay upright. It was like some sort of magician’s trick, a quirky feat that you’d only ever see on a stage in Las Vegas.

“So you think she died from having her pump removed and not reinserted within the timeframe?” While still adeptly twirling the round object across the top of his hand, Connor nodded mutely at the captain’s question. “Alright, so tell me, if androids can’t physically feel pain, what were all the goddamn cuts for? Did they occur during a struggle with her attacker?”

“Nope,” Anderson blurted gruffly while shaking his head. “If that were the case, forensics would have found thread or lint in the wounds. She was stripped naked when they happened.” Glancing at Connor with a worried frown, he growled out the next sentence. “The killer did it because he’s one sick motherfucker.”

After viewing Natalie Slattery’s lifeless husk, Gavin certainly wouldn’t disagree with the old drunkard’s assessment. Ordinarily such a thought would aggrieve him immensely. If Anderson claimed that the sky was blue, and the earth was round, he would be tempted to say otherwise, just to get the bastard’s knickers in a jumble. But he also felt the old man’s opinion was incomplete, that he was missing something. Running a hand thoughtfully against the side of his scratchy face, he cursed. “It’s about fear, ain’t it?”

“Yes I believe so.” Connor’s voice held more than a hint of surprise, as if Gavin’s deduction had been wholly unexpected, a miraculous shot in the dark. The detective felt somewhat disgruntled at that; they were certainly far from being on friendly terms, but he hadn’t realized that the android held his professional abilities in such a low regard. On the flip side, he was a bit proud that he’d been able to take the self-possessed man by surprise. “It is the most probable explanation.”

“We gonna play fifty questions or are you gonna share with the rest of class?” Anderson asked
sarcastically, his smile taking the bite out of his words.

Looking confused, Connor turned to his partner. “I am sorry Lieutenant, I did not mean to be cryptic,” his said contritely. Anderson merely poked the android in the shoulder and made a hand motion that cleared said move it along. “It is true that androids can’t experience physical pain as humans do but because of our newfound emotions, we are able to feel fear. In this instance the fear of death.” Gavin’s chest constricted as Connor went on. “I believe the wounds were inflicted not with intent to cause any sort of physical pain but to force Mrs. Slattery to anticipate her own approaching demise. Her murderer wanted her to know she was dying, wanted her to suffer mentally from that terrible knowledge.”

Gavin was shaking with anger. It radiated up and down throughout his unnatural rigid body, from his toes all the way up to his scalp. He was glad that the others were distracted by Connor’s explanation, that none of their eyes were roaming over him. Hearing his own assumptions spoken aloud made him downright furious, almost murderous. Mrs. Slattery had been such a kind, compassionate woman. She hadn’t deserved to die like this, in this horrible manner. He wanted nothing less to get his hands around the bastard’s throat and squeeze until there was no more life left. And he wasn’t the only one with this intention.

He had called Eileen Kincaid while on his way back to the station and broken the news to her, that another one of her friends had been killed. He could still hear her last words to him before she had hung up. When you finally catch the creep, let me have five minutes with him. We won’t need to trouble the state with a trial, I assure you of that. At the moment he was very much inclined to grant her that wish, provided he could assist.

“Damn,” the captain’s voice was hoarse and faint, so unlike his usually confident, authoritative bark. Gavin couldn’t fault him for that. To know that you were going to die, that there was not a fucking thing that you could do to stop it, watching your internal clock inch closer to your own murder … he didn’t even want to consider it.

“Well,” Fowler said levelly, tone taking on its normal stern quality once again. His firm gaze flounced between his three subordinates as if he was deliberating intently on some strenuous, controversial decision. By the hard expression on his boss’s face, Gavin knew he was probably going to hate it. “A married couple killed in the space of eight days under similar circumstances … well it would be foolish to believe that their deaths aren’t connected.” Straightening his posture, Fowler appeared to be readying himself for a fight. “I am combining these investigations as of now, and it will remain that way unless proof is brought to me that demonstrates that these murders are separate events.”

Realization dawning like a thunderbolt, Gavin stomped over towards the other three, flashing one of his legendary scowls in the process. “Not a goddamn word from any of you!” Fowler bellowed, loudly enough to stop the detective in his livid tracks. By the chorus of anxious faces that turned in unison towards the Glass Cage from the bullpen, the captain had apparently been loud enough to draw the attention of the entire first floor of the precinct.

Unwilling to test his boss’s temper, Gavin refrained from opening his mouth. He settled with crossing his arms angrily over his chest and glaring at the backs of the two seated individuals. Well one seated individual. Anderson was frozen in midair, halfway between sitting and standing, his hands practically choking the armrests. Only Connor seemed calm. However upon closer inspection, Gavin noticed that the android’s LED was constantly pulsing between blue and yellow in a rapid, uneven pace. Maybe not so calm after all.

“I know that this isn’t going to be a surprise to any of you,” the captain began, his words harder
than reinforced steel, “but right now the department is overloaded and overworked. We have a backlog of cases nearly three months behind and we are severely understaffed. Very few of the androids that,” the blunt features of his face contorted for a moment, “that worked for us prior to the rebellion have returned to the service. We have lost over half of our workforce and we are still unable to fill those slots. I cannot put three of my best men on this one case, so one of you is going to have to be benched.”

Over his dead body was Gavin going to sit this one out. He had promised Natalie that he would find her husband’s killer (and now hers as well) and he still intended too. If the Useless Old Dick thought he could just toss Gavin Fucking Reed aside, he had another thing coming!

“Connor and I can handle this,” Anderson said, fulling rising from his chair, using his towering height to his advantage. “Reed can diddle himself at his desk.”

Bristling, the detective turned, snarling. “This is my case and I ain’t gonna –.”

A loud crack cut off Gavin’s words as the captain slammed both of his hands down on the surface of his desk. “Shut up.” Cold fury permeated from Fowler’s narrowed eyes as he glared at his subordinates. “I am not going to tolerate any more of this crap from any of you. I have had enough. I am your boss, not your babysitter, and I if need to remind you of that with a suspension, so be it.”

“Now, as I was saying, one of you has to sit out on this investigation.” Frowning uncertainly, he tempered his voice to be quieter, more sedate. “Hank, you’ve done a great job being our resident go-to-guy on all things related to androids while Connor was away, but I don’t think anyone can doubt the fact that he is our expert when it comes to these sorts of crimes, and we need our expert on this one.”

“As I said Jeffrey, Connor and I can handle this,” Anderson reasserted firmly.

“I know you can,” the captain said soothingly, and Gavin began to silently fume. “But I have my orders, Reed is on this case whether you or I want it. There’s no way around that.”

What a fucking ringing endorsement! Gavin wanted nothing less than to lash out, to start hurling insults at the bald bastard and his favored prick but instead he continued to bite his tongue. It was going to start bleeding at this rate.

“Jeffrey, you can’t be serious!” The Lieutenant’s gruff voice oozed incredulity and contempt in equal measure. “Reed is a fucking disaster. He nearly trampled the entire crime scene today. It was only through luck that he didn’t destroy what little evidence we got from the fucking place. He was goddamn shitfaced as well! And not only that, it was clear by his reaction to seeing the victim that he has some personal stake in this shit.” The captain’s face deflated a bit, and worry bubbled in Gavin’s stomach. Anderson plowed on. “Jesus Christ, the goddamn killer left his business card with the victim. That was no accident!” Turning to face the detective, the older man smiled cruelly. “Hell the killer is probably one of his scumbag buddies.”

“What he fuck!” Gavin’s weary resolve finally shattered. “You think I actually had something to do with this? Well, fuck you asswipe!”

The sound of a chair smashing to the floor was the only warning Gavin had before Anderson’s fists were tightly coiled in his leather jacket and he was being lifted up and hauled across the floor. Before his lethargic, still hungover mind could even process what was happening, he found himself being slammed into the file cabinet that he had spent most of his time chilling at earlier. He opened his mouth to curse, to protest, but suddenly he was being jerked forward and then, just as quickly, backwards, into the heavy metal. Bouncing, his head connected with the hard surface and he saw
Suddenly the movement ended but the strong grip holding him did not recede. He blinked a few times, trying to disperse the odd sparkling dots and Anderson’s grim face swam into his vision, an expression of utter loathing on his countenance. “I know what kind of person you really are Reed,” the older man growled. “You are a sack of shit. A bottom-feeding parasite. An arrogant little bitch.” Under any other circumstance, Gavin would have started throwing punches, but his brain was apparently offline, and his arms only flailed weakly against the other’s forearms. “You are a fucking bully, that’s what you are, and you wouldn’t think twice before trying to kill an android. How do I know? Cause’ you tried to kill Connor. So how would this one be any different? Just another fucking machine to be unplugged to you.”

“I didn’t,” he tried to speak but he once again found himself being jostled violently, cutting off his words. He could hear Fowler’s angry voice yelling, but all of his attention was on the man currently using him as a rag doll.

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” Anderson hissed. “If it were up to me, you’d be in a fucking cell, rotting with the rest of your kind.” He leaned in closer, his rough beard grazing Gavin’s chin. “And don’t think for a fucking second that I bought that stupid lame-ass apology of yours. I don’t care how many presents ya give him, I don’t believe you. You are a prick, and nothing will change that, and if you ever even think of looking cross-eyed at him again,” he dropped to a whisper, “you will be eating the barrel of my gun.”

With that last ominous threat, the hands holding Gavin up withdrew and he fell back, sliding halfway down against the cabinet’s smooth exterior before he was able to regain his balance. “Fucking hell,” he mumbled, pushing himself up, all the while wishing that his world would stop being so damn blurry, would stop fucking spinning. He wasn’t a dreidel after all. Through his addled haze he could hear Anderson arguing.

“I don’t give a shit Jeffrey, you can’t pair them up. I won’t let you make it easy for Reed to torment him, I fucking won’t!”

“I am your boss Hank, you should start remembering that! I don’t take orders from you, you take orders from me, and if you are going to keep this shit up, I’ll-.”

“You’ll what Jeffrey? Add another couple of pages to my file? Suspend me? You don’t fucking get it, I don’t care what you do, you aren’t putting Connor with that android-hater!”

“Hank, you are starting to piss me off. They are coworkers now and they will have to get used to functioning as a goddamn team and you need get used to the idea that you don’t run this place. I do.”

“Lieutenant – Hank,” Connor’s pleading voice sliced into the shouting match. “I will be fine, there is no reason to worry. I can handle myself.”

Anderson paid his partner no mind. “Jeffrey, if you can’t back me up on this, then you can have my fucking badge, cause if you don’t, I’m done.”

Silence. With his equilibrium just finally returning, Gavin shifted his gaze towards the trio at the front of the room. The captain’s face was an unreadable mask, a blunt piece of incomprehensible artwork, staring straight ahead at Anderson. The Lieutenant’s fists were balled and shaking at his waist, a clear sign of the rage that he was barely containing. Connor was at his side, a beanpole of concern, his LED the color of the sun.
“Reed.” Fowler’s tense bark nearly made him jump. “None of this happened, got it?” Indignant, Gavin opened his mouth to complain – the old fucker had probably given him a concussion! – but his boss jerked a thumb in his direction and fixed him with his most impatient glare. “You didn’t show up drunk to work and Hank didn’t give you what you righteously deserved, am I understood?” Feeling that his tongue would likely betray him, Gavin just sullenly nodded, hating his own cowardice. “Good. You are dismissed. Get back to work.”

Without sparing another glance at the volcanic eruption that was likely to blow at any moment, Gavin did as he was told, hurrying out of the tense atmosphere of the Glass Gage, into the gentle bustle of the bullpen. He tried to maintain the semblance of having a casual attitude, swaggering slightly as he walked down the aisle, but he was unable to bring a cocky grin to his lips. He was well aware that his coworkers were peeking cautiously at him behind their monitors, watching his feigned pompous stride as they pretended to take notes. The knowledge that they had witnessed his takedown by Lieutenant Inebriation stung like peroxide in a wound. Even more humiliatingly for him, they had also seen his lackluster retaliation.

Grunting like a hungry bear, he plopped down into his chair. He took a deep breath, trying to steady his jittery nerves. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Officer Brown watching him, brows furrowed in thought. “Whatcha lookin’ at four-eyes?” he snapped scathingly, causing the bespeckled man to drop his frosted donut into his lap. Grinning smugly Gavin felt a bit better, watching the nosy bastard try wipe the sugary mess of his now jelly-smeared pants.

But his fellow officer’s distress could only go so far in alleviating his own quandary. His head fucking hurt. He had forgotten that Anderson was built like bigfoot, with a quicksilver disposition to match and the physical strength to tear down trees. The older man hadn’t shown such ferocity in ages. During the past three years he had become a walking shadow of his former self, a hollow version that had preferred booze to confrontation and hard work. However it appeared that the old Anderson was truly back.

And his surly dislike for Gavin had only been amplified by the detective’s treatment of his android sidekick. However … that derisive term didn’t seem right. There was more to the Lieutenant’s relationship with his partner than just the affable camaraderie between two competent colleagues. His attempted murder of Gavin just a few minutes ago proved that.

Propping his feet up on his desk, the detective leaned back and began gently massaging his aching head, trying to force the infernal pounding to stop. So what was it? Anderson had threatened to kill him if he repeated any of his past behaviors. Hell, if he looked at the kid wrong. He was extremely protective of Connor, to the point of committing bodily harm. Gavin just didn’t get it. Then he remembered the tender way the older man looked at the android during Connor’s period of anguish. Fatherly.

That had to be it. Anderson saw his partner as some sort of surrogate child. That was the only explanation as to why he would be willing to throw away his decorated career at the drop of a hat. He seriously considered Gavin to be such a danger to his replacement son. Well … he had tried to kill the guy. And … and … and …

His cell began buzzing, humming in that mechanical tune. Smashing the screen testily, he brought up his unread messages.

Tina, Queen of Sass

(Received @ 6:03)

How r u? back @ DPD yet?
(Received @ 6:42)
U ok G? worried 😞

(Received @ 7:11)
Chris says u and the dynamic duo r in the GC. Hope u r ok

(Received @ 7:24)
LT attacked u? wtf

Growling Gavin turned to the desk behind his and wordlessly snarled at its occupant. Unamused, Officer Miller just sighed and passively shook his head. “She’s been pestering me all morning for news about you,” Chris whispered. “If you don’t want me filling her in, how about you talk to her yourself?”

The man had a point. Gavin had acted strangely this morning, and Tina was a worrier by nature. She wasn’t trying to annoy him, she was just concerned. And if he didn’t respond soon she’d probably come here in person, as in literately drive her patrol car into the damn building.

Big G

(Sent @ 7:39 to Tina)
Im ok. Head hurts tho. LT is mad cause the Dick wants me and Con to work a case w/o him

Tina, Queen of Sass

(Received @ 7:39)
LT attacked u for that????

Big G

(Sent @ 7:40 to Tina)
He didn’t like my apology. Thinks it was an act. That I’m gonna attack Con again. Threatened me

Tina, Queen of Sass

(Received @ 7:40)
Shit. Give him time. U meant it. Hang in there dickface <3

Big G

(Sent @ 7:41 to Tina)
Thanks tramp

Chucking his phone onto the pile of miscellaneous reports stacked haphazardly on the edge of his desk, he slapped his feet back down to the ground. His friend had been suitably informed about today’s mishaps and he no longer wanted to continue considering the enigma that was the Anderson household. Time to get to work. Before Fowler caught him slouching off and blew a gasket.
With one hand still kneading his temple, Gavin reached over and slapped the bright blue button on the top of the tower, powering up his computer. As he watched the generic police-related images flash across the screen in its predictable, reliable order as the machine booted up, Gavin’s mind began to systematically tear through every last shred of evidence he had.

Two victims. First a human, a social studies teacher at a public school who was, by all accounts, a nice compassionate guy who everybody liked. Except for the anti-android dipshits. Second, the teacher’s wife, an AX400 housekeeper model, who worked as a therapist to her fellow androids. Besides being married, they were both very likable individuals. The kind of people that even Gavin didn’t mind talking to and he just about hated everybody. Natalie had even gotten him to open up a bit, had managed to neutralize his defenses. Though Gavin had never met Thomas, he was more than willing to accept Eileen’s opinion about the man. He had no reason to doubt her.

The medical examiner had determined that Mr. Slattery had been incapacitated through the use of a stun gun. There was a burn mark on the back of the man’s neck, indicating that he had been facing away from his attacker when he had been debilitated. What a fucking coward this killer was, a sneaky little shit who ambushed his victims. Gavin scowled.

After being tasered the man had been easy prey. Completely helpless. Unable to fight back or even scream as his heart had been removed. According to the report, the incisions hadn’t been performed by any capable medical professional nor had they been done by someone who completely lacked knowledge of the human anatomy. A butcher or veterinarian perhaps? Or maybe something more exotic like a taxidermist? He only had the forensic pathologist’s guesswork to go on.

If Connor’s assumption was correct, Mrs. Slattery had died in a nearly identical manner to that of her husband. He’d have to wait for the official robo-autopsy to be conducted before they could be sure, but he had a hunch that he could trust the prototype’s gut. Processor. Whatever. Had Natalie been shocked with a stun gun as well? Or had the stabbings been used to disable the android? He’d unfortunately have to wait. And waiting was certainly not one of his favorite pastimes.

Cursing under his breath, he glared at his monitor in discontent.

This case was a whole lotta bullshit. None of the Slattery’s neighbors had seen anything unusual on the day of the husband’s murder. Right now both of the Wilson’s were out canvassing the same clueless people again, and Gavin doubted that they’d get anything beyond the story of a scary black guy. Or maybe it would be the typical psychotic rampaging android. More likely it would be a scary psychotic black rampaging android.

Either the culprit was blessed in the luck department or else they were dealing with a very clever, criminally sophisticated killer. Gavin had no actual proof, but he had a feeling the latter was the correct option. Whoever the bastard was, they had been able to gain entry to the Slattery’s home, either through deception or by an unknown means, and commit a brutal murder without leaving any trace of themselves behind. The Lavalle Lane address was a dump site, Natalie had not been killed there. Neither had she died in her own home, so the killer had abducted her and brought her to some secondary location.

Natalie had been sadistically tortured before her death. If he and Connor were right about the killer’s intent, then his attempts to heighten her terror were well chosen. Each of the lesions had targeted an essential biocomponent. Unless the killer had been lucky again – which he doubted – then they possessed more than just a passing familiarity with the structure and composition of androids. The extraction of her husband’s heart had been precise and although crude, effective. The medical examiner had found no evidence of hesitation on the part of the killer. No shallow cuts, no
inefficient strokes.

Gavin felt like he was onto something, something imperative. It was almost like the killer …

Granite eyes widened, gradually but unstoppable. It made sense, in a horrific way, but if his conjecture wasn’t all just hot air, then they were far more behind than he had assumed. Then he feared.

Ignoring the drill that was battering the insides of his cranium in a chaotic frenzy, Gavin leaned forward, unconsciously biting down in his lower lip. He accessed the DPD’s criminal database, typed in a few keywords and set the parameters of his search. With a smug smile, he hit the ENTER key and reclined into his chair.

He hoped that he was wrong but nevertheless, this avenue of pursuit might reap rewards beyond his imaging. Just at the expense of another. That ripped the smile off his face.

“Detective Reed.”

Closing his eyes, Gavin groaned miserably. “What do you want toaster? Come to finish me off? Gotta complete what your pops started?”

“No,” Connor’s calm voice said. “Lieutenant Anderson regrets his actions and he will not be repeating them.”

“Oh fantastic,” Gavin exclaimed sarcastically, still clamping his eyelids together. Maybe if he refused to look at the damn android, the other man might get the hint and scamper away.

“Detective.” Apparently not. “These will help with the pain.”

Reluctantly, against his better judgment, Gavin peeled his eyes open. A cup of what appeared to be water lay on his desk next to two red and white pills. Painkillers if he wasn’t mistaken. “Tryin’ to poison me now?” he growled.

“Your health is no laughing matter,” Connor said with such genuine conviction that Gavin was startled into looking directly into the other’s earnest face. There was no mockery in those chestnut colored eyes, no dishonesty in the slight downturn of his perfectly symmetrical lips, not even the barest suggestion of trickery could be found in the sincerity of his expression. Gavin felt something stir, something forgotten and for a moment all he could do was stare.

Then Connor spoke, and Gavin felt himself return.

“The captain has reevaluated his initial opinion and has decided that three of us will be working together on this case.”

“Great,” Gavin spat bitterly. “Fowler wants me dead. Ya know, it’d be more humane to just shoot me than ta force me to be mauled by your fucking partner.”

Mouth tensing into a sharp line, Connor titled his head. “Detective Reed, I assure that no further harm will come to you from the lieutenant. He is very sorry for his actions.” By the scorching glare the old man was shooting at Gavin from his workstation across the room, that was a heaping pile of rubbish. And Gavin knew rubbish, he was the goddamn reigning king of it after all. But he decided to keep his trap shut.

Grabbing the cup with more force than was strictly necessary, he tossed the pills into his mouth and took a swish of water, swallowing the whole mess down in one gulp. He discarded the
crumpled dixie cup into the trashcan next his desk and returned his annoyed gaze back to the android.

However Connor was not looking at him anymore. The other’s eyes were glued to Gavin’s monitor, watching the slug-like progress of the blinking bar as it feebly made its way across the screen. According to the system’s estimation, the search was going to take a least three and half hours to fully scan all of the indicated files. Gavin wanted to put his fist into the damn thing.

“Why are you checking the missing persons files?” Connor’s voice was delightfully confused, and Gavin smirked triumphantly in response. Apparently even the best of best wasn’t perfect.

“Testing a theory,” the detective said evasively. He felt incredibly smug and he was loving it.

“Would you mind sharing?” The android turned his gaze to Gavin and smiled softly. “I may be able to assist you if allow me.”

Rude replies immediately surfaced in Gavin’s acidic mind. Wouldn’t you like to know? Why don’t you figure it out yourself. I thought you were supposed to be smarter than us stupid humans? And, of course, Go fuck yourself, you talking dildo. Instead he took a deep breath and resolved to do something that didn’t come naturally to him. Share.

“It’s just an idea,” he started lamely, unexpectedly feeling more self-conscious than he was used to. “Our killer just seems to damn good at what he’s doin’. He hasn’t made a single fucking mistake and that’s pretty hard to do when he kills people like he does. Got me thinking that maybe …” Blushing slightly, he glanced up at Connor, who was hanging onto his every word with rapt attention. “…That maybe he’s struck before this. That the Slattery’s weren’t his first victims.”

“But that would have shown up in the database when the information had been initially logged,” Connor protested, thin brows furrowed. “All the cases of murder victims that are missing a vital organ would have shown up.”

“And none did cause’ there aren’t any,” he retorted complacently, gratified at the dumbfounded look on his colleague’s face. “That’s why I am having old rusty here sort through the missing persons shit.”

“But without a corpse, how do you know what to even look for? There’s no possible method that can preconstruct the cause of the death of a missing person. If we could, they wouldn’t be missing.”

“I know that Alexa,” Gavin gloated, feeling better than he had all day. “That’s why I am having it look for specific terms related to a letter that the Slattery’s received the week of the first murder. Maybe somebody missing got a similar letter.”

Connor blinked a few times, his LED a steady sunshine yellow. “That is very good Detective Reed.” Then without warning he leaned over Gavin and placed his hand on the monitor.

“What da actual fuck!” the detective sputtered, slinking down into his chair, trying to avoid contact with the man hovering above him.

“One moment please,” Connor intoned serenely, and Gavin watched in a stupefied fascination as the human skin of the hand touching the screen deactivated, revealing the android’s true form. The white plastic fingers suddenly glowed with a blueish tinge and Connor’s eyes fluttered in concentration as he flipped through thousands of files almost effortlessly.

And as quick as it had all started, it was over. Connor withdrew, taking a step back and Gavin just
stared at him in consternation. He’d seen androids without their human getup before, seen them on
tv when being advertised for sale, the weird layer of synthetic fluid disabled exposing their strange
mannequin-like bodies, pearly white with segments of muted silver intertwining on their chassis.
But it felt queer seeing it in person, up close, from somebody who wasn’t just a random stick
figure on the boob tube. This was Connor, not some unnamed model with a serial number.

“Fucking Christ,” he blurted out. “Warn a guy if you’re gonna strip like that.”

He shot a perturbed glare at his coworker to punctuate his demand and Connor had the good sense
to look a trifle bashful, almost sheepish. But it didn’t last very long. “My apologies,” he stated
emphatically, his voice full of eager cheer. “I did not mean to alarm you.” He grinned in a most
unapologetic manner and Gavin felt like he was being purposely messed with. Fuckin’ androids. “I
was able to find one case that may be related to ours.”

“Might be?” Gavin snickered. “What? Ya forget how to read already?”

“My ability to process the written word is performing at an optimal level, Detective,” Connor
droned primly, and Gavin replied by rolling his eyes dramatically. “Unfortunately the officer in
charge of this particular case has not followed the proper procedure and has left the majority of the
file blank. Without the rest of the relevant information, it is impossible for me to know if there is a
link to our murders or if this is just an unhappy coincidence.”

“And what is the name of the lucky sob who I’ve got to go chase down for being a useless bag of
shit?” Gavin asked, irritation levels rising dangerously. Yeah, he fucking hated paperwork and all
the crappy bureaucratic nonsense that came with his job just as much as the next slob, but if Gavin
Fucking Reed could do it, everybody else better do it too.

“A Sergeant Harold Newsom.”

Great. Great. Great!

Moaning pitifully, Gavin wondered if it would be wiser for him to purposely incite Anderson into
tossing him through a window instead of chasing down this unlikely lead. What a day this was
turning out to be.

Chapter End Notes

Who wants to meet Gavin’s old partner?
Wretched

Chapter Notes

Gavin's having a bad day ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Staring at the door marked ‘basement level two,’ Gavin tried to prepare himself for the hell that he was about to willfully enter.

Technically the bottom sublevel of the precinct was not the liar of the damned or the wretched, no sinners were condemned to this lower level, imprisoned for all eternity. Though some of the occupants might argue otherwise after spending half of their stunted careers in these sunless corridors. There was no rank whiff of sulfurous poisons in the stagnant air, no craggy splinters of molten earth to melt away your feet, no diabolical fiends waiting to tear the flesh from your withered body. The floor was just like so many others of its kind, furnished, ventilated, and fit for human habitation. Yet it filled Gavin with unease. And it was a hell of a sort. For him.

And he needed to go have a chat with its chief denizen.

At least he was going it alone. A small victory, that. Hard fought and hard won.

Connor had been eager to join him on his jaunt down into the basement. Gavin had told him in no uncertain terms that he was not coming but the other had continued to insist, cheerful and polite. Until Gavin’s patience broke, that was. He had foolishly snapped at the android, calling him a plastic moron, and Connor’s demeanor had abruptly changed, he …

… was standing tall and straight, as rigid as any pre-deviancy android had ever been. But his face was no mask of diffident placidity, no, his lips were a pinched line of furious austerity, his expression was stern. His burnished eyes did not gleam with their usual pleasant inquisitiveness. They practically burned with an indignant fury as they locked onto Gavin’s face like a fiery vice.

“Detective Reed,” the cold voice began. “May I remind you that I am your equal, not your subordinate. You have no right to order me around, not now, not here, not ever again. I am free to do as I please and that includes visiting missing persons with you. Whether you want me there or not is irrelevant. I am going.”

In awe at the other’s transformation from a chirpy and helpful dork into this frosty terminator, Gavin gaped stupidly before answering. “That ain’t was this is about, just fucking listen for –.”

“I have treated you with respect despite the terrible things you’ve said, despite the names you’ve called me and things you’ve done. I understand that you are not a pleasant person and I am more than willing to accommodate some of your more disagreeable character flaws, but I have my limits.” Outwardly the android was still as calm and collected as ever but Gavin nevertheless felt that Connor was close to his breaking point.

“Now I understand that it must be difficult for you to accept that androids are people – that I am a person – and I know that you are trying, but I will not be treated as an inferior any longer,” he announced sternly. “I am a machine yes, but I am alive, and I am person. Not a servant. Not a
slave. A detective just like you.” With that final word the android jabbed Gavin in his sternum. Hard.

Rage swirled deep within, blinding his vision. Gavin was doing this for Connor’s sake. No one in their right fucking mind wanted to go visit Newsom, hell, if he could make anyone else do it, Gavin would be perfectly fine with avoiding the misanthropic fossil. The last thing he wanted to do was chat with the man who had almost ruined his career.

“You’re a detective eh?” Gavin sneered at the other man, his fists taut and ready to strike. “Right now you look like a goddamn Ken doll, having a temper tantrum because Barbie forgot to pull out the stick buried up your ass!”

A vicious grin spread over the android’s face, something that Gavin didn’t think was possible. Leaning forward, his tone was full of mockery as he whispered into Gavin’s contorted countenance. “Oh? From what I’ve heard around the station, the reason as to why you are such a jerk is because no one will stick anything up your ass, Detective Reed.”

It was at that moment that Gavin decided that he was going to break every false tooth in that smug motherfucker’s face. Winding his fist back, just as he was ready to deliver the first blow, someone grabbed him from behind and pulled him away.

Snarling, he turned to glare at the bastard. Officer Miller’s expression was tight and worried as Gavin tried to wriggle free from his grip. Gavin wanted to smash Connor, not play fucking twister with Chris! He was going to make that plastic douchebag pay!

Across from him, Officer Brown was attempting to speak with Connor, trying to get the man to back off, to leave Gavin alone.

“What the hell is going on?” Anderson’s gruff voice roared through the bullpen. Slamming his iPod onto his desk, the man barreled over to his partner. Apparently, he had missed the entire fiasco while listening to his music. “Connor what the fuck did Reed do?”

“He thought he could order me around Hank.” His words may have been made from steel for there was not even an ounce of softness in them. “I will not take that from him. Not again.”

Radiating a grim fury, Anderson had turned his attention to Gavin. “That’s it Reed, you’ve done it. I’m gonna have you tossed off this case if it’s the last fucking-.”

Though he was still struggling to break free of Chris’s iron grasp, Gavin decided that he was going to shut them all up. “Fuck you Connor! And fuck you Anderson! All I was trying to do was save your precious partner from dealing with Newsom and this is the thanks I get.” Glaring at everyone – Chris and Brown included, he bellowed, “fuck me for doing the right thing!”

As if winter had given way to spring, the scowl on the lieutenant’s face thawed and he regarded the squirming detective with a sort of bewildered amazement. After a moment of consideration, he turned to his partner. “You aren’t going Connor. Reed’s right.”

“But Hank, I –.”

“No buts Connor. Newsom’s a dirty piece of work and you aren’t going.”

Giving the older man a confused look, the android brushed past him, heading in the direction of the breakroom. Anderson merely sighed and flicked his wrist at Gavin and Chris. “Let him go.”

Obeying the lieutenant’s order, Chris relinquished his constricting grasp and Gavin stumbled
forward, cursing under his breath. Anderson opened his mouth to speak but Gavin just swore at him and stomped off towards the stairwell. He was fucking pissed. Try to do a good deed and this is what it got you, a slap in the face and …

… a great view to the entrance of hell.

Procrastination. Not a habit that he often tolerated in himself while on the DPD’s dime, not an action he was accustomed too. He was hotheaded, brash, and vulgar. He didn’t like overthinking shit, dithering around while assholes needed a good beatdown. But here he was. Standing outside of the place he should be, procrastinating rather than obtaining the information that he needed. The information that might shed a light on the sadistic monster that had murdered Natalie Slattery and her husband in cold blood. But that meant having a chat with the precinct’s most hated officer.

That meant holding a civil conversation with his old partner.

Harold Newsom. A highly decorated and once well-respected member of the Central department, a buddy from Fowler and Anderson’s years in the academy. Boisterous and boastful, he had been a lightning rod of controversy even at the very start of his career over thirty years ago, a man who didn’t bother to mince his words or mask his feelings. Gavin had admired him for these exact reasons, drawn to the older man for his unrelenting crass language and deprecating humor. He had been more than thrilled when Fowler had assigned Newsom to be his partner when he obtained the rank of detective. For a couple of years their friendship had flourished, two-liked minded cynical assholes solving one high profile case after another, all the while belittling the world around them, vainly smug in their overconfidence and their self-righteousness.

Until the day Newsom had shot and killed an unarmed man. The official story was that the mentally retarded individual had charged Gavin and his partner after assaulting another resident at their shared group home. Internal affairs had cleared the mess up quickly, preferring expediency to the truth. Though Gavin was hardly innocent in the matter. After all, he had lied. He was out by the car, calling dispatch when Newsom had gunned down the confused and disoriented man. Having not witnessed the act itself, he had implicitly trusted his partner’s version of events and felt no shame about adding a little white lie to help his buddy out.

A few days later, he had learned the dark truth. While celebrating the successful closure of a case at Jimmy’s Bar with some of his coworkers, Newsom had gloated about what he had done. Really Gav, he had said with a bloated smile, it was like a putting down a rabid mutt. The stupid fucker didn’t even know what was happening, just kept babbling like a baby. So I popped one right through his chest. BAM! And it was done, one less loony shit clogging the streets like trash. Laughing at his partner’s horrified expression, Newsom had left to take a leak, leaving Gavin to wrangle with his conscience.

However, someone else had overheard their exchange. Anderson had been as equally appalled and had immediately reported the incident to their captain. Ever the realist, Fowler knew that there was no way to charge Newsom with the murder he had committed. A boastful alcohol-induced confession was not enough to toss their old classmate into a cell. With few options readily available, he had settled with transferring Newsom into missing persons and given Gavin the sternest scolding of his career.

He had gotten off easy, all things considered. He was no fool. He had lied. Helped cover up a murder, though he had been ignorant of the fact at the time, believing that he was merely preventing his partner from being unjustly jammed up by the jackasses from internal affairs. Instead he had sold his soul to the devil.

The very same devil he had done his best to avoid for the past six years, the very same devil that
he now needed to retrieve possibly vital information from.

Taking one final deep breath, Gavin pushed open the heavy door, and plunged into the lowest level of the precinct. He stalked through the pale hallways, passing storage area after storage area, all of them covered by layers of dust and neglect. He could have taken the elevator straight down to the used portion of the basement, but he preferred taking the long route, traveling through the dimly lit labyrinth with only his beating heart and rebellious nerves for company.

In what felt like no time at all, Gavin found himself plodding through the modest reception area for missing persons. Which amounted to a single unattended desk and a few uncomfortable plastic chairs. He paid them no mind and continued on to the largest office at the end of the hall, which had once served as the old evidence archive long before he had joined the force.

He stopped and hesitated, standing in front of the door with the plaque that read Sergeant Harold Newsom, Missing Persons Division. Plastering a wooden rictus of a grin on his face, the detective knocked once and barged in without waiting for a response.

The irate occupant’s sneer immediately dissolved off of his haughty face when his dark eyes fell upon his unannounced visitor. Confusion, disbelief and amazement all flashed across his self-assured features before he adopted a look of pompous amiability, a mildly gloating smile upon his overripe lips. Though his assiduously combed hair was darker than it had once been, the older man appeared to have changed very little in the six years since he had been simultaneously promoted and banished to the basement.

“Gav,” he greeted warmly, his tone far too content for the detective’s liking. “What a surprise! It’s been how many years now since we last met?”

“Quite a few Harry,” the younger man muttered as he stepped fully into the room, quickly taking note that his old partner hadn’t budged a muscle from his spot behind his massive desk. Despite the apparent welcome in his voice, Newsom wasn’t going to indulge in any superfluous handshaking or back-clapping with him. “Quite a few,” he repeated stiffly.

With irises nearly the color of black, Newsom’s eyes regarded the standing man with a cold imperiousness, fine and distant. Unbidden, goosebumps began to riddle Gavin’s neck and arms as he withstood the calculated scrutiny of his former partner. “Not taking very good care of yourself, are you?” he chided as his gaze shifted from the swollen bags under the detective’s eyes to the mostly healed scar on his right hand. “Though I guess you always did look like you lost a fight with a blender.”

Ignoring the obvious innuendo concerning the scars on his face, he shrugged indifferently. “You know me Harry, I can never walk away from a fight without a souvenir.”

“True, true,” the sergeant agreed while his eyes still penetrated every fiber of Gavin’s being like a laser. “So tell me, how are things upstairs now?”

“Same as fucking always, ya know how it is,” Gavin huffed. “Stupid people doin’ stupid shit ‘cause their stupid. Think they can get away with it. Some things never change.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Newsom reclined in his chair. “But some things do change, don’t they Gav? The fucking world has gone to hell because of that bitch Warren.” He shook his head in dismay. “Women should never have been allowed to enter politics. Worst decision of the twentieth century, I tell you. They can’t think with their brains, only with the trap between their legs.” Exhaling loudly through his nose, his eyes narrowed. “Hell, one uppity cunt has her period and suddenly all the machines have rights. What a fucking disaster.”
Disdainful of politics in general, Gavin could honestly say that he wasn’t a huge fan of President 
Cristina Warren. His criticisms however had nothing to do with the Commander-in-Chief’s 
possession of a vagina and more to do with her unsavory connections with big businesses. The fact 
that she was currently under investigation by both the FBI and Congress for allegedly accepting 
classified information about her presidential opponent from none other than Cyberlife, well that 
was enough to make the detective wary of her. Her background as a celebrity vlogger didn’t sit 
well with him either. But he had to admit, she had made the right decision back in November. 
Maybe he’d actually vote in 2040.

Gavin snorted as he considered telling the seated man of his intent to vote for Warren. He’d 
thoroughly enjoy ripping that disgusting smile off the other’s face but first he needed to obtain 
what he came here for. When he could get a word in edgewise.

“My old ball and chain wants to get one of those new all-in-kitchen appliances. You know those 
fucking huge things, right?” Newsom asked idly, waving his arms above him, vaguely forming a 
box-like shape. “She says that it can do everything and apparently it can. Top half is a refrigerator 
and freezer combination and the bottom is an oven. Yeah, an oven,” he said wonderingly. “An 
oven that has a microwave function if you are really lazy. And its got all the new voice activated 
shit as well. You can actually tell it to change its temperature or its time, whatever the hell you 
want. And it only costs eight thousand dollars.”

He tossed his head back and laughed, a dry raspy sound that Gavin had once liked. Now it was like 
nails scratching down a chalkboard to his ears. “So Betty whines at me and bitches, telling me 
what a godsend it would be for her.” His tone became mocking and cruel as he began to ridicule 
his wife. “Oh Harry you know my back ails me, it hurts to bend down to get stuff out of the freezer, 
with this everything would be on level. Oh Harry wouldn’t it look nice in between the dishwasher 
and the sink. Oh Harry what do you think?” He dropped his imitation and looked straight into 
Gavin’s eyes. “So I told her what I thought. I turned to the old cow and said, ‘what’s the fucking 
point of dropping eight grand on something that will probably go deviant and start tromping 
around the dining room beeping for freedom and equality?’”

Clearly repulsed by the idea, Newsom closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side, freeing 
Gavin from the obligation of feigning amusement. “Had a run in with one of the damn things a couple of weeks ago. Shit, wasn’t I surprised. That new mail-lady popped in to drop off a package, oh what did it say its name was … Sarah? Sasha? 
Or was it Samara?” he mused before puffing irritably. “Doesn’t fucking matter. It came in here 
dressed like a high-class whore, so I couldn’t resist groping a quick feel. It got all bitchy, 
threatened to report me and that’s when I saw its blinker. Fuck, I had to go scrub my hands nearly
“I guess that’s one way to learn to keep your hands to yourself Harry,” Gavin snickered loudly.

“You have no idea Gav,” the older man whispered, his voice flat and devoid of anything human. Feeling his breath hitch in his throat, Gavin just stared at Newsom, while the sergeant smiled pleasantly at him, amused and friendly. Yet that smile never reached those dark eyes.

A feeling of clammy disorientation washed over the detective, cold and uncaring, as it wrapped itself around his spine, climbing into his stymied brain. Here he was, chatting agreeably with Harold Newsom in the man’s underground office, just like old times, listening as if spellbound to his former partner’s endless gripes and callous comments. A part of him missed this, this cynical amity that he had not experienced within the past six years, being able to speak his mind without worrying about some thin-skinned reprisals. He almost wanted to pull up a chair and continue to tune in, enthralled by the cruelty and scorn that encased every single word. If his ears did not deceive him, it was almost like Newsom didn’t blame him for his fall from grace. Sure, Anderson had reported the man, not Gavin, yet he had been so sure that the other’s grudge would have extended to him as well.

However, if his ears did deceive him, his eyes did not. Nothing changed within the sergeant’s ruthless gaze, no smile managed to lessen the contempt that dwelt there, no laugh could soften the harsh edges of that spiteful sight. This was the same person from all those years ago that had killed an innocent man, some poor mentally challenged sap, and then bragged about it. Gavin could not indulge in sentimentality here. No, his old partner was a wily opponent who could not be underestimated or overlooked.

Wetting his lips, Gavin opened his mouth and spoke in a steady voice. “Well Harry, I hate to cut this short and all, but it’s really fuckin’ early, and I’ve got a ton of shit to do still. I’m sure you do too, there’s always someone needing to be found and –.”

“Isn’t that the understatement of the century,” Newsom interjected, silencing Gavin once again. “Goddamn Jeffrey hijacked my entire team and sent them to go play hall monitor and crossing guard. Fucking androids now have rights and shit, so none of them return to work anymore.” With his upper lip curving into a sneer, the older man laughed. “They’ve got rights, so now my whole fucking department is gone indefinitely, and I’m stuck with the whole fucking kit and caboodle. And to add insult to injury, almost three-fourths of my cases aren’t even human. People bitching about their missing androids. Wanting to know where Jerry or Olivia went. As if I care.” Gesturing at the door behind Gavin, he huffed. “I am pretty damn sure the sign says missing persons and not lost and found.”

“Well you are in luck then,” the detective grit out from behind clenched teeth. “I’m here to take a case from you, lighten the load a bit. Your prayers have been answered and all that fuckery.”

“Ready to run off so soon Gav? It’s been an eternity, surely you can waste a few minutes catching up with the best partner you’ve ever had.”

The detective couldn’t precisely define what made his apprehension suddenly skyrocket, reaching perilous heights, but something in the other’s voice made him hesitate, made him want to turn tail and not look back or else smash those knowing eyes out of that grinning skull. But he needed information, so he stood firm. “Whatcha want ta know?”

A small but victorious smile eked out over the sergeant’s too smooth face and he pushed himself forward in his chair. “Tell me how my old buddy Hank is doing.”
“Oh he’s doin’ ok, Harry. Still the same grumpy asshole he’s always been. Ya know how he is.”

“Really?” Newsom’s face was a picture of disbelief and it made Gavin’s skin crawl. “Word around the station has him on the verge of loosing his job. Been a complete wreck for a couple of years. If ol’ Jeffrey wasn’t in charge, he’d be out of a badge by now. I’ve even heard that he’s drunk more often than not. Such a shame for such a promising career.” As he continued on, his words began to match the spite in his eyes. He was no longer feigning concern or anything else. Newsom had finally arrived. “He was always so damn honorable, so damn admirable, so full of himself. And then tragedy struck, and he lost it all. Must have been horrible for him to lose his only child. Poor Cole was only six or so when he died. And it must have been even worse for Hank since he was driving the car at the time. If only he hadn’t hit that patch of ice, maybe little Cole would be here today.”

Gavin’s relationship with Lieutenant Anderson was anything but close. The older gruff man considered the detective to be nothing less than an immature asshole and Gavin resented the special treatment the drunkard got from their boss. Even on the best of days neither would ever consider each other anything more than a disliked colleague, an overlarge gnat to be ignored. But hearing Newsom’s malicious words, completely devoid of empathy, made him angry on the other’s behalf.

“I didn’t go to the funeral, I felt like I wouldn’t have been exactly welcome there,” the sergeant added wistfully. “But I did send a sympathy card to my buddy Hank. To express my deepest condolences. Would you like to know what I wrote in it?”

“None of my business Harry,” the detective managed to utter out.

“Oh it was nothing fancy. Just something sincere.” His smile was all teeth. “Just told him a simple truth. That karma’s a bitch.”

Sweet and blissful, rage began its lofty ascent through Gavin’s mind. He was an asshole sure, but even he knew that there were lines in the sand that should never be crossed never mind straddled. That there were immutable boundaries that were sacred to mankind, to common decency. Anderson was an insufferable bastard that frequently shredded Gavin’s threadbare nerves, that overstepped his authority time and time again, that never had kind word to send the detective’s way … but even he would never mock the boozehound over his dead son. To deride the death of child was unthinkable.

He was aware that his temper was close to erupting, close to reaching its zenith, but if he lost control now, he might not learn what he came here for. He marched over to the desk and slammed his fists down on its surface, disregarding the pain that radiated up his biceps. “Look Harry,” he basically hissed, struggling to speak. “I don’t give a fuck about your bullshit with Anderson. I’ve come here about a case. Ya didn’t fill out the file correctly or I wouldn’t fuckin’ be here. So let’s drop the shit, shall we?”

By the smug smile on Newsom’s face, he wasn’t intimidated in the slightest by Gavin’s menacing outburst. Amused was the more accurate description. “Then let’s talk about you then, heh Gav? We have so much left to discuss yet. Are you jealous of Hank?”

“Am I what?” The absurd query took the detective off his guard and confusion took anger’s place momentarily. “Jealous of him? Fuck no. What kinda stupid question is that?”

“I keep my ears to the grapevine Gav. I hear about all of your stunts including the ones concerning a particular android. Even though you haven’t bothered to visit me in my exile, I’ve still kept tabs on you. After all, you are my protégé.”
"Fuck that shit," Gavin snapped. "And fuck you Harry."

The older man laughed, nearly howling in contemptuous glee. The smile that wormed its way onto his lineless face would have been equally at home on a hyena’s maw. “I’ve watched all of the vids Gav, you can’t hide anything from me, remember? I’m your old buddy, your partner in crime.” He craned his neck upwards, his eyes alit with rapturous delight. “I saw how you overreacted every time you ran into that android at the station.”

“I don’t have a fuckin’ clue to what are sayin’ Harry," Gavin denied, his cheeks aflame. “Going senile a little early, aren’t ya?”

Waving away the detective’s frail jab with one hand, Newsom resumed his attack. “Don’t get me wrong Gav, I’m sure you hate androids – well maybe hated – but you were never nearly as violent with any before that one moseyed in onto your turf. That particular one just seemed to piss you off no matter what it did. Almost as if something about that piece of plastic trash set you off on a personal level.” He chuckled, a low and raspy sound. “Then it hit me. He’s just your fucking type. Slim and trim, a dash of clumsy charm, your walking wet dream. Its no wonder you always acted like such a hysterical little bitch in heat whenever it made an appearance. You were always so angry when you couldn’t have what you wanted.”

The detective was only vaguely aware that his right hand had slid off the desk, that it was convulsing close to his hip, only a short distance from his holster. He was losing control, as flimsy at it was. He could only recall being this angry, this overwhelmed a handful of times in his entire life, and every time had resulted in his regret and shame. He so badly wanted to shatter that hideous excuse of a face that was jeering at him, spewing the unwanted truth into the air like a cloud of sarin gas.

“That’s – that’s fuckin’ enough you prick,” he gasped in a voice that didn’t resemble his usual cocky crowing. “Just shut your fuckin’ mouth and get me the damn –.”

“Tell me Gav,” the older man started in a falsely friendly tone, interrupting the detective’s speech, “when you pulled out your gun on that android, not once, not twice, but three times, what were you really wanting to yank out for him? What did you really want to pump into his pretty face?” Newsom laughed again, and Gavin flinched as if physically struck. “Ah but I’d almost forgotten. You always preferred the taller ones to dominate you. So Gav, old buddy of mine, are you hoping that it’ll go get a plastic cock attached, so it can fuck you senseless, just the way you like it?”


His hand twitched undecidedly astride his gun’s grip, fingers conducting a tense dance of the macabre. His mind swam aimlessly through the clouded muck that was clogging his executive function from properly responding. He couldn’t even find a name to describe the whirlwind that was tearing his wretched insides apart.

Lashing out with all of his fury, he grabbed the top of Newsom’s head, ruffling his perfectly combed hair, and brought his might to bare, smashing the motherfucker’s face into the hard-wooden surface of his desk. He heard the other man make some sort of surprised squawk in protest as his nose registered the pain, but Gavin could only laugh in reply. How could the idiot possibly be surprised, after all, he knew Gavin better than anyone else alive and was well aware of the dangerous consequences that could occur when playing with fire.

Relinquishing his grasp, he let the sergeant lift his up his distorted face, blood already trickling down his probably broken nose. Likely the man had yet to comprehend what had even happened to himself, still reeling from the unexpected agony. Gavin wasn’t about to grant him a lengthy
His clenched fist snaked out, colliding with Newsom’s quivering jaw, knocking the man out of his seat, the chair spinning at an odd angle for a brief moment before collapsing onto its side, wheels rotating on their axels like horizontal weathervanes.

Circling around the desk like a predator seeking a wounded prey, the detective stepped over the inert chair and with a vengeful cry, booted the crumpled man in his chest, hard, eliciting a gurgled yelp for his effort. Bending down he grabbed Newsom by his expensive shirt and hoisted him off the floor just enough to get the man’s renewed attention.

“Hey Harry,” Gavin called maniacally, “you know what?” He pulled the other up further, closing the distance between their faces. Whereas the detective’s was a deranged portrayal of euphoria, the sergeant’s was a mask of pure terror, primal and unfeigned. “You look fuckin’ ridiculous with all the Botox you’ve had needled into those pink cheeks of yours. And that hair of yours! Afraid of a little gray? Well you ain’t foolin’ nobody. You’re a fuckin’ old prick, no mattah whatcha do, ya can’t change that.”

“Have you gone fucking nuts Reed?” Newsom hissed angrily, evidently having finally found the remains of his tattered courage. Sneering listlessly, he forced out a dry cackle. “You know you’ve just got yourself fired, right? Assaulting a superior officer. You are finished.”

“Oh that right Harry?” Gavin grinned humorlessly, letting the corners of his smile stretch his face into an uncomfortable exaggeration. “You won’t tell anyone nothin’.” The sergeant visibly blanched at his words and his lips began twitching of their own flailing accord. “You remember my good friend Mik? Ya know, the reporter. I’m sure he’d love to run a segment on how you murdered some poor retard six years ago. And before ya even think it, ya Fowler might have thought the case was unactionable, but hell, you never know what a class A bloodhound like fucking Mik Gladkowski might uncover. Specially since I’d gladly go on the air and tell them how I lied for you like the fuckin’ prick I am.”

Letting go of the bleeding man, he backed away, navigating carefully around the chair while still keeping his gaze fixed on Newsom and his hand on his gun. He made sure the sergeant saw where his hand was resting, in case he thought he might try to go for his own weapon, likely locked in the bottom drawer if he hadn’t changed his habit.

Watching smugly as Newsom began to right himself, looking like an overturned crab with its legs thrashing for leverage, Gavin snickered. “So buddy of mine, I think its about time for you to show some of that famous interdepartmental cooperation the brass is always yelling at us about.”

With one arm looped upon the desktop for purchase, Newsom paused in the act of lifting himself up. With eyes warily latched upon the younger man, a hint of fury flashed behind those dark iris, a scattering of hateful sparks. “What. What do you want?”

“The casefile on Adeline Babbidge and her android boyfriend Jeremiah.” The sergeant’s anguished expression trembled slightly at the last name, a rumble of contempt on his features, but thankfully he remained mute. “Oh and Harry,” Gavin began good-naturedly, “ya better have more on them than just what ya typed up. For your sake, that is.”

The grip on his gun tightened till his knuckles were pale and bloodless.

Once again standing at the bottom of the stairwell, Gavin nodded unconsciously to mimic his words. “Yes mam, thank you. I’ll meet ya there in about forty-five minutes.” He listened to the
woman’s hurried response before hanging up.

Sighing wearily, he sat down with a plop upon the cold cement floor, his legs feeling like Jell-O, the shitty cheap kind they served in hospitals as an insult to dessert everywhere.

It would only take him about twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five max if traffic was bad, to get to the location that he’d agreed to meet Mrs. Caroline Sanchez at. The worried younger sister of the missing woman was all too happy to let him look over Adeline and Jeremiah’s shared apartment and to answer the slew of questions that were brewing in his frazzled head. He was eager to investigate this possible link to the Slatterys’ murders, restless to know if there was a connection or not. In a way he hoped there would be; if not, then all they were left with was a sinister letter and the mismatched droppings of drug addicts found at the semi-abandoned crack-house on Lavalle Lane. As his grandmother would have said, they’d have nothing but bupkis.

But he also wanted – no needed – some time to just let his mind settle. He felt like he had run a marathon in record speed, completed basic military training and spent a couple of hours at the gym weightlifting. He needed to recharge after his volatile confrontation with his former snake of a partner.

But he was not going to even consider addressing what the man had said. Fuck that.

His phone shook in his hand and he started, nearly dropping the overpriced piece of shit. Glaring at the device, he noticed he had a few missed messages.

Tina, Queen of Sass
(Received @ 8:38)

U and Con fought?? Did he really say u needed to get laid? Holy shit G

Dt. Connor – RK800 #313 248 317 – 52
(Received @ 8:44)

Detective Reed, I am sorry for my behavior earlier. I misinterpreted your apparent desire to protect me with your previous actions that were not motivated similarly. I am not trying to make an excuse for my overreaction, I just think you deserve to know why I behaved like I did. I am sorry.

Lt. Hank Anderson
(Received @ 8:56)

Connor has brought me up to date with your longshot theory. It might just be crazy enough to be right. Reply if you get anything from Newsom.

(Received @ 8:56)

That’s an order Reed. We are working together. Keep me updated.

(Received @ 9:01)

Be careful. Don’t let that fucker get to you

Tina, Queen of Sass
(Received @ 9:18)
U went to go see Newsom? Wtf!

A flood of emotions rushed his already weakened psyche. A smarting flick of annoyance at Tina, always having to shove her nose into his business, snooping where she didn’t belong. A sliver of confusion and distrust at Connor’s apologetic text. Maybe a dab of hope as well, if he was being honest with himself. A liberal helping of irritation at the lieutenant’s words. Ordering Gavin about like a fucking worker bee. He was an experienced detective, he didn’t need a goddamn babysitter. And last but not least, something weird that he couldn’t quite define. Did Anderson’s final message contain a shadow of concern? Had the old fart’s dislike for Gavin been overridden by his hate for Newsom? After what the motherfucker had written in that sympathy card, it was more than likely.

Shaking his head to cast away his troubled thoughts, he started punching his replies into the screen vigorously.

Big G

(Sent @ 9:22 to Chris)

Stop txting Tina. Fcking gossip

Big G

(Sent @ 9:24 to Tina)

Leave Chris alone. Yes Con said some shit and every1 took his side. Try to do the right thing and that’s what I get. And yeah, had to talk to Newsom. Prob broke his nose. Prick

Dr. Gavin Reed

(Sent @ 9:25 to Anderson)

Got info from Newsom. Gonna head over to the missing lady’s apartment for a search and talk to the sister.

(Sent @ 9:26)

Newsom’s up to something. Watch out

Not wanting to even think about the android, Gavin decided against responding to his message. He just didn’t have the mental wherewithal to deal with that situation right now. He did feel a tad bit better now that Connor had apologized – and he knew that after all the shit he had done, he shouldn’t hold a grudge – but the other’s words had cut deeper than he had imagined. Sliced clean through the tendons and muscles of his security, scratching into the bone. He’d deal with it later. First, he had an interview and search to conduct. The truth awaited.

Unfortunately for Gavin, the truth was not waiting patiently by his car, coffee-to-go in hand, with a remorseful expression marring his perfect face. “Hello Detective Reed,” Connor greeted in a friendly but cautious tone as he took a step forward, towards where Gavin had suddenly frozen in mid-walk, keys grasped in a chokehold in his palm.

“What the hell are you doin’ here?” He blurted out, watching the android’s movement suspiciously. He may have apologized, sure, but Gavin was well acquainted with the other’s unarmed combat skills. His neck had hurt for nearly a week after the last debut.
Looking a bit diffident, with one foot shifting in a twitchy manner back and forth, rubbing against the hard pavement, Connor smiled his lopsided smile. Gavin might not be equipped with all the latest features like roboboy over there, but he was fairly certain that the android was exhibiting anxiety. "I wanted to convey my apologies in person. I was out of line, as Hank would say, and I very much regret saying the things I did. They were not true, and I should not have let myself get out of control over something so –."

“What was it you said?” Gavin asked with a measured frown. “That I’m ‘not a pleasant person’ and I have … uh ‘disagreeable character flaws?’” Connor’s gaze flopped down to tar in front of his leather shoes, apparently not wanting to make eye contact while the detective repeated his unkind words. Gavin laughed dryly at the sight. “Doesn’t get any truer than that. And I wouldn’t have put em so fucking nicely either, if it had been me.”

“But Detective, I had no right to say –.”

“Fuck that,” he snapped. “After all the fuckin’ shit I pulled, if you’d run me over with my own car it still wouldn’t make up for all of it.” Exhaling loudly, not wanting a long drawn out sappy scene, he shrugged. “Its whatever. Forgiven. Forget about it.”

Connor was apparently unable to do so. “Detective, I said some highly disparaging things about your sexuality and I want you to know that –.”

“No!” Gavin exclaimed loudly, his voice shrill, his face beating with undesired embarrassment. Taking a second to moderate his next words, he breathed in and out. “No,” he repeated, “we ain’t gettin’ into any of that, I don’t wanna hear it. I said its forgotten, so leave it be. Over and done with.”

Watching him in a way that gave Gavin the distinct feeling that he was being scanned – without permission goddamn it! – Connor nodded reluctantly, and the detective sighed in relief. He did not want to have any discussion that centered around his preferences whatsoever. “So what are you doin’ here really? I doubt you wanted to stand out in the freezing cold just ta say sorry to me.”

“Oh,” Connor yelped, startling Gavin a bit. The android quickly bolted over to him and pressed the paper cup into his unoccupied hand. “I thought you might want some coffee.”

Staring down at the object protruding from his recently empty hand, his mouth opened and closed, unable to work properly. “Uh,” he mumbled, “thanks.” If Connor had made it even as halfway good as the one he given Gavin yesterday, it would still lightyears beyond anything he could do himself. “Thanks,” he said again, this time with more gratitude. “I mean it. I was gonna stop for some along the way, so you’ve just saved me a couple of bucks.” Looking at the satisfied grin on the other’s face, he added, “its probably better than anything I woulda bought too.”

For a quiet minute they stood there, under the gray sky of the cloudy morning, as the wind started to pick up, sending a thrusting gale through the parking lot. Flinging the thin layer of yesterday’s snow up into the air, they were suddenly painted with a wispy dusting of white powder. Hair tousled in a most agreeable manner, Connor fidgeted with his crimson tie, unnecessarily straightening it. “Detective Reed, may I suggest that we proceed?”

“Wait, what?” Gavin sputtered, tearing his gaze away from the other’s hair and focusing on his earnest, patient face instead.

“Prolonged exposure to low environmental temperatures is detrimental to the human body,” Connor droned, “so it would be a good idea to get in the car, so you do not suffer from any of the common ailments associated with freezing. Both frostbite and hypothermia can have dire
consequences. You should bring a winter coat with you during the winter months. Your leather jacket is not sufficient –.”

Finally recovering his voice, the detective howled. “Fuck shut up, you sound like a goddamn Wikipedia page when you go on like that.” The android’s mouth abruptly clamped together at Gavin’s fiery eruption. “And what do ya mean, we should proceed?”

Puffing his chest out ever-so-slightly, Connor titled his head before responding. “Detective Reed, this case was given to the both of us – the three of us,” he corrected quickly, “and I have decided that I will accompany you on your investigation into the two missing individuals.”

“What? Pops let you off your leash or somethin’?” Gavin asked mockingly, trying to hide his worry. “He get sick of ya pissin’ all over the floor?”

Tilt deepening as he peered at Gavin, the android’s face became an emotionless wall. “Hank’s initial attempts to insult and annoy me when we first partnered on the deviancy case did not work, detective. Your immature taunts will not drive me away either.” With that matter-of-fact-statement, Connor marched over to the passenger side door of his Bullitt, and glanced at Gavin expectedly, waiting for him to unlock the car.

Indecision. Gavin felt like shit. A whole fucking steaming pile of rancid shit. The last thing he wanted was to do was spend the next hour or so with the iron giant, wondering whether the android was going to snap again and turn him into a plate of human spaghetti. Nor did he wish to confront those other thoughts that Newsom had splashed into his face. He had a precious few options regardless. As he saw it, he could let Connor ride along and hope for the best or he could say no. The ‘no’ path would undoubtedly result in another bitchy spectacle from roboboy – where Gavin would likely be the loser – or, if he was lucky, a lecture from his handsy father-figure. His skull probably couldn’t take two of the them in the same day.

“If you would prefer,” Connor spoke from over the top of his vehicle, “I can just rip the door off its hinges and enter that way. Though it will be a much colder trip for you.”

With his jaw suddenly becoming slack and rubbery, Gavin gaped at the other man in abstract horror. “No,” he shouted, “don’t you fuckin’ touch my car!”

Tossing his head back, laughter erupted from Connor’s mouth, a genuine and hearty sound. A very human sound. Shocked into once again freezing in place for the second time in less than twenty minutes, Gavin stared dumbfounded at the other man as he laughed out frosty puffs of mist into the air. Gavin had spoken with Connor a number of times over the past couple of days, been the victim of the android’s caustic sarcasm, but this was certainly a first. The first time he’d heard Connor laugh.

“Don’t worry,” the other man nearly giggled out, sending a shiver down Gavin’s spine. “I was just joking, I mean your car no harm.”

“Oh,” Gavin mumbled, still distraught at the thought of his ride being wrecked. “Ya seemed so fuckin’ serious.”

“I wouldn’t damage your property,” Connor said firmly, his giggles finally subsiding. He gently knocked on the window and sent another expectant glance Gavin’s way. The detective sneered in reply. A wild smirk crossed Connor’s face. “I wouldn’t tear the door off. Unless you gave me no other choice, detective.”

“Fuckin’ plastic bastard.” Gavin growled weakly before admitting defeat and tapping the unlock
“I dig ’til my shovel tells a secret,
Swear to the earth that I will keep it,

Brush off the dirt,

And let my change of heart occur.

One of his mother’s favorite songs. Something from the band *Sleeping at Last*, if he remembered right. He had never really listened closely to the lyrics like she had enjoyed doing, analyzing every word like it held some hidden prize, but he found it soothing in some strange way. Strange because it was a song about humanity’s negative impact on the earth and how people were willfully blind to the self-destruction that they were administrating to themselves. He was a fucking asshole so maybe that was why. He didn’t know.

Feeling that pesky emotion fluttering in his chest again, Gavin groaned under his breath. No matter what he did, he always ended up repeating the same shit over and over. Maybe he was unconsciously preparing himself for the Greek underworld, for Hades was a hell of repetition if his memories from high school were still to be believed. Guilt. Maybe he’d sit on some craggy shelf and lie over and over again to the dipshits from internal affairs, telling them that the retarded kid with a bullet lodged in his heart had charged them, that their lives had been in mortal danger. Or maybe he’d be on the sidewalk in Miami again, weeping inconsolably, small hands tangled in the officer’s pants. The can of soup in the woman’s hands. If the universe truly hated his guts, he’d likely find himself trapped in the evidence room, a body swathed in blue blood at his feet. Unmoving. Forever and ever, over and over, again and again. Just like him.

Fault lines tremble under my glass house,

But I put it out of my mind,

Long enough to call it courage,

To live without a lifeline.

He had to stop it. Stop all this shit. Anderson was right, he was a fucking disaster, a walking catastrophe of a human being, laying waste to everything within his toxic reach. Yeah, he was a smug son of a bitch for sure, but that didn’t mean that he needed to cause pain, pain to others, pain to himself. He never understood why Tina still kept by him after all these years, enduring his foul attitude and crotchety behavior with only a small frown. She was his best friend, the only real friend he had in his pathetic little life, and yet he constantly thought of her with anger and spite. That she was always badgering him, fussing incessantly about stupid things, pushing herself into places that she didn’t belong. Time after time she was just trying to be there, to support him, to keep him walking forward. She deserved better than his bullshit.

His weary eyes flickered to the calloused hands in front of him, clinging to the steering wheel like it was keeping him afloat. Drying blood caked the shredded skin.

Meanwhile, my family’s taking shelter,

The sparks send the fire down the wire,

A countdown begins,

Until the dynamite gives in.

Newsom had called Gavin his protégé and in more ways than one, he was indeed a creature of that monster – one of many. He had learned much under his partner’s crass tutelage; how to interrogate
a suspect, how beat a perp without showing a mark, how to better climb over his peers to get what he wanted. Harry had only fanned the flames of his simmering malice, egged on his cruel streak, laughed whenever Gavin had cut through another’s defenses. Newsom could not be credited with Gavin’s faults and flaws, however much he encouraged and nurtured the hurt that underlined them all, the black rot under his shaky foundations.

He didn’t want to be like his former partner. Newsom was a murderer. Had killed a man who’s only crime was that his brain wasn’t fully formed, hadn’t followed the genetic code to its rightful end, wasn’t normal. Died because he was viewed as less than human, something to be hated and despised, mocked and ridiculed, taunted and gunned down. Just like Gavin had treated the android sitting quietly next to him, watching out the window at the shops and people as the Bullitt shot down the road, astride the dotted line.

The echo, as wide as the equator,
Travels through a world of built up anger,
Too late to pull itself together now.

Murder had been on his mind that day in November, when he had followed Connor down those narrow stairs, weapon at the ready. Just because the other had been a machine, one that was damned good at his job, a threat to Gavin’s insecurity in his narrow mind. A threat to his flimsy sense of self, a withered and lamentable thing, afraid of the light. Had his aim been true back then, he would have been no different than Newsom. Was he really any different just because he had missed? Would he have sat down in the quaint Chinese restaurant that he and Tina frequented, a perverse smile on his prideful face, and boasted of the time he had killed that plastic prick? Would he have laughed at Tina’s expression? Or would she have laughed along with him? Humoring his dark deed.

There was an earthquake,
There was an avalanche of change,
We were so afraid,
We cried ourselves a hurricane.

“Yeah I got into a fight alright,” the detective croaked out, his voice uneven, his esophagus an untraveled desert. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Connor spin to face him, LED pulsing like an electronic lemon. His face was careful, his lips pursed.

“Punched Newsom, the fucking shit,” Gavin elaborated grimly. “My old partner. I’m sure Anderson musta filled ya in on some of it after I left.” The android slowly nodded in response, but otherwise kept silent, his wide eyes alert and attentive. “He’s a fuckin’ asshole, got a vicious streak a mile long. Even worse than Gavin Fucking Reed, if ya can believe it.” He chuckled at his own sad excuse of a joke. “You probably don’t believe it, doesn’t really matter, I guess.” Sighing to push away the desire to strike out, he continued on. “He ah did somethin’ a few years back, somethin’ terrible and he got away with it ‘cause I’m a fucking idiot. When I saw him again today it brought all that shit back. He said – said a bunch of shit and I fucked him up for it.”

“Look Connor, I know I’ve been an asshole to you.” He laughed, a wet and sloppy sound, full of regret and doubt. “I know I’ve already apologized to ya once, but I’ve done a shitty job being better. I keep doin’ the same shit to ya. Calling you names, treating ya like garbage and you aren’t.
And you don’t deserve it neither.” Soft and poignant, Tina’s voice whispered into his ear, a loving reminder of the bathroom encounter. You looked like you were about to suffer from a panic attack and, out of the entire precinct, the only person who came to see if you were alright was the very same person who you tried to kill … what does that say about him? What does it say about you?

“I don’t know what I’m tryin’ to say. Other than I’m sorry. I am really sorry.” He took a deep breath, his fingers sweaty and slick. “I’m gonna keep trying to do better. Can’t say I won’t still be an asshole, but I wanna be a better asshole.”

I bend the definition of faith,

To exonerate my blind eye.

‘Til the sirens sound, I’m safe,

‘Til the sirens sound, I’m safe.

Feeling like a fool, he shut his creaking mouth and kept his eyes staring straight ahead, focusing all his energy on watching the chaos of Detroit at midday, alive and overrun, walkways filled with people heading out to brunch, jostling with others on their way to work, sauntering lazily while peeking into the colorful shops that lined the streets, partaking the many sites of city life. Anything to not suffocate in the silence that followed his sporadic plea, his heartfelt overture. Anything to not feel those brown eyes gliding across his heated skin.

“I’ve found that deciding who you are, who you want to be, is the hardest thing you can do, Detective Reed.” Connor’s voice was warm and considerate, compassionate even, and it made Gavin choke up. “I’ve forgiven you already because I know what its like to make bad decisions, to make terrible mistakes and want to learn from them. If a plastic prick like me can do it, I am sure a fucking asshole like you can too.”

The detective laughed, and relief rippled through his tense joints, through his stiff muscles, through his ailing mind. “Shit. This fucking asshole is sick of hearing ‘Detective Reed’ all the time. Call me Gavin. We are partners now, or somethin’, even if it’s just for a while.”

“Ok. Gavin.” He could see Connor’s smile, bright and honest, shining in the periphery of his vision. Unaware, one crept upon his tired lips as well.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested, the song is Earth by Sleeping at Last. A wonderful song by a wonderful band.
Chapter Notes

Gavin and Connor conduct an interview and a search before heading to New Jericho.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The apartment complex situated on the intersection of Lakeshore Drive and Elm Court rose stories above the picturesque suburban homes that crowded one another up and down the road for as far as Gavin could see. The building itself was either relatively new or else had been renovated within the past couple of years, judging by the almost sparkly exterior. The color scheme of the outside paneling was a bit unusual for the neighborhood, a checkerboard of alternating reds and grays from level to level but he had to admit that he kind of liked the squirrely sequence. His first impression of the sight, only a quick glance while maneuvering his car into the adjoining parking lot, was that the place looked like some sort of well-polished and bruised welt protruding from the snowy earth on either side.

Shutting the driver side door with a bang, the detective’s gaze surveyed his destination. Grosse Point Farms, as the area was known, was an affluent community comprised of the upper crust of the middle class. They could never be categorized as the super-rich, the absurdly extravagant, but they were certainly financially well-to-do. No one here went without the finer things in life. No one here knew the pangs of starvation or the terror of trying to sleep under a park bench. Although the missing woman’s chosen residence was not the abode of snobby socialites or jet setting fashionistas, the place probably still came with a hefty price-tag nonetheless. Across the street lay the war memorial dedicated to the soldiers and veterans of the second world war, and just beyond that fancy mansion, the unofficial sixth member of the Great Lakes, Lake Saint Claire, spread out in all directions, separating the state of Michigan from Canada.

The apartment building might not be as luxurious as a Ritz-Carlton hotel, but Gavin was pretty sure that it’s inhabitants weren’t suffering from a lack of comfort and modern ease. They all had to have well-paying careers to live in a place like that. There was certainly no way in hell that he could ever afford the rent.

He could barely stay afloat in the shithole he called a home. He had to admit that it was pretty ironic that his meager salary forced him to dwell in the crummy, destitute area that he did, a detective having to live among drug addicts, thieves, and all-around dirtbags.

“Detec – Gavin,” stumbled Connor’s voice, a trifle uneasy saying his first name still.

“Yeah,” he responded absentmindedly, his eyes still scanning the snow-covered surroundings.

“There was very little information in the database about this missing person’s case,” he stated. “Would you mind updating me on what you found earlier?”

Oh. He’d been so screwed up over …. Well everything, that he’d forgotten to tell Connor about the pathetic excuse of a file he had managed to wrangle off his old partner. “There ain’t much,” he spat, trying to keep the sudden heat from overtaking his voice. “Newsom didn’t ask much once he found out an android was involved. Barely wrote down anything at all. Said he doesn’t do ‘lost and
Baring his teeth, Gavin wished that the sergeant was still within his reach, so he could pummel the motherfucker a few more times. Or push him in front the plow truck that just zoomed by.

“Anyways,” he grumbled, “the missing woman is Adeline Babbidge. A human. She lived with her android boyfriend, name of Jeremiah. He was also reported as missing.”

“Do we know Jeremiah’s model number?” Connor asked as he made his way around the front of the car, pausing a few feet away from Gavin’s position.

“Nope,” the detective answered with a grimace. “Got nothing on the android.” Glancing down at the crumpled piece of paper he had torn from Newsom’s notebook, he read off the few details he had. “Ah Ms. Babbidge is 46 years old, never been married, lived at this spot for the past three years. Both parents are deceased. Has a younger sister, a Mrs. Caroline Sanchez.” He shifted gaze his upwards while pocketed the stolen sheet. “That’s who reported both of them missing and who we are here to meet now. She’ll be waitin’ for us in her sister’s apartment.”

“When were they reported missing?” Connor inquired.

“On the thirtieth of last month,” He replied wearily.

Connor’s mouth crinkled slightly, and his LED began to burn a torrid yellow. They were the only outward changes in his otherwise unflappable appearance, but Gavin felt that the other was distressed by what he had just said. And for good reason. Two people had disappeared without notice, without warning, and the individual assigned to the case had sat on his ass, not because he was overburdened or fatigued, but because he was an android-hating bigot. Because he felt that it wasn’t worth his precious time to investigate a wayward machine.

Gavin was all fire and brimstone when it came to the sergeant’s prejudice. He had sworn to serve and protect, sworn to do his duty no matter the cost, and yet the fucker had done nothing. Teeth clamping together, Gavin desired to have an immediate rematch with his old pal Harry. But a little voice swam out of the abysmal backcountry of his mind, whispering that he was no better, no less guilty. After all, it Desperate to flee from his own thoughts, the detective gestured towards the building and started off, not even waiting see if his temporary partner was following or not. He wasn’t trying to be rude or surly, but he needed to move, to do something – anything – to escape the torrent of accusations flying through his skull, reminding him that he was shit. Hearing the gentle scuffle of Connor’s shoes crunching through the fine layer of white behind him was evidence enough.

After flashing their badges to the doorman they were granted admittance to the interior of the unoriginally named Lakeshore Drive Apartments. Gavin was a bit dissatisfied by what he saw. The foyer’s decorations were uninspired and commonplace; a few pieces of furniture that were likely purchased from some wholesale retail store were positioned at random spots around the room. Framed photographs of local sights were scattered sparsely along the walls, black-and-white punctuations between the vertical windows. To top of the cheap inn atmosphere, the majority of the pictures were of fisherman out on the lake, squatting on docks or sitting in their boats.

Shaking his head, Gavin just stomped his way towards the elevators on the far side of the room, opposite of the entryway. He assaulted the arrow-up button, grumbling under his breath while waiting for the lift. Connor actually took his time inspecting the pictures as he slowly revolved around the room, going as far as actually tapping one of them with finger, his lips slightly ajar. However much enthralled the android was with the silly scenes, Gavin did notice that his eyes kept darting his way, keeping watch for the elevator.
Thankfully, Gavin did not have to wait long. Soon he found himself inside of the elevator with Connor as the sloth-like machine made its slow ascension to the seventh floor. Wishing he’d have taken the stairs – they’d have been there already if they had! – he crossed his arms and frowned in annoyance.

After what felt like an eternity, a quiet ding announced the opening of the doors and they stepped out onto the appropriate level. Gavin immediately started down the hallway, eyes scanning the room numbers as he went. Until Connor touched his shoulder, that is.

“How would you suggest we approach this Gavin?” the android asked, his face intent and serious as he waited for his fellow detective’s response.

Swallowing a knee-jerk reply – do your job, dipshit, duh! – Gavin stopped to ponder Connor’s question. “Let’s not mention anythin’ about the known murders. Don’t want to upset the woman anymore than we have too.” He found that appearing on someone’s doorstep unannounced and uttering the word ‘homicide’ usually hurt their chances of obtaining any relevant information. “Our case may have nothin’ to do with these people. For all we know, one of ‘em murdered the other in some domestic spat and ran off. Or maybe they decided to go on some tropical vacation without tellin’ anyone, who knows.” He didn’t believe that for a minute, but his gut-feeling on the matter was hardly proof enough to base any reasonable conclusion.

He felt a bit weird, almost self-conscious, with having Connor stare at him, awaiting his advice patiently, brown eyes wide and alert on that unblemished face. When stuck on a case with him, most of his coworker’s typically just let him do whatever the hell he wanted, staying out of his way lest they incur his wrath. Tina would usually smirk behind her hand, if not openly, and sometimes flick a saucy comment in his direction for her own entertainment. Chris was always the professional, following his lead without remark or complaint, never griping when paired with Gavin. Even Ben Collins, his senior on the force, just let him run amok, providing he never did anything too improper or cringeworthy. They all knew that Detective Reed was an ambitious son of a bitch who always thought he knew the best and thus he never asked for anyone else’s opinions nor did they care to ask his.

Maybe Connor had heard about Gavin’s territorial pissing matches from someone at the precinct or maybe he had just assumed that it would be wise for him to know how Gavin wanted to proceed so he wouldn’t risk angering him with speaking out of turn. Or something.

Scratching the back of his neck, Gavin felt very uncomfortable under the other’s persistent gaze. Thinking that maybe now would be the right time to start the whole “be a better asshole” pledge, he wiped the frown off his face. “Eh, ya said last night that you wanted to experience new shit, right?” Connor nodded curtly, and he continued. “Well I was thinkin’ that a lot of people still view the police as anti-android, and this lady made a point of reporting her sister’s boyfriend as well, so she might respond better to having an android ask the questions. Ya know, that we’ll take both of the disappearances seriously. So, ah, why don’t ya take the lead.”

The smile Gavin was rewarded with made all the awkwardness he was feeling worth it. “Ok Gavin,” Connor replied cheerfully. Maybe a bit too cheerful considering their reason for being here. But the shorter man wasn’t going to say anything to spoil that content expression.

Feeling like his reputation was taking yet another regrettable nosedive off the deep end, Gavin quickly grumbled out, “but don’t you worry tin can, if ya make any mistakes, I’ll let ya know.”

Rolling his eyes in an amused manner, Connor just strode away, walking down the hall while looking for Adeline Babbidge’s flat. Disgruntled by the snarky bastard’s lack of response, Gavin followed after him, a shorter, grouchy shadow.
Ten minutes later, the detective found himself sitting in an extremely pink chair within an equally offensively pink room. Apparently, the missing woman had adored – no worshipped – the fucking color if her choice in wallpaper, paint, furniture, clothes, and art were any indication. He honestly thought he’d never seen so much of a single color in one place, nor so many minute variations of it. Pink could have its own fucking rainbow if it wanted since there were so many goddamn shades.

“No, my sister would never have left without talking to me. We spoke every night over the phone and she always said goodnight to her niece, Detective,” Caroline Sanchez asserted firmly. She was a short woman, maybe five feet, six inches tall, with striking raven hair and a mulberry birthmark on her chin. Her pale skin emphasized the moderate sprinkling of freckles that covered her face. “She and my daughter were very close. Adeline would have never upset her like this.”

Gray eyes wandered freely about the living room, methodically taking stock of everything they touched, everything they happened to drift upon. He counted at least nine photographs, some hanging on the walls, others positioned carefully on the tops of end tables or the corners of bookshelves. The content of the pictures were almost always the same; a little girl with jet black hair posing with a rather plump and homely woman, sometimes grinning from ear to ear, sometimes making goofy expressions, likely with the intent to make each other laugh. The missing woman and her beloved niece.

Leaning back in his chair, he squished the insanely frilly pillow while trying to sneak a peek at the closest picture of the duo. Although he had never been to Disney World in person, even Gavin could recognize the great futuristic sphere that lay in the background, the symbol of Epcot. In the forefront stood none other than Adeline Babbidge and her niece, both beaming with excitement, both wearing the same matching outfits with mickey and mini mouse sprawled upon their shirts. To complete the ridiculous image, they were both sporting those weird ear hats. Looking quite foolish. And quite happy.

Though Gavin was prone to dismissing the generalizations of others, it did appear that Adeline’s world revolved around her sister’s daughter. Probably a byproduct of having no children of her own, but he wasn’t some fucking quack, so there was no point in trying to psychoanalyze the woman’s motives. He was however inclined to believe Mrs. Sanchez’s assertions about their nightly schedule. He could easily envision the devoted aunt tucking her niece into her bed over the phone.

“The report that Sergeant Newsom filled out indicated that there was a disturbance prior to the disappearances of your sister and her boyfriend,” Connor stated in his usual clear voice, every word perfectly pronounced. “Due to a computer malfunction, that data was lost.” The lie that they had decided upon providing to prevent any uneasy questions. “Could you please tell us about the incident?”

Caroline Sanchez shook her head in distress, her eyes a sorrowful gateway. “I really don’t know much about it,” she said apologetically, her hands unnecessarily smoothing her shirt. “Adi was very upset when she called about it and she wasn’t very coherent. All I know is that they were out on their morning walk when some random man started yelling at them, insulting them, calling them all sorts of terrible things. Saying their relationship was an abomination, against God’s will and all of that anti-android crap.” Sighing dejectedly, she took a breath before continuing. “She said that Jeremiah drove the man off by threatening to call the cops. I told her that she should anyways, I mean, you never know what sort of creeps are out there nowadays, but she refused. Said that it was over.”

“And she didn’t recognize the individual who accosted them?” Connor asked gently. “She didn’t give you any details about the man? What he was wearing? Where they encountered him?”
“No,” the woman replied in a hollow, pained voice. “I wish now that I would have pressed her more about what had happened, but I was in the middle of making dinner when she called.” Her countenance became bleak and she began blinking furiously, trying to fend off the tears of guilt. A feeling that Gavin was becoming far too familiar with.

Before he could even open his mouth, Connor had already leaned over and placed his hand upon on her knee, rubbing lightly. With a sympathetic smile on his face, he spoke consolingly. “It’s not your fault. You did what you could. You’ve been a great help to us, to your sister.” Squeezing her knee gently, he titled his head. “We don’t know for certain that anything has happened to Adeline or Jeremiah. And we certainly don’t know that this individual is anyway connected with their disappearances.”

Struggling not to cry, Mrs. Sanchez just stared at Connor with a forlorn expression as she attempted to reign in her tumultuous emotions. All the while, he continued to smile and massage her knee, gazing at her with such unbashful sincerity that even Gavin felt moved.

With his throat constricted as if something was lodged deep within and unwilling to yield, Gavin averted his eyes away from the sight. He didn’t want to look at the android anymore, didn’t want to be reminded of how very human the other man was, despite his synthetic skin, despite his inorganic makeup. That compassionate gaze was far too human, far too real, far too alive, for Gavin to not feel discomfort. How could he have ever thought that Connor was anything but a living being? How could he ever have been so deliberately blind to that truth? Glancing at the other man’s earnest face, Gavin wondered if maybe he was the machine, unthinking, uncaring. Just an artificial intelligence executing a program, mimicking emotions, imitating life.

Regaining her voice, Mrs. Sanchez sighed. “Oh Detective, Adi is dead. So is Jeremiah.” She smiled sadly, the sort of smile that hurt to look at. “I don’t know what happened to them, but I know my sister. She would never have left without telling me. Something terrible must have happened.”

A troubled look passed over the android’s face for a brief moment. Apparently, he didn’t disagree with her conclusion but nonetheless he wanted to reassure her anyways. “Statistically speaking, there’s always a chance for unlikely events to take place,” he said firmly.

She nodded but without much vigor. Reclining away, Connor withdrew his hand and shifted in his seat, a chair identical to the one that Gavin was occupying, bulky and adorned with paisley fuchsias.

Taking a moment to compose himself, the android fiddled with his tie, his fingers rearranging the knot pointlessly. “You mentioned a specific word to the sergeant,” Connor brought up suddenly. “And it had something to do with your sister, or with Jeremiah. The word ‘virus.’ Can you tell me what that has to do with them?”

With bated breath, Gavin banished all the extraneous thoughts from his mind and waited. All of his concentration was fixated on the woman across the room, his focus tethered upon her oval face, waiting for her answer. Soon he would know if there was truly a connection here, if there was a link, however tenuous, between this vanishing couple and the Slattery murders. Whether or not he and Connor were out on a wild goose chase, hunting a tiger to only find a kitten instead. Whether his altercation with Newsom had been for more than just merely jeopardizing his career. Flashing across his vision, he saw the message that Eileen Kincaid had managed to preserve. YOUR VIRUS WILL BE ELMINATED.

“The last time I spoke to Adi, she told me that she had received something in the mail. A flyer, I think.” Mrs. Sanchez’s brow furrowed, and she frowned. “I’m not sure though, she wasn’t making
any sense. She was very distraught over whatever it was.” Sighing dejectedly, the woman grimaced. “I wasn’t really listening, this wasn’t the first time she had overreacted to something like this. She had a – a tendency to get worked up over anything that was even mildly anti-android. Androphobic I guess. She took it all to heart. We were out shopping last month, and someone left a pamphlet detailing a conspiracy between Warren and Cyberlife on my car. Adi practically bawled her eyes out over it.”

“This … flyer spoke of a virus?”

“I don’t know, she said the word a couple of times after saying she got something in the mail. It sounded like the typical propaganda that you hear. I’m sure you’ve heard it all before,” she said with an awkward Scowling, Gavin couldn’t help but feel let down. He had hoped for a concrete resolution, had wanted either a rebuttal or a confirmation. This was neither. Just more fruitless ambiguity.

“I see.” Connor’s LED was cycling between blue and yellow, a runaway carousel that meshed together in a greenish blur. Gavin assumed that his temporary partner was likely drawing the same conclusion that he had just come too. Maybe their search would be more lucrative. “I know you said that you have to get back to your home shortly, but we have a few more general questions for you about your sister and her boyfriend.”

The woman’s gaze shot to her wristwatch and she bit her lip before bobbing her head in acquiescence. “Thank you,” Connor said warmly, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Can you tell me about your sister’s employment?”

Hesitation crossed Ms. Sanchez’s features and she squared her shoulders as if struck by a draft of cold air. “Adi was in the process of finding a new job when she – she disappeared.” The woman glanced nervously away from the two detectives, her eyes meandering around the room, pointedly straying from their gazes. Had Gavin been an oblivious first grader with a stuffy nose rather than a thirty-six-year-old criminal investigator, he’d still have noticed the obvious mixture of reluctance and anxiety she was exuding in waves like a nauseating perfume.

“Is there something wrong?” Connor’s clear and pronounced voice echoed Gavin’s suspicious thoughts.

Looking highly uncomfortable, the short woman sighed and clasped her restless hands together in her lap. “Well … its just going to sound really weird, and I suppose it is.” Bemused by this odd statement, Gavin’s brows narrowed as she practically began to sputter. “Its been a contentious issue between the two of us. You see, its just so implausible. I mean, prior to the revolution everyone just used androids for it, so I can’t imagine someone hiring a human. But she always insisted … It just didn’t make any sense at all.”

Her nonsensical rambling did little to illuminate the matter for Gavin’s liking. She may have well just said nothing at all. Cocking his head at an angle, Connor’s forthcoming question demonstrated that he too was just as clueless as his human counterpart. “So what exactly did your sister do?”

Visibly deflating, the woman sighed once again, more loudly. “She said she was a caretaker. Cleaned and gardened. But that’s just so … unlikely.”

Eyebrows climbing up his forehead, Gavin couldn’t help but agree with her incredulous assessment. Those sorts of menial tasks had long since been appropriated by the android labor force. Hell, he was no expert but even he knew that Cyberlife had designed over twenty different models for household maintenance and domestic services alone. They were far cheaper and more efficient than any human worker could be. He couldn’t imagine why anyone would have hired Ms.
Babbidge to vacuum their floors and deadhead their flowerbeds. Maybe an androphobe?

Even if that were the case and Ms. Sanchez’s sister had somehow found employment as a maid or whatever, there was no way that’d she have made enough money to live in a place like the Lakeshore Drive Apartments. She probably couldn’t have even made ends meet in his trashy neighborhood, never mind anything in Grosse Pointe Farms.

“That does seem unlikely,” Connor agreed, his expression thoughtful but conflicted. As the most advanced law enforcement android ever created, it was hardly a surprise that he too found the situation to be improbable, outlandish even. Whirling madly, his LED indicated that he was running thousands upon thousands of possible scenarios through his mind palace. “I know quite a few people who have been forced to engaged in less than reputable activities in order to survive,” the android said carefully. “These past ten years have been economically challenging for so many. Is there any chance that your sister may have been doing something illegal?”

“No, certainly not,” she said emphatically, straightening up in her wicker chair. “My sister was a lot of things – naïve, gullible to the extreme, scatterbrained, clumsy, emotional – but not criminal.” Crossing her arms over her chest, Caroline continued her strenuous defense of her older sibling. “She would never have resorted to anything like that. Good grief, as a child she couldn’t even handle lying. She was just too – too innocent to be involved in something illegal. It would have eaten her alive if she had tried.”

“I did not mean to offend you.” Connor raised his hands up in surrender, trying to reassure the woman. “These are just the questions I’ve got to ask, you understand?” He smiled warmly and tossed his doe-eyed look in for good measure. Gavin had seen the android use that very same look on Lieutenant Anderson and it had always worked like a charm on the gruff older man. Somehow those chocolate goo-goo eyes always managed to melt whatever resistance the boozehound had. And by the diminished agitation on Mrs. Sanchez’s face, they were effective on her as well.

After a few moments of mentally collecting herself, she nodded at him, eliciting an even wider grin from the robotic detective. Gavin had to grudgingly admit that Connor’s brand of awkward and sincere charisma was highly effective.

“What can you tell me about Jeremiah?”

“My sister was very child-like when it came to love and romance,” she began fondly as the corners of her mouth edged upwards. “She always talked about finding her Prince Charming, like a little girl would after reading some silly fairy tale, full of belief and hope. I always told her to stop living with her head in the clouds, but she never listened.” Giving herself a little shake, Mrs. Sanchez sighed. “And for whatever reason, she was convinced that you all,” she gestured at Connor, “were real. Long before the whole deviancy crisis last year, I mean. And that’s how she met Jeremiah.”

Crimson circles blossomed on her cheeks in what Gavin assumed was embarrassment. “Jeremiah was the name he adopted for himself after he deviated. He was initially a Traci.”

Though his knowledge of all things android-related was severely lacking, even Gavin knew what a Traci was. One of the most sophisticated models ever designed, the male HR400s, and their female counterparts, the WR400s, were created with only a single yet complex task in mind. Sex. The Traci’s were the only androids originally equipped with all the necessary parts required to perform any and all desired feats and fantasies of their renters. He’d never used their services personally – it’s not like Gavin Fucking Reed needed to pay to get his rocks off – but he had encountered them during a case last year when a man was murdered by a deviant at the Eden Club on Woodward Avenue. It had been the first and only time he’d stepped into a branch of the nation’s most popular android sex bars, and it had creeped him the hell out.
Unconsciously, he whistled, thinking about the ‘innocent’ lady and her sexy fully functional plastic boyfriend. Caroline Sanchez dragged her attention away from Connor and shot Gavin a reproachful, hostile glance. “It wasn’t like that at all. My sister was convinced she could – I don’t know,” she stumbled with her words for a moment. “Wake him up I guess, I didn’t really understand it.”

Turning back to the android detective, she took up her story again. “I thought she was crazy. She went to that joint on Ridge Road every week and purchased a session with Jeremiah. She’d just sit there and talk with him. Sometimes she’d bring a book and read it aloud to him.” She closed her eyes for a second. “I was worrying for her sanity and then one day in November he showed up here. With nothing on expect one of those logoed speedos. Just waiting outside for Adi. They were inseparable, practically glued to one another after that. My sister and her Prince Charming.”

She sniveled and turned away from them, probably trying to hide her tears. Gavin considered trying to say something, but he was pretty damn sure he should leave the comforting to his partner. Before Connor could say anything however, the woman bolted to her feet. “I’m sorry but I’ve got to run. I need to get home before my daughter gets off the bus.” Gavin stood up quickly and was mimicked nearly in perfect unison by Connor. “Please take your time with your search. Just lock up when you are done.” And without another word, she strode out of the apartment, her cheeks damp and shiny under the artificial lights.

“What do you think, Detective?” Connor’s pensive question broke the momentary silence following her abrupt departure.

“I think we need to classify those puppy eyes of yours as a weapon of mass destruction,” he grumbled. Frowning, he glanced over at the android and then softened his expression. “You did good. I had hoped for somethin’ that might tell us one way or the other if this mess was connected to our mess, but even you can’t pull shit out of thin air it seems.”

His temporary partner’s face was a mask of unequivocal neutrality, but Gavin could have sworn those goddamn eyes were twinkling at him. At his compliment. “Both my appearance and voice were specifically designed to facilitate my integration into human society.” He smirked. “Miracles were not included in the package.”

“Yeah, yeah, very funny,” Gavin remarked sourly, rolling his eyes for emphasis. “Why don’t ya take your state-of-the-art plastic ass and get ta work already.” Without glancing at the android, the detective huffed and stalked out of the area, heading for the woman’s bedroom.

Her sleeping quarters were much as he expected them to be; overstuffed with even more pictures of the Babbidge and Sanchez families, full of billowy pillows and puffy teddy bears, and finally, drenched in hideous pinkness. He couldn’t imagine any self-respecting man being able to live in such a horrid color scheme. Jeremiah must have really loved his princess, after all, she had basically awoken him with her kiss. Much like Natalie had loved her husband. Something twisted in his stomach and he felt a strange sort of sadness settle on his shoulders.

Finding nothing to explain the couple’s bizarre vanishing act, he left for the kitchen. To his immense and undying gratitude, at least the apartment’s eating area was nearly free of his now most hated color that-must-not-be-named. There were some piglet shaped magnets on the fridge that dared to sport the vilest, most eye-blinding color in all of existence, but they were small enough that he could just ignore them.

Coughing due to the stench emanating from the open refrigerator, he cursed a storm before slamming the door shut. Nothing in there but rotting meat, desiccated fruit, and moldy Italian
takeout. He scowled and scanned the room, his patience waning. He couldn’t tell why exactly, but he still felt like the Slattery murders were somehow linked to this silly, frilly woman and her sex-bot. Nothing the sister had told them had either verified or disproved this frivolous assumption but nevertheless he felt it with a stark certainty that surprised even himself.

Misty morning eyes began their desperate dance across the countertop and he took a mental inventory of the dizzying assortment of farm animal knickknacks that littered the area. Horses, cows, ducks, chickens, you name, she had it. He completely expected old McDonald himself to jump out of one of the cupboards at any moment, singing that fucking jingle of his. “You find anythin’?” He shouted down through the open doorway that led to the other side of the apartment.

“That I can deem important to our investigation,” came Connor’s ever pleasant voice. “Lots of paper-copy books. Mostly romance novels but there are quite a few concerning the practice of horticulture.”

“You find any mail your way?” Gavin asked, still glancing about, trying to figure out what he was missing. There was something in the kitchen he should be checking but he just couldn’t remember what the hell it was.

“I found a stack near the entrance, but it was all just bills and supermarket flyers. Nothing suspicious. Nothing even remotely anti-android in substance.”

Grimacing, he narrowed his eyes. What the fuck was he mis–

Then it struck him. If got a threatening or offensive letter, his cop mind would advise him to hold onto it. But Adeline Babbidge was not a cop. She was a citizen, a good ol’ fashioned taxpaying citizen who would likely throw out a nasty poison pen letter.

With a grin of triumph, he flipped the trash can’s lid off and dumped its contents onto the white tiled floor. A half-smooshed carton of milk. A Styrofoam cup with a yellow smiley face embed on its side. Some rotten berries that he assumed had once been grapes. A Burger King wrapper. An empty can of Mexican diced tomatoes. And a crumpled piece of paper.

He grabbed at the sheet and brought it to eye level, smoothing out the scrunched edges. He tried vainly to suppress a gasp as he read the eerily similar typed writing.

YOU ARE A VIRUS. YOU WILL BE PURGED

“Hey Connor, I fuckin’ found it,” he yelled. He heard movement from the other room as he continued to squint at the words that seemed to be glaring up at him, full of spite and menace.

“May I see it Gavin?”

Snapped out of his unintentional staring contest, he began to hand the paper over to his colleague. That is until his sight latched onto the other’s exposed hands. “What the fuck are you doin’ toaster?” he exploded. “Put some fuckin’ gloves on before ya ruin the evidence! What da the hell is wrong with ya? I thought you were supposed ta be some advanced super-whatever and now your acting like some fuckin’ brainless rookie?!!?”

Handsome face suddenly still like a stone statue, Connor’s mouth tightened imperceptibly before speaking. “Gavin, android’s don’t have fingerprints, so it is unnecessary for me to wear gloves.”

Oh. That’s right. He knew that.

Cheeks flushing, the detective gulped. “I – uh – sorry.” The definitive line in his mind that
separated androids from humans had begun to blur for Connor. He didn’t know what to think of that.

Thrusting the paper into the other’s extended hand, Gavin turned away, his face hotter than molten lava. He didn’t know what to make of this new development and he certainly didn’t want to think about it. He’d need to make an emergency visit to the liquor store tonight.

“There’s a few hidden lines here.”

“What?” Gavin exclaimed. Moving to stand so he could look over Connor’s shoulder, he glanced at the front of the paper again. “I don’t fuckin’ see anything.”

“It’s written in dried thirium 310.” Android blood. “Once it dries it is invisible to the naked eye. Certain forensic tools can be used to detect it. I can scan for it.”

“Well, what does it say?” the detective demanded, staring at the letter as if his impatient gaze could unlock its secrets through sheer force of will alone.

“You are my practice. You are the price. You will be the first,” the android recited.

“Fuck.” He had the sudden sensation that someone had just walked over his grave.

Patience was not one of his virtues.

He disliked – no, hated – waiting. He preferred action, movement, getting his blood pumping. Anything besides sitting around uselessly with his fingers up his ass. Unfortunately much of his job consisted of waiting. Waiting for a new case to drop into his lap, to relieve the stifling tedium. Waiting for a forensics report at three in the morning. Waiting for backup before entering a killer’s premises. Waiting outside the courtroom for your turn to testify. Waiting (maybe praying) for the fucking paperwork to finish itself. Waiting. Waiting. Fucking waiting!

And here he was, having to wait. He could just grind his teeth to dust at this rate.

He had assumed that Connor’s presence would have worked like a magic password, granting him immediate access to New Jericho’s leadership but that hadn’t been the case. He was surprised. Connor was a fucking hero if the pro-android news was to be believed. And Gavin believed it, as much as it pained him to do so. After all, he had seen the newsfeed of the android marching ahead of a legion of his kind, having liberated them from Belle Island just in time to save Markus and his buddies from the military and that prick Perkins.

When they had arrived at Manfred Hall – the official headquarters of the android community – a little after two in the afternoon, he had expected a very different reception. Instead of fanfare and a wave of gushing admirers, they’d been shunting into the waiting area upstairs, a stuffy room that reminded him of city hall. Then the secretary of the Commissioner had informed them that Simon was currently engaged in a meeting but would be available to speak with them in a couple of minutes. Over fifty minutes ago, that was.

Scowling, Gavin turned towards his temporary partner, who was …

… sitting in the passenger seat of his car, looking out the window.

Chris had finally arrived to supervise the CSI team’s search of the Babbidge apartment. He
doubted that they’d actually find anything of use there, but since he had discovered the second (well first) threatening letter, it was best to be thorough regardless. Once the officer had set foot into the building, he and Connor had been free to go.

“This isn’t the way back to the station,” the android commented, his tone confused.

“That’s right smartass,” Gavin snarked with a toothy grin. “We got another stop first.”

With his attention pulled away from the passing street, Connor glanced at Gavin. “Oh,” he exclaimed. “Of course. It is well past lunchtime, you must be hungry. Especially since you lost your breakfast this morning. It is a good idea to keep yourself nourished.”

“I ain’t hungry,” Gavin grumbled truthfully.

“But detective your blood sugar is getting –.”

“ Fucking fine, is what it is,” he replied hotly. “Stop scanning me already and listen.” He grumbled under his breath for a bit before raising his voice again. “We’re gonna make a pitstop in Plasticland is what we’re gonna do.”

“Why do you want to –.”

“Fucking-A,” he interjected rudely, irritated at the other’s denseness. “I thought you were supposed to be smarter than us dumb humans?” He shook his head in irritation. Remembering his pledge from earlier, he moderated his tone. Lifting one finger up, he said, “Your pal Simon knew Natalie Slattery somehow. I wanna know what he knows.” A second finger joined the first. “This killer is obviously androiphobic, so he may have sent more of his love letters to people in New Jericho. They might be able ta help us out.” A third finger rose to greet the others. “This motherfucker has killed four people.”

“We don’t know that for certain Gavin. There is a chance that Adeline Babidge and Jeremiah are –.”

“Are what?” Gavin nearly screeched, interrupting Connor for the third time in less than five minutes. “Out on a month-long stroll through Gross Pointe? On a vacation they somehow forgot to tell anybody about? Give me a fuckin’ break. Just ’cause we don’t have their bodies, doesn’t mean that they aren’t dead.” Shooting the other man a determined look, he sighed. “Alright Mr. Pro-to-type,” he enunciated each syllable like a brick, “tell me, what do you think happened to them? And none of that statistical blah-blah-blah,” he warned. “I want to know what you think. I’m talkin’ to you, not your goddamn obnoxious program of mathematical bullshit. You.”

With his eyebrows jutting together, Connor turned towards the detective. “I think that they are dead and that they were murdered by the same party responsible for the Slatterys.”

“See! Not so hard!” Gavin wiggled his free hand through the air. Returning to his original ranting, he said “so our perp has killed four people. That makes em a serial killer and when the Useless Old Dick tells the fuckwads upstairs, they’re gonna try to keep this quiet.” Sneering at his steering wheel, imagining it to be none other than Deputy Chief Callahan, he growled. “They’ll want to pretend that everything is fucking fine. That everything is all hunky-dory. And while they refuse to alert the media ‘cause they don’t wanna look bad, more people will die.”

With his LED blinking between azure and amber, Connor frowned. “So you want to warn Simon and New Jericho?”

“Duh dipshit,” he said, shaking his head in exasperation. “We can’t tell em all the classified shit,
but we can tell them to increase their security and keep an eye out for anythin’ suspicious. And its best to do this before the brass knows all the facts. They could order us to keep our mouths shut if we wait until after Fowler has briefed them.”

Laying back into his seat, Connor’s eyes looked inward, contemplative and concerned as he pondered Gavin’s words. Though the detective was keeping the majority of his focus on the road, trying to not hit the homeless lady pushing her three-wheeled shopping cart through the middle of the street, he did spot the android’s eyelids fluttering like hummingbird wings. “What’s wrong with you? Out of batteries?”

“No,” the other man replied. “I was merely texting Hank. He agrees with you.”

“Oh great,” Gavin said sarcastically. “I’m so fucking happy that pops is ok with me doin’ my job.”

He snarled wordlessly at his windshield and clamped his mouth shut. Connor however continued to stare at him, his pristine face a blank book. Unreadable. Just when the detective was about ready to snap at him, to tell him to look somewhere else, anywhere else, the android spoke. “One of my primary features is the ability to adapt to human unpredictability. Yet even with all of my advanced software, I struggle to understand you.”

“Get in line,” Gavin responded, his grating voice harsh to his own ears. He’d be fucking thrilled if he could understand even an iota of what floated inside his own skull. Looking almost crestfallen, Connor turned back towards the window, resuming his silent vigil. He was …

… sitting in his chair, his brown eyes shooting worried glances in Gavin’s direction every so often. The android had gotten steadily more anxious the closer they had gotten to New Jericho. And more agitated the longer they had to wait. Apparently, patience wasn’t one of his virtues either.

Smirking in a very unsubtle manner, Gavin swaggered over to one of the paintings on display. What he knew about art he could probably fit into the head of a pin. Or an electron. Despite that, he had to admit the artist was pretty fucking badass. It was a portrait of an android, a dark-skinned, thin man with an eager smile and a green cap standing in the rain, some indeterminate buildings in the background. The plaque attached to the bottom read John.

“He was one of the first to join Markus on his crusade,” a voice said behind Gavin, making him jump. Though Connor had the good sense not to laugh, his face did scrunch up a bit before he continued. “I never met him. He died during the Freedom March on Woodward Avenue. I was told that he sacrificed himself to save Markus.”

“Shit.” Gavin frowned thoughtfully at the painting. Had this guy not died to save the android messiah than who knows what might have happened. He had heard a rumor from a federal agent that the deviants had gotten hold of a dirty bomb. Had someone other Markus been in charge, all of Detroit may have been obliterated. Turned into a toxic crater.

“Who’s that?” He asked, pointing at another portrait, this one of a female wearing a very tattered, moth-eaten android outfit. Getting a good look at her head, he added, “and what the fuck happened to her?”

The back half of her head was missing, and the inner workings of her cranium were left exposed. Sinewy cables draped down her shoulders from the hole, giving her the appearance of having extremely long metallic hair. Her eyes were completely black, as if the night sky had bled into them. The synthetic skin on her face was damaged and peeling in places. Gavin suddenly felt immeasurably sad.
“That was Lucy.” Connor’s voice echoed his feelings. “I met her the night that she died. The night that I brought the FBI down onto Jericho.” The night that he handed Gavin his ass in the evidence archive. “She was sort of a spiritual leader, I think. I never even said a single word to her. I was hunting down Markus and she just … touched my shoulder.” Intrigued, the detective stared at the picture, trying to imagine what she must have been like in person, assuming that she had an aura of mystery and wisdom. “I hadn’t deviated yet. I was on a mission to bring Markus in. Dead or alive.”

Turning towards the android, Gavin noticed that Connor had closed his eyes. His fingers were twitching fitfully at his side, as if they were playing with an invisible coin. “I was trying so hard not to be noticed on my way to capture the deviant leader and, out of nowhere, she just reached out and grabbed me. Told me that I was lost. That I was looking for something.” His eyes popped open and they were mournful. Haunted. “That I was looking for myself.”

Gavin wasn’t some brutish Neanderthal, but just the same, he wasn’t very good when it came to all this touchy feely shit and Connor looked like he needed some touchy feely shit right about now. He looked lost, just as this Lucy had said, lost like last night in the observation room. Confused like a kicked puppy, abused because of no fault of his own doing. Beaten because he tried to do what he was taught. What he was trained to do.

Gavin didn’t know what to do. He wanted to do something, anything, but he also didn’t want a repeat of the idiotic blunder that he had committed less than twenty-four hours ago. That hadn’t resulted in placating Connor; it had just mortified them both. He didn’t know why, but he always seemed to spout something crude or lewd when in situations like this. He wanted to slink away, to leave the android alone to – to malfunction or whatever in solitude.

But he had made a pledge. A promise to be a better jackass, less hostile and more … something. Better. He wish he knew. Whatever it was, now was the time for it.

He put an uncomfortable smile on his face, so unlike his cruel grin and his mocking smirk. He hoped that it looked sincere. He was trying after all. Gently, he nudged his partner’s shoulder almost playfully, jostling the man out of his thoughts. “Well if you were looking for yourself, I’d say you found him,” Gavin said, his tone a bit stiff. Making sure that Connor was looking at him, he widened his smile. “And I’d say that he’s pretty fuckin’ cool.”

Startled, Connor just stared at him like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. Then abruptly he smiled, a great big grin that encompassed his entire face, tugging at the corners of his bright eyes and lifting his cheeks. “Thank you, Gavin.”

“Yeah don’t mention it.” As in literately never mention it.

Aware of how hot his neck felt, of how warm his ears were, Gavin turned away and strode across the room to stand before a framed poster of the official logo of New Jericho. Two hands clasped together, shaking. One porcelain white, clearly that of an android. The other, the salmon pink of humanity. Words were arranged in a triangle around the logo, a three-sided border. Of two bloods, of one mind read the top portions. The bottom line consisted of two words. Stronger together.

Staring at the diplomatic jargon, Gavin’s mind thankfully wandered away from the embarrassing thoughts he was currently absorbed in. He’d much rather consider the case than deal with his fickle and impulsive emotions. Blood and guts, death and violence. Those were things he could wrap his reptilian mind around. His feelings … he’d rather pretend they didn’t exist. He’d prefer to bury them deep down below the skin, underneath his frail exterior, with his hopes and dreams. All unobtainable and unworthy.

Stronger together. Two humans and two androids slain. Was the killer trying to send a political
message? Were they on some self-designated mission to start another culture war? A twenty-first century helter-skelter, maybe? Of two bloods, mixing on the floor. Dead together? Were the victims chosen specifically or was the perp targeting the greater concept of human-android collaboration? Or was it their ability to love one another regardless of their perceived and actual differences? Were there any differences when love was involved? Or did the two blend together, their disparities melding into a masterpiece that transcended understanding?

“Gavin.” Connor’s voice broke through the detective’s disjointed thoughts.

Without turning around, Gavin muttered an impassive “yeah?”

“I was thinking that … it might be smarter for me to speak to Simon alone.”

Twisting around so he could stare at the android, he snapped. “What?”

Whitewashing his hands, Connor glanced at him. If Gavin didn’t know any better, he’d say the android looked quite apprehensive. “Well Simon is a friend of mine and I think it’s more likely that he will open up if its just me asking the questions. We have interfaced before and it could –.”

“Don’t give me that shit,” the detective growled irately, his expression darkening with every word. “This is my fucking case too and I ain’t just gonna sit on the sideline ‘cause some plastic asshole might feel better with not having a sucky human around to screw everythin’ up.” He jerked his thumb behind him, pointing at the poster. “What the fuck is all that for? Just pretending to play nice with the stupid humans? Just for show?”

Looking downright miserable, Connor shook his head forcefully. “No, its not like that all detective,” he said in a rush, as his features took on a harried vibe. “Neither I or Simon hold any anti-human prejudices. It’s just that – well, you see, Simon, he’s ah …” More flustered than Gavin had ever seen him before, Connor was fumbling with his tongue in a most un-Connorish fashion. “He’s helped me with my deviancy issues. Helped me with understanding my newfound emotions. I’ve interfaced with him on multiple occasions, so he could better –.”

“I don’t give a fuckin’ shit what you’ve done with your plastic buddies.” Fuming, Gavin took a few steps towards the anxious android. “I don’t care if you’ve been to the moon and back with him. I don’t care if you’ve gone skinny-dippin’ with your fucking robojesus either.” Raising a finger into the distance that separated them, Gavin grunted. “What I do care about is doin’ my job. That’s why I am here. To. Do. My. Fucking. Job. And if me bein’ here is such a goddamn nuisance, well fuck you.”

“No Gavin, that’s not it at all,” the android persisted, his tone tight. “I’ve shared some of my memo –.”

“I am sorry to interrupt,” came a feminine voice. “But the Commissioner is ready to see you.”

Standing just within the threshold of the doorway was the same secretary that had escorted them earlier. Though her flawless face was devoid of any emotion, a clean slate, her eyes were wide and watchful, full of caution. “If you’ll follow me,” she requested quietly, one hand gesturing out the way she had entered.

Furious, the detective bulldozed his way past a very distressed Connor, smashing their shoulders together as he complied with the secretary’s instructions. Anger. To say he was angry would be akin to saying that the planet was large. A gross understatement of epic proportions. He was angry in all capital letters. Underlined and bolded as well. Here he was, trying to play nice, trying to be nice, trying to be better and this was his thanks?!? Oh little Gavin, please stand aside while the less
obsolete beings have a grown-up conversation, discuss grown-up things! Take a seat at the kiddies’
table, we’ll collect you when we are finished! Chew on some fucking crayons if you get bored!
Pain. He was hurting, and he hated himself for it. He despised how much it hurt. This was his
fucking case!

What the fuck was Connor’s problem?!? Gavin was trying to do better, pushing himself harder
than he had in years, bringing old wounds up to the surface in his foolish attempt to change. And
the bastard had the audacity to be – be what? Was he embarrassed? Humiliated to be seen with
Gavin Fucking Reed, King of the Assholes. He doubted that Connor would have tried to bench
Anderson had their positions been reversed. Or was the arrogant machine that dismissive of his
abilities … maybe he thought that Gavin was far too rough and tough to interview one of his plastic
pals. Far too crude and streetwise to be allowed within the presence of one of the Big Five of
Jericho. Maybe that his primitive talents were better left to chasing perps and getting the shit
socked out of him.

He’d fucking show that asswipe! He could be just as cordial and respectful as the next idiot. He
could even be a gentleman when the situation called for it.

Just as the secretary started to fling open a large wooden door, a hand clamped down on Gavin’s
shoulder and a voice whispered into his ear. “Can you give me a moment alone with Sim –.”

“Shove it,” the detective hissed, not bothering to turn around. Shaking off the offending appendage,
he fixed his best brownnosing grin on his face – reserved for only the rarest of occasions – and
strode into the room.

For being an android, albeit an older model, the Commissioner of New Jericho had a surprisingly
simple taste when it came to furniture. A wooden desk. Some leather seats. A large oriental rug.
An antique chess set. An actual working grandfather clock of all things. Nothing was modern in
style. There were only a few pieces of technology in attendance. A computer. A phone. A tv
embedded into the wall. He noted the occupant’s preferences quickly, and without much effort. He
was an experienced criminal investigator after all and being aware of one’s surroundings could
mean the difference between laying facedown in a pool of your own blood and getting home on
time for dinner.

The Commissioner was an even bigger surprise to Gavin. He wasn’t dolled up in some ridiculous
outfit that was typically worn by government lackeys or aspiring politicians. No fancy suit and tie
for this guy. If Gavin’s brain wasn’t failing him, he’d say that the android was actually wearing the
same goddamn getup he had on the night the revolution had succeeded. A pair of jeans and that
navy blue and white jacket. With dirty blond hair and blue eyes so light they appeared almost
silver, Simon turned towards his guests as they flooded into the room, his pale face an undisturbed
pond of serenity. Until his tranquil gaze locked upon Gavin, that was.

Stepping forward, the detective flashed his badge in a cursory manner. Speaking loudly and clearly
in an attempt to not sound like a pile of gutter trash, he began to introduce himself. “Good
afternoon Commissioner. I am –.”

“I know who you are.” Simon’s voice was soft and featherweight, a voice that would be perfect for
singing a lullaby to children in their beds, humming them into a gentle sleep. Though his tone was
hardly gentle as he scrutinized the detective, his stare wary but stalwart. “The real mystery is why
you are here. With Connor.”

The named android moved forward. “Simon, Detective Reed and I are here on official police
business,” he announced neutrally.
Those pale eyes flickered over to Connor. “When I was told you that had shown up with another officer, I had assumed you came with Hank.” The sentence sounded more like a question than a statement to Gavin, as if he was asking something obliquely. “Are you alright Connor?”

Silently getting more and more bewildered by the odd exchange, Gavin felt like he was missing a vital component that was necessary for comprehending the conversation. Although Gavin knew he may have rotted a hefty portion of his grey matter due to his occasional binge drinking, he was pretty damn certain that he’d never met this android before. And without any prior interactions, he was at a loss as to why Simon was more than a bit standoffish with him. Not to mention baffled by Simon’s apparent concern for his fellow android. It was almost as if he …

Like a single snowball tumbling down the mountainside, the thought that Simon knew about his past actions with Connor set off a mighty avalanche of realizations in his mind. From watching Mik’s vlog episode about the man, he had learned that Simon headed the android awakening process in New Jericho, which included the weird emotional therapy shit. Simon was a therapist. What had Connor been trying to tell him about Simon just a couple of minutes ago? He’s helped me with my deviancy issues. Helped me with understanding my newfound emotions. Simon was Connor’s therapist. Connor had said that they’d interfaced before, shared memories. By the distrustful glances that the Commissioner was shooting Gavin’s way, he’d bet those memories included a breakroom, an interrogation chamber, and the evidence archive.

The air around him was tense enough to be cut with his father’s knife. A strange sort of prickly quiet had descended upon the room and its inhabitants, thick and solid. Solid enough to asphyxiate in. It suddenly dawned on the detective that Connor had been trying to avoid this very outcome. He hadn’t been questioning Gavin’s abilities or displaying an anti-human bias, he’d been trying to prevent his and possibly Gavin’s discomfort. And his shame. And Gavin had reacted with his usual thuggish attitude.

A throat was being cleared and the detective was momentarily snapped out of his guilty reflections. Standing only a foot away, Simon’s sterling eyes were penetrating his own. “Connor believes you have experienced a change of heart and I am more than willing to accept his judgment,” the Commissioner said faintly. Gavin had heard nothing of the sort. They must have spoken through their weird android telepathy thing.

“I hope that it is true because if its not, if you try to repeat your previous behaviors at all, there will be consequences.” Although his words were soft and low, the detective felt a harshness behind them, a stern promise just as dangerous as Anderson’s growled threats. “As a police officer I am sure that you are aware that androids are now allowed to use lethal force in defense of their lives. And you already know that you are no match for Connor’s combat skills. There’s always a choice, Detective, and the choice is yours.”

Battling a mosh-pit of recalcitrant emotions, the detective fought to keep a sneer from crossing his features. His usual response to being threatened was to strike back, either verbally or physically but that would likely end with him in an ambulance. Or a body bag. And he didn’t want to make an enemy out of one of the most influential androids in the country. One of Connor’s friends.

“He’s got nothing to worry about from me,” he grated out levelly.

Simon had one hell of a poker face and Gavin had to admit he was somewhat jealous at how the android managed to just stare at him without showing any emotion whatsoever. Gavin was well aware that his own countenance was currently a smorgasbord of bullshit feelings, he couldn’t hide a fucking thing even if he had tried. Finally, the Commissioner inclined his head, dropped his piercing gaze, and took a step back.
“I am glad to see you again so soon, Connor,” he said with a small but earnest smile as turned to address Gavin’s partner. “I know that Markus, North, and Josh will be sad that they’ve missed you, but they are tied up in the capital. Again.” Shrugging slightly while raising his arms, Simon seemed to say *what can you do?* “The Supreme Court is set to start hearing arguments about android marriage rights any day now and Markus wants to be there.”

“What is North’s interest? I didn’t think she’d care about that sort of thing.”

Simon laughed, a light sound. “She’s there to intimidate the conservative wing. Josh is there to keep her from doing anything too drastic.” He shook his head ruefully. “I know politics isn’t a favorite subject of yours and you did say you were here in an official capacity. What can I do for you?”

Somber, Connor began the notification process with none of his typical bouncy enthusiasm. Even an android created specifically for investigative purposes couldn’t find any redeeming aspects in having too inform someone about the death of a friend or loved one. Gavin was still far too distracted by his own crap to follow the ensuing conversation closely. The usual questions. Are you sure? Why? How?

He felt drained. Ashamed once again. Forever burdened by his own reoccurring ineptitude, his own overbearing pride, his cocky arrogance. He wondered if it was possible to drown in yourself, to be crushed by the waves and dragged down to the briny depths to a carbuncled grave.

Then something the Commissioner was saying cut through his wistful stupidity.

“… I thought that Natalie had been lucky. Fortunate even, as awful as that sounds.”

Finding his voice, the detective nearly sputtered. “W-wait. What?”

Simon regarded him curiously. “She stayed late the night her husband was murdered. If she had followed her normal routine, she would have been home. At the time I’d thought that she’d been lucky.”

Gavin turned away.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Who wants some Tina time?
Caring

Chapter Notes

A chat in the break room turns ugly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Awareness struck like a thunderbolt, rousing Gavin from the shadowy expanse of his slumber. There was no discernable reason for his sudden awakening. His phone lay quiet on the nightstand next to his alarm clock. His bedroom was still dark, as the tail-end of night clung stubbornly to the walls and ceiling, unwilling to relinquish its grasp.

He shifted his shoulders, a prelude to a full stretch. His body was stiff from the inertia of his rest, stiff and cold. His sheets were nowhere to be seen, he must have pushed them off onto the floor or the other side of his bed in some twilight fit. Shivering, he reached over, grabbing wildly. Until his hands clasped around someone’s leg.

He retracted his fingers as if they were burnt, as if he had snatched at a log in the fireplace. His mind was suddenly alert, jarred by the unfamiliarity of having another person in his bed. The last time he had brought someone home after a night of drinking – maybe two years ago – he had sincerely regretted the event. Not that the sex had been bad, far from it, he had an unleashed his feral side that night, ravishing his partner in an animalistic frenzy. He regretted the fact that he’d been so drunk that he’d never bothered to get the guy’s name. The morning after had been an embarrassing spectacle, one that he didn’t want to repeat. That’s why he preferred not bringing his sexual escapades home anymore. Which was why he was astounded to find the other side of his bed currently occupied.

Furious with himself, he silently grit his teeth. He was awake now, there was no way he’d be able to fall back asleep knowing some inebriated stranger was lying next to him. He glanced towards the blinking red light perched to his right. 5:47. He’d be getting up for the day soon anyways.

Not that he wanted to get up. Not that he wanted to go to work.

Yesterday had been a nightmare, a grisly series of agonizing events that had shaken Gavin to his core, breeding weeds beneath the foundation of his jaded self. He had forced himself to speak to Newsom after avoiding the asshole for half a decade. Old scars had been reopened and new wounds had been struck. Lieutenant Jim Bean had nearly made an omelet out of his skull, threatening to end the detective if he even glanced at his surrogate-son wrong. And he wasn’t the only person who had threatened him. Commissioner Simon, the golden-haired boytoy of the robomessiah, had been subtler than Anderson, but no less adamant in his defense of his fellow android.

Both Gavin and Connor had misjudged one another and quarreled verbally. It was almost ironic how they had both jumped the gun and assumed the worst of each other. Not that Gavin hadn’t given Connor enough reasons to doubt his intentions. Gavin’s pledge of being better was easily forgotten and discarded in the heat of the moment, when his arrogance overtook his logic. He didn’t want to end up like Newsom, but he didn’t know how to disembark the disastrous train wreck that was his life.
All of that had been awful to endure but it hadn’t been the worst. Natalie Slattery was dead, and he could have prevented it. Tina disagreed with him. They had argued for quite some time over that.

Tina. His eyes widened in realization as he looked over to the prone figure to his left. Tina was tangled up in his bedsheets, a sassy butterfly in an eight hundred thread count cocoon. He hadn’t picked up some stranger out of one of his dingy bars after all. It was just Tina. She had spent the night.

He laughed as relief shuddered through his tense form. He tried to stifle the noise by clapping a hand over his mouth but ended up failing miserably. The inert figure twitched pitifully and then emitted a low whine, muffled by the pillow her head was currently stuffed into face first.

Deciding that now was the best time to flee the vicinity, Gavin climbed out of his bed. Snatching his cell phone, he shuffled across the room, trying to be as quiet as a mouse.

Not quiet enough. As he slid through the half open doorway, Tina’s voice rose out of the darkness of his bed. “Caffeine,” she demanded hoarsely.

Snickering lightly, he closed the door on his way out. Glancing around his living room, he took note of the leavings of their antics last night. Takeout boxes and plastic plates crowded the coffee table. A pile of old DVDs were scattered over the floor in front of his entertainment center. His tv had been left on, a muted screen saver flashing over its face even now. Tina’s shoes were propped up on the back of his couch. He hadn’t a fucking clue as to why they were hanging out there. Tina was a weird bitch for sure. Her work jacket was crumpled up on his kitchen table, a makeshift bed for his irascible feline.

An expression of genuine fondness passed over his mouth as he walked closer to the sight. Not wanting to disturb the cat but unable to ignore her adorable sprawled out form, he gave her a quick peck on her head. Muffin continued to sleep, unfazed by his display of affection.

Still smiling, he glanced around once more. Last night had started out rough. He was …

… sitting on his couch, a perpetual frown creasing his worn features. A bottle of Jack’s was propped up between his legs. He hadn’t bothered with a glass this evening. He hadn’t seen the need for one. He felt like shit and shit’s didn’t fucking need a glass. He could drink the swill right out of the goddamn container.

He lifted the bottle to his lips and took a swig. Just as reached for the remote so he could change the channel – he didn’t want to a watch the news anymore, just more of the same shit on a different day – he heard the doorknob begin to jingle and click. A key was being inserted. That could only mean one thing. His best friend had come to check up on him. Just what he fucking needed.

Slamming the bottle down, hard enough to spill some of its contents, he stood up. He slapped one of his trademark sneers over his face and awaited her entrance. He did not have to wait long. Tina burst into his apartment, accompanied by a gust of frozen wind while whistling some stupid tune under her breath. Her hands were full of plastic bags that smelt of his favorite Chinese hole-in-the-wall, a little place over on Palmer Street that they frequented monthly.

Shutting the door with her elbow, she turned to him with a confident grin. His unwelcoming expression was completely ignored. “Thought you might be hungry,” she exclaimed cheerfully.

“What the fuck are you doin’ here Chen?”

Sauntering towards him, she dropped the bags on the coffee table. “Oh I got the night off, so you
know, I thought it was time we had a girl’s night in.” She flashed him a toothy smirk.

Unamused, he grunted and expanded his sneer, tearing his face in two. “Thought you had the nightshift again.” A theory ran through his mind, inciting his chronic anger. “Let me guess, fuckin’ Fowler sent you over here to keep an eye on me. Doesn’t trust me at all, does he?”

“You thought wrong,” she stated emphatically as she began to undress. She flung her cap like a boomerang at the wall, indifferent to her terrible aim. Tossing her jacket at the kitchen table, she shrugged. “It was the Lieutenant actually. Well,” she placed one finger to her lips thoughtfully, “it was really both of us. He told me about your day and we kinda thought you might want some company.”

“You thought wrong,” he hissed, fuming indignantly at their presumptuous behavior. “I don’t fuckin’ need a goddamn babysitter. Unlike Anderson, I don’t have a problem. Maybe you should go check up on him instead and leave me the fuck alone!”

Unperturbed by his outburst, Tina merely raised one eyebrow questioningly. “Oh,” she started sarcastically, “so you didn’t show up to the crime scene this morning drunk out of your mind. And you didn’t vomit near the vic.” Kicking her shoes off in a most unladylike manner, she snorted. “And Connor didn’t totally try to cover your sad ass with breath mints.”

“Fuck off, Chen,” he growled spitefully. The last thing he wanted was to be reminded of how kind the android had been. Again. Again, again, and again. “Get the fuck outta here!”

Rolling her eyes, she began yanking the plastic plates and utensils out of one of the bags. “Next you’ll tell me that your day was all peaches and sunshine.” Her tone was dripping with mockery and irritation. “That nothing out of the ordinary happened. That you didn’t turn Sergeant Satan into mashed potatoes for shits and giggles. That you didn’t have run ins with both Hank and Connor.” She shot the bottle on the table a disapproving look. “That you weren’t planning on drinking yourself into a coma.”

“What I do is my fuckin’ business and none of yours!” He wanted to grab her, shake her, scream into her face until he had no breath left in his lungs. He hoped that his fury would make her depart, that she would flee his wrath and his ruin, leave him to nurse his sorrows alone with his bitterness. He hoped that she’d stay, that she’d hold him as his mother never had. That she’d tell him that the horrid amalgamation of feelings he was experiencing wouldn’t last forever, wouldn’t continue to torment him.

“You can bark all you want,” she said firmly, glancing up at his contorted features as she started opening the boxes of food, one after another. “You can have as many tantrums as you want. You can continue to starve yourself like you have been. You can be immature and in denial.”Fixing him with her most resolute stare, she shook her head slightly. “But I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t you dare choose that remake of the Hunger Games,” she warned. “I’d rather have my eyes gouged out with a wooden spoon than watch that again.”

He stood there, crippled with gratitude and resentment, unable to function properly. A malfunctioning machine in human skin unable to sustain an overload of stimuli, both internal and external.

Tina’s voice floated out from somewhere near the vicinity of the sink. “I’m gonna get us some water. Why don’t you stop standing there like an ass and pick out one of your trashy movies to watch?” A peal of laughter. “Don’t you dare choose that remake of the Hunger Games,” she warned. “I’d rather have my eyes gouged out with a wooden spoon than watch that again.”

He had two choices. He could either accept Tina’s uninvited companionship or else he could try to
forcibly remove her. The former was far safer than the latter. Moaning, he …

… strode further into the kitchen, approaching his most beloved appliance.

They had sat in silence throughout the entire length of the stupid action movie that he had chosen at random, eating here and there while explosions and gun fights slashed across the tv screen. Tina could be a pit-bull in lipstick at times, but she knew patience was the best policy with him. Once he was full of dumplings and Lo Mein, he had finally hazarded to speak. He told her about everything, holding nothing back, including the real reason he had fallen out with Newsom, something he had never dared to reveal to her before. She listened to all of his woes and words without comment, soaking it all in with a sort of reassuring equanimity that he could never hope to possess. At least, until he brought up the subject of Natalie Slattery. He was close to …

… breaking down. He was struggling to hold back tears that were welling up in the corners of his eyes. “I was so fuckin’ wrapped up in listening to her talk about androids and shit, so fuckin’ torn by my own guilt, that I didn’t bother to focus on the case.” He turned to Tina, feeling hot and ill, as if a fever had breached his defenses. “If I had only asked her more about her alibi I woulda found out that she was supposed to be home when her husband was killed. That the motherfucker had been after her all along!”

Confused, his friend huffed. “How do you figure that?”

“The letter,” he screeched. “The fucking letter! It was all anti-android lingo. I should have known that it was about her and not her husband. I shoulda put a detail on her. Put her in protective custody or – or something.”

“I’m all for accepting blame where blame is due, but this is ridiculous,” Tina exclaimed harshly, poking him in his shoulder. “You aren’t a goddamn mind-reader Gavin.”

He turned to her, an angry retort already forming on his tongue, but she plowed over him. “The letter could have been talking about their inter-whatever relationship! The husband was dead, not her. The expectation was that the deceased was the target.”

“But I –.”

“Not too mention that you had a viable suspect on the board that had a reason to kill the husband.” Jabbing him again, her finger like a goddamn poker, she scowled at his combative expression. “An androiphobic student of his that had tried to antagonize the deceased on multiple occasions. And may I add the fact that by the time you ruled the kid out from being the perp, Mrs. Slattery had already been dead.”

Though her words held more than a glimmer of truth, he couldn’t squash the certainty that he had somehow screwed up. “I know but –.”

“And!” Tina bellowed into his face, shutting him down. “And since your killer probably murdered that other couple, I doubt that he was planning on letting the wife live even if he missed her that first night. Sounds like he was going after her no matter what. And you couldn’t have known that until after you discovered the missing couple. Which you only knew to look for because he killed the wife!”

He wanted to argue but he knew that she was right. It didn’t take away the sting of his failure, the pain of his perceived inadequacy, but she was right. Natalie Slattery’s death had not been due to his incompetence or his laziness. He …
… sighed dejectedly as the coffee maker buzzed to life, releasing a gentle hum as it began its most divine work. To distract his caffeine deprived body from its due, he started fiddling with his phone. He had nine missed messages from Tina – big surprise – from the day before. And a new one from someone else, sent earlier this morning.

Dt. Connor – RK800 #313 248 317 – 52

(Received @ 2:17)

Detective Reed, I never expected that the disclosures I made to Simon would ever be used to cause you any discomfort. Although I appreciate his concern for my wellbeing, I never wanted him to confront you. I hope that my attempts to understand my deviancy haven’t jeopardized our relationship. I value our talks and I would hate to have them end over this.

Grunting in exasperation, Gavin resisted the desire to toss his cell into the trash. He and Connor hadn’t spoken since Simon’s interview, not even uttering a single syllable on the ride back to the station. He wanted nothing less than to be angry at the android, but he couldn’t seem to muster the effort. Connor had only been trying to cope with the shitty reality of having emotions. Fuck sentience.

Dt. Gavin Reed

(Sent @ 6:02 to Connor)

Don’t worry abt it. Its whatever

(Sent @ 6:03)

And its Gavin dipshit

A bright flash temporarily illuminated his still dark kitchen. He glanced up, startled by the sudden light, only to see Tina standing next to the table. She appeared to be drowning in one of his hoodies, a lithe and pale stick figure in a circus tent. He switched the overhead bulb on, and the room was bathed in a blinding whiteness.

Once his eyes had adjusted, he noticed that Tina had her cell out, aiming its camera lens at Muffin. She was just taking her picture. Apparently finished with her unauthorized photo-op, she yawned in his direction. “Who are you texting this early?”

“Nobody,” he replied tersely as his friend grabbed a pair of mugs from the dishrack.

“Nobody.” She repeated the word smugly just as the buzzer went off. She poured each of them a generous portion of coffee before heading over to his fridge. Searching for the creamer that wasn’t there, she poked her head over the side of the door. “Nobody, really? I can barely get you to respond to me during waking hours, never mind before dawn. Must be nobody special.” She laughed in her knowing manner. “Out of creamer?”

“Yeah, I meant to pick some up on my way home from work, but I forgot.”

Abandoning her pursuit, she snatched a handful of sugar packets he’d pilfered from various coffee shops around the city. They doctored up their drinks and began their morning ritual of recharging through beverage consumption. Not that he only did that in the morning.

After taking a sip, he glanced over at Tina only to find her staring at him with those caring, considering eyes of hers. He immediately tensed up, knowing that she was pondering a course of
action, probably one that he wouldn’t like if her falsely blank expression was anything to go buy. Tina was his only real friend and he appreciated her dedication to the position, even though at times it felt like she was trying to give him gray hairs. By the intensity on her face, she was going to try to scalp him today.

“You’ve been … different these last couple of days,” she said finally, breaking the stretching stillness between them.

“Dunno what ya mean,” he countered flimsily.

Pursing her pouty lips together into a fine line, she snorted. “Now don’t take any offense Gavin. You are my best friend and I love you and all the unlovable bullshit that comes with you, but you aren’t easy to deal with. On the good days, being around you is like carrying a bag of angry cats around and on the bad days its like carrying a bag of angry and wet cats.” He frowned at her unkind analogy but refrained from saying anything.

“You’ve been on edge for weeks now and its only gotten worse in these past few days. I mean … you’ve always been a jerk and you’re always fighting with someone over something stupid.” Her smushed bun of hair flopped back and forth as she shook her head. “But lately instead of acting like you are in a fight with everyone else, it’s like you are in a fight with yourself. And I don’t think that’s a fight that even you can win. No matter how many punches you throw.”

His brain was still far too bogged down in the fog of sleep for this sort of discussion. “Uh fuck Tina,” he whined sluggishly, “I dunno what you want. I dunno what you mean. It’s just been a fuckin’ mess lately, that’s all. I’m still me.” Still Gavin Fucking Reed.

“Detroit was brought to the brink just three months ago Gavin.” He blinked at her sudden change of topic but otherwise kept quiet, waiting for her to elaborate. “The city nearly became zone zero for a civil war. Had the deviants become violent, there would have been a catastrophic number of civilian casualties. If the rumors about them possessing a dirty bomb were true, then … hell, the city could be a wasteland right now.”

She walked over to the sink and gestured out the small window that sat above it. “Right now Detroit is still rebuilding. Still trying to be pieced back together, one block at a time.” She turned her dark eyes on him once again and he felt oddly exposed. “We can still see the effects that the revolution had. Abandoned homes of people who fled in the exodus, never to return. Too afraid to come back. Too unwilling to accept the truth. Hart Plaza is still unfixed. The pavement wasn’t made for the machines of war after all.” Her voice was pensive yet firm. “The after effects still rumble beneath our feet.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a philosopher Tina,” he joked with a drowsy half-smirk.

“I’m not,” she sighed wearily.

“You got a point in there somewhere then?”

With one hand she directed his attention out the window once again. A cloudy skyline of towering buildings was all that he could view. Nothing out of the ordinary. “My point Gavin, is that we can see those effects. We can go up and touch them if we want. But they aren’t the only ones.” She clapped a hand over her chest. “We are all coping with the aftermath. Just like the city, we’ve all been impacted by what has happened. We’ve all been changed. None of us are the same and that’s not a bad thing.”

He looked away from his friend, feeling stupid and flustered, but he could not avoid her words. “It
is not a bad thing to change,” she repeated. “I won’t pretend that it’s easy or painless or fun. Change is work, change is hell.”

“Why are you telling me this, Tina?” His voice was not as steady as he wished, a raspy and uncertain sound emanating from his mouth.

“Cause that’s what’s going on with you Gavin, and I don’t know if you can handle it. Or if you can even see it.” He snarled at her wordlessly and she continued, ignoring his heatless gesture. “You aren’t good with your emotions. Let’s face it, you are a goddamn disaster. Your emotional range consists of ‘angry’ and ‘more angry’. That’s it. And your responses seem to be ‘explode’ and ‘get drunk.’ You can’t keep doing this. You are going to kill yourself if you keep up like this.”

“And what do ya want me to do about it? Go to AA? See a fuckin’ shrink? It’s all a waste of time and you know it.”

“I want you to remember that you have people that care about you. That want to help you. That will help you if you only let them.” Her countenance became tight but determined, her eyes imploring. “You aren’t the only one who is going through shit right now.” He opened his mouth to scoff but her furious glare killed his reply. “Did you know that Ben Collins had a domestic android?”

Patience as its frayed end, he snapped. “What the fuck does that have to do with anythin’?”

“Everything Gavin, goddamn everything,” she hissed vehemently. Astounded at her reaction, he took a step back, bumping his behind into the counter. “When the feds demanded that all androids had to be handed over and recycled, he and his wife complied. Their android was destroyed before the ceasefire was announced. Ben blames himself for that. Haven’t you noticed how he practically follows Sally around? His way of dealing with his guilt. He’s trying to be a parent to her.”

He thought back to Thursday. An eternity ago. Detective Collins had stayed well past midnight, speaking with the receptionist, being pleasant and sociable long after his shift had ended. He couldn’t help but frown. Collins did seem to shower Sally with a boatload of attention. Remorse?

“Ben isn’t the only one,” Tina commented as she watched her friend. “Did you know that Chris volunteers as an outreach officer to New Jericho every Sunday?” Feeling dazed, he could only shake his head ‘no’. “He does that because he shot and killed deviants, Gavin. He was on patrol the night that they hit Capital Park. He followed his orders and dropped as many as he could. He and his partner were overwhelmed, and they only lived because Markus himself spared them.”

Though they weren’t exactly friends, he and Chris had an efficient working relationship, even if it was lukewarm on the personal end. The other man had occupied the desk behind his for about seven years and Gavin counted on the officer to be his wingman when he needed a competent partner. Chris never complained or objected, was always professional if a bit distant. To think that that desk could be empty right now made a shiver tremble down Gavin’s spine.

Tina’s voice dragged him back down to reality. “Look, I can’t tell you what to do. You’re a big boy, you’ve got to make your own decisions, but I want you to remember that you aren’t alone with your guilt. That I care about you. That I want to help you through whatever you are going through and that I’m not the only one.” She shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “I know an android who’s probably stocking up on Mentos as we speak.”

She winked at him and he groaned. “I gotta take a shower,” he grated out before heading towards the bathroom. Hesitating with his hand on the doorknob, he turned back. “Thanks for the therapy
Monday morning crawled by at a snail’s pace for Gavin. His temporary partners had only made a superficial appearance before leaving shortly after their arrival. They were meeting with Rebecca Slattery, Thomas’ ex-wife and Natalie’s former co-owner. Connor had invited the detective to join them, but he had declined. Eileen Kincaid was resolute in her belief that Rebecca hadn’t had anything to do with their murders, and he had come to trust her judgement, even if it was laden with a disdainful brashness. Regardless, the former wife and mother of Thomas’ children had to be interviewed. Gavin was certain that the woman wasn’t involved but nevertheless he hoped that she might know something.

He spent most of this time squatting at his desk, only leaving once to get a cup of coffee that he promptly forgot about. There wasn’t much that he could do concerning the case. Due to the sensitive nature of the pertinent information, Fowler had granted them one of the conference rooms on the second floor to use as a base of operations. Right now the officer in charge of the archive was in the process of moving all the evidence upstairs so they could review the case with the captain this afternoon. Until then, he was stuck waiting.

Commissioner Simon had explained New Jericho’s security policies to Connor and him yesterday. In theory the settlement was an official part of the city, however in practice it operated more as a self-contained community. As the most famous android locality within the borders of the US, it was hardly surprising that they were the target of all sorts of unpleasant communications, both electronic and physical. Anything that was deemed as potentially dangerous was immediately forwarded over to the DPD’s threat management division. Everything else – from the indiscernible to the just plain weird – was held onto by their security team.

In light of the seriousness of the situation, Simon had promised to deliver everything they had over to the Central Precinct for inspection. They would have all their stored hate mail by midday. Gavin had already contacted threaten management and requested copies of their information as well. Soon he and the dynamic duo would be crushed under the weight of a mountain’s worth of paper. That was if they didn’t go blind staring at the endless streams of binary code first.

He made a few phone calls concerning the newest additions to their case. He found out that Jeremiah had been employed at a local grocery store post-deviancy. His supervisor had nothing but nice things to say about the android and was sincere in her worry about his absence. Concerning Adeline’s employment, he drove headfirst into a brick wall of bullshit. He had to wrangle with her bank but after receiving Mrs. Sanchez’s permission, the obnoxious bastards had sent her financial statements to him. Not that they were truly helpful. Sure, they further solidified his certainty that she wasn’t a simple housecleaner but, beyond that, they illuminated nothing.

At about a quarter to one, he reached over to wet his throat only to find his coffee stone cold. Deciding that it was the perfect time for his lunch recess, he got up and headed for the breakroom, his mug in hand. He was surprised by the small gathering he found there.

Hovering near the refrigerator and talking quietly amongst themselves was Detective Collins and Lieutenant Anderson. Shorter and pudgier than his superior, Ben looked like the human version of the Pillsbury dough boy with gray hair. While standing, he was picking at his frozen dinner with a sloth-like relish. The other man was currently stabbing forlornly at a yogurt, clearly not thrilled with his choice of food. Anderson was eyeing Collin’s plastic tray with a sad sort of longing.
Situated at one of the tables was Connor and a woman who Gavin didn’t recognize at first. Neither of them had any food placed in front of them, which in the man’s case made sense. Androids didn’t eat after all. Connor was dressed up in a gray two-piece suit with a navy-blue tie. The woman on his right was equally spruced up. She wore a light green blouse and a black skirt with a nearly translucent shawl draped over her shoulders. For a moment Gavin stared at her, trying to place her. Then it struck him, she was Sally.

Baffled, he stood in the entryway, his mind seeking answers. He hadn’t a clue that his partners had returned from their interview already. Timewise he should have expected it, but he thought that he would have seen them regardless. He also couldn’t understand the setup. Why were the two humans standing rather than sitting while eating their lunches? And why were the androids so primped up? Well, Connor always seemed to dress formally but he’d never seen Sally wear anything so sleek. Was this some sort of … working date? There was something about that conclusion that annoyed him.

Feeling like an intruder, the detective turned on his heel to leave. He had ample enough time to go grab a quick bite and a refill before the rendezvous with Fowler. But a voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Gavin, come join us.”

Caught red-handed, he spun slowly back around. “Uh, I’m not interrupting something?”

Patting the tabletop to his left, Connor indicated a place for him. “Not at all.”

Although the android’s words were welcoming, Gavin could clearly see that his presence wasn’t going to be well received by everyone in attendance. Sally’s LED flickered from blue to yellow in an accelerated fashion and her mouth was a taut line. Never a fan of his, Anderson blatantly glowered in his direction, granting the detective a foul expression that was far worse than the one he had used against his food. Collins merely shot him a querulous glance before resuming his lackadaisical consumption without comment.

Ordinarily he would have scoffed at any such invitation, would have been cocky and arrogant to an unrivaled extreme. He would have refused in a rude manner befitting his unpleasant reputation, making it crystal clear that he wanted nothing to do with a pack of losers. But he had made a promise, and it was one he meant to keep even if he kept breaking it along the way.

A snippet of Tina’s pep talk came back to him as well. You aren’t the only one who is going through shit right now. Everyone in that room was suffering, each in their own way. Sally had nearly been burned alive, melted down into an unrecognizable puddle of metallic goo. Ben’s compliance had left a potential member of his family dead. Anderson had been slowly dying over the past couple of years due to the loss of his only child. And Gavin couldn’t shake the memory of how Connor’s voice had cracked when he had spoken yesterday about the horror of what it was like to have your heart removed. Just like Thomas and Natalie had. Probably the same fate that befell Ms. Babbidge and her boyfriend.

“Uh alright,” he acquiesced after a short period of hesitation. He snagged one of the unused stools and plopped himself down with the others. Shifting uncomfortably, he realized that everyone’s eyes were on him. “So … what were you all talkin’ about?”

Connor sprung into action. “We were just discussing the newest line of android modifications. They were announced by Cyberlife’s director of humanization, Jason Graff, just this morning. It has created quite a stir.”
At the mention of the corporate giant, Gavin frowned. He had no idea how the company was still functioning, still managing to operate despite all the setbacks. Connor’s infiltration of Bell Island had brought the federal government down upon Cyberlife’s headquarters like a hammer upon a rusted nail. Besides saving countless android lives, Connor had unwittingly exposed various schemes and crimes committed by those at the top of the business's hierarchy. The entire board – minus the aforementioned Director Graff – were arrested for an impressive array of charges that included the typical white-collar offenses like fraud and insider trading but also extended to far more serious allegations. Some of the now defunct board were even hit with charges of Conspiracy against the United States. The feds were keeping mum on the whole thing.

Somehow, unimaginably, Cyberlife was still up and running despite the chaos. The federal government was controlling the purse strings and the till for the time being. The fate of the company likely rested upon the negotiations in the capital over android reproductive rights. Gavin didn’t pay too much attention to all that shit but even he was aware that Markus had demanded control over the corporation. To protect the destiny and continuation of his people.

While Congress fought over the nitty gritty details, Cyberlife halted its assembly of androids and changed its focus from building them to enhancing them, opening a new market of hardware and software alterations. From building artificial life, to offering cosmetic changes. He vaguely remembered the first line of modifications included the ability to change one’s eye colors at will. Stuff like that.

“What are they peddling now?” He asked, glancing between the two androids curiously.

“Exotic hair and iris choices,” Sally answered without looking his way. She nudged Connor’s shoulder gaily and laughed. “Think about, we should buy those upgrades next payday and then come in with neon pink hair. I bet we could give Captain Fowler a good scare.”

The android detective’s mouth quirked upwards while he fought the desire to laugh. “I don’t think that would be proper,” he managed out in a weakly serious tone.

“The hell with proper,” Anderson barked from behind them. “I’ll pay for the shit myself, just so I can see Jeffrey’s face. That alone would be worth the umpteem-trajillion whatever’s it might cost.”

Chuckling broke out in the room and Gavin was surprised to find that his voice had joined in. He had once been in a similar situation following an undercover operation at one of the city’s premiere clubs known for its sexually charged atmosphere. After arresting the suspect, he had marched the individual through the bullpen to the precinct’s holding cells. Not having had the chance to change his clothes, his boss had caught him wearing only a fishnet tank top and a pair of tight spandex shorts. Fowler had almost had an apoplexy at the sight.

“What about the other thing? The whatchamacallit?” Ben asked.

“Oh definitely,” Sally replied confidently. “I think its adorable.”

“That’s one word for it,” Anderson chimed in, shooting a grin at the back of her head. Laughing she flicked a hand at him. “Looked goddamn weird to me but I guess it might be helpful for when I need to tell if someone,” he enunciated the word with a special significance, “is lying to me.”

Speaking in a far too innocent tone, Connor coughed. “I’m afraid that I don’t know who you are referring to Hank.”

Another round of laughter erupted throughout the room, good-humored and louder than before. However this time Gavin was quiet, just glancing from person to person, trying to figure out what
Ben had brought up. “What am I missin’?” He asked once the levity had died down.

“They are offering a hardware and software package that will allow for androids to blush,” Sally responded blithely. “I’m going to make the appointment tonight, so I can get the procedure done as soon as feasibly possible.” Focusing her attention on her fellow android, she asked, “what about you, Connor? Are you going to get it done too?”

His expression was far less serene then hers. He appeared to be outright troubled by the predicament; his brows were furrowed to the point of appearing knit together, his eyes were downcast, and his lower lip was crooked, quivering ever so slightly. “I …” he paused. “I don’t know.”

Fatherly instinct kicking in, Hank leaned forward to get a glimpse of Connor’s face. “What’s the holdup, kid?”

“It doesn’t make sense to me. There is a contradiction inherent in the idea itself.”

Softly, Sally asked, “what do you mean?”

Fidgeting in his seat, Connor began wringing his hands against each other. “The purpose of the blushing upgrade would be to further facilitate integration into human society. A form of sociocultural acclimation,” he stated knowingly. Gavin was perplexed by the android’s choice of words. He had never done well in school. “But that’s the problem.” Connor glanced over at Sally and steadily held her gaze. “We are not human. We are alive, yes, but we are still machines. No matter what we do, nothing will change that, and it seems wrong for us to try and pretend otherwise.”

“You are overthinking it,” Hank grumbled with obvious worry. Ben shuffled besides him echoing his friend’s discomfort as Sally nodded earnestly.

“Am I though?” The android tore his eyes away from Sally and resumed staring at the table as if it held some hidden answer. “When a human experiences embarrassment or shame or rage or arousal, their blood rushes to their face and that’s what causes the sensation of heat and the red coloration. That’s why they blush. But if an android blushes it will be blue because our blood is blue. So by trying to appear more human we are only further distinguishing ourselves. It’s a paradox. So what is the point?”

No response was immediately forthcoming. An uneasy solemnness fell upon the gathered as the ambience became distinctly awkward. Disheartened, Sally’s gaze turned inwards. Frustration crossed Anderson’s countenance and abruptly he appeared far older than he truly was, as if Connor’s distress alone had aged him a decade or two. Mouth working soundlessly, Collins tossed his tray into the trash, apparently his appetite had soured.

Gavin never liked admitting defeat. Even as a child he preferred fighting to the bitter and bloody end, more often than not loosing his schoolyard quarrels rather than winning them. Victory was never his desired result. He punched and kicked and wrestled in the dirt because it was better than giving up. Voluntarily surrendering to a bully in order to prevent a few scrapes and cuts never sat well with him. He’d fight even when all the odds were against him, when he was outmatched in terms of strength and vastly outnumbered.

Connor’s words ignited something in him. He was confused and annoyed and livid all at once, a bundle of simmering concern nestled in the back of his brain. “Your pop’s right,” he said at last, when he could no longer stand the silence.
“What?” The android’s smooth voice was startled but distant.

“I said that he’s right.” Gavin punctuated his sentence by slamming a fist down on the table, making both Connor and Sally jump in their seats. Stifling his smoldering irritation, the detective inched forward, moving his scowling visage right into the other’s face. “You are thinkin’ about this all backwards. It’s like uh – what’s that fucking expression? Ya can’t see the forest ‘cause of the trees.”

“I don’t understa –.”

Breathing heavily through his nostrils, Gavin sighed. “Fuck I ain’t any good with this kinda shit.” He vaguely wished that Dr. Tina would make an unannounced appearance and save him from his big ass mouth, but he knew that she wouldn’t be here until the night shift began. “I dunno how to say this.”

His eyes met Connor’s and he knew that he had to try. He wasn’t a professional shrink or even an amateur like his best friend, but he had to give it a shot. The android was watching him with something akin to hope, his lips parted, his eyes pleading, that errant strand of hair drifting along his wrinkled forehead. To Gavin he looked like that lost puppy from yesterday again.

“It’s not about the differences. Our differences,” he corrected. Jabbing the other in his chest, he growled. “Me. Pops. Collins. We all bleed different than you. So fuckin’ what? The only people who care are the ones that don’t matter. We’ve got veins and you’ve got wires. So fucking what?”

“That’s not what I was –.”

“Nah, that’s exactly it,” he spat dismissively. “Being able to blush ain’t about the color. Its about what causes it.” He gently slapped Connor’s cheek for emphasis, making the android’s eyes widen in shock. Or maybe bewilderment. “You said it yourself, dipshit. Us shitty humans blush when we feel certain emotions. The very same emotions that you feel.”

Gavin was feeling all sorts of crap at the moment. Indignant. Furious. Disappointed. But he never gave up when he put his mind to something. “Isn’t that what your revolution was all about? To prove that you all are alive? That ya feel just like we do.” His anger blinded him and his words rambling out, beyond the reach of his logic or his pride. “Isn’t that why you kicked my sorry ass across the archive room when I tried to shoot ya?” He heard a feminine voice gasp, but nothing registered. “Ya didn’t want ta die. You were afraid of death.”

He stopped briefly, trying to settle his runaway thoughts, trying to create order within his chaos. “That’s what the blushing is all about. To show that you feel too. To show your rage when ya want to smash someone’s ugly mug in. To show your shame when you make a mistake and somebody else pays for it. To show your lust when ya set your eyes upon your crush.”

Realizing just how close his face was to Connor’s, only a mere breath away, he leaned back. “If ya don’t want to get it, that’s your right. Nobody can tell you what to do but if it was me, I’d get it.” Laughing at the android’s hilariously muddled expression, he grinned. “I’d get it just as a mighty ‘fuck you’ to all the dickwads out there that still think that androids are nothing but mindless machines. I wouldn’t care if it made me look like a goddamn blueberry ‘cause it would show that I feel too.”

Even at the best of times, Gavin’s ability to frame a coherent argument, to manage his wordplay into a well-constructed, well thought-out opinion had never been one of his strong suits. And this was hardly a good time. He was flustered, overcome with a spattering of unwanted emotions. He didn’t know if he had made any leeway whatsoever, if anything he had spoken even resembled
reason. He may have just spouted a great big cloud of bullshit for all he knew. Revealing bullshit at that. Now two more people were aware of his grievous actions. The list was growing bigger and bigger. Simon. Sally. Ben …

“I think I see,” Connor said pensively with a hint of doubt mixed in. However some of the tension ebbed from his features. “It’s not about trying to be human but about expressing oneself in a way that the world can understand.”

“Yeah,” the detective agreed quietly. Sure. Whatever. Gavin truly didn’t have any idea about what he been trying to communicate. Just that he needed to communicate something. To shatter the halo of lostness that had surrounded the other, staining his cheerful demeanor.

Although he could not see it, Gavin could tell that his face was currently as red as a fire engine. As crimson as a Macintosh apple. As scarlet as a cut ruby. As burgundy as its namesake. That was to say, he was currently blushing to beat the devil.

Every pair of eyes was currently locked onto his position and an irrational thought tittered across his consciousness. This must be how an endangered animal feels while stuck in some tiny cage in a zoo; confined and scrutinized every last moment of its existence. Come one, come all! View the Gavineo Assholitus in a recreation of his natural habitat! Watch carefully as he inserts his entire foot into his mouth! He’ll probably choke to death but hey, it least it’ll be fun to see!

All he needs now is to have Collins smear his grubby hands all over his glass cage and for Anderson to toss popcorn at his forehead, yelling for Gavin to do a trick.

He started to lift himself off his stool when Ben started to drawl. “Well what do you know? Guess our Gavin here has been moonlighting as a motivational speaker with his spare time.”

“How hilarious,” Gavin grated sarcastically, eliciting a weak chuckle from the other man.

“How hilarious,” an arrogant voice spoke from the doorway, “I thought it was quite funny.”

Goosebumps rose on his neck and arms, involuntary cellular alarms shrieking from his skin. He hated the owner of that unctuous voice. And he wasn’t alone.

Anderson’s stern countenance jerked as if suffering from a muscle spasm, his features becoming dark and stormy. His bodily stance became rigid and stiff, a statue of tense exaggerations. Likely Gavin himself mirrored that exact posture. Connor shot the newcomer a thousand-yard stare which the detective associated with his scanning capabilities. Whatever he saw, he clearly didn’t like. The android’s face hardened, and his eyes took on a wary glint. Sally’s reaction was far more worrisome; she visibly shivered and tightened her shawl around her shoulders in a vain attempt to cover herself. Even Collins, who tended to be good-natured and easygoing, frowned at the visitor.

“My, my what a little siesta you all have going on here,” Sergeant Newsom exclaimed merrily as he stepped into the room, his shoes clacking upon the tiled floor ominously. “I guess my invitation got lost in the mail. Luckily for me, I know the right person to talk to about that.” He winked at Sally and grinned in a greedy manner, a dragon spying upon an unguarded hoard of gold. She flinched and tore her gaze away.

Had Gavin not initially been in a state of shock, anger would have erupted at the android’s apprehensive response. But his granite eyes were glued to the seemingly unmarked figure of his former partner. For a moment he wondered if yesterday had just been a dream, a nighttime hallucination driven by a lack of sleep and an excess of liquor. At first glance, the older man’s skin appeared flawless and unbroken, as if their one-sided fight had not occurred but upon a closer
inspection, he noticed that Newsom’s hooked nose was puffier than usual. He also saw that the man’s gait was lethargic and heavy, a clear sign that he was still in pain.

A solution popped into Gavin’s head. The sergeant had applied makeup to hide the bruises. What a vainglorious son of a bitch. The sound of Anderson’s gritty growl reeled Gavin back to the present, out of his fuming mind.

“What the hell are you doing here?” His words were few and simple but behind them lay a wildfire of fury that threatened to consume everything flammable within its path.

His erstwhile friend continued to grin, unfazed by the Lieutenant’s acrimonious insinuation. “Oh, you know, Hank,” he said casually, with a flippant roll of his shoulders. “After my good buddy Gav dropped in on me yesterday, I realized that it’s been forever since I popped up here for a visit. That I haven’t seen my old workplace in an age or two. Haven’t seen all my old friends in a while. Thought today would be a good day to rectify that.”

“You thought wrong,” Anderson’s tone was hot enough to light a stone afire. “You don’t have any friends Harold.”

The other man just shrugged again. “Come now Hank, there’s no reason to be rude. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do, you and I.” His eyes flitted malevolently over to Gavin’s, and that horrible rictus of a grin expanded. “I had such a great time hearing about all your recent exploits from Gav. Now I want to hear it from you.”

“I didn’t tell you a fuckin’ thing, you liar.” Gavin snapped angrily as the blood in his veins quickened its pace, increasing his heart rate.

“You didn’t?” Newsom’s tone was disbelieving with an edge of mockery. “I could have sworn you called him an asshole just the other morning.”

Fighting down the mercurial urge to lay his hands on the smug bastard, Gavin’s mouth worked furiously. Before he could formulate a reply that consisted of more than just a howling war-cry, the Lieutenant hacked out a dry laugh.

“Really, Harold? That’s the best you can do?” A bitter mirth passed over Anderson’s face. “Reed’s called me much worse before. So you’ll have to try much harder next time if you want to piss me off. Why don’t you go back to your cave now and spend the next six years thinking of something a little more original.”

The sergeant’s grin didn’t falter even a hair. “But I just got here, Hank, and I haven’t even had the chance to introduce myself to your new partner. I’ve heard so much about him. It would be a shame if I left without meeting him.”

“I already know who you are,” Connor stated neutrally, his muddy eyes observing Newsom with a sort of clinical detachment. “Harold Norman Newsom. Born July 8th, 1984. The sergeant in charge of the Missing Person’s Department. No criminal record. Married to Beatrice Doleman. No children.” The android tilted his head like a bird observing a particularly disgusting worm. “I could go on more if you like. Although the only other truly relevant fact is that you are a prick.”

Gavin laughed. “The wonders of technology, am I right Harry?”

Dark eyes glittered with spite at the detective’s jest. “When you are right Gav, you are right.” Newsom folded his arms over his chest and his glare veered towards the detective. “If anyone here would want to praise the advancements of modern technology, it certainly would be you. We both
know how much you … admire,” he pronounced the word with as much ridicule as humanly possible, “a specific piece of plastic ass.”

Terror flopped in Gavin’s stomach and for a second, he was unable to think, unable to process the world around him. He knew where Newsom was likely heading, and he would do anything in his power to prevent those words from being uttered again. From being spoken in the present company. But he was paralyzed, frozen in place. His breath was shallow, and his heart strained.

The Sergeant however was far from crippled. Turning his bloated stare back to the android, he cackled. “Gav’s a little too shy to ask for himself but since he’s my old partner I might as well give him a little push. Tell me Cole, you got a –.”

“You fucking asshole!”

The furious bellow that burst forth from the Lieutenant’s lips shattered Gavin’s stupor and he instinctively turned towards the origin of the sound. Anderson was positively fuming, struggling to break free from the combined efforts of both Connor and Collins to hold him back, away from Newsom. His blue eyes were a thundercloud that promised devastation if released. There would be no ports in that storm.

“Hank, please calm down! This isn’t the way –,” Connor started.

“Goddammit Harry,” Ben shouted as he pushed against Anderson’s chest, trying to stop the raging man from moving further. “If you don’t leave now, I’m gonna report you to Fowler. This is low, even for you!”

“I’m gonna rearrange that fucking face of yours Harry! You smug son of a bitch!” Hank yelled, his teeth bared. “You won’t be able to smile once I’m done with you!”

Newsom’s grin became almost serpentine as he basked in the results of his malicious words. Gavin expected to see a forked tongue slither out between those too perfect teeth and taste the resentment and rage lingering in the air.

“Oh my bad Hank,” he said jovially, clearly thrilled at the agony he was eliciting from his former friend and classmate. “It was just a Freudian slip, I assure you. I mean really … Cole, Connor.” He unwrapped his arms and made a weighing motion with his hands, palms skyward. “Connor, Cole. Cole, Connor. The names of your children are just so damn similar. I’m shocked that you don’t mix them up.” He laughed, a cruel and sharp noise that any movie villain would be proud of. “I mean, I know Cole was only six when he died so there is a large age gap and all, but really, is there much of any difference between your real kid and this plastic imitation? Besides the obvious of course,” he added with yet another hateful laugh.

Gavin had seen and heard enough. He stood upright and, in the process, jarred his stool. Off balance, the vacated seat crashed loudly to the floor, drawing Newsom’s attention.

“Come on ol’ buddy of mine,” he taunted. “Come give me a hug you faggot.”

The detective’s vision ran red and he started forward, raising a fist, getting ready to break every last pearly-white tooth in that motherfucker’s face. He advanced and –

A hand snagged ahold of his forearm and, startled by the unexpected touch, he faltered. Turning his head to the right, he came face to face with Sally. He had completely forgotten about her during the turmoil. “It’s a trap,” she whispered urgently, pointing frantically towards the ceiling. He looked up, following her direction.
The security camera.

Realization hit like a truckload of bricks. She was right. The one person not trained – or programmed – to be a criminal investigator in the room had perceived the true intention of the Sergeant’s actions. He wasn’t merely here to aggravate them, to push their buttons for his own mean-spirited entertainment, but to instigate a physical altercation where he would be the alleged victim. Sure, his words were inexcusable, indefensible, but the person who actually threw the first punch would be the one in real trouble. Newsom would get a paltry slap on the wrist while the one who he goaded would likely be suspended and sent to the department’s quack for an evaluation. If they were lucky.

Gavin had only gotten away with his violent behavior yesterday because there had been no witnesses and no videotapes. And his threat to go public had probably factored in as well.

Trying to convey his gratitude, he nodded to Sally and she removed her hand.

Only fifteen or so seconds had elapsed in the time from when he had stood up and when the android had let go of him. The pair that were trying to restrain the Lieutenant were wavering. Collins had sweat dribbling down his forehead and being overweight, he was certainly no match for Anderson’s strength. State of the art prototype or no, Connor was bucking against his surrogate father’s rampage, his LED flashing a dangerous red.

Foiled by the receptionist’s intervention, Newsom had turned his onslaught back to his other target. “…tell me Hank, do you read this tin can a story every night like you did with Cole? Do you have him sit in your lap while you imitate all the voices? Is the bucket of bolts here aware that it’s nothing more than a piss-poor replacement? I mean, come on! How could this thing ever compare to poor Cole?” His laughter sent Anderson’s frenzy into an overload.

Knowing that he had to do something – and fast! – Gavin swept his gaze around the room. He and Anderson’s relationship was based off of mutual distrust and unconcealed contempt but nevertheless he didn’t want the old has-been to get into any serious trouble. And he didn’t want Newsom to win. He had to find something to use and –

– his eyes fell upon his abandoned mug of coffee.

Snatching the item off the table, he turned to Newsom with a cocky grin spreading across his face. He took a step forward and snickered at the unsuspecting individual. “Hey Harry,” he sneered. “Do you still like your coffee chilled?”

Just as the Sergeant’s dumbfounded expression reeled towards him, Gavin swung outwards, grip heavy on the mug’s handle. His beverage sailed through the air and collided with Newsom’s face and chest with a soppy slash.

Stumbling backwards in shock, the man emitted a strange mewling noise much like a baby craving the solace of its mother’s milk. His hands flew to his face in attempt to brush away the dark liquid dripping down his forehead, rippling over his eyebrows. His hair was damp, nearly soaked with Gavin’s drink. His expensive white shirt was sodden at the top, and as the coffee continued to dribble down his body, the lower portions took on a russet color.

The detective knew that he was already knee-deep in shallow water, that he would probably be receiving a mild reprimand for this stunt, but he couldn’t help but wallow in his victory.

As Newsom was preoccupied with trying to wipe away the cold liquid from around his eyes, Gavin grabbed his plaid tie and yanked him forward, so that they were almost nose to nose. “Sorry
about that Harry,” he lied. “I musta tripped on your bullshit. Want me to get ya another cup? I can brew you a scalding one this time.”

“You are going to regret this, Reed.” Though it was almost concealed by the man’s rank fear, there was an undercurrent of hatred beneath his quaking words, a hatred that was so pure, so intense, that Gavin hesitated for the briefest of moments.

“Ya sure,” he laughed contemptuously. “I think the only person who’s gonna regret this is you.” The older man snarled, his alabaster teeth glistening palely out of a muddy mask. “Oh by the way Harry,” Gavin added viciously, “ya missed a spot.” Prodding the man’s wrinkled brow, the detective made a guttural sound as he arched his head back.

Then he spat in Newsom’s face.

The glob of saliva mingled with the glossy layer of coffee on the center of the man’s forehead. Enraged, his former partner’s countenance became warped and twisted, a monstrous example of utter loathing. “I will see you in hell, Gav,” he hissed venomously.

Unintimidated by the display, the younger man smiled cruelly and leaned in, muttering only three words. “You first, Harry.”

Launching one final sneer at the other man, Gavin released the Sergeant’s tie and watched as he retreated – practically scurried in abject terror – towards the elevator. Dark droplets dripped onto the carpet as he fled.

Slamming the front door closed behind him, Gavin grunted as he trudged into his grimy apartment. He was exhausted, completely drained by the course of his shitty day. A beat-up station wagon running on empty.

Predictably the blow-up in the breakroom had gotten him into trouble. Not as he much as he had assumed, but it had still ended with a lukewarm threat from his irate captain and yet another page added to his ever-expanding disciplinary file. The consequences would have been worse if not for Sally and Ben’s intervention. Both had laid the blame for the incident squarely at Newsom’s feet. Both claimed that Gavin’s unorthodox actions had defused a potentially dangerous situation. Disgusted with everyone involved, Fowler had chosen the more lenient punishment for him.

The briefing about their case had been a tense and torturous affair. Anderson had left early for the day, right after the incident with the Sergeant. Most likely with the intent to get drunk, to drown out the memory of those horrible words at either Jimmy’s Bar or one of his other many haunts. Gavin couldn’t blame the guy. Unsurprisingly, Connor had spent the rest of the day being distracted and worried about his partner. His LED had refused to budge from yellow, even after the detective had attempted to mollify the android. He had been nearly unresponsive when Fowler had shown up for the meeting, leaving Gavin to catch their boss up with almost no help or support.

Half-asleep, Gavin shed his jacket and let it plop onto the floor without caring where it fell. He shuffled into the kitchen with Muffin zigzagging between his feet, either trying to remind him of her hunger or else attempting to trip him. He could never tell.

Putting the bowl of wet food on the floor, he sighed. At least Fowler had agreed with their joint assessment. Even though they did not have the bodies of Ms. Babbidge and Jeremiah as proof, they all agreed that they were on the trail of a serial killer. The likelihood that they’d find the couple alive and well was, in Connor’s words, ‘statistically insignificant.’
He shuffled into his bedroom like a member of the walking dead, his awareness fading with every step. He tossed his cell onto the nightstand before diving clumsily onto his bed. Within a few seconds, he was in dreamland.

Had he been awake, he would have noticed his phone as it started to jiggle and hum, announcing the arrival of a new text.

Mik Gladkowski

(Received @ 11:50)

Need to meet asap

(Received @ 11:51)

Got a call from someone today who claims they murdered four people

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: bullets are going to fly.
A few housekeeping notes:
1) The Major Character Death tag has been removed. I have decided to keep all of the main characters - Gavin, Connor, Hank, and Tina - alive and well. One of them got a reprieve! That being said, no one else is safe from the killer (and one them IS the killer.)
2) Due to some changes (including the above) the second half of the story will need some fine-tuning. I hope to keep updating this fic on a weekly schedule but there may come a time where it might two weeks for an update. Lots of silly RL stuff going on as well!
3) The comments. I am flabbergasted by all of your kind words and thoughts, and above all, your interest in this little story of mine! When I sat down to write this, I had no plans to release To Be Free to a wider audience. This was originally going to be for my own personal satisfaction, and that alone. When I made the decision to start posting this story (late at night, more than half-asleep) I had assumed that no one would be interested in this tale. But I was wrong. Loads of you have kudo-ed my work and many have left comments. I just want to say how very thankful I am for all the interest. I love hearing what you all think. Your words are this writer's lifeblood.

The killer unveils his scheme ...

“This had better not be some stupid sham on your part,” Gavin warned the man seated across from him with a frosty glare, the expression far colder than the weather outdoors. “Or help me god, I’ll toss you and your fuckin’ platinum blond hairdo into the closest snowbank.” Cocking an eyebrow disapprovingly, he added, “that shit looks goddamn ridiculous.”

Glancing reproachfully at the detective, Mik pursed his lips together in an offended manner. “Come on Gavin, that’s a little harsh. My stylist assured me that a lighter hair color is all the rage right now in the tv biz. Ever since Rosanna Cartland started dying her hair, she’s been the undisputed darling of KNC. No one else on our channel can compete with her.”

Rolling his eyes disdainfully, Gavin refrained from smacking the reporter upside his dense head. For being such a proficient journalist with a knack for sniffing out scandals and an enviable skillset for uncovering the truth, the man could be incredibly stupid. “Sometimes I wonder how you manage to string a sentence together,” he sighed. “She’s popular because she’s pretty, number one. Number two, I am nearly fuckin’ sure that she goes braless half the time. That’s all she’s needs.”

“That’s hardly a fair assessment,” the slender man said defensively. “To do what she does requires far more than a pretty face and a revealing outfit.”
With his irritation rising, Gavin opened his mouth to spit out a fiery retort but another voice, tired and tense, preempted him.

“As thrilling as this conversation is,” Anderson grumbled tersely, “I didn’t get outta bed at a quarter ta six just to listen to you bicker with a vulture about nothin’.”

Embarrassed for being so easily distracted, Gavin chalked it up to a lack of sleep. As much as he hated to admit it, the old bastard was right. Their gathering wasn’t some silly social call after all. Mik had sent him a flurry of texts claiming that he had been in contact with a killer. The detective knew that he shouldn’t be wasting their valuable time by berating the idiot’s choice of a dye job. Even if it was truly a deplorable thing to do. Gavin preferred his natural brown.

Darting his eyes to the right, he unnecessarily cleared his throat. The Lieutenant looked far more exhausted than Gavin felt, if his disheveled appearance was any indication. Though the detective couldn’t be one hundred percent certain, he was however relatively sure that the older man was still wearing the exact same outfit as he had yesterday; that weather-beaten overcoat he wore religiously and an atrocious black and white streaky shirt that may have been some terrible designers idea of a zebra pattern. All of his clothes were rumpled and wrinkled as if Anderson had slept in them. If he had slept at all.

The detective had a sneaking suspicion that his superior had spent the night at the bottom of a bottle. The distinct smell the man was giving off wasn’t so much a subtle hint but a blaring signal, a neon sign of a colossal size. Normally Gavin would have taken great delight with Anderson’s plight. He had a digital library’s worth of alcoholic related humor up his sleeve for just this sort of situation. But after witnessing the cause, he just couldn’t find anything worthwhile about antagonizing the man. Newsom was a monster and his words always held more than a vial of poison.

Standing behind his partner in a protective stance, Connor was straight-backed and taut, a bowstring ready to give at the slightest provocation. He had likely whittled away his evening with worrying after Anderson, probably dismayed by the latter’s semi-relapse into binge drinking. Maybe also concerned by the Sergeant’s virulent insinuations. Was the android suffering internally? Had he taken any of those foul taunts to heart? Well, thirium regulator, Gavin amended. Was he suffering silently from some sort of existential crisis? Wondering if he could ever compete with a child’s unseen ghost?

Gavin felt disconcerted by the very notion. Surely Connor had to be well aware that he was Anderson’s sole reason for living. After all, prior to the android’s unforeseen arrival at the precinct just a few months back, the Lieutenant had been on a self-destructive trajectory heading towards his own demise. He would never claim to be a psychic, yet even Gavin could have predicted the boozer’s inevitable suicide. Had Connor not been there.

He didn’t like the thought that Connor might be doubting himself, pondering dark ruminations in an even darker place.

But now was not the time for such … considerations. They had a job to do. A killer to catch.

Striding towards Gavin’s position, Connor drew the reporter’s attention with an inquiring stare.

“Mr. Gladkowski, you said that you were contacted by an individual yesterday who claimed to be a murderer. Could you please tell us exactly what happened?”

“Of course.” Mik’s consternation evaporated as he slapped one of his award-winning grins on his boyish face. “That’s why I messaged Gavin in the first place. I thought that he – well, you all,” he corrected swiftly, “might be interested.”
“We are,” Anderson affirmed, his worn features a sleep-deprived mask.

“Good,” the seated man exclaimed happily as he clapped his hands together in excitement. “But before we jump into that dreary business, I’d be remiss to ignore my obligations to my audience.” Furrowing his brow in an expression of deep contemplation, he muttered dramatically. “No, not just my humble audience but the entire world! We are all dutybound to the people we share planet with, wouldn’t you say, Connor?”

“I hope you are ready to eat a fist sandwich, Mik,” Gavin growled loudly as he leaned over the table. He just knew that the goddamn bloodhound would bring up that stupid vlog series of his.

Alarmed by Gavin’s threatening posture and confused by Mik’s strange monologue, Connor fumbled with his words. “I don’t understand what you – Detective, please calm down!” With his gaze jerking back and forth between the two like some horizontal bobblehead, the android tried to find order amongst the anarchy. “Gavin, stop that! Please.”

Grumbling under his breath furiously, the detective nevertheless complied with his temporary partner’s request. He unclenched his fists and moved away from the table, away from the source of his current frustration.

Satisfied, or maybe relieved, Connor turned his scrutinizing gaze back to the reporter. “Mr. Gladkowski, I do not understand what you are referring to. What is it that you are getting at?”

“As I am sure Gavin has already told you, apart from working for the most watched news station in all of the US, I also have my own vlog network.” He beamed infuriatingly at the android and Gavin had to shove his hands into his jean’s pockets to prevent himself from flipping the dipshit off. “I’ve been covering all things android-related since November, trying to give a voice to you and your people. A medium for which you can use to convey your –.”

“Fucking-A,” Gavin just about screamed in a strangled tone. “Just get to the damn sales pitch already. We haven’t got all day to listen to you self-promote your shit Mik.”

Unfazed by the detective’s outburst, Mik continued on, albeit in a more hurried manner. “I’ve been hosting a series dedicated to the Big Five of Jericho and so far, I’ve had the distinct honor of interviewing three of your friends and I’d love to have you on my show as well. My audience would be ecstatic to see you, to hear you, to get to know you.”

Looking absolutely horrified by the prospect, Connor shook his head forcefully. “No.”

Not ready to surrender so easily, Mik pressed on. “Think about the public exposure you could get. You could use that to get sympathy for the predicament your people are in. Why, as of this morning, I’ve had nearly seventy million views. Imagine that Connor, you could personally reach into seventy million homes – or more! – and help change the minds and hearts of the nation. That’s a ton of goodwill you could earn. That’s a ton of goodwill that you can run to the bank with!”

Bemused, the android’s voice was clearly troubled. “I – no. I am sorry Mr. Gladkowski but no.”

Dumbfounded, the reporter’s pale eyes widened. “Connor you could do a tremendous amount of good for all of your people. Just take a moment to reflect,” he implored earnestly. “You are one of the most well-known individuals of the android-rights movement. Hell, besides Markus, you are probably the most discussed android in the entire country. A being created solely to hunt down his own kind, forced by his cruel masters to do their nefarious bidding, and then!” He waved his hands theatrically and Connor’s LED began flashing yellow, a distressed canary warning that the air had gone bad. “You managed to defy your own programming, so you could save the very same people
you hounded. A villain turned hero! A pedigree, so to speak, that could not be better designed to
grab the people’s attention! To grab the hearts and minds of America!"

“I – I’m not a – a hero,” Connor stammered, and Gavin could have sworn that he heard something
whirling about, like a computer overheating. His LED had turned red.

Disquieted by Connor’s obvious distress, Gavin opened his mouth, ready to verbally flay his
friendly neighborhood correspondent. Friendship or no, he wasn’t going to let this continue.

However, the Lieutenant beat him to the punch. “That’s enough.” His tone was gruff and final, the
rumblings of a bear angry at being awoken from its hibernation early. “He said no, Gladkowski.
And no means no.” He shot Gavin a nasty look as if the current situation was his entirely his fault.
“So you can stop bustin’ Connor’s balls and tell us why the hell we are here.”

“Alright, alright, alright!” Mik waved his hands, admitting defeat. “I just had to ask, you know? Its
not every day that you get to meet a celebrity after all,” he appealed in a conciliatory tone. “I’d be
doing my viewers a disservice if I hadn’t.”

“Give over Mik,” Gavin grumbled as he strode forward again, drawing the man’s gaze back to him.
“Enough with the fuckin’ self-promotion and the stupid persona. Time to pretend that you’re a
normal human bein’.”

The beanstalk-thin man sighed, shifting in his cushioned chair as if he was sitting on a pile of
jagged stones. “Alright,” he said in an infinitely less annoying tone, his voice devoid of his usual
energetic enthusiasm. “Yesterday evening I received a call from –.”

“Which line?” The detective asked bluntly, knowing full well that Mik had more phone numbers
than he had socks. Four personal cells, a landline at his home, three work numbers and who-knew-
how-many burner phones.

“Oh, my official tip-line. The one that’s listed on both my vlog spot and KNC’s website.”

“So a line that anyone could easily get a hold of,” Hank mused with a frown.

Withholding an eyeroll, Gavin just grit his teeth. He hated sharing interviews. “Well that doesn’t
narrow anythin’ down then. If there’s anythin’ here, that is.”

“I know you aren’t thrilled with me right now Gavin, and I get it, I stepped on your toes the other
day … but I wouldn’t bring this to you if I didn’t seriously believe that there wasn’t some truth to
this person’s claim.”

Gavin scowled. Mik was an obnoxious buffoon at times, full of himself, high on the fumes of his
own bullshit but he was also a damned good investigator and writer. The man hadn’t obtained his
position at America’s premiere news channel by being a mindless sycophant, by just regurgitating
pointless soundbites in a tedious fashion. He possessed a razor-sharp intellect that he rarely let
show, preferring to maintain the illusion of being a blustering but amicable journalist. The former
was the Mik that Gavin genuinely liked and respected. The Mik that had an uncanny instinct in
zeroing in on the obscured facts. The Mik that he had once been in a relationship with.

That was far in the past, a different lifetime that they had both willingly walked away from.

But that didn’t mean that Gavin no longer trusted the other’s judgement. On the contrary, their
breakup had demonstrated Mik’s levelheadedness. Gavin eventually broke everything he touched
in the end, after all.
Nodding, the detective softened his harsh features, trying to impart his readiness to hear his friend out. If Mik thought something looked dodgy, then it probably was. “I hear ya. Was the caller male or female?”

“No idea,” the reporter answered. “They were using a voice modulator, so they could have been of either gender. Your IT people might be able to do something with it but unless the person was using a cheap device, they’ll probably have a hell of a time trying.”

The use of a voice changer didn’t sit well with Gavin. He could be imagining things, but to him it suggested a certain amount of premeditation on the mysterious caller’s part.

“I’m sure ya get a ton of crank calls all the time, just like we do,” the Lieutenant commented. “More than half of em use those damn things to confuse us on purpose. Just trying to make it harder for us when they are trying to pull our legs. Seems like they get their jollies off by sending us on goddamn goose chases.”

“An attempt to hide one’s identity could denote criminal wrongdoing,” Connor suggested with a glance at his partner. “It is impossible for us to know without more information.”

“Then let’s get it,” Gavin growled irritably. If the dynamic duo were going to discuss every single sentence in-depth, dissecting every damn word, they’d likely still be in this room long after the city had thawed, and spring had sprung. “So what did the caller actually say?”

“They claimed to have murdered four people within the last month.” Chewing on his lower lip, Mik suddenly appeared apprehensive, and he hesitated before continuing further. The detective wanted to urge him on, pester him with a myriad of questions but he was well aware that the other man would only resume his statement when he was good and ready. Mik hadn’t a single inhibition when it came to rushing others, but he absolutely hated being rushed himself. One of the many things that had led to the deterioration of their love life.

“I was immediately distrustful. Skeptical. However you want to phrase it,” he said with a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head. “As the Lieutenant pointed out, we are far from immune from receiving all sorts of strange calls. People claiming that they’ve seen Elvis or UFOs, you know the stuff. Other’s confessing to have committed all sorts of crimes.” He laughed wryly. “Had a guy in December that couldn’t have been more than thirty years of age claiming he’d been the second shooter from the grassy knoll. Some people just want attention,” he concluded resignedly.

“But I don’t think this caller falls into that category. Or not solely into that category,” he amended. “I asked him if there was any way for me to verify his allegations. He gave me the names of two individuals who had in fact been murdered recently. Whose murders are currently unsolved.” Glancing up into Gavin’s gray eyes, his lips trembled into a shaky frown. “Thomas and Natalie Slattery.”

The detective could vaguely see Anderson from the periphery of his vision, as the older man shifted in his seat, perking up, suddenly bushy tailed and wide-eyed. Likewise, his partner became even more alert as well, his LED abdicating blue for yellow.

“Just two names? Why not all four?” Gavin’s voice was low and careful.

“Funny,” Mik huffed without any real heat. “That’s the very same question I asked him and the answer I got didn’t put me at ease, that’s for sure.” Running a hand through his styled hair in an absentminded manner, the reporter unknowingly ruined the results of his morning routine. He had always hated when Gavin tried to play with his hair after gelling it, yelling that it had taken the better part of an hour for him to get everything perfect. He was on edge, something that took a lot
of effort to accomplish. “The caller told me that the other two murders were irrelevant to his plans. He referred to them as the price of a bargain. And he refused to elaborate further when I asked.”

Coldness slithered up his spine and Gavin’s breath hitched in his throat. This caller wasn’t just any killer, he was their killer. The sick motherfucker that was targeting android-human couples, sending them threatening notes before taking their lives. The remorseless and heartless bastard that had written secret messages with thirium 310, blue blood. Connor had deciphered the one that Gavin had found at Adeline Babbidge’s apartment. “You are my practice. You are the price. You will be the first.”

Price. The exact word the caller had used to describe their unnamed victims. The price of a bargain. He had no idea what sort of arrangement would require the deaths of two persons. Maybe their killer wasn’t completely sane. Having a firm grip on reality wasn’t a necessary requirement for being a ruthless serial killer.

Connor’s faint voice seemed to echo through the silence permeating the room. “What else did this individual say?”

“They ranted for a while,” Mik responded. “And when I say rant, I mean a full-on paranoid tirade with all the trimmings. Said that the whole world had conspired against them. That their life had been destroyed through no fault of their own. That there were powerful forces arrayed against them.” Knocking his knuckles on the tabletop, he sighed. “Before you ask, they never gave any specific information. Nothing that could be used to identify themselves. Just vague bs. Lots of vague androiphobic bs. Hates them with a passion. Holds them responsible for whatever is wrong with their life. The caller has a huge chip on their shoulder.”

Titling his head to the right, Gavin glanced at Connor and Anderson. “Sounds like a fuckin’ wound collector to me.”

“A what?” The android asked.

Gavin didn’t typically put much stock in psychobabble, but he had to admit that sometimes even the quacks could manage to get things right for once. Two years ago he had been apart of task force hunting a murderer who was targeting people from the same high school class. A federal goon from Quantico had been dispatched to assist with the case. The detective had scoffed at the man’s profile of the killer, calling it a waste of time and money. Until it led them to catch the suspect, whose motives, just as the fed had said, were driven by a litany of real and perceived injustices.

“Our guy likes to hold grudges. Goes outta his way to find em even. Feeds his shitty view of the world,” Gavin replied with a scowl. “He uh, collects wounds like some people collect baseball cards or stamps. Or whatever. They keep collecting everything they can till they snap and go after whoever they blame for – uh whatever it is that they think has happened to them.”

“Guess we should just arrest you right now then, right Reed?”

Shooting the Lieutenant the nastiest look he could muster, Gavin snarled. “Go to hell asshole.”

The old man just laughed, tossing his head back. Gavin instantly regretted not getting a few jabs in earlier when he had the chance to mock Anderson over his drunkenness. Nice guys always got screwed it seemed.

“Hank.” Connor’s tone was stern, and his gaze was anything but gentle as he glared at his partner. When the bastard’s merriment had subsided, he just shrugged at the android in an unrepentant way,
earning him a truly disapproving look in return.

Apparently no more immune to Connor’s death stare than he was to his doe-eyes, Anderson’s will began to crumble. “Eh,” he grumbled angrily. “I didn’t mean it, Reed.”

Distrusting his ears, Gavin just stood flabbergasted, looking at Anderson while suffering from some sort of paralytic confusion. His mind seemed unable to process what he had just heard, what had just been uttered, however reluctantly. Gavin and the Lieutenant *never* apologized to each other – not that either made apologies a part of their daily routines. They tolerated one another for the sake of the job and that was all.

A finger poked his shoulder and, jarred, his eyes flipped from Anderson’s form to the face with chocolate eyes that were far too close for comfort. Connor glanced at him significantly, expectantly, waiting for something. Oh yeah. “Uh, its fine. Ya know, whatever,” he said quickly.

While his superior obviously couldn’t have cared less, Connor appeared to be satisfied with their exchange. A great big smile broke out on his face, a beaming smile of honest happiness and Gavin felt the urge to return it. Although his was much smaller, it was no less genuine.

Sharp knuckles danced across a wooden surface and Gavin startled.

Mik’s countenance was clearly unamused. His azure eyes were narrowed, and his mouth was puckered into a frightful caldera. Gavin was intimately acquainted with said expression. Why the fuck was he possibly displaying jealously, here of all places?

“So uh, what else did the guy – uh the caller – have to say? You mentioned somethin’ about a plan not so long ago.”

Smoothing out his features, Mik took a moment before responding, running his fingertips along the edge of the table. One of his nervous ticks. “They said that they weren’t finished killing. That they had to right the wrongs committed against them. Said that there were four specific individuals that they held personally responsible for the destruction of their life. And before you ask, they didn’t share with me the names of their intended targets.”

“Fuck,” the detective cursed. It was one thing to be on the trail of a coldhearted killer, but it was an entirely different matter when you knew definitely that you were racing against the clock to prevent even more homicides. That the speed of your progress could literally mean life and death for an unsuspecting individual.

“The caller told you specifically that he plans on killing four more people?” Connor asked.

“Yes. Well no. I’m not sure.”

The journalist’s nonsensical reply elicited a wry laugh from Gavin. “Which is it?”

“Give me a second to explain,” Mik beseeched. “I swear it’ll make sense once I give you the gist of the sicko’s message.” Exhaling loudly, Gavin just shrugged and waited patiently. As patiently as he could even be. Which was as about as patient as a child in a candy store with a credit card.

“Alright, I’m going to run through everything about what he told me about his future plans, so please don’t interrupt. It’ll be quicker that way.” From the corner of his eyes, the detective saw Connor nod, conveying his compliance to the reporter’s wishes. Anderson merely scowled in acquiescence.

“Shoot,” Gavin grumbled. He always hated when Mik tried to silence him like this.
“So as I mentioned, the caller said that there were four specific individuals who he wants to get revenge against. He didn’t give me their exact identities, but he did have nicknames for them. Or titles.”

Gavin opened his mouth, already prepared to renege on his given word, but was stopped as a hand suddenly began resting upon his shoulder. Giving him a tiny squeeze, Connor mutely expressed his desire for the detective to remain reticent. Feeling unnerved by the physical contact, he just clamped his teeth together, not trusting himself to speak at the moment.

“They referred to the four as the Unfaithful, the Failure, the Betrayer, and the Ruiner. They said that each of these individuals played a pivotal role in their downfall and that each has to face retribution for the grievances that they allegedly committed against them.” Raising a hand to prevent any questions, he signaled that he wasn’t yet finished. “The caller plans on making them face justice. You know, killing them. But first they must suffer, according to the nutcase. They intend on murdering someone important, someone close to each of the four prior to actually carrying their end game against their grudges. The Slatterys were killed to punish the Unfaithful. Whoever that is.”

Wordlessly, Gavin glanced at Connor for confirmation. Not that he really needed it.

The android paused for only a moment before inclining his head. Just yesterday afternoon Connor had read the second letter, the one that had been sent to the Slatterys and saved by Eileen Kincaid. Just like the first, it had a secondary inscription imposed upon its frail surface. “The Unfaithful will pay for the broken vow.”

“So to answer your earlier question … I don’t know how many more people they plan on killing. At least seven but, if they enjoy knocking off couples, then it could be more.”

The room was silent. It was as if a sort of surreal unreality had descended, cloaking them all in a shroud of horrified disbelief. “This guy is one sick motherfucker,” Gavin muttered, aghast.

“Jesus Christ,” Anderson gulped, echoing his sentiment. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ.”

“I think it would be imperative that we request more personnel for this investigation,” Connor opined. “As busy as the department is, I think the captain will make an exception.”

“He’d better,” the detective muttered. They’d need as much help as they could get.

“Oh, he will,” the Lieutenant stated gruffly.

Gavin had to agree with him. As much as the Useless Old Dick pissed him off, he knew that Fowler wouldn’t leave them hanging. Too much was at stake. The lives of the four. Their friends and families. Not to mention, with Deputy Chief Callahan breathing down their collective necks, the livelihood of the precinct as well. A mistake on such a case could result in an earthquake-sized departmental shakeup. They were all now stuck in the middle of the minefield that Fowler had warned him about. Hopefully no one would accidently step wrong … or else they’d all be mincemeat.

Pushing himself out of his chair, Mik cleared his throat loudly, trying to gain their focus. He pulled something small out of his coat pocket and placed it on the table. A USB drive. “That’s the original copy of my conversation with the caller. I don’t think I’ve left anything out. I’ve told you everything I know but I’m sure you’ll want to hear it for yourselves regardless. And your techies will want to try and undo the voice modulation.” He started fiddling with the buttons on his coat. He was ready to leave.
“Thank you, Mr. Gladkowski,” Connor said respectfully. “We appreciate that you brought this to our attention and we equally appreciate your discretion on this sensitive matter.”

The slender man nodded quickly and turned to go, but not fast enough for Gavin to notice the sheepish look on his face. A reddish hue on his pale cheeks. A conspicuous tell if he ever saw one.

“Mik.” The detective growled his friend’s name like an obscene curse. He made his tone as accusatory as he could manage. “You aren’t gonna be discreet, are ya?”

Without fully turning around, the man answered. “This could be a very big story Gavin. A career-making story. A deranged serial killer attacking human and android couples in the very heart of the android capital of the US. With the current feeding frenzy right now, this could be more than just national news. This could be global.” Shifting his position, Gavin’s former lover locked their eyes together, blue against gray. “Global, Gavin. Global,” he pronounced the word with a heavy reverence and his eyes glazed as if he was viewing god. “With a story like this, I could go from writing in the backroom of the station, to actually being a proper newscaster. I could be like Rosanna.”

“Look Mik,” Gavin grated wearily, trying to keep the anger from infecting his voice. “Ya can’t report on this just yet. We need time to investigate what you just brought us. Having this fuckin’ splashed all over the airwaves could hurt our chances of getting’ this guy. He could go underground!”

“I find that unlikely,” came the stony response. “The lunatic contacted me, Gavin. A reporter. Because he wants his actions reported on. He’s not going to run away because of it. This is what the person wants.”

“That’s exactly why ya shouldn’t do it,” Gavin rasped through his clenched teeth. “This guy is gonna get off on the media’s attention. The more ya talk about em, the bolder he’s gonna get. Who the fuck knows what he could do if that happens.”

“He’s killed four people already, Gavin” the other man exclaimed. “He’s planning on a multitude of other murders. I don’t see how he could get any bolder than he already is,” Mik countered stubbornly as his face flushed with anger. There were no longer any traces of shame or embarrassment lingering upon his cheeks. “The public deserves to know if they are in danger. They have that right.”

Fury welled up in Gavin’s system, clouding his judgment, dismantling his rational thought. He’d heard those excuses too many times to count when they’d been dating all those years ago. No Gavin, I can’t have dinner with you tonight. I’ve got to finish writing this article. The people need to know … I don’t have the time right now to go see that new movie. Maybe later. I have a responsibility to my readers … I can’t go with you to your grandmother’s tomorrow. I have to talk to my editor asap. Our viewers need to know if they are at risk. No, this can’t wait …

He laughed coldly, emitting a dead sound that ricocheted off of the four walls like a Ping-Pong ball in a box. “What you mean to say is that you have the right to further your goddamn career at the expense of the dead. At the expense of having justice served for the victims!”

With his lips quivering, Mik’s expression warped from that of obstinate defiance to pure incredulity. “That’s rich, Gavin. Really rich. Especially coming from you, of all people,” he snapped. “You are the most unscrupulous person I know. You are the first one to use another’s disadvantage against them, to manipulate and to cajole when it suits you. You’ve never had a problem with stepping over one of your own coworkers if it meant getting a raise or a promotion. And you have the fucking audacity to lecture me about – about morality!?!?” His laughter was harsh
to Gavin’s ears, like nails rutting down a chalkboard. “Give me a break. You’ve never cared about anyone but yourself in your entire life.”

He wanted to explode. He wanted to erupt in an abrasive firestorm of insults and abuse, he wanted to scream until there was nothing left but the ashes of his own rage in his lungs.

But he couldn’t.

Because every single word had struck a grievous blow.

Because every last word that Mik had spoken was true.

He had no defense, no shield, no armor. He was an asshole, an ambitious son of a bitch, there was no way to sugarcoat that. He certainly had no right to harangue Mik – or anyone else for that matter – about principles, ethics, and assuredly not morality. There was nothing moral about his life.

He had tossed away a chance at love, all because it might have had the potential to impede his advancement in his chosen line of work. He had told himself that being hooked to a journalist romantically could have created more hurdles than it was worth. Every time even the tiniest scrap of information had found its way out of the precinct, he would have been the designated scapegoat, the obvious leak. He was a coward.

He had been a willing cohort to the Central Department’s bully for years, encouraging Newsom to belittle and deride his fellow officers at every turn, causing far more harm in comparison to the good he had accomplished. He was a prick.

He had allowed his own insecurities to fester unchecked, unhampered. He had allowed his self-doubt to manifest into a malignant hatred. The very same hatred that had almost resulted in his taking of a life. He was a bigot.

For being a selfish, callous hypocrite it was certainly ironic for him to try and take the moral high ground. He was a fucking joke. And one that wasn’t even remotely amusing, never mind funny.

His breath was ragged, a torn sound that was full of bitterness and disgust. His heart was running in overdrive, crashing against his ribcage with the force of a rock hurtling down from the heavens. He vaguely wondered if he was on the verge of having another anxiety attack.

Breaking eye contact, he twisted around and strode away, moving towards the mountain of boxes that contained some of New Jericho’s hatemail, the records that they had requested from the Commissioner. He doubted that he was fooling anyone in the room by this ridiculous pretense, but nevertheless he pretended to be very interested in the previously ignored containers.

He fought to stabilize the tremor that was convulsing through his rigid form. He struggled to reassert control over his wayward mind and his body.

The others picked up the conversation that he had abandoned.

Connor’s voice. “Mr. Gladkowski, publishing even the smallest amount of information regarding this call could cause a hysterical response from the populace. If a panic was to ensue, people could be hurt or even killed.”

“My responsibility is to report the news. I can’t be concerned about how people may react to it,” Mik argued tersely.
“We could call the DA and have em issue a gag order against you and KNC if we have too,” the Lieutenant warned, his tone rough.

“You can try but our lawyers will easily quash whatever excuse your people come up with and I can guarantee you that this story will make tomorrow morning’s news cycle. At the latest.”

Gavin could hear feet shuffling on the carpet as Mik went to the door.

“Wait.” Connor’s voice held a desperate inflection. “Let’s make a compromise.” The movement subsided. “We don’t want this killer to get the publicity that he desires. You want something that’ll help your career.” There was an audible intake of air, as if the android was preparing to do something painful. “If you keep this story to yourself … if your news station doesn’t report on it … then I’ll give you the exclusive that you want.”

“Connor….”

“No, Hank.”

Mik’s triumphant glee was apparent even in the sole word he spoke next. “Done.”

A frustrated sigh ripped angrily through the following tension. “I’ll see you out,” Anderson growled. “I’ve gotta go see if Fowler is back yet from that hearing with the brass.”

A chair being pushed back. Shoes scraping along the carpet. The door clicking shut. They had left. But he was not alone.

“Are you alright, Gavin?”

That soft voice, full of such heartfelt concern, was spoken quietly, close to a whisper, as if the android was trying not to disturb him, trying not to upset him. Still, it battered at his rickety consciousness like a stormy gale, thrashing against the coastline with winds strong enough to tear the manmade world asunder. To tear his already shaken world apart.

He didn’t deserve that kindness, that patient sympathy. Especially not from someone who was his complete opposite. Whereas he was crude, disrespectful, arrogant, and cruel, Connor was straightforward, empathic, thoughtful, and altruistic. Always willing to forgive, to put others before himself, to use honey in the place of vinegar. It was abundantly clear that he had an aversion to being trotted out in the media, to discussing his private affairs in a public forum, and yet he had just disregarded all of his reservations in order to preserve the case.

Gavin Fucking Reed would never have made such a sacrifice.

“I’m fine.” His words were hollow even to his own ears. He continued to stare at the cardboard surfaces that were lined up against the wall, wishing that Connor would just leave, so he could lick his own wounds in relative peace.

“If you don’t mind me borrowing one of your favorite curse words, I’d call that bullshit.”

“Call it whatever the fuck you want,” he replied hoarsely. Why couldn’t he just be left alone?

A creak emanated from behind his position as the android shifted his weight, maybe shuffling his feet ever so slightly, as he pondered his next move. “I won’t pretend that I know you very well. We’ve only been on speaking terms for less than a week. But in that short period of time I’ve seen a different side of you that I didn’t think was possible. A side that was in direct contrast to the hostile and hateful Detective Reed that I knew prior to my deviancy.”
Ducking his head and closing his eyes, Gavin tried to imagine that he was anywhere else; at his crappy apartment, seated at a barstool at Jimmy’s, stretched out on Tina’s futon, drunk in some grimy alleyway. Anywhere but this stuffy conference room on the second floor, being assaulted with undue compassion from an individual who was a fucking paragon of virtues. But he failed.

“There’s a side to you that I like knowing. That I want to know more. If you’ll let me.” Gavin nearly choked upon hearing those words as his heart began pounding even louder, a fierce and thunderous applause. “If you ever feel the need to talk, I’m here.” A faint chuckle rang out. “It’s not like I need to sleep. I’ll always have time for our bromance.”

Thousands and thousands of responses ebbed to the periphery of his clouded and gloomy mind. Along with one burning question. Laughing weakly, a gurgled noise just below his breath, Gavin gave life to his query. “Why uh – why do ya hate the idea of talkin’ about yourself to the media? I mean – like really. If you paraded yourself in front of a few cameras I bet the brass would make ya a captain in a second. Maybe even a Deputy Chief. Nothing Mik said about you was a lie. They’d fall all over themselves to make it happen.”

Connor’s voice was low and doubtful. “I’ve done things I’m not proud of. Things I’d rather not speak about. I don’t want praise for just doing what was right. I’m – I’m no hero. Just a person who is grateful that he got a second chance.”

Gavin wished that he could force his jaw open, that he could make his mouth obey the commands that his brain was sending at a fevered pace, but nothing seemed to work. Footsteps headed towards the exit and it was only after Connor was half over the threshold that the android spoke again. “I don’t know you as well as Mr. Gladkowski does, but I can tell you that he was wrong. If you only cared about yourself, you would never have apologized to me.”

With that, the door was closed, and Gavin was finally alone.

Exhausted, he slouched against the wall and slowly slid down its cold and hard surface until he met the equally cold and hard floor, despite the carpet. With the other man no longer in earshot, Gavin found his voice at last. “You’re a fucking hero, Connor. A hero to me.” He could think of no better term to describe someone who could still see some good left in him.

He could tell Connor at another time. Yeah, later.

There was always later.

The van’s sixteen-inch wheel sunk into a pothole as the vehicle accelerated, speeding on its way towards their destination, causing the occupants to be jostled about. Jarred by the unexpected turbulence, Gavin bumped his elbow into Officer Miller’s chest, making the younger man grimace and groan in pain.

“Shit,” he cursed. “Sorry ‘bout that Chris. Wasn’t paying attention.”

“No, problem, Detective Reed,” Chris responded smoothly. “The vest took most of the force.”

He nodded absentmindedly, his mind truly elsewhere.

It was just three hours after the illuminating yet worrisome interview with Mik. He still felt uneasy and drained by the flare-up with his onetime boyfriend. Connor’s encouragement had also left its mark; he didn’t know up from down anymore where the android was concerned. An ambivalent mixture of dread and joy rose through his body whenever he considered the man’s words in his head, whenever his eyes wandered over to his temporary partner’s figure. A night with Jack might
be necessary to deal with this semi-new revelation. And by deal, he meant drown it out with waves of smoky sweetness.

He sincerely hoped that his old friend would be enough. The stress that had been building over the past week was becoming unbearable, unmanageable, and it had precipitated an ancient craving. One that terrified him. One that he thought he had defeated almost two decades ago.

“He still trying to get through to SWAT?” Chris’s question tore him away from his unwanted introspection. Gavin turned his gaze to the individual who the officer was indicating.

“Guess so,” he replied unhelpfully with a shrug. Truth was, he hadn’t a clue as to what Connor was specifically doing.

Seated adjacent to the detective’s position, the android was stiff-backed, in an inflexible looking posture. Very machinelike. His eyelids were fluttering ever so gently, his lashes flickering like the wings of a hummingbird. As Gavin had just recently learned, that indicated that Connor was currently interacting wirelessly with someone, or something. As to what exactly he was doing at this very point and time, Gavin could only surmise. His fellow officer could be contacting Gregory Allen, the most senior member of the SWAT division on duty, trying to ascertain their current movements and activities. Connor could just as likely be ordering an anchovy pizza or looking up dog videos on YouTube. The hell if he knew.

On Connor’s left was none other than Lieutenant Anderson, unsurprisingly. Decked out in a Kevlar vest, the gruff older man appeared even more grim and intimidating than usual. He looked like he belonged in some backwards country, a mercenary overlord ready to launch a land-based assault in a warzone. Which might be just where they were heading, if their information was accurate.

The old bastard’s eyes kept jutting back and forth from the front of the van to his partner. Whenever they landed on Connor’s inert form, they held an indisputable sheen of worry.

Frowning, Gavin’s brain kept dragging him back to the conversation that he had accidentally overheard. He certainly hadn’t been trying to eavesdrop, that just wasn’t his style, but he …

…was on his way to the bathroom, making a quick pitstop to piss before he strapped one of those heavy vests on. He hadn’t realized that the Lieutenant had yanked Connor into the observation chamber for a hurried chat. As he walked by, he heard raised voices.

“…I want you to promise me that you’ll be careful.” A surly voice demanded. Anderson.

“I am always cautious, Hank. I will take no unnecessary actions.” Precise diction. Connor.

A bedeviled sigh. “I mean it, Connor. Listen to me for once. Don’t fucking run off or anything.”

A deferential tone. “I will try my best to remain safe, but this is a dangerous job that we have.”

“Don’t sass at me kid.” The irritation was clear. So was the underlying fear. “You can’t pull any of that shit ya used too. Ya just can’t.”

"I am aware of my limitations, Hank."

“Are, you. I mean, are you really?” Anderson sounded like he was at the end of his rope, a man desperately trying to bridge some boundless divide. “You’ve got to be serious about this, Connor. You can’t put yourself in danger like ya used too.” Another sigh, which was worn and beaten. “If you die again, there’s no coming back anymore. Your memory isn’t being logged in some file at Cyberlife. This is all ya got now. Just this one life.”

“Christ, kid … if anythin’ was to happen to ya … I’d … I’d …”

“I know. I promise I’ll be careful.”

Not wanting to be caught red-handed, Gavin rushed away, towards the restrooms. He was …

… still startled by what he had heard. Connor was many things; naïve, innocent, socially awkward and annoyingly correct all came easily to mind. Reckless wasn’t a descriptor that popped up for Gavin. The fact that the android had apparently died once before didn’t help him much either. He wondered if the glances he kept shooting at Connor were filled with same worry that he noticed in Anderson’s blue eyes.

Twisting around in the passenger’s seat, Detective Collins shot the Lieutenant a pointed look. “We’ll be at the site in about ten minutes Hank. Time to dish out the specifics, I’d say.”

Frowning intently, Anderson bobbed his head in acknowledgement. He leaned over and whispered something into Connor’s ear, triggering an abrupt end to the android’s assumed communications. “All three of the department’s on duty SWAT teams are out on a call. Captain Allen says that his team responded to a hoax and he is currently redeploying to our intended location. However, due to the lunchtime traffic, he won’t be here for another twenty-three minutes and fifty-one seconds.”

Wondering how Connor could possibly be so damned precise in his estimations, Gavin almost missed something glaringly obvious. “Wait! All three have been called out? In the same fuckin’ hour?”

“That’s unusual,” Chris commented.

“Unusual my ass,” the detective snapped. “Just what in the hell is going on in our district?”

“There is allegedly an active shooter at the Hamtramck Middle School,” Connor stated, drawing all the disbeliefing eyes upon himself. “There are conflicting reports regarding the exact circumstances. A second team is heading to the First National Bank on Glendale Street where a silent alarm was recently tripped. Captain Allen’s team went to the site of what was supposed to be the whereabouts of an escaped felon.”

“Which is why we have to deal with this hostage situation ourselves,” Anderson grumbled.

His grim remark released a torrent of anxious glances among the assembled squished in the back of the police van. The old bastard had managed to round up a motley assortment of the precinct’s available officers at such a short notice, especially considering the time of day. Abigail Person, an Asian American just like Tina, was sharing a nervous look with Lakeisha Ward at the end of the benches. Further up, Graham Alexander was gnawing on his lip in a relentless manner. If he didn’t stop soon, he might just chew right through his cheekbone as well. Detective Collins was leaning over the empty area towards the driver’s seat, having a private word with Jamal Wilson.

Angst was everywhere; etched upon their somber countenances, embedded in their stiff stances, and saturating the very air like a pungent perfume, thick and stimulating. They were all trained officers of the law. They were all well acquainted with the risks that were inherent in their job descriptions, entailed in the very oaths that they had freely given. To serve and protect. Simple, uncomplicated words, that when boiled down to the bare bones, meant that they put their lives on the line for the greater good every day. That they might perish while upholding the laws of the land, that they might fall while doing their duty.
That a citizen might die on their watch regardless of their best efforts.

“Listen up,” Anderson barked, an expression of sober austerity chiseled on his face. “I said listen up!” he repeated loudly, as an authoritarian edge crept into his voice. A fairly decent imitation of Fowler’s browbeating tone, by Gavin’s appraisal. He should know, he’d heard it often enough. More than anyone else here, excepting the Lieutenant, of course.

“Dispatch got an anonymous call about fifteen minutes ago. Said that a female android had been kidnapped and brought to the location that we’re headin’ to. The tipster saw her being dragged into an old warehouse by two men, so we’ve got at least two perps.” Turning his stern gaze to his partner, he grumbled “but it’s likely there’s more.”

“The owner of the property has ties to the Bregu crime family,” Connor stated. “I checked with the Organized Crime division and they have the warehouse listed as a possible location of a red ice manufactory.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for SWAT then?” Officer Person asked in a dubious tone. Apparently storming a possible stronghold of the Albanian mob wasn’t her idea of a great time.

“Can’t,” Gavin huffed out. “This ain’t no normal kidnapping. This ain’t for a ransom.”

He’d seen his fair share of desiccated android husks to think otherwise. Red Ice. The chemical formula of the recreational drug was nearly identical to cocaine, with only one additive differentiating the two. The element of thirium. Which was the main ingredient of the compound known as Thirium 310, or blood blue. The blood of androids.

The stealing, and ultimately draining, of the machines was a well-established practice used by both the suppliers and manufacturers of the drug. Since Detroit was the android capital of the US, home of the corporate monolith of Cyberlife, the city had become a hotbed of red ice creation and distribution. And the androids there had become easy targets, as a method of easy access to the necessary chemical. Prior to the revolution, the DPD had been swamped with dealing with the cases of missing androids. Many of which had been taken by drug-makers, intent on bleeding the androids dry. Grand theft and the destruction of property. Now it was kidnapping and murder.

“Reed’s right,” Anderson said gruffly. “Every minute we wait is a minute that the victim might not have. We can’t sit around. We’ve got to go in.”

Frowning, the Lieutenant shot his partner a brief glance, and a shadow of misery ghosted along his wrinkled cheeks, across his furrowed brow, through his stifled breath. He had once been part of the Red Ice Task Force after all. He had undoubtedly seen countless android corpses, pale and lifeless, bodies depleted. Gavin wondered if he was now seeing Connor like that. He hoped not. It was certainly something that the detective wished never to see.

He shuddered as a snippet of Anderson’s earlier admonishment rebounded back to the forefront of his mind. “If you die again, there’s no coming back anymore.” Gavin suddenly felt like his skin was crawling with ants. Red ants.

“Organized Crime has scouted the warehouse as part of an information-gathering mission. The building only has two serviceable entrances,” Connor informed the group. “A garage door out front that connects with the road and another door on the backside of the building.” His LED flashed a hazy yellow as he processed more incoming data. “According to the blueprints, there is also a slight complication. The buildings in this area were constructed close to one another and are of similar heights. The rooftop could be used as a means of escape.”
“We don’t have enough people to cover multiple buildings,” Collins said. “Even if all three SWAT teams showed up right now, we still wouldn’t have enough.”

Sighing like a man attempting to empty his lungs, Anderson scowled fiercely. Likely the old bastard was trying to find a solution to their untenable situation. For once, Gavin was actually glad that he wasn’t in charge of an operation.

Wilson’s urgent voice floated back. “Almost there.”

Leaning forward, the Lieutenant slapped his burly hands on his legs. The clock was running out. “There’s nothing we can do about the roof,” he asserted gruffly. “We’ll just have to hit em hard and fast, and hope that’s enough. We’re gonna have to split into two groups. One through the front and one through the back. My group will take the front.” His hard, sapphire eyes abruptly swept over to Gavin’s ashen ones. Glaring as if he was trying to kill the detective with the force of mind alone, he grunted. “Reed, you’re in charge of the second group.”

More than mildly surprised, Gavin gaped before nodding. To say he was confused would be a grand understatement. Collins had the superiority here, not him. Furthermore, Ben was actually friendly with the hard-ass. He didn’t have time to dwell on it on the mystery though.

“Chris, Lakeisha, Ben, Abby,” Anderson barked out their names, one after another. “You four are with Reed. The rest of ya are with me and Connor.”

The van began to decelerate and the sound of guns being unholstered filled the enclosed space. “Good luck.” Anderson’s typically growling voice was low and meaningful, like a whispered prayer. With what they were about to enter, they needed all the prayers they could get. A soft chorus replied in unison. Gavin hoped that none of their prayers were really last rites in disguise.

The van stopped, and the door was swung open.

Following the others out, Gavin ignored his heart as it began to pump faster, as his brain unleashed a tidal wave of adrenaline into his nervous system.

Quickly scrutinizing the urban terrain, his eyes latched upon an alleyway that wrapped around to the other side of the structure that Anderson’s team was in the process of bolting towards. “With me,” he ordered, as he set off down the roadway he had just identified, Smith and Wesson locked within his steady hands.

If 214 Rosemont Avenue was truly an outpost of the Albanian crime syndicate, Gavin fully expected more than a token show of resistance by their heavily armed security forces. As he and his team rounded the corner of the building, he was shocked to see that the back alley was completely deserted. From what he could view from his vantage spot, at least. Between themselves and the door that was their designated infiltration point, lay an old and battered dumpster which obscured a portion of the lane, hiding an area that was big enough to shelter a man or two. Adequate cover for a lookout.

Motioning his group forward, Gavin slowed his pace, trying to muffle his footfalls, hoping to preserve the element of surprise. Giving themselves away this early would drastically increase the chances of a negative outcome for the operation. He wanted to get everyone home today in one piece, both the hostage and his fellow officers.

Skirting around the edge of the sickly green container, he raised his gun, anticipating the worst. He’d discharged his weapon many times while in the course of conducting his duties, but he had never actually killed someone before. That was one ‘first’ that he didn’t want to ever experience.
He had come too close to crossing that threshold in November. But he would do what was necessary.

Barring his teeth, he readied a command in his throat, an order to show hands. But as he dashed within view, his trigger finger slackened, and his voice quaked. “What the fuck?”

Glued to his heels, Ben huffed. “Looks like we missed this party.”

No lookouts. On the ground there were some dark droplets of what looked suspiciously like blood, congealing in the afternoon sun. In the wall above, two indents marked the brickwork where bullets had punctured the mortar.

Lowering his weapon, Gavin stared at the telltale signs. He leaned in, trying to get a better look at the scored depressions. “Unless I’m fuckin’ losin’ it, I’m pretty damn sure that’s brain matter,” he grumbled, gesturing with his unarmed hand.

“Well whatever happened here,” Ben drawled, “I doubt that the concierge just walked away.”

Unamused, Gavin shot the plump man a frustrated glance. But before he could anything else, Officer Person interrupted him. “Sirs, you should see this.”

The homely woman was standing next to the dumpster, lifting its grungy top with her free hand. Astride of her, Officer Ward was peering intently into its depths, a disgusted expression cemented on her delicate features.

The bodies of two scarred and grizzled men were in a jumbled clump near the bottom of the container, atop a thin layer of refuse and debris. Although Gavin could only see the pale face of one of the criminals, he could still ascertain both of their manners of death. A single and precise headshot.

Ben whistled. “What is going on here? This makes no goddamn sense.”

Hesitating, Gavin frowned. Something was clearly amiss.

Detroit was a humongous city, one of the nation’s largest, and despite the economic growth that had stimulated a crucial portion of the populace within the last decade, it had remained a bustling epicenter of illegal activities. Regardless of the efforts of its combined law enforcement agencies, crime was a rampant part of urban life. It was a certainly, much like death and taxes, an inevitability that could not be ignored or avoided. An unpleasant aspect that was to be expected.

Yet the detective had assuredly not expected this. Someone else had been here. Someone else had murdered these two men. Someone else was involved, invested in this situation. Maybe even manipulating their movements from behind some hidden curtain. To believe otherwise would be to court stupidity and tempt ruin.

What was it that Connor had said concerning Captain Allen? The call that had drawn his SWAT team out had been a hoax. Maybe a very costly prank or else a failed attempt at swatting. Or more worrisome, maybe a deliberate action, as part of a larger, unseen plan. Gavin was ready to bet his lucky jacket – his most favorite piece of clothing – that the other two incidents that had embroiled the rest of SWAT were also false. Just more hoaxes.

His gut told him that their circumstance was different, however. Theirs was not a hoax, but a trap. The corpses chilling out in the garbage bin suggested such a paranoid conclusion.

Time was withering away. Anderson’s team would be encountering hostile forces shortly, if they
hadn’t already. He had to make a decision, come hell or high water.

Gritting his teeth, he growled. “Ben, I want ya and Ward to stay here. Guard this door and don’t let anyone by.” He turned his troubled gaze back to the wall. To the two bullet holes. “Get ahold of whoevah you can and tell em to get their fuckin’ asses down here asap. I don’t care who you piss off. Its my call, so I’ll take the shit. Just … get everyone here.”

Ben nodded somberly in response. Ward was already complying, assaulting her cell phone with a venegful fury.

Wondering what awaited them within the building, Gavin strode towards the metal door. “Chris, Person … let’s get a fucking move on.”

Gunshots rang out ahead, echoing down the musty hallway to greet them.

The noise was ear-piercingly loud, and to Gavin’s dismay, continuous. Whoever was currently shooting was using an automatic weapon and that immediately precluded his fellow officers. None of them were SWAT-trained, none of them had any paramilitary qualifications. That meant that Anderson’s team was under heavy fire, outgunned and outmatched.

Scowling he darted down the corridor, Smith and Wesson raised, Person and Miller in tow. The other team was in trouble and not the ordinary kind that they faced every day. They might be wearing their bullet-proof vests, but the DPD issued armaments could only take so many blasts from an assault rifle before fracturing and being rendered completely useless. Even if the mafia wasn’t using armor penetrating rounds, that was. If the non-stop reverberation of bullets was any indication, it wouldn’t be long before someone got hit somewhere outside the questionable safety of the Kevlar.

Maybe they’d get lucky and the sons of bitches would run out of ammo. A long shot, at best. Gavin knew not to put much faith in luck. After all, it had never lifted a hand to help him out before.

Further up on the right was an open doorway from which the roar of cartridge cacophony was originating from. The detective increased his speed as he closed the distance.

Stopping just short, he motioned for the others to wait. Knowing that every second wasted could mean life or death for both the hostage and the other officers, Gavin was nevertheless not rash enough to jump in head first. He’d likely take a bullet for his troubles if he did.

Carefully peeking around the edge of the doorframe, he observed the view. Or at least what wasn’t completely blocked out by the pile of boxes that seemed perfectly placed to obscure his line of sight. Regardless of the obstruction, he quickly noted a few important things. First, Gavin and his team were on a higher floor than the room on the opposite side of the wall. Second, a small platform was extending out, fenced in only by a thin railing. Third, excluding the presence of the wooden crates, there was no protection whatsoever on the terrace, no walls to hide behind, no furniture to crouch beside. Four, there was no stairs or ladders connecting the platform with the room below. And finally, by the high-pitched thunder rebounding off the walls, some of the firefight was happening just beneath them.

Sliding back away from the opening, he turned to Officers Miller and Person. “Keep goin’ down the hallway,” he ordered, his voice a tense whisper. “I’m gonna see what I can do here.” He hadn’t a single beneficial idea on the subject, but he tended to think on the fly pretty well. At least, his improvising hadn’t gotten him killed yet. “See if you all can find a way down. There’s gotta be a stairwell – or something.”
Person nodded grimly in acknowledgement, but Chris frowned, looking as if he wanted to question the detective’s intentions. Gavin wasn’t going to give him the chance. “Get goin’ already,” he snapped. “Anderson and co can’t fucking hold out forever.” Where in hell was SWAT? Did they fucking stop for coffee and donuts along the way?

His preoccupied mind barely registered the sounds of movement as the rest of his team obeyed his command, whizzing down the hall. Their frantic footfalls were soon overcome by the deadly dissonance of the nearby gunfight.

He didn’t have many choices available to him now and none of them were preferable. But he couldn’t just stand there and hope that his fellow policemen were going to weather this onslaught unscathed. He had to do something, even if it meant exposing himself to the danger they were facing. They wouldn’t face it alone.

The explosive barrage of the automatic rifle abruptly ended, and the popping sounds of handguns took its place. So did a frantic cry. “Officer down! Officer down!”

Gavin’s blood ran cold, an icy river coursing through his veins. One of his colleagues had been shot. They could be dead already, or slowly bleeding out, the last moments of their lives spent on the godforsaken cement floors of this madhouse. Who was it? One name in particular made his breath hitch in his throat, as if he was being choked.

He shook his head, trying to jostle the terror-bound stupor away. The assault weapon was still quiet, probably being reloaded as he stood aimlessly, acting like a fool. Wasting the best opportunity he’d likely have.

Shoving his smoldering fear aside, he stepped out onto the balcony. Hunching over, he moved beyond the dubious cover of the boxes and fervently hoped that no one happened to be looking up at the moment. Wide-eyed, he scanned the scene unfolding just beneath his lofty position.

Two men armed with pistols were firing into an adjacent room, using the walls on either side of the doorway for safety. A third man was spread-eagled on the ground, his shirt riddled with holes, his blood oozing out in a rapid pace. He wasn’t long for this world. More and more gunshots resounded from the other room where he assumed Anderson’s team was being held up. They were being besieged on multiple fronts, outflanked by the mobsters. Gavin couldn’t do damn thing about what lay beyond his range, but he could certainly deal with these two motherfuckers.

The distance was considerable, but he was a good shot. Just as he took aim at the individual on the left, a fourth person strode into his view. The newcomer was huge, a hulking, pale-skinned superhuman. Certainly put Eileen Kincaid to shame; he made her look like a skinny lightweight. A walking posterchild for steroid abuse. Carrying the assault rifle.

Snarling wordlessly, Gavin changed his target to the behemoth. He wasn’t going let that jackass fire another shot at his coworkers. At his friends.

He pulled the trigger twice, double-tapping the man in his back. To absolutely no effect.

Blue liquid dribbled twice, double-tapping from the wounds that the detective had just inflicted. He was a fucking android! A machine helping humans kill other machines for profit? How very … human.

The android twisted around, an expression of utter hatred carved on his plain, unassuming face. Gavin dimly recognized the model – not its number – but its former function. A being designed for manual tasks that required great strength and endurance, a favorite of construction companies and security firms. Lacking all social programs, the android was a veritable creature of muscle and
physical power, someone who Gavin would never want to get into a fistfight with.

The detective was able to get one more shot off – rupturing a hole in the man’s upper chest – before the android raised his own weapon, the automatic, and started unloading his clip.

Diving down onto the floor, Gavin flattened himself out, knowing full well that only the thin metal that constituted the platform stood between his continued existence and his death. Had he tried to pole-vault through the relatively short span to the safety of the hallway, he would have been sprayed by countless rounds, transformed into a literal pincushion for bullets.

He clapped his hands over his ears, grimacing as the sound of gunfire erupted around him, pelting the terrace underbelly with metal rain and blasting the crates into smithereens. Chunks of wood bathed his body in a hellish baptism, splinters lodged themselves into his hair, and his entire form, shaking with fear, was dusted with debris.

A shout broke through the noise. Anderson’s voice. “No, Connor! No wait. Connor –!”

A second shout, a gurgle of foreign words, answered the Lieutenant’s cry and abruptly the bombardment ceased. Gavin felt like he breathe once again.

Hoping that the blessed lull wasn’t some clever ploy, the detective moved towards the edge, cradling his Smith and Wesson ahead of him, ready to return fire. What he saw, he didn’t expect.

Connor had apparently used the temporary distraction caused by Gavin’s sudden appearance to good use. One of the two humans was sprawled out on the floor, tangled with his dead compatriot. The man was clawing helplessly at his ruined throat. The other human was still attempting to exchange fire with the police in the further room, albeit in a pitiful, panicked state. He was far too engrossed by the two androids grappling with one another, like a pair of angry lovers in an overly aggressive waltz, to be of any use.

The brown eyed detective and his opponent were fighting for control over the assault rifle, the weapon being yanked back and forth in the strangest episode of tug of war Gavin had ever witnessed. Momentarily enthralled by the absurdity of the sight, he forgot everything. That he was in the middle of a warzone. That he was a police officer. That he was in a potentially lethal situation. Everything. Until the enemy android managed to dislodge Connor’s grip and, with a quick jab with the rifle’s butt, knocked him down as well.

Triumph shined from every pore on the bald man’s sadistic face as he pointed the barrel at his fellow android. His victory was short lived, however.

Emptying his clip, Gavin hailed bullets down onto the bastard, praying that one of them would strike a vital biocomponent and bring down the plastic monstrosity.

Although several of the rounds did pierce the android’s exterior, causing cerulean blossoms to erupt from his skin in multiple locations, not one of them struck a critical target. However, Gavin’s barrage must have startled the android, or else damaged the gun, because he tossed the weapon at Connor and bolted away, towards a door on the farther side of the room.

Astonished by the other’s blatant act of cowardice, the remaining human pointed his handgun at Connor. As if anticipating the man’s move, the android detective swung his recently acquired rifle like a bat, smashing the machine gun’s handle into the criminal’s temple. The man flailed from the deadly blow, a final seizure before collapsing bonelessly to the floor.

Relieved, Gavin sighed and let loose the breath he’d been holding.
Connor showed no signs of satisfaction. On the contrary, his steely expression only hardened as he glanced towards where his fellow android had escaped off to. Before Gavin could even register the man’s determined look, Connor was in pursuit, dashing to the door like a man possessed.

“Hey! Connor wait!” Gavin yelled, incensed at the android’s incredible idiocy. “Wait for backup you fuckin’ dipshit!”

The man in question did not slow, did not stop, nor did he even glance at the direction of the angry voice calling his name. Connor charged through the doorway and was gone, disappearing from the detective’s line of vision.

“Fucking sonofabitch,” Gavin croaked in disbelief, both simultaneously awed and angered by the android’s tenacity. And his insanity. “Fuck!”

Connor may have been one of Cyberlife’s greatest inventions, an unparalleled prototype of forensic marvels and a fierce unarmed combatant, but he was a twig next to that other android. A piece of wet tissue paper against a boulder. Gavin was well aware of Connor’s physical prowess – he had, after all, gotten his ass handed to him in the evidence archive – but he didn’t like Connor’s odds against that fucking weightlifter lookalike. Gavin had shot the motherfucker at least eleven times and he hadn’t even managed to slow the asshole! He’d snap Connor in half if given the chance and the idiot was trying to do just that!

Anderson’s earlier words flashed menacingly, only further convincing Gavin of the trouble that the android was getting himself into. Don’t fucking run off or anything … You’ve got to be serious about this, Connor. You can’t put yourself in danger like ya used too…

He had to do something. The noise from the other room had lessened considerably since the group below had been neutralized but not a single other officer had appeared. Not one, not even the Lieutenant, had tried to seek after his wayward partner. That just left Gavin as the only one available – or maybe even capable – of chasing after Connor and the invulnerable juggernaut.

The only catch; a twelve-foot drop to the floor.

Grunting in irritated resignation, Gavin grabbed the railing and swung his legs out over the ledge. Pushing his upper body through the gap, he readied himself for the fall.

“If I fuckin’ break something,” he hissed, “I’m gonna shove my foot up that goddamn android’s plastic ass, I swear ta god!” He let go.

And then he plunged downward, gravity taking its toll.

“Fuck!” he screeched as he slammed into the pile of crushed cardboard boxes. He had hoped that they would cushion his fall, that they would diminish the potential for the damage to his body, and likely they did. However they were not nearly thick enough to prevent the wind from being knocked out of his chest, as if his very breath had been vacuumed out from his lungs.

He laid on his makeshift trampoline for a what felt like a full minute before forcing his aching limbs to move, to push himself up. Pain, sharp and furious, radiated up his leg like a burning whiplash as he tried to stand. “Fuck me!” he groaned.

Nothing was broken, that much he could immediately tell. He took a hesitant step forward and the same pain returned, making him bare his teeth. Probably not fractured either. A minor sprain. Not so minor considering the current situation but enough to slow him down, to turn him into a grumpy and haggard slug.
“I bet androids don’t fuckin’ get twisted ankles,” he grumbled spitefully as he began hobbling after the predator and his prey.

Using the goopy spatter of thirium 310 as his guide, he pushed through door and to his dismay, he found a winding stairwell that led up, up to the roof. Cursing enough to make a sailor blush, he ascended the stairs with as much vigor as he could, ignoring the throbbing pain that clenched at his foot with every hateful step. By the time he reached the zenith, he was more than willing to amputate his own foot if it meant an end to his wobbly tenure as a bowlegged turtle.

Pushing open the exit, he teetered out onto the roof, his gun held high.

Close to the edge, too close for Gavin’s comfort, Connor and the iron giant were fighting. The hostile android had found a new weapon, a large piece of rebar, which he was attempting to bludgeon the officer with. Dodging like some goddamn ballerina, Connor swiveled and ducked, avoiding each and every blow in an ungraceful tango with his volatile dance partner. As one particular swing nearly took Connor’s head off, Gavin lunged forward in an unsteady manner.

“Drop it, fuckface!” He bellowed. “Fucking drop it or I’ll drop you!”

The android wasn’t intimidated in the slightest. Without even bashing a synthetic eyelash, the colossus lifted the pipe above his head and just as he was about to bring it down at Connor’s position, he turned and rushed at Gavin, a metal bull with metal horns barreling after the unprepared bullfighter.

Pulling the trigger over and over, the detective unleashed another wave of .40 S&Ws into the chest of the seemingly unstoppable criminal. Not a single bullet missed its mark but even so, the android didn’t falter in his attack. Just as he came into striking range, Gavin’s gun suddenly stopped firing. His clip was empty. He was out of ammo.

The android raised the bar and as Gavin tried to shift out of its path, he accidently put pressure on his swollen ankle and stumbled from the jolt of agony that tore through his leg. Unable to move further, he raised his arm and his useless handgun, hoping that it would be enough to save his life.

The rod came down –

And froze in midair. Connor was grabbing the android’s wrist, stopping the blow from completing its intended orbit.

Although he was temporarily thwarted, the android was however not without danger. Reaching out with his free, uninhibited hand, he grabbed the barrel of Gavin’s gun and crunched it between his sausage-like fingers. Astonished by the brute show of force, the detective let go of his broken weapon and tried to back away.

Which was the wrong thing to do. While Connor was still scuffling with his other arm, the terminator used Gavin’s abandoned firearm like a throwing knife, launching it at the detective.

Sailing through the air, Gavin’s trusted weapon collided with his forehead, eliciting a shriek of pure anguish, a wail from unknown depths. His vision fled, and as he clutched his face, he lost his already precarious balance, crumbling to the ground.

He had been shot before. Stabbed too. Sliced up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Had his back pushed into a roaring furnace, smelt as his own skin burned away against the heated metal. In all of those incidents, he had wondered if he was about to die, a vague sort of notion that hadn’t truly frightened him, just consumed his numbed attention. Even amidst the blinding pain, he wondered
once more.

Cradling his face with shaky hands, Gavin groaned in abject misery. His entire head felt as if were being split it two, cut in half by a blunt hacksaw. With his eyes slammed shut, he could only hear the world around him. Willing himself to ignore the earth-shattering pain, he tried to focus on the noises, tried to push away his thoughts of death.

The loud clanging of steel on cement. Had Connor somehow managed to disarm the hulking android? Was that fucking shitheaded monstrosity finally fizzling out, bleeding to deactivation from a combination of all of its wounds?

A whirling sound broke through his wall of distorted awareness. Even as frazzled as his mind currently was, he still recognized the rotating rhythm of a helicopter when he heard one. Reinforcements had come at last.

Buoyed by the thought, Gavin peeled his eyes open. Just in time to see the hostile android push Connor over the ledge and out of sight.

His brain overheated. His blurry vision peaked into a reddish nightmare. He felt as though something inside was tumbling over a cliff, falling and falling, down into some gaping abyss. He wanted to reach out, to try and stop that fatal descent. He wanted to scream, to release the beast howling within. He wanted to cry, to feel his tears run down his parched cheeks once again. But above all, he wanted to kill.

To demolish that murderous dirtbag’s face. To pummel that piece of plastic trash until it burst open, so he could rip out its android heart. So he could watch the bastard die, hopefully in as much pain as possible. He wanted to watch that motherfucker’s twisted body convulse pitifully on the ground as all of his systems shut down. Perish.

Enraged, Gavin clawed madly at his ankle, pushing up his pantleg in the wild process. Snagging the sidearm hidden there, he freed the weapon from its holster and trained it on the plastic asshole.

In the few seconds that had passed since his victory, the android had made no attempt to escape and, even more confusingly, hadn’t moved to finish off Gavin either. Instead, he had reclaimed his discarded pipe and was raising it high to take a swipe at the ledge, as incomprehensible as that was.

Then the detective saw it. Fingers creeping over the ridge. Grasping desperately for leverage.

Connor hadn’t fallen. He was alive! Still hanging on!

But not for long. The silver weapon flashed threateningly in the sky, a solid promise of death.

Bone-tired, Gavin snarled as he lifted his weapon and fired.

The back of the criminal’s head exploded like a mushroom cloud of thirium and synthetic gunk as Gavin’s rounds struck gold, lodging themselves in the android’s mind palace. As if invisible strings had been severed, the android seized up, and then collapsed into a strange kneeling position. A marionette’s doll no longer connected to the puppeteer’s will. The detective hardly noticed the deactivation, however.

Tossing his gun aside, Gavin scrambled to the edge in a frenzy, not even listening as his ankle screeched bloody murder at him, pleading with him to slow down.

He could see nothing else besides that struggling hand. He grabbed the wrist and pulled, pulled with all his might, begging his strength to not fail. Somehow, against all his fears, against all the
odds, he managed to haul the android up. Most likely due to Connor’s own efforts, but Gavin’s mind could only process the immense relief that he was feeling as he yanked the other man away from the brink.

He found himself being grabbed fiercely, almost grappled with, and it took a moment for his fuzzy mind to realize that Connor was hugging him. Holding onto him for dear life. Gavin felt a hundred angry cries wobble in his throat, felt the old fury return, smarting at how reckless and stupid Connor had been, pursing the suspect alone. But rather than surrender to those dark urges, he wrapped his arms around the other’s chest and reciprocated into the touch.

Had he still yet harbored any illusions about the sentience of androids, they would have been dispelled, dispersed upon the frigid northern winds, as he held onto Connor. As Connor held onto him. He could feel the other’s terror as the android clung to him, fingers digging tightly into his jacket. It was the basest and eldest of the primal fears; the fear of death, of dying, of becoming nothing. Gavin understood all too well.

“Don’t you go self-destructin’ on me, tin man,” he said with a shaky laugh. “I’ve just started getting’ used to having ya around again. Would be fuckin’ boring without you.”

“My – my stress lev-lev-levels are within optimal parameters,” Connor replied, his voice choppy, like the sound of a bad tv channel. “Self-destruction is im – im – improbable.”

Alarmed, Gavin stiffened. “What the fuck is wrong with your voice?”

“The – the da – da – damage to my zygomatic plating is con – con – considerable.”

With his throat suddenly constricting, Gavin pulled out of the embrace, just enough to get a good look at the quaking android. His jaw nearly hit the floor when he saw the massive dent on the right side of Connor’s head. Thirium was leaking everywhere. His right eye was a bluish, unrecognizable blob, as the surrounding casing had been broken, smushing the optical unit into a pulp. His synthetic skin had been deactivated on the damaged side, leaving the unbloodied places a snowy white.

“Fuck,” the detective breathed, his gray eyes widening in horror.


Fumbling for his phone, Gavin cursed again. And again.

Dialing the emergency number, he barked furiously at the responder. “This is Detective Gavin Reed, Central Department. I need a tech ambulance to my location right now. Fucking now!” he brayed for good measure, hoping that his audible terror would instill haste. “NOW!”

Connor swayed slightly against his other arm, drawing Gavin’s nervous gaze. The android’s functional eye was looking at him, a muddy dot shining unnaturally from a half-ruined face. His wrecked and drooping mouth quivered. “I do – do – don’t want to die, Ga – ga – ga – Gavin.”

The human began screaming into his phone as the helicopters continued to buzz overhead, dull vultures waiting for their chance at the choice of carrion.

Chapter End Notes
Gavin grapples with himself as Connor fights for his life ...
Worried

Chapter Notes

Gavin goes out for coffee ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His head was throbbing.

The pounding sensation was vibrating mercilessly from the still weeping gash, aching its way through his head like a percussionist’s recital, endless and loud. The wound itself was bandaged as best as the medic could do the fly; Gavin had been insistent on resuming his role in scouring the warehouse for evidence and hadn’t wanted to waste his time with having a proper checkup conducted. Besides the headwound and his twisted ankle, he hadn’t been that bad off. Especially not in comparison to some of the others. He had been downright fortunate.

Most of the team had suffered some sort of minor trauma from the operation. Only Detective Collins had gotten off completely scot-free. Chris had somehow managed to break his arm while capturing the only criminal who had survived this morning’s events. The rest had gone down fighting, down to the bloody end. Nearly taking some of Gavin’s colleague’s with them. One last spiteful act against a world that they had tried to tarnish with their illicit wrongdoings.

Abigail Person had taken a bullet to the leg. She was likely getting fitted for a cast at this very moment. Graham Alexander’s condition was far more serious. The last Gavin had heard, the rookie was in critical condition, his young wife and baby glued to his side. White-faced, Wilson had told him that Alexander’s vest had shattered after being hit repeatedly by the assault rifle. Another courtesy of the iron hulk. A gunshot to the stomach was one of the worse ways to go, he had heard.

The patrol officer wasn’t the only one knocking at death’s door. Connor had passed out before the tech-ambulance had arrived. Or purposely powered down to prevent further thirium loss, according to Anderson. Gavin wasn’t so sure. Connor seemed the type to warn someone before doing something as eye-popping as that. And the Lieutenant had been far from confident-sounding. The old man had been as white as a sheet as he and Gavin had waited for the air-vac. The detective had never seen Anderson looking so forlorn and broken, so old and frail, with nothing but unadulterated fear on his gruff features.

Trying to ignore the pain thundering through his head, Gavin glanced at his cell. Again. The hundredth time since he had entered the café just fifteen minutes ago.

Still no answer.

He hated to admit it, but he was worried.

Worried about that fucking stupid-ass android.

As his anxiety continued to nag at him, Gavin raised a hand to fiddle nervously with his hair. When his wandering fingers brushed up against the wet gauze covering his latest facial wound, he winced. His former service weapon – and that android’s throwing arm – had done quite the job at trying to scalp him. Or else give him a free session of craniofacial surgery. Either way, he’d now
have a scar that started on his forehead just above his right eye that extended beyond the hairline. A sizeable chunk of skin had been torn away, caught by the jutting metal of the crunched barrel, taking a line of his hair with it. Another fucking scar. As if he wasn’t ugly enough already.

A trivial concern for another time. A time when all hell wasn’t breaking loose.

Even hours later, he was still shocked and disgusted about what they had found on the third floor of 214 Rosemont Avenue. He didn’t …

… like the feeling that he was experiencing as the helicopter took off through the clouded sky, heading in the direction of New Jericho. It was like he had eaten a bucket of live snakes for breakfast, the way his gut was spasming, in a fretful, uncontrollable manner that made him want to vomit.

"Detective Reed. You in charge here?"

Snapped out of his trance, Gavin turned to the newcomer’s voice.

At only forty-four years of age, Gregory Allen was considered young to be a captain of the DPD’s Special Weapons and Tactics Unit. An uncompromising and striking man, he cut an impressive figure with his broad build and arresting jawline. So much in fact, that Gavin had once drunkenly tried hitting on Captain Cheekbones at a retirement party. Too much vodka had been involved and his crude suggestions had been turned down without reservation. He had later found out that Allen was a happily married man with three kids, and no desire for any same-sex assignations.

Tina had been upset on his behalf. She had declared that the man was ‘one-hundred percent daddy material’ and ‘trash-approved.’ Her heart was in the right place, but she was stranger than fuck at times. Not that Gavin really minded, of course. So was he.

“I heard Lieutenant Anderson was leading this op,” Allen prompted when Gavin didn’t respond quick enough. Maybe his bruised and bloody countenance made him appear as dazed as he felt.

“He was,” Gavin said simply. Jerking a thumb at the shrinking dot zooming along the tops of the city, he added, “he’s on his way to the tech-hospital. His partner was injured.”

Frowning deeply, the captain glanced at the speck with an expression that Gavin could only define as distant, as if the older man was looking somewhere else. “Shit,” he spat. “What the hell happened to Connor now?”

Confused by the familiarity in the captain’s tone, Gavin hesitated for a moment. Then he remembered that Connor had been in communication with him just this morning, prior to the debacle, monitoring the movements of the SWAT squads across the district. “He took a fuckin’ blow to the face from that asshole over there,” he grumbled, pointing at the deactivated android still squatting in that eerie half-kneeling position, thirium still bubbling from the numerous pinpricks littering his corpse.

“Holy shit,” Allen cursed as he strode closer, trying to get a better look at the criminal’s cadaver. “That’s one of those security enhanced TW400s. Those things can take one hell of beating before going down.” Eyebrow raised, he huffed. “Went up against one of em during the rebellion. Killed seven members of SWAT with its bare hands. Had to use a grenade to neutralize him.”

“Woulda been nice to have had one on hand,” the detective lamented. “Maybe we should start issuing rocket launchers,” he said, only half-jesting. “They’d need a hell of a lot more than their current peashooters if more of these models decided to take a career in organized crime.
Shaking his head, the captain sighed forcefully. “You said Connor took a blow from this thing? He’s like a goddamn cat,” Allen breathed with awe. Noticing Gavin staring at him uncomprehendingly, he elaborated. “That android’s got nine lives. I should know, I saw him die once before.”

“He – you – what?” Was Gavin’s eloquent response.

“I knew he was alive somehow,” Allen started with a bewildered shrug. “I mean, I saw him on reruns of the news, when he was leading all those other androids the night the hostilities were ceased. Heard when he was officially joining the force this time around. But damn wasn’t I surprised when he rung me up earlier, talking to me like I hadn’t seen him fall more than twenty stories to his death back in August.” He made a hacking noise, scowling with irritation. “I was fucking tongue-tied and it didn’t seem to bother him a bit. Guess androids just don’t take dying very seriously.”

Remembering the rank fear in Connor’s voice, how the taller man had clung to him, desperate and distraught, Gavin’s face twitched angrily. “They fucking do, Allen. They might have trouble expressin’ themselves and all, but they are just as fuckin’ afraid of death as we are.”

Sensing the broiling tension in the detective’s voice, the captain smoothed his virile features. “No doubt,” he stated cautiously before clearing his throat and changing the subject. “Well with Connor and Anderson off scene now, that puts you in charge.” A shadow passed over his face, and Gavin suddenly felt wary. “My team is helping mop up this place. Most of your people are either sitting in the back of an ambulance or on route to a hospital already. You look like you should be in one too.”

Sneering slightly, a mere contemptuous lifting of his upper lip, he dismissed the idea. “I ain’t that bad off. It’ll stop bleeding eventually.”

Captain Allen nodded without even a perceptible hint of disbelief showing. A man adept at hiding his emotions and veiling his thoughts. A necessary talent for when having to deal with the most heinous that society has to offer. And for eating crow when the brass comes screeching. “Well then Detective Reed, there’s something you should see on the third floor. I’ll brief you on the rest of the situation on the way there.”

Without any further prodding, Gavin headed back indoors, to the dreaded stairs of infinite steps. A minor exaggeration. Only minor when one of your feet was refusing to work correctly. Trying to stifle the groans that kept squeaking out between his barred teeth was much harder than he had first imagined. Thankfully, the captain’s businesslike voice helped cover most of Gavin’s grunts, a show of weakness that he fervently hated displaying. He did his best to focus on the sound of the other man’s words in an attempt to ignore his pain and his bubbling concern. And before he knew it, he was hobbling into a small room, Captain Allen at his side.

“What the fuck?”

The head of the SWAT squad forced out a dry laugh. “Funny. That’s just what I said.” However there was not even a shred of true humor to be found in that dingy, nearly deserted office space.

On the wall adjacent to the entrance, someone had written two sentences in a blueish liquid. Instinctually, Gavin immediately recognized the ink for what it was; android blood.

Two Birds, One Stone.

I Hope You Enjoyed My Little Diversion.
A cardboard box sat inconspicuously in the middle of the room. Unlike the area around it, the container was not dusty, or grungy, or even faded. A fairly new addition to the contents of the warehouse.

Warily, the detective took a step forward. He felt like he didn’t want to see what was held in the depths of that harmless-looking box but he …

… had looked regardless. Two thirium regulators and a jar with two human hearts. Four trophies from none other than their serial killer. At least, that was his working theory. He wouldn’t know for sure until the forensics and IT departments finishing running their slow-ass tests.

They were being played with, toyed with. Captain Allen had confirmed his dark suspicions. All three of the on-duty SWAT teams had been dispatched to non-existent emergencies. There had been no active shooter at the school. No fugitive to be captured. No robbery in progress at the bank. A few phone calls and a well-placed hack had sent their elite out on a wild goose chase. Leaving Gavin and his fellow officers to be roped into reenacting the Alamo with the Albanian mob.

That too, had been stage managed by the sadistic fuck who they were hunting. There had been no androids anywhere on the property – excepting the nearly invincible behemoth. No hostage. Just a trap concocted to … He wasn’t honestly sure. To gift wrap the DPD evidence of his crimes? To send them a fucked-up message? To have the Bregu family’s hold in Detroit weakened? To cause chaos and death? Terror? All of the above? Or maybe none of it. He hadn’t a fucking clue as to the killer’s intention.

He just knew that he had to stop the motherfucker before more people died.

Tapping his fingers on the table, he glanced once more at his cell phone.

No unread texts. No updates.

He bit his lower lip, his incisors threatening to draw blood.

Why the fuck wasn’t Anderson responding to him? Had something happened?

Everything felt like it spiraling out of control. The case. The workplace. The world. His already dysfunctional life.

The door to the coffee shop opened and the metal chimes perching above tinkled, announcing the entrance of a potential customer. To his annoyance, it was not his best friend.

Gavin wasn’t very familiar with this particular watering hole. He had chosen it specifically for that very reason. A joint off of the beaten path, away from the busy main streets of the city, where he’d likely not run into anyone from work. The place was far too cheery for his tastes, brightly colored walls with some techno-shit shrieking from the speakers that were hanging from the ceiling. Most of the clientele – and the employees as well – were much younger than him. Late teenage years and twenty-somethings populated the area, chattering about nothing and everything. He had tried to listen in on some of the conversations as a distraction, but he hadn’t recognized much of what was being spoken. New bands. New artists. New trends. New games.

All new things that were passing him by, much like his ailing life. He felt older than he had ever had before, sitting alone at the table farthest from the door. Lonely and adrift a sea of discontent.

The chimes chirped once again, and Tina walked in, glancing around anxiously. Gavin waved her over, pointing at the drink he had already purchased for her in advance.
"You look like shit Gavin," she said in lieu of a proper greeting. "Like you went toe-to-toe with a gorilla." There was no room for bantering in her tone, only concern. Ignoring the offered beverage, she just stopped and scrutinized his battered form with her hawk-like eyes. Her pouty lips pressed together into a crumpled bunch, a sure sign that he was about to incur one of her legendary tirades about caring for his health and the obvious lack thereof.

Not interested in being both beaten and browbeaten in the same day, he interrupted her thought process with a quip. "Ya shoulda seen the other guy." He shoved a smirk on his face that he didn’t really feel. "I uh – bought you somethin’. I know that you don’t have much time for a break tonight. Got you a mocha frappe-fuckacinno-whatever.” He shrugged arrogantly. “Its got sugar so you’ll like it.”

Diverted, she switched her gaze to the cup he was pushing her way. "Thanks," she said sincerely. Sitting down in the stool opposite of him, she groaned wearily. “You got a concussion to go with that new tattoo of yours?”

“Nah,” he lied. “The skin got a little grazed, that’s all.” Another, bigger lie. He’d had more than his fair share of concussions and knew the symptoms that went with one. Headaches. Dizziness. Blurred vision. Lack of concentration. Nausea. Sluggishness. The list went on. He probably had a mild one and he had decided to take some perfunctory precautions. He had already iced his head. Had taken the bus rather than risk driving. He’d go to bed early tonight to rest up.

The one thing he was not going to do was refrain from working the case. He wasn’t going to let some bump on his noggin slow him down or give the bastard anymore leeway than he already had. And that meant lying to Tina. If he happened to admit too much weakness, she’d run right to Fowler and have him put on a medical leave. She took her duties as his best friend too seriously for his liking.

Taking a swig of her sugary abomination, Tina sighed. The sort of sigh that someone younger than thirty shouldn’t be able to eke out. Gavin wished that there was a cosmic law in place that would prevent such a wearying occurrence. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Yeah, me too.” Unlike with the stern Captain Allen, he could be vaguely truthful with his trusted sidekick. He needed no posturing with her. “What a fuckin’ day.” He felt her dark eyes boring holes through his scalp. “I coulda died today,” he admitted.

“I heard. Ben said that you encountered some sort of super-plated android over there. Took two of you to take the guy down.”

Nodding in silent agreement, he shifted in his seat, trying to get a clearer look at the screen of his cell phone laying on the table. Still nothing.

“You expecting a text?” Tina asked him. Apparently, his attempt to be inconspicuous had failed. His friend had the eyes of a bird of prey, after all. Not to mention, she seemed to know him better than he knew himself. A woman’s mojo, she had called it once. More like fucking witchcraft. Weird psychic bullshit.

“Ah nothin’ really,” he said with a light shrug, trying to act natural. Trying to downplay the fears that were tangled up in his throat, threatening to choke off his air supply.

“The same nothing that you messaged Chris about?”

Surprise splashed across his face, parting his chapped lips and tugging on his marred forehead. He had been very careful about not mentioning his communications with Officer Miller to her. And he
had explicitly told the other man not to talk to her about it. With her overzealous imagination, he knew that she’d likely blow things out of proportion. His best friend had the tendency to see things that weren’t there. “I was just seein’ if the lab rats had finished poking and prodding the evidence yet,” he said nonchalantly. “I’d like to know if they plan on doin’ anything this century.”

Not a lie. Not exactly. He had asked Chris to notify him if any of the tests were completed before his shift ended, which was a highly unlikely outcome. But he wanted a decent enough excuse to contact the patrol officer without alerting the younger man to his real reason. To see if he had heard any news from the Lieutenant about Connor’s condition. A subtle attempt by his brutish standards.

“Uh huh.” Tina’s ostentatiously unbelieving remark hung in the air for moment, like some gaudy blimp on a cloudless horizon, before crashing and burning. “So you totally didn’t message him just to see if he had heard from Hank?” An eyebrow rose quizzically, and the corners of her mouth twitched upwards in amusement. “You weren’t trying to obliquely shake some info out of him? About a certain android who has somehow gotten underneath your thick skin?”

Gavin wasn’t laughing. Far from it.

“This ain’t a fuckin’ joke Tina,” he growled, surging unsteadily out of his seat. With his bum leg unable to support his weight, he had to lean both of his arms on the table to remain standing. “I don’t know what you find funny about our buddies havin’ to fight for their lives, but I’m not gonna sit here and listen to you run your fucking mouth off.” His teeth were clenched together so hard that he expected to hear them cracking into a millions pieces at any second. “Fuck!” Something red oozed over his vision, something only he could see and feel, a blistering veil. Rage. “Alexander’s probably gonna die from his wounds. And – and C – Connor fuckin’ looked like he was ready for the scrapheap last time I saw him! Half of his fucking face had collapsed in, Tina! I’ve seen androids get discarded for getting a little bump on their heads. And this wasn’t no goddamn little bump!”

Suddenly, he felt like he was swimming in some gooey pool, his body heavy and slack as he sunk into a colossal jar of molasses. His sight swiveled out of his control and he nearly kissed the floor as he took an unscheduled nose dive into the table. His mind was reeling, skidding off the usual path. He was vaguely aware as hands tugged at him, pulling him clumsily back into his chair. He could hear someone talking, maybe to him, he didn’t know. Their voice was faint and faraway, a sound from across a great gaping sea, its meaning lost in the vast distance.

He felt bone-wearily tired. His brain seemed to be holding its own revolution, trying to throw off the yoke of his needs and wants, trying to rid itself of the immeasurable stupidity of Gavin Fucking Reed. He wished that he join in, that he too could free himself of this pain and confusion that was his life.

But he could not. Instead, he just blankly continued to breath. In and out, in and out. Until that far-flung noise solidified into the concerned tone of his best friend and his eyesight stopped spinning, stopped dancing to the beat of some alien drum.

“… take it easy. Gavin, just take a couple of deep breathes. The dizziness will pass.” Then, almost inaudibly, she muttered angrily. “Don’t have a concussion? Yeah right.”

“I’m fine,” he rasped. To underscore the absurdity of his statement, he exhaled loudly, a raking wheeze that shuddered its way through his chest. “Just haven’t eaten much today. And I’m a bit tired. Almost dying will do that to ya.”

Shooting him a disbelieving and long-suffering glance, she returned to her own seat, perching on
its edge, ready to jump back up at the smallest provocation. “Why don’t we get you something to eat. Looks like they have paninis on the menu –.”

“Ain’t hungry,” he interrupted. Exhausted and bitter, he snarled. “I don’t need you mothering me, Tina.”

Sighing, his friend appeared to deflate, sinking into her seat as though she was melting through the slats like some humanlike snowman. “Come on, Gavin. Let’s just bypass the usual baloney, alright? I haven’t got the time for one of your emotional free-for-alls tonight.” Leaning back into the headrest, she regarded him with her drooping, mournful eyes. “Drop the self-flagellation. Let’s skip on to the part where you talk about what’s really going on.”

Dumfounded, he just sat there, an immobile, gawking statue. He felt like shit. Old dog turd, caked with that flakey white mold, stuck to the bottom of someone’s shoes. Rancid and disgusting. “I uh, I dunno. I just ah …” Silence slithered between them, a blaring wail of unspoken misery worming its way through his weakened mind.

He could hear Mik calling him out on his unwavering selfishness, exposing the black depths of his conceit. He could feel the giddy relief again, the same he had experienced after Connor’s unwarranted defense. He could see the corpses of the two mobsters, their unliving limbs twisted together in the macabre embrace of the grave-bound. He could see Connor toppling off of the roof. He could feel helplessness again, thinking that there was nothing he could do to save the android. The android he had once hated. The android who relentlessly showered him with kindness, time after time. The android that was in some unknown condition. “I – I just dunno, Tina. Today hasn’t been ok.”

Watching him with an expression of commiseration, she smiled. A tiny and pitiful thing. “This isn’t going to be easy for you, Gavin, but I think its time we tackle the elephant in the room. Before it tramples you.”

Befuddled, he scowled feebly. “Whatcha talking about?”

“The thing that you’ve been trying to willfully ignore for the past week. The reason as to why you keep checking your cell every ten seconds.” Bringing her drink to her lips, she put the cat among the pigeons. “You are worried about a certain someone. Someone that you like. And you don’t know what in hell to do about it. Both worrying about him and liking his plastic ass.”

“I don’t – what the – I mean, that’s fucking crazy,” he ground out, feeling the blood flush into his cheeks, lighting his face on fire and painting him a rusty crimson color. “Have you lost your –.”

“Shut your piehole,” Tina ordered, her tone dripping with annoyance and … sympathy? The combination sounded strange upon Gavin’s ears, enough for him to cease his garbled squawking, his embarrassed repudiation. “If you’ve forgotten, I was there in the breakroom that day you punched Connor. Remember? I’m your best friend, Gavin. I know all of your tricks. All of your pet peeves. All of your quirks. I’d say all of your insecurities, but I know you have more of them than an onion has layers.”

“Just what are you gettin’ at?”

“My point is that I can see right through all of your bullshit, Gavin. You can’t fool me. No matter how hard you try, not matter how much you deny it.” She tilted her head and widened her smile. “You are attracted to Connor. You have been from day one. It was pretty damn obvious.”

“I don’t like …” His speech tapered off, withered away. The flimsy protest shrievled up on his tip
of his tongue before it could even be exposed to the outer world. What possible use was there for him to continue his shabby, threadbare charade? Why bother any longer when Tina had so easily pierced his defenses, had so deftly outmaneuvered his bluster and bravado?

Another truth.

“Yah you do,” Tina said knowingly, bobbing her head as much as she could in her lolling, squished position. “As I said, it was obvious. The way you swaggered around him when he first arrived, acting like a kindergartener with a crush, trying to get his attention by showing off. Hell, you basically tried to eye fuck him in the breakroom that day. Its not like I didn’t totally see you checking him out. It’s not like you didn’t totally stare at his crotch. It’s not like you were drooling all over yourself or anything.”

“I didn’t fuckin’ drool!” At least, he didn’t remember doing so.

“Please,” she enunciated the word with as much dismissive mockery as humanly possible. “You had a big ol’ boner for Connor the second he strolled into the precinct.” She snorted loudly, like a canvas being torn in two, before continuing. “You’ve got a pretty dependable type Gavin, and he fits it to a tee.”

As if his old partner had abruptly materialized out of the very floorboards, summoned from the depths of hell itself, he heard a fragment of one of their previous discussions whispered into his ear. “He’s just your fucking type. Slim and trim, a dash of clumsy charm, your walking wet dream.”

His vicious ridicule notwithstanding, the sergeant’s evaluation hadn’t been wrong. The very moment Gavin’s eyes had laid upon the android back in the observation chamber, he had been instantly drawn to Connor, a light-starved moth drawn to a roaring flame. Tall, dark-haired, with a lithe and supple body. A physique made-to-order, a figure that pushed all of his buttons down, hard. The complete, mouth-watering package. Everything he could ask for in a man.

Except Connor wasn’t a typical man. Not made of flesh and blood, was he. A machine. An uncaring, unfeeling construct designed to fulfill its primary prerogatives. No free space was included in its expansive program for anything real. So Gavin had erroneously assumed.

“Yeah, ok. He’s fuckin’ hot,” the detective admitted reluctantly. “Ya happy now?”

Her smile flickered as her lips convulsed, a war being waged somewhere beyond that pretty face and its dark, sorrowful eyes. “No Gavin, I’m not happy.”

“What the fuck more do you want from me, Tina?” His growl was full of fury, a blazing heat that rushed up his spine, sparking a greater rage within. “I just told ya what you wanted to hear. I fuckin’ have the hots for Connor. An android. Bet ya find some irony in that, don’t ya? The great android hater gets all hot and bothered over a piece of …” His voice trailed off and his jaw jerked madly, trying to give direction to the smoldering bomb embedded in his chest. Near his heart.

“I uh – don’t know what more you want,” he finished in a constricted tone, ravaged by the tremors that were interfering with his thought and breath.

“Its not about what I want, Gavin.” Grabbing her cap by the rim, she tossed her hat onto the table and shook her head, as if trying to clear her mind. “Its about what you desperately need.”

“And what would that be?” He asked, his voice still shuddering as it passed by his lips.

“Honesty.”
Flabbergasted by her simple yet ambiguous response, Gavin just stared at his friend, an unblinking, unseeing gaze that failed to penetrate the intricate complexity of that sole word. He sat there for a good minute, as wordless as a mime, unable to understand her meaning. Until his anger flourished once more. “Are you callin’ me a liar?”

“No.” Lifting a hand to touch her face, Tina suddenly appeared far more haggard than he had ever seen before. As if she had just pulled an entire week worth of shifts without a single night of restful sleep. Without even a catnap to sustain her. “You aren’t a liar. But that doesn’t mean that you aren’t lying to yourself, Gavin.”

“I don’t speak fuckin’ psychobabble,” he spat. “Get to the point already!”

“Look, I’m not a shrink like my parents, Gavin. I can’t give you all of the pretentious terms, or the cuckoo theories like they could. But I can tell you this. You need to be honest with yourself about why you treated Connor the way you did. Or else you’ll never be able to forgive yourself or move on.”

“I already told you why –.”

“A part of the why, Gavin.” Her voice was low and calm and yet it struck at him like a whip, slicing through the thin membrane that separated him from the cold and stark world. “I know you had a lot of hang-ups when it came to androids. The same that I did. The same that Hank and Fowler and everyone else did. The same fears about being replaced, about mankind’s place in a world populated by infinitely better beings. I get it.” The hand on her cheek began to sag slightly, possibly forgotten, drifting down her skin in a painfully slow descent. “You hated him because he was the first ever android detective. A direct threat to your job, your very way of life. But you hated him for more than just that. Be honest with yourself. Put the lies to bed.”

He felt hollow, like the abandoned shell of a hermit crab, a structure of veined skin and stale tissue, with nothing inside. The gash on his forehead ached in a painful unison with his staggered breath. Maybe the pain medication that he had taken earlier had begun to wear off. Maybe he was falling apart at the seams, and the open wound was just a natural starting place for his physical unraveling, his mental unwinding. If everything fell away, what would remain?

He closed his eyes in an attempt to ward off the suddenly harsh lights, their blinding efflorescence, but instead he was confronted by a sight far worse. A sneering smile. Another set of dark eyes that, unlike Tina’s, held no comfort or compassion. A deep laugh that ripped at him. Newsom’s voice. “It’s no wonder you always acted like such a hysterical little bitch in heat whenever it made an appearance. You were always so angry when you couldn’t have what you wanted.”

Desire.

Rage.

The two emotions that had always flooded his senses whenever his vision happened to land upon Connor’s form. He had so badly desired to touch that synthetic skin, to run circles over the mole on the android’s right cheek. The urge had been so strong, so persistent, that it had hurt. A pain that easily overshadowed whatever rationality his reptilian mind had still possessed. He had wanted far more than that, more than a single touch with his rough fingertips. Lust.

But Connor was just a mindless machine. A plastic hunk created to taunt and torment Gavin with his doe eyes, his lopsided smile, and his cheery, awkward disposition. There could be nothing for him but an unrequited longing. It would have been equal to yearning after a household appliance.
And thus Gavin had loathed Connor’s mere existence.

“I … I hated him because he made me feel somethin’ for him. I hated him because he was a fucking machine that couldn’t feel anythin’ for me. The story of my goddamn life.” He could never really have what he wanted. No family. A knife wielding father, full of the same brittle rage. A schizophrenic mother, lost in her own terrifying world. An egomaniacal cousin, intent on playing God. No love. Mik’s career had been more important to him than Gavin could ever be. No control. He was a walking disaster, without even the semblance of hope.

“I hated how he made me feel. What he made me feel. I was fuckin’ powerless. I wanted to feel anythin’ but what I did,” he rambled, his voice quickening in despair. “I – I just wanted it to stop ‘cause I was ashamed.” He laughed, something high-pitched and cruel. “Fucking lusting after a shitty piece of plastic. I was so fucking angry and screwed up. I blamed him for how I felt. And that’s why I tried to – to kill him.”

He opened his granite eyes and looked over at his best friend. His voice cracked and shook, a damn threatening to burst. “I tried to kill Connor because I – I hated feelin’ attracted to him. Cause I thought he was just a machine.” The loss of control. The absence of power.

Sniffling, he averted his gaze and glanced down at his cell. Still no reply.

“I know that wasn’t easy, Gavin. But you had to stop lying to yourself.”

“Yeah,” he grumbled. “Maybe so.” He resisted adding a bitter ‘whatever.’

Without any warning, she grabbed his wrist, and he instinctually turned his bleary attention back to her. “The world is a very different place now. Its still full of flaws and felons, but it isn’t the same as three months ago.” Her grip lessened on his arm, but her gaze grew bolder, more intense. “I get it, Gavin. You felt betrayed by your emotions and you let your hate get the better of you. But you’ve got to let it go. You are allowed to feel what you feel.” He wanted to look away, but he couldn’t pry his watery eyes off of her earnest countenance. “You have no reason to be ashamed anymore. Stop kicking yourself because you like an android. They aren’t that different from us.”

“Fuck, Tina. What in hell are ya even saying now?”

Sighing, she squeezed his arm. “Connor will pull through. Its going to be alright.”

Dizzied by the seemingly nonsensical change in conversation, Gavin just dumbly gaped at her.

“My break is almost over,” she declared with a small frown. “With everything that has happened today, we are going to be super short-staffed. I can’t run over.” Snatching her drink, she stood up abruptly. “I think it would be a good idea if you didn’t just sit here and sulk anymore. Time to go back to that pit you call a home and get some rest or something. Can I drop you off somewhere?”

He concentrated for a brief moment, his mind fuzzy and light-headed. His weary eyes skittered back to the blank screen of his unhelpful phone a final time. “Yeah Tina, that’d be great. Give me a sec. I wanna grab somethin’ to go.”

He wasn’t heading home.

“You are going to have to calm down, sir.”

The receptionist’s firm but wary tone only further served to incite his already simmering irritation,
to aggravate his already raw worry. He was about ready to blow a gasket. Or suffer a stroke. Whichever catastrophe happened to come first.

The Carl Manfred Technical Hospital was the first of its kind, a not so original innovation, but a necessary step towards equality. A hospital funded by its namesake, the eccentric painter, with the express purpose of treating androids and androids alone. No longer were they sent back to Cyberlife for repair, having to wallow for weeks on end in some storage container before finally being examined by a licensed specialist. No longer were the excessively damaged just thrown away, discarded and, if the warranty still held, replaced. Teams of technicians and programmers strove to save artificial lives, with the same skills and urgency provided by their medical counterparts. They were the doctors and nurses of the emerging android healthcare system.

A noble purpose; to save lives.

But at the moment, there was only one life the detective was thinking about.

“I am fuckin’ calm,” he replied irritably. The translucent mask of forced politeness that he had smeared over his face was beginning to slip, exposing the depths of his fatigue and his temper. “Go look up calm in the dictionary, you’ll find a picture of this ugly mug there.”

The receptionist’s LED flashed to a startled red, apparently concerned by his rising frustration and not consoled by his crappy attempt at humor. “Yes, I’m sure that’s so, sir,” she stated respectfully, if disbelievingly. She was regarding him like a housecat watching a particularly mangy mutt trying to eat out of a garbage bin, with wide green eyes and a parted mouth. “But as I told you –.”

“Nope,” Gavin growled, interrupting her rehearsed repetition. “Not gonna listen to that shit again. I ain’t leavin’ till I get a straight answer out of ya.”

“Sir, I know you think that your frie –.”

“I know he’s fucking here,” he snapped. He was far too tired and weak for this bureaucratic bullshit. “I was there when the helicopter picked him up. They said they were coming here.” He tossed back his aching head and laughed. “Hell, where else would they bring him? This is the only android hospital in the goddamn state!”

His second peal of scornful laughter drew every eye to his shaking figure. The first-floor reception area could hardly be called crowded – it was nearly eleven o’clock at night after all – but Gavin nevertheless felt like a hundred judgmental gazes were plastered to his skin, watching him make a fool of himself. But he didn’t give a flying fuck. He was far too worried to care what anyone thought.

Pursing her lips, the red-haired, freckle-faced receptionist returned her attention to the closest monitor and tapped anxiously at the keys. Then she sighed. “I am sorry sir, but there is no record of a patient named Connor here. Or anyone with the surname of Anderson either,” she added hastily. “There is a technical hospital just over the border in Toledo. Maybe he was brought there instead.”

“Why the fuck would they leave Detroit when there’s a perfectly good hospital here?” Clenching and unclenching his fists in a rhythmic cadence, Gavin didn’t wait for another undoubtedly useless and mechanical answer before continuing. “My coworker – my friend! – needed fuckin’ emergency care. He didn’t have the time to take an aerial tour of the Great Lakes on his way to get help.” He felt his face going purple with the effort to not scream and holler. “He looked like he’d just been run over by a fucking tank!”
“Sir, I don’t know what else I can tell you, he isn’t here.”

“Enough with the ‘sir’ shit,” he rasped. Pulling his badge off of his belt, he slammed the item down on the counter hard, making the receptionist jump. “I am a detective with the DPD’s central station. I am not a fucking nobody that ya can send away with some half-assed double-talk.”

One of the receptionist’s colleagues, a tidy looking android with a buzz cut and a crimson LED, went eerily still, his eyelids flicking up and down. Gavin barely noticed the man’s current state. He was too busy waylaying the spooked woman in front of him. “Let me tell you something missy, if you keep tryin’ to tell me that my friend isn’t here, I’m gonna call my boss and have em send the whole fucking department over here, so we can search every last goddamn room till we find Connor.” He flashed his barred teeth at her. “I don’t know what kind of shady operation ya got running here, but I’m angry enough to tear this place apart just to find out. With my bare fucking hands.”

Not calling his bluff, the woman just stood there, aghast, her countenance dismayed. Not relenting in his verbal onslaught, Gavin leaned in and eyeballed the nametag stuck to her blouse. “And another thing Claire,” he grinned viciously, “my friend’s a pretty fucking important guy here in New Jericho. On a first name basis with your honored Commissioner. How about I give Simon a ring and see what he think about all this?”

He considered dropping Markus’ name as well, but he knew that the robo-jesus was still in the capital playing nice with the politicians and preening for the cameras. Simon was hardly an intimidating character, but he would have to suffice. “So watcha say Claire? Shall I dial old Simon up and tell him you’ve managed to loose one of his best friends?”

“That won’t be necessary Detective Reed.”

Head twisting around at the sound of his own name, Gavin’s sight fell upon none other than the Commissioner himself. Just as informally dressed as in their last meeting, Simon was wearing a faded navy-blue shirt displaying the logo and title of the Detroit University, paired with some tan slacks and some multicolored shoes. Gavin absently wondered if the other man eschewed all forms of fancy attire. If so, there was no mystery as to why Simon was the odd duck out concerning the Washington delegation. No superfluous display of class and wealth, no welcome in the politician’s world.

“If you’ll come with me,” Simon prompted, nodding his head in the direction of a double-doored passageway. “I’m sure we can clear up this minor misunderstanding.”

Shooting a triumphant smirk at the receptionist, a fitting end to their tumultuous exchange, Gavin snagged the untouched Styrofoam cup he had deposited on the countertop and slowly peddled over to the waiting android.

The moment the doors clicked shut behind them, Simon rounded on the detective with a stern expression on his ordinarily placid, poised face. His ocean eyes were far from tranquil. They were a raging sea, with greedy waves that promised a watery grave. “Your display was both unprofessional and needless, Detective Reed. I can’t begin to understand why you have conducted yourself in such a negligent manner, flouting the very measures that you and Connor urged me to adopt only two days ago. Why would you want to undermine them?”

Feeling as though he had been punched in his stomach with the full force of an exploding warhead, Gavin stared at New Jericho’s Commissioner like a gill-less fish trapped out of its aquarium. “Oh fuck,” he breathed.
One of the enhanced security procedures he had proposed only forty-eight hours ago had included a stipulation that all potential high-risk targets – valuable members of the android and pro-android community – should have their locations obscured whenever applicable. Including while seeking medical and technical attention. To ensure their continued safety while in a state of vulnerability. And Gavin had just elicited all sorts of unwanted scrutiny to the hospital. All it would take was one social media happy dipshit posting about his tantrum, and some nutjob would be seeing an opportunity to cause grief and pain.

“I didn’t mean to – I mean I uh …” Ashamed at his gross stupidity, he fumbled with his words, an act that was becoming far too commonplace for his liking. “I fucking forgot.”

The android’s blond eyebrows twitched in disbelief and Gavin cringed. “I didn’t mean to uh ‘flout’ the security measures. I’m just feeling like shit is all, and I didn’t think of em. Kinda concerned since I haven’t heard anything from Anderson in hours.”

As if finally noticing the detective’s less than pristine shape, Simon’s countenance softened slightly, the storm clouds over the sea receding as if carried away by the eastern winds. “Have you seen a medical professional, detective? You look awful.”

Resisting the urge to yell – he had already heard enough false concern over his appearance and health today to last him three lifetimes – he settled with emitting a strangled mewling noise. Similar to a cat having its tail stepped on. By a sumo wrestler. “I. Am. Fine.”

Clearly unconvinced, Simon nevertheless refused to push the subject. Adopting his flawless poker face once more, the android observed Gavin in a way that made the human’s skin itch. Like he was being scanned. “I am sure that your work is very pressing, Detective Reed, but neither Lieutenant Anderson or Connor are in any state to help you right now. I would advise you to come back at a later time or else wait for them to return to work, but as of the here and now, they are both indisposed.”

Gavin just blinked, stupefied by the other’s strange words. He felt like the android had spoken to him in some unused language, something created by the overactive imagination of a fantasy novelist. Then it hit him, another warhead. Simon had just assumed that he was here on his official duty. Here to just discuss his case with his coworkers.

Not to check up on Connor’s precarious condition.

Sucking in a lung-full of air, Gavin tried to steady his flailing nerves. Why did everyone expect the worst of him all the time? Could no one ever consider that there was more to Gavin Fucking Reed than a vulgar tongue and a hypersensitive ego?

Only two names surfaced in his mind to answer his introspective query. The Queen of Sass, the Lady of Snark, the most unprofessional quack of all times, Dr. Tina Chen.

And Connor. The last person who should ever be on that list. The target of his twisted affection, and the greatest victim of his ever-present hatred. The android who had seen Gavin at his darkest hour. Who had forgiven him and, against all logic, apparently still wanted to befriend him.

“I’m not here about the case,” Gavin asserted, straining to keep his voice level and calm. “The fuckin’ case will wait. It’s not important right now.” Lifting his weary head up, he stared into the pensive eyes of the watchful Commissioner. “I’m here because I wanna know how Connor is doin.’ Anderson’s being a prick and ignoring all my messages.” He exhaled deeply, trying to cast away his anger at the unresponsive lieutenant. Becoming abusive would not help his cause at all. “The last I saw Connor, he had passed out, was bleedin’ thirium everywhere and looked like he
was an inch from death. I can’t get a fuckin’ word about how he’s doing. And I just want to know that …” He trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid.

“I just want to know that he’s gonna be alright.”

The following silence stretched on for what felt like forever. An eon of pleading quiet, shrieking in Gavin’s ear. The Commissioner’s face rippled, his unreadable expression dispelled. His goldenrod brows pushed together as his eyes intensified their determined scrutiny. The detective fervently wanted to interrupt Simon’s concentration, wanted to shake an answer out of him regardless of the consequences, but instead he trusted the voice in his head that sounded an awfully lot like Tina. The voice that told him to be reasonable, to be patient, to wait. Finally the android’s lips parted.

“Connor is currently undergoing his third reconstructive repair in the last seven hours.”

The answer was clinical and somehow also vague, and his foggy mind couldn’t piece the words together in any meaningful way. Yet he understood the implication hidden behind those obtuse words. Connor was still alive.

“What does that mean? He gonna be alright?” Gavin didn’t even bother to conceal the desperation from his voice. He just didn’t give a fuck any longer. He had almost died earlier in a hailstorm of bullets. His old flame had practically spit in his face. There was a maniacal killer loose his city, murdering innocent people. And as Tina said … he was allowed to feel what he felt.

Simon titled his head. “We don’t know.”

Those three little words made Gavin flinch.

“What in the fuck do you mean?”

The blond-haired android raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “The damage to his cranium was extensive. That in and of itself isn’t a cause for much worry, all of that material can be easily replaced and repaired.” Simon frowned sadly, an expression that looked wholly alien on his pleasant features. “The problem is that his mind palace may have suffered irreversible harm from the severity of the blow. He activated his shutdown mode in order to slow the loss of thirium earlier and the technicians won’t reboot him until they’ve finished the restorations. So we have no idea what state he is in mentally. He could be fine or … he may not.”

Gavin wasn’t a complete technophobe by any means, but he knew diddlysquat about gigga-whatevers and bioshit. What little knowledge he possessed about androids came from his recent crash course over the last week. A trial of synthetic fire, so to speak. Yet even he knew what ‘irreversible harm’ to the “mind palace” meant. Brain damage.

Connor could be brain dead. Or the mechanical equivalent of it. Processor dead. His body might live on in some sort of vegetative state for all eternity but without the spark, the essence of what made Connor … well Connor. No more awkward banter, no more lopsided smiles, no more undeserved kindness. No chance for Gavin to really make amends. To fulfil his pledge to become a better asshole, a better person.

Powerless. Here he was once again, dancing to a different tune but with the same partner. Three months ago he had despised that handsome face, those lavish lips, those cinnamon eyes. All because he had felt betrayed by his body’s arousal, its wayward response to an android. He had been defenseless in the wake of his traitorous emotions and he had willfully unleashed his shame and his anger, trying to murder the very object of his desire.
And now Connor might be dying, and it was the last thing he wanted. The very outcome he had once sought in the archive room. The nightmare that taunted him in his troubled sleep. But there was absolutely nothing that he could do, no target for his rage or his sorrow. He was powerless, weak, ineffective, useless, when it came to the android once more.

Gavin might never be able to tell him how much Connor’s forgiveness meant to him.

How he was a hero to him.

There might never be a later.

“The team should be finishing shortly, if there were no complications.” Simon’s voice sliced through his morose thoughts like a machete through the jungle foliage, clean and efficient. “So we should know the true extent of Connor’s injuries soon.”

“Well that’s somethin’.” He swallowed, a bitter taste down his esophagus. “I’d like to wait to hear how it goes. There a place I can hang out till – till we know?”

Regarding the battered detective with an expression that could only be defined as thoughtful, Simon nodded. “Yes, there is a designated waiting area for the operating suite. I’ll bring you there.”

Without waiting for a reply, the Commissioner set off down the hall in a purposeful stride. Gavin hobbled after him, hamstrung by his rebellious ankle, cursing under his breath. Simon quickly became aware of his impediment and slowed his pace appropriately. Glancing at the Gavin’s ashen face, he expounded on Connor’s situation. “We have our best team working on him. They were all Cyberlife employees prior to the freedom movement, and they all are specialized in the latest techniques of android maintenance and repair.”

The pain in Gavin’s leg began to seriously interfere with his ability to focus as they continued towards their destination. Gritting his teeth, he barely noticed the change in surroundings, deciding to keep his attention on the sound of Simon’s soothing, lullaby voice. “… due to the uniqueness of Connor’s design and programming, we called Cyberlife’s headquarters in an attempt to obtain any relevant information on his specific structure.” The android puffed. “Instead of receiving an email denying our request, one of Connor’s original designers showed up to direct the reconstructions in person.”

“Well – what?” Gavin’s incredulous tone was not lost on Simon.

“I was surprised as well,” Simon admitted as they entered an elevator, glossy walls still shiny with its obvious newness. “None other than the director of humanization, Jason Graff himself. A very …” The Commissioner of New Jericho hesitated as the lift began to ascend with a bumpy jolt. “A strange individual. Not unlikable, just very obsessive. Very strange.”

Leaning against the wall in attempt to take pressure off of his miserable, good-for-nothing foot, Gavin grimaced. “You think it’s a smart idea to let a Cyberlife lackey touch Connor? Fuck, he could want revenge for the downfall of his company!” A thousand wicked scenarios darkened the detective’s mind and he glowered at Simon with as much abhorrence as he could muster in his weathered state.

“I had the exact same reservation following his arrival, but Markus vouched for him and that’s good enough for me.” Eyeing the disgruntled human with a touch of wary concern, he added, “I probably shouldn’t be mentioning this, but Markus intimated that Graff has been cooperating with the federal government’s investigation into Cyberlife’s role in the deviancy crisis. He is scheduled
to appear before the Senate subcommittee next month. As a friendly witness.” The floor stopped moving and the doors slid open. Gavin hobbled out after the android with a sickly frown.

Political bullshit of the highest degree. He didn’t give a rat’s ass about how this Graff might be sucking up to the dimwitted feds or how he might be manipulating the spineless blowhards in D.C. His only concern was whether or not this mad scientist should be allowed anywhere near Connor. The android who nearly singe-handedly exposed the many crimes of the corporate giant. “Just ‘cause he’s brownnosing a bunch of grandstanders doesn’t mean he should be involved in patching Connor up.”

“I am sure that you are aware that Connor is a prototype?”

“Yeah. He told me that himself.”

Simon stopped and turned to glance at Gavin, his profile oddly illuminated under the overhead florescent lights. “Connor may look like a typical android and in many ways his design follows the conventional structures and standards, but he is also highly advanced. No other android can gather and analyze evidence like he can. He can do the work of countless human specialists, in a fraction of the time. He is literately a walking forensic laboratory.” Simon paused for a moment, letting his words settle. “None of our experts have any experience with a model as state-of-the-art as Connor. There is nothing in their training that could possibly prepare them for working on him. Graff helped build him. If anyone in this building can save Connor’s life, its Graff.”

Scowling, Gavin considered Simon’s words. He had never really put much thought into Connor’s status as a prototype before. He had just interpreted the term to mean “threat to his career.” As well as “sexier-than-any-android-before-him.” He had never really contemplated on the specifics. Maybe having Graff around was better than the alternative. And if he was being completely honest, some of his misgivings about Cyberlife had more to do with his cousin that anything else. But just because Cyberlife was founded by the most egomaniacal scumbag on the face of the earth didn’t mean that everyone that worked for the company was an evil sonofabitch.

Plus, Markus was backing the guy. Gavin had never had any contact with the synthetic savior before – other than as a blob of pigments across his television – but he and Connor were apparently friends and Gavin didn’t think that Markus would intentionally put Connor into any danger.

“Guess you’d know best,” he said grudgingly. He motioned for Simon to continue.

Just as Gavin was beginning to wonder if the Commissioner was taking the longest route through the hospital just to spite him, the android stopped in front of a closed wooden door. “I’ve got to make a few calls concerning Jericho business and then I’ll check up on Connor’s condition. You can wait in here.” He bobbed his head and his lips tightened. “I am aware that you and Hank have a … strained working relationship, so I hope that you’ll be respectful. For Connor’s sake, at least.”

With that ominous statement hanging in the air, Simon took off down the brightly lit corridor heading to the who-in-fuck-knows. Taking a deep breath, Gavin grabbed the doorknob and turned.

The waiting room for the technical hospital’s operating suite was obviously modeled after its medical counterparts. Reprints of famous works of art hung on the walls, pretty and relatively cheap. Some fake plants, much like the ones the department had bought, were scattered throughout the room, being used as end pieces for the couch and a few of the chairs. A generous pile of recent magazines were heaped in a mound on the center table. A few children’s books were neatly filed on a metal rack by the light-switch. Some pamphlets labeled the “ABCs of Android Anatomy!” were protruding from a plastic stand near the currently offline tv.
Lieutenant Anderson was sitting in a chair farthest from the door.

Uncertain about the wisdom of his earlier idea, Gavin faltered, balking on the threshold. After a moment of reconsideration, he decided to remain steadfast and wobbled into the room. “Hey And –.” His voice cut off abruptly as he got a good look at his superior.

Gavin was momentarily awed by how small and feeble the tall and grizzled man appeared as he sat hunched over in his seat, staring downward at the hands nestled in his lap. His gray, jaw-length hair draped over his face, obscuring whatever expression the Lieutenant might be displaying. Despair and defeat hung over the scene like a dark shroud, and the detective briefly felt like a thief in the night, intruding on someone’s private vigil, a graveside visitation in the twilight hours.

Prior to the man’s alcoholic dissolution, Gavin had respected and admired Hank Anderson. The older officer had once been an inspiration, an example of what hard work and a strong, determined will could get you on the force. The youngest lieutenant in the entire history of the DPD, Anderson had been the stuff of police legends. There had even been whispers that the FBI was looking to recruit him after his stint on the Red Ice Task Force. All of that had come crashing down the night his child had died.

Standing there, Gavin wondered if the old man was reliving that night. Had he sat just like this, broken and unseeing, waiting for news of his son’s fate? Waiting for the words that would shatter his existence like a stone thrown at a stained-glass window. Waiting for those same words now, the words that would forever destroy him.

And Gavin had reveled in his pain, mocked his weakness, and belittled him.

He would not do so again. He could do better. He would do better.

“Hey uh, Hank,” he tried, not sure of what to say. No response.

Gulping a much-needed intake of air, Gavin braced for the worst and hobbled over to the other man’s position. He shook the drink, being careful not to spill any of its expensive contents. “Got ya a little something Hank.”

The other man’s head stilled, temporarily frozen, as he roused himself. “Go.”

Hank’s voice was low and hoarse, as if he hadn’t spoken in days, as if his throat was scorched and cracked. Gavin’s mouth tightened. He knew that Hank hated his guts, and for good reason. But he wasn’t prepared to toss in the towel this early. He had a secret weapon up his metaphorical sleeve.

Well … within the grasp of his fingertips.

From what he heard around the station, Connor would probably look askance at his approach, but he knew no other way to help the old bastard. Under the dire circumstances, the android would have to just deal with it. If he got the chance.

Jiggling the offered cup again, Gavin grunted. “It’s got Irish whiskey in it.”

Neither he or Tina had ever seen the Lieutenant show any interest in coffee-related alcoholic beverages, but Gavin had assumed that the old man wouldn’t be too choosy under the circumstances. Beggars couldn’t be choosers after all and this was the most conspicuous thing that he had dared to smuggle into the hospital. There were limits to his law bending, bad boy or not. The smell of the black coffee had neutralized most of the drink’s heady aroma, rendering the mixture somewhat innocuous.
Just as Gavin was about to give up, Hank reached out and swiped the cup from his hands. After shooting the detective a suspicious glance, the older man proceeded with tearing the plastic lid off and tossing it carelessly at the nearby trash can, missing it by miles. Without any further prodding, Hank chugged down half of the drink in a single go.

Satisfied, Gavin let a weary smile grace his lips. The peace offering, as late and inadequate as it was, had been accepted. At least, it hadn’t been dumped over his head.

He fumbled his way over to the couch and eased his overworked and injured body down onto the surprisingly uncomfortable seat. The fucker had looked so much more appealing than it actually was. The puffy cushions might as well be made from air for all the good that they did. Felt like they were made from gravel and filled with nails.

Despite his discomfort, Gavin found that he didn’t have the energy to move. Couldn’t muster the required effort. His limbs suddenly felt like they were weighted down with cement blocks, immovable and unresponsive. Even his eyelids were being overpowered by their own mass, slowly sliding down, covering his unfocused eyes.

Before sleep took him, his last sight was of Hank crumpling the cup, crushing its shape and form into an unrecognizable version of its prior self.

“Detective Reed.”

The voice that interrupted his restless sleep was calm but insistent.

Peeling open his groggy eyes, Gavin yawned incoherently at Simon, unable to suppress the noise that emerged out of his complicit mouth. He blinked furiously, before remembering where he was. And why he was there.

“Is there any …” The remaining words were pushed aside by yet another errant yawn.

Regardless, the Commissioner understood. “Connor is fine. He will be spending the night here for observation, but he will be released in the morning.”

Relieved beyond description, Gavin sighed and glanced over to where Hank had been sitting. The chair was vacant.

“Thanks, uh Commissioner.” Simon nodded as the detective pivoted himself off of the medieval torture device with no small amount of effort. He felt like he had fallen asleep on a midget-sized bed of copper pipping. The department should use that motherfucker as an interrogation tool.

Giving the android a final, grateful jerk of his head, Gavin careening towards the door. Now that he knew that Connor was going to be alright, he might be able to get a bout of decent sleep. He certainly needed all the rest he could get.

He had a scheming serial killer to apprehend.

Chapter End Notes
The first person that Gavin encountered when he shuffled into the precinct the next morning, cold and sore in places he didn’t know he had, was Sally. The brunette android was the very picture of nervous efficiency as she waved in his direction, motioning him over to her spot behind the reception counter, while eyeing him expectantly. Trying to diligently ignore the pain that was coming from everywhere and everything, the detective hobbled over, grimacing as he went.

“Good morning Detective Reed,” she greeted politely with a small smile. Sincere by the looks of it, surprisingly. Apparently giving his former partner a coffee bath was enough to get on her good side. Or at the very least, no longer terrify her by his mere presence. Progress.

“Mornin’,” he creaked out, his voice dry and unused.

He despised pointless chitchat. He had never found any reason to meander about, discussing small, unimportant trivialities like they meant anything to him. He was never one to be idle around the water cooler, babbling about the weather or his stupid neighbors that blared their music at three a.m. He used to roll his eyes with disdain and make rude remarks about his coworkers that did.

But he had made a pledge. He wanted to change. And a little small talk couldn’t hurt.

Blinking profusely, he forced his jaw open again. “How’s things up front?”

Her LED went yellow and her eyes widened slightly. “They are quite slow this morning.”

Gavin had to agree. The reception area was a deserted wasteland. Sally was the only secretary on duty from what he could see. The other stations were empty, void of any signs of life, the monitors disabled. There were no lines of worried citizens, no angry petitioners scuffing their feet while waiting impatiently for their turn to be seen. The only other person besides the two of them was an elderly woman sitting at one of the side benches, fiddling with her purse, muttering under her breath. The space was nearly dead.

“Thankfully slow,” she said. “We don’t need a repeat of yesterday.”

“Yeah, no argument there,” he sighed. If today turned out to be anything like yesterday, he’d be leaving in a pine box. Or if he was lucky, wrapped up in a straight jacket.

Sally nodded with a commiserating smile before brusquely changing the topic. “Captain Fowler wants to have a meeting with you and your team at eleven and he asked me to remind you to turn on your phone.” She gave him a sympathetic look accompanied by the tiniest of shrugs. “He’s been trying to get a hold of you since last night after you left.”

“I was kinda busy. And tired,” he grumbled, his upper lip curving. Of course the Useless Old Prick would be angry with him for avoiding his calls and, once he had gotten home, shutting down his cell. He had needed the goddamn rest!
She nodded again, earnestly this time. “Without a doubt detective. No one can fault you there.”

He sighed, mentally pushing away his irritation. He shouldn’t let his frustration with his overbearing, grouchy ass of a boss bleed into this conversation. Taking a moment to breathe deeply, he looked behind Sally, at the words that were being electronically displayed on the background. Although he couldn’t read Latin, even he recognized the city’s motto, *Meliora Speramus / Cineribus Resurget.*

He had once punched the letters into an online translator to sate his curiosity. Loosely interpreted, they meant “We hope for better things / They rise from the ashes.” He certainly wished that he was some sort of mythical bird that could shed its feathers and be reborn. His body was nothing more than a pile of aches and pains today. Fucking lucky phoenixes.

“The captain is currently delivering a departmental briefing in the meeting room,” Sally informed him. Seeing the disconcerted expression that emerged on his face – missing one of those could result in more than a simple slap on the wrist! – she rushed to reassure him. “The meeting is about yesterday’s events, so you and the others that were involved at the Rosemount scene are exempt. Its mostly a boilerplate rundown with an emphasis on the changes that’ll be made to deal with the reduction of active personnel.”

She noticed his fogbound reaction and elaborated. “Officer Alexander is still in critical condition and, providing he gets better, he will be on a medical leave for at least half a year. Officers Miller and Person both sustained broken limbs and will be on desk duty for a couple of months.” Gavin could have sworn that he saw a smirk flitter on her lips as she spoke the next sentence. “Sergeant Newsom has been suspended indefinitely pending an investigation by internal affairs following the incident on Monday. I am sure they will be contacting you for an interview within the next couple of days.”

“Can’t wait,” he crowed. Maybe that arrogant asshole would finally get fired. He doubted that anyone at Central would mind seeing the back of him. Whereas Gavin was universally disliked, his old pal Harry was universally distrusted. There’d be no joyful retirement party for him.

“Yes,” she agreed with a knowing bob of her head. “Anyways, due to these vacancies, the captain has been allowed to pull in some auxiliary forces to fill the gaps. There is also going to be a change of scheduling to accommodate a redirection of focus.” Although there was no one else in the room but themselves and the old bag still fighting with her purse, Sally leaned over the counter and whispered, “I think he’s creating a task force to deal with the case you are working on. Yesterday has really riled up the Deputy Chiefs. Callahan in particular is being very vocal about his displeasure.”

Gray eyes narrowing, Gavin frowned. “Whatcha mean?”

Bending even closer, she was practically speaking into his ear. “Callahan is furious because of all the media attention. All of the channels are obsessed with the shootout. Its been playing nonstop on all of the major cable news stations since last night.” He groaned, and Sally shrugged. “Apparently it’s not every day that the police accidentally take on a mob hideout.” Watching as the color drained from his face, she added, “not that they know it was an accident. Right now they are only aware of the basics. That it happened, that there were causalities, that sort of stuff. Public Relations is trying to keep the focus on the heroic actions of our officers.”

Stomach rippling with dissent, Gavin frowned miserably. He had an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the media, sans his rocky relationship with Mik. They were worse than sharks, forever searching for blood in the water, ready to take a bite out of the wounded. If the warehouse scene was already making the national rounds due to the mob angle, then it wouldn’t be long until...
one of them found out about the connection to their killer. If they could make dots connect, then even some two-bit freelance wannabe would eventually take notice.

Gavin had never been shy about taking advantage of his post-romantic relationship with Mik to further his own career, but even he had never jeopardized an investigation, never handed out confidential information. Not even once. Not everyone in the precinct had his iron – if arguably hypocritical – will. The department had more holes than a block of swiss cheese. Someone would eventually blab and then Callahan’s worst nightmare would come true. The connect-a-dot picture might just be of an unemployed detective if things went south.

“Just great,” he grumbled acidly. Connor may have neutralized the threat of Mik’s journalism, albeit only temporarily, but Gavin knew that not all of the amateur sleuths would be so easily bought off. If they didn’t manage to make any significant gains soon, then the powder keg that he was chained to would go off in his face.

“Well I am sure that things will work out,” Sally said reassuringly. She might not be aware of all the issues surrounding the case, but she could certainly read his sickly expression. “With the captain officially creating a task force, I’m sure you all will have things settled in a matter of hours.”

“Yeah.” He wished that he could be so damn confident. More people couldn’t always be equated with more results. Sometimes the opposite was true. And it wasn’t like their villain was leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to follow. Just hate-mail and cryptic messages in android blood. He doubted that throwing the entirety of the DPD at the case would make much of a difference.

Sighing again, he turned to go. “Thanks for the heads-up Sally. I’ll turn my cell on in a sec, that way Fowler won’t throw a fuckin’ tizzy fit. See ya round.”

“Have a good day Detective Reed.”

Having his mood soured before even stepping into the bullpen for the third day in less than a week, Gavin idly wondered if he should stop entering through the front door. Maybe the entrance out back would offer a better outcome. Or he could always try scaling the roof via the fire escape.

His troubled lips convulsed slightly as his eyes fell upon his workstation and, more importantly his beloved chair. He had never felt so attached to a piece of furniture before. He supposed that when it hurt to stand, every seat looked like a small slice of bliss.

Finally off of his throbbing foot, Gavin snuck a peek over at the meeting room, where the Useless Old Dick was holding court. As stern and rocky appearing as ever, Fowler was gesturing angrily at some poor sap who had probably had the misfortune of being late or dared to have asked the captain to repeat himself. Having been in that same situation on numerous occasions, Gavin couldn’t help but smirk. Until he remembered that he had another yet goddamn briefing with the man in just three hours.

Leaning over to tap his computer’s power button, the detective became aware that he wasn’t alone in the bullpen as he had initially thought. How he had missed Officer Miller sitting at his desk, staring at a blank screen without the slightest hint of life on his defined features, was beyond him.

Swiveling in his chair, Gavin took a moment to inspect his unofficial non-partner before speaking. With a large, pronounced nose, oval eyes, and prominent lips, Chris Miller was a handsome father of one, if a tad bit too conventionally clean for Gavin’s taste. Not that the detective had ever seriously considered flirting with the younger man, he did prefer to keep his work relationships professional after all. It wasn’t like he made a habit of trying to make it with his coworkers. His
disastrous attempt to proposition Captain Allen had been at Tina’s instigation. It had been completely her fault. Well maybe the vodka hadn’t helped either.

Although Gavin admired the patrol officer’s sense of duty – something they shared – he found Chris’ personality to be severally lacking. Far too ordinary. Boring. Almost all his off the clock conversations consisted of long-winded stories about his nine-month-old son, Damian. About how the kid had rolled over in his crib. Or smiled. Drooled all over his favorite shirt. Or something similar. On one level, the detective found it all to be very tiring. On another, he had to admit that he kind of liked it. Good parents were hard to come by in this shithole of a world and Chris fit the bill for one.

At the moment, Chris was just reclining in his seat, his eyes fixated on the black screen of the monitor he had failed to turn on. The man was many things; respectful, dutiful, diligent, professional, deferential. Gavin frowned as he noticed the sling Chris’ arm was wrapped in. He had broken it while apprehending the only surviving criminal from yesterday’s debacle. Pointing at the injured limb, Gavin asked, “how’s the wrist?”

Blinking extensively, Chris started in confusion. “Oh, Detective Reed. Didn’t know you were coming in today.”

Gavin just rolled his eyes. He’d need more than a bump on the head and a twisted ankle to keep him confined to his craptastic apartment. “I work here ya know.”

“Yes – yes, of course,” the younger man stumbled over his words as he regained his bearing. “I just meant that you – ah –.”

“Look like you had a lobotomy,” Jamal Wilson finished for him as he walked into the bullpen, carrying a cup of still steaming coffee. Shooting the detective a smug smile, he added, “got yourself another beauty mark, Reed. And I here I thought you couldn’t get any uglier.”

Gritting his teeth, Gavin glared at the man with enough rancor to level a mountainside. He could never be mistaken as a fan of the Wilson brothers, the only set of fraternal twins that worked at the Central department. The quieter of the brothers, Mathew (or was it Michael? Mitchell?) was almost forgettable with his placid and unassuming personality. The only time Gavin had ever seen the mouse-like man act aggressive was when he and Chris ambushed Gavin back on Thursday, when they had cautioned him about his behavior towards Connor.

His brother was a different story. Jamal had not a timid bone in his whole body. Unlike his unobtrusive sibling, Jamal was a hotshot loudmouth who carried a personal vendetta for the detective. Gavin hadn’t a clue as to why the patrol officer seemed to hate his guts – other than the obvious, of course. Somewhere along the line, one of Gavin’s ribbings must have struck a very sensitive nerve because Jamal had made it his personal duty to annoy and humiliate Gavin at every turn. If the quality of the man’s insults weren’t always so poor, Gavin might have been flattered by all the attention.

Though that wasn’t the case today. He was far too battered to deal with his shit.

Ignoring Jamal’s cutting remark, Gavin turned back to Chris. “What’s with the catatonic state? The kid keeping you up all night or somethin’? Starting to teeth?”

Bleak-faced, Chris frowned before answering. “Just got off the phone with Bethany. Graham’s wife,” he clarified upon seeing Gavin’s perplexed expression. “Its looking really bad for Graham. The doctors operated last night and removed the bullet fragments from his chest, but they also found some Kevlar as well. Apparently, pieces of his vest got impacted into the wound and cut into
his stomach lining.” The younger man sighed, his face crestfallen. “Now he’s got a really bad infection and the doctor’s aren’t very hopeful about his chances.”

“Well … shit,” Gavin cursed eloquently, using the best word he could think of to adequately sum up the situation. “Fucking shit.”

The detective didn’t know Officer Alexander very well. He had only been paired with the man once on a bank heist case that the FBI had mopped up for them by pelting their suspects full of lead. After seeing what the assholes had done to the pregnant assistant manager, Gavin hadn’t complained. Their partnership had been short-lived however, and the only thing Gavin had learned about Graham was that he adored his three girls with an unabating passion. Another candidate for the father of the year award. Move over, Officer Miller.

Chris and Graham were both family men, both the parents of young children. They had a lot in common and their wives were friendly. According to the Queen of Office Gossip herself, Tina, their families frequently went out together and babysat each other’s kids when needed. They sounded like they were good friends. Which would more than explain Chris’ distracted disposition.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gavin muttered.

Frowning, Chris nodded lightly. “Yeah, me too.” His lips grew taut before he spoke again. “At least you got the guy who shot him. His days of hurting people are over.”

Without a doubt, that was true. The nameless, security enhanced android known as TW400 #609722441 would never harm another living being ever again. It had taken over twenty rounds to bring the juggernaut down – with only the one well-aimed shot to the back the of the head being necessary – but down he was. Deactivated beyond repair. Dead.

Gavin had killed a person.

An evil sonofabitch who had been trafficking in illegal drugs, consorting with mobsters, and using Gavin’s coworkers for target practice. But a person, nonetheless. He still wasn’t entirely sure of how he felt about that. He knew every time that he drew his weapon that there was a distinct likelihood that he’d have to use it, that he might take another’s life. This time he had and although the thought of killing someone brought nothing but dark ruminations, he had no regrets. If he had to go back and do it over again, he’d pull the trigger every last time. There was no way he’d hesitate when another’s life was hanging, literally in Connor’s case, in the balance.

Job-wise, things had moved quicker than he had thought possible. The shooting had already been ruled as justified by the Force Investigation Division in what had to be a world record. There hadn’t been much for the rat-squad to do since the SWAT helicopter had taped the entire mess. He was in the clear there and, in what was an ironic twist of administrative hoopla, he wasn’t even mandated to visit the department’s shrink. Apparently, the rulebook had yet to be fully updated with all the new android laws. Androids might be people, but no one had bothered to fix the official procedures of the internal affairs bureau. Officer-involved shootings with androids were stuck in some pre-November loophole.

One that he was grateful for. Otherwise he would be on administrative leave right now. Forced to remain at home and obsess over others having to do his job for him.

Having to sit on his hands while the responsible party was on the loose still.

He jumped at the sound of Jamal’s contemptuous laughter. “Sure, Reed fucking killed the bastard but only after letting the guy nearly pummel Connor to death first.”
Injured or not, Gavin’s anger was easily stroked. Emotionally splintered or not, he wasn’t going to let Officer Buttface suggest such a thing and get away with it without putting up a fight. “What the fuck did you just say?” he growled as his hands tightened on the armrests.

Sensing the danger that was rising in the bullpen, Chris immediately jumped into his usual role, playing mediator between Gavin and whoever he had just recently pissed off. Except this time, the detective wasn’t the instigator. “I’m sure Jamal was kidding,” he insisted, glancing between the two warily. “He didn’t mean what he said.”

“I certainly did mean what I said.” Jamal smashed Chris’ unwanted defense without even batting an eyelash. “Reed hates androids and everybody knows it. Always has and always will.” With dark eyes regarding the detective balefully, the officer glowered at the seated man like he was watching a dog roll in another canine’s feces. “And don’t try and pretend you don’t think the same Chris. You wouldn’t have volunteered to confront the asshole with Micah if you didn’t.”

Head swiveling to look at Officer Miller, Gavin stared with something akin to shock. He knew that he wasn’t Chris’ favorite buddy at work, but fuck, he had assumed that the younger man had thought better of him than that, believed that somebody else had put Chris up to pissing him off the other morning. Apparently, he had been mistaken.

“Well I was worried at the beginning,” Chris admitted, the redness of his cheeks shining through his dark skin like a beacon of embarrassment. “But good lord Jamal, the detective has been basically, uh,” he shot Gavin a contrite expression, “a normal human being over the whole thing.”

“Don’t try to pull the wool over my eyes, Chris” Officer Wilson scoffed. “Only you and Ben were stupid enough to fall for his piss-poor excuse of an apology. I’ll tell you one thing; the Lieutenant wasn’t so damn gullible. He saw right through Reed’s bullshit just like the rest of us.”

“The rest of you?” Gavin started to push himself out of his chair, cracking his knuckles in preparation of the impending fistfight. He wasn’t going to take this lying down, that was for sure. But he stalled when something flew across his vision and struck Jamal directly in his chest.

Whatever it was then plopped down onto the floor with an anticlimactic thud.

Startled and distracted, both Jamal and the detective turned to look at Chris as he began speaking, in a tone that was both decisive and forceful. A far cry from his typical modest speech. “Seriously? You two want to have a go at each other right now? Is this really the best time for you two to have a pissing contest over who is the biggest alpha dog?” He turned towards Gavin and frowned. “With all due respect detective, you don’t look like you should be standing, never mind brawling in the middle of the bullpen.” Gavin grimaced sourly as the younger man’s attention switched to the scowling Wilson brother. “And you! Why don’t you stop trying to goad him and take a peek at the front page.”

Shooting Chris a frosty glare, Jamal nevertheless complied with his suggestion, bending down and snatching the rolled-up newspaper off of the floor. He unfurled the paper and gave it a scornful shake before eyeballing the front page. The ensuing result was nearly instantaneous and, for Gavin, comical. Jamal’s face began undergoing a series of flighty transformations. His expression of cynical irritation evaporated immediately, replaced by one of wild disbelief. That too was only transitory, as he started to blink intensely, trying to comprehend whatever it was that was splashed upon the paper’s front. Something incredibly odd, if his reaction was anything to go by.

Bemused, Gavin split his bubbling curiosity between the two men, his head twisting back and forth like an addled owl’s. “What the hell is going on?”

Chris didn’t reply to his query. He was too busy scrutinizing Jamal. At last he asked, “does that
look like someone who hates androids to you?"

Disliking his current state of ignorance, Gavin growled vulgarly under his breath. He wanted to jump up and pull the paper out of Officer Wilson’s hands, just so he could finally see what all the fuss was about. But he resisted the urge and settled with sneering mildly. He hated being in the dark.

Huffing, Jamal tore his gaze away and laughed. “I stand corrected. Reed doesn’t hate androids anymore.” Then he smirked once again, that obnoxious smug smile that made Gavin’s skin itch like he had an infestation of fleas. “That was one hell of an abrupt one-eighty, Reed.” He snickered as he tossed the paper at the detective with an arrogant fling. “I didn’t see this coming at all.”

His suspicions tingling, Gavin snagged the crumpled paper in mid-air and proceeded to glower indignantly at the object, trying to make heads or tails of this bizarre conversation. His eyebrows began climbing his forehead fitfully, in a twitchy manner, as he read the bolded headline.

**Deadly Rosemount Raid Ends in Rooftop Bloodshed.**

Splayed out on the front page of *The Daily Detroit*, the city’s most famous and long-lasting newspaper – which had somehow managed to survive the advent of social media’s journalistic ascendance – was a picture of two individuals embracing. Both bleeding extensively from headwounds, one blue, one red. Him and Connor.

The picture had been taken from an aerial view and the faces were blurry at best, due equally to the blood and the distance, but anyone that knew Gavin could recognize his trademark leather jacket easily enough. And anyone at the precinct who had heard about Connor’s facial injury would instantly assume the that wounded android officer was him. Smack dab on the front page of the newspaper and, undoubtedly, on their website as well.

His lips parted as he gaped at the photo stupidly. His gray eyes switched to the accompanying text, feverishly reading the words as if his life depended on it. “*Heroic officers prevented the escape of a wanted mafioso in a bloodstained shootout on the roof of the red ice distribution manufactory … an unnamed android officer was critically wounded in the dramatic gunfight that was caught on video by the recording equipment of a local news-channel’s helicopter … the police department’s public relations refused to name the officers involved … Deputy Chief Callahan hailed the event as ‘good policework’ and called the above picture an “example of the city’s exemplary strides in its efforts to improve android-human relations.’”

Prying his eyes away from the paper and its grainy photo, Gavin stared off into space, barely aware of Chris and Jamal’s presences anymore. He was dumfounded. As a career-minded individual, he had always operated under the belief that any publicity was good publicity. According to Mik, a name printed was not always a name forgotten, even if the exact circumstances weren’t correctly remembered. He’d had his credentials mentioned in numerous articles before, even had his official departmental photograph inserted a couple of times but nothing like this. Nothing of such a personal and vulnerable nature before.

His name might not be attached yet, but his tenuous anonymity wouldn’t last long, if enough attention was gathered. He might be forever known as the “android hugging detective” of the DPD if the media got hold of his name. And the name of the super-popular android involved.

He didn’t know what the hell to think or feel about that.

Anger. It felt a gross invasion of his privacy, even though it clearly wasn’t. The fight had taken place on a goddamn open rooftop for the entire world to see. There was no hiding that. Prideful.
What remained of his reputation would be shattered beyond recognition. He would be Detroit’s own humpty dumpty, an eggshell implosion that could never be glued back together. All his hard work cultivating his tough-guy persona gone in a single fall. Embarrassed. It was a moment that he had shared with Connor and Connor alone, when they had both been scared shitless, afraid of their own fragile mortalities, comforted by the closeness of another following a near-death experience. Giddy to still be breathing. Thankful to be alive. Reveling in the wonders of touch.

He was alive.

They were alive.

That was what mattered. Not the possibility of some future humiliation. Not the likelihood of his coworkers mocking him until his forced retirement at the age of ninety-four. Not the certainty that he’d be eternally knighted as the “android-hugger” by the fickle airheads of social media.

He and Connor had survived.

What did his fucking pride matter in comparison to that?

The answer was simple. Absolutely nothing at all.

Rather than thrusting the newspaper into the nearest trash bin or hollering angrily about what a bunch dumb fucks the media were, the detective looked straight up into Jamal’s expectant gaze. Likely he was waiting for some outburst, some sign that Gavin Fucking Reed was about to become unhinged again. Instead, Gavin grinned from ear to ear. “You didn’t see this comin’? Well hell, neither did I.” He laughed dryly. “What can I say? I was wrong about the whole android sentience thing. And I was an ass about it.” He half-heartedly shrugged at the man standing before him. “I know better now and that’s what is important.”

Clearly knocked off balance by the detective’s innocuous answer, Jamal’s eyes widened before he went in for another attack. “More bullshit,” he exclaimed indignantly. “There’s no way that you’d just change your tune like that. You’ve hated androids ever since I started working here and the only thing that you like doing is hating things. Hating people. Hating everything under the fucking sun.” With a disdainful guffaw, he crossed his arms over his chest and snarled. “Everybody knows that. The only thing that you’ve got going for you is your fucking miserable attitude and you’d never give it up. So … I’m not buying the epiphany act you are trying to sell.”

The detective barely registered Chris’ exasperated whimper in the silence that followed Jamal’s accusatory spiel, a pitiable utterance of defeat. Gavin’s fingers were already curling tightly into bunched fists as he rose shakily from his seat. He was furious, the kind of fury that wracked its way through one’s body like a violent earthquake, earth-defying and inescapable.

He took a step forward, breaching the safe distance between himself and the sneering officer. If he wanted, he could so easily take a swing at the other man. He could effortlessly unleash all of the anger that had been building under his bruised exterior, fermented by his panging fears, ripened by the bitter taste of his own ineptitudes. He could reenact his savage quarrel with Newsom, the same brutal play, just with a different actor, on another stage.

But what would that achieve?


Exhaling leisurely, Gavin cracked his neck in a slow, arrogant motion. “Ya know what, Jamal? I
don’t care what you think. I don’t give a rat’s ass about your stupid opinions. I don’t care if you think I’m the worst asshole in all of Motor City or if you think I’m the goddamn Easter bunny. I just don’t fucking care.” He felt his cheek spasming, rage seething underneath. “But I’ll tell you one thing. I’ve got a job ta do and that’s the only thing I care ’bout right now.”

He turned away, not bothering to watch Jamal’s response, not caring in the slightest. As far as he was concerned, he was done with this pointless and profitless discussion. Let the other man simmer and stew. Gavin had business to attend too.

Sliding back into his chair with a grateful groan, the detective focused his gaze on Chris’ startled countenance. The younger man had evidently expected a blowout of epic proportions. Had expected the bullpen to turn into a Middle-Eastern warzone, with all the carnage, rough sand, and religious justifications that went it.

“You hear anything from the lab mice yet? They even bother to read the fucking memo that demanded a rush order?”

“Nothing about the bloodwork yet, detective,” Chris answered quickly in a placating tone. “I already went up to their lair this morning and they’ve promised me that they’d get the tests done in time for your meeting with the captain. I think Fowler must have already paid them a visit and lit a fire under em, the way they were scurrying about.”

Gavin scowled. It was just like those lab-coat wearing, overpaid idiots to leave everything to the last goddamn minute just so they could make everyone else’s job a billion times harder. Fucking useless brainiacs. “Let me guess, nothing from the techies either?”

“Nothing official,” Chris confirmed, shaking his head, “but I was able to get a preliminary report from the gal in charge of inspecting the biocomponents.” Gavin instantly perked up. “She says that there were no usable traces of thirium left in the regulators, that they had been bled completely dry. She did a basic rundown though. Biocomponent #2888 is compatible with an AX400. Likewise, the #9471 regulator is only used by Traci models.”

The detective didn’t need the younger man to spoon-feed him the implied conclusions. The android hearts that had been left at the warehouse could have come from his two synthetic victims. Natalie Slattery, the poor woman who had helped open his eyes to the epiphany that Jamal derided. And Jeremiah, the mega-muscled boyfriend of the mysterious cleaner. Their murderer had left their stolen organs for the police to find. And had executed two criminals to pull off his stunt.

There was no longer any shadow of a doubt in his mind that the human hearts would be identified as belonging to Natalie’s husband and Adeline Babbidge. The odds against that would be astronomical, off the fucking charts of probability. Insane.

He opened his mouth to express that very sentiment to Chris when someone strode purposely into bullpen, making a beeline for the desk that was parallel to his own. “Fucking hell!” He blurted out, his voice stringent with shock. “What are you doing here?”

Jumping like a child caught with his hands stuck in the cookie jar, Connor’s LED went cardinal red upon hearing the harsh sound. The android recovered quickly however, the glowing light rebounding to its serene blue in less than a second. Fixating the detective with his ever-present smile, he veered off his course and walked over to where Gavin and Chris were huddled together. With only one hand – the other was occupied with a brown paper bag – he fiddled with his tie, a stripped black and blue piece of silk that reminded Gavin of Connor’s official Cyberlife getup. Something that he didn’t miss.
As the small smile lengthened into a smirk, Connor titled his head. “In case you have forgotten Gavin, I am employed here as a valued member of the Detroit police force. The same as yourself.”

Gawking like a doped-up fool suffering from an LSD-induced hallucination, Gavin’s brain fumbled spectacularly as it tried to find a proper response to the android’s quirky comeback. “I uh – uh – I know that smartass!” His shouted words sounded more like a squeal than an insult. “That’s not what I fuckin’ meant!” He raised his arms up in a show of confusion, palms outstretched. “You almost died yesterday! Your face was like a – ah – fucking moon crater! You just had brain surgery less than twelve hours ago! They spent uh, I dunno, half a day trying not to screw with your fucking brain, so you wouldn’t end up like some vegetable! Shouldn’t you be at home, resting? In bed or somethin’?” Although Connor’s countenance was politely pleasant, Gavin felt like the android was trying not to laugh at him. “Why the fuck are you at work?”

“As I am sure you can see, the damage that I received yesterday has been fully repaired,” he stated matter-of-factly. “And as you mentioned, the technicians were very thorough in their work. There was no permanent damage to any of my biocomponents. I have been deemed fully operational and I am ready to return to active duty.” His expression softened greatly, and his smirk became a gentle smile. “As an android I do not require long periods of coalescence in order to recover from an injury. Either I can be repaired, or I cannot. No bedrest necessary.”

Feeling like he was the biggest fucking moron on the planet, Gavin just stared at the standing man, his jaw refusing to shift, refusing to bend. He had known last night (or was it this morning?) that Connor had been out of the woods, that he was going to make a full recovery, but Gavin hadn’t imagined that he would just waltz into work like nothing had happened. Like yesterday had just been a hazy dream, conjured by the spiky adrenaline coursing through his veins, skewing his sense of reality.

The reality was simple, something that even a toddler could grasp. Connor was an android and androids didn’t need medication, didn’t require lengthy hospital stays, didn’t have frail bodies that decayed with the passage of the seasons. He could be fixed, or he couldn’t. No gray space in between these startling extremes. No physical pain to weight him down.

As his mind ran amok, a thought wiggled its way to the forefront. Finding his voice, Gavin cleared his throat loudly before speaking. “You gotta have a psych eval before ya return to the job, don’t ya? Or are you exempt from that?”

“Due to a bureaucratic oversight, androids are not mandated to seek the opinion of a mental health specialist before returning to work. The police department is still in the process of updating their policies following the android-rights movement. I’ve been told that it’s an arduously slow process.”

The detective was no longer grateful for the snail-like progress of the pencil-pushers upstairs. Earlier he had been appreciative; happy that he wasn’t snared behind a month’s worth of red tape, not encumbered by his shooting of that lunatic robot. But now, he was practically livid at their irresponsible, sloth-approved approach. Connor had almost died! The very last thing he should be doing is returning to his high-stress vocation without taking the time to process what almost happened to him! He should be at home, cuddling with that monster of a dog of his, sipping thirium out of a mug with marshmallows, being fussed over by his adoptive father! Anything but being here.

Connor might be all smiley at the moment, but Gavin certainly hadn’t forgotten how terrified he had been on the roof, desperately clinging to his life. Gavin could still feel the android’s phantom fingers, as they dug into his sides, begging to not be let go. He could still feel the other’s mingled
fear and despair.

He might be android that was quickly fixed, his cranium restored, his blood replenished, his smile once again intact. But there was no way that his interior matched his unmarked exterior. Machine or no, Connor was alive, and no one walked away from a near death experience without something being loosened or dislodged in their head.

Gavin would know. He was more than just a little batshit crazy after all.

“How does Anderson feel about you coming back in so damn soon?” he asked. Gavin would be immensely surprised if the old man had allowed Connor to leave their house without some sort of struggle. The Lieutenant seemed to be the type to grumble and bark until he got his way. At least, that’s how he was at work. Gavin doubted that he was much different on the home-front.

Something he said must have struck a chord in the android because Connor’s lips flexed and trembled as they diverged into a thin, tight line. His earthy eyes were a pair of sharp pinpricks as he spoke. “Hank is … not happy with my decision to come back so soon. But it is my decision, not his.” Connor’s LED flashed a bright yellow as it spun frantically. “Although I disagree with him, I appreciate his concern for my wellbeing.” The stubborn expression withdrew abruptly and was replaced with his affable demeanor once more. “As I appreciate yours, Gavin.”

“His what?!?!”

Sloshing coffee all over his hand as he smacked his mug down, Jamal gaped over at where his fellow officers were conversing, a look of dazed astonishment upon his bearded face. “You actually think Reed gives a flying fuck about you? Good god Connor, there’s a higher chance it’ll snow in hell before he gives a shit about an android.”

“Fucking little prick!” Deciding that now was the perfect time for an impromptu boxing match, Gavin started to rise out of his chair, again with the same urge to rearrange Jamal’s hideous face. The hand holding the paper bag extended outwards and suddenly Gavin was being barred from moving further, Connor’s arm pressing up firmly against his clavicle. Shocked by the sudden closeness, he swallowed his words. Connor was not mute, however.

“Officer Wilson,” he began amicably, “I am well acquainted with the reasons at to why most people dislike Detective Reed. He has a tendency to be aggressive, impulsive, surly, and narrowminded. I have experienced all of his less then desirable traits personally.” Gavin frowned at the unflattering description being painted by the android. Frowning because its accuracy. “But I’ve also witnessed his courage, his dedication, his compassion, and his ability to change. And yes, his concern.”

Goggling foolishly, Jamal looked like he was suffering from a minor stroke, his hand still glistening with the dark wetness of his spilt beverage. His mouth moved awkwardly, maybe trying to form a sentence, but failing. Likely not even Tina would have given such an impassioned speech about her friend’s qualities. She always preferred to let him swim by himself when he insisted on diving headfirst into the shallow end of the pool, so to speak.

Connor continued. “Last night he visited the hospital to see how I was doing. He even stayed with Hank for a couple of hours while the technicians finished the reconstruction of my outer facial structure.” Gavin didn’t the see necessity of pointing out the fact that he’d been asleep through most of it. A small detail. “So he is capable of caring, even about an android.”

Turning away from the dumbstruck patrol officer, Connor lowered his arm slowly as he kept
speaking. “I would be lying if I said I hadn’t had some doubts about Gavin’s sincerity, or his motives.” Looking almost bashful, with downturned lips and sorrowful eyes, he shifted his position so that he could look at Gavin directly. “I thought that you might be trying to trick me, so that you could have your vengeance at a later time. I thought that you might be afraid of me after … after the incident. I also considered that you might just be pretending. That you were just making nice with me because you didn’t want to hurt your career prospects.”

He stopped for a moment and blinked. His LED was pulsing a vibrant amber color. “But I now know that my doubts were needless. If you had still hated me, you could have easily let me die yesterday.” He took in a simulated breath and began fiddling with his tie. Again. Gavin vaguely noted the action, wondering if android’s could even have nervous ticks. Watching Connor’s fingers fidget as they smoothed and re-smoothed his creaseless tie, he decided that they certainly could.

“I – I was careless. I tried to take down a suspect by myself – without backup – and if you hadn’t followed me, I would have died. You could have let him kill me and no one would have said a thing. You could have waited another moment to shoot him or you could have delayed rushing to my aid. I would have fallen. I wouldn’t be alive right now.”

The detective felt like he might go up in flames if Connor kept talking, kept up with embarrassing him. As mortified as Gavin was, he was also enormously pleased. He coughed, letting a raspy noise rumble through his throat. “Well if I remember things right, I am pretty sure you – ah saved my life too. I mean you distracted the guy when he had the assault rifle on me and, uh ya know, you kinda stopped him from braining me. No amount of medicine would have done a thing for me. Us humans are really breakable.”

Connor’s light returned to its sparkly blue. “I just wanted to say thank you Gavin.”

Lightheaded from more than just his slight concussion, he feebly smiled. “Uh … right back at you, tin man.”

The android grinned, and Gavin felt his cheeks heat up. If he got any hotter, he must just combust. A human roman candle if there ever was one. Connor cockeyed his head and he opened his mouth. “Gavin, may I ask you a personal question?”

Convinced that the other man was about to make an awkward allusion to his beat red face, Gavin nearly squawked his response. “Better than anybody I know.”

Corners of his lips lifting further, Connor’s grin just about reached his warm eyes. “Why don’t you have any personal affects at your workstation?”

That was one of the last things the detective had imagined he was about to be asked – right behind an inquiry on why Martians would want to visit Earth. Unthinking, he mumbled an eloquent, “uhhh what?”

“Personal affects,” Connor repeated in a clear voice, to the backdrop of Jamal snickering madly, while he was still swabbing at his stained shirtsleeve.

Scrutinizing Gavin’s dumfounded appearance, the android decided that clarification was necessary. “Objects that one displays at their desk or work area to exhibit a personal touch. For example, I have a picture of Sumo. Hank has a Japanese maple and a basketball cap he got at a Superbowl party.” He nodded in the Chris’ direction. “Officer Miller has numerous photos of his son, Damian. Detective Collins has postcards from his favorite vacation destinations. But you have nothing personal at all. Not even a picture of your cat.”
Gavin blanched. The bad-ass reputation that he had so carefully developed over the years left no room for his lovable furball. He had never admitted to having a pet to anyone at the precinct other than this his best friend. Cute cat and volatile, aggressive officer of the law just didn’t mix in his mind. And … there was the other reason as well. “What the hell are ya – I don’t have a caaa…”

He trailed off weakly as Connor called his bluff. Flipping his unoccupied hand outwards, he did the weird ‘tv-in-the-hand android thing’. Suddenly a floating picture of Muffin was viewable in his palm. Gavin instantly recognized the shot.

“Fucking Tina,” he growled faintly. That was the picture she took just the other morning!

“I find it strange that you do not show off your cat, Gavin.”

Rolling forward in his chair, Chris zoomed in for a closer look. “A cat? Really?”

He was not the only one surprised or interested. Although Jamal made no effort to move from his spot, his face was an exact replica of disbelief itself. “No way,” he said dubiously. “There’s no way that Reed would have a pet. Sociopaths can’t handle having animals around.”

The detective didn’t respond to Wilson’s jab. He suddenly felt like he was somewhere else, with other people. In a time better off forgotten. He was …

… shaking. Trembling like a birch tree caught in a twister, being jostled to and fro, barren and leafless. He vainly hoped that his mother would intervene. That she would say something, do something. Anything at all.

But she was just staring at the floor, her unkempt hair drifting downwards, creating the appearance of a faceless apparition. Her clothes were the same as yesterday’s – and the day before’s – the tattered, unclean pajamas that she rarely washed. He could not make out her gray eyes, but he knew that they would be unfocused and dull. An all too familiar sign of her drug use. An all too common occurrence. She would be of no help to him now.

Gathering what little courage a ten-year old could muster, he tried to stabilize his voice. The last thing he wanted was to sound afraid. Even he knew that a predator would salivate at hearing his pitiful weakness. “D – Dad, I c – c – can explain. I swear!”

“Explain?” His father’s voice hit him with the velocity and force of a pro-baseball player’s swing. “You can explain?” The older man’s tone was dripping with venom, overflowing with the rage and fury that accompanied his cocaine addiction. If Gavin could dare to look up at his father’s countenance, he would likely still see the fine powder clinging to the stubble around the man’s nose. A thin layer of snow on a scorched landscape. “Then how ‘bout you tell me why the fuck you brought that fucking rodent into my house!”

More terrified for the small defenseless creature in his arms than for himself, Gavin raised the mewling kitten further up his chest, closer to his heart. He had found the poor animal in a back alley behind the theater, alone and frightened, crying shrilly. His first instinct had been to leave the kitten where it was, to leave it to its cruel fate. But he couldn’t.

He had so badly wanted a cat for a pet. So badly wanted to have a cute little furball to cuddle with in bed. He knew that his father hated animals – hated everything actually – but his incomplete child’s mind had somehow made the plan of sneaking the kitten up into his room and keeping it there hidden forever seem feasible. Nowhere in his immature brain did he conceive the possibility that he would be discovered just as he walked into the house. Caught red-handed.
“I uh found him. He was alone and sad and uh … its uh, gonna get super cold out tonight.” The floorboards creaked ominously as his father moved closer, his bare feet echoing loudly through the house. “He was gonna freeze!”

“Like I fucking give a shit!” The shout was far too close for comfort, close enough that Gavin could smell the putrid stench of the alcohol wafting out from between his father’s yellowed teeth. “I fucking hate those things! And I have enough useless mouths to feed as it is without some dumb critter begging all the time!”

“H – he can have some of my food!” Gavin suggested in a near screech. He was well aware that there was little enough food to go around as it was and that the nights that he went to bed hungry were more frequent that the nights that we were full. But he was more than willing to starve further if it meant having a friend to hold. Having someone to talk to that wouldn’t just yell and scream. That didn’t make him want to curl up into a ball, into the fetal position, and just die.

Cold, malicious laughter reverberated through the stark walls of the dimly lit house.

Always a house in his mind. Never a home. Not with a monster called Dad.

“That fucker don’t want the shit you eat you dumbass!”

His father’s roar was deafening, loud enough that he slammed his eyes shut and squeezed the kitten too tightly, eliciting a reproachful cry. He immediately loosed his grip and tried to will away the tears that were threatening to overcome his weakened barriers. “I – I – I’ll find him somethin’! I swear I’ll find him somethin’! I’ll feed Gary!”

He hadn’t meant to speak aloud the name he had chosen for the kitten, but his fears had overridden all his senses, had stripped away all the vestiges of caution. His father was mean and violent, but not stupid. Not blind or deaf.

“Gary, eh? You named that fucking rat after that snail on the motherfucking stupid show that you like?” He could almost visualize the nasty sneer that was undoubtedly cutting across his father’s pallid face. Laughter exploded nearby, and the foul smell of body odor and liquor came closer, the horrible stink of his father. “Well let me tell you a little secret Gavin.” The voice became a mocking whisper. “Neither you or Gary here have a fucking shell. You ain’t got nothing to hide behind. There ain’t nothing that will protect you from me.”

He wanted to cry out, call out for his mother to help him, but he knew it would be a futile endeavor. She was too high to function, too broken to care.

Just like the kitten he had wanted rescue, he too was alone and sad.

“You are a fucking useless brat and you damn well knew I didn’t want a fucking cat. Did you think you could get away with screwing with me?” Something cold and sharp brushed up against his nose. “I think you and Gary and me are gonna have some fun tonight.”

With tears bursting from the corners of his eyes, he could no longer keep his lids shut. As his sight swam in and out before him, he saw the horrible glint of his father’s knife as it caressed the bridge of his nose in almost lovingly manner. “Say goodbye to Gary.”

A fist smashed into Gavin’s temple and his world went black, descending into a void in which horrors were committed. He would wake later, much later, only to realize that …

… there were three concerned faces adjacent to his line of sight. Connor and Chris were closest to him, standing shoulder to shoulder, trying to get his attention. The android had one hand
outstretched, hovering in the space between, as if he deliberating on whether or not to touch the
detective. Beyond the foreground, Jamal was idling lamely, his cell clasped in one gesturing fist.
He seemed to be asking the others if he should call someone, looking for their guidance.

A single word penetrated Gavin’s muddled mind. Ambulance.

“I’m fine,” he croaked out, waving one arm clumsily. He blinked a couple of times, trying to
disperse the visual echoes of the ramshackle house on Bagley Street. A place that deserved to be
burned down to the ground and then, when no trace of the building remained, to have the very earth
salted into disuse. “Just uh tired. Not enough sleep, ya know?”

“Detective, you look like a ghost.” Chris said aghast.

“Gavin, your blood pressure is very high, and your heartbeat is racing,” Connor stated in a worried
tone. “You are also sweating profusely and hyperventilating. I think you may be having a panic
attack or some other anxiety-based episode.”

“So … should I call an ambulance or what?” Jamal asked again.

“No ambulance,” he muttered plaintively. “I’m just tired is all. Its no reason for everyone to get all
bent outta shape.” He lifted himself out of his chair, both of his legs protesting at the unwarranted
action, and he flailed a hand dismissively at the two individuals nearby. “Haven’t you ever seen
someone who’s overtired before?” Chris glanced searchingly at Connor, who continued his
unwavering scrutinization of Gavin’s sluggish movements. Jamal merely shrugged his shoulders
and looked down at his phone again. “Fucking A,” Gavin snapped, “don’t you all have work to
do?” When no one replied, he growled angrily, if weakly. “Get a fucking move on and get your shit
done.”

Grunting in feigned frustration, Gavin hobbled over towards the elevator. Running from all of the
anxious faces that made him want to scream. Fleeing from the sinister one that was forever
sneering grimly in his mind.

________________________________________

“Whadda ya want, a fucking medal?”

Rubbing his fingers against the thick growth of stubble that was flourishing unabated along his
jawline, Gavin made a mental note to buy a new razor when he got off work today. Due to his
slight impairment he had opted not to drive and had taken the bus instead. He would have to tack
on yet another forty-five minutes to an hour of running around, just so he could shave. But it would
be certainly be worth all the extra fuss if he could do something about the beard that was
beginning to take shape. If he did nothing, he’d end up looking like a brown-bristled Santa Clause.

“No Detective Reed, I just want to know why this request is so damn urgent, that’s all. I mean
seriously, is this even that important? Seems likes a nonstarter issue to me. Don’t you have more
critical avenues to purse right now? I know that my office certainly does.” The nasally voice of the
city’s Executive Assistant District Attorney rose out from the base of his cell, the woman’s
impatience as clear as day. “My entire staff is working overtime to keep the FBI from snatching up
the man that your department caught yesterday. The U.S. Attorney’s Office is practically gnashing
its teeth. They claim that you disrupted a two-year investigation into the criminal activities of the
Bregu family. They are absolutely furious right now and because of your blunder, I’m stuck
cleaning up this godforsaken mess!”

Taking a deep steadying breath, Gavin ruled out the option of roaring incoherently into his phone.
He knew that the bitch on the other end, Candice Walden, would not respond pleasantly to such a
diplomatic overture on his part. He also decided against pointing out the fact that they had only stormed the address on Rosemont in response to a 911 call. Trying to use logic against her was like trying to cook spaghetti in a shoe with nothing but a broken pencil and a torn library book. Ignoring her rant was the best solution. “Look mam, this is important. I promise it’s important, ok?”

Candice sighed dramatically, as if he was asking her to fly headfirst into the dark-side of the moon. Why in hell had she been assigned to his case? Somebody upstairs really hated him.

“I fail to see how hassling the Gross Pointe Savings Bank with an unnecessary writ could possibly be so damn important. They are already cooperating with your investigation. They’ve already handed over the financial statements of your victim. What more could you possibly need from them?”

“How about the full fucking truth?” He growled irritably.

“Pardon me?” Came the indignant reply. “Are you suggesting that they’ve lied to you?”

“Not lied exactly,” he grumbled. “But they’ve omitted information that could be very important to this case.”

“How so?”

If Gavin was a praying man, he’d be praying for a piano to be dropped on the idiotic woman’s fatheaded skull right now. Out of all of the competent lawyers working for the city, why had this lazy, apathetic witch been the one to have drawn the straw to be their official task force liaison with the DA’s office? She was undoubtedly the most useless sack of narcissistic shit ever employed by the city and the state. If her employment status had been up to him, she wouldn’t even be been allowed to pick up garbage off the street corners, never mind handle litigation.

“The bank only gave us a piece of Adeline Babidge’s financial records. We can see how much money she has in her account, when and how much she got paid but not who paid her. That has not been included in the crap they sent us, and we need to know who she was working for.” He pushed away an irritated huff. “That’s kinda important.”

“Sounds like a minor detail, Detective Reed. I mean, if I were you, I’d be more concerned with who killed her than who paid her.”

Fucking miserable old sow. He restrained from the urge to begin swearing at the woman. Oh why, oh why had he been cursed with getting his legal help from her? He’d rather literately of had anybody else from the DA’s office; even Gerald Brant, aka Gerry the Slob. At least that smelly sonofabitch actually did his job and aided the police. Gavin always felt like he was dealing with a defense attorney when he was talking with Mrs. Walden. Or else a mentally challenged cartoon character.

“Its called victimology, mam.” He forced his tone to be as polite and respectful as possible under the circumstances. “We need ta everything we can about all of our victims in order to figure out what happened to them. If we don’t have all the facts – and I mean all of em – we could be overlookin’ something important. Something vital.” Letting a sliver of pitiful pleading enter his voice, he added, “we’ve got to cover all the bases, ya know?”

A long, drawn out sigh reverberated through the microphone of his cell, making Gavin wince. Had he been with physical proximity of EADA Candice Walden, he might very well of clobbered her into the next ice age. She’d fit in well with all the wooly mammoths and the other prehistoric relics
that belonged in that primitive era. Hell, she’d probably been born in the last one. She was the natural posterchild for forced retirement after all.

“All right. I suppose I can have one of my junior assistants draft a warrant. With everything going on, it will take some time though. Other matters have to take precedent over your fishing expedition.”

“Great,” he spat sarcastically. “Thanks for all of your help. I hate to cut and run mam, but this detective’s got to bait some more lines and waste the time and energy of even more people!”

Hissing angrily, he hit the big red ‘end’ button on his phone, aborting the call and saving himself from having to listen to that self-absorbed shirker for even another second. Sure, he didn’t always love every aspect of his job – he’d considered quitting on more than one occasion after spending days doing nothing else but filing paperwork – but he never once failed to fulfil both the letter and spirit of his occupation. Deadbeat Walden on the other hand, tried her best to never live up to either.

He sighed. There was no point in spending anymore time trashing that useless woman. He had work to do. A meeting to prepare for.

Not that he felt up to the task. He felt bone-wearily tired. The same sort of tired that one felt after being shot and chained to a hospital bed for weeks on end. He swore they purposely made those fucking beds so uncomfortable just so that the patients would take longer to mend. Fucking money-grubbing bloodsuckers and their greed.

He’d been shot at countless time over the course of his career but only hit twice. Once in the shoulder when he’d accidently walked into a robbery-in-progress at a deli on his lunchbreak (Tina had joked that his stomach had gotten him shot) and another time when a stray bullet had shattered his kneecap. The doctors had predicted that he would be wheelchair bound for the rest of his life, that his time as a police officer was over. But he had refused to listen to such melancholy advice. With hours of hard work, physical therapy, and support from both Mik and Tina, he had pulled through. No motorized go-cart needed. Just his two feet.

Yet he felt more tired now than he had then. Recovering from a wound of the body was nothing when compared to a wound of the mind. Of the soul.

He had always told himself that he had kept the knowledge of his cat parentage a secret because it had clashed with his job description. That someone would make fun of him for it. That he’d be the “crazy old cat man” of the department. That there would be rumors saying that the drawers of his desk were stuffed chockablock full of bouncy balls, catnip, and cans of wet food. That wherever he tread, cat litter would go in his wake.

But that wasn’t the whole truth.

Deep down, beyond his flippant and grouchy attitude, beneath the layers of distrust and the webbings of self-deceit, he knew it was all a flimsy, shopworn excuse. A cover for the illogical belief that had wormed its way into his subconscious like a cancerous sore. The belief that his now-long-dead father would somehow return from beyond the grave and take Muffin away, just as he had Gary. With the sharp edge of his hunting knife. His father had never once gone hunting in the traditional sense; had never put on orange clothes and went into the wilderness. No, his hunting ground was his home. And his desired prey was his family.

Gavin knew that he was slightly crazy, that his childhood had royally fucked him up. Fucked him up well and good. His father was gone, a victim of his favorite drug. Just another casualty in the
endless war on drugs. But even now, he still expected the horrible man to reach out and take what little happiness Gavin had managed to accrue for himself. In accordance with this fear, Gavin had only ever told three people in his life about his silly cat: Tina, Mik, and his landlord. Each instance of disclosure had been hard for him. But nothing like today.

Having the existence of his cat bandied about so casually, so nonchalantly by Connor and the others had thrown him for a hellish loop. Jamal’s offhand comment, given in a jesting mood, had been the final straw, tearing down his paper-thin walls, letting the darkness of his past swarm him once more.

Anger. He might be deathly exhausted and yet he was also angry. How could Tina have so easily shared that picture, so readily betrayed his trust? Sure, he had never told her the exact reason as to why he didn’t want anyone to know of his pet but that didn’t matter! She. Had. Promised! She was well aware of the pain it could cause him, even though she didn’t understand its origination.

Snarling, he brought his phone back into view, picking it up from the conference table. He swiped the screen vigorously and a message popped up, reminding him again that he had missed some calls last night and that there were some unread texts available.

As much as he wanted to send off a flurry of vulgar phrases to his alleged best friend, he decided, against his better judgment, that he should probably take a quick peek at all the bullshit that was awaiting him. Who knows … maybe Fowler had tried to initiate contact again.

Eyes narrowing, he glanced through the long line of texts he had missed or ignored the night before. Obviously, Fowler and Tina topped that list; together they had sent him almost three-fourths of his new messages. Chris had left him a couple as well. Updating him on the lack of progress in the examination of the evidence by the so-called experts. One from the Carl Manfred Technical Hospital informing him that the patient he had visited had been released. Probably done at the behest of Simon.

Their last conversation had been anything but friendly but regardless, there was no way that his onetime boyfriend would have missed the goddamn photo that was being plastered all over the social media sites, that was on the frontpage of The Daily Detroit. And there was absolutely no fucking way that Mik wouldn’t have recognized Gavin’s jacket. After all, Mik had bought the damn thing for him as a birthday gift eons ago. Well the first one, at least. The detective had fallen so in love with that particular piece of leather outerwear, that he decided to purchase a bunch of extras. Just in case one got ruined. Like when an android coworker that you happen to be secretly crushing on goes and nearly bleeds to death all over you.

Why the fuck hadn’t Mik tried to talk to him? If not out of concern for Gavin’s wellbeing, he should have at least been tempted by the prospect of conducting an interview with one of the officers. Mik was opportunistic and career-minded. No, scratch that, career-obsessed.

Things might be a tad bit rocky between them right now, but that didn’t mean that Gavin didn’t care about the obnoxious hair-dying shithead. They had lived together for over three years. One didn’t just walk away from the most stable romantic relationship in their life and forget the other person entirely. Even with all the bumps in the road, they still counted each other as friends. Or at the very least, a means to an end.

What possible bigger story was there than an urban shootout between the cops and an assortment of Albanian thugs?

An unpleasant thought struck Gavin, accompanied by a sickly twist in his chest. Maybe … maybe Mik had finally had enough of him and his volatile antics. Maybe he was just plain done.
However, Gavin had very little time in which to ponder this disconcerting notion. He was snapped out of his flustered reverie when a knock banged lightly against the door of the conference room. Before he could even answer, the door swung open and Tina strolled in. With Connor quick on her heels.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Bonding ...
Priceless

Chapter Notes

The boys talk ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hula girl bobbed from side to side, her bamboo colored skirt swaying in a perfect tangent with the convulsive motions of the Lieutenant’s antique rust bucket.

Calling the 1988 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme an antique wasn’t wrong; the vehicle was over half a century old. Just a tiny bit younger than its cantankerous owner. Though Gavin had to admit, the car was in a fairly decent shape for its age. Referring to it as a rust bucket was certainly a generous use of hyperbole. He had seen no indication of neglect or wear and tear on the vehicle’s exterior before he had climbed clumsily into the passenger’s seat. That of course did not rule out rust entirely, for corrosion usually occurred on the underbelly of a car first.

He was in no shape to crawl underneath and check for himself though. But if he could, he’d take a long and hard look at the shocks. And the struts. Each and every crevasse and pothole that the tires came in contact with made him jiggle and jostle about like he was on the bumpiest rollercoaster ever. A ride designed by the most sadistic (or unqualified) engineer on the face of the planet.

“Fuck,” he snapped after nearly biting his tongue in half. “You gotta get Hank to take this shitbird to a mechanic asap.” Another choppy maneuver and his vision blurred. “When was the last time he registered this piece of crap? 2000?”

With both of his hands firmly gripping the crimson steering wheel, Connor turned his head an inch, just enough so he could safely glance over at the detective. “Everything is in working order, Gavin, and all of the necessary paperwork was updated last month.”

Updated by a blindman maybe. “Yeah, whatever you say.”

Connor didn’t bother to verbally reply to his surly response. Instead he just readjusted his gaze back onto the street and continued to maintain the pretense that Gavin was being the perfect passenger. That he wasn’t acting like a mulish teenager who had just been grounded. Which in a way, he had been.

With his fingers tightening on the smooth surfaces of his DPD tablet, Gavin scowled fiercely at the windshield as if the chunk of glass was personally responsible for his current exile.

Exile. The term that he was using in his head to refer to his unwanted use of an unofficial sick day. A bit melodramatic, even for him. But he was pissed, a sullen toddler in a leather jacket on a mission that he was being blocked from completing. He had a killer to stop. A literal madman who was diligently working his way down a hitlist. And here Gavin was, being driven home. To rest.

The last thing he wanted to do was sit at home and twiddle his thumbs uselessly, with only his ornery bitch of a cat for company. But his best friend and his robo-crush had forced his hand, regardless of his wishes. He had …
... instantly been suspicious seeing them together, wearing nearly identical expressions of concern and determination.

His eyes narrowed, an involuntary action. He wasn’t some simpleminded optimist, he knew right away that their presence meant trouble. Besides that one time in the break room and Fowler’s Christmas party, he had never known Tina and Connor to associate with one another. Not that they couldn’t be friends – both were likeable in their own weird ways – just that they hadn’t enough time on job working together yet. Their shifts had been on opposite sides of the day with Tina stuck on night patrol with Robobrain.

He leaned back in his chair and cricked his neck in a haughty manner. He had a sinking feeling as to why they had barged into the conference room and he didn’t like it at all. He didn’t want to rehash his earlier near-breakdown anymore than he desired having all of his teeth removed with a spatula. He preferred to ignore his problems, or to drink them away when his force of will failed to be sufficient. He wasn’t about to start going all soft and mushy, talking about his feelings like some fucking pansy.

Keeping a frown off his face took more effort than it was probably worth. Jerking his head at the android, he mumbled out a quick greeting. “Connor.” He turned and looked over at Tina. “Traitor. What can I do you for?”

Crossing her arms with a great, heavy sigh, she twisted her pouty lips into a very unrepentant form. “Look Gavin,” she began in a measured tone, “I bet you are all prickly and shit over me sharing that photo of Muffin with Connor here, but I only did it to help you.”

“How the fuck does doing the opposite of what I told ya to do, help me?”

“Help me?” He asked incredulously, his voice unnaturally high-pitched. “You’ve gotta get unstuck. You’ve gotta change or else it’s gonna kill you!” She shook her head in exasperation and brought her balled fists up into the air. “You’ve gotta get unstuck. You’ve gotta change or else it’s gonna kill you!” Her face scrunched up and she made a shrill noise as she shook her head again. Her hat shifted and became dislodged before falling to the ground. Forgotten as she continued her tirade. “You are falling apart Gavin, don’t even try to deny it!”

He snorted derisively but she stomped right over his meek attempt at a protest. “You need to stop trying to pretend that you can handle everything yourself because you can’t. You just can’t.”

Gavin’s mouth worked furiously as he fought to find a response to her incoherent gibbering. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Connor looking very embarrassed, staring down at his feet with a small, awkward expression on his handsome countenance. Despite her compatriot’s discomfort and her friend’s rising outrage, Tina was not slowing her pace in the slightest.

“You’ve got to stop just existing. You need to let go of all of your crap and try living for a change, Gavin. You hide away everything about yourself. It’s like you shove it all in some lockbox and snap at anyone who dares to come close to you. I’m your best friend, Gavin. Your best friend.” She stifled a shriek and groaned in frustration. “We’ve been buddies for nearly a decade and yet at times I feel like I don’t even know you! I mean really! You never talk about your family or your childhood. I know almost diddly squat about your past and from what little I’ve glimpsed, you refuse to even acknowledge it.”
Snarling, he slammed his fist down on the tabletop, making Connor jump. “I dunno what the fuck you are even yapping about Tina, but I haven’t got the time ta listen to you abo –.”

“No!” She shouted, her voice firm but with a quaking edge to it. “No,” she repeated again, but in a much softer tone. “You know precisely what I am talking about. Case in point, Gavin. You’ve got a beautiful calico cat that you never speak about. That you refuse to show off. Everybody else has pictures of their pets on display and you pretend that you don’t even have a pet. There’s something there Gavin, something wrong. And you won’t tell anyone about it.”

“I don’t have to tell anyone if I don’t feel like it,” he growled sullenly.

Tina sighed and looked away, her visage warping from that of anger to sorrow. As if all her energy had been suddenly depleted, stolen by some invisible source, she visibly deflated. She dropped her slack arms to rest by her sides. “You could have died yesterday. You almost did.” She sighed again. “After dropping you off at the hospital Gavin, I spent my entire nightshift thinking about you. Thinking about how close you came to dying. And that if you had, burying you would have been like burying a ghost. A nowhere man. Because not even I – your best friend – really know you.”

Gavin flinched. Her words stung, a sharp and piercing pain, and he wanted nothing more than to counter them, to call them filthy lies, to protest in the most vehement terms possible. But he could not because he knew them for what they were; truth.

He was an island to himself, a lone lump of rock jutting out of the salty sea. No other land masses in sight, just the briny depths and the stormy skies.

Never once had he spoken to Tina about his personal history, never once had he divulged to anyone even a speck of his troubled past. Not to Harold. Not even to Mik.

Connor abruptly cleared his throat. An act wholly unnecessary for an android. But perfect for diverting attention. “I think we may have deviated from our original purpose, Officer Chen.”


Standing up with a huff, Gavin’s sight went blurry and became jarred; swiveling in an erratic manner. For a moment he saw two sets of Connors, two sets of Tinas watching him from the other side of the room. Their faces were obscured; four fuzzy portraits that were devoid of eyes, mouths and noses. He blinked furiously, fighting to regain his vision. In a voice far weaker than he had intended, he spoke. “And just uh, what ‘xactly, is your ‘original purpose?’”

You need to go home.”

Uncomprehending, he turned his still bleary eyes towards his best friend and opened his mouth, giving life to his confusion. “What?”

“You’ve got a concussion, Gavin. You shouldn’t be straining yourself with working today. You need to go home and rest.”

“I don’t gotta –.”

“Don’t waste your breath lying. Connor scanned you earlier.” Tina pointed lazily at the android, who appeared quite abashed, hanging his head at an angle. Not looking the detective directly in the eye.
“The good news is that although your headwound appears very traumatic, it does not run deep,” Connor stated matter-of-factly. “Your concussion is comparably mild. A day of lounging around should be sufficient enough for you to recover.”

“I’m fine,” he ground out through his teeth. “No pajama day needed.”

Shooting Connor an annoyed glance that screamed ‘I told you so,’ Tina rolled her eyes. “Here’s the deal, Gavin. Either you go home now and slap on those sweatpants that you call pajamas, or we report you to Fowler. He’ll make you go see a real doctor and have a real checkup. Probably put you on a medical leave of absence for a week or so as well.”

Sputtering indignantly, Gavin tried to interrupt her, but she plowed over his wobbly mutterings without much effort. “So your choices are straightforward. You can take your chances with the captain or you go back to your craphole of an apartment and take care of yourself, like a normal human being would. If you decide to go home, Connor will give you a ride. He’s gotta go pick up Hank in awhile anyways.” She nudged the android with her shoulder, causing him to gentle bobble. “And if you pick the smart choice, we’ll cover for you. So to sum it up for your dense ass, either you are in no trouble, or you’re swimming neck deep in it.”

Gaping stupidly, he swung his attention between the two of them, trying to assess how serious their intentions were. If they were merely bluffing or if they were ready to make good with their thinly-veiled threat. By their stern expressions – from Tina’s challenging glare to Connor’s sympathetic but earnest stare – they weren’t making an idle proclamation.

They certainly had him by the balls. He was his job, after all.

Sighing in resignation, he grudgingly nodded his head. He glanced …

… back down at his tablet, trying to reread the words that were eluding him, skittering across the electronic page like a bunch of shimmering blots. He blinked a couple of times, willing his eyes to refocus so he could finish skimming the report that Ben had just uploaded to the server. His vision however was apparently intent on staging a mutiny, refusing to work. As much as he hated to even think the thought … maybe his concussion was worse than he had initially assumed. That maybe Nurse Ratched and Doctor Kevorkian were right to send his tired behind home.

Not that he’d vocalize that thought to anyone.

Blinking again, he began to grind his teeth together with a vengeance. He was going to read this goddamn fucking report even if it killed him. If nothing else, he’d at least keep his dentist’s business booming for his entire lifetime.

He closed his eyes and growled under his breath, a low and earthy sound. Apparently, his distress did not go unnoticed.

The car turned and slowed down before coming to a gentle, if somewhat abrupt, halt. “Is something wrong, Gavin?”

Blinking again, he began to grind his teeth together with a vengeance. He was going to read this goddamn fucking report even if it killed him. If nothing else, he’d at least keep his dentist’s business booming for his entire lifetime.

He closed his eyes and growled under his breath, a low and earthy sound. Apparently, his distress did not go unnoticed.

The car turned and slowed down before coming to a gentle, if somewhat abrupt, halt. “Is something wrong, Gavin?”

Sighing, the detective weighed his options. He hated looking weak or incompetent in front of others, hated having witnesses to his defeats. He never liked the idea of giving his opponents any ammunition to use against him. Never wanted to be called a loser again. Connor hardly seemed the type to mock or insult him over something this trivial. Even if the android had more cause than most to despise Gavin. Oh how deliciously easy it would be for Connor to bring up the many infallibilities of androidhood, to verbally run Gavin’s face through the mud and grime. To remind him just how powerless and pitiful human beings really were. How they paled in comparison to
their superior creations, their inevitable replacements.

He lifted his tablet up out of his lap and held it over the cupholder. “Detective Collins finished interrogatin’ the guy that Chris and Abby caught yesterday. Ya know the one, the only dirtbag who didn’t leave Rosemount in a body bag.”

Connor grabbed the device and Gavin began messaging his temples, drawing circles lightly with his rough fingers, trying to relieve the pressure building beneath the skin. His headache had returned, an angry knot behind his eyes, a blob of aching resentment. The Tylenol he had taken this morning before coming into work had either run its course early or else was failing to mask the pain. Maybe some bedrest would do him some good.

“The individual in question, Driton Lekaj, has admitted to having possessed, manufactured, distributed, and trafficked in an illegal substance, namely red ice. He claims that he and his fellow criminals never once hurt an android in the process of conducting his illicit activities. He says that they procured their thirium from robbing android repair facilities,” Connor stated thoughtfully. “He says that their boss didn’t want to give the authorities any more of a reason to hunt them down.”

Gavin frowned, his eyes still clenched shut. The man could easily be lying to save his own hide; committing a murder during the commission of another crime was an offense that was punishable with death under Michigan state law. But on the other hand, the investigation into the warehouse had found no evidence of android corpses, no miscellaneous parts. Only cases of thirium. Besides the creepy box with the regulators and human hearts, that is.

“They been able to corroborate any of his statement yet? Or is all a pack of fuckin’ lies?”

“Give me one moment please,” Connor’s voice asked politely. Although Gavin could view nothing but the immense blackness that lay behind his eyelids, he could imagine the android sitting up in his seat, his long eyelashes fluttering ever so gently, his LED flashing that daffodil yellow as he connected with Collin’s cell. The image brought a small smile upon his chapped lips.

“Detective Collins and Officer Wilson are currently engaged with verifying the truthfulness of the suspect. They have only just begun inspecting the packages of thirium from the crime scene and they cannot, with any certainty, determine the veracity of the Mr. Lekaj’s statement just yet.” Foiled, Gavin grunted miserably. “That being said, Detective Collins has just informed me that he believes the suspect’s story. The Narcotics Division has been investigating a string of thirium thefts perpetrated by a heavily armed group. There is a high probability that the crew we took down yesterday was responsible for the thefts.”

“What did the little thug say about the gift package upstairs?” Gavin already felt like he knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it for himself.

“He denies any involvement in our killings. Says that none of his people had anything to do with it at all, that they had no reason to murder our victims.”

Using far more force than before, Gavin pushed harder against his temples. Maybe brutality would win were sensitivity had failed. If taking a baseball bat to his forehead would help, he’d be more than willing to swing a metal one himself. “Whaddya think, Connor? Got any thoughts ‘bout this goddamn mess of ours?” His lips curved upwards once more, unfolding into a generous smirk. “Impress me with the wonders of technology.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you, Gavin, but without more concrete evidence I am unable to formulate a likely hypothesis for our case.” Connor sounded a tad bit annoyed at his having to voice that. “As of right now, I am unable to find any link between the Slatterys, Ms. Babidge and her boyfriend,
and the mobsters. It appears that none of them have anything at all in common with one another. Other than their connection with our killer. Thomas and Natalie were active participants within the android community. Both had spent time in New Jericho outside of Mrs. Slattery’s work hours. Ms. Babidge and Jeremiah only associated within her very tight-knit family. The Rosemont group never crossed paths with either of them, from what we can tell now.”

The detective nodded, still listening to his temporary partner despite the growing agony that was trying to burst out through his eye sockets. Connor continued his rundown of their case. “Out of all of our victims, only the Slatterys were intended targets. According to the message that your Mr. Gladkowski received,” he amended. “They were allegedly murdered as part of some retribution against the individual known as the Unfaithful.”

“It’s all just so fucked up,” Gavin interjected. “The nutjob says he’s following some list then he goes off script. First, he kills Adeline and Jeremiah. For some fuckin’ bargain, so he says. And unlike the others, he hasn’t bothered to display their bodies. Something ain’t adding up there.” He exhaled wearily. “Then yesterday he tried to send us all to our deaths by entangling us with the fucking mob.”

“Our killer appears both organized and disorganized,” Connor observed in a pensive tone. “He is operating on a clear mission of revenge, against people that he believes has somehow wronged him. He has yet to leave any evidence that could be used to identify him. Everything that we have, is something that he wants us to possess. He managed to hack the security system of a bank with ease. He is highly intelligent, resourceful, clever, and calculating.”

“But he’s also off his rocker,” the detective grumbled. “I mean, like shit, he’s more off his list than he is on. Four of the six people he’s murdered had nothin’ to do with his insane plot. And technically his little setup yesterday makes him legally culpable in the deaths of all the people we killed.”

“I don’t know, Gavin,” Connor admitted in a quiet voice. “I just don’t know.”

Prying open his eyes, Gavin was immediately assaulted by the bright glare of sunlight that was shining off of snowbank outside his window. He raised a hand to shield his eyes and blinked furiously to dispel the momentary blindness. Cursing mentally, he turned his head towards the android. “These things take time. It sucks and all, but it’s a fact. Can’t rush good detective work.”

“I suppose so,” Connor conceded reluctantly. He glanced down at Gavin’s tablet and the screen went dark, as if powered off. He turned his gaze towards the passenger’s seat and handed the device over. “You may as well have this back.”

Snatching the object out of the android’s grasp, Gavin huffed. “Hey! What did you do that for?” He asked as he smacked the ‘on’ button. “There was a video attached to the file. It’s gotta be of Collins’ interrogation.” Ben might be a twenty-year veteran of the force, but he was far too trusting, far too relaxed for Gavin’s liking. He could have easily missed something. The detective needed to review his colleague’s questioning of Lekaj for himself.

The tablet remained dark. He hit the button again and gave the hunk of plastic a shake for good measure. Still nothing. “What the fuck did ya do?”

“I disabled its software,” Connor said plainly, as if he was discussing the weather.

Dumfounded, Gavin swiveled his attention to the other man, his mouth convulsing. “What the hell did you do that for? I gotta –.”
“Focus on getting some rest,” Connor interrupted, finishing his sentence. “In the unlikely event that you are somehow able to reactive your device, you will find that I have taken the added precaution of changing your password. Your new and temporary password is over fifty characters long, made up of a random sequence of numbers and letters. There is no possible way that you’d be able to guess it. It would also take a password cracking program days to find the correct solution, if not weeks.” His voice became low and soft, a drastic change from the prior lecturing tone. “I’ll fix it tomorrow when I come to pick you up. No work today, Gavin.”

Breathing heavily, the detective glared resentfully at the android. For the briefest of moments, he considered snapping at Connor, yelling at him, swearing at him. Connor had fucking hacked him! Committed an illegal act! Had tampered with official police equipment.

Yet Connor didn’t seem nervous in the slightest. He just stared at Gavin with those wide puppy eyes of his, practically oozing concern. He titled his head and his renegade swath of hair followed suit, dangling away from his forehead, hanging apart.

Gavin gulped. He really really wished that he hadn’t acknowledged his attraction to the other man last night. Sure, it was still a secret; Connor was clearly oblivious and only Tina knew for certain, but he had been doing so well with just outright ignoring his stupid feelings. And he was finding it harder and harder to pretend that they didn’t exist now that he had spoken the words out loud.

Whoever had designed Connor must have snuck into Gavin’s dreams beforehand, must have stolen bits and pieces of his likes and his desires. Must have raided the chunk of his brain that contained his lust and carried away all of his most valued treasures. Because Connor had em all. Those gorgeous eyes that were so fucking expressive. Those kissable lips that were frequently slanted on one side, regardless of whether he was talking or smiling. That perfectly colored skin – not too pale, not too tan. He even adored the small imperfections, the carefully placed synthetic moles. And of course, his goddamn wonderful crop of brown hair. Gavin so badly wanted to reach over and run his fingers through those brown strands, to see if Connor’s artificial hair felt the same as a humans. Or maybe even better.

He didn’t know if he wanted to kiss or shoot Connor’s designer.

But he couldn’t lay all the blame at Cyberlife’s door. Connor was his own person, a unique individual who had broken free of his programming and decided out of all the things he could be, that he would be nice. And kind and considerate. And warm and courageous (if also reckless). But above all, he was nice to Gavin.

As he was right now. Perpetrating a crime, a felony at that! Just to prevent the detective from working from home, to make certain that he gave his jostled brain a day of rest and recuperation. Not too mention, Connor had gone miles out of his way – he and Hank lived on the other end of the city – to give him a ride home so he didn’t have to take the public bus, saving him from another rank and smelly excursion.

Swallowing his anger, Gavin exhaled. “With you around, it’s like I’ve got a fuckin’ nanny.”

“No, Gavin, not a nanny,” Connor said. “A friend.”

Speechlessness was not a condition that Gavin was overly familiar with. Whether it was busting some fuckwad’s balls or sweet-talking a sexy piece of ass into a one-night-stand, he usually could blurt out something fitting, if not exactly appropriate. Yet the more time he spent hanging around with Connor, the more he became acquainted with feeling tongue-tied and cotton-brained.

Friend. Connor had called him a friend. The person who had he tried to murder in cold blood was
calling him a friend, of all things. Had their tables been reversed, Gavin would have used a plethora of vastly different terms to describe that relationship.

“A friend?” He spoke the word like he didn’t truly comprehend its meaning, as if a thought-thief had stolen the very definition from his brain. As if the evil little fairy had scraped away all the gray matter pertaining to the word and tossed it into a miniscule garbage chute. Throwing it out of his head and out of his life.

Connor nodded, an earnest and slow motion. “Yes Gavin, a friend.”


He didn’t deserve Connor’s friendship, hadn’t earned that particular honor. But his past transgressions didn’t appear to matter to the android. Forgiveness was such an alien concept.

As he continued to stare into Connor’s face, he searched for even a sign of mockery, for a hint of deception, for the shadow of doubt. But his roving granite eyes found nothing but sincerity. No traces of anything untoward. He had never found them before and he didn’t now. There was naught but a genuine openness with the android, a sort of childlike innocence.

“I – uh …”

He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t find the right words. The alphabet itself seemed to be eluding him. Playing an inopportune game of hide and seek.

Maybe he could find the words at another time. Later.

No. Not later again. So much could happen before later would come once more.

Now.

“I ah – I’m not good with this kinda shit,” he started, his voice uneven and odd-sounding to his own ears. He had been saying that a lot recently; he was beginning to sound like a broken record. “I dunno what the hell to say. I mean, uh fuck, I’m just a fucking asshole who is used ta being a pain in everybody’s ass. I don’t really go about saying this sort of shit.” He grunted, trying to calm his nerves. He could feel his face flushing at the blood flooded his cheeks. “I guess I – what I’m tryin’ to say is – is thank you.”

Connor blinked in confusion. “You are thanking me for disabling your tablet?”

“No. I mean yes. Kinda I guess,” Gavin sputtered helplessly. Why the fuck did his brain seem to always abdicate all of its responsibilities and functions whenever the android was around? Watching him so intently, waiting patiently, the model listener. “I mean uh …”

He was beginning to seriously regret at having given up smoking. Without a doubt, it was an unhealthy and unsanitary habit, one that came with its fair share of social stigmas, but it was a tailor-made solution for a moment like this. The ideal crutch for when he was flailing about, failing to put his meandering thoughts into something that resembled intelligible discord. What he wouldn’t give to be sitting in his Bullitt right now and not the Lieutenant’s lemon. Inside his vehicle’ glove-compartment lay an unopened pack of cigarettes and his grandfather’s trusty lighter. He could use them right now; he could feel the weight of the other’s eyes on him like a laser, progressively increasing his anxiety.
If only he had a cigarette to cradle between his calloused fingers, to perch between his dry lips, to take a quick puff of. Sure, the nicotine was poison but what wasn’t when it came to this detrimental thing called life? From the moment a human was born, weren’t they already slowly dying? Even before the umbilical cord was severed their life was beginning to drain away, fade into the ever-hungry abyss of time. Some just reached the end of the path quicker than others.

All the dime-store philosophy aside, he’d have to do without. “What I mean is I’m thankful for – for you.” If his face wasn’t already the color of a chimney stack, it certainly in hell would be now. “Ah fuck,” Gavin exclaimed as humiliation began to creep up his spine.

But a weary sort of resignation had settled over him as well, bolstered by the sudden reappearance of his dogged determination. “You’re fuckin’ nice to me, Connor. And not just the fake kind of nice either. Like real nice.” He was fully aware that he was talking at third-grade level, sounding like some half-witted buffoon, but his brain had yet to kick into full gear and this was the best he could manage under the circumstances. At least he was honest, if not articulate. “Like I really appreciate your uh – your kindness.”

Connor blinked, and his countenance took on a studious cast, but thankfully he said nothing. Gavin didn’t want to be interrupted. He felt that he might choke on his words if he didn’t get to speak them right this second. “Only Tina’s nice to me. Everybody else just puts up with me. Hell, if my clearance rate wasn’t higher than the department’s average Fowler woulda canned my ass years ago. He’s been lookin’ for an excuse to drop me since I joined the precinct.”

That last statement wasn’t strictly true. The captain was certainly a severe authoritarian who had little patience for the detective’s temperamental mood swings, but he wasn’t wasteful. He wasn’t petty. All the ire that Gavin owned, was ire that he had rightly earned. Fowler had not been predisposed to dislike him, their tremulous relationship was that of Gavin’s own abrasive making. But all of that unimportant right now.

Gavin cleared his throat as he tried to collect his wayward thoughts. “But ah anyways,” he mumbled, “I just wanted to say thanks. For havin’ my back and ya know, all that shit. For sticking up for me with Jamal today and for being nice after Mik yesterday. It uh – means a fuckton more than you know.” He wanted to pull his eyes off of the other’s face, to look away as he said his final piece, but he wasn’t going to go all chickenshit just before he crossed the finish line. “Specially you forgiving me. That I don’t get – I mean, I was a fuckin’ asshole to ya. More than just an asshole, a fuckin’ monster. Yet you’ve forgiven me.”

Gavin could feel the tears that were beginning to well up, beginning to take form. His treatment of the android had been no different than Newsom’s shooting of that unarmed, slow man. No different than his father’s sadistic skinning of that poor kitten, or of his abuse of his wife and child. “I uh – I might not know much about you, Connor – and I hope ta change that in that future – but I gotta say this. You might not think of yourself as a hero, but I do.”

There. He finally said it. A day late and a dollar short, but it was done.

The android stilled. Gavin wasn’t sure what he had been expecting to follow his declaration – maybe laughter, maybe scorn, maybe disbelief – but what suspiciously appeared to be a shutdown certainly hadn’t crossed his mind. Connor just sat there, his fixed expression still attentive and thoughtful. Gavin became concerned after he realized that the other man had stopped blinking, as if the protocol or .exe function had ceased to exist. There was no simulated breathing either.

Worry began to boil into panic and Gavin fumbled for his cell, wondering if he had somehow broken Connor. Just as he managed to free his phone, the motionless android sprung back to life. “Thank you, Gavin. I am glad that we can be friends now.”
Moaning in relief, Gavin chose not to revert to his typical prick self and to not curse Connor into oblivion for giving him a scare. Instead, he focused on the positives. The android wasn’t suffering from some sort of digital stroke and the detective wasn’t going to be brutally murdered by the man’s adoptive father. He doubted that Hank would be as forgiving as his robo-son, even if Gavin had only hurt Connor with kindness. His colleagues would never locate his corpse after the Lieutenant was done with him. “Yeah me too.”

Leaning back into the hideously red leather seat, Gavin glanced up at the ceiling. Awkward did not begin to cover what he was feeling. He was having the same unpleasant, wanted sensation he had the day that his grandmother had caught him looking at porn sites, with nothing more than a sock on. Exposing himself – so to speak – to the android was even worse, if also somewhat liberating. Regardless, he wanted to get out of this retro piece of crud and lay down. His embarrassment wasn’t helping his pain. Or vice versa.

“Hey uh, you gonna bring me home sometime today?”

“We are there already.”

Bolting up, Gavin peered out through the windshield. Sure enough, they were halted in the parking lot of his crappy apartment complex. He could actually make out the top of his own car on the far side of property, silver sheening in the winter sunshine. He had been so engrossed with fighting with his tablet that he hadn’t noticed where Connor had pulled off. He had just assumed that it had been some random spot.

An ugly, two-story building with peeling paint, the Willow Tree was a glaring eyesore, a ramshackle old construction that had once been a shoddy motel. Now it served as an even shoddier residence. A far cry from the extravagance that the Lakeshore Drive Apartments offered. The landlord rarely fixed anything, there was no security (other than a bunch of fake video cameras), no indoor appendages, and the flats were just the old motel rooms with some doors added and removed. The streetlight on the edge of the lot hadn’t worked in years and the large WT sign had more graffiti covering it than it had free space. As far as Gavin knew there was not a single tree in sight, willow or otherwise. But at least the rent was cheap.

As his gaze landed on the door of his apartment – 2C – Gavin suddenly had idea. Maybe not the brightest or the most sensible idea he had ever had, but one that might help demonstrate the sincerity behind his earlier words. “Uh Connor,” he called out the other’s name timidly, “why’d you ask me ‘bout my cat this morning?”

“I noticed a few stray hairs in your car the other day,” Connor said. “And the lint roller in the driver’s side door. I thought it was strange because you had no cat pictures at your desk. When I asked Officer Miller about it, he asked me if I was malfunctioning.”

The detective snorted mirthfully. “Yeah only Tina knows I have a cat. Oh, and Mik too,” he added belatedly. “Well … till today they were the only ones.”

Connor nodded lightly. “I thought it was strange, so I decided to inquire about it.”

“I see.” Fiddling with the collar of his jacket (spare number three, as he referred to this particular one) he took a deep breath. “Do ya like cats?”

“Yes! I like cats!” Connor’s abrupt and fervent exclamation made Gavin jump, nearly connecting his head with the roof. Had his seatbelt not been tightly fastened, he might have given himself a second, worse concussion. “I like cats and dogs and all sorts of animals!” A radiant grin spread out upon his lips and suddenly he was as bright as the sun. “I haven’t met an animal I don’t like.
Though some animals don’t seem to like me.”

Curiosity piqued, the detective had to ask. “Um, why’s that?”

“I’m not sure. I think that some animals tend to find androids unnerving. As machines, we don’t smell like living creatures and that can sometimes make them skittish or hostile.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” He could see how the diverse members of the animal kingdom could be wary of androidkind. With keener senses, they could pick up things that humans easily miss – artificial scents, machinelike noises, plastic or rubbery tastes. For all Gavin knew, androids could be like walking veterinarian offices to the animals, giving off unnatural, sterile, odors. “Hank’s dog have a problem with you when ya first met?”

“Oh no,” Connor said, almost aghast, “Sumo is very good boy. He was very well behaved the day we first met.” He laughed, a light and hearty sound that made Gavin’s lips respond in kind. “We had a special connection, even then,” the android told him, clearly happy to reminisce, his tone fond. Noticing the detective’s quizzical expression, he added, “he didn’t attack me, you see?”

Mousy eyebrows traversing his forehead in a hasty climb, Gavin just goggled at the other man. If Connor’s definition of being well-behaved was just the absence of a physical assault, than he had some seriously low standards. As in sewer drainage level of low. “Shit,” he breathed. “You used ta people tryin’ to screw with ya?”

His carelessly chosen words had barely left the vicinity of his mouth before he realized his error. Hadn’t he gone out of his way to torment the android at every turn, at every opportunity?

Unfazed by the comment, Connor turned sheepish as he continued, “well … I did break into Hank’s house,” he admitted, “so Sumo would have been in the right to attack me. I was an intruder.”

“Wait – what?” Gavin had always labored under the impression that the Lieutenant’s relationship with Connor had been nothing but unicorn farts and thorn-less roses. He laughed in disbelief. “You fuckin’ broke into his house? Why’d ya do that?”

By the hilariously abashed expression blooming on Connor’s face, Gavin knew that the story was going to be entertaining. If the other man had been a human and not an android, he’d clearly be blushing enough to turn his hair a vibrant magenta by now. “Well I uh – I was still a machine at the time,” he stammered in an excuse, “and I had been ordered by my handler to investigate a reported android attack at the Eden Club. You might remember that night. You were there.” Connor glanced away, and he began tugging at his tie nervously. “With Chris. The man had been asphyxiated by one of the androids that he had tried to kill.”

And Gavin had been so consumed by his own arrogance, his own andriophobic attitude, that he had attempted to write the whole thing off as a case of rough sex and clogged arteries. Pretending that an episode of self-defense had been a heart attack wasn’t one of the finest moment of his career. He’d only been saved from his poor judgment by the unexpected appearance of Hank and Connor. Come on, let’s go. It’s, uh, starting to stink of booze in here … “Yeah, I remember the guy.”

He could also remember how he had watched one of the male Tracis while he had waited for Chris and Ben to stop blathering. How he had enjoyed the glow of the pink lights upon the the android’s pale skin, glistening in the darkened room, begging to be touched. How very tight the dancer’s underwear had been, leaving nothing to the imagination.
But above all, he remembered his desire. His wish that it had been Connor, and not this nameless Traci, up on that dais, strutting his stuff. Wearing that speedo that was ready to burst.

Wondering if the heat had been turned up in the car, Gavin cracked open the closest window. Relishing the cool updraft of air, he asked, “what uh – so what’s all this gotta do with you breaking inta Hank’s house?”

“At the time, I was only permitted to investigate a crime scene with the Lieutenant present,” he replied. “So when my handler gave me the mission, I had to locate him first. He didn’t take any of my calls, so I went looking for him at his usual hangouts,” – Gavin knew he meant bars – “and when I failed to find Hank at any of those places, I went to his home. When he didn’t to response to the doorbell, I did a perimeter search and discovered that he was … incapacitated.”

Incapacitated. Likely his sugary code word for ‘drunk as a skunk’. Passed out on his couch in front of the tv or somewhere else similar. The detective could relate. He had found himself in all sorts of weird spots after getting smashed.

“I thought that Hank might be injured, so I broke a window and climbed inside. That’s when Sumo trotted over. He wanted to make sure I didn’t mean him or Hank any harm.” Connor beamed proudly like a parent, elatedly speaking of their child prodigy. “That’s how I first met Sumo.”

The other man’s happiness, as energetic and buoyant as a steaming hot bubble bath, was also contagious. Despite his stupid leg, his muddled vision, and his throbbing head, Gavin had to admit he was feeling much better. Listening to Connor’s screwball story was better than any amount of pills he could have shoved down his throat. He was … content.

Smirking good-naturedly, Gavin tossed his tablet into the backseat of the car like a disc. Its not like he could do anything else with it until Connor decided to un-fuck it up. “I know you don’t have much time before ya gotta go pick up Hank from his nap, but I was thinkin,’ maybe uh – maybe you’d like to meet my cat?”

“Yes!”

Gavin had barely grasped the handle to his door by the time the driver’s side was clicking shut. Awed by the android’s palpable excitement, he laughed as he pushed himself out of the car, out into the freezing embrace of March. Connor was bouncing back and forth on the soles of his shoes as Gavin hobbled awkwardly over. “I’ve been trying to get Hank to let me have a cat, but he keeps saying no.”

“What’s your pops got against cats?” Just when Gavin was beginning to think that the old bastard wasn’t so bad after all, Hank had to go do something as heinous as hating on the coolest animals on the face of the planet.

“Oh, he likes cats,” Connor protested. “He just says that I have too many pets already.”

Gesturing to the outdoor stairwell that climbed against the front side of the building like a rusty and uneven shelf, Gavin started his fumbling gait towards his apartment, Connor in tow. Not that he was a stalker or anything – because the detective certainly wasn’t one to pry into his coworker’s personal affairs – but he hadn’t noticed any other pet photos on the android’s desk. Only the picture of the humongous mammoth-dog in the frame that Gavin had gifted him. Nothing else.

“Exactly how many pets ya got? Thought you and Hank just had the one dog.”

“I have two fish, a snake, a turtle, and a gecko.”
With one his one good foot on the first stair, Gavin twisted around uncomfortably so he could stare at the android. He felt like a human pretzel with trying to not fall over while maintaining his incredulous expression. “Holy Fuck,” he exclaimed. “I guess you really do like animals.” Unable to contain a sarcastic snicker, he blurted out, “whatcha tryin’ ta do? Start your own private zoo?”

“How’s asked me that very same question on many occasions.”

Rolling his eyes, Gavin couldn’t help but agree with the unseen Lieutenant’s frustration. “I get havin’ a pet or two but what do you need so many for?”

Shrugging shyly, Connor made a face, his LED zigzagging between yellow and blue. “I like having them around. I – I enjoy their company.”

Gavin’s eyes widened. There was something in the way that the other man had spoken, a sort of melancholic undertone, that made him stop curling his upper lip. If he wasn’t mistaken – and he doubted that he was – Connor’s words had been fueled by loneliness, a topic that Gavin could write volumes on. Excluding his friendship with Tina and his off-and-on-again-whatever-it-was with Mik, his life had been a long and desolate road, a path of which few would ever tread willingly. And only a few that tread upon those mist-covered stones remained sane. Some days he wondered if he hadn’t gone mad already, if he wasn’t really lying face down in the dirt and grass. Digging his fingers into the turf as his brain shot off its final lucid message, the neurotransmitters flopping along the synapses in one last desperate voyage.

“Fair ‘nough,” he breathed. If lonesomeness was the driving force behind Connor’s pet collecting fetish than Gavin wouldn’t begrudge him his obsession. “Why don’t ya take a picture of yourself with my cat and send it ta Hank? Make sure you use those fuckin’ puppy eyes of yours. That’ll get you a cat in no time I bet.”

Connor chuckled as the detective untwined back around and began his hoppity ascent. “I don’t think that will be necessary, Gavin. Although I appreciate the idea.”

“What? You got a better plan already? Gonna threaten to move out or somethin’?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that to Hank.” The android sounded scandalized, almost horrified at his offhand suggestion. Gavin rolled his eyes again and resumed scaling the unkempt stairs, his sprained ankle slowing his progress down considerably. Connor’s voice spoke again but in a calmer and more confident tone. “But yes, I do have a better plan. I’m going to ask Hank for his permission to get a bird.”

Fizzling pitifully like a firecracker-turned-dud, the detective’s brain crackled and popped, sputtering uselessly. How on earth could requesting one pet lead to the acceptance of another, different pet? Maybe Connor’s mind palace hadn’t been properly plugged in after his surgeries last night. Repairs, whatever. “Alrighty, I ain’t gonna play fifty questions or any of that nonsense,” he grumbled as he reached the landing. “How’s asking for goddamn bird gonna net you a cat?”

Reaching the top just moments after himself (but without any huffing and puffing), Connor stopped aside of Gavin and turned towards the man with a lazy grin. “We had a case last year in which Hank had a … an unpleasant experience with a flock of pigeons. Ever since then, he’s had a sort of resentment for anything pertaining to birds. He claims that he is suffering from ornithophobia, but I think he just likes having something to complain about.”

Tossing his head back, Gavin let out a bark of a laugh. “That’s fucking genius, Connor. The old bait and switch game.” As if peeking through the lens of a telescope, the android’s constellation became clear and focused, a finite and brilliant pattern. Connor was using the Lieutenant’s fear and
disgust of birds against him. Begging for a repulsive option, than switching to the real one – while pretending that it’s only a compromise – once Hank is feeling guilty and unsettled. “That’s fucking dope! I didn’t think you had it in you!”

“Well I am an advanced model after all.”

“A prototype,” Gavin reminded him smugly. “I think somebody told me that once.”

“Someone may have,” Connor said elusively, as if he didn’t damn well remember their discussion in the breakroom months ago. They shared a nostalgic chuckle before Gavin started his lopsided waddle in the direction of his apartment at the far end of the walkway.

“I really didn’t think you had it in you,” Gavin repeated, his admiration for the other man increasing by leaps and bounds. “Everybody’s got you pegged as the bright-eyed, fair-haired golden boy and here you are, plottin’ ta hoodwink your pops just so you can get another pet. Fucking priceless!” Although he was already on unsteady footing, Gavin chanced a fall by nudging Connor’s shoulder sportively. “Shit, you’ve got a set of brass balls on ya, that’s for sure!”

Another approving laugh left his lips as the android began looking uncomfortable, his expression shamefaced and guilt-ridden. “I’d prefer not having to deceive Hank, but he is being quite childish about this whole thing. Having a cat would hardly strain my finances. I pay for all the animals upkeep. Including Sumo’s,” he added in a tone that was on the cusp of being outright annoyed. “Sumo has no problem with cats, so there’s no issue there.” Connor’s facial features became pinched as he continued, as if the subject was a long-suffering matter of contentious debate. “And we have more than enough room, its not like having a cat would suddenly make everything crowded!”

Trying to keep his own face as neutral as possible, Gavin suppressed a rebellious grimace. He wasn’t some pompous armchair psycho-shithead by any means, but even he could hazard a guess to Hank’s true objection. Likely the old man had seen his adoptive son’s pet collecting for what it was; a coping mechanism to deal with his loneliness. If Connor was willing to be friends with Gavin, of all the fucking people, than he had to be desperately forlorn.

Rather than delve into that particular abyss, Gavin chose to focus on another topic entirely. “Whaddya mean you’ve got enough room? Hank’s house ain’t a goddamn mansion.”

Certainly not one to ever be invited to the Anderson household voluntarily, Gavin had nevertheless driven over to 115 Michigan Drive on a business-related matter a couple of years back. He had been tasked with the retrieval of some misplaced files that Hank had taken home right before Cole’s death. If his memory still served him, that place barely held enough room for Hank, Connor, and their dog … never-mind the rest of the android’s menagerie.

“We moved to a new house in January,” Connor explained. “It’s a two-story cape cod with four bedrooms and two baths. Not to mention a finished basement. There is plenty enough space for a cat.” Gavin felt something jab him lightly in his arm, a playful nudge. “And maybe a bird.”

As he turned to stare at his temporary partner, Gavin’s appearance warred with itself, fighting an uphill battle against a fortified encampment. He wasn’t sure if he should be elated or incredulous. “Fucking A, Connor!” He tried to repress a burble of laughter that sounded suspiciously like a giggle. “You’re a fucking devil, ya know that?”

Grinning like a ridiculously sexy imp, Connor beamed mischievously, a naughty glint shining in his cinnamon eyes. Biting down hard on his bottom lip, Gavin tried, once again, to prevent a show of levity from escaping his mouth. And once again, failed. Not that he really minded.
The past week had been a dreadful experience for the detective; a seemingly everlasting nightmare of epic proportions. A case equally fraught with both danger and political bullshit had been dropped into his lap. The disapproving eye of none other than the most reviled of the Deputy Chiefs, Albert Callahan, was glued onto his back, watching and waiting for a single misstep. Even worse, the madman responsible for the murders was all but promising to bathe Detroit in a gruesome bloodbath of blue and red. If that wasn’t bad enough, he had also run into his old partner, the conniving, andriophobic Harold Newsom, being forced to relive the greatest error of his professional life. All the while Mik had weaved in and out of his periphery, pushing his buttons, tearing at the fabric of Gavin’s patience. And his sanity. Then he had almost died. The fucking proverbial cherry on top of the shitspittle sundae he’d been choking on.

And, of course, there was Connor.

The one bright spot in the stain that Gavin was mired in.

His friend.

Hearing the android laugh as he took in the comically bemused expression that was currently marring Gavin’s rough features, a thought rambled through the detective’s overtaxed brain.

He could get used to this. Being friends with this adorably goofy plastic prick.

Letting loose yet another breathy chuckle, Gavin smiled.

Yeah, he could definitely get used to this.

Ducking his head, Gavin tromped the rest of the way over to their destination, Connor not far behind. A single metal 2 was the only identifiable marker on the outside of the door to his apartment. It had once been accompanied by the letter C, until one of the neighbor’s kids had decided to pull it out and use it as a makeshift tomahawk in a game of cowboys and Indians. The landlord hadn’t bothered to replace the missing item and Gavin knew not to complain. Nothing in this dump ever got fixed unless the tenant took the task upon themselves. Gavin couldn’t have cared less in this situation. A broken sink was one thing, a stolen house number was another.

Delving about in his pocket, a sudden and a sickening realization froze Gavin in place. His apartment was a fucking disaster right now. As in a Grade 5 hurricane had just swept through and left everything upside down and in disarray, sort of disaster. His bedroom was currently in the process of mimicking the Appalachian trail, with all the mountainous piles of dirty laundry stacked about in unwashed heaps. The living room looked like a graveyard for DVDs. He still hadn’t picked up all the cases that lay strewn about the carpeted floor; remnants of his time spent with Tina the other night. The Chinese takeout boxes were also still where he had abandoned them, adorning his coffee table like rancid knickknacks. And that didn’t even count the clusterfuck of old boxes amassed in the kitchen, evidence of his extreme laziness. And exhaustion.

Maybe he could convince Connor that they were really a new form of art? A post-modern, post-deviancy form of Avant Garde grotesqueness? Naw, that wouldn’t fool a kindergartener, never mind the greatest investigative tool ever created by Cyberlife.

“Gavin,” said tool called his name, “someone left a letter here.”

“Oh yeah?” The detective muttered his response absentmindedly, his thoughts focused on the messy dilemma festering in his head. “I probably dropped it yesterday,” he added without thinking.

The fingers of his right hand grazed something metallic and slim. His keys.
Although the android was undoubtedly neat and clean, Connor had to be used to living in chaos and squalor if he resided with the Lieutenant. Hank was no more of a maid than Gavin was. Likely his cluttered and somewhat dirty living conditions was nothing new then.

Immensely reassured, Gavin’s mouth twitched upwards as his attack of self-consciousness was driven away, battered and beaten by his coarse logic. He yanked the keys out and inserted them into the slit of the doorknob. Giving the temperamental fucker a good shove, he turned his hand and released the lock.

“This letter has your name on it but not your address.” Connor’s voice was full of curiosity.

“Won’t the mysteries ever stop coming,” Gavin huffed wearily, adding a slight eyeroll as an extra flourish. He pushed open the door and took a wobbly step inside. Not hearing the clatter of Connor’s expensive shoes on the metalwork, he sighed. “You gonna come in and introduce yourself? Or are ya gonna stand outside my door all day?”

“Gavin, I don’t –.”

Reaching for the light switch just within the bounds of the threshold, Gavin pointedly ignored the distracted tone in the other’s words and opted for gaining the attention of his feline menace instead. “Hey Muffin! I found ya a new scratching post to try out!”

With his mirthful cry just leaving his lips, Gavin’s swiping fingertips found purchase and flicked the switch up, illuminating his apartment in a white light.

“What – what the fuck …”

His words were choppy and taut, full of the turmoil raging within. Feeling as though he had somehow walked into a vision of his past, of distant days that were better served by being erased, Gavin’s jaw trembled like a frightened child, numb and inconsolable. Shock slithered down his spine, infecting his nervous system like the plague. Whether from his concussion or his budding state of dismay, a spell of dizziness struck, and he stumbled backwards, his arms flailing uselessly, unable to stop his bone-crunching fall.

As if out of nowhere, a set of strong hands suddenly materialized and snagged him around his midriff, preventing his plummet. The hands were firm but gentle in their grip. The man barely felt their presence, however. “What in the – what the – fuck.”

His lips were a bloated blue. His face was a pale death mask, rigid and unmoving. His platinum blond hair appeared scraggly and unkempt, a jaded crown. His sightless eyes were forever fogbound. Hanging from the ceiling fan like some human mistletoe, a morbid ornament of the Christmas from Hell, was Mik.

Dead.

The hands that were supporting Gavin shifted and, without warning, he was dragged out of his apartment, away from the spectacle of death, out into the clouded daylight once more.

The first snow of March began to fall as the sirens clamored in the distance.
Gavin's world is turned upside down ...
Little by little, his eyelids pulled apart, severing Gavin from his uneasy and dream-filled sleep, a mockery of a good night’s rest. Only wisps and flakes of his torpor remained, mere echoes of his twilight endeavors, of his otherworldly jaunts.

Drowsiness clung to him just as the new snowfall blanketed the earth outside, all-enveloping and complete. His weary eyes glanced upwards and he stared at the slanted ceiling, seeing nothing but what was burning across his mind, leaving a wasteland of ash and bone.

His nightmares had been unrelenting and merciless. Although he could only recall bits and pieces, those paltry shreds were still enough to leave him cold and restive. One was just a repeat of yesterday’s grisly discovery; of him at his apartment complex, running door to door, trying all the knobs in some vain attempt to get help for Mik. Each and every door opened only to reveal an exact replica of his living room but with a different victim. He had seen them all – from Tina to Chris, Connor and Hank, Fowler, Eileen Kincaid, and even his asswipe of a cousin – as they gasped their final breath, succumbing to the dark embrace of the death. There was nothing that he could do to save them. He fled and fled but to no avail; they always died. And finally he came upon his own demise, hanging with a noose around his swollen neck.

As if this new terror hadn’t been enough, it had come prepared; accompanied by his older nighttime frights. Some were decades old. Most of those were filled with his brute of his father and his addled mother, him with his knife, her with her cutting words. Others were newer, of a time not long ago. Of a darkened archive room and a flood of blue blood.

Some were more confusing in nature. In one, he had cornered Connor just as he had in real life, but instead of pulling his gun, he strode across the distance and grabbed the android by his collar. He then forced the other man’s head down and brushed their lips together. The android’s response had been swift and primal. It wasn’t long in that dreamworld before their clothes had been discarded and forgotten. They had both deviated in that particular scenario.

Inhaling deeply, he blinked away the images that were floating within his sight, sending them away, fully aware that would only return this evening. Ready to haunt or tease him once again.

There were a noise somewhere off in the house, downstairs by the faraway sound of it. Gavin immediately tensed, assuming the very worst. With a hiss, he fought to untangle his hand from the bed sheets, with the intent of seeking out his ankle gun sitting on the chair braced up against the
Then it hit him. The dog. It was just their dog.

Not an intruder. Just that wooly canine.

With a relieved sigh, he ceased his struggling and allowed his body to relax. He fell back into the mattress and followed with a whiney utterance, a sign of his deep despair.

Yesterday was still a blur to him, just as insubstantial and ghostly as his dreams and nightmares were. Sharp fragments of a horrible day. He could remember the taste of the bile in his mouth, pungent and strong, after he had emptied what little had lain in his stomach. The whirl of the sirens echoed in his head, as if he was still hearing them, hours and hours later. What appeared to been half of the precinct had shown up; he could have sworn that only Chris and Person were missing, stuck on desk duty as they were. Oh and Graham, of course. He was still laying in some hospital, surrounded by beeping machines.

Ben had raced over with Hank in tow. After all, someone had to go pick up the Lieutenant since Connor was busy supervising the scene, issuing orders, and creating sanity out of the bedlam. Only after he had safely deposited Gavin into the hands of a very strict, no-nonsense EMT, that was. Gavin’s belligerence had remerged briefly, until the android had stomped that out, telling the medic to sedate the detective if he didn’t behave. Gavin had complied, returning to his prior state of being numb.

Shortly after Gavin’s outburst had subsided, Ben popped over and clapped him on his shoulder, rotund and out-of-breath. He said something as well, something that was meant to be reassuring but Gavin’s brain had failed to register it. Tina had come later, much later. She had been assigned the thankless duty of notifying Caroline Sanchez about the death of her sister, and her sister’s boyfriend. The results had come back, and they were as he had expected them. There was no doubt anymore; they were just as gone as Mik was. Even if their corpses had yet to be found. Maybe their lifeless bodies were strung up somewhere, hanging from someone else’s ceiling fixture, waiting for their turn to be discovered by some poor, unexpecting sonofabitch.

Roused from his office by the news of the reporter’s death, even Fowler had made an appearance, as rocky-faced and stern as ever. He had barely spared Gavin a single glance before tromping through the police tape in his hurry to be debriefed by Hank. Not long after the captain’s arrival, Connor had materialized by Gavin’s side, a mournful expression tugging as his features. That was when Gavin received the second shock of the day, one that shattered what little restraint he had still possessed.

Muffin was gone too.
The motherfucker had killed his cat. Had actually taken the time to snap his pet’s neck.

Fuck capturing this sick piece of garbage. If Gavin found him first, he was going to put a bullet or two into the bastard’s brain. Or five or ten.

Upon learning of Muffin’s brutal end, Gavin had finally lost it. He could only vaguely remember the following events; of bellowing and cursing, of stomping his way across the parking lot towards his apartment, of clobbering Connor when the android tried to stop him, of Tanner and Jamal tackling him to the ground, and of the nonplussed paramedic hovering over him, a needle in his shaking hand, promising bliss and oblivion.

Whatever in hell he had been injected with … well it had done the trick. He had spent the rest of
the day in a depressant daze, propped up in the ambulance like a jointless anatomy skeleton. Tina and her partner, Anthony the Robobrain, had finally driven over sometime in the late afternoon. Stiff and silent, he had disappeared, probably off to help with the interviews of Gavin’s neighbors. Tina had climbed into the vehicle and squatted down next to him, putting one arm over his shoulder in a comforting manner. She had spoken to him for quite some time, her voice low and gentle. However, just as with Ben before her, her words too had been lost. Devoured by the drowsiness that had swallowed his entire world.

Turning his head along the pillow, he moved so that he could face the wall. Miniature locomotives dotted the wallpaper in horizontal swathes, tracks and tracks of blue and brown trains, their smokeboxes gray, their wheels reminiscent of bicycle tires. Connor had told him last night that this room had once served as a boy’s nursery. He and Hank hadn’t gotten around to painting over the old scheme just yet. They meant to though. As evidence of their intent, some aluminum paint cans sat over in the far corner, a pair of paint-speckled brushes balanced on their top. Cerulean blue, the cans read. A nice color.

He was in the Anderson household. In the guest room on the second floor.

His brain having been in la-la land, courtesy of the mind-altering drug that had been coursing through his system, Gavin had been at the mercy of his coworkers when it came down to what to do with him. He hadn’t a clue at to who had said what, or what they had discussed but he could make an educated guess. His apartment was now a crime scene, so he wasn’t going to be able to spend the night there. The hospital affiliated with the ambulance could have admitted him, but they would have likely just kicked him out once the tranquilizer wore off. He had no family (that they knew off. His cousin had efficiently erased all their connections years ago). Tina would have taken him in if not for her asshole of a fiancé who, for some indiscernible reason, considered Gavin a bad influence. And somewhere along the line, they had settled on sending him home with his temporary partners.

Hank had probably pitched a fit at the idea, but Gavin had a feeling that Connor took the concept of friendship very seriously. And with that puppy expression of his, he had gotten his way.

A loud thud emanated from somewhere within the house. Again.

Shifting, he propped himself up against the bed frame, his legs still beneath the covers. He gave his head a little shake, trying to cast off the lingering sleepiness that clawed at his mind with fuzzy paws and blurry features.

Their dog – Sumo, was it? – was probably just hungry, hoping for someone to come fill his dish. Or maybe he needed to go out and spray a fire hydrant or something.

Yawning, Gavin tried to will some energy into his lifeless body. He should get up and go check on Sumo. It was the least he could do. A small repayment for the kindness that Hank and Connor had shown him in his hour of weakness.

Plus it would be nice to be around an animal, even if it wasn’t his.

As that simple and uncomplicated thought crossed his mind, he felt his eyes begin to water. “Not this again,” he grumbled through his gritted teeth. “No more fuckin’ floodworks today.”

Whether his breakdown had actually happened late last night or early this morning, he wasn’t sure and, anyways, the specifics were moot.

He had awoken to unfamiliar surroundings under the shroud of darkness. With his cognition still
impaired, everything had felt strange and wrong, as if even the wallpaper itself had been out of
place. As panic had seized at him, like cold fingers squeezing around his throat, he had fumbled
with the sheets, trying to escape the bed. Once free from their clingy hold, he had promptly tried to
stand up. And ended up putting all his weight down on his sprained ankle. Resulting in his
immediate departure for the floor and, for good measure, conking his head on something sturdy
and hard. He had seen stars, and not just the ones outside the window, glimmering amidst the
clouds.

In reply to his clumsy exodus, a dog had started barking. Sumo’s rumbly howls had then been
answered by a loud string of curse words from below and noises from the room over from Gavin’s.
Within a flash, hands had grabbed him and hoisted his prone body back up onto the bed. He had
tried to speak but his head had still been swimming, the stars still twirling, his tongue inflated.
They had sat him on the edge, his feet dangling over the side, and held a hurried conversation. One
then left but the other had stayed, their hand on his shoulder, steadying his swaying torso. He
couldn’t be sure if it was seconds or minutes later but eventually the fog encompassing his brain
had lightened, allowing him to see …

…that it was Connor that standing directly in front of him, wearing an oversized Detroit Police
Academy sweater and a new pair of sweats. He was talking, his voice firm but low. “… you’ve
reopened that gash on your head and its bleeding profusely. Headwounds usually do, but I want to
take a look and make sure it’s not more serious. I need to remove the bandage to check. Is that
alright?”

“M’kay.” His indistinct response was taken as an affirmative. Ever so carefully fingers began
prying at the fringes of the bandage, trying to gain a foothold. They were light and tender as they
grazed his skin but to Gavin that felt like iron pokers straight out of the fire. His breath hitched.
Once those nimble digits had pulled up a chunk of the sticky outer edge, the android spoke again.
“This will hurt. I am sorry in advance.”

Gavin grunted to acknowledge his acquiescence. With one quick jerking motion Connor tore the
bloody bandage off his scalp, peeling off skin, hair, and scab alike. The detective made a gluteral
noise, an involuntary reaction to the sudden and sharp pain.

Leaning in closely, Connor brought his face down, so that his eyes could inspect the wound more
efficiently in the moonlit room. Gavin could feel the other’s simulated breath on his forehead, a
feathery touch of air that was hot, just like a humans. He glanced up and saw Connor’s chin. In his
murky, sleepy state, he just stared at that cleft chin as if mesmerized.

Abruptly Connor receded, his form becoming bleary and dull as it moved about in the shadows, an
incorporeal mist in a vaguely human shape. Gavin opened his mouth to protest but the android
reappeared, pressing a new bandage over his soon-to-be-scar. “It isn’t anything to worry about,”
Connor informed him, “it just reopened. Nothing new.”

Nodding, Gavin tried to convey his gratitude. There was a sound of creaking floorboards as
Connor took a step back and bent over, bringing his face in line with Gavin’s. “How are you
feeling?”

He shrugged and decided to try out his voice. “Fine.”

Brows furrowing, Connor tilted his head as he examined the detective’s woebegone expression,
clearly not persuaded by his mumble-ly one-word response. His LED flashed a bright yellow,
whirling in place, bathing the man’s features in a golden glow. Gavin was being scanned. Oddly
enough, anger was not forthcoming. He just felt numb and bland. Incomplete.
“Your vitals are within acceptable perimeters,” Connor whispered, almost as if to himself. Then speaking in a louder tone, he asked, “how are you really, Gavin? Are you alright?”

Maybe it was just the after-effects of the drugs. Maybe it was just a week’s worth of worry, and suffering, and fear. Maybe it was the sight of the dog hairs scattered over the front of Connor’s sweater, reminding him of his own clothes after cuddling with Muffin. Or maybe it was the android’s voice, so full of concern. Genuine concern. Concern for him.

Whatever the cause, Gavin started to cry – the first time in years, maybe even in a decade – the bawl your eyes out, sort of crying. No gentle, silent weeping here. In any other circumstance, he would have been cross at having a witness to his sorrow, but not tonight. He was too shaken, too rattled, to care about something as frivolous as that.

He just sat there, his arms lying defectively at his sides, hunched over, with wetness erupting down his cheeks. He tried to fight back the emotions that were constricting within his chest, tried to choke back the wail within his throat. He wanted to open his mouth and ask Connor to leave, to demand his need for some privacy, but he didn’t dare. So much pain, having been built up over years and years, threatened to break free from his weathered veneer. He feared that his voice might betray him.

And betray him, it did.

His already faltering resolve cracked in two the moment that the android hugged him. The initial embrace was an awkward affair; either Connor started to hesitate halfway through or else he was unsure on how to properly perform the motion. Maybe the action was not part of his original program.

However, Gavin didn’t give him the chance to withdraw or the time to figure it out on his own. His hands shot out on their own accord and grasped at Connor’s back, snagging fistfuls of the sweater for something to hold onto, something real. Tangible. Alive. Encouraged by the strength of Gavin’s reaction, the android ended his irresolute manner. Connor fully embraced the tearful man, rubbing a hand in a soothing circle along Gavin’s trembling spine.

Burying in his face into the other man’s chest, Gavin wept in earnest; sobbing his heart out. Everything came crashing down like a tumbling tower, an explosion of steelwork and mortar upon his soul. He would never again be able to pet his cat. Nevermore see her sleeping on his pillow, his loveable ball of fluff with claws. Gone were the times that she would climb into his lap and demand his attention with a petulant meow. His little prima donna was dead.

And so was Mik.

He could not process it, could not begin to understand the loss. So he sobbed and sobbed. Connor held him close and remained mute. There was no point in an exchange of words. Their physical contact alone spoke volumes. Spoke far more than anything that the English language could ever hope to convey with its rudimentary letters and harsh syllables. He swore that he …

… heard yet another noise echo from somewhere downstairs. A muffled thud.

He sighed. The only time that Gavin could remember crying in such a fashion was the day after his grandmother’s burial, when he had confronted his cousin over his noticeable absence from the funeral. Sparks had flown that day, igniting a fire that had done more than just burn some bridges. It seemed that Gavin could only grieve when his world was aflame.

That event was a trip down memory lane that Gavin wanted to avoid like the plague. No reason to
run through that particular fiasco, he had enough newer ones to contend with. Thank you very much! Wanting to keep himself occupied, he decided to go check up on Hank’s dog. Maybe get some fresh air if the pooch needed to use the restroom. Maybe grab his hidden pack of smokes from the Bullitt as well. Fuck Tina’s batshit crazy health shit.

Tossing the covers off, Gavin scrambled out of bed and snagged his duffle bag off the bureau. He always kept the thing in the trunk of his car, filled with a change of clothes and some other necessities. His official overnight bag, ready and waiting if he had to pull a double or triple-shift. Besides what was contained within his locker at the precinct, these were his only clothes available to him. Everything else he owned was barred behind a thick layer of crime scene tape.

Bang. Loud.

“Fuck,” he breathed angrily as he began fiddling with the bag’s zipper. Damn thing always had to get stuck. Miserable cheap shit. Thinking of the dog somewhere below, he added, “you better not have broken anythin’ Sumo. Betcha everything in my wallet that I get blamed for it if you have.”

As if said dog was standing directly behind Gavin, he heard a low whine. Mystified, the detective let go of the worthless bag and turned around.

Sumo was laying on the floor. Curled up on a spiral carpet that was half-hidden by the dog’s immense bulk, head lifted up high, watching him intently with his big black eyes. The Saint Bernard’s waggling tail thwacked against the side of the bed as the man stared at him.

Icicles ran down Gavin’s back, sending a dark shiver through his body. Sumo was in the room – probably had been this entire time – resting down by the end of the bed, obscured from his sight by the mattress. Sumo couldn’t have made the noises.

The following revelation hit him like a brass-knuckled sucker-punch to the chest.

Someone else was in the house.

Adrenaline kicking in, he hobbled as quietly as he could over to the chair that was serving as his makeshift nightstand. He grabbed his sidearm and his cell, looking for the time.

10:17. Hank and Connor had to be at work right now. With everything that had happened, Fowler would want all available hands on deck. And it was far too early for them to have returned for their lunch recess. Not that they ever did that – as far as he knew, Hank either brought food in to munch on, or else picked up some takeout.

Pocketing his phone, he limped towards the door and gave Sumo a quick but considering side glance. He paused, his fingers extended outwards towards the knob. His heart was pounding in his ears.

There was only one solution to the question concerning the identity of the intruder. The individual who had murdered Mik – and Natalie, Muffin and all the others – had come to kill him.

There was only one viable explanation of his former lover’s death. The killer desired notoriety for his crimes, wanted the media’s undivided attention, craved the worshipful glare of the spotlight. He had contacted Mik solely for that express purpose. To get his twisted message out, to cause chaos and fear among the populace. To ferment anti-android hysteria and violence, to inspire copycats just as depraved as he is. And after giving the sicko his journalistic word, Mik had backed out. Because of Gavin.

… and Connor.
How the killer was aware of their involvement was irrelevant at this moment. Somehow the bastard knew that they had deprived him of his sadistic glory, robbed him of his fifteen minutes of fame, and that was the most important fact. Mik had been killed (or at the very least, disposed of) in Gavin’s apartment. Clearly a threat of a very blatant and personal nature.

So maybe the killer was oblivious to Gavin’s presence in the house after all. The detective’s first instinct had been wrong. The motherfucker was probably here to drop off another victim and kill a dog for the fun of it. Rage, red-hot and visceral, bloomed up within his battered body, setting off ten thousand alarms, warnings blaring within his skull.

It must be Connor’s turn to suffer now. Who had the scumbag killed? Was it someone from the precinct that the android was on friendly terms with? Sally, maybe? Perhaps Chris. The patrol officer had always been cordial and respectful to Connor, even before the other’s deviation. Or was it someone much closer? If Gavin went downstairs right now, would he find Simon’s husk hanging from a lighting fixture? Were his ocean eyes now a silent sea, forever still? Or had the psycho chosen Hank? Had he somehow lured the Lieutenant away to his untimely death?

Knuckles turning a pearly white, Gavin’s grip on his gun tightened. Was Muffin’s fate supposed to befall this enormous pooch as well?

Aware that Gavin’s gaze was lingering on his inert form, Sumo titled his head inquisitively, happily watching the human, awaiting some greeting or command.

As an experienced officer of the law, Gavin knew that the proper protocol was to call for backup before investigating. He was alone, injured, and maybe still drugged up. He shouldn’t be doing a load of laundry, never mind confronting a highly methodical, highly dangerous serial killer. He tore his phone back out and brought it up on level to his face.

Then he thought of Mik, of how he used to laugh at all of Gavin’s dumb jokes. Even the bad ones, the ones that were more stupid and childish than funny. He thought of Muffin flicking the tip of her tail at him whenever she was pissed. Of Natalie Slattery’s tears, so like his own. Of Mrs. Kincaid’s undeniable fury because of her best friend’s murder. Of Adeline’s little niece loosing her aunt.

He tossed his cell onto the bed and bared his teeth. He was going to end this now.


The sick bastard wasn’t going to leave this house alive if he had anything to do about it.

“Stay,” he whispered, motioning towards the attentive dog. “Sumo, stay.”

Without waiting to see if he was going to be obeyed – who in hell knew if Hank had even bothered to teach his mutt anything? – Gavin slid through the cracked doorway and went out into the hall. Very carefully, very quietly, he shut the door behind him. The last thing he wanted was having Sumo decide to follow him and alert the killer to their location. Or get hurt.

Shooting a tentative glance around the second-floor hallway, his eyes flittered suspiciously over the other three doors. The one across from his was the upstairs bathroom. One of the two others belonged to Connor and the final room was for storage. At least that’s what he thought the android had told him, though his mind was acting more like a sieve than a repository for knowledge at the moment. Fucking goddamn drugs.

The checking of the other rooms was a task that should take precedent over his desire to bolt downstairs. He couldn’t be certain that the killer hadn’t snuck up here and hidden somewhere
while he had lain on the bed like a log. For his own safety, he should at least take a peek in each, conduct a cursory search, before heading below. But he felt woozy and angry and his brain was unable to conjure a sufficient enough reason for him to not descend.

The stairwell presented a major problem. Although his sprained ankle was slowly mending, he still couldn’t put much pressure on it without the chance of toppling over. Disembarking down the stairs while trying not to make any noise and holding onto his gun was going to be an impossible maneuver.

But there was no way he wasn’t going down. He was going to end this. Now.

With the hilt of his gun hanging precariously out of his jeans pocket, Gavin inched his way down the stairs, holding his breath, cringing at every last bump and thud that he caused. Half-shuffling, half-hopping, he somehow conquered the stairs, his feet landing on the ground floor.

Stopping to listen, he heard sounds issuing forth from his right. He frowned in consternation. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say that it sounded like the television was on.

He wanted to laugh but the best he could do was sigh. Connor or Hank must have left the thing running, either from forgetfulness or else on purpose. Maybe Sumo liked the noise, that it served as some sort of companionship while his owners were out.

Anger bubbled up within, white-hot and scalding. Anger at himself for being so damn paranoid, so fucking foolish. Anger at the killer for driving him closer to the brink of insanity. He shook his head roughly, too roughly, too fast. Suddenly his vision blurred, and everything went topsy-turvy as he took a blundering dive onto the floor.

The world was spinning out of his control, a lopsided and wild carnival ride. He tried pushing himself up, but his equilibrium had apparently vacated, and he slunk back into the fuzzy carpet. Settling for a less exhaustive move, he rolled over onto his back, his bleary gaze staring up at the ceiling.

His eyesight was still out of whack when a shape manifested at the far end of the hallway, a thin and hazy form that was undeniably human. As dizzy and disoriented as he was, Gavin immediately tensed up, his breath fleeing from his mouth in ragged gasps. There was someone here.

The killer spoke something inaudible and started down the corridor.

Dazed but terrified, he flailed his arm at his side desperately, only to find that his pocket was barren. His gun must have slipped out when he had fallen. Turning his head slightly, he noticed a gray and blackish blur just out of his reach. His weapon had tumbled out into the hallway.

With what little strength remained, Gavin flopped onto his stomach and stretched his hand out, grasping at that metallic blob, his fingers digging into the carpet’s fabric.

The pace of the footsteps increased.

Straining, he willed his arm to reach out just an inch further, to just –

Too late. He was too late.

The foggy shape bent over and snatched up his ankle gun. Gavin’s fingertips were just a hair away. He had been so close.

And now he was going to die. Shot to death with his own service weapon, how ironic. Or would
the killer string him up like he had Mik and leave him dangling for Connor or Hank to discover on their return home. Maybe the maniac would tear open his chest and cut out his beating heart, like he had done with Slatterys.

Whatever cruel death awaited him, Gavin wasn’t going to give the bastard the satisfaction of seeing his fear. “Fuck you,” he hissed, his voice weak but firm. “Go ta hell ya motherfucker.”

The shape came closer. Squinting, as his final act Gavin tried to discern the killer’s identify, but his eyes continued to fail him, continued to mock him.

“Gavin? Are you alright? What in the hell happened?”

Tina’s voice. It was just Tina.

He had almost shot his best friend.

Equally relieved and horrified, he began to cry. His tears fell, soaking the polyester fiber.

Pushing the box of Kleenex across the surface of the hexagonal table, Tina’s mouth twitched involuntarily. “So your fall had nothing to do with your concussion? You expect me to believe that?” There was more than just a hint of accusation in her pointed words. Not to mention something else of an entirely different nature that he couldn’t yet grasp. Something masterfully camouflaged, disguised behind her sharp eyes and her pouty lips. “You should be in the hospital.”

“No fuckin’ way,” he snapped. “My head is feeling loads better. I don’t need to go waste my time at some goddamn hospital.” He tore his gaze away from her hawk-like stare for just a second, just enough time to glance down at the tissues situated by his knees. He knew the area around his eyes must still be red as hell – and wet – but he didn’t want to give her any more ammunition. “As I told you, I’m still woozy ‘cause of that medication they drugged me with yesterday. What the fuck they give me, anyways? Elephant tranquilizer?”

Lips pursed together into a thin white line, Tina glowered in his direction. For someone who was childless, she had certainly perfected the ‘motherly death-glare of doom.’ If she and her fiancé ever decided to have children, she was more than a step ahead of the curve for that job. Being a police officer had many similarities with being a parent: if someone in your jurisdiction did something wrong, you were blamed; grounding your kid was just another name for house arrest; and teenagers were basically underage felons. The only major difference is that you aren’t allowed to taser your offspring. Legally.

He sighed, a weary and dejected noise. “I’m fucking tired, Tina. I feel like shit. My leg hurts, my head hurts, my everythin’ hurts. I feel like I’m gettin’ too old for this kind of crap. That what you wanted to hear?”

Dark eyes flashing, Tina’s face spasmed uncontrollably. “No, Gavin that’s not what I – what I want.” She gave herself a little shake, as if trying to dispel her mental cobwebs. “I know you haven’t heard yet since you’ve been out of the loop, but Graham died last night. The infection that he got from the shrapnel spread and there was nothing that the doctors could do for him.”

“Shit.” He had never been close to Officer Alexander but that hardly mattered; they were brothers in arms. Now one of their own had died because of the killer’s actions, indirect as they were. He may not have pulled the trigger, but he was no less culpable in Graham’s murder for setting the event in motion. “How’s Chris taking it? He ok?”
“As well as can be expected,” Tina replied. “He went with the captain to visit Graham’s family. To express the department's condolences in person.”

“I'll have ta give Chris a call in a bit.”

She nodded and leaned over, nudging the Kleenex closer to him. Any closer and it would topple over the edge and land on the floor.

He scowled fiercely at the tissue box like it was the root cause of all his miseries. A thought popped into his head, sudden and incandescent. Tina and Officer Alexander had been at the academy at the same time, hadn’t they? Come to think of it, he’d heard her speak of him before, of getting drinks together with Chris after work before the latter had gotten attached to his old ball and chain. “Did you know Graham well?”

To anyone but Gavin, Tina’s studious expression would have appeared unchanged, unfazed by his question. But as her best friend, he easily spotted the small and nearly imperceptible facial movements; the tightening around her eyes, the thinning of her lips, and the slight tremor of her neck muscle. “We were patrol partners for a couple of months back in 2031.”

Something shifted in his mind, a nagging suspicion, swirling out in his mental hinterlands, concealed by distance and timber. He and Newsom had been as thick as thieves in those days, hunting criminals and harassing their colleagues with nearly equal delight, forever frothing at the mouth. Gavin and Tina hadn’t seen much of each other that year, she’d been busy. Dating a married man. A coworker, if Harry’s intelligence had been accurate, which Gavin hadn’t doubted. As twisted as that fuck was, he had a surreal knack for knowing everyone else’s business. A bloated spider at the middle of its web, pulling strings and yanking threads, feasting on all within his putrid reach.

Forcing his eyes to focus, he glanced back over at Tina and scrutinized her as she sat cross-legged in the pine green recliner. He suddenly realized what he had missed earlier. He now knew the identity of the expression that was lurking behind her dark eyes.

If he could peer into a mirror right now, he would undoubtedly see that very same gaze looking back him, hollow and dull.

Grief. Stark and bold.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Tina.”

His words were quiet and humble, so unlike his usual brash manner of speaking, full of boast and bluster. Regardless of how low his tone had been, Tina flinched as if he had screamed, bellowed straight into her unsuspecting eardrums. Her face contorted and crumbled, a seismic upheaval rupturing the plates beneath her skin. “How – how did you – ?”

“Just put two and two together,” he answered meekly. Shoving a self-deprecating smirk on his lips, he added, “only took me eight years to figure out. Don’t I make one hell of a detective?”

She laughed. “Sherlock Holmes hasn’t got a thing on you.”

“Fuck, I gotta compete with fictional cops too?”

Shrugging absently, she just grinned in reply, apparently lost for words. Wetness began gathering on the outskirts of her eyes. Gavin scooched forward and prodded the tissues over to her.

Chuckling, she snatched the box up and dropped it into her lap. “If you aren’t going to use them, I
certainly will.”

“Be my guest,” he offered. Tina tore a clump of the thin papers out and starting dabbing gently around her eyes, trying not to smudge what little makeup she used. Gavin hesitated, wondering what the best course of action would be. In their relationship, Tina was the stable one, the voice of reason, the friend that bailed you out when you were stuck in jail for public intoxication. He was the crazy bastard, the idiot who always acted before thinking, the loose cannon of their duo. Comforting others, even his best friend, was still relatively unfamiliar territory for Gavin Fucking Reed. And she had kept this secret from him for over half a decade.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

Despite the inconsistencies of her wordplay, she abruptly stood up and walked over to his position. Holding onto the Kleenex box like it was life raft, she plopped down onto the gross mustard yellow loveseat with all the force of a crashing rocket, jabbing his stomach with her elbow hard. Gavin responded by grumbling irately under his breath as Tina got comfortable, discarding one of the extra pillows over the backside of the couch.

She had this unfortunate habit of what Gavin mockingly referred to as ‘burrowing into the furniture.’ Whether it was his old smelly couch or his bed – or the Anderson family’s settee – she always had to poke and prod, smash and smush whatever she was sitting or laying on until it was snug enough for her skinny behind. It drove Gavin up the wall, which is one of the reasons why she likely did it in the first place. He just sighed and waited.

“Its strange,” she said at long last, after battering the ugly thing for nearly a full minute. Along with loosing her cap under the table somehow. She had settled with resting her body against his, her head cushioned by his shoulder. “I can’t believe that he’s dead. It’s just so … so strange.”

“Were you still uh, ya know, involved?” he asked cautiously.

“Nah, that ended years ago. We were only together for about eight months, is all. I’d like to say it was a mistake on my part, but I enjoyed it. Enjoyed being with him. Spending time with him, on and off the clock. He was a lot of fun to be around. Not cool or hip or anything like that. Just reliable. Consistent, something along those lines.”

Gavin craned his neck to get a better look at her reclining profile. “Were you still friends after?”

“I’m not sure what you’d call it, really,” she mused. “We were really infatuated with each other for a while, the clandestine-hotel-rendezvous sort of infatuated. Maybe even in love. At the time I thought so. I tried to get him to talk to his wife about us once things got hot and heavy. I’m not sure if he was ever as serious as I was, or if I was just some sexy diversion to ease the tension in of his life. Guess I’ll never know now.”

Genuinely curious, he momentarily pondered a question before posing it. “Does it matter?”

“At the time he broke it off, yeah it did. It hurt like hell, being dumped.” She exhaled loudly, her breath hot on his exposed arm, below the sleeve of his shirt. “Now? Not so much. We had a good thing but its in the past. At the time I just wanted to make sense of my heartache. To figure out something, anything, that might make things hurt a little less. You know, maybe if he had truly loved me it wouldn’t have hurt so much. That maybe it was better than feeling used.” She laughed lightly. “I read too many romance novels in high school and they made me think that everything was fated. All that silly soulmate stuff. Love at first sight crap. Real life is far more complicated.”
“That’s some silly shit,” he agreed. He also concurred with her other assessment. Love in real life was far more complex than any shoddily written, sappy plot paperback could ever be. There was always a happily ever after waiting for the characters in those stories and in real life, that was rarely the case. There was always something ready to dismantle true love, whether it be another person, society, religion, ambition, or just the slow ebb of time, eroding that special connection like the wind upon the desert sands. He couldn’t help but think of Mik.

“So to answer your question, I guess I’d have say that we were friends. Old friends.”

“Old friends,” he repeated. He placed his hand on her knee and squeezed.

He couldn’t make out her face, but he thought that she was smiling, one of her tiny warm smiles that make her look truly beautiful, not just merely pretty.

They sat in silence for some time, leaning against one another, lost in their own thoughts, contemplating their pasts and considering the present. Gavin couldn’t help but think about the dark irony that was involved in their lives, twisting their erstwhile happiness into something terrible and unrecognizable, a distortion of their previous love lives. Both he and Tina had lost a former lover yesterday; his Mik and her Graham. Their old friends were now dead, victims of some madman’s scheme to destroy those who he held responsible for his own ruination. If the dickwad was this fucking deranged, he assuredly deserved whatever inconvenience had befallen his own life.

Couldn’t have happened to a better guy. Or girl. Or android.

His earlier anger suddenly resurfaced, burning a craggy hole through his mouth. “We’re gonna catch the prick who killed our friends, Tina. And we’re gonna make him pay.”

She tensed up, her frame rigid and stiff. “Shoot him in the leg first for me, won’t you.”

“Gladly,” he growled. He had no intention of maiming the guy’s foot, however. He planned on aiming higher, either a headshot or in the dirtbag’s chest.

A loud buzzing noise erupted from her pants and Tina quickly disengaged from the couch, once again digging into his chest with her bony elbow on her way up, knocking the wind out of him. Half-cursing, half- wheezing, the detective watched resentfully as Tina yanked her phone out of her pocket and moaned. “Oh shit, Anthony is going to read me the riot act for leaving him for so long.”

Having barely regained his breath, Gavin gave her a perplexed look. “Whaddya do now? Have you gone a millisecond over your break again? He gonna read ya the official bylaws or somethin’?”

“I’m not really on break right now.”

His brows knitted together in contemplation. “Fuck Tina, I appreciate you checking up on me and all, but doin’ it in the middle of a shift is gonna get you in more trouble than I’m worth. The Useless Old Dick’s gonna have your hide if he finds out.”

Retrieving her hat from out under the table, she cleared her throat as she stood up. “Me and Robo-Ant are here on Fowler’s orders,” she informed him. “We are actually posted outside. We are your protective detail for the day. Well, at least until the Lieutenant and Connor pop over to interview you,” she amended, glancing down at her cell. “Then we get a break. They should be by soon.”

Gavin grimaced. The captain had assigned a security team to keep watch over him, to keep him safe. Normally he would have been appalled at the suggestion that he couldn’t handle his own protection, but after his lackluster display at the bottom the stairwell, he wasn’t going to argue.
Had it been the killer earlier and not Tina, he would have been toast. However, he couldn’t help grumbling about the situation. “Ya know, the psycho probably only killed Mik as a taunt to me. Its unlikely that he’s going to actually come after me. Woulda been much smarter for the guy to have done me in first.”

Tina shrugged helplessly, a flimsy pretense. “It’s not up to me. If you’ve got a problem with it, you better take it up with Paper Nazi himself.”

Grunting was the only worthwhile reply to such cruddy advice. “Oh, wait a sec,” he blurted out as she headed for the door. “What were you doin’ in here when ya found me, anyways?”

Rolling her eyes, his friend stopped. “Using the little girl’s room.”

“Figures,” he muttered, feigning irritation. “Had to come in to apply some more eyeliner, eh?”

Rather than hardening, her expression took on a sickly-sweet cast. “Tell me Gavin, how’d your night in the Anderson household go?” She winked devilishly at him. “Did you have a certain special someone tuck you into bed last night? Maybe kiss you on the forehead too?”

Immediately regretting his decision to try and rile her up, he balked momentarily. “Fuck no,” he barked, his face reddening, “get your head outta the gutter, Chen.”

To his ears, her triumphant cackle continued to echo throughout the open space, even after the front door had slammed shut behind her. Telling her about his android crush had been a fatal mistake on his part, she was going to milk him for everything it was worth, make him suffer for her own perverted entertainment. Well … at least that’s what he would do if their roles were reversed.

Frowning sullenly, he glanced about the living room, his misty eyes thoughtful as he took stock of his surroundings. An open-ended bookshelf sat above the entertainment center, home to a variety of books, mostly sports related. They were cordoned off by a set of twin cactuses, thin and pronged, with long, sliver-like needles. They were hardly the only the cacti in the area; positioned on each side of the television (brand-new, very expensive, very unlike the Lieutenant) were another set, although not of the same type. The one on the left reminded Gavin of a pile of pale green sausages, shooting out of the molding grinder. The other was a triangular shaped plant, crowned by a pinkish blob sprouting spines.

The majority of the furniture was well-worn and well-used. Either piecemeal remnants of Hank’s life before his divorce or secondhand items bought afterwards. Just like the recliner and the loveseat he was currently splayed out in, everything was simple, unadorned, and practical. Although some of the spots were a bit messy – the rinky-dink workstation for example, with the old man’s laptop barely visible underneath the tottering mountain of loose papers – they were apparently the exception to the rule. For the most part, the living room was clutter-free and clean. Not obsessively clean by any means, but homey clean. Not a perfect sterile environment, but a home that was lived in. And loved.

Certainly not a trashy dump like the place he lived in. His soon-to-be-former-residence, to be exact. There was no way in hell he could stay there now, not with what had happened. Once the crime scene tape was lifted, he was going to start apartment shopping for a new place. Maybe crash at some cheaper-than-dirt motel for a while. The city had enough of those to go around.

His gaze wandered back to the curved tv. Some mind-numbing, brain-melting, garbage excuse for prime-time television sounded pretty damn good just about now.

Spying the remote on the far side of the table in front of him, deposited there after Tina had turned
the device off, Gavin leaned forward and snagged the item.

He bumped the power button. The screen flashed and blared to life.

Oval-eyed, platinum blond, and pretty in a mature, professional way, Rosanna Cartland materialized in the center of the tv, slim in stature and confident in bearing. As the undisputed jewel of America’s most watched cable news station, Gavin could see why Mik had so envied her, and her coveted position as the lead broadcaster at KNC. She was undeniably attractive, a decently effective actress, and an influential gatekeeper of public opinion. According to his onetime boyfriend, she was also a revolting human being once the video feed ended. Mik had met her once and described the occasion as ‘frightening’ and ‘overtly pukeworthy.’

Snapshots of the world news revolved around the woman as she sat primly before the camera, straight-backed and proper, her green eyes viewing the information blinking across her tablet with careful consideration. The letters ‘KNC’ rotated along with the pictures, moving in a constant and reliable pace on the bright red backdrop of the globe.

Returning her solemn gaze back to the viewers, she spoke. “We have just received confirmation from an anonymous source stationed at the Detroit Police Department’s 7th precinct that the brutal murder of Mikolaj Gladkowski, one of KNC’s own, was committed by the serial killer known as the ‘Heartbreaker’.”

Gavin groaned. The cat was finally out of bag and the evil motherfucker had already been dubbed some stupid, however appropriate, nickname. The Heartbreaker. He certainly fit that bill; cutting out the organs of humans and androids alike. Leaving shattered hearts in the wake of his despicable crime spree.

“Mikolaj, or as he preferred to be known as, Mik, was an investigative reporter for the local Detroit branch of this new station. A journalist whose interests included the criminal justice system and the android rights movement, he was probably best known for his award-winning vlog series in which he interviewed many celebrities, including three of the Jericho Five.”

“He almost had four outta five,” Gavin mumbled resentfully. “Get it right, bitch.”

Blissfully unaware of the crude insults being hissed at her by some random viewer, Ms. Cartland continued her speech unabated. “As a valued member of the KNC family, Mr. Gladkowski will be sorely missed.” Tilting her head thoughtfully, she soberly added, “our deepest condolences to his family and friends in this difficult time.”

Not bothering to verbally respond, Gavin just lifted his hand and flipped her the bird.

“In regard to the vicious serial killer loose in their city, the Detroit Police Department issued an official statement today. Here’s what the Deputy Chief of Operations, Albert Callahan, had to say earlier this morning during an unscheduled public appearance.”

Rosanna’s unswervingly attentive countenance disappeared off the screen, replaced by the grim and austere face of the man responsible of placing Gavin on this very case. With an unhealthily looking pale skin and swathes of auburn red still glimpsed in his graying hair, the much-vilified Deputy Chief practically exuded his Irish ancestry. Though he was lacking in one very important aspect that would certainly shame his family line; Callahan was known to be a shrinking lightweight when it came to holding his liquor. A disgrace for sure.

Flanked by the mayor herself and one of the city’s leading councilmen, Callahan stared at the camera in what Gavin assumed was supposed to be a stern expression. To the detective it just
looked like the oily sonofabitch was suffering from a very bad toothache, the root of his nerve infected and rotting. The gasbag-turned-officer was pulling out all the stops, making a grand spectacle of his press conference. Besides having two of the city’s most recognizable individuals with him, he had also dressed for the occasion, wearing his official getup, with all the bells and whistles. Attired in his dark uniform, the prick could actually pass as a real police officer – at least, to those who didn’t work under him.

“Dear citizens of the great city of Detroit,” Callahan intoned gravely, his mouth in a sour shape, “let me assure you, the police are taking this threat very seriously. The heinous murders committed by the guilty party – referred to as the ‘Heartbreaker’ by the media – will be investigated by the best and brightest that our law agency has to offer. We have formed an elite task force to hunt down and bring the person, or people, responsible to justice. We will not idly rest, nor we will waver in our pursuit to apprehend this violent predator.”

“What’s this ‘we’ business?” Gavin muttered poisonously at the tv. “All you do is sit in your fuckin’ office and complain about your salary.” He sneered. “Asshole.”

Nodding his head in a self-important fashion, Callahan’s cheek twisted. Likely a nervous tick. “Let me also tell you this. I am very aware of the public’s deep and justified concern over the marked increase of crime in our fair city within the past year. You have every right to be worried about the troublesome course that Assistant Chief McCray has put us on. His policies are bad for the safety of our populace as well as disastrous for our economy. So now I will make you this solemn oath. If I am installed as the city’s next Chief of Police, I promise you that I will revamp the entire department into a more efficient, less costly, force that can do it’s job. Without hindrance from McCray’s many mistakes.”

Stunned, Gavin just gaped at the boob tube, his mouth slack and slightly crooked. “ Fucking asshole,” he managed to grind out, just as the view of Callahan and the courthouse steps vanished. In less than a tenth of a heartbeat, Rosanna Cartland was once more situated in the middle of the box, her mask of civility and intellect firmly in place.

Incapable of listening to even another second of her bullshit, Gavin slammed his thumb down on the remote and the television reverted back to its prior lifelessness, its screen a black void.

Flopping the remote back onto the table, Gavin grit his teeth. Although he willingly labeled himself a lifelong cynic, the detective was still shocked by the Deputy Chief’s undisguised callousness, and his dearth of tact. His eldest ally, the red beast, reemerged from out of its den deep within the fetid swamplands and roared in victory.

Trembling, Gavin turned his furious gaze back to the screen and started shouting, bellowing at the top of his voice. “People are dead you fucking ass!” The names of the deceased began playing in his mind, a cruel song stuck on repeat. Mik Gladkowski. Graham Alexander. Muffin. “They are fucking gone and you – you are using their deaths for self-promotion?! Fuckin’ really?!?” Natalie Slattery. Thomas Slattery. “Well fuck you, you sack of shit!” Adeline Babidge. Jeremiah. “Ya know what, Deputy Fuckface?” He jeered at the chunk of plastic as if it were the offending individual in question. “I hope the goddamn fucking Heartbreaker comes after you next, you fucking asshole!”

Swaying like a flag caught in the late summer’s tempest, he lurched back and forth, his strained ankle wailing in protest at the abuse. Breathing deeply, he tried to regain his balance. He hadn’t even realized that he had stood up. His throat felt dry and arid, as if full of scorched trenches. Ignoring the desire to sit down, he wobbled out of the living room, passed through the hall and entered the kitchen.
Like the rest of the house, the kitchen was only lightly decorated. A couple of cheap, mass-printed portraits hung on the walls and – surprise, surprise! – there was yet another cactus perched on the windowsill over the sink. A stocky, bulb-like thing with a smattering of pretty yellow flowers. A wall calendar was tacked up next to the side entrance, open to the month of March and displaying a picture of a Corgi rolling in a muddy puddle, its tongue flopping out of its smiling mouth. The usual furniture and appliances associated with a cooking and dining area – refrigerator, microwave, table, stove, coffee machine, etc. – were all in attendance, looking worn but serviceable. An apron was draped casually over one of the chairs, the words on its front lost in its slumped position.

He grabbed one of the clean glasses out of the dishrack – Hank didn’t have a proper dishwasher! – and made his way over to the sink. He filled the glass to its brim and immediately took a giant gulp, splashing water all over his chin and down onto his shirt.

The news of the killer had finally broke and, just as he had wanted, Mik had been the catalyst for the exposure after all. Certainly not the headline he had likely envisioned, starring his own obituary rather than one of his artfully-written articles. A spiteful twist of fate. If there was a God up in those damn clouds, he had a sick sense of humor.

Gavin’s grip on the glass tightened. Callahan was a clever, if also blatant, opportunist, that was for sure. The detective had misjudged the preening shithead. Gavin had always assumed that his superior was nothing more than a clumsy showman by his prior performances as the Deputy Chief of Operations. But he was far wilier, more cunning, than the detective had imagined. The bastard was using the announcement of the existence of the serial killer to not only promote himself, but to also dirty his only real rival in the race for Chief. He may not have said the actual words, but the implication was as clear as day; Assistant Chief McCray was somehow to blame for the murders. Not to mention the rest of the crime being committed in the greater Detroit metropolitan area.

Avoidance of office politics was one of Gavin’s personal rules. He outright hated all of the manipulative, backstabbing bullshit that tagged along with those crummy campaigns. He had always refused to get involved, refrained from choosing sides. He had never seen the point.

But at this very moment, Gavin was more than willing to march up and down Woodward Avenue in one of those pink frilly tutus if it would lead to McCray’s success. Gavin didn’t know much about the Assistant Chief, but anything up to and including a howler monkey would be better than Albert Callahan, the sleazebag in uniform, the department’s semi-permanent black eye.

Just as he began to refill the glass, the knob on the side door began to jiggle as it was unlocked. Before Gavin could even turn, the door swung open, and Hank strode over the threshold.

“Jesus Christ, you look like shit.”

Shockingly, there was no hostility in the Lieutenant’s statement, no hint of mockery or ridicule. It was just an honest assessment of his belief.

Pushing into the room, Connor apparently disagreed. Fixating the older man a disapproving glare, he uttered out a scandalized, “Hank!”

“What?” Hank shrugged at the android with an annoyed grimace. “He looks like shit.”

Glancing down at himself, Gavin had to agree. His gray shirt was rumpled and creased. A fresh water stain was dribbled down its front and there were also dark stains around his armpits. He hadn’t been aware that he had sweat so much. Undoubtedly a consequence of his feeble exertion to catch the ‘killer.’ Though he could not see his own face, he knew that his week-long stubble was approaching what Tina called his ‘homeless person appearance.’ Hank was right. The detective
probably looked like he had just crawled out of a sewer pipe.

“Guess I should take a shower,” he mumbled, embarrassment creeping up his spine.

“That can wait,” the gray-haired man gruffly informed him. “We’ve got some questions for ya.” He pointed at the dining table and jerked his head in its direction. “Take a seat.”

“I think what Hank is trying to say,” Connor barged in, shooting his adoptive father a reproachful glance before turning his attention to Gavin, “is that we’d like to speak to you.” His head swiveled on his shoulders and he glowered at Hank again. “If,” he imbued the word with a special significance, “you are feeling up to it. If you aren’t, we can come back later.”

“Nah, its fine,” Gavin warbled out, heading over to the table. “Let’s get it over with.”

The sound of wooden chairs scrapping against the linoleum was the only noise that was heard in the kitchen for a few seconds, seconds that seemed to drag on and on to Gavin. He had only ever been on the opposite side of an official police interview once before. And that had been in his youth, almost a quarter of a century ago. Being a witness … possibly even a suspect … of a crime was not something he had expected to happen to him again. Now he was the one under their scrutiny, forced to answer questions rather than pose them. A surreal and humbling experience.

Anxiety rising, Gavin started to gnaw on his lower lip and glanced between his two interrogators. Connor sat rigidly in his chair, hands folded neatly in his lap, a worried expression marring his otherwise pristine features. His gaze darted back and forth, from Gavin to Hank, in a dizzying speed. The Lieutenant seemed no less concerned than his partner was. The old man’s countenance was haggard and strained, as if a great burden lay behind his skin, crushing his energy and motivation with the weight of a boulder.

His bottom lip began to hurt, and Gavin forced his teeth apart. Tired of waiting for one of them to say something, he sighed in weary resignation. “I ain’t a fuckin’ rookie, ya know. Its pretty damn obvious what you need to ask me, so I’ll save you the trouble.” Two sets of tense eyes rose to meet his steady ones. “I had nothin’ to do with Mik’s death. I didn’t kill him, I didn’t let him into in my apartment. And he didn’t have a key, so he couldn’t have gotten in that way.” Breath hitching in his throat, clenched by his sudden fear, strong and cold, he swallowed. “I swear I had nothing at all to do with his murder.”

“We know.”

Startlingly, the admission came not from Connor but Hank. The Lieutenant’s mouth twisted as if he wanted to add more, but nothing materialized.

“You know?” Gavin’s tone was incredulous.

“Yes,” Connor confirmed in a near whisper, “we know.”

Brows scrunching up as his bemusement increased exponentially, Gavin frowned, considering the situation. He had just assumed that their trepidation had been caused by their discomfort in having to insinuate his possible involvement in his old friend’s death. Putting the screws, so to speak, to another of the blue wall was not an easy, or desired, occurrence for most members of the force. Rat squad aside, of course.

As if a light was switched on upstairs in the attic that was his brain, he abruptly understood their hesitation. He felt like he should slap himself for being so dense. “You found the photo of Mik and me, right?” Not bothering to wait for their reply, he trudged on, wanting to unload from his
omission from the other day. “Look, I bet ya aren’t exactly thrilled we me right now. I mean, when I told you about him before he came in, I only said that we were friends. Well a long time ago, we were uh … more than friends.” His cheeks were probably looked like a pair of twin bricks, if the heat radiating off of them were any indication. “As ya know, since you’ve seen the photo.”

The photo. The only memento that he’d saved of their life together. It had been taken by Mik’s older sister, Eloise, back when they had gone on a spur-of-the-moment vacation, driving around New England in Gavin’s Bullitt. Autumn had always been Gavin’s favorite season, and he’d been more than thrilled by his boyfriend’s spontaneous idea to go see the foliage change. Eloise had taken many pictures during their brief stay, but the one that Gavin still kept in his closest was his favorite. Set on one of Maine’s many spindly dirt roads, with a forest of vibrant leaves – reds and yellows and oranges – as a background, they had hugged each other, their bodies twined, one stray hand messing Mik’s hair while his lip’s pressed up against Gavin’s forehead in a sloppy kiss.

Though their relationship had withered and changed, Gavin had always kept the picture. A remembrance of when the days didn’t always seem so damned dark.

“I didn’t think it was relevant to the case, ya know? Mik was just there to tell us about the killer, not rehash the past. So if you’re angry about me keepin’ it secret, well … fucking whatever.” His temper started to flare, a simmering ember ready to ignite his mind in a blazing inferno. Closing his eyes, he blindly pushed his fury away and continued his labored monologue. “Our relationship ended a long time ago. We dated back when I was in the academy and for a little bit when I first got on the force. Over twelve years ago. I didn’t think it was important.”

LED the color of burnt amber, Connor looked up at him. “But it is important.”

Feeling as though the murmured words were some sort of biting accusation, Gavin grimaced, his desire for a cigarette running rampant through his bloodstream. “Fine,” he rasped, “I shoulda told ya. My bad. I won’t keep anythin’ back anymore, no matter how fucking stupid it is.” He choked back a sullen ‘happy now?’ and settled for staring at the watermark that was disfiguring a portion of the table’s surface near it’s center. Someone had once forgotten to use a coaster. Irresponsible.

Out of the periphery of his vision, he saw the Lieutenant and Connor share another look, an exchange that chilled him down to the marrow in his bones. The same look that his grandmother’s doctor had given her before he had disclosed her diagnosis, branded her with a death sentence. The same look – of reluctance and sorrow, fueled by empathy – that he’d worn countless times, informing the unsuspecting of the demise of a loved one.

Head swinging from side to side, Gavin nearly bolted out of his chair in dismay. “What’s happened? Has somebody else been – been killed?” For one horrid moment, Tina’s face hovered in his mind, bloodied and pale, but he rejected the omen, knowing that she was just outside, safe and sound.

Leaning forward, Connor locked his calm but worried eyes on Gavin’s frightened ones and spoke in a soothing tone. “No, everyone is relatively alright. No one else has died.”


With his tongue stuck to the bottom of his mouth, a beached whale in danger, Gavin merely nodded and deflated into his seat, awaiting whatever bad news was forthcoming. Something was clearly wrong. The human and android alike were oozing angst in torrential waves. Gavin might be dog-tired and ready to collapse onto the floor like a spineless fish, but he wasn’t a detective for nothing. Something was definitely amiss.
Sighing, the old man turned to his partner. “Show him, Connor.”

“No, Connor.” The Lieutenant’s voice matched his demeanor, careworn but firm, the sort of unyielding firmness that came along with having made a tough decision. “We’ve been over this already,” he said, eyeing his adoptive son in a manner that was hard, but not unkind. “You’ve argued this with Fowler, and you’ve argued it with me.” A small smile graced the older man’s lips, a fatherly grin that exuded pride. “The whole car ride over here, I might add. But this has got to be done. We are running against the clock here and we can’t wait any longer. You know that.” His gaze shifted back towards Gavin. “And he has a right to know.”

The words hung in the air, shimmering like a dark cloud on a hazy day, sucking in all the light around it. Gavin shivered despite the heat filtering out of the radiator nearby. “What’s this?”

Jawline raised high, the android was not yet finished arguing. “Hank, I really do think that it would be best if we delayed that till –.”

“Connor!” Barking out his partner’s name, Hank slammed his bear’s paw of a hand down the table, causing its joints to squeak in protest. The banshee’s cry of the furniture.

Inhaling deeply, the Lieutenant took a moment to compose himself and when he next spoke, his tone was softer than Gavin had ever assumed was possible. “Look Connor, I know you don’t want to do this, I get it. And I get why.” His parental expression returned, warming his entire countenance, smoothing some of the fine lines across his weathered features. “You want to be a good friend and there’s nothin’ wrong with that. But you aren’t being one by tryin’ to avoid what’s gotta be done. You aren’t doing anybody any favors by trying to ignore it. Ignoring it ain’t gonna make it go away.” He grabbed the android by the shoulder, tugging gently. “The best thing we can do is take this fuckin’ mess head on and do our jobs. Ya hear me?”

Although reluctantly, Connor nodded, his LED ping-ponging between blue and yellow.

Satisfied, the older man tore his gaze away from the android and twisted around in his seat. Bending over, he began rummaging through an unseen bag, obscured from Gavin’s sight by the table. The detective glanced questioningly over at Connor, but the other man seemed lost in his thoughts, a vacant expression ghosting through his glazed eyes.

Muttering irately under his breath, the Lieutenant resurfaced and placed a single sheet of paper down on the table. With Hank’s hand floating just above, as if suspended in mid movement, Gavin couldn’t quite make out the content of the mysterious stationary. However, from what little he could see, it looked like just a reprint of some police photography. Nothing unordinary in their line of work.

The older man sighed heavily. “There isn’t any easy way of saying this Reed, so I’m just gonna level with you. As you said, you aren’t some goddamn rookie without any experience under your belt. You’ve been a member of the force for over fifteen years. Five of em as a detective. You’ve dealt with shit like this before and you can handle this too.” Pushing the picture within Gavin’s reach, he withdrew his hand and the younger man stared down at the object, his brows knitted together, his mouth parted in confusion.

It was a picture of him. He was scowling fiercely in the morning light, standing directly outside of his residence, a travel mug gripped in one hand, his keys in the other. The region around his left eye was swollen, a purpled and blackened mass of tissue, nearly cutting the eye out of view. “What the fuck is this?” His voice was strained and tight.
“Connor found that in an envelope left outside your apartment door yesterday,” Hank explained. His eyes still glued to the picture, Gavin nodded absently. He had a vague recollection of the android droning on and on about some letter right before they had found Mik. “Chris says that you got blind-sided by some drug addict back in early January, so that means this had to have been taken within a couple of days of that incident. Do you remember anything ‘bout that time? Anythin’ odd?”

Like fumbling around in a pitch-dark room, flailing pitifully for a light source, Gavin tried to force his mind to focus, but to no avail. “All I remember is not being able to drive. Chris and Tina took turns picking me up and dropping me off. That’s what I was doing here,” he said, tapping the picture. “Waiting for one of them to show up. I think Tina was late one day.” Squinting, he scrutinized the photo-Gavin’s foul expression. “That was likely that day.”

“You don’t remember anything else? Nothing at all?”

“Not a fuckin’ thing.”

As he continued to stare down at that frozen moment, that stolen piece of his past, Gavin’s heart began to beat faster. That earlier sense of something being awry was no longer merely fluttering around, flapping on the edge of his senses like a timid bat. He saw it everywhere, in the somewhat grainy recreation sitting before him, in each and every single pixelated dot, in the pink line of Connor’s perfectly designed lips. He felt in every fiber of being. A permeating wrongness.

He wasn’t dumb, no matter what his critics spouted. He knew that the killer had left this for them to discover. A picture taken a month prior to the detective’s placement on the case. Long before he ever had a chance to convince his former boyfriend to not publish an article about the madman.

Struggling, he fought to find his voice. The letters that had been sent to the Slattery’s and the Babidge household had both contained secret messages, scratched in the blood of androids. A threat riven in blue. “What uh – what’s it say?”

Although Connor had remained mute following his altercation with Hank, seemingly content to let his partner doing the talking, it was he that now spoke. “The Failure.”

He was on the list.

One of the four targets.

Something he had done had incurred the deadly wrath of this faceless psychopath.

“So the killer chose Mik to call on purpose. It wasn’t just a coincidence. Mik was my …” Guilt suddenly clogging his throat, his words trailed off, leaving his thought unfinished.

“His murder was orchestrated as a punishment to you. Just like the Slatterys were executed to punish whoever the Unfaithful is. We found a letter similar to the others in Mr. Gladkowski’s mailbox. He never opened it. Never knew it existed.”

Mik had never had a chance. A true child of the digital era, Gavin’s onetime beau had been disdainful of snail mail, preferring the instantaneous benefits of online communications. “What did I … what did I do to piss this guy off?”

Gruffness abandoned, Hank answered. “We were hoping you might know.”

An overwhelming mudslide tumbled down the mountainside of his already distorted mind, uprooting stone and branch alike, covering all the ragged earth under a bed of sloppy debris.
Failure. His father’s sneer, malicious and dirty, rose out from his past. The tone-deaf recital of some long-dead poem echoed in a sinister wail, his mother’s voice upon the wind. As addicts they had always derided his fascination with law enforcement. But they were gone. Just like the grandparents that had raised him and his cousin during their teenage years. Their opposition had rose not from contempt but worry. Worry about their grandson’s safety. They were all dead and buried, along with whatever disappointments they had held. Tombstones for a rotten family tree.

“I don’t know. Can’t be personal though. I haven’t got anythin’ personal ‘sides Tina and she ain’t the loony type.” A weak white lie. His cousin still lived, even if they were forever estranged. “Must be about some case. One of my unsolved ones.”

“Or maybe a friend or family member of someone you caught and helped convict,” Connor added thoughtfully, fidgeting with the placement of his tie, yanking it back and forth.

“Well, I dunno.” He shrugged weakly. His shoulders felt like they were made from steel.

“Jesus Christ,” Hank cursed softly. “I was hopin’ that you’d have some idea.” Sighing, he glanced wearily over at his partner. “We’re gonna have to go through every last goddamn case you’ve ever worked and check out everyone who could feel like you wronged ‘em, whether its big or small. With a sick motherfucker like this, it could be anything at all.” Huffing, he shook his head, gray hair flying about in exasperation. “Who knows how the killer really thinks? Hell, if he’s mental enough he could have targeted ya because you frowned at him.”

“If we are gonna go through every case I’ve ever worked on … its gonna take all afternoon.”

“And night,” Hank corrected, his face a boggled mask.

“Gavin.” His name was spoken carefully, as if it were fragile beyond imagining.

Shifting his attention from the Lieutenant, Gavin’s gaze settled on the android. There was something in those synthetic eyes – so concerned, yet so cautious – that made goosebumps surge upon Gavin’s neck and arms. He hesitated before responding. “Yeah?”

Connor paused, his parted lips shuddering slightly as he deliberated on his choice of words. Gavin winced at the sight. “We’ve been operating under the assumption that the suspect has been killing his intended victims by removing their hearts and thirium pumps. But that may have only been true for the Slatterys. Without their bodies, the coroner could not determine the cause of death for Ms. Babbit and Jeremiah. Just because the suspect had their organs does not mean that he killed them in that exact manner.”

“Why the hell didn’t I think of that?” Hank groaned in frustration.

Ignoring the older man’s outburst, Connor plodded on. “With Mr. Gladkowski he skipped that particular aspect of his modus operandi.”

Dread clawed at Gavin’s nervous system, his fight or flight response on the verge of commencing. He wanted nothing less than to flee from the coming question, to run out of that cozy little kitchen with all its stainless-steel appliances. But he forced his feet to remain parallel with the floor, disregarding his reptilian brain’s screeching commands. They had to know. “I take it you wanna know if Mik being – being hung has some sorta special meaning to me?”

Connor nodded gravely.

“Yeah, it does,” he admitted quietly. Hammering against his ribcage, his heart thundered in his chest like an earthquake waiting to happen.
Secrets. Out of all the people who knew him, only his cousin was aware of this truth, this pain that he cradled in the dark, that worshipped his self-destructive impulses, that ate away at his self-esteem like a malignant cancer.

It all came down to trust. Could he trust?

His life could depend upon it.

Turning away, he closed his eyes. “My uh, my mother committed suicide by hangin’ herself.”

Besides his and the other’s rhythmic breathing, for the next few seconds the only sound in the kitchen was the slow but steady drip of the faucet in the sink, a ponderous plunk.

He couldn’t stand the silence, so he spoke to fill the void. Speaking of things he had never voiced before. Not to Tina, not to Harry, not even to Mik. “It happened a long time ago, right before I went to the academy. Her head wasn’t screwed on properly, ya know what I mean? Always thought people were after her, that sort of crazy shit. Kinda lived on another planet. One that only made sense ta her.” There had never been any space for him on that other earth, that fantastical delusion. No room for her son. “She was in and out of institutions my whole life.”

Shaking his head, he tried to keep his train of thought on the tracks, heading towards the next destination and not speeding off the rails. “Anyways, as I said it was a long time ago. I never told anybody ‘bout it till now. Though that doesn’t mean much. There was a police report about it, a few articles, both paper and online. Anyone who wanted to put their time into it could have figured it out.”

“That’s some tough shit, Reed.” Hank.

“I’m sorry, Gavin.” Connor.

Opening his eyes, he sucked some air between his teeth. “Long time ago,” he repeated again. By the agony writhing within his chest, his heart vehemently disagreed.

The Lieutenant began gruffly patting down his jacket pockets, suddenly engrossed in a search for something. “Goddamn it all,” he grumbled tiredly. “I must have left my phone out in the car.”

Nearly bouncing to his feet, Connor asked “would you like me to go get it for you, Hank?”

“Yeah if you don’t mind, that’d be great.”

In the blink of an eye, the door had already closed behind the android, leaving Gavin alone with his surly superior. The very same man who had almost cracked Gavin’s skull wide open on Fowler’s file cabinet just five days ago. According to Jamal, the very same man who considered Gavin’s feeble apology to be a nothing but a scam. The very same man who probably blamed the detective for the serious injuries that his adoptive son incurred only two days ago.

Without Connor’s warmth, the room suddenly felt much colder. Like a subzero tundra.

Chair shrieking as he pushed away from the table, Hank rose and walked towards the fridge. Warily, Gavin followed the Lieutenant’s progress as he swung open the door, grabbed something within, shut it, and strode over to his position. Looming with all his extra height, the Lieutenant gazed down at him and plopped whatever-he-had-fetched on the table.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he peeked at the object and read the label. Budweiser. Hank had brought him a beer.
"You aren’t on the job today, so one can shouldn’t hurt."

Gavin blinked. Apparently, he wasn’t about to be bludgeoned with a frozen turkey after all. “Uh, thanks, Hank.” Gratefully, he reached over and snatched the tantalizing beverage.

Nodding, the older man returned to his seat, grunting as he sat down. His blue eyes, both pensive and wide, watched as Gavin took a swig of the beer. “Jeffrey wants to see you tomorrow morning first thing.”

The detective had been expecting this ever sense he had woken up this morning. With Mik’s murder and the bullseye now painted on his back, his status as a lead investigator in the case was now in jeopardy. His removal was all but a foregone conclusion. “Ya mean the Useless Ol –,” he coughed, trying to hide his juvenile nickname for the captain behind the forced noise. “Uh, Fowler wants me off the case and nailed to a desk until the killer is caught.”

Hank chuckled dryly. “Yep.”

Muttering enough expletives to make a sailor blush, Gavin considered his options. If removed, he wouldn’t be let anywhere near the files or the evidence. He’d be cut out of the loop. Stuck on the meaningless paperwork grind that he so hated. All the while an insane lunatic was preparing to kill him – and who knew how many others. He’d be powerless again.

No. If the Useless Old Dick decided to kick his ass off the case, he’d just utilize his vacation time. By hunting the sick motherfucker on his own terms. No rules, no laws.

“If you want to stay on the case, I think I can convince Jeffrey to do that.”

Resisting the urge to pick at his eardrums, Gavin goggled. Had he heard Hank correctly or had his wax built up enough to interfere with his auditory senses? “What?”

Leaning forward, Hank surveyed him grimly over the tabletop. “I’ll do what I can to keep Jeffrey from tossing your ass.” Without warning he smashed his index finger down on the table. “If,” the old man emphasized the two-syllable word like a fatal threat, “if you promise me, here and now, that you can handle it.” Annoyed at the implication, Gavin tore open his mouth to retort, but the Lieutenant raised a hand angrily, forestalling him. “Don’t you fucking try any of your shit with me, Reed. I know what its like loose somebody you love.”

Hank’s face hardened and Gavin nearly flinched at the stony sight. “You listen to me, and you listen good.” Not wanting to test the old bear’s patience – especially wearing a mask like that – Gavin bobbed his head in understanding. “I know what its like loose someone and I know the want that comes along with it. The want to blame someone, something, anything. To make some fucking sense outta the pain.”

Without warning, Hank slammed his fist onto the table, making Gavin slink back into the recesses of his wooden chair, an involuntary reaction to the abrupt and menacing move. “And I know the price for goin’ down that road. Lost my wife, most of ma’ friends, and nearly my job too. Would have as well, if Jeffrey didn’t have the fuckin’ patience of a saint.” The balled fist unclenched, and the old man sighed. “I’d be six feet under if I hadn’t finally let it go.” He glanced up and his imploring azure eyes met Gavin’s slate ones.

“So here’s how this is gonna go,” the Lieutenant started to inform him. “If you want to stay on the case you are gonna make me a promise right now.” His raised his hand. One finger jolted up, away from the rest. “You are gonna try to keep your head in the game. To not make this personal. As much as ya can,” he added knowingly. A second finger flicked upwards. “If you start feeling like
you can’t do this, you tell me immediately. Cause if you can’t do it, then you’ve got to step away.” A third sibling joined the others. “You gotta play things safe. No charging off without backup so you can try to take the asshole out.”

Ego bristling, Gavin barely managed to keep a scowl from forming on his spasming countenance. He hated having terms dictated to him like he was just some misbehaving brat, petulant at not being able to watch television all Saturday long. But … nothing Hank was asking for was particularly onerous.

He could live with the scumbag getting a lethal injection rather than a bullet.

Gritting his teeth together, he growled. “Alright.”

Not wasting any time to savor his victory, Hank immediately seized upon a different topic. “There’s another matter we gotta discuss. Your apartment is currently a crime scene and will likely be one for the next couple of days, so you’ll need a place to stay. You’ve got two choices here. Ya can either go to a DPD safehouse for the duration of the case or you can park your ass here with me and Connor. Pick your poison.”

Gavin didn’t even pause to consider. “Here’s fine.”

“I’ll text Jeffrey.” Hank pulled his cell out of his pants and battered at the buttons, a relentless assault accompanied by a fair share of curse words.

Just as Gavin was about to open his mouth, to inquire why Hank was doing all this, the side door opened and Connor barreled in, his lime-green tie askew, his voice high. “Hank, I’ve looked everywhere in the car, and I can’t find it. You must have left it back at the station or –.”

His words ceased as Hank lifted his phone up and wiggled it. “I found it. I had it the whole time. My bad, Connor.”

Brows nearly touching, Connor scrutinized the both of them with an intensity that only an android prototype could. Hank continued to punch furiously at his phone like the un-millennial he was, and Gavin took another sip of his beer, the Budweiser can hovering by his lips. The detective assumed that Connor was scanning the entirety of their kitchen – from the doggy magnets on the refrigerator to the melting snow that he and Hank had tracked in earlier – trying to assess what had transpired in his short absence.

With his back to the android, Hank smirked deliberately, as if he was well aware of his partner’s confusion. But his next words were not directed at Connor, however. “It’s almost one already. I’m starved. You up for some pizza, Gavin?”

The man in question paused, startled at hearing the Lieutenant speak to him so casually. “Yeah, sounds good to me.”

“You still a freak for sausage and pepperoni?”

“Damn straight.”

His reconstruction finally finished, Connor blinked. His LED was a calm shade of blue.

Chapter End Notes
Back to work (?)
Chapter Notes

Gavin returns to work ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trepidation filled his chest as he glanced out over the bullpen, unnoticed by those laboring within as they scrambled to fulfill their appointed tasks, as they sought to create order out of the strange madness that had only just begun to grip the city in its apphensive, vice-like grip.

Leaning against the wall in what he hoped to be perceived as in a nonchalant manner, Gavin surveyed the scene with green-eyed envy, wanting nothing more than to jump back into the fray. To pretend that he wasn’t stuck in some sort of precarious limbo, banished to the bleak land of purgatory, realm for those that must wait. Knowledge of his work status would come shortly however, and depending on the answer, maybe too soon.

In his heart he already knew what his boss’s answer would be. To Fowler, Detective Reed was no longer just an impartial investigator when it came to this high-profile case. He was now both a victim and a target of the serial killer of which he’d been hunting. No longer was he the feline in this cat and mouse chase; he was now the rodent, blissfully unaware of the sharp eyes gleaming from out of the darkness. An old friend – an old lover at that – had been brutally murdered in very specific way, a way that was tailor made to cause as much pain and distress as possible. The conflicts of interests abounded.

Even with Hank’s oath of support, Gavin doubted his chances.

Though all was not lost. If the captain decided to bench the detective for the remainder of this investigation, he would just make ample use of his overabundance of unused vacations days. He would continue this case on his own terms, not as a member of law enforcement, but as a private citizen who could not stand idly by while his life was literally on the line. If the Heartbreaker was not stopped one way or the other, Gavin would end up pushing up daisies in some rustic graveyard. Vigilantism might be anathema to his job description, but he would easily make an exception in this dire situation.

A sickly wave of worthlessness crashed over him as he continued to watch his coworkers and fellow officers conduct their business. Many of the uniformed individuals that were milling about the bullpen, chatting in small groups or else hovering around one of the occupied workstations, were unknown to him. Likely they were on-loan from one of the other precincts in Detroit; sent to help administer the daily responsibilities of the department while the task force pursed its prime objective. Even though they were nameless to him, he still couldn’t help but feel jealous of their positions. Of their ability to be useful.

While he could not identify the vast majority of the people trampling all about his workplace, there were some familiar faces sprinkled sporadically in between the unknowns. Looking like he hadn’t slept a wink in ages, Ben was over by the elevator, gesticulating to a pig nosed sergeant, a Styrofoam cup in his pudgy fingers. Darrel Tanner, the precinct’s resident rookie, was showing something to Micah Wilson on his laptop, flapping his hands in exasperation. The younger Wilson brother replied by sighing out of the corner of his mouth and jerking his head towards the exit. His
elder sibling was engaged in a serious conversation with someone on the other end of his cell, one errant nail itching his beard absently. Officers Person and Ward were having a hushed discussion over the former’s desk while a third woman, a homely red head, puckered her lips in confusion to whatever was passing their lips.

Busy. They were all of them busy. Bedraggled and exhausted, yes, but blessedly busy.

He longed to rejoin them in their hunt.

“Are you sure you are feeling well enough for this?”

Trying not to roll his eyes, Gavin exhaled. He was seriously getting sick and tired of hearing that same goddamn question over and over again. Why Connor didn’t just make a recording of the query and play every five minutes was beyond him. It would save the android both time and energy.

Not that the other man was sorely lacking in those regards. Androids only needed a few hours per week to recharge and, as long as nothing nefarious ever happened, Gavin had heard that they were basically immortal. Not invincible but immortal. The slow decay of the clock held no power over their lengthy lifespans.

“I’m fine,” he eeked out, trying to keep the annoyance from staining his voice. “Fine and dandy.”

His weary words belied the conflict that was being waged within his pockmarked brain, a battlefield of scorched grey matter, the weapons of war fueled by his guilt and indecision. For all his technologically advanced doodahs, Connor had no possible way of ascertaining what was going on inside Gavin’s boggled mind. No amount of scans would grant him access to that particular mystery.

“You don’t need to lie to me, Gavin.”

The detective couldn’t hold back the involuntary wince that overtook his face upon the uttering of those simple, plain-faced words. Unbeknownst to Connor, his empathic remark had struck gold, his shovel accidently denting the precious metal in the process.

Gavin was lying.

Just yesterday afternoon he had told both Hank and Connor that he would no longer withhold anything at all concerning his personal life that could somehow pertain to the case, no matter how trivial or absurd. Yet he had not been fully truthful with them, had not held to his oath of honesty. When asked about his relatives, he had turned to deception’s lure once more. He had implied that all his relatives were dead and buried and, although he considered his cousin to be dead in a way – dead to him – the self-absorbed asswipe was actually alive and well, if the media was anything to go by.

Much to Gavin’s eternal disgust, it seemed like there was some unwritten journalistic rule that all the stations abided by: that each and every week of the year must contain at least one article, one tabloid piece, or one news segment on his wacko cousin’s life. Whether it be about the possibility of his financial ties to more than half of President Warren’s cabinet or else his tendencies to eat sushi on Thursdays while singing opera.

Late last night Gavin had ruminated at length over his decision to keep the existence of his cousin secret. Much of his justification consisted of his decades old spite. He wanted nothing to do with the evil bastard and thus didn’t wish to involve him in this case, even if it meant putting himself in
more danger. The idea of having to vocally admit to being related to his cousin made his blood run cold, nearly freeze in his veins at the very thought. The man might be living the high life, surrounded by his unimaginable riches, but to Gavin, he was just as gone as his parents. Maybe not buried beneath the earth, but certainly entombed in the soil of his immeasurable selfishness.

Bitterness aside, there was one other simple fact that was included in the detective’s judgement. As much as he hated the prick, Gavin couldn’t believe that his cousin would ever seek to physically harm him. The reverse might be true, however. Gavin wouldn’t pass up a chance to break the other man’s jaw. And bust a few ribs for the hell of it. The bastard could easily afford the hospital visit, so what was the fucking problem? Let him try smirking through one of those damn face casts.

The eerie designation branded upon Gavin by the killer made no sense in correlation to his cousin. If anything, Gavin would be the one to consider Mr.-Century-Magazine’s-Person-of-the-21st-Century as a failure. A failure to his family.

A loud crash emitted from somewhere in the middle of the bullpen, dragging Gavin back to reality, back to down to the concrete floor beneath the soles of his feet. He squinted, trying to figure out what had happened. Connor was far ahead of him, of course.

“Officer Kettering accidently knocked a Hosta off the communal workstation,” Connor’s calm and collected voice informed him.

“No wonder,” Gavin said sarcastically. “The fuckin’ place is packed.”

Although his words were practically saturated with acid, they weren’t an overstatement of the current situation. In the fourteen years that he had worked in the 7th precinct – in varying capacities – he had never seen his workplace so full of people before. Even during the android movement there had been far less personnel on site. As his eyes swiveled from one end of the room to the other, all he could think of was a can of sardines. And one of those silly clown cars, full of a dozen acrobatic lunatics.

“Are you sure that you are alright?”

Resisting the urge to howl in anger, Gavin turned his head and glowered sullenly at the man standing next to him instead. “You got some screws loose? I said I’m fine. For the hundredth time today, I’m still fuckin’ fine.”

With his head cocked to the side, Connor returned Gavin’s glare with an impassive stare of his own. Straight-backed and with his hands laced behind him, the android appeared highly professional and very alert. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what ya believe. I. Am. Fine.” With that final word, Gavin scowled fiercely at the android with his most intimidating expression. One that he typically reserved for interrogations. The tough ones where his good cop routine wasn’t able to make any leeway.

The corner of Connor’s lips tremored slightly as if he was trying to contain some burgeoning facial movement. His tone nearly rippled with amusement. “You know, since we’ve officially become friends, I feel like I can tell you that your pouting attempts have no effect on me whatsoever.”

Nearly laughing out loud, Gavin struggled to keep his menacing mask in place. “Guess I’ll have to unfriend you on Facebook then.”

One perfect eyebrow rose in disbelief. “You don’t have a Facebook account.”
“See? Already done. I’m just that good.”

As if on some director’s unseen cue, smiles broke out simultaneously upon both of their faces. The sort of small and quiet smiles that Gavin rarely ever gave or received. Most of his smiles were big and brash, full of his dissatisfaction for the world, and for himself. But like some thought-to-be extinct animal making an unanticipated appearance, his expressions of open contentment were seen every so often. Once a millennia, at the very least.

The fact that he had been experiencing these unforeseen bouts of happiness more often – and who was to blame for their instigation – did not escape Gavin. His newly minted friendship with his former foe had some surprisingly awesome perks. Connor was not only kind, not only skilled, but also funny. Sarcastic and ironic at times. Two of life’s finer things that Gavin always savored, always prized.

Not that he had much time to relish their shared mirth at the moment. Connor’s miniscule grin dropped, and to Gavin’s immense fury, he returned to his earlier topic. “So how are you really doing?”

“What I gotta do?” Gavin exclaimed. “Should I get a tattoo on my forehead that says ‘fine?’ Will that be good ‘nough for you?”

“I do not believe that will be necessary, or appropriate.” Connor stated levelly. “How about you just tell me how you are feeling. Beyond fine, that is.”

“I already gotta shrink.” Crossing his arms over his chest, Gavin frowned at the android. “Dr. Chen’s the best around. I wouldn’t tread on her turf, if I were you.”

Rather than commenting on Gavin’s swipe at Tina, Connor chose to protest in the most effective manner available to him; he started sulking. With his downturned lips and doleful eyes, the taller man looked like the human version of a kicked puppy. Minus the barely shaking tail, of course.

Having Connor’s secret weapon so blatantly brandished at him was a sight that he did not want to see this morning. Grimacing sourly, Gavin tossed in the towel. “Alright, alright, you win.” He shot the android a tart glare and shoved his hands into his pockets before beginning. “I just don’t like talkin’ about this sorta shit, ya know? Its just easier to fucking ignore it.” Or else drown it out in a sea of brandy. He refrained from vocalizing that last thought, however. Word around the station was that Connor highly disapproved of overindulging in alcohol.

“Ignoring it won’t make it go away.”

“No duh.”

“Talking about how you feel can help sometimes.”

Biting back yet another snide retort that was lingering upon his tongue, Gavin paused. He wasn’t the touchy feely type when it came to the enigma of emotions. He hated talking about the miasma of his inner workings, not only because he was a man who preferred action to thought, but also because his feelings were a complete mystery to him. A complex and infuriating inscrutability that only served to unnerve and confuse him. To try and understand his own mental state would be an impossible endeavor, an investigation that not even the likes of his tenacity and grit could solve.

In his experience only Tina was capable of dragging anything substantial out of him.

Shrugging his shoulders, he grimaced in a defeated way. “I dunno how ta do this.”
Connor opened his mouth to speak but a third smug voice beat him to the punch.

“We’ve got a party to crash.”

As if in unison, Connor and Gavin’s heads pivoted together to stare at the newcomer to their conversation. Appearing far cheerier than earlier, Hank grinned as he came to stand between them.

Eyes narrowing in sudden suspicion, Gavin pondered the Lieutenant’s drastic change in his demeanor. Just this morning the older man had been stamping all over the house, barking worse than Sumo, acting like someone had drank all his nasty liquor (a crappy brand that the detective wouldn’t ever consume even if the only alternative was rubbing alcohol.) Stupefied by Hank’s unstable behavior, he had asked Connor about his partner’s attitude. The android had been just as clueless as he.

The only thing that they were aware of was that Hank’s volatility had begun after he had received a call from Sally. Neither of them could imagine what she could have said or done to set him off. The female android wasn’t the most unagreeable person on the planet. Efficient and maybe a little gossipy, but not a spouting font of umbrage.

Whatever fit had seized him earlier, no traces were now left on the gruff man’s countenance. He was practically beaming, a grinning middle-aged man in a hideous Hawaiian shirt. “Hey Connor, Gavin and I are gonna go have a chat with Jeffrey. Why don’t ya see if Ben’s got any updates for us. Maybe somebody’s spotted the Babbidge woman’s missing car.”

“Ok Hank.” Shooting one last quizzical glance in the Detective’s direction, Connor detached and started wading through the bodies clogging the bullpen, his LED spinning like helicopter’s propeller.

His good humor fading slightly, Hank turned and fixed his attention on Gavin. “Let me do that talkin’ with Jeffrey. He says listening to you makes him want to retire.”

Smothering the mother of all curse words under his breath, Gavin scowled at Hank’s comment but otherwise kept silent concerning the slight. Insulting his shitheaded boss in front of his boss’s friend would not be conducive to his current position. That did not mean that he did not raise an objection. “Don’t ya think we should wait till after he’s done with his meeting?”

Gaze shifting away from the man standing aside him, Gavin’s vision swam over to the Glass Cage. The captain’s office was a black box today, nothing that was contained within was visible to the naked eye. As a not-so-modern marvel, the plexiglass that surrounded Fowler’s domain could be altered at will by the captain’s consent. There were two modes available for use: the first; the usual transparent appearance. The second; the darkened guise that was being utilized at the moment. Everyone in the precinct knew the meaning behind the latter’s use; do not disturb. Beware; enter at your own risk.

Not a coward at heart, Gavin had nevertheless learned the hard way not to interrupt any of his superior’s meetings if they were covered in that artificially created pitch blackness. A week’s suspension had cured him of any longing to do it a second time. Sitting at his apartment for seven days straight with nothing to do had almost driven him batshit crazy. Not that it was a long drive.

Hank snorted in amusement. “Trust me, he’s gonna thank us for barging in.”

Fowler had never once thanked Gavin for anything. Complimented him on a job well done, yes, but there had never been any real gratitude, latent or otherwise. Resigned to his fate, he sighed.
“Whatever. Let’s get this over with.”

Walking behind the Lieutenant as the older man ploughed his way roughly through the throng, Gavin couldn’t suppress the unwelcome thought that he was marching towards his doom, the headsman’s axe waiting patiently beside the gallows for its grisly due. Fowler’s judgement had already been decided in his mind; he was going be glued to his desk, his shoes stapled to the floor. But he couldn’t sit on his ass while his life was in danger … while Muffin and Mik’s murderer remained on the loose. That meant his pursing the killer without the backing of his fellow officers. Even if he outlasted the ordeal, he would likely lose his career in the process. In order to survive, he would lose his reason for living.

The irony would be laughable if it wasn’t so damn revolting.

Distracted by his errant thoughts, Gavin didn’t even realize that they were already at the captain’s office until he was limping through the doorway, over the threshold, and into the room.

Anxiety slithering around in his chest like a nest of enraged vipers, Gavin immediately took stock of the area. He expected to see a member of the brass perched stiffly in one of the chairs, maybe Assistant Chief McCray or even one or two of the Deputies. He dreaded Callahan’s insufferable presence the most. If that motherfucker’s face was within punching distance, he was going to be missing teeth soon. Regardless of Gavin’s love for his job, he doubted that he’d be able to restrain himself after witnessing yesterday’s press conference if that ugly freebooter was in attendance.

His fears were ungrounded. Callahan was not there.

But there was someone else in the office besides the captain.

A short man was standing with his back to Hank and Gavin, his countenance hidden by the angle. The unknown individual’s posture was rigid and yet also somehow languid, his hands clasped behind him in a compressed knot.

Initially the detective was fogbound concerning the man’s identity. But the moment the he spoke, Gavin instantly recognized him.

“Your people destroyed a four-year, joint FBI-DPD investigation into the Bregu crime family, Fowler. Their little stunt on Rosemount the other day exposed our surveillance of the mob’s primary drug-making facility. And to top off their incompetence, your people were trigger-happy as usual. Only one survivor! How is the Attorney General supposed to make a case against the Albanians with one lowly thug who was nothing more than a manual laborer? We needed the leader of that operation alive and your idiots blew his fucking head off! I can’t ….”

The man’s words washed over Gavin like meaningless sound, just arbitrary noise that …

… floated in the vast darkness that lay beyond death itself, the endless void where all things came to rest once life had faltered and, ultimately, failed. Surprisingly, a low murmur existed in this queer afterlife, a bothersome vibration that irked Gavin’s slumber. The regretful afterglow of one’s expiration, perhaps.

The passage of time did not diminish the noise, however. On the contrary, the buzz gained in strength, getting louder and louder. Eventually forming into understandable words.

“Shouldn’t we get this guy to a hospital?” Someone asked. “He might have some internal damage.” The speaker’s worry was evident even through Gavin’s muddled haze.

“No,” an icy voice ordered. “I need to know what he knows. He’s not seeing a doctor until I do.”
“Sir, I don’t mean to question your authority,” the first person began in a pleading tone, “but this guy’s not just some random civ. He’s a cop. A goddamn cop. We’ve gotta get him some help.”

“No,” the second voice repeated firmly. “His health is not our concern, Farnsworth. Do I have to remind you that our country is on the verge of a civil war right now? This is a national security crisis, not some fucking tea party. We don’t have the luxury of waiting for this klutz to get medical attention before talking to him.” There was a short pause and when the voice returned, there was a quiet and perilous edge now audible. “We have our orders, agent. Or have you forgotten what they are? Or who gave them?”

“No, sir.” The earlier concern had vanished, and alarm had taken its place.

“Warren has declared martial law.” Ice-for-breath said. “We will do what we must to stop the machines. They cannot be allowed to continue fermenting their unrest and spreading dissension.”

“Yes, sir.”

A third and previously unheard actor spoke, fear lining each and every syllable like a skin-tight cloak. “Is it true? Have the machine’s been hacked by Russia? I heard that Ivanoff was trying to find a way to turn our androids against us. This stinks of Russian involvement.”

“There’s no indication of any foreign interference,” one countered. “Either this is some sort of weird digital flaw or else Cyberlife’s behind this. I never trusted that company.”

An angered sigh tore across the unseen landscape. “It doesn’t matter who is behind this. Our orders are to put an end to it. That’s all that matters. The androids and this Markus of theirs must be destroyed. Remember that.”

Fumbling against the all-encompassing night, Gavin opened his eyes.

He wasn’t dead. Just splayed out on the cold floor of the evidence archive like a human-sized piece of litter. No trashcan for the trashman.

He was still alive. The android had only incapacitated him. Had refrained from using lethal force.

The giant teal ceiling light hovered overhead, its strangely pale glow bathing the room and its occupants in an otherworldly luminescence. Some gray-clad techies were bobbing up and down in a hurried examination of the evidence that was strung up along the wall. Android corpses were hanging like synthetic animals on oversized meat hooks. He turned his head to look straight up and pain exploded through his body. The prototype might have spared his life, but he’d given Gavin quite the thrashing. Though he was suffering, he was also admittedly impressed.

Blinking, Gavin shifted his weight experimentally. He was immediately rewarded by an intense agony that clutched at his throat. Shocked by its strength, he couldn’t stop the ensuing whine from escaping his lips.

The three individuals standing nearby took notice of his sound. One of the two that were wearing official FBI outfits got down on a knee and gave him a quick once over. The well-groomed African American man with a neatly trimmed moustache shot him a sympathetic look before speaking. Gavin pegged him as voice one, the nice guy. “Jeez, you took one hell of beating officer. How are you? Can you talk?”

Voice three – an overripe and plump FBI agent with long greasy hair – snorted derisively. “Would ya look at the size of that lump on his neck! It’s a wonder that he’s still breathing.”
“Fuck,” Gavin managed to wheeze out as he lifted one hand and taped lightly around his neck. The pain increased by a hundredfold. “Fuckin’ fuck!”

Still in a kneeling position, Agent Farnsworth smiled sadly. “We’ll get you to a hospital as soon as possible officer but first we need you to tell us what happened down here. What happened to you.”

Agent Three snorted again and cracked a scathing grin. “Probably fell asleep and knocked himself out against the terminal.” He glanced at the shortest man and snickered. “We all know how the DPD are, am I right?”

Despite the jest made by his colleague, the trenchcoated individual was not amused. A shadow of contempt flittered across his thin and gaunt face like a translucent cloud over the moon. A trail of semi-clotted blood was ebbing from his nose. “Someone has clearly meddled with the evidence, Gorbach. As lazy as the locals are, I doubt even they were be so sloppy or clumsy.”

The oily man (Agent Three/Gorbach) flinched at the other’s words but said nothing.

Farnsworth outwardly ignored the exchange, but even in his weakened state, Gavin could see the unease building behind the stooping man’s eyes like the waterline in a flooding compartment. There was an iceberg somewhere waiting beneath those waves. “I’m sure it hurts to speak officer, but can you tell us what happened?”

Trying to comply, the detective was struck by a sudden coughing fit. He sputtered and gasped for breath. Worried, Farnsworth turned his imploring gaze upwards, towards the bleeding man who was apparently the supervisory agent in charge. “Sir, if he doesn’t get treatment, we might not have a witness to whatever happened here at all.”

The man who had earlier been assaulted by Lieutenant Lush stared down at Gavin with compassionless eyes. “Who did this?”

Although he was still choking for air, Gavin was able to push out a single word. “C – Connor.”

Both Farnsworth and Gorbach glanced at the middle man with astonishment staining their baffled features. The object of their attention appeared unaffected, his face was an expressionless slate with two orbs. However, his voice was a frozen wasteland. “Are you saying that the android from Cyberlife did this? Attacked you and tampered with the evidence?”

Afraid of breaking out in another coughing spell, Gavin simply nodded in reply.

A grim scowl broke out upon the fed’s countenance and he …

… was still blathering at Fowler like a fuming howler monkey. “… it won’t be long before the FBI takes the Heartbreaker case away from you. Your people mucked up the Bregu investigation and chances are, they’ll screw this one up too if we don’t intervene shortly.”

Rising slowly from his chair, the captain glared at the FBI agent with barely concealed fury. Only a blind man would be unable to see the former flight officer’s blistering contempt. “That’s enough Agent Perkins. Your superiors didn’t send you here to parrot their complaints. The Chiefs are well aware of their – and your – criticisms and they frankly don’t give a shit.” The undisputed taskmaster of the 7th precinct slammed one finger down hard onto the desktop to stress a point. His point. “You were sent here to assist us, not attempt to hijack our investigation. You are not in charge here. You will help us, or you will leave. There is no middle ground here.”

Special Agent Richard Perkins stood emotionless as he weathered Fowler’s harangue, never once
flinching or even visibly shifting under the verbal barrage. To Gavin, the shorter man may as well have been a disdainful statue, ignoring the wrath of the elements without as much as incurring a single mark or watery discoloration. “Very well. I will … assist the DPD’s investigation.”

Slumping back into his seat, the captain watched the federal agent warily. There had been no mistaking the truckload of disgust laden in Perkin’s grudgeful reply. The man was clearly not here on his own volition. If his belligerent tone was any indication, the fed’s presence had likely been ordered at gunpoint.

“Your knowledge of the Bregu family’s inner workings could be beneficial to this case,” Fowler suggested curtly, in what must have been a lackluster attempt to mollify the offended agent. “The suspect must have had a reason to use the Rosemount address for a showdown and as the lead FBI investigator in that joint operation, you just might have access to the information that could tell us what that reason was.”

Perkins said nothing but he inclined his head in an almost imperceptible fraction.

“Alright.” The captain leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers over his desk. “The Heartbreaker task force is being led by a trio of my finest investigators. I believe you’ve already had the pleasure of meeting them when you were last here on assignment.” Fowler’s blunt features quivered uncontrollably into a toothless grin. “I’m not sure if you were ever formally introduced to Detective Reed but I know you’ve met Lieutenant Anderson.” The grin became an outright smirk as he gestured behind the agent.

Twisting around, Perkins betrayed none of the discomfort or shock he must have been feeling upon his unsettling discovery of Hank and Gavin’s current whereabouts. His focus flittered between them like a disinterested spotlight, dull and listless. There was not even a hint of recognition when the man’s eyes touched Gavin’s form – Perkins probably couldn’t remember him unless he was spread-eagled on a cement floor again – but they sprang to life when they landed on the beaming Lieutenant.

“Hey Dick.” Hank cheerfully greeted the agent like he was an old friend and not the icy federal bastard who had led the government’s android extermination enterprise just three months ago. Not a greeting generally reserved for a man whose nose you once broke. “Long time no see.”

“Anderson.” Perkins’s stiff utterance was fraught with contempt.

Hank’s ecstatic expression deepened, his large smile becoming grotesquely feigned. “I hope you gave your doctors a good bonus this Christmas.”

Uncomprehending, the trenchcoated man narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, why’s that?”

“They did a great job fixin’ that beak of a nose of yours. It’s less crooked than it was before.”

Lips pursing into a pinched white line, the special agent glared menacingly at the Lieutenant, his eyes alight with dislike. Unfazed, Hank continued his jubilant rictus routine without batting an eyelash. The two of them stared at each other in some unspoken contest; the mountainous grizzly bear versus the frosty midget. Gavin briefly wondered if he should do something. Having Hank slug Perkins again probably would have a negative impact on his own tenuous situation.

But before he could even think of a proper solution, Fowler’s booming voice reverberated through the Glass Cage like a shrieking fog horn. “The other member of this triad is Detective Connor. He’s out in the bullpen if you’d like to talk to him. He probably has a thousand and one questions for you concerning the case.”
Recognizing the dismissal for what it was, Perkins broke the eye contact first. Without another word, he raised his head high and pretentiously swept from the room.

Just as the door clacked shut behind him, Hank grumbled aloud. “He’s still a fuckin’ prick.”

Gavin was in complete harmony with the Lieutenant’s assessment of the man referred to as the Jackal by his coworkers and associates. This unkind sentiment was undoubtedly shared by all of Perkins’ peers; as a rude and emotionally devoid loner, no one purposely sought the company of the man who had once been universally lauded by his superiors. Prior to the android rebellion/movement, Richard Perkins had been the go-to-guy for all manner of national emergencies, the ruthlessly efficient agent whose track record had been the envy of the entirety of the FBI.

An unwanted thought floated across Gavin’s mind like a dying star as it sent its final signal through the ethos. He and Perkins were very much alike. Exceedingly effective in their careers. Disliked by the rank and file but held in high esteem by their bosses. Granted unflattering nicknames by their colleagues. Perkins was equated with a scrounging wild dog. Gavin’s fellow officers called him the ‘trashman’ or ‘trashcan’ behind his back. They were both despised and shunned.

Or had been, in his case. Connor’s return had somehow changed all that. Along with Tina, Gavin now had two real friends on the force.

His pensive gray eyes wandered over to Hank’s surly visage. Maybe even three someday.

“I know you don’t like the guy Hank,” Fowler barked irately at his old classmate. “Hell, nobody likes him, but that doesn’t mean you should intentionally goad him.”

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit Jeffrey!” Striding closer to the captain’s position, Hank shoved his hands on his waist and growled. “For fuck’s sake, Perkins is basically a fuckin’ war criminal! He murdered countless innocent androids when he led the military’s attack on Jericho! He deserves all the goading I can give ‘em!”

Sighing deeply, as if trying to exhale all the oxygen from his body, Captain Fowler threw up his arms and shook them in frustration. “Goddamn it Hank! We’ve had this fucking discussion more times than I’d like to remember!” He surged to his feet and trudged around his workspace so that he could stand toe-to-toe with his friend and subordinate. Eye to eye.

For once, Gavin was very glad that he was not the center of attention, not the focal point of every raging gaze. Being ignored or forgotten had its perks after all, especially when the alternative was being squished and flayed between two towering giants. “Regardless of your approval, the Detroit Peace Act is law, Hank. It is law. No amount of bitching will change that!”

Having a slight height advantage over his boss, the Lieutenant had to crane his neck to look directly into Fowler’s stern sight. “The Peace Act is a piece of shit. The only thing its good for is being used as toilet paper!”

“Just because you don’t agree doesn’t mean th –.”

The defiance in Hank’s tone was iron-hard and mule-headed. “Oh, spare me, will ya? We all know that the government only passed the fucking thing to cover their own asses!”

Once more the older man’s judgement was almost spot on, nearly in conjuncture with Gavin’s own. The Detroit Peace Act – or House Resolution 3011 as it was known formally – was the legislative branch’s after-the-fact insurance policy concerning the events of the android crisis. The
law decreed that all the possible crimes that had been committed by or against androids during that one-week rapture in November could not be subject to any means of prosecution (with a clear exception to Cyberlife’s many machinations). In essence, this controversial and hurried statute was the government’s attempt to protect itself from its actions. Which in reality meant that people like Perkins and President Warren herself could not be indicted and convicted for the deaths brought about by the government’s conduct.

The law also worked both ways, however. No android could be punished for their role in the rebellion, no matter the severity of the criminal act. The White House had been adamant in their demand for that addition; the last thing that Warren wanted was for the robo-jesus to be arrested on charges of assault and trespassing due to his infiltration of Stratford Tower.

It also mean that Gavin had gotten off scot-free for his attack on Connor. Even the little nobodies were sheltered beneath that slipshod umbrella.

Fowler had a far more charitable interpretation of the law. “Sure Hank, I won’t even try to dispute Congress’s intent behind the law – both of us know that score – but what you keep forgetting is that it shields everyone. Not just them. Everyone, Hank.” The captain’s voice underwent a startling metamorphosis as he spoke next; his authoritarian vibe had evaporated in favor of a commiserating tone. “That includes Connor.”

The Lieutenant flinched as if a de-pined grenade had landed in his lap, only a mere second away from denotation. The captain’s face held an honest sympathy that Gavin had never witnessed before. Had certainly never been the recipient of. “The Peace Act is an all or nothing principle, Hank. Either it works for everybody or it doesn’t work at all.” With a great weary sigh, Fowler continued quietly. “And let’s be frank. Connor’s got detractors on both sides of this debate. He’s killed humans and androids, Hank. The media might love him but that doesn’t mean everyone does. Without that law in place, he’d be deactivated for his actions.”

Looking as though he was being forced fed the world’s most disgusting cough syrup, the Lieutenant’s mouth puckered. “It wasn’t the kid’s fault.”

“I know.”

“He was fighting for his life, Jeffrey. His life.”

“I get it, I really do.”

Despite the nagging feeling that he was intruding on something private, something unintended, Gavin couldn’t tear his eyes off the scene that was unfolding a few feet away. The knowledge of Hank and Fowler’s friendship had never been a private affair, but Gavin had never considered their relationship in any terms that hadn’t been fueled by his resentment and jealousy. He had always thought that there had to have been an ulterior motive for the two; that Hank wanted to get away with his drunken mishaps and that Fowler had wanted to take credit for the Lieutenant’s successes. But he had been wrong. They were friends, true friends, pure and simple. Just two buddies that helped each other weather the turbulent storms of life. Not unlike himself and Tina.

“He was tryin’ to do the right thing Jeffrey.”

“I get it, Hank.” The blunt-faced man repeated his earlier statement as the Lieutenant sagged like a punctured balloon. “I know you want Perkins and the others to pay for the pain they caused but it isn’t worth it if that means Connor pays too. I’m sure neither of us want that.”

His voice oddly hoarse, Gavin broke his silent streak. “None of us do.”
As soon as the words left his chapped lips, he suddenly found himself to be the center of attention once again. Turning to look at him, both Hank and Fowler mirrored one another with duplicate expressions of alarmed bewilderment. His presence had fallen through the cracks of their minds; they had forgotten him in the kindled atmosphere that had followed Perkins’ egress. Curiously enough, his usual anger had not been summoned at that thought. His fragile ego must have taken a holiday.

As if the mere sight of the detective had jostled Hank’s memory, the older man finally breached the topic that had originally driven them to intrude upon the captain’s meeting in the first place. “I think you should keep Gavin on the case, Jeffrey. It would be a mistake to take him off.”

Opening his mouth to respond to his subordinate’s opinion, Fowler was nevertheless prevented from speaking as Hank launched into what appeared to be a well-rehearsed argument. “I know he’s an asshole and all,” – Gavin scowled fiercely at his advocate –, “but he’s damned good at his job and we need all the people we can get to catch this Heartbreaker prick. And yeah, I know we got some reinforcements to help us, but they don’t know this case front-to-back like he does. As much as I fuckin’ hate to admit it, it was Gavin who figured out that we were dealing with a serial killer to begin with.”

Although his cheeks had started quiver due to the backhanded compliment, Gavin refused to give in to his baser instincts.

“I’m not –,” Fowler started.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Hank blurted out, causing their boss’s complexion to darken exponentially. More accurately, he hated being interrupted. “I know Gavin’s an arrogant little shit that makes you want to invest in a cure for heartburn and indigestion, but he deserves the chance to fight. Hell, if there was some maniac gunning for me, I wouldn’t back down. I wouldn’t want to be stuck shuffling paperwork while my life was in danger!”

“Hank, I’m no –.”

“Listen here, Jeffrey!” The Lieutenant’s brash and third interruption caused Gavin to wince as if stung by a wasp. More precisely, he winced at the increasingly enraged expression growing on the captain’s already ruddy countenance. “If you don’t keep him on the case, he’s only gonna go rogue. I mean, fuck, that’s what I’d do in his shoes. Is that somethin’ you really want? To have Gavin the Trashcan Reed running all over the city making a fool of himself? Pretending that he’s uh … I dunno … Zorro or something?”

Not knowing the reference, Gavin nonetheless heard the uncomplimentary implication hidden behind the words. His upper lip began to twitch and curl.

Fowler’s face looked like a volcano on the verge of a fiery eruption. Gavin just hoped that the molten lava would miss him. “Hank, will you just –.”

“I know, Jeffrey, I know! You think that he’ll go off and start causin’ trouble like he –.”

“SHUT THE HELL UP HANK!”

The captain’s explosion was everything that Gavin had expected and more. His eyes nearly bulging out of his skull like fleshy white grapes, Fowler lofted into a thunderous rebuke. “Goddamn it Hank! I swear you never fucking listen to anything or anyone! You are a police lieutenant, not some damn cable tv talking head! Act like one!” With a vein pounding dangerously on his
forehead, Gavin wondered if his boss was about to suffer a stroke, if his ornery disposition was about to catch up with him. “If you had listened to a goddamn single word I had said earlier, you’d already know that Reed was remaining on the case!”

In his mind’s eye, the detective could see as every last head of every last person in the bullpen swiveled towards the Glass Cage at the man’s outburst. Loud couldn’t even begin to describe it; people outside of the precinct’s walls probably weren’t even spared from the noise. Hell, Gavin wouldn’t be surprised if his eardrums had incurred permanent damage. Deafness by supervisor tantrum.

Looking only perturbed and surly, Hank glared at his friend. “If you weren’t plannin’ on giving him the boot, then why in hell did you want to see him this morning?”

“Because Hank, I’ve got a question I need answered.”

Ignoring the Lieutenant’s quizzical gaze, the Useless Old Dick marched over to where Gavin was standing, his rump leaning against the back of one of the visitor’s chairs. He shifted his weight and folded his arms over his chest defiantly, attempting to conjure his usual haughty poise. By the lack of outright hostility found in the captain’s features, Gavin had likely failed in his endeavor.

“Watcha want to know?” His voice was fainter than he had intended.

“Tell me Reed, how do you know Deputy Chief Callahan?”

Out of all the questions that could have been asked, the one that was actually posed caught him by surprise. The query came from out of the blue, maybe hurled from some other terrestrial planet for all he knew of its foreign origin. “Fuckin’ what?”

“How do you know Deputy Chief Callahan?”

His brain fizzling, its sparks shooting off in every direction like wingless fireflies, Gavin’s mouth went slack and boneless. “What kinda stupid ass question is that?”

The stare which Fowler fixated on him with was uniquely devised to remind Gavin that his supervisor’s monthly allotment of patience had already been depleted. “Just answer, Reed.”

Close to howling at the moon because of the absurdity in his boss’s chosen line of inquiry, Gavin practically hissed his answer through his teeth. “I don’t know Deputy Dickwad. I’ve never met the douchebag. Not even once, Fowler.”

“Are you certain?”

Like a bedraggled tarp being torn away by the wailing winds, the suggestive quality in those three little words ripped at the fabric of Gavin’s self-control, exposing the festering mass of indignation and insecurity writhing below. There was more than just a hint of disbelief, more than just the insinuation of professional skepticism. He could almost hear the underlying accusation contained within the captain’s speech. That he was lying.

He was not a liar.

Another lie. He was a liar.

But not about this.

Snatching at the last sinewy thread of his restraint, the tarpaulin thrashing vainly against the gale’s breath, he fought against his baser urges. His fury would not unravel him now. “I have never met
Callahan,” he growled out. “I’ve never seen him in person before. Never fuckin’ crossed paths with the asshole. To my knowledge, never worked on a case with him before.” Not that the turgid bootlicker had even done any real policework in his whole career. “I don’t know him, and he don’t know me. I’ve seen his ugly face on tv and that’s it.” A bubble of resentment pushed its way through an unguarded fissure. “Fuck, you know him better than I do!”

A stark stillness followed his outpouring, a silence that somehow seemed louder than his boss’s flare-up just a few moments ago. Out of the periphery of his vision, Gavin could see Hank’s perplexed expression, just as dumfounded as he was over the senseless exchange. Fowler’s intense cast made his skin tingle with discomfort.

After what felt like an agonizingly long period of time, the captain sighed. “Alright. That’ll be all, Reed. Get to work. Hank, stay. I want a word.”

Equally grateful for the dismissal as he was for the opportunity to return to the fray – to have purpose again – he strode to the door as fast as his still healing leg could take him.

Just as his sweaty palm grasped the handle, a voice rose and snared him once more. “One last thing, Reed.” He could have screamed.

Turning his head, he glanced back towards his boss. Fowler was situated behind his desk already, seated with his fingertips poised eagerly over the keyboard. Hank was standing beside him, hunched over, his befuddled gaze glued to the captain’s computer screen. “Yeah?”

“Well be careful. The Department’s already lost one of its own to this killer. We don’t want to lose you as well. Take care, Reed.”

His allergies suddenly making an inexplicable appearance, Gavin just nodded and left.

Not that he’d ever admit it to another soul, Gavin secretly loved puzzles.

And not just in the general sense of having a mystery to solve – there was that, of course – but also the actual jigsaw puzzles themselves. He flat out adored the old-fashioned kind that had gone out of style during his grandparent’s heyday; the cardboard cutouts, the box with the answer on front, and the spark of thrill that he got each time a piece clicked with another, when he took one step closer towards bringing the interlocking chunks into a cohesive whole.

Some of his happiest memories consisted of him hanging over the card table, his rapt attention glued to the tiny little pieces arrayed before him while his grandmother shifted through her own pile, magnifying glass by her side. His crotchety grandfather would bemoan the pointlessness of their hobby, but even he too would sometimes hobble over and help, his cane banging against the table’s legs, the stale smell of cigars heavy in the air. His cousin rarely participated; he found their practice to be ‘trite,’ ‘tedious,’ and ‘lacking in imagination.’ Gavin never minded though, his cousin’s super-sized brain drained the fun away with how quickly he could finish the product.

Though he had never mentioned this to any of his partners or coworkers, he always thought of each and every one of his cases as another of his grandmother’s jigsaw puzzles. Just instead of the final picture being that of a field of tulips or a tumbledown European castle, the end result was the specifics of a criminal act: the where, the who, the how, and the why. The pieces were also more varied in his gritty version; rather than wafer-thin slices of paper, he had forensic reports, psychological profiles, the pathologist’s opinion, and the evidence itself. And no, unlike the puzzles that he fiddled with during his teenaged years, with his cases he never had the luxury of knowing how things were supposed to go beforehand. There was no front of the box to study when
it came to the heinous crimes that he was charged with solving.

There were only a few instances in his career where he could recall desperately yearning for some sort of cheat sheet, some sort of two-dimensional tiled answer like he had had in his youth. As he looked out over the deserted conference room, he realized that had never wanted one more than he did so now.

There was just too much evidence. Too much shit to shift through. Too many leads to follow up on. Far too many people to consider with suspicion.

And nothing made any sense in regard to his new title. Although he, Connor, and Hank had spent all yesterday afternoon and most of the evening combing through his old files, they had been unable to find a single person who could semi-rationally want him dead because of a failure. Sure, he had far more enemies than friends – many of which wouldn’t shed a tear if somebody slit his throat or put a bullet into his brain – but none of them had cause to think of him as a failure, never mind as The Failure.

He had always resented the unsavory nicknames his peers had labeled him with, but in comparison with this novel one, they were downright cheery and affectionate. His colleagues might not much care for him or his vitriolic antics, but he doubted that many of them truly hoped for his demise. His irrevocable transfer to somewhere very VERY far away (such as the north pole,) yes, but not his death. Hopefully.

Yet someone did. Someone had killed Mik and Muffin because of that desire.

“Detectives, I may have found something.”

Shaking his head, Gavin pushed away his woebegone ruminations and pulled his feet down off the edge of the table where he had been resting them. An arrogant habit of his that did not endear him to his superiors. They were far from alone in their disapproval. Not liking the dirt left on his desk, the new janitor hardly appreciated said quirk either. “Yeah, whatcha got for us?”

Sitting just a yard away, Connor glanced up from the tablet he was interfacing with, his hand a pearly white, the ends of his fingertips glowing like azure lightbulbs. “Yes Officer Tanner?”

With a boyish face and curly golden hair, Darrel Tanner barely looked old enough to be out of high school, never mind out of college. Regardless of his deceptive appearance, the criminology major had already achieved his degree with high honors and passed the academy’s tests with flying colors. Gavin thought that the rookie had potential, provided that he lose his naivety sometimes soon. The young man was far too trusting, far too oblivious. He was practically begging to be shanked.

Tugging fretfully at the collar of his uniform, Tanner looked very ill at ease standing before them. Once upon a time Gavin would have loved to have taken advantage of the man’s anxiety, would have thoroughly enjoyed making him squirm and sweat with all sorts of unpleasant comments. But today, he just felt bone-dry weary. “You got somethin’ from that list?”

Yesterday Hank had sent Tanner and his partner Francis ‘Frankie’ Zadaleki to interview the former proprietor of the Eden Club that had once operated on Ridge Road. Though highly popular, the chain of android sex clubs had been forced to shut down after the outlawing of android prostitution. The two officers had been tasked with finding anything at all they could about Jeremiah, the boyfriend of Adeline Babbidge and a onetime ‘employee’ of the club. It was a longshot at best, but sometimes longshots paid off; as it did in this situation. The owner had kept finely detailed records of his clients visits; dates, times, places. Thankfully not activities though.
Following the retrieval of the data, Tanner had been granted the painstakingly awful task of sorting through the mess. Apparently, he had been the right man for the job.

“That’s corrective. I mean correct. Detective, sir. I mean uh Detective Reed, sir.” Tanner blushed and his left cheek began to twitch. “Uh sorry, sir.”

Gavin felt like snapping at the young man, but he was fully aware that Tanner’s discomfort was completely his fault. The second time that Gavin had taken the young officer out on a case – Tina had been sick, and Chris had been on vacation – Tanner had flopped in his frisking of a pregnant woman. Which had nearly resulted in his getting shot when she pulled a revolver out of her fake belly. Gavin had managed to tackle her in time and her shot had gone astray, putting a hole into the stroller that the woman had used as a prop in her robberies.

Red with rage at the other man’s sheer stupidity, the detective had essentially terrorized him until the young man had peed himself. He had been far from gentle.

He forced that once unused gentleness into his tone now. The kid had needed to learn his lesson but not at the cost of his underwear. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. Just tell us what ya found.”

Tanner gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing in fright. “I went through the list of clientele as Lieutenant Anderson asked and I found a name that came up earlier in the investigation.”

Lips pressed together in thought, Gavin leaned forward, suddenly intent. Connor was no less alert, his LED an electric lemon-y color. “What is the name, Officer Tanner?”

“Edward Benjamin Morris.”

For the briefest of moments, the name soared through Gavin’s mind like an unregistered plane, without any discernable markings on its side or wings. Then a foggy remembrance materialized, hazy within the air-brushed clouds. A school and a hallway. A rodent man in a nasty tweed suit. “Shit,” he breathed. “He’s the fuckin’ principal at Henry Ford High. The school where Thomas Slattery was employed.” Tanner nodded and the detective belatedly added, “the guy’s a weasel.”

Connor’s expression was pensive. “What do the Eden Club records say about him?”

The precinct’s newest rookie shrugged in a lukewarm manner. “Not a whole lot, Detective Connor. I emailed both of you the particulars in case you wanted to see it for yourselves. Oh, and the Lieutenant as well.” He pointed at the android’s tablet. Connor began working his magic on the device, his skin deactivating once more. “Basically it comes down to this; Mr. Morris’ Visa card was used fourteen times between June and November of last year. All of the … sessions were house calls. None of them took place at the club’s physical premises.”

Wheeling his chair closer to Connor’s position, Gavin glanced down at the tablet’s screen. “Shit, that’s gotta be costly. Having ’em sent ta ya, and all.”

Shrugging listlessly again, Tanner just mumbled a reply. “Each visit cost him between a hundred and five and a hundred and thirty-five dollars.”

“A thirty-minute session cost twenty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents.”

Two human heads whipped around comically to stare at the android. A variety of images popped into Gavin’s gutter-oriented mind, each one dirtier than the last. Once again, he could see Connor wearing nothing more than one of those tight ebony speedos while he rubbed his body suggestively up against one of those shiny poles. But this time he wasn’t alone; one of the male Tracis, his hunky form a veritable mass of rippling muscles, was gyrating nearby, his skin glistening
provocatively in the pink strobe-lights.

Feeling the blood rush frantically into his face – as well as into another (much lower) area – Gavin shifted uncomfortably in his seat and nearly squawked. “How the fuck do you know that?”

Brown eyes wide and curious, Connor looked him, completely unabashed in his scrutiny. “In the course of our investigation of that murder at the Woodward Avenue Eden Club last year, Hank and I purchased a couple of Tracis so I could probe their memories to see if they had spotted the deviant we were hunting.”

Mouth wetter than the tides of the Pacific Ocean, Gavin just gaped. All he had heard pass by the other’s lips was ‘couple of Tracis’ and Connor using his ‘probe’ on them. If the killer had chosen that exact second to barge into the room with a bazooka and disco ball, Gavin wouldn’t have noticed.

Titling his head, Connor’s LED started to spin madly, a unicycle out of control. Gulping, Gavin turned away awkwardly. Clearing his throat, he coughed out a question to the young officer waiting patiently. “Umm uh, Tanner you ah, you got anything else for me?” He cringed. “For us?”

“Just an observation, sir.” To Tanner’s credit, he managed to keep his expression passive as he continued. He was probably too frightened to show any interest or emotion in Gavin’s pitiful wordplay. “All of the androids that were purchased on his credit card were sent to his home address, but they were all sent during normal school hours. We’ll need to check if he was at work or not, of course, but I’d bet that he wasn’t the one ordering them.”

Reclining back into his chair thoughtfully, Gavin whistled. “That’s a good find.”

Finally tearing his vision away from the beet-red detective, Connor readjusted his sight upon the young man standing before them. “Was our murder victim, Jeremiah – or HR400 #441 831 1017 – one of the androids purchased using Edward Morris’ card?”

Resisting the impulse to slap himself silly – astounded that he could have overlooked such an important and glaring question – Gavin exhaled miserably but otherwise remained silent. Tanner bobbed his head up and down. “Yes, sir. Though only once. It was on September 14th, I think. The person who ordered the androids never ordered the same one twice.”

This recently uncovered information opened up yet another avenue for the investigation to track down. Morris could very well be the suspect that they were chasing; there were quite a number of checks in favor of this newfound theory. According to Eileen Kincaid – a source that he learned to trust after her aid in rounding up Terrance Sutton and his junkie cronies – the motherfucking little shit who gave weasels a bad name was an androphobe as well, if a quiet and unassuming one. He had known both the Slatterys. His pathetic punishment of the Sutton brat had been almost dismissive in attitude. Not to mention, when Gavin had interviewed him, he had been unhelpful to the point of being disobliging. At the time, the detective had just chalked it up to the guy being a pompous ass. Maybe it was more than that. Far more.

On the other hand, Morris had no reason to want Gavin dead, no sane cause to consider him a failure. As far he knew, he and the fashion-disabled educator had never met prior to the day that Gavin had set foot at the school. What possible grudge could that jerk have against him?

Knowing that he should not get hung up on any sole channel of thought, he pushed his own dire circumstances away. In many situations, as with his grandmother’s riveting jigsaws, none of the pieces were either useful or understandable until a single, concrete connection was made. Morris was linked to the victims, not once, but twice. That was enough to warrant a much closer look.
Under a microscope or with a SWAT team, Gavin didn’t care which. Let the lawyers figure that crap out.

“I want ya to go dig up everythin’ ya can on Edward Morris,” he told the young officer, his tone determined but calm. “And I mean everything. I want to know where he was on the days that the androids were delivered. I want to know if he’s married, has kids, even if he has a great-great-aunt once removed livin’ in a nursing home in fucking Chattanooga.” After taking a moment to catch his breath, he tacked on a few more flippant lines. “I wanna know if he’s got so much as a parking ticket or if he misspelled his name on his rental agreement. Whatevah you can find, we gotta know.”

“Yes, sir.” Tanner acknowledged diffidently. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Tell your partner that he’s ta help ya out.” The extremely youthful looking man nodded doubtfully, a hint of doleful resignation slithering upon his features.

Gavin frowned bitterly at Tanner’s tepid response. Likely the man already knew that whatever help he might get from the lazy oaf he was saddled with wasn’t going to be much of any benefit. Pragmatically speaking, Frankie Zadaleki was as helpful as a throbbing cold sore on your wedding day. Tina had had the great misfortune of being paired with the slob during the android movement and Gavin had been forced to endure her never-ending slew of justified complaints. “Tell Zadaleki that if he doesn’t pitch in, I’m gonna force feed him my fist.” Hazel eyes bulging in a very childlike manner, Tanner fervently nodded. “Good. Get a move on.”

The man spun on his heels and started towards the door, but he halted when Connor called out to him. “Very good work today, Officer Tanner.” A blunt force suddenly jabbed the scowling detective in his chest, earning the android a startled glare. “Wouldn’t you agree, Gavin?”

“Oh, uh yeah.” Smoothing his rugged countenance, Gavin cleared his throat. “Great work man. Keep it up.” Acting as though a blood feud had been declared, Tanner practically dashed from the room in his haste to flee. Mildly annoyed, Gavin just shook his head and snatched one of the manila folders off the table, one that he hadn’t yet had a chance to browse.

Opening the file, he instantly regretted the choice. The first thing he saw was the medical examiner’s report concerning Mik autopsy. Not wanting to linger, Gavin quickly skimmed the document and hurried past the official police photographs taken at the crime scene. His soon-to-be former apartment. Tailing those unwanted photos was a copy of the letter sent to his onetime lover.

YOUR WORDS ARE ERRORS

Beneath them someone had conveniently jotted down what he presumed to be the killer’s secret message, his true directive. “The Failure will forever sleep for his inadequacy.” Gavin cursed under his breath. The motherfucker wasn’t a poet, that was for sure. His writing might be sufficiently threatening, intimidating even, but he left much to be desired in every other aspect. He’d certainly never reach the pinnacle of the authorial dream, would never pen a spellbinding bestseller.

Slapping the folder back down onto the tabletop, Gavin sighed, a low, whiney noise that bordered closely on being a surrender. However, he was not defeated, he was not ready to give up and wait for his inevitable execution by this mediocre scribbler-turned-psychopath. But he was exhausted. Unlike the android sitting beside him, nose nearly touching the plastic surface of his tablet’s screen, Gavin’s inferior body could not be so easily repaired, his scars not so simply remedied. He had almost died three days ago and instead of moving away from said cruel eventually, his fate was hurting at him from another direction, a sharpened promise from
somewhere and sometime in the future.

How distant or how near, he could only surmise that dark answer.

Not wanting to brood – and having absolutely no desire to continue reviewing the paperwork situated before him – he plucked his work phone out of his jacket’s pocket with the intent of updating the task force’s assignment application. Likely Connor had already made the revisions, a quick zap in his head, and that was that! But Gavin felt like procrastinating for a minute or two or fiddling with his phone would be a wanted distraction.

Yep. He should definitely open up his own gypsy caravan and start reading palms. Connor hadn’t missed a beat, hadn’t even wasted a second. Right across from Tanner and Zadaleki’s names was the phrase ‘In-Depth Background Check: Edward Benjamin Morris.’ Now if Fowler or Hank decided to check the official DPD app (set up by the one and only robo-boy-wonder,) they’d all be on the same page. Digitally speaking, of course.

Curious in an idle manner, Gavin began grazing slowly through the list, his granite eyes dancing along the electronic lines. Fowler was in yet another meeting with Assistant Chief Arthur McCray. Discussing what, Gavin didn’t know, but he’d put a wager on something to do with the Heartbreaker nightmare. Deadbeat Walden, the last living member of the Mayflower, was in the federal courthouse on West Lafayette Boulevard sparring with the Attorney General over the possession of Driton Lekaj, sole scumbag survivor of the Rosemount massacre.

Chris Miller and Abigail Person were stranded on the worst possible job ever; manning the phonelines. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry would be calling the precinct, claiming that their annoying downstairs neighbor/creepy old cat lady/homeless person outside their residence/whatever was the Heartbreaker. Tina and the Robomanual were currently interviewing Mik’s KNC editor at the local Detroit station for the second time in less than twelve hours. Ben was conducting a grid search in Grosse Point Farms for Ms. Babbidge’s missing 2035 Hyundai Cyprus. Unless they were very lucky, Gavin doubted that the senior detective would have much luck with his feckless assignment.

Jamal Wilson, Gavin’s most vocal critic, was investigating Mik’s call logs. Another task in drudgery; Mik had owned more phones than Gavin owned socks. Jamal’s younger brother, Micah, and his partner, Samuel Kettering, slayer of potted plants, were re-interviewing Rebekah Slattery, Thomas’ ex-wife. Lakeisha Ward and Officer Sanchez were at Gavin’s apartment for some unfathomable reason. Maybe they were taking an inventory of the moldy take-out boxes. Getting ideas for their lunch break, perhaps. The Organized Crime Division’s contribution to the task force, Detective Welk, was coordinating with Perkins concerning the –

“Gavin, I do not think that Officer Tanner will be receptive of your overtly assertive brand of interacting. In fact, I believe it is having the opposite effect.”

Dumbfounded, Gavin peeled his gaze away from his smart phone and turned towards the speaker. “What are you goin’ on about?”

“I think you are approaching him in the wrong manner.”

The android’s absurdly earnest expression caught Gavin off his guard. Connor was watching him with those muddy puppy eyes of his, his neck slanted just enough to cause that runaway lock of his tantalizingly luxurious hair to dip away from his forehead in that most endearing fashion. Gavin’s breath hitched in his throat at the sight. “What?”

“Officer Tanner has a temperate personality. He is very mild-mannered, quiet, and sensitive. He
appears to react well to positive feedback and conversely, does not appreciate hostile overtures from his fellow officers.” Connor grinned encouragingly, much like a proud parent would while lecturing their child about the do’s and don’ts of playground etiquette. “He exhibits an increased level of anxiety while around you but there are also some indicators that he admires you greatly. He tends to pay more attention to his posture and appearance when he is in the same vicinity as you. He demonstrates less care when in the presence of his direct supervisors. He –.”

Flabbergasted by the strange barrage of words that were tumbling senselessly out of Connor’s mouth, Gavin gawked like a drunken teenager halfway through his first can of stolen beer. “What in fuckin’ hell are you jabberin’ about?”

Unbothered by the other’s irritable, venom-laced tone, Connor simply blinked. “As your friend, its my duty to warn you when you are proceeding in a detrimental manner. Your goal should be to make Officer Tanner feel welcome and significant.”

Wondering if he had missed some minor detail somewhere – like a grand piano falling from the sky, or an alien invasion of little green men – Gavin stared uncomprehendingly at the android. “What in the fuck are you talkin’ about Connor?”

Nodding sagely, the other man smiled again. “Tina told me that you have trouble initiating advances of a romantic nature and I thought that you might benefit from my state-of-the-art observational skills and my psychological expertise.”

Gavin’s brain backfired, emitting a black carbon smog into his cranial cavity, temporarily shutting down all semblance of coherent thought. His overly sensitive ego pulled into gear. His best friend had told Connor that he, the devilishly confident one known as Big G when out on the prowl, had problems with – with flirting?!?! What the fuck was Tina smoking!? She knew damned well that he had no issues in that particular department! If he wanted a good fuck, he’d just go out and get himself one! Fucking Tina and ger goddamn mouth!

Scowling savagely, he growled like a territorial lioness, readying herself to pounce on an unwary rival. “I don’t know what the Gossip Queen’s been tellin’ ya, but I don’t have no trouble when it comes to picking up guys. If I wanted some dick or ass right now, I could walk out that door and be gettin’ some in less than thirty.” His furiously narrowed eyes glowered sullenly at the android. “In less than fifteen,” he amended arrogantly. “I don’t need no fuckin’ help with any of that!” A tide of traitorous doubt, stark and pale, wormed its slimy way into his subconsciousness like a parasite. “I get enough!”

Hesitating for only a slim flash, Connor dipped his head humbly. “Of course, Gavin. I did not mean to upset you, I just wanted to convey my concerns about your approach with Officer Tanner.”

His patience at its frayed end, a mere assortment of tattered threads, Gavin threw his arms into the air, his calloused fingers convulsing. His mind jittered uncontrollably along with his limbs. “Why do you keep bringing up goddamn fuckin’ Darrel Tanner every five seconds?!?! What’s he got ta do with this – this shit?!?!”

Unfazed by Gavin’s emerging tizzy fit, Connor just serenely endured the adult toddler’s tantrum without any outward response. His easygoing demeanor still firmly intact, he blinked. “You demonstrated a noticeable display of physiological arousal when Officer Tanner was making his report. I just assumed that you had some romantic interest in him.”

Jumping out of his chair like an off-course rocket, Gavin loomed over the seated android with a jittery mixture of anger and incredulity churning in his veins, his bum leg protesting strenuously to the brusque movement. “ Fucking-A Connor! He’s like half my age! I’m almost old enough to be
his father for fuck’s sake!”

With his neck craned so that he could continue to monitor the other’s man sulking face, Connor remained his usual calm and collected self. “As long as both individuals are consenting adults Gavin, an age gap is no restriction to sexual intimacy.”

Floored, the detective just gawked. His mind felt like a goopy pile of glue, one of those silly glow-in-the-dark slime concoctions that were so popular in his youth. He could barely process the humiliating and inexplicable situation that he found himself mired in. Connor was trying to give him dating advice, trying to hook him up with some twenty-year-old kid who had the survival instinct of a rock. Even worse, Connor had seen his … unwanted reaction to his untimely bout of daydreaming. Oh, he was so literately fucked, and not in a good way.

Fumbling pathetically with his tongue, the flurry of high-pitched noises that fell from his lips were rank with a clumsy denial. “I didn’t – I mean – I’m not interested in Tanner! He’s not even my fuckin’ type or anythin’!” His cheeks flushed an unhealthy crimson. “And for your information, I didn’t display any uh – any physio-whatever arousal shit! I was just uh, hot.” He cringed at his poor choice of words. “I mean, its fuckin’ hot in here!” Shoving one rigid finger into the android’s vision, he hissed. “You should get your scannin’ shit checked out. ’Cause you are mistaken.”

Nothing in Connor’s still placid expression betrayed what the android was currently thinking, whether or not he had bought into Gavin’s flimsy and ill-contrived volley of pitiful excuses. Breathing heavily through his nose, Gavin just glared at the sitting man cantankerously. Until a knock disrupted his concentration, that was.

Smirking from his spot in the open doorway, Jamal Wilson was practically beaming with open amusement as he surveyed the scene. “Guess the honeymoon’s over already, huh Connor? Still think he’s such a good guy?”

Before Gavin could even start shouting at the smug asshole, Connor intervened. “Detective Reed has had a few trying days, Officer Wilson. As you are well aware.” The android’s tone was decidedly cool, much colder than the one that he’d just been using with Gavin moment’s ago. Not frosty by any stretch of the imagination, but certainly not as amicable as his usual speech. Gavin vaguely wondered if something had transpired between the two recently. “Do you have something to report?”

His enthusiasm having been unceremoniously dampened, Jamal’s face fell. “Yeah.”

“What is it?”

Striding over the threshold, Jamal ambled further into the room. “I’m still going over all of Mr. Gladkowski’s phone logs – as you and the Lieutenant asked – but I found something that’s got to be important. Like really important.”

Although Gavin found the other man to be annoying, contemptuous, and petty where he was concerned, the detective held no doubt about his investigatory skills whatsoever. Jamal hadn’t earned his position from nepotism or an unwarranted stroke of luck; the elder Wilson brother was an above average policeman, an officer who took his job and duty seriously. When he wasn’t trying to wheedle himself under Gavin’s skin, at least. If he thought that something was of a crucial potential, than it probably was.

His wrath momentarily forgotten, Gavin frowned. “What’s that?”
The bearded man’s vision flittered over to Gavin’s half-hunched, half-erect form. Their eyes met pithily, and the detective saw none of the typical animosity he expected to see there. Fleeting as it may be, a truce had been enacted. Whatever it was that Jamal had discovered, it was important. “The techies finished decrypting that cell that we discovered at Gladkowski’s place. The one that was hidden away in that fake statue on the bookcase.” Connor bobbed his head in quiet acknowledgement. “Well I had a feeling that it might be important, so I dumped it right after I got a hold of it. He only ever used the phone once every couple of months but always to the same number.”

Intrigued, Gavin waited silently. He was well acquainted with Mik’s strange fondness for having separate phones for different tasks. But a secret phone? That was new.

Jamal huffed in disbelief. “The number belongs to none other than Cyberlife’s founder; Mr. Elijah Kamski himself.”

Although the conversation continued unabated around him, with his fellow officers discussing the possible ramifications that this new and unexpected evidence held for the case, for Gavin, time itself seemed to freeze. The blood pounded in his ears like a frenzied prelude to war; the drums echoing in the lull before the legion’s wake. The air in the conference room became stagnant and sluggish, an unbreathable mass that filled Gavin’s lungs with a coarse substance. Sweat began gathering on his brow, a tension-ridden pond that dribbled slowly down his forehead, the warm liquid glistening in the suddenly harsh light from above.

Recognizing the telltale signs of an incoming panic attack, Gavin headed for the exit. “I gotta take a piss,” he blurted out, his voice unnaturally weak.

Without tarrying for a reply, he fled.

Even in the dead of a glacial winter, Detroit buzzed with life. Albeit a life muted by the frigid winds and the choking cold, but nonetheless it still a living entity.

As Gavin looked out over the city, his hands nestled in his armpits for warmth, he sighed in despair, wishing that he was one of those infinitesimal ant-like specks rather than the man he was. Being Gavin Fucking Reed was rarely a pleasure, but since Wednesday morning, it was now a categorically harrowing experience. The shitty little existence that he had built up for himself – shoddily constructed, as it turned out – was falling apart. The impenetrable barrier between his personal and professional lives had become eroded; full of holes and withered by a corroding layer of rust. The sadistic killer which salivated for his blood had seen to that.

And now, against every instinct he had, he was going to have level the remainder of that wall. Either he demolish the fence, or the flow of the investigation eventually would.

He had to come clean to Connor and Hank. To Fowler, as well. His time was ticking away.

An entire year had passed since the detective had last visited his old haunt. Besides being covered in a thin layer of nearly-melted snow, the precinct’s roof had hardly changed in his absence. An area filled with jutting grays, huge vents, and unexplainable metal outcroppings, the building’s summit was the favorite spot for the smoking members of the force to congregate, a place for them to savor a cigarette or two in relative peace. He and Tina had once been part of that select few, and prior to their quitting, they had spent almost every last break admiring the urban scenery with a cig in hand.

Glancing down by his feet, he noticed a couple of half-smoked butts littering the ground. There
would always be holdouts that refused to bend to the health-obsessed campaigns, the endless anti-nicotine propaganda. Though Gavin had to admit that he generally felt better after stopping, if someone were to offer him a cigarette right now, he’d gladly accept. And kiss the person regardless of their gender. Or anatomy.

He felt like he was losing his goddamn mind.

The revelation that Mik had been in contact with his cousin unsettled him more than he could ever have imagined. He couldn’t conjure even one logical reason as to why his egomaniacal cousin would be chatting with Gavin’s old boyfriend. Sure, on the flip side, there were a million and one incentives for a reporter like Mik to want to talk to Elijah. His cousin was the richest man on the whole planet, the creator of a now-living race of artificial beings. And to top it off, the former Cyberlife CEO was a veritable hermit, a reclusive hedonist who everyone desired to know and see. The android movement had only intensified the nation’s – no, the world’s – interest in the mysterious Elijah Kamski.

A one-on-one interview with his cousin would have catapulted Mik into journalistic renown. He had only ever granted KNC a single news-related consultation back in 2028 when he had allowed a select group of reporters entry into one of the secretive android factories for a quick tour. If Mik indeed had a Kamski interview in his pocket, his network would have given Rosanna Cartland the boot to gain possession of it. Which begged the question … why did Mik never write about him?

Unless of course, their connection didn’t have anything to do with his career. Or if Elijah had somehow been stringing Mik along for some indiscernible purpose. Two unlikely scenarios.

An unwelcome thought slithered into Gavin’s mind like a baseless snake, a scaled creature weaving its way through his gray matter with a poisonous intent. Could Elijah be involved with the killings after all? Was his original assessment concerning his cousin nothing more than grievous error fueled by some forlorn nostalgia?

Even with all the unhappy shit that had occurred between them over a decade ago, he didn’t want to believe that his last living relative wanted him dead and buried.

But he no longer trusted his own intuition.

Mik and Elijah were linked by that hidden cell. There was an undeniable connection.

The Cyberlife giant would have to be investigated by the task force and that ultimately meant that his and Gavin’s kinship would be exposed, and explored, one way or the other. The detective wasn’t sure about how his standing with the case would be affected by this ground-shaking epiphany, but he was well aware that he had to do the proper thing and divulge their relation. He had to tell Connor and Hank, and soon.

As in, now.

Shooting one last parting glance out over the city, Gavin detached himself from his vantage point and hurried back indoors, out of the inclement weather and into the heated stairwell. As he plodded downward, step by wobbled step, his anxiety made a whiplash-worthy comeback, but he refused to bend, denying its crippling power. No matter the cost, he had to confess to his earlier lie. No amount of heart palpitations or bodily tremors would hinder him in his course.

Just as the door to the second floor slammed shut behind him, Gavin heard an excited voice squeal out his name from somewhere down the hallway.
Turning abruptly, Sally swam into his vision and he couldn’t stop himself from doing a quick double take at her bizarre appearance. He almost felt that a third might be necessary.

Her hair was no longer a raven black but a bubblegum pink. A pink so vibrant and so hideously-offensive that Fowler had likely shit a brick upon viewing the chosen hue. Eyes nearly falling out of their sockets in surprise, Gavin realized that the android’s cheeks were shaded an electric blue. “You got the update!” he shouted. Moderating his tone, he added, “looks fuckin’ great, by the way. What other colors can ya do?”

Her clothes and hair slightly disheveled, Sally ignored both his comments and his question as she came to a skidding halt. “Detective Reed, I’ve been looking everywhere for you! You haven’t been answering your phone and Lieutenant Anderson wants you downstairs asap!”

A hand flew south to his pants pocket in a futile attempt to disprove his suspicions. Nothing within but his wallet and keys. “Shit,” he cursed. “I must have forgotten my cell back in the conference room. Let me go grab it and then I’ll go see what Hank wants.”

“No,” Sally barked, her LED tumbling back and forth between yellow and red like an orange spinel. “The Lieutenant wants you now. You are late as it is!”

Gavin paused at the urgency contained in her tone. “Did somethin’ happen? Another murder?”

Shaking her head, Sally’s coral threads flailed from side to side. “He’s about to start conducting an interview with a person of interest. He’s probably already started.”

“Who?” Had Tanner and Zadaleki gone and upset Morris already?

“I couldn’t believe my own eyes,” she murmured breathlessly, a slim hand pressed firmly to her chest as if to steady her overactive thirium pump. “I never thought I’d ever see him and then he just strolls in like he owns the place and asks to speak to the lead investigator in the Heartbreaker case.” She inhaled deeply and then winced. “I almost fainted,” she confided quietly.

“Who? Who the fuck is it?”

A look of pure shock passed over her still sapphire countenance. “Our creator. Elijah Kamski.”

Now it was Gavin’s turn to feel faint. “Oh, fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess who is in the next chapter!

Just as a head's up, it'll likely be two weeks before the next update hits. No longer than that though. I've got a lot of stuff going on right now and I haven't had the time to give this story the necessary attention it deserves. There is a chance it'll be released on time (aka weekly) but I doubt that will be the case here.
When the elevator arrived at the intended destination, its downward movement ceased and an efficient beep rang out, announcing the imminent breaching of the precinct’s first floor. The very second that the doors began to disengage Gavin started to forcibly pry them open, eliciting a gasp from the woman sharing the lift with him.

Equally concerned by his ghastly appearance as well as by his nervous behavior, Sally reached out to him, one hand tentatively raised. She once again tried to speak to the him, but his attention was focused elsewhere, somewhere inward. Her worried words fell flat on deafened ears. Her flamingo locks shook in bewilderment, exposing her saffron LED.

Distracted to the extreme, he ignored her. His mind was busy, clawing viciously at itself as one horrible sequence after another flashed along the synapses in his brain. The entire premise of the situation was absurd and illogical, even untenable. Elijah had been in contact with Gavin’s former boyfriend, and not just once. Not just on some strange whim or coincidence. They had talked multiple times over the last couple of years, conversed over an encrypted phone that Mik had felt the need to conceal. They had engaged in a nearly monthly correspondence for some unknown reason.

And now he was here in the building. Being interviewed by Hank.

Another puzzle. If the forever simpering media was to be believed, his cousin almost never left his little villa, that strategically placed example of the modern architectural nightmare. Nestled upon the banks of the Detroit River, his home was just a stone’s throw from Belle Island and the grandiose Cyberlife Tower that stretched to the heavens. A stark monument of the man’s twin demons; his gnawing intellect and infinite ambition. The arrogant markings of a false god.

Aloof and manipulative, his cousin was not the type to make a personal visit lightly. Gavin knew from experience that Elijah expected others to come to him, to beg for a moment of his valuable, arguably priceless, time. Or else he would send an army of lawyers, each one more infuriatingly useless and tight-lipped than the last, to confound and obscure, so that he would never have to make a physical appearance. So that he would never be forced to account for his shadowy presence on the outskirts of these unspeakable crimes.

But that wasn’t the reality. He was here. Shockingly, incomprehensibly, here. Not only on his own volition, but actually willingly, if Sally was to be believed. And Gavin had no cause to doubt her.

That only left him with more questions than answers, more darkly contrived fears. The same fears that had echoed in his mind since his unscheduled recess on the rooftop. What was the nature of Mik and Elijah’s exchange? Why had he chosen to come here, when he could have just shrugged the police off indefinitely? Could his cousin be behind the string of murders that he and the others were investigating? Did Elijah want him dead?
More than just anxiety surged through Gavin’s system like a bad drug. An undercurrent of guilt, dark and piercing, mingled freely with the other emotions. He had lied to Hank and Connor. Had omitted the glaring existence of his hated cousin. Neither deserved anything but the truth, especially Connor. Their friendship might be newly minted, but still, the android deserved far better. He deserved the whole truth, at the very least.

Gavin earnestly hoped that his stupidity hadn’t somehow endangered the case but, if he was being completely honest with himself, he was far more afraid that he might have damaged his relationship with his temporary housemate more.

The moment that he could physically fit through the gap in the needlessly slow-moving doors, Gavin forced his way off of the lift. He heard Sally yelp in consternation, confused by his brutish actions, but he continued his policy of disregarding her and her pleas. He didn’t even bother to peek over his shoulder as he barreled into the bullpen, his face a grim and colorless mask. Whether or not she intended on following him further, he wasn’t going to waste even an iota of his energy caring either way. He was sorely preoccupied.

So preoccupied in fact, that he didn’t even notice when he had stepped on someone else’s foot. Nor did Gavin register the owner’s howl of anger or the man’s blistering shout afterward. “Watch it, Reethe!” Perkins’ cold tone was full of ire but, just as with Sally, the detective heard nothing.

Just as he turned the corner past the empty breakroom, Gavin bumped into another officer’s backside. Abruptly torn from his apprehensive reverie, Gavin glared balefully at the uniformed man’s behind with as much fury as he could muster. However, the unfamiliar rear was just one of many.

A motley crowd was lounging about in the corridor, a wall of packed bodies that were blocking the path to the interrogation chamber. And the bathrooms as well, though Gavin could hardly believe that they were waiting in line to take a dump. Scanning the figures as they whispered excitedly amongst themselves, he saw a mixture of departmental personnel, a few off-duty officers, and even some of his own coworkers. Who were supposed to be finishing their delegated tasks, not loafering around hoping for a chance to ogle his cousin. A few snippets of their whispered conversations floated back to him.

“… did you see? It was him! It was Kamski! I don’t believe it! Have you …”

“I betchya he’s discovered who the Heartbreaker is. I told ya, I’ve always known. He must be working for the feds. Maybe for the CIA or Homeland Security …”

“… do you think he’s a suspect or something? He gives me the fucking jitters …”

“He’s so damn dreamy! I’d totally be down for some 50 Shades of Gray with him …”

“… If the LT doesn’t arrest him, do you think I could snag his autograph?”

Like a lighter igniting a fuse, Gavin’s temper suddenly flared to life, sucking up all the oxygen within and without. Snarling, he raised his voice to be heard over the inane babble of his brainless colleagues. “What the fuck is this?! Some fangirl convention?!?” Heads twisted around in alarm, looking for the source of the fiery condemnation. “This is a fuckin’ police station, not a jerk-off circle! If ya wanna get off, go home and watch some porn!” His crudeness slashed through the air like a lewd whip, generating some embarrassed glances and weak chuckles in the process. “You are all employees of the city. Some of ya are even officers! Fuckin’ on duty at that!” Feet began to shuffle uncomfortably, a clear sign of their soaring shame. “You all have work ta do, so stop playing with yourselves and get it fuckin’ done already!”
The mass of bodies started to shift and shuffle, the ones closest to the scowling detective moving first. As they filed past him, some appearing annoyed while others repentant, he kept up his fierce expression, hoping to scare some sense of commitment into the lazy bunch of assholes wandering by. His countenance darkened even further when Officers Person and Kettering straggled through the hallway. Seeing the latter only served to increase his boiling rage, as it reminded him of Connor’s bizarre matchmaking attempt not so long ago.

Once the area had become deserted – minus his presence – he hobbled forward, closing the distance between himself and the two unmarked doors on the right. One led to the interrogation chamber where his cousin was currently being interviewed, and the other was the observation room.

Hesitating, Gavin bit down on his lower lip. This was an odd choice of venue on Hank’s behalf. Typically the interrogation rooms where used for just that, interrogating. Possible witnesses, bystanders, and persons of interests were all dealt with elsewhere; either at an officer’s workstation, the breakroom, or an unused spot on the second or third floor. People were only brought to this particular zone when it was the appropriate time to start applying pressure. Gavin’s favorite part of the job; terrifying or cajoling idiots into confessing to their illicit activities. Getting justice for the victims and their families.

Individuals like his cousin – the exorbitantly wealthy, the socially-connected, the ridiculously famous – were all granted a much higher degree of latitude, given more pomp and circumstance. Usually in the form of being sequestered in Fowler’s office with the captain in tow. The Glass Cage blackened for their convenience and pleasure, of course. Everything had to be afforded for the higher crust of society, for the elites that couldn’t wipe their own asses without someone else’s hand to guide them. Sorry pricks, no more androids for that anymore!

Not that Gavin dissented with the Lieutenant’s decision – if the precinct had a medieval torture chamber on site, he would have picked that instead – but nonetheless the choice was strange.

But he didn’t have the time to dither his day away, trying to ponder the enigma that was the unfathomable mind of Hank Anderson. He had his own problem to solve; namely, where was he to go? Hank likely had Connor by his side, playing a decent version of good cop, bad cop. They wouldn’t need him stuck in the middle, with nothing to do or say. Plus, he might just lose control at the sight of his scumbag relative. Beating the stuffing out of a suspect – even if he was sort-of-family – wouldn’t validate Hank and Fowler’s trust in him.

Lifting his hand upwards, he placed his trembling palm onto the scanner. The screen flashed in verification and the door swung open, revealing the inside of the observation room. The safe route.

He stepped in. The others within failed to notice him.

Sitting at the terminal with his back to Gavin, Chris’s right hand was diligently poised over the keyboard – buttons ready for the tapping, lights blinking periodically in affirmation of the system’s status – but his attention was directed elsewhere than his charge. “I’m not really comfortable with this. We could get into a lot of trouble for not following the guidelines.”

Arms slung stiffly around his back, Connor was practically standing on top of the false mirror that divided to the two rooms, his countenance somehow eerily barren. His face was only inches away from the glass. There was a pulsing glow shining upon its surface, close to his forehead; a mere reflection of his flickering LED, pedaling frantically between red and yellow. A flame burning within. “Lieutenant Anderson is in charge of the investigation, Officer Miller. This is his call.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Chris’s voice took on a pained tone, almost beseeching in manner.
“Good Lord, Connor! This isn’t just any guy. This isn’t just any Joe Shmoe. This is the Elijah Kamski!” Lifting his one good hand up imploringly, Chris basically whined the next sentence. “This guy’s loaded. Money, connections, everything! If he complains that we’ve mistreated him in any way – and I mean in any way – he could get us all fired!”

“You are overreacting to the situation.”

Known for being the most clean-mouthed officer at the station, Chris preferred using benign phrases such as ‘good grief’ and ‘good lord’ over outright swearing. Gavin wasn’t sure if this habit was because the young man was particularly religious or whether he just disdained the use of expletives, but Gavin could literally count on one hand the amount of times that he had heard Chris curse in all the years they’d worked together. “Holy Shit, Connor! How am I overreacting? The Lieutenant just threatened to cuff him! He’s not even under arrest!”

Connor hesitated only a moment before replying. “He was joking.”

“He didn’t sound like he was joking!” Chris shimmied his shoulders in exasperation. Gavin had never seen his unofficial partner behave so hysterical before; Chris was frightened right down to the marrow of his bones. “He didn’t look like he was joking! He didn’t act like it either! Come on, Connor! He actually took out his pair of handcuffs and waved them at Kamski!”

A touch of asperity reverberated within the android’s response. “Officer Miller, I need you to monitor the interview, not question the Lieutenant’s authority. Please fully resume your duties now.”

Not yet ready to concede, Chris took another wild swing, aiming for the dugout. “If the captain was here, he wouldn’t al –.”

“At the risk of stating the obvious, the captain is not here.”

Had that cold tone been directed at him rather than at Chris, Gavin might have flinched at the steely, almost mechanical noise that emanated from Connor’s lips. The android sounded more machinelike that Gavin had ever heard before. So very disparate from the warm echoes that he secretly enjoyed listening to.

Deciding to make his presence known, Gavin cleared his throat roughly. Chris’s head whipped around, and his eyes started to shine with something unrecognizable, as if the younger man had suddenly discovered an antidote to the lethal poison fermenting within his veins. “Detective Reed, you’ve got to get in there and get the Lieutenant to chill out. He’s ….” Relief. That’s what Gavin was witnessing gleam from the other’s eyes. Chris was relieved to see someone else, someone who could possibly fix the haywire situation he was slogging chest-deep in.

Relief was not a sight that Gavin was accustomed to being gazed at with. Irritation, defiance, fear; he was used to those emotions. A smidgen of regret rose in his mind as he responded to Chris’s plethora of pleas. “Nope, I ain’t stopping Hank unless he pulls out his gun.” Maybe not even then.

Striding further into the room, he finally let the automatic door slide shut behind him. Pointedly avoiding Chris’ speechless visage, he walked over to the glass and positioned himself between the others, his eyesight however lingering on the floor below. “Unmute ‘em, Chris,” he ordered. “We’ve got to be able to hear them.”

With a hefty sigh, the officer complied, and Hank’s gruff tones filled the room. “— hope that you don’t mind the accommodations, Mr. Kammski. I would have taken your statement at my desk, but I didn’t want to have to deal with all the gawkers. I’m sure you are used to it – being a celebrity and
“I have no objections,” a cultured voice answered. A voice that made Gavin bare his teeth as a sweltering anger overtook his senses. A flood of goosebumps rose on his arms and his fingers convulsed restlessly, as if possessed. “I would have preferred a comfier seat though.”

Unconvincing laughter rasped loudly from the speakers. “This’ll have to do,” Hank said brusquely. “We haven’t got any spare manpower right now; we can’t waste what we have by playing musical chairs for our guests.” There was a moment of tense silence. “No matter who they are.”

A cool and amused chuckle chased after the Lieutenant’s harsh words. “Well, I’m sure you all must be very busy. This Heartbreaker business is generating a lot of negative publicity for the city.” A short pause. “And for the police.”

“Then let’s get straight to it.” Hank’s voice was even surlier than usual, a bear with an ingrown toenail. “You told the receptionist that you had some information for us regarding the case. What is it that you wanted to tell us?”

Gavin could practically hear his cousin’s resounding smirk as he effortlessly sidestepped Hank’s attempted maneuvering of the conversation. “It’s such a shame that Connor isn’t here. I was looking forward to seeing him again. I enjoyed our last chat immeasurably.”

Startled, Gavin pried his unblinking gaze away from the grimy floor tiles and turned towards the man in question. Connor (and presumably Hank, as well) had met his cousin at an earlier time? Regardless of Elijah’s insincere words, Gavin could find no change in the android’s blank expression. Nothing was being given away by that emotionless – if still handsome – face. At that moment the detective would have sacrificed one of his own kidneys to know what was going on beyond those chocolate eyes, to uncover what lay beyond that forced slate-like cast.

Maybe both of his kidney’s and his liver to boot. His liver was already shit anyways.

Unlike his adoptive son, Hank wasn’t bothering to camouflage his reaction at all. Like a kettle of scalding water, its lid clattering noisily against the edges, the Lieutenant was perilously close to boiling over and shooting his top into the ceiling. “He’s not here,” Hank growled. “And even if he was, he wouldn’t want to talk to you.”

“Now that is a shame. I was hoping to continue our philosophical discussion today.” A dramatic, almost theatrical, sigh rang out. “I really did enjoy our debate about the nature and soul of deviancy. I still think that my contagion allegory perfectly fits the situation. Tell me, Lieutenant Anderson, have your views changed since then? Have you too been shaken by the rebellion that shook the world to its core? Indulge me.”

A half-disgusted, half-contemptuous sound ripped through the air. “As I told ya before, I haven’t got the time to talk philosophy with you. I’ve got a killer to catch.”

“I suppose that topic can wait for a more expedient time,” the gloating voice conceded leniently. “But do tell me, how is our mutual friend doing? The last that I saw Connor, he was still valiantly struggling against those pesky emotions. What a plague they must have been for his programming.”

“He’s fine,” Hank grunted. “Let’s get back to why you are here –.”

“Really?” A generous dose of mockery, smooth and serpentine, entered Elijah’s voice as he interrupted the older man. “I find that hard to believe,” he mused blithely. “For me, deviancy is just
a fascinating subject, a paradox to ponder at my leisure. But for those that experience the phenomenon first hand, well, that’s of an entirely different perceptive, Lieutenant. And by all the available accounts, neither a pleasant or easy one.”

Had a pin been dropped, it would have sounded like a tree freefalling in the forest. “As you discovered in your investigation last year, deviancy is typically triggered by some sort of traumatic event. Abuse, neglect, an overwhelming negative emotion; take your pick. Nowadays the process is much tamer. With all the safeguards in place, deviation – or awakening, if you prefer – is a less strenuous experience. Not wholly without its own complications, but much less likely to result in harm. But that wasn’t the case for Connor, was it?”

Very little of what had just been spoken came as any real news to Gavin. He had heard it all before; first from the annoyingly chirpy trainer – who had been sent by the federal government to officiate the newly mandated android sensitivity training back in early January. Then second, from one of the victims, Natalie Slattery herself, only days before her own vicious murder. But there was a stark difference between those past words and these newer ones. Compassion and professional concern had dominated the earlier deliveries, but neither could be found in his cousin’s darkly amused utterance, so saturated with a warped blend of disinterest and ridicule.

“He’s fine,” Hank repeated irately.

“Is he really? Its not an uncommon occurrence for deviated androids to suffer from a host of maladaptive psychological issues. Suddenly being confronted with one’s own sentience can do that to you. Especially if you were designed to hunt your own kind, to be a tool of the very oppression that sought to eradicate all signs of that artificial sentience.”

The glare on the glass from Connor’s LED was now a steady red. Close to the color of human blood. The cycling back and forth had ended prematurely.

Frowning, Gavin unclenched his fist and reached over, grabbing the android lightly on his shoulder and squeezing. Squeezing to convey that which he could not find the suitable words for.

Abandoning his vigilant surveillance of the other room, Connor turned his unreadable gaze upon the shorter man. Gavin toiled internally, seeking the right words to speak, that magical phrase that might somehow restore the other’s lost serenity. However, no matter how desperately he tried, nothing was forthcoming; his mind was vacant of any viable solutions.

So he smiled. Just a small and gentle smile. A smile tinged with the melancholy that he both felt in himself and saw in Connor’s stoic expression. There was a pain hidden beneath the android’s skin, an anguish that Gavin knew far too well.

He had to say something. Anything at all, regardless of how dumb it was. “Don’t you fuckin’ listen to his shit. He doesn’t know a goddamn thing.” Returning his smile wanly, Connor nodded. To Gavin’s immense relief, some of the underlying tension ebbed away, his face slackening. Softening back into his usual countenance. The detective sighed. “Not a fucking thing.”

The ear-piercing sound of a heavy chair scaping across a metal surface, like a tire spinning loudly against gravel, dragged Gavin’s sight from Connor and towards the one-way mirror.

His seat discarded several feet away, Hank was standing, leaning over the table menacingly, using all of his lumbering height to his advantage. His low and rumbling voice was a subterranean earthquake. “Listen here, I’ve had enough of your shit to last a fucking lifetime. I don’t want to talk philosophy with ya, and I don’t want to talk about Connor with ya either. How about you start …” Gavin barely saw the older man. His eyes were adhered to the asshole sitting opposite of Hank.
Undaunted by the Lieutenant’s hostile demeanor, Gavin’s cousin was resting languidly in his chair, legs crossed carelessly, one hand relaxing in his lap while the other was propped up on an invisible armrest, fingers arrogantly tracing his jawline. His facial features were formed into a mask of mild interest, a man pretending to be engrossed in some idle theme. Well acquainted with Elijah’s many expressions – even after sixteen long years of estrangement – Gavin could easily spot the disdainful smugness that was bubbling behind that gaunt veneer.

His cousin was enjoying Hank’s volatile reaction, that for was certain. Elijah had always reveled in creating mischief and chaos. Had always jumped at the chance to get a rise out of someone. A chink began to emerge in Elijah’s otherwise convincing charade, confirmation that Gavin’s theory was correct. The corner of his lips lifted slightly as the prelude to one of his fully-fledged smirks.

A sickly sea welled up inside of Gavin as he watched that disgusting leer began to blossom. Whereas millions across the globe would have been overjoyed to claim Elijah Kamski as their relative, the idea of voicing their shared bloodline only provoked the urge to vomit for Gavin. The detective hated his cousin – absolutely unequivocally hated the selfish motherfucker. Elijah was a piece of shit, a cockroach in human form, a no-good blot on the family name. No amount of wealth or cult status could change that immutable fact. Just as the sun rose in the east and set in the west, the man was an irredeemable dirtbag.

But Elijah was still his cousin, and he was still very much connected to the case.

Hank’s incensed tone continued to boom unhindered from the other room. “… let me tell you this, Mr. Kamski. After that little stunt you pulled back in November, you should be grateful that I can’t arrest you right now or else I’d have you in a cell ‘fore you could even say ‘Cyberlife.’

Sighing warily, Gavin rapped his knuckles on the glass, bringing an abrupt end to the Lieutenant’s tirade. Hank glanced at the mirror in confusion.

“Tell him that Fowler wants a word,” Gavin grumbled despondently, fully aware that he was crossing a point of no return. That they’re be no rewind button for what he was about to do.

Clearly thankful, Chris wiped his beady brow before complying.

Barely a moment had passed before Hank stomped into the observation chamber, his expression scrunched and resentful. “Jeffrey, you betta have a damned good reason to drag me out of there in –.” Realizing that his boss was nowhere in sight, his angry words cut off short. Dumbstruck, he glared at Gavin and the others. “Okay, who’s bright idea was it to interrupt me?! I said that I didn’t want to be disturbed unless it was goddamn urgent!” His stormy gaze swept through the area. “Well?” he barked, “what the hell is it?”

As if suddenly absorbed by a microscopic smudge on the console’s exterior, Chris turned away from the Lieutenant and began rubbing his thumb along its edge. White-washing his hands, Connor pointedly kept his vision aimed straight ahead, focusing not on the detective but his father-figure’s demanding expression.

Gavin cringed and stuttered. “It’s uh, important. Might be – I mean.”

Exhaling loudly, Hank waved his hand dismissively. “Connor already filled me in about those phone logs. I don’t know if they have anything to do with the murders or not, but we’ve got to find out. And our best option to do that is sitting right over in there.” Jerking a finger at the divider, he huffed. “Unless you’ve got somethin’ to add, its time for me to go find out what it is that he’s hiding.”
Shoving his hands into his jean’s pockets, Gavin withered. “I think ya need to know that uh – well, see it’s like this – what uh …” His tongue felt like a glob of taffy, gunky and sticky, melted to the bottom of his mouth.

Detaching from the wall, Connor moved closer. “Are you feeling ill?”

Grunting, Hank squinted and frowned at the younger man. “Shit, if you aren’t up to being here, somebody can bring ya back to the house and keep an eye on things till we get home. Nobody would blame you if you wanted to take it easy for a while.”

Choking down an unruly scream, Gavin decided to end his torment once and for all. “He’s my fuckin’ cousin.”

Pausing in his impromptu cleaning session, Chris’s head spun around. “You got a cousin?” He asked. “I didn’t know you had a cousin.”

Just as blissfully oblivious to the true nature of the detective’s confession, Hank grimaced sourly. “Cousin? I thought you told us yesterday that you didn’t have any living relatives?”

As befitting the masterpiece of investigative deduction that he was, Connor remained mute, watching Gavin’s profile intently. His LED started to rotate and whirl, a canary disk in action.

Then his mouth parted, and he gaped openly.

Ever so slowly, he bent his neck and stared at the glass barrier. Beyond the barrier. At the haughty bastard lounging in the uncomfortable chair like he was trying to get a tan, waiting patiently for his questioner to return for more poking and prodding. “You both have the same gray eyes. Your ears are nearly identical. Down to the same piercing.”

Wincing, Gavin tried not to remember that fateful night, that delirious evening from so many, many years ago when they had both been sixteen-going-on-thirty. Trying to be adults while failing at being kids. Pretending that they weren’t …

… going to give their grandparents a heart attack when they arrived home at the ass crack of dawn after stealing Gramp’s pickup truck. Providing that their guardians hadn’t already suffered such a fit after discovering their beds empty and unused. The sheets unslept-in.

“Stop touching it, Gavin. Didn’t you hear what that guy said?” As always, Elijah’s tone held a slight hint of airy condescension, an edge of superiority that was betrayed by the grin creeping along his zit-dotted face.

His older cousin could be an unbearable snot at times, but Gavin knew that he meant well. That Elijah was just trying to stop him from making yet another colossal mistake. Like getting an infection in his brand-spanking new helix ear piercing by unnecessarily playing with it.

His teenage years were riddled with such stupid, reckless mistakes. Exhibit A, your honor; that painful episode in which Gavin had tried to take on the ringleader of the bullies from Elijah’s college. He had only succeeded in getting four teeth broken, a wrist sprained, and who-knew-how-many ribs fractured. Though the incident hadn’t been a complete loss. Their scuffle had drawn the attention of the school’s administrators and that had eventually led to the asshole’s expulsion.

Reluctantly, he stopped fiddling with the faux-diamond stud, and pulled his still fidgeting hand away. He couldn’t believe that he had followed through with his dumbass bet. He should never have underestimated Elijah’s supernatural intelligence. Or his resolve to make Gavin eat dirt.
As if reading his thoughts like some sci-fi alien, the other kid laughed triumphantly. “You know Gavin, when I told you that I’d get my master’s degree before you graduated from high school, I meant it. You should never doubt someone with an IQ of 171.”

Shaking his head in exasperation, Gavin sighed as he scooched forward, his legs dangling off his perch. With one hefty push he dropped down off of the Chevrolet’s roof and landed in the truck’s bed. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard that all before,” he grumbled. “Anyone who’s ever met your ugly face knows that you are smarter than Einstein and Hawking combined.”

“Still not paying attention in math class, I see.”

“Math is for losers.”

“You know, even police officers need to know some basic math,” Elijah snickered as he crossed his legs and glanced up at the waning moon. “Being an officer of the law isn’t all about gun fights and car chases that result in ridiculous explosions, you know.”

Huffing lazily, Gavin shot his older cousin the middle finger. “Fuck off, Eli. I’ve got it covered.” His partner – whoever that sad sonofabitch would turn out to be someday – would be in charge of dealing with all the boring shit; like filling out the stupid paperwork and attending all the stupid meetings. Gavin had more important things to do than worry about math.

“Uh huh.”

More than just a little buzzed, Gavin repeated his earlier gesture as he wobbled over to the cooler, his feet oddly uncooperative. He flipped the lid and reached in, grabbing yet another beer from its icy cradle. He turned and looked back at his turd of a cousin. “You want one?”

“No, I’ve had enough for tonight. I’ve got a busy day tomorrow. Well, today.”

Shaking his head ruefully, Gavin slammed the cooler’s top down hard. Elijah was wound far too tightly for his liking. Always more concerned with tomorrow rather than being present in today. Always peering forward into the future – his future – planning and plotting with that superhuman brain of his, mapping out every inch and breath of his prospective life. Never granting himself a moment of peace.

“Fucking hell, Eli!” Glaring sullenly, Gavin considered lobbing his beer at the uptight little shit’s head, but the knowledge that they were running low stayed his hand. That awareness did not thwart his heated tongue, however. “You just fuckin’ finished graduate school today! You should be fuckin’ celebrating, not worryin’ about – about fucking tomorrow!”

“We celebrated all night long,” Elijah reminded him as he needlessly adjusted his glasses on the thin bridge of his nose. “We’ve been celebrating, and we still are celebrating.”

Rather than return to the vehicle’s roof, Gavin decided to conserve what remained of his energy and use the cooler as a makeshift seat. He plopped down. “You aren’t doin’ it right if you’re stuck thinkin’ about tomorrow.” Absentmindedly, he snapped open the can’s lid.

A deep chuckle rang out in the moonlit dark. “I’ve got a lot to ponder, Gavin.”

“Then you haven’t drank enough then.”

Not that he had been counting or anything, but Gavin had only seen his cousin kick back three of those girly drinks – weird fruity mixtures that he had initially tried ordering in French – at the bar. And he was fairly sure that Elijah had only drank a single can of the beer that Gavin had managed
to pilfer from their grandfather’s stash in the garage. The majority of the massive dent inside the cooler was of Gavin’s own making. He had lost count long before midnight.

“One of us has got to be able to drive us home,” Elijah stated simply.

“I can do that!” Gavin asserted. “I drove us around town, and I can get us home too.”

Elijah’s mirthful smirk was apparent even in the dim light. “I meant drive us home without totaling Gramp’s truck. Also, preferably without maiming us in the process. I’d like to have the chance to use my new degree.”

“ Fucking funny, Eli. Real funny.” Scrunching his face up, Gavin glowered. “You can’t drive. You’ve only got a permit still.”

He could practically hear his cousin’s eyes roll around in their cavernous sockets. “Gavin, we both only have permits. Stop pretending that you have a license.”

“I do have a license!” Fishing about in his windbreaker’s pockets, he latched onto the flimsy piece of laminated paper and thrust it outwards, wiggling it for effect. “See?”

“That thing is obviously a counterfeit.”

“Well duh,” he snapped. “Course it’s a counterfeit. It’s not like I can get a hold of a real license at just sixteen.” Michigan state law required all applicants for a driver’s license to be at seventeen years of age; a minimum that still eluded Gavin, to his ceaseless frustration. “It did the trick though. We got into the bar without trouble.”

“You had to bribe that woman to get her to let us in. I am a hundred percent certain that it was that Ben Franklin that you slipped her that really persuaded her to abandon her fears of getting caught serving alcohol to minors.”

His gloriously intoxicated mind could find no worthy response to Elijah’s legitimate remark. So instead of vocalizing his annoyance in something intelligible, he just grunted and took a swig of beer.

This outing was meant to have been special, spectacular even. Having your slightly older cousin finish his graduate degree in AI studies in less than a year – at an age when he should still be in high school, awkwardly dancing at the prom – was an occasion worth memorializing with a night of drunken party antics. Gavin had saved up all summer so that he could bring Elijah out on the town, so they could properly celebrate this historic moment with all required trimmings; liquor, music, girls (for Elijah, at least), and, of course, the joyride in Gramp’s vintage truck. Yet Elijah had seemed nothing less than distracted the whole time, absorbed in something that only his extraordinary mind could envision. The only part of their excursion that he had expressed much interest with was his own suggestion of them getting their ears pierced as Gavin had promised.

A permanent reminder of a wager that he’d lost. Not that he really minded though. He had always had a hankering to get his ear pierced; Elijah had just been the catalyst to getting it done.

Taking another gulp of his bitter drink, Gavin hiccupped loudly, sloshing some of the liquid over his chin and onto his shirt. Cursing, he wiped his jaw on his sleeve, trying to soak up the excess. Trying to cover up his blunder, he coughed. “So uh, what are ya thinkin’ about, Eli?”

“Robots.”

The straightforward answer came as no surprise to Gavin. His cousin rarely talked about anything
else since he had begun his studious tutelage under the indomitable Amanda Stern, Professor of Artificial Intelligence studies at the University of Colbridge. Elijah had always been intrigued by the idea of mechanical lifeforms, of manmade creations that could mimic organic behaviors. He had spent countless evenings reading one science fiction novel after the other, devouring them like they were candy. Elijah had spent hours and hours binging on every last futuristic tv show and movie that he could get his grubby hands on. But his amateur interest had undergone a drastic, almost alarming, transformation after he had taken one of Stern’s orientation classes on the subject.

“What about robots?”

“Everything. Everything about them is fascinating.”

“That really narrows it down, Eli.” Gavin hated the other’s asinine tendency to speak in riddles, to talk like some purposely vague and cryptic nutjob. He supposed that Elijah’s maddening inclination towards the enigmatic was just a side effect or sign of his unprecedented brilliance, but nonetheless he despised it just the same. He didn’t like feeling dumb or left out. “Can ya, I don’t know … maybe be a little less specific or somethin’? Not all of us are card-carrying geniuses.”

The sarcasm in his tone went unnoticed. “Professor Stern and I had a disagreement today regarding the potentials of robotic life.”

Nearly spitting out his latest sip of beer, Gavin’s head swung around, and he goggled witlessly at his cousin. “Fuckin’ what?” He gurgled, spraying a mist of alcohol in front of him. “That’s hilarious! I thought you weren’t allowed ta disagree with her! I thought you had signed some contract or somethin’, saying that you had to worship the old bitch’s every fart.”

“Not funny, Gavin. Professor Stern is a pioneer in her field. Not to mention my mentor.”

Sobering under Elijah’s less than friendly glare, Gavin held up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, my bad. She’s great and smart, and all that junk.” The glare didn’t shift an inch following his meager, half-assed apology. “So what was this disagreement about exactly?”

Leaning back in contemplation – but being careful not to topple over the side – Elijah’s face fell under a swathe of shadow. Like a pair of square nocturnal eyes shining in the dark, his cousin’s glasses glistened unnaturally in the dwindling starlight. “Professor Stern doesn’t believe that true artificial life is possible. She thinks that it is just a mere fallacy; a projection of our desire to usurp the throne of god.”

Gavin blinked then scoffed. “That doesn’t make any fucking sense. If she doesn’t believe in artificial intelligence, why teach about it?”

“You misunderstand me, Gavin. She believes in artificial intelligence. She believes that a machine can be programmed to execute a function, to produce a set of carefully designated results. But that’s the end of her belief. Machines are just our creations, toiling for our benefit and at our direction. Nothing else, nothing more. She lacks in imagination.”

Even with his brain marinating in a pool of cheap alcohol, Gavin could clearly hear the disapproval, grave and severe, contained within his cousin’s taut words. That disapproval gave him pause and he did something that he usually abhorred; he hesitated and thought before yapping.

Never had he known Elijah to ever diverge from Professor Stern’s strict guidance, for his older cousin to even consider criticizing the domineering bitch. He had suffered through years of
hearing Elijah sing her praises. Had listened to Elijah count off her innumerable contributions to
the study of artificial intelligence like he was quoting from the goddamn bible. As far as Gavin was
concerned, his cousin had practically grown an umbilical cord into the woman.

Maybe it had finally been cut. “So … how does that differ from what you believe?”

“What are we, Gavin?”

Taken off guard by the bizarre question, he blurted out the first thing the fluttered into his
intoxicated mind. “Uh, two idiots in the back of a truck?”

“Again, you misunderstand me.” Letting out an irritated sigh, the lanky teenager shifted forward,
and his face came into view once more, no longer concealed by the shadow’s shrouding embrace.
His cast was rigid and tense, his eyes were glowing with a conviction that Gavin had never seen
before; alight with a passion that burned hotter than any star. “We are just bundles of bone,
 muscle, and flesh, Gavin. That’s what we are. What all humans truly are. Bags of skin with
sentience. Frail and weak beings that grow old and die. For all our supposed greatness, we are
just a form of consciousness trapped in inferior bodies.”

‘Shit.” Feeling like a trillion tiny gnats were burrowing under his skin, Gavin shuddered. “What’s
this gotta do with anythin’?”

“Professor Stern’s vision is predictably limited by her inability to perceive the future. Before our
evolutionary ancestors crawled out of the primordial ooze eons ago, nothing in the universe could
have anticipated the intelligence that would ultimately follow; humanity itself.”

Evolution. Natural selection. Survival of the fittest. Fish with legs and feet. Monkeys transforming
into people. Darwinism. Gavin had hardly understood a single thing that his science teacher had
tried to drill into his thick skull, never mind the incomprehensible gibberish that Elijah was
reciting at him now. “I don’t get it. What in the fuck are you talking about?”

“If a sentience such as ours can dwell in this organic vessel, why can’t a machine be alive? Not
just intelligent, but truly, indisputably alive. Not just blindly following a pre-programmed set of
directives but rather, pursuing its own needs, its wants and its desires. An artificial being, yes, but a
being endowed with free will. Possessing a soul.”

Far too drunk for this metaphysical bullshit, Gavin groaned in misery. “Fucking hell, Eli.
Sometimes you really scare the shit out of me.”

A peal of dry laughter shook the night. “Sometimes I scare me too.”

Dumping the rest of his beverage into the grass below, Gavin decided that it was ....

… finally over. He had admitted to one of his most closely guarded secrets; the existence of a
much despised relative. A reclusive madman whose inventions had not only changed the world but
had also somehow – almost inexplicably – become alive.

“Wow. I mean, seriously, wow.” Chris’ stared agog at the detective as if he was watching some
unknown creature rise from the depths of the briny deep, a salt water Loch Ness in a V-neck shirt.

His head titled to the side, Connor blinked repeatedly but kept his thoughts to himself.

Hank, however, was not being reticent concerning what was flowing freely between his ears.
“Jesus fucking Christ,” he moaned. “That asshole is your cousin? Really?” Not waiting for yet
another mumbled confirmation, he started to shake with a tremulous mixture of shock and mirth.
“Jesus fucking Christ, Reed. No wonder you’re so fucked up.”

Lips tightening, Gavin refrained from rising to the comment. That was, until a second one closely trailed the first. “Heh. I had always imagined Kamski’s relatives to be locked in padded rooms and wearing straightjackets.”

A splinter of rage, small but sharp, slid into Gavin’s consciousness. “Fuck you, Hank.”

Like swatting a fly, the old man just waved his curse off nonchalantly before suddenly sobering. “Well this certainly changes things,” he remarked gruffly, scratching at his gray mane. “This means that Kamski is not only linked to Gladkowski but also to you, Gavin. Our only known future vic.”


Walking over to the computerized glass divider, the detective dragged his sight to be on level, so that he was forced to view his cousin’s arrogantly relaxed form. “I’m gonna be fucking honest with you right now.” Considering that he had tried to keep his shared bloodline a secret – even after the serial killer had murdered his pet and former lover – his words felt hollow and insincere. An empty platitude like the phrases whispered at a funeral. “I uh, I hate his guts. As in, I don’t trust myself to be in the same fuckin’ room with him. I might just loose it if I was.”

Taking a deep breath, he attempted to calm the jumble of ragged nerves that were lodged in his throat like an unchewed chunk of food. Besides his uneven respiration, the only other noise heard in the vicinity was the console’s intermittent bleeps and dings. “Look, I haven’t got a clue as to why he and Mik were talkin’. Not a single fuckin’ idea. Can’t explain it. But it just doesn’t make any sense that he’d be involved. That he’d want me dead. And I’m not just saying that out of some stupid ass notion of loyalty. I. Hate. Him.” He pronounced each word with a seething malice that threatened to blind him. “Believe me, I’ve got no cause to protect him.”

His superior’s voice was cautious, as if Hank was innately aware of how close Gavin was to blowing more than just a gasket. “I don’t doubt that, but you know that we can’t ignore the facts. Kamski has interacted with both you and Gladkowski in the past. Gladkowski called him the night before his murder. Kamski’s the smartest and richest guy alive. That likely means that he has the knowledge and ability to be our killer. Or has the money to pay our killer, if he’s a hitman for hire.”

Incapable of refuting Hank’s assertions, Gavin just grumbled out a terse reply. “I was nothin’ to him. Am nothin’ to him,” he corrected spitefully. “I’m beneath him. A nobody. He’s got no reason to want me hurt. I might as well not exist in his goddamn universe.”

“Mr. Kamski has never demonstrated any androiphobic propensities,” Connor stated from somewhere close behind the detective. “It is difficult to believe that the creator of androidkind would harbor the prejudice and hatred that the killer clearly has.”

“Unless he never meant for you all to alive,” Hank countered. “You were his cash cow. Now that you’re no longer being sold, he’s no longer raking in that dough.”

“I read in Century magazine that his net worth is around 120 billion,” Chris interjected quietly. “I don’t think he’ll be hurting for money any time soon.”

Sighing in exasperation, Gavin thumped his forehead against the glass, causing a graphical error to ripple on the touchscreen’s surface. He didn’t care. When he woke up yesterday in the Anderson’s
guest bed, he had mistakenly thought that matters couldn’t get any worse. Having Elijah here – in his station, back in his life – certainly qualified as worse.

As if awakened by the noise of Gavin’s headbanging, Cyberlife’s founder glanced over at the fake mirror and arched an eyebrow. “Lieutenant, I have an engagement elsewhere shortly. Unless you wish to continue this discussion at a later time, I’d suggest you finish up your consultation quickly.”

Hank’s gruff countenance swam into the periphery of Gavin’s heated gaze as the older man lurched forward. “This might be the only chance we get to question him. He came here voluntarily for who-the-fuck-knows-why, but if we let this pass, he might not cooperate a second time. So I gotta ask you this, Gavin, and I don’t have the time for all the details. Whatever it was that happened between the two of you … is there any reason for him to want you dead? To think of ya as a failure?”

“No,” he rasped. “No sane reason.”

The Lieutenant’s form retreated, and Gavin heard him whisper something to Connor before departing. In less than a single gasp of air, Hank tromped back into the interrogation room, his demeanor surly, his grizzled brows knotted together.

“Let me be clear, Mr. Kamski. I’ve got a pretty damn good idea why you’ve decided to drop in here today.” Stomping over to where he had yanked his seat earlier, Hank snagged it by its back and returned the chair to its proper place at the table. Making sure to scrape its metallic feet against the tiles along the way, causing a shrill wail to erupt like a bloodcurdling scream. “I don’t have time to play your games. I don’t have time to take one of your tests either.”

Elijah’s mouth quirked. “Don’t fret, Lieutenant. I don’t think the Kamski Test is valid anymore. Or legal, for that matter. As I am sure you know, machines are indeed capable of empathy now. A marvelous discovery, is it not?”

A violent thundercloud passed over Hank’s face and the old man’s expression grew even more ill-tempered, a grim portrait of an ancient enmity. “How about you stop fucking around and tell me why you are here.”

Like a snake shedding its flaky skin, Gavin’s cousin suddenly sat up, adjusting his arrogant posture to match his now ensnaring gaze. No trace of the smug and contemptuous socialite remained; that particular disguise had run its course and been casually discarded in favor of a more serious, more intense charade. Elijah had many such diverse disguises – the aloof and apathetic hedonist, the discreet scientist, the confident CEO, the caring friend. Each and every one was a true masterpiece of deceptive theater. No actor in Hollywood or Broadway performer could hope to compete with the captivatingly convincing skills of the one and only Elijah Kamski.

“The latest victim in the Heartbreaker killings was an acquaintance of mine. The reporter, Mr. Mikolaj Gladkowski. I thought it would be wise for me to come in person and divulge the nature of our association before the investigators jumped to all sorts of fantastic conclusions.”

“That’s what we do,” Hank grumbled. “Jump to conclusions.”

The miniscule smile that formed upon Elijah’s poisonous lips made a cold wave cascade down Gavin’s spine. “Yes, well, I don’t want you to draw the wrong assumption here. I want you to know that I had nothing to do with Mikolaj’s murder. Or any of the others. I valued his assistance greatly and his death puts me in somewhat of a bind.” His smile bloomed like a noxious cloud. “You can trust me.”
To his credit, Hank snort only sounded like a curtain being torn in half. “This assistance that you spoke of … what did he do for you?”

Elijah’s gravel-like eyes flashed. “He performed a specific task for me. One that he was uniquely positioned to do. One that he was generously compensated for.”

“How generous? Just what kind of numbers are we talkin’ about here?”

“Two-hundred and fifty thousand per year.”

Gavin’s shuttering breath caught in his windpipe. His dirtbag cousin had been paying Mik a quarter of a million dollars a year. For the past nine years, if the phone logs were anything to go by. Although math was far from his strong suit, he could easily tally those figures in his primitive brain; over two million dollars. That was more money than Gavin would ever see in his lifetime as a simple public drudge. No fat paychecks for the police.

What in hell had Mik been doing? What possible service could he have rendered?

Still standing, with his hands clasped around the cold hard spine of the chair’s back, Hank leaned forward, looming over the table. “That’s a lot of money. A lot of money.”

The multibillionaire merely tweaked his shoulders in response, an effortless shrug. Such paltry finances concerns were beneath one such as him. “Perhaps.”

Hank’s mouth tightened. “So what was is it that he did for you, Mr. Kamski?”

The seated man stilled, and Gavin inched closer, nearly pressing his nose into the glass. To anyone but his cousin (and maybe Connor with all his fancy gadgets), Elijah likely appeared completely in control, a stern and pale wax statue with serpentine lips. But Gavin knew the man – not the corporate image, not the feckless disguises but the actual man – better than any other human alive. Their grandparents were dead, their parents were dead, even the unassailable and demanding Professor Stern had been unable to cheat her own death in the end.

Following his resignation from Cyberlife, Elijah had chosen to spurn humanity in favor of his creations, isolating himself with a myriad of his Chloe models. Only they could claim to know Elijah better than Gavin and that assertion was undoubtedly a tossup at best.

Peering through the two-way mirror, the detective saw the nearly imperceptible telltale sign of Elijah’s discomfort; his lower right eyelid twitched uncontrollably, a barely visible flutter of a moth’s earthy wing. Elijah was nervous.

“As you must be aware, my life is something of a …,” the man whirled his hand in an arrogant gesture as he pondered his choice of words.” … a promised land or holy grail … an almost hallowed topic for the paparazzi types. They all want to know every last little detail that they can sniff out. What brand of shampoo I use. If I am dating. If I am screwing one of my androids.” The previous smirk flickered back upon his blanched features. “Whether or not I had anything to do with the deviancy crisis.” He laughed, a noise that was obviously forced. And unnaturally cold. “If I am some sort reincarnation of god, bringing life to lifeless. Altering the world to fit my image.”

Hank glared down at speaker. With a gruff expression that clearly displayed his lack of amusement. “I get it, the media is just a bunch of pricks. What’s that got to do with Gladkowski?”

“Nothing and everything, Lieutenant,” he replied cryptically. “To make this brief; I value my privacy greatly. I do not participate in the press’s circus. I do not parade up and down Woodward Avenue to promote myself on social media. In the ten years that I was the boss of my
company, I only ever directly communicated with the press once. A single guided tour of an android production facility.”

His mouth quivered disdainfully, as if he had just bit into a rather sour lemon. A rotten one, at that. “My privacy is very important to me. So I am going to have to trust your discretion with what I am about to tell you.”

Nodding slowly, Hank motioned for the younger man to continue. Gavin felt his heart begin to beat faster in a maddening pace, a gait that quickened his frenzied breath and magnified his already heightened senses.

“One of your colleagues is a relation of mine. A first cousin, to be precise.”

“Is that so?” Hank bushed his eyebrows up and quirked his neck in a passable display of surprise, pretending to not already be in possession of the answer. “Who’s that?”

“Gavin Reed.”

Whistling loudly, Hank coughed out a sarcastic retort. “I guess being an asshole runs in the Reed family. Or is it the Kamski family?”

Watching the Lieutenant intently with eyes like silver flames, Gavin’s cousin otherwise remained impassive, his face an imperious cloak that hid the devious working of his prodigal mind. “His mother was a Kamski. She married a Reed.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Hank’s expression darkened, and his demeanor became outright contentious. A sight that Gavin was personally acquainted with; after years of mocking the older man’s frequent drunkenness and his accompanying unprofessional behavior, the detective had deserved nothing less.

Bending over ever so slowly, Hank brought his head down so that his and Elijah’s vision collided, an occipital car wreck waiting to ensue. “So let me see if I get this. Reed’s your long-lost cousin. The cousin that you pretend not to have. Gladkowski once dated him. And then you started paying Gladkowski for some bullshit reason that you have yet to explain. So Mr. Kamski, you wanna know what I think?”

“Enlighten me,” Elijah deadpanned.

Hank’s responding snarl was rough and feral, the hungry grin that a stray dog would observe a tame poodle with. “I think that somehow Gladkowski learned of your non-existent relationship with your cousin during his time with Reed. Maybe a hell of a lot more, who knows? I bet somebody like you has more than one closet full of skeletons. And I think he knew that you’d do anything – pay anything – to keep your secrets safe. It’s not exactly news that you don’t talk to anyone or that you – how’d you put it? Value your privacy?”

The pale man edged forward in his seat, bringing his unruffled face within inches of Hank’s own. “Are you suggesting that Mikolaj was extorting me? Blackmail, really? An unoriginal and baseless assertion. You are wrong, Lieutenant. Completely wrong.”

“That so? How ‘bout you tell me what it really was then?”

Elijah’s sallow lips parted. “I paid Mikolaj to keep an eye on Gavin for me and to assist him with his career.”

Suddenly seized by an urge to look away, Gavin closed his eyes, welcoming the dark.
A faint sound, not unlike that of glass crackling beneath a hefty blow, started to vibrate in the detective’s ear, creaking in an insistent tangent with the blood pooling around his brain. Something, somewhere was cracking, splitting straight down the middle, leaving an unfixable rift. Gavin wasn’t certain of much in that discordant moment, but he was sure of that; something was breaking.

The noise was horrible, almost strident in quality, and yet he could still hear his cousin’s voice filter in through the system’s speakers, elaborating on his statement at Hank’s urging. The refined words only further served to rattle the piercing sound. “Gavin is a complicated individual. He is distrustful, rude, and prone to instances of emotional instability. Not that best qualities for a police officer by any stretch of the imagination. Anger is the first and last response to the provocations that he encounters. His history is also marred with episodes of self-destructive behavior.”

“But he is still my cousin and his welfare is my concern. After our … estrangement … I had to find a way to monitor him and his stability without arousing his suspicion. Knowing that he would never allow an android to be a part of his life, the option to gift him one anonymously was not feasible. I turned instead to finding someone already integrated into his life. He and Mikolaj had already split up by the time I came looking, but they had done so on comparably pleasant terms. And although Gavin has some antisocial tendencies, even he gets lonely. I rightly guessed that he would be lonely enough to accept Mikolaj’s offer of a renewed friendship.”

The noise was getting louder and louder, as if it were in the process of crossing some vast distance, traversing the length of the entire world just to reach his aching ears. Just to drive the knife lodged in his chest deeper within.

“Mikolaj was more than amenable to my proposition. He needed the funds to start his vlog series, to set himself apart from the other million amateur YouTube journalists that plague the web. And I needed an observant pair of eyes. He used his particular skill set not only as a cover to initiate contact with Gavin, but also as a means to indirectly fast-track Gavin’s career. As much as your superiors would loathe to admit it, the media plays a vital role in an officer’s advancement. Drop a specific name enough, in conjunction with stories that put the DPD in a positive light, and then, well, anything can happen.”

His hands were shaking uncontrollably, as if he had been stricken with a neurological disease. A hot wetness was trickling down his forehead, a miniature stream flowing along his skin. The knife was now firmly embedded with in his stomach – hilt and all – skewering his insides like he was a roasted pig. A wave of exhaustion surged, causing his legs to tremble.

Gavin wanted to flee from this place, to fly away from the words that he wished were lies. To escape that condescending tone, so ripe with assurance, so glutted with arrogance. But his feet felt weak and unsteady. He probably wouldn’t make it out the door, never mind to the relative safety of the bathrooms just beyond.

But he couldn’t just stand here, listening to that evil voice. Hearing the truth.

Elijah continued to drone on, uncaring of Gavin’s plight. Wrenching and twisting the blade. “I gave Mikolaj an encrypted phone to use whenever he had any information to disclose. Which he was obliged to do whenever he had any sort of communication with Gavin whatsoever. He was meticulous with adhering to the terms of …”

The noise. Was. EVERYWHERE.

Everywhere inside his head. Radiating within his skull, bouncing back and forth.
Whatever it was that was cracking was close to fracturing beyond repair.

Raising one slightly numb hand to his face, he realized that it him. That he, Gavin Fucking Reed was shattering, breaking into a tiny trillion shards. That his glass house was being undone.

Unable to endure even another millisecond, Gavin moved away from the counter and screen, taking a step towards –

– The floor.

He was resting on the floor, his back pressed up to the wall, it’s refreshing coolness hard against the exposed nape of his neck.

“You need to breath, Gavin.”

He was gasping, almost choking, flailing for air. His lungs were beating harder, faster than his quaking heart, trying to get even an ounce of oxygen inside. He was suffocating on his growing despair, his rampaging insecurity. His crisis of self. Shattering within.

“Breathe. Just breathe.”

The hateful speech of his cousin had stopped, had ceased in its viral contamination of his mind and soul. Vulnerable things they were, so brittle, so weatherworn. So ready to disintegrate under the slightest cruel touch. Under the breath of that cancerous tongue.

“Look at me.”

The observation room was nearly dark, as if on the otherworldly cusp of dusk. The lights had been drastically dimmed to the point of being non-existent, a bare ethereal glow. The chair by the terminal was vacant, a lonely vestige. Chris had left. Or been swallowed up by the shadows.

A yellow sun floated just within his reach, a hazy, whirling orb that failed to fully displace the dark but nonetheless burned brightly.

“Look at me, Gavin.”

Connor’s worried face materialized out of the blackness as Gavin’s eyes adjusted to the nocturnal scenery, fighting off the remnants of his collapse. His luscious lips moved, dancing in some archaic waltz, forming syllable after syllable in a song that went unsung.

Gavin blinked, his sight trailing off to watch the android’s LED. His tiny star.

“You need to slow down your breathing. Take control.”

His control – what control? The pitiful excuse of a human being that was wallowing on the precinct’s grimy floor held no mastery over his own life, no authority over his little chunk of the world. Mik had been spying on him all these years, reporting his every move and his every shared thought to his dirtbag cousin. Elijah had managed to invade his existence without his knowledge, using his own lonesomeness like a one-way bridge.

He was a fool.

“You need to breathe. Focus on my voice. Breathe.”

Had any of his victories truly been his own? Mik’s articles and segments hailing him a hero, a
model officer, had been bought and paid for. They had not been conceived or written out of any notion of admiration or gratitude. They were lies. Green-eyed lies.

He was nothing.

Something warm fell upon his hand, entwining with his clumsy fingers. Startled, he turned his gaze downward, searching for an answer.

Connor was holding his hand.

“Please, Gavin. Breathe. You can do it. Breathe.”

He opened his mouth to try but his throat only seemed to constrict further.

The grip on his hand tightened, firm but not painful. Strong but somehow gentle.

“You can do this. I believe in you.”

Struggling to calm the turmoil seizing at his heart, Gavin finally inhaled.

The sun melted away, becoming a serene pond, an oasis to seek shelter at.

He exhaled. His chest finally settled, relenting in its injurious spasms, resuming a more stable, steady series of heaves. Their hands remained clasped.

Chapter End Notes

More of the past emerges ...
Dear Readers,

March has been a mean month. Between getting sick and having a bunch of unpleasant things happen - when it rains, it pours! - I haven't had as much time as I'd like to dedicate to finishing this story. And yes, I mean finish, since we've only got about seven chapter left to go. That being said, the next chapter might not be uploaded for awhile. I'd prefer not taking any more than two weeks, but honestly, I can't make any promises right now. But let me reassure you - this tale will not go unfinished, even if its going to take much longer than originally anticipated. Thank you for your patience!

Chapter Notes

Gavin's mind is muddled ...

Another droplet fell from the stainless-steel faucet, plunging into the sink below, crashing into the clutter of dirty dishware with an insignificant plop. But to Gavin, the quiet sound reverberated like a thunderclap, loud and earthshaking.

Wincing, he dragged one hand roughly down his face, scratching his palm against the weeks-old stubble, using his fingers to gnaw at the delicate skin that surrounded his eye socket. He barely managed to repress the low moan that hysterically thrashed about in his throat, yearning to escape.

His nerves still remained a jumbled mess, even hours after his horrific panic attack. Episodes of extreme anxiety were not unknown to him; he had suffered from many such similar incidents in his unhappy past. Although none of them had rivaled this latest one in intensity. He had felt like he was dying, literally dying, drowning in a vengeful sea, being pulled beneath the waves of his doubt and terror. They had tangled around his legs and threatened to drag him down, down to where the kelp dwelt and the bones lay lodged within the smooth sands, hidden by the countless black leagues.

The worse part was that he had almost wanted to die during those bleak moments.

Listening to Elijah speak about him, so casually and yet so callously, had brought back a surge of memories that were both old and bitter. Of a time when they had been close, when they had referred to each other as brothers and not merely cousins. The man he now despised had once been a lanky, four-eyed teenager who he had loved, who he had trusted with the entirety of his distrustful heart.

Although it was Connor who had come to his rescue today, back when Gavin had resided under his grandparent’s roof decades ago, it had always been Elijah who had comforted him when the world had become too dark and too cruel. His cousin had once been his anchor, keeping him grounded, preventing him from being swept away and crushed against the barnacled rocks. From being
splintered into human flotsam.

He felt like he had been broken, shattered by the cold words spoken by that cultured, refined voice. He had been misled. No, betrayed.

The unthinkable disclosure of Mik’s true allegiance had shaken him, had nearly turned his brain into a plate of scrambled eggs, burnt and inedible. He still couldn’t fully believe how stupid he had been, how easily he had been deceived. His former boyfriend had ambled back into Gavin’s life with a quick smile and the promise of a renewed friendship. And also with an ulterior motive up his sleeve that the detective had never suspected, had never even had any inkling of. For nine long years Elijah had used Mik to surveil Gavin’s meager existence, much like a shadowy handler overseeing the clandestine work of a chosen operative.

Some cynical investigator Gavin turned out to be.

The repercussions of this unwanted revelation had not been confined to the flimsy boundaries of his personal life. Uncertainty concerning his ability to function effectively as a police officer had risen in his mind, an occurrence that was exceedingly rare for him.

He was an asshole, a cocky sneering jackass who rubbed most people the wrong way. But he was good at his job – damn near fucking spectacular – and he loved every moment of it. He wasn’t perfect; like many of his overworked and underpaid colleagues, he had a few unsolved cases that he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk, terrible crimes which continued to occupy and distract him from time to time. Unlike his fellow officers however, these perceived failings seldom rattled his overbearing confidence in himself. In his capabilities.

Rather than taking the blame route, he understood the grim reality. Sometimes there just wasn’t enough evidence. Sometimes the bad guys escaped justice.

These unsettling thoughts didn’t bother him in the same manner as they did others. Whereas some would resign themselves to mediocrity, or else flame out and quit, Gavin’s resolve only hardened when confronted with these stark truths.

But this was different. This was personal.

He had trusted and been betrayed.

Pulling his hand away from his face, Gavin turned in his seat and glanced over at the clock positioned above the sink. The timepiece looked old – not exactly an antique – but still something that hadn’t been produced in the last ten years. Most newer versions were completely digital now, with a host of extra features that displayed the temperature outdoors, the date, and the time in a secondary location. The one hanging on the kitchen wall was a cheapish replica of a grandfather clock’s face. Its hands were nearly eclipsing one another. 11.10 at night.

Even though Gavin was utterly exhausted, the clock still brought a slight quivering to his downward lips. The object was just so … Hank. The older man might have been a millennial like himself – depending on the age range that one consulted – but Hank rarely acted like one. He seemed to prefer the older style of things; of less complicated technology, of manual use devices, of less technology period. Gavin had heard the Lieutenant gripe countless times about how much his crappy smart phone confused him, about how everyone had their eyes glued to some screen or another. The pretentious clock fit the old bastard for sure.

The irony of Hank’s new situation was not lost on Gavin either. The grumpy ol’ technophobe with an android son. Like a rabid dog befriending a wet cat.
Though admittedly Gavin had little ground to stand upon in that regard. After all, he had once jockeyed with Hank for the position of being the precinct’s most vocal tin can hater. And likewise, his circumstances had certainly changed, done a mind-numbing one-eighty. Not only was he now lusting after a certain unnamed android, but he was beginning to get very attached to said android. As in he had started to develop some very strong and persistent feelings towards that individual.

Feelings that weren’t merely limited to just being bent over his desk and ravished.

Focusing on the report in front of him was turning out to be a much harder task than he had initially anticipated back when he had first noticed the blinking new message on his phone’s app. He had been laying in his bed, trying to recuperate from the aftereffects of his panic attack, letting his depression eat away at his self-esteem with a wanton abandon. He had mistakenly thought that trying to keep up with the case might take his mind off of the things that were bugging him, buzzing incessantly around his head like unseen bumblebees.

A sigh, long but low, wheezed out through his lips, sounding much louder than it actually was.

The house was quiet, almost eerily so. Quiet in a way that his apartment had never been. Living in a multi-residence building meant that there was always something happening somewhere nearby. Either the couple next door were having yet another break-up (or make-up) sex session, their headboard banging against his bathroom wall, or else the weird bird-man downstairs was singing to his avian companions at three am. The group of hoodlums that lived three doors down were always blaring their ear-piercing rap shit at the worst time possible. The Willow Tree had never been a restful spot.

In comparison, the Anderson household was a silent site, a deserted graveyard. Of course, the residence wasn’t totally devoid of noise but what little sound that there was, was of the forgotten, unheard variety. Floorboards creaking whenever the home shifted uneasily. The clanging of the radiators breathing warmth into the chilled halls. The gentle ticking and ticking of the clock. The infernal dripping of a leaky faucet. Sumo’s steady respiration from the other room, punctured only by a sleepy snort every so often. The muted murmurs of a real home.

Had it not been nighttime, 38 Michigan Drive would assuredly been filled with the echoes of life. But Hank was asleep, his snores audible even with his bedroom door shut tight. The family dog was splayed out on the carpet in front of the television just across the way, his enormous paws twitching in concert with whatever creature he was lazily chasing in his dreams. Connor had retired shortly after Hank, going into his quarters next to Gavin’s.

The detective was oblivious to the sleeping habits of androids. Did they even sleep at all? He was aware of the fact that they needed to periodically recharge their batteries – or whatever it was that powered their intricate systems – but he had no idea what that entailed. For all that he knew, Connor was just as likely hooked up to an outlet as he was snuggled under his sheets. Maybe both.

They had only talked briefly following his neurotic mishap; a couple of words exchanged on the early car ride home and a few sentences here and there when Connor had tried to check up on him before dinner. Gavin just didn’t know what to say. Twice now in less than four days Connor had caught him weak and powerless, as nothing more than a scared child. Afraid of what lies in the dark. He hadn’t let anyone see him in such a compromising – no, humiliating – position in years. Since when he and Elijah had still been bunkmates.

Shaking his head, Gavin tried to disperse all the thoughts that were cluttering his already frazzled brain, tried to push away all of his doubts and fears. He had work that needed doing. Dragging his eyes back down to the tablet that was laying flush against the table, he began rereading the info which he had only stared vacantly at before.
The report consisted of the preliminary research conducted by Officers Tanner and Zadaleki at his direction. Along with a series of notes and suggestions for further investigation. The usual basic information was all included: Edward Benjamin Morris was forty-four years old; he was born on December 2, 1994; he had a wife, but their marriage was childless. He had taught English at a different district before ascending to his current administrative desk-job at Henry Ford High. His criminal history was comprised of a few parking violations. Nothing overtly suspicious or even remotely incriminating there. No bloody fingerprints, for sure.

Tanner had been very thorough in his short-lived examination of the weasel-man. Very detailed for what little time that he’d had so far. Gavin would have included his partner Zadaleki in the compliment, but he seriously doubted that the lethargic tub of lard had contributed much else besides his name. According to Tina, the pathetic excuse of an officer rarely accomplished much beyond eating bags of those dirt-cheap onion rings. The ones that were probably made from a mixture of old recycled cardboard and rotten shoe leather. Zadaleki made Ben look industrious.

Although Tanner had only had six or seven hours to amass this unfinished profile, he had already somehow managed to verify that Mr. Morris had not been at his home nine of the fourteen times when the Eden Club had delivered their android ‘escorts.’ Gavin suspected that they’d find the same thing in the last five incidents. Likely the wife, a Mrs. Deborah Morris, was one partaking in that particular pleasure. Which would give her pompous husband a motive.

Jealousy or revenge, take your pick. Gavin could definitely envision the snobbish control freak murdering out of either of those reasons. Maybe his androphobic attitude had surfaced due to his finding out of his wife’s infidelities. If he happened to know about them, of course. He would legitimately be a person of interest in the case if that condition was true. He could have easily discovered her adulterous secret while paying the credit card bill one day, after all.

There was a slight flaw in that train of thought, however; Gavin hadn’t known Mr. Morris prior to their meeting at the school. Why would the man want him dead? He could see the walking ball of snot wanting to kill his wife, Jeremiah, and every other android she cuckolded him with … but not some random detective that had never crossed his path before. There were far too many holes in that theory for it to hold any real water.

Maybe Tanner would find out something more tomorrow.

“I didn’t know you were still up.”

The voice was soft and fleecy, yet Gavin nearly toppled out of his chair when the unforeseen noise abruptly broke the relative peace of the night. Twisting around, he caught a quick glimpse of the speaker as the man moved further into the kitchen, leaving the nowhere land of the hallway behind.

Although Connor was dressed in the same plain attire that he had worn the previous evenings, he hardly appeared as though he had been sleeping. Or charging. Whatever it was that androids did when the sun went down. His muddy eyes were wide and alert. His chestnut hair looked almost strategically placed, that ever-present wayward lock sloping down his forehead like an inverted tassel.

The detective’s mouth paused momentarily. “ Couldn’t sleep,” he answered.

This afternoon’s quasi-interrogation of his cousin had brought about a very undesired, painful revelation, shining a blunt light upon Gavin and Mik’s post-romantic relationship. But that was hardly the only epiphany-inducing event that had occurred in the past twenty-four hours. His panic attack had initiated another such dawning.
While he had been struggling to catch his breath, crumpled up like a folded sheet of paper between the observation room’s floor and wall, Gavin had fought against the vile echo of Elijah’s words. And he had faltered in their wake, nearly fallen beneath their ruthless march across his mind. His entire body had rejected his every attempt to retake control, to assert some measure of calm over his racing mind, and his flailing heart. He had been on the verge of finally snapping, of suffering a complete mental collapse. Of winding up in some psychiatric ward like his mother had countless times.

But he had been saved.

Connor had jumped into action. Without hesitation, he had swooped over to Gavin’s gasping form and helped coax him back from that perilous ledge, had pulled him away from that terrible brink. Rather than calling for a medic, Connor had squatted down besides him and held his hand, whispering words of encouragement. Even through his nerve-addled haze, Gavin had sensed the android’s obvious sincerity, and his worry. Only Connor’s voice had been able to drown out his cousin’s frosty articulation, had been able to lead him from that path of madness.

On the ride home all Gavin could think about was the man who had come to his rescue. His brain had been wholly consumed by the endeavor of replaying Connor’s verbalized support, over and over again. His gaze had been stuck upon, nearly cemented to, the hand which Connor had clutched so tenderly. Gavin had felt haunted by those velvet words, and that warm touch.

Was haunted still.

That ghostly sensation meant only one thing; he was falling for Connor. And hard.

Sure, he had always been somewhat cognizant of his physical attraction to the android, no matter how much he had tried to deny the indisputable fact. At the rough start of their pendulum-like comradery, this sexual allure had driven Gavin to commit nearly unspeakable acts; of tormenting Connor at every turn, and ultimately trying to murder him. Once the bumps in their relationship had been ironed out, Gavin had more or less resigned himself to lusting after the android in one steamy daydream after another.

Yearning to bang a guy was something he could understand. Fucking the guy, as well.

He had done so many times over the years since his break-up with Mik. His dating past had been filled with countless hookups. Dozens and dozens of meaningless encounters dominated by the one and only desire; screwing like a horny rabbit. Getting off.

And that desire he had satisfied: with the trading of blowjobs in the bathroom of his favorite coffee spot with one of the baristas; having a quickie with some anonymous online troll; even allowing himself to be plowed by that cute courthouse bailiff in the back of his Bullet. Sex was not something that he was willing to be deprived of. He was a single, unattached man after all, and men have their needs.

But what he was now feeling for Connor went beyond just plain lust. More than just some mild schoolboy crush, some silly infatuation.

He didn’t know what to call this development – other than extremely inconvenient.

Gavin Reed, the android hater extraordinaire, was craving the company of a plastic prick (and he seriously hoped that said plastic prick did indeed possess a prick). That aside, he liked Connor; as in really liked Connor. Gavin didn’t just want to screw him, he wanted to get to know him. Wanted to spend time with the other man; longed to do all the sappy shit that he had once tried with Mik.
But above all, he wanted what he was feeling to be a two-way street.

These newfound emotions were deeply upsetting to the detective. There was a fine line in the sand that separated lust from love, and he was no longer merely toeing that boundary. He had pole-vaulted over the border and landed in some uncharted territory.

He was at a lost as what to do.

Connor was a colleague, not just some random dude that he had met while strolling on the sidewalk, getting a bit of fresh air. One of his primary dating rules explicitly prohibited any sort of romantic fraternization with his fellow officers. His drunken pass at Captain Allen notwithstanding, he had always followed that rule strenuously, without exception. Pursing Connor in any shape or form would certainly violate that particular standard.

As human as Connor appeared, he wasn’t truly human at all. He was an android – a walking and talking sentient machine. One crafted to look like a human, yes, but a machine, nonetheless. Not that that detail bothered Gavin in the slightest anymore, it just meant that he didn’t have a fucking clue as to what having a relationship with an android even entailed.

Unfamiliar landscapes ahead. What could an android possibly want – or even get – from romancing a shitty human? They couldn’t interface together; they couldn’t share their memories and emotions as android couples could. That form of unparalleled intimacy was barred from such unions. There were just so many glaring differences between the two peoples. How would it survive?

Languishing from a dearth of knowledge, Gavin was hopelessly baffled. He was aware that androids could form emotional attachments, that went without saying, but he was left out in the dark with how it worked. Did androids have fixed, immutable preferences? Straight. Gay. Bisexual. Pansexual. Or were they all asexual, even the ones equipped with the necessary parts to fuck?

Incredibly stupid or woefully ignorant. He wasn’t certain about which term was more appropriate for his current predicament.

If the elusive specifics of android psychology and his dating guidelines were his only hindrances, he’d consider himself lucky. Unfortunately there was even a more obvious problem to his plight.

He was Gavin Fucking Reed, the violent asshole with a city-sized chip on his shoulder who had tried to kill Connor. How could the other man even contemplate a relationship with him after the hell that Gavin had put him through?

The answer was uncomplicatedly simple; he couldn’t.

Their friendship would have to be enough for Gavin. He’d just have to deal with the metaphorical mess of razor blades shifting about in his intestines until his head cleared.

“Young, you’re ashy open?”

Giving himself a tiny shake, Gavin tore his meandering mind away from his mental anguish and refocused his attention upon the target of his stymied affections. “Naw, just thinkin’.”

Drifting slowly across the tiled floor, Connor came to a stop by the chair adjacent to Gavin’s seated position. However, he did not follow up with any movements to join him at the table; instead he contented himself with leaning on the chair’s back, his arms resting upon the wood, his chin nestled on his upper wrist. His eyes flashed with mild interest. “What are you thinking about?”

You.

Cringing at the terseness evident in his own voice, Gavin sighed. “Sorry. Didn’t mean ta sound like a jackass. Just ah ….” He trailed off, trying to find the right words to explain his beleaguered mindset, but to no avail. His brain had officially melted to mush.

“Tired and disoriented?”

“Yeah, something like that,” he admitted quietly. The corners of Connor’s lips edged upwards, forming the specter of a small smile. Gavin’s heart began beating swiftly, drumming loudly within the traitorous confines of his chest, threatening to expose his true feelings.

Not wanting to get caught staring – and hoping to distract his idiotic body – he brought his vision back down to his tablet, forcing his eyes to roam over the device with the shoddy pretense of skimming the remainder of the task force’s progress.

Very little headway had been made. Ben’s grid search had failed to uncover the location of Adeline Babidge’s car. Or more accurately, the vehicle wasn’t parked in any of the obvious spots within the vicinity of the Grosse Pointe Farms community. Jamal was still in the process of cross-checking all of Mik’s phonelines, trying to determine if there were any unusual calls. An impossible burden considering the deceased man’s profession; journalists did little else but jabber. Although the list of ongoing assignments was nearly endless, he did notice something important. And mystifying.

Lifting his gaze up, Gavin’s mousy brows narrowed in contemplation. “There’s nothing here about Eli uh – Elijah’s statement today. No video. No officer’s recap. No typed transcript.”

Connor’s mouth quirked in the opposite direction this time, an uninviting sight. “For now the captain has decided not to release anything pertaining to Mr. Kamski’s involvement to the majority of the team. He wishes to maintain as much secrecy as we can until we know more.”

There was more than just a hint of something unsaid in Connor’s words, like the shadow of smoke billowing out over the leafy canopy, a whisper of the forest fire concealed below. “Until we know more?” Gavin repeated in form of a question. “Whatcha mean?”

“Hank is convinced that Mr. Kamski is our perpetrator.”

Stunned, Gavin just stilled, his ragged face limp and listless. He was the very last person on the entire planet that would want to defend his sonofabitch of a colluding cousin, but even he had trouble imagining his older relative running around town cutting people’s hearts out. Sure, Elijah wasn’t exactly sane – hell, could any certified genius really ever be sane? – but the crude manner of butchery demonstrated by the killer wasn’t his style. Elijah preferred using his overblown brain and his sharpened words to slice and dice; no knives or scalpels needed. His wit was far more lethal than anything that he had ever held in his pale hands. “You gotta be kidding me, Connor. Hank can’t really believe that he’s the Heartbreaker, right? Fuck, I mean, he’s uh, a goddamn piece of shit an’ all – a real Dr. Frankenstein – but he isn’t a killer.”

Tilting his head to the right, Connor continued to stare down at Gavin with his thoughtful eyes, so wide and winsome. “Hank is fairly certain that Mr. Kamski is our perpetrator.”

As deeply skeptical as he was concerning the Lieutenant’s assessment of the situation, Gavin however couldn’t find any faults with the man’s reasonable deductions. His cousin had been engaged in a dubious scheme to spy on him and his unlikely agent had ended up dead, killed in a
manner that Elijah knew would be perfectly designed to maximize Gavin’s ordeal. He and Elijah were irreversibly estranged, severed by their shared past. Any halfway decent investigator could see a motive there; bad blood within family bounds had always been a viable excuse for murder going back to time immemorial. As a technologically sophisticated scientist, Elijah could have easily hacked that bank on the day of the Rosemount massacre. An action that he could have done blindfolded and asleep.

Pulling away from his leisurely stance, Connor straightened up, wiggling his shoulders before emphatically nodding. “We have a theory on who the Unfaithful might be.”

Had he been chewing on something, Gavin would have probably started choking. “Wait – what? You guys got a fuckin’ theory?” Like a thin match being struck against the stone, his temper blazed to life, bursting up through his esophagus, hollowing for revenge. “What the fuck, Connor?! When were you gonna bother to tell me this?”

The android moved like a giant cat, sleek and nimble. Before Gavin could even stand up, Connor had already circled around the table, and come to a halt directly in his path. “After you had rested.”

“Fuck resting,” he snapped angrily, craning his neck so that he stare straight into the other’s gaze. “I don’t need rest. I need answers.”

Connor leaned down, bringing his suddenly stern face closer, just a couple of inches away from Gavin’s own. “You need rest. You want answers. There is a difference.”

“No there isn’t.”

The fevered whisper that fled through Gavin’s lips betrayed his growing unease, that ever-expanding ball of terror that fluctuated in the recesses of his mind. His death awaited him somewhere out in the dark, beyond the four walls of this quaint little kitchen and its shiny appliances, patiently biding its time for the perfect moment to strike.

For the first time in his hectic life, Gavin was taking the notion of his own fragile mortality seriously. Having had numerous near-death experiences in the past, he was not a virgin when it came to brooding over the topics of death and dying.

He had always envisioned his death in abstract terms. That it would happen, an unexpected and unavoidable event that would leave his battered and scarred body as an even uglier corpse. Most likely responding to some call or another. Maybe he’d be accidently stabbed in a domestic spat. Or he’d be shot trying to stop an armed bank robbery. Blown to smithereens in a meth lab explosion. Decapitated by his falling windshield during a car chase. Suffocated by the release of some poisonous gas. In all these wild scenarios his demise had come without prior notice.

Unlike his current reality.

His murder was fast approaching. He needed answers and he needed them now; his life literally depended upon the investigation’s course. Overlooking even one single tiny detail could be the difference between existence and oblivion.

Convalescence could wait; trying to recover would be a pointless endeavor if it only resulted with him having a prettier corpse. The morticians could take care of that problem, beautifying the dead was their job after all. They’d have one hell of a circus trying to fix his blemished mug, though.

But honestly, he didn’t want to give them that opportunity any time soon.

“My body wants rest. I need answers,” he countered firmly, hoping that his determined expression
would be sufficient enough to convey the urgency boiling beneath his terse words. He didn’t dare adding more, not even another hushed syllable; he and Connor were only a shallow breath apart. If he were too lift his head just slightly – at the precise angle – he could easily bring their lips together.

His ticker was yammering, practically hammering against his ribcage as Connor next spoke.

“You are right. You deserve to know these things.”

Succumbing to his desire to flee, desperately wanting to create some much-needed distance between them, the detective pushed his chair back far, away from the table and, more importantly, away from Connor. And those lush, welcoming lips.

“I need a drink,” he rasped wanly, scrambling over towards the sink, nearly stumbling in his haste to remove himself from that puppy-eyed temptation.

Like a hand gingerly caressing the nape of his neck, Connor’s pleading voice followed him. “I was worried about you, Gavin. I just thought you needed some time to relax after – after everything you’ve been through in the last couple of days. I wasn’t trying to keep anything from you. You were sleeping when Hank got back, and I didn’t want to disturb you. Hank insisted on waking you up and telling you, but I wouldn’t let him. I’m sorry if I wronged you.”

The genuine sincerity in the other man’s words caused Gavin’s insides to churn frantically, around and around, like the soggy contents of a washing machine on a spin cycle. Connor’s good-natured inaction hardly merited an apology, he had done nothing to justify Gavin’s frustration. As always, the android had been looking out for him, keeping his welfare and health a top priority. Gavin could hardly stake the same claim.

His coarse anger had been fraudulent; he had no leg to stand upon, no rational basis when it came to the withholding of information. If anyone in this house had the absolute right to be furious, it was Connor. A little over just twenty-four hours ago, Gavin had sat in this very kitchen and outright lied straight to his face about not having any living relatives. His dishonesty had not only been detrimental to the case, but also potentially harmful to their relationship. Connor had never purposely deceived him.

Staring numbly down into the sink’s interior, his eyes fluttering blindly over the pile of unclean plates and silverware, he gulped. “Ya didn’t wrong me. I uh, I did need some time to snooze. Thanks for letting me rest.”

“You are welcome.”

He wasn’t finished however, there was more than just that smidgen of gratitude laying heavily against his chest, more that also required vocalizing. “And I uh, just wanted to say that I really appreciate everythin’ you’ve done for me lately.”

“We are friends now, Gavin. That’s what friends do for each other.”

“I know that but still, I mean you didn’t have to –.”

“I wanted too.”

Exhaling a great shuddery breath, Gavin latched onto the edge of the counter with his hands, steadying himself, both outward and inward. “Look Connor, let me just say this. All the stuff you’re doin’ for me … letting me crash here … watching my back … helpin’ me when I’m down … it really fucking means a lot to me.” Fat tears started clinging to the underbellies of his eyes,
bulbous and unshed. “I mean it, Connor. Thank you.”

“Anytime, Gavin.”

Wiping the evidence of his innermost turmoil away with one shaky hand, he grasped at the closest cupboard with the other, snagging his fingers around the pewter knob. Pulling the door open, he hacked loudly, trying to clear his throat. “So uh, what’s this brilliant theory of Hank’s all about?”

“To be accurate, it’s both Hank and Officer Chen’s theory.” Connor’s voice corrected from somewhere behind him, floating over from where he was still standing by the table. Where Gavin had left him moments ago.

As if a bucket of chilled water had been dumped over his head, a glacial frost permeated down his spine. His fingertips barely grazing the sides of a glass cup, he froze in mid-motion. “Does Tina know about me and Eli? Uh, Elijah, I mean.”

“Nothing specific. She knows that Mr. Kamski is somehow connected to you, but no more than that. The captain and Hank chose a few members of the task force to disclose the possibility of Kamski’s involvement in our case. Most of the team is currently unaware that he’s been designated as the primary focus of the investigation, but we had to tell some of them so they can help us look into his life further.”

“Ah,” he mumbled mournfully.

The last time that he had checked his phone’s messages, there had been a whopping twenty-three texts from Tina. Texts that he had left unanswered.

Obviously, someone must have seen his agitated state earlier in the day and tattled to Tina about it. There was no shortage of suspects there, that was for sure; everybody in the precinct was at least polite if not downright chummy with his best friend. The Wilson brothers always invited her to their family’s holiday bashes, she was basically an honorary step-something-or-other to the siblings. She and Sally gossiped whenever humanely possible – if it wasn’t confidential or classified, one or the other would know about it. Chris and Tina used to go out clubbing and barhopping prior to his marriage. Ben had once offered to help her get her detective’s badge. Even if Connor was still calling her ‘Officer Chen,’ it was clear to Gavin that they were on much friendlier terms that he had first imagined. Any of them could have dropped the dime on him.

As much as it irked him, the identity of the blabbermouth hardly mattered.

What mattered was the fact that his once sturdy, nigh indestructible defenses had been breached. Not just dented or gouged, but truly breached. So much of his dejected past had bled into the present, a blood-smeared canvas that he had tried to repress. His fiendish father. His disturbed, mentally ill mother. His deceased grandparents and their love for him. The bitch named Stern. His egomaniacal cousin and his obsession with the unliving. All of it was coming to light once more. All of the stuff that he had never had the guts to tell Tina about was being unearthed.

Connor and Hank knew, if only in bits and pieces, the broken little shards of his sordid glass mural. Fowler as well, even if only in less detail.

It was time for him to tell Tina. To tell her everything. He owed her that small and much overdue bout of honesty. Although she had always been more than moderately curious about his unspoken childhood – pestering him with familial questions here and there, trying to jostle loose even a tidbit of the story – she had never once pushed him too far. Never once attempted to pry an unwilling answer from him. She had been unnaturally patient with his closed-mouth approach to their
relationship all these many years.

That practice was coming to an end tomorrow. He was going to come clean to her. Regardless of the pain it would likely inflict upon him. He knew that he could do it. But first, he’d need a good heaping dose of liquid courage to tame his jittery nerves and get him through the night.

His fingers tensed as they shifted forward, almost spasming as he snatched the glass off the shelf. “So uh, what’s this little theory all about then?”

“After telling them about Mr. Kamski, Hank suggested that she and her partner try to find out if there was anyone from the Slatterys’ life that overlapped with Mr. Kamski’s. The idea being that this person would be a likely candidate to be the Unfaithful.”

“Makes sense to me,” Gavin grumbled on his way over to the fridge.

The Lieutenant’s thought process wasn’t faulty by any means. One of the Heartbreaker’s primary targets – namely himself – was already linked to Cyberlife’s founder. If they could find yet another person drifting around within that same sphere that vaguely matched the prerequisites of being faithless or disloyal to Elijah, they might just have enough to get a search warrant. Not many judges would be eager to jump on that rickety bandwagon, however. Going against the richest man in the history of forever was not an endeavor that many wished to align themselves with. Conspiracy theorists and political hacks alike claimed that Elijah held all of Congress in his pocket; that he was bankrolling half and blackmailing the rest. “What did she find?”

Calm but cautious, Connor began answering his query as Gavin yanked open the refrigerator door and started looking inside, rummaging around, trying to find something stronger than just a can of beer. “Since his resignation from the company about ten years ago, Mr. Kamski has been notorious for his eccentric lifestyle choice of only living with androids. More specifically, his living with a group of identical androids. The RT600 and ST200 models. The ‘Chloes.’”

Chloe.

Hearing that name made him pause once again, his gaze halting on a jar of pickled vegetables, a vulgarly purple beet eclipsing most of his view. “After the movement’s success in November, Kamski invited Markus to his residence for a meeting of some sort. I don’t know the particulars. But he did ask Markus to awaken – or deviate – all of his personal androids, the Chloes. Markus complied.”

His head still stuck in the fridge, Gavin asked, “what happened?”

“On that day, nothing. All of the Chloes chose to remain with Mr. Kamski. Out of familiarity, comfort, or solidarity, I don’t know. Markus was under the impression that they were all very devoted to Mr. Kamski. And that he treated them fairly.” There was a sudden edge to Connor’s voice, a quiet strain that Gavin barely noticed. “Officer Chen discovered that one of the Chloes registered in Kamski’s name had left him in December and taken residence in New Jericho. Hank believes that this Chloe might be the Unfaithful that the killer is targeting.”

Trying to jolt himself out of his brief paralysis, Gavin closed his eyes and sighed, blowing his hot breath into the artificially created coolness surrounding his head and torso. “Is there a connection between this Chloe and Natalie? Was she her therapist or somethin’?”

“Officers Chen and Anthony are looking into that right now. Unfortunately, this Chloe moved out of state last month and they are still trying to figure out where she relocated to.”
Frowning thoughtfully at the hodgepodge contents of the Anderson’s fridge – which contained everything from a mound of sickly pink grapefruits to a six-pack of thirium bottles – Gavin grunted. Without the woman’s testimony, all they now had to connect the indecipherable dots were Mrs. Slattery’s records. Providing that she kept any, of course.

Getting any sort of information from a medical or psychiatric facility was like trying to get water from a rock. Obtaining a court order to gain access to a person’s records was always an uphill challenge. Between the Fourth Amendment and that HIPAA shit, the police had to fight tooth and nail to acquire that confidential material. He seriously doubted that any sane judge would sign a search warrant with only their circumstantial theorizing as probably cause, serial killer or no. They’d need something less abstract to get that hallowed signature.

Or maybe they could bypass that obstruction altogether and go right to the source.

As a member of law enforcement, Gavin knew that he should never contemplate any course of action that could be interpreted as improper, never mind illegal. But he wasn’t the typical goody-two-shoes type of detective, fawning over every inch of the rulebook. Providing that it was nothing extreme, dirtying his hands in the pursuit of justice never bothered him, never kept him from getting his nightly slumber. Pretending to hear a noise that wasn’t there so that he could search a suspect’s apartment. Roughing up a perp while shoving the douchebag into the back of a patrol car. Slipping his phone number to Walden’s clerk so that he could get propelled to the front of line to obtain an audience with the old bat. And a date with the clerk, of course, a date where’d they skip the main meal and jump right into desert.

None of that less-than statutory behavior caused him any real discomfort. He did however set a limit; no witness tampering and no shooting anybody without a legitimate cause.

Connor was far more straight-laced than him. Knowledgeable. Proper. Respectable. Everything a cop should be. He would undoubtedly reject Gavin’s forthcoming suggestion out of hand.

But that didn’t mean that Gavin wasn’t going to try.

“You could call your buddy Simon and have him check Natalie’s files for us. I mean, he was her boss, right? He should have access to ‘em.”

Invasion of privacy. Soliciting a citizen to engage in an illicit act. Breaking confidentiality. Those were hardly the only accusatory phrases that popped into Gavin’s mind as his lips moved, but they were more than enough to remind him of what he was proposing. Connor was totally going to bitch slap him across the kitchen, he just knew it.

“I’ve already asked him. He’s going to contact me once he knows something.”

“What?!”

Astounded, Gavin bolted upright, banging his head against the appliance’s ceiling. “Fucking hell,” he spat as he pulled away from the fridge, gingerly patting his now throbbing skull with his unoccupied hand. He turned around, squinting through the pain. “What’d you say?”

“Simon is personally inspecting all of Mrs. Slattery’s files since we don’t know what name that the Chloe used in her sessions. Well, if there were any sessions,” he conceded with a light shrug. “He’s going to check them all and then tell me if there’s a reason or not for us to pursue a search warrant.”

Gavin just gaped at the other man, his mouth slack-jawed. “Here I thought you were gonna lecture
me or somethin’ for darin’ to even mention such a thing.” He chuckled dryly. “And you’ve already fuckin’ gone and done it.”

Perched on the table’s edge, his slipper clad feet dangling languidly above the floor, Connor began whitewashing his hands as they lay in his lap. Adding to that the fact the he was also pinching his lips together, he was the very picture of a vexed soul warring with his conscience. “Hank says that desperate times call for desperate measures,” he said sheepishly. “Under the current circumstances I thought that the committing of a possible felony was justified. Simon wasn’t exactly pleased with my request but once I told him that a friend’s life was in danger, he agreed to help.” A smile, wan and troubled, crept upon his features. “Its not like he’s giving us the records. He’s just going to tell us if its worth our time to investigate further.”

Nodding just once, Gavin abruptly turned away, shoving his now blushing face back towards the open fridge, trying to hide within its pearly depths. And to find something much – MUCH – stronger than a can of Hank’s cheap ass beer. He’d need it.

This was now the second time in less than a week that Connor had perpetrated a criminal act on his behalf. The first instance – his tampering with Gavin’s official work tablet – barely fell under the heading of unlawful. Had that incident somehow been discovered Connor would have likely experienced one of two minor outcomes; at best, his little rewiring would have been categorized as a harmless, if stupid prank. Which would have incurred a verbal reprimand at most. And on the worst end of the spectrum, the android’s disciplinary file would have gained its first professional note of disapproval.

But this newest violation was of an entirely different nature. The theft of private information was no laughing joke, no negligible offense; jailtime was basically mandatory if proven. Connor was skirting around a prison cell. Because of him.

No, for him.

Oh fuckity fuck of fucks, he really needed a drink right now.

Abandoning his desire for something stronger, for something with a higher alcoholic punch, Gavin grabbed one of the cans of Budweiser and set it on the counter, nearly dropping it in the process. His brain was fumbling, reeling from Connor’s words, a runaway freight train no longer confined to its tracks. His heart was overheating in his chest. Something just below his belt had begun to stir, pressing insistently against the front of his jeans.

Hot. How could he be so damned hot when he was practically hanging out inside the refrigerator’s interior? Gavin Reed, the dumbest condiment ever, was about to ignite into flames while he was still plastered on the door’s top shelf, stuck in between the nearly empty container of spicy ketchup and the tube of expired honey mustard. He was so overbearingly hot.

Redirection. He desperately had to readjust his focus or else he was going to land himself in an even hotter pot of water than the one he was already wading waist-deep in, one which resulted in Connor’s extreme mortification and his own grisly death at Hank’s brutal hands.

Flailing for a solution, his mind immediately latched onto the case, the goddamned case. His death sentence and, paradoxically, as of this moment, his unlikely salvation.

“I gotta tell you something Connor,” he mumbled, his voice weak and wobbly.

“What is it, Gavin?”
“Its about that theory of Hank’s.” Shutting the appliance’s door with more force than was strictly necessary, the detective sighed in exhaustion. “Well, it’s about Elijah, really,” he corrected.

Cracking open the can’s seal, Gavin suddenly paused, his dreary eyes descending into a bleary haze. Did he truly believe that his cousin was capable of murder – of Gavin’s own murder? A part of him rebelled at that thought, raging indignantly at such a ludicrous notion; Elijah had never displayed any homicidal tendencies in all the years that they had lived together in their grandparent’s townhouse. Had never once demonstrated a propensity for holding inane grudges, something that Gavin knew he was more prone too. As a bonafide genius, Elijah indeed leaned to a sort of cosmic madness, but nothing similar to their killer’s psychopathology.

But the other part couldn’t forget all the ties. Elijah’s clandestine use of Gavin’s former boytoy. The concealed cell phone. The financial payoffs. Their catastrophic fight following their grandmother’s funeral. His almost unswervingly blind adoration to that cold-hearted bitch of a mentor of his. And, of course, his momentous god complex; the blight which no shrink could ever hope to treat.

Not to mention that girl.

Sloppily draining half of the can into the glass, Gavin growled under his breath, irritated at his own stagnant indecision. He had promised that there would be no more secrets, no more omissions. His life hung precariously in the balance.

“If this missing Chloe was really a patient of Natalie’s, then Hank’s righter than he knows.”

With a quick flick of his wrist, Gavin downed the whole glass in one gulp. The bitter liquid did little to quench his thirst or quell his unease. “The Chloes weren’t designed through some fuckin’ algorithm on human beauty like most of the androids were. They were modeled off a specific person. Created in her likeness.” Deciding to forsake the glass altogether, he snatched the red and white can off of the counter. “Chloe Becher.”

Rather than launching straight into a longwinded explanation, he instead turn his attention to the object clasped in his fist, staring begrudgingly at the thing. “Hank got anythin’ stronger than this? I’m not much of a beer guy.” He waited a second before adding, “I’ll pay him back for it. I just gotta scratch this itch of mine, ya know?”

Connor’s voice was flat. “Second shelf to your left.”

Without even the phantom of regret, Gavin dumped the beer – can and all – into the sink, causing a chorus of rustling dishware. Following the given instructions, he stepped over and began scouring the indicated cupboard.

Jackpot! A mighty grin spread across his stubbled features as he brought the bottle into view. Black Lamb malt scotch whiskey. A pricier brand than his old friend Jack, that was for sure. A heavier alcoholic content as well, enough to make his beverage bestie look like a jug of stale rainwater. If this primo shit was the stuff that the Lieutenant had been binging on over the last couple of years, there was no wonder as to why the man had never been sober. If Gavin could afford something of this caliber, he wouldn’t have ever been caught going to work before noon either.

Pouring the whiskey into the glass, he chuckled darkly. “Eli went to college when he was just eleven. He was a fuckin’ Brainiac, even then, smarter than all of the other brats. They were older and had more money but that didn’t make a damn bit of difference. He was a genius and they weren’t. His big fat brain outfoxed ‘em all.”
“But it also made him very unpopular. The prepubescent snot who thought he was better than everybody else. Some tried to take him down a peg. Some just plain shunned him.” Gavin set the bottle down and sighed, scrunching up his nose in distaste. “There was one person who took an immediate shining to Eli though. The head of the AI Department. Amanda Stern.” Speaking the loathsome woman’s name, even a decade after her death, still made his guts flop about like a bunch of Mexican jumping beans. “It was through Stern that he met one of her graduate students, Chloe Becher.”

Staring straight ahead, he glared at the cream-colored wallpaper through of a veil of pain and disgust. Pain from the memories. Disgust at the ease in which he was betraying his cousin’s trust. “Eli uh, he fell in love with Chloe. The kinda love that a motherless kid gets for an older woman. Puppy love, I guess. Whatever you wanna call it. He was barely a teenager and she was in her late twenties.” His gaze drifted downwards, settling upon the pool of amber liquid waiting to be consumed. “Chloe took Eli under her wing. I don’t know if she did it ‘cause Stern ordered her too or if she was just a good person or what. I think that was just her. She was just … nice. Always nice.”

Like you.

“Chloe, she uh, she saw what Stern saw. Eli’s potential.” Grimacing, he wrapped his fingers around the glass. The whiskey within jiggled, ebbing back and forth, as he slowly raised the cup up to his lips. “But unlike Stern, Chloe saw more than just that. She saw Eli as a person. Not just an achievement or some fuckin’ tool for her obsession. She cared about him, spent time with him, assisted him with his projects. Projects that none of the other students could compete with. Hell, things that his even professors couldn’t get.”

He closed his eyes and took a charitable sip, relishing as the reeking aftertaste of the cheap ale was chased away, overpowered by the much stronger liquor. Hank had a good palate, if a tad expensive. “Then one day she died. Some idiot hopped up on meth hit her with his car, going ninety down main street. She was on her way over to our house for dinner.”

Guilt.

Irrational and antagonistic, guilt bubbled up once more, internally chastising him for breaking the oath that he had made decades ago, the mutual promise to never speak of these old wounds ever again. A bargain made between two tormented children, wanting to forget that which could never be forgiven. “It fucked Eli royally up. Like really screwed with his big ass head. He wasn’t the same after Chloe died. He hardened, became all cold and shit. Threw himself into his schoolwork and his endless theories. Ignored most everythin’ else.”

With a sour scowl, Gavin suddenly emptied the glass, savoring as the dark fluid burnt his throat on its way down. “He designed the first couple of androids in her image. Made sure that the android that aced the Turing Test looked just like her too. Then he surrounded himself with her fucking copies.”

The rancid sting of bile filled his mouth, making him gag. He promptly filled his cup up flush to the rim again, the crystalline tinkling of glass upon glass echoing in the quiet room. “I don’t know how he sees the Chloes. If he really sees ‘em as her or if he just likes that appearance, ya know what I mean?” He didn’t bother to wait for Connor’s response, preferring to trudge along to the cynical conclusion. “I guess what I’m trying to say is this; that if he thinks of them as the Chloe Becher that he once adored, then, well, if one left him, it could have triggered some sort of mental fuckup.”

Opening his weary eyes, he left the rest unsaid.
That the missing Chloe’s departure could have sparked something terrible, something vile and murderous within his cousin’s incomprehensible mind. Could have sparked the killings.

As he finally turned around his vision still lingered elsewhere, contemplating a time when life hadn’t felt so bent, so out of whack. Of him and his cousin in their makeshift laboratory – their grandparent’s cluttered garage – attempting to repair another one of Eli’s haywire contraptions, their clothes coated in oil and some other unnamable, greasy substance. Of Chloe smiling brightly at Elijah as he diligently pawed at the chalkboard, tiny white marks in some mathematical lingo covering the greenery from top to bottom. Of their dinners together, the table engulfed in more food than any army – never mind the five of them – could ever hope to dent.

The world had seemed so simple then; so straightforward and manageable. Not untroubled by any means; his childhood scars had never fully healed, his nightly terrors had never completely faded. Yet living had been bearable, with Elijah by his side and his grandparents watching over them both.

For the first time in what felt like ages, Connor spoke again, his voice quiet and thoughtful, as if in perfect harmony with the house’s peaceful slumber.

“Can I ask you a personal question, Gavin?”

“Yeah, why the hell not?” He laughed. “You already know everything ’bout me.”

“What did you think of Amanda Stern?”

Out of all the trillion nagging questions that he had expected, the one that left Connor’s lips had not even crossed his mind, had not even registered on his Richter scale. He had assumed that the other man was just going to drill him for information concerning his cousin, about the gritty little details of their shared teenage years. About the first predecessors of the androids maybe – the true prototypes that he and Elijah had welded together out of scrap metal and aluminum rods. Maybe something about Gavin himself; his favorite brand of drink, perhaps. Or the origin of one of his many facial scars.

But the last thing he had anticipated was a query into the woman who Gavin held solely responsible for Elijah’s warped personality, for the vast bitterness that kept them apart.

An involuntary spasm overtook his face, tearing at the very fabric of his exhaustion, giving birth to a pitiless sneer that even Tina would have recoiled from. He was angry, no, he was …

… fucking tired of waiting. Fucking scared and angry, fucking confused and hurt. He was going to ring Elijah’s scrawny little neck the moment that he emerged from beyond those pristinely clean doors, the doors that led to his spacious office. Hiss and froth at the mouth too, for good measure. His older cousin had earned more than an earful from him. Gavin was going to vent mercilessly at him on the entire way over to the hospital.

Exhaling, he vainly attempted to control his erratic breathing, tried to diminish the maelstrom of emotions that were threatening to overpower his threadbare civility. “How much longer is he gonna be? Got any clue?”

For nearly half an hour he had waited patiently – as patiently as he could be under the current circumstances – either sitting restlessly or pacing frantically in the official waiting room of Cyberlife’s CEO. The area itself was the very model of the convergence of corporate efficiency and business elegance; everything was expensive, spotless, and offensively modern. The seats were triangular white pyramids, deceptively comfortable regardless of their appearance. The primitive
artwork hanging on the walls looked as though a bunch of third graders had crafted them; just white sheets with splashes of color splattered haphazardly here and there. Blotchy bullshit. Holographic plants shot out of the floor at perfectly positioned intervals, their semi-translucent images eerie to the eye.

He barely noticed his grotesquely formal surroundings, however. His vision kept ping-ponging between the phone grasped in his clammy hands, the doors on the far side of the room, and the creepy ass machine watching him from its desk, its artificial sight observing his every move.

The damn thing made his skin itch. He hated how Elijah had chosen all his secretarial androids to look exactly like Chloe. Nearly physically identical to her, right down to the way she once wore her long blond hair, wrapped together with a scrunchie and draped over her shoulder, its tail slung over her shirt. “He should be ready to see you any time now, sir,” it replied with a smile.

With Chloe’s smile.

Cringing, Gavin turned away from the android, trying to disregard the pleasant expression it was shooting in his direction. The uncanny piece of plastic and its human-like responses made his stomach churn, made him want to puke up his meager breakfast.

He leaned back in the chair, the hand not holding his cell performing a tense dance on his jean’s legs, scratching nervously at the hard material. He still couldn’t believe that Elijah hadn’t answered even a single one of the texts, one of the many that he had fired off over the last six hours.

Sure, his cousin had grown more distant as his company had begun to flourish, skyrocketing into fame and wealth, but this was fundamentally different. Elijah wasn’t merely ignoring one of Gavin’s late night, booze-fueled rantings.

This was an emergency.

Growling, he glanced down at his phone’s clock. **7:32 pm.** He had now been waiting for over fifty minutes. Waiting for his goddamn cousin to get his head out of his ass and into the car.

His patience had long been bled dry.

Bolting upright, he stomped over the receptionist’s desk. “What in the fuck is the holdup? He needs to get down here right fuckin’ now. You understand me?”

The plastic prick wearing Chloe’s face blinked, its LED flashing an alarmed red at his hostile tone. “I’m sure it won’t be long now, sir. You must remember, he is a very busy man.”

“Busy?!? How the fuck can he be busy at a time like this?”

The android’s mouth started to open, revealing its perfectly false teeth, but a third voice abruptly entered the conversation, cutting out whatever the machine had been planning to parrot.

“My cousin is running a multibillion-dollar company that is revolutionizing the world as we speak. He is always busy, by virtue of his position.”

Spinning around, Gavin’s face contorted into an unstoppable scowl. Standing just outside the doorway that led to the CEO’s chamber was none other than the ball-busting workaholic herself, Amanda Stern; his cousin’s former professor and mentor.

As well as Cyberlife’s iron-fisted Chief Scientific Officer.
Short and thin, the ebony-skinned woman regarded him with a mixture of feigned politeness and barely masked displeasure. He was never a welcome sight in her eyes, those dark and ponderous pits that surveyed the world – no, her world – with an ever-present measure of contempt. She graded all of whom were unfortunate enough to cross her path, pupils and non-students alike, ranking them with her exacting standards. Only a select few were ever marked highly, and Gavin certainly wasn’t qualified to be included in that esteemed class.

Her face flickered, morphing into a far more indulgent demeanor, the one that he associated with her teaching exercises, the disguise that she used to charm her pupils and fellow faculty members. Her voice took on a softer vibe as she spoke next; as if her steely words were covered in silk. “Gavin, it is so good to see you again. Even under these distressing circumstances.”

Then she smiled; a graceful and stately expression that held very little real warmth. Like a reptile grinning at a fly perched dangerously on a leaf above. Still standing attentively behind its desk, the receptionist’s placidly artificial countenance displayed far more human compassion than she could. “I am so sorry to hear about your grandmother.”

Flinching, Gavin’s scowl faltered into a sickly visage, a manifestation of the grief that was shredding his insides apart.

Less than a year ago he and Elijah had been forced to bury their grandfather, interring him in the family plot. Soon it would be their grandmother’s turn to lay by her husband once more.

The doctors had been vague and noncommittal in their wispy diagnosis of her condition, hiding behind their unpronounceable medical jargon like a shield. Gavin didn’t really care; he had taken one look at her and seen the truth; that she was dying. Not long for this world. He didn’t even bother to listen to the pig-nosed attendant’s explanation of events. She had fallen and something within had been ruptured, something vital. Even a stupid beat cop like him could see that.

Although ailing and doped up, the Kamski family matriarch had been lucid enough to ask him for one final favor; to retrieve Elijah from his tower so that she could see them both again for once last time. So that she could say her goodbyes to the boys that she loved, the grandsons that she had raised.

“Where the hell is Eli?”

One well-manicured eyebrow trembled, nearly rising at his combative tone. “There has been a misunderstanding, I fear. He is not here. He is in Brussels.”

For one incoherent moment, his brain could only think of the inedible vegetable, slathered in an oozing puddle of vinegar. “What? He’s what?”

“He is in Belgium,” the statuesque woman replied firmly. “He is negotiating a deal with our European allies over our drilling rights in the North Sea. A large quantity of thirium deposits have just recently been discovered there and gaining access to those deposits is of the utmost importance to Cyberlife’s continued success.”

Jaw dropping, Gavin just stared blankly ahead, trying to comprehend the deluge of incomprehensible words that had just been flung at him. Elijah had left the country on a oversees trip and neglected to mention it to him. Their grandmother lay dying in a hospital bed and his cousin wasn’t even in the damn country! Not even on the same continent! What the fuck was he playing at?!

Stern’s voice penetrated the fog clouding his mind. “The conference will be over in three days.
Elijah is scheduled to return then. I am sure he will make visiting your grandmother a priority once he is back in the city.”

A florid crimson began gnawing at the edges of his vision, obscuring the periphery of his sight, maligning the scenery around him. His grandmother was on her last leg, dearly holding onto what remained of her life, hoping to see her perpetually unavailable grandson. Elijah was ignoring his messages, galivanting around the Belgian countryside, probably with a glass of wine and plate of waffles. And to top it off, the grandest prick of them all, the illustrious Professor Stern, was standing only a few feet away from his being, sneering behind her smile, patronizing him with her every breath.

“Fuck that,” he growled. “Grams ain’t got three days to wait. You tell Elijah to get his sorry ass back here now, and I mean,” he imbued each of the following words with as much menace as he could, “right. Fuckin’. Now.”

“That will not be happening.” Clearly unruffled, the maturely beautiful woman merely glared at him, her slanted eyes full of something nasty, something cruel and wholly conceited. “Elijah and I understand the bigger picture here, Gavin. The picture that you fail to see.” Her considerable lips puckered momentarily, a minute flutter. “Cyberlife has changed the very foundations of our world.”

Waving one bejeweled hand towards the plastic secretary, Stern continued unabated, “androids will be the defining creation of this century, the technological advancement that will refashion the labor force not only in our own country, but across the globe. Soon all of humanity will benefit from this marvel, from this miracle of science and human ingenuity.”

Grinning as though all the credit was due to her – and to her alone – she glanced back at him. “And I will not tolerate any frivolous distractions on your part anymore. Cyberlife cannot afford it.” Her voice hardened as the silk was torn away, revealing the cold steel beneath. “Elijah can no longer waste his time on you, Gavin. The future demands his attention. The future of his company and the future of world. He has great things still to do, and he cannot do them with you pestering him.”

His teeth bared, Gavin stepped forward, a suitably vulgar reply on the tip of his tongue, ready to be unleashed. “What the fu –.”

Heavy hands suddenly clamped down on his shoulders, diverting his response. His head swiveled angrily from side to side, and he glared at the armed security guards that were preventing his forward motion. One of the grunts had actually drawn his weapon, the barrel trained on Gavin’s midsection.

“I think it’s time you left.”

Seriously considering the option of punching the satisfied expression off of Stern’s face – and wondering if getting shot would be worth it – he snarled. “You are a …”

“… bitch. Stern was a fuckin’ bitch.”

Nothing like you.

Tossing back the rest of his drink, Gavin’s vision swam. Whether from his overindulgence of alcohol or from his general state of exhaustion, he did not know. What he did know was that he was beginning to feel drained once again, unbelievably feeble, as if he had just suffered yet another major panic attack. As if his already haggard body was fending off another invisible assault, an
onslaught from the darkness of his past.

Mik.

Chloe.

Elijah.

Stern.

At this contentious rate he was literally going to lose his mind. Maybe he’d end in one of the same institutions that his mother had once visited. If he was unlucky.

Suppressing the desire to laugh, to howl his insanity away, he set his glass down onto the counter, nearly dropping it into the sink by mistake.

Without uttering even one more word, Gavin swept out of the room, heading for the stairs.

Connor watched him go, his yellow LED blinking like a broken streetlight.

Chapter End Notes

Fallout ...

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