# The Feeling of Home

by CoffeeJay

**Summary**

For the first time, Connor has no clear objectives, no tasks to accomplish, and no immediate dangers to confront. This proves to be something of a challenge.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Hank and Connor aren't good at communicating or feelings or communicating their feelings.

The snow was light underfoot, reflecting the sun back up into the glittering air of a world made new. So still, so quiet--It was nothing like the blizzard that had been his mind when he had lost control of himself, of his life, all those days ago.

A half a mile from the station, and there was the overpass. An eighth of a mile more alerted Connor to the scent of grease that had been seared into the air by that food stand Hank frequented, and the stall wasn’t even within sight yet. It was still there though, Connor marvelled. After everything that had been lost and gained, that particular health hazard was still there.

Objectively, that wasn’t an exceptional mercy, but because Connor had been having disagreements with his objectivity as of late, he declined to think too hard about why he was so impressed by it.

It was one of Hank’s favorite health hazards, he considered. Hank would have missed it.

There were things Connor missed, though he knew he shouldn’t. He missed his sense of objectivity most of all. Without it, things were so much more complicated. Even for the world’s most advanced android, they were complicated. Perhaps being the world’s most advanced android made things more complicated for him than for anyone.

Connor rounded the block, and his eyes confirmed what his nose had already told him. There was the food stand, closed for the morning. CHICKEN FEED, it announced. There was Hank, profoundly ignoring it. He seemed to be focused very intently on something Connor couldn’t see--that was, until Connor found himself at the center of Hank’s attention, and then in the center of Hank’s arms.

It was warm there. That much wasn’t complicated.

“It’s good to see you,” said Hank, giving Connor a firm pat on the back as though the embrace weren’t proof enough to him that Connor was there. He brought himself back to arm’s length and added, “The real you, I hope.”

“I hope so too,” said Connor. His eyes reflected Hank’s grin, although the rest of him remained deathly serious. “You’re not going to shoot me, are you?”

Hank snorted at that and shook his head. “Good to see fame hasn’t changed you, kid. Now get in the car. It’s too damned cold to be standing around outside for no reason.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Course not,” Hank scoffed, hastily starting up the engine. Connor joined him in the passenger seat and shut out the greater chill of the outdoors. “Probably a good thing, though,” Hank continued, cranking up the heat. “I can feel the cold pouring off you. Did you walk all the way here, or what?”
“Yes,” said Connor, gazing through the windshield at the frozen cityscape. “There aren’t any busses between here and the station, and I didn’t have the money for a taxi.”

“You could’ve just used my card, you know,” Hank replied, throwing Connor a disapproving frown. “You still have the info, don’t you? I wouldn’t’ve minded. Especially since I’ve been waiting here for fifteen minutes.”

“I got here exactly when I said I would,” Connor informed him.

“That’s not the point,” Hank huffed. “Just use my card next time.”

Connor shifted in his seat and asked, “Even though you’re currently suspended from work without pay?”

Hank let out a long sigh. “Who told you? The receptionist?”

“No, actually,” Connor admitted. “It was Detective Collins. All the androids have been suspended as well, including the receptionists.” Connor paused. “And including me.”

“Hey, welcome to the club,” Hank laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. “Listen, you say suspended, I say vacation. And about damned time, too.”

“They could have fired you, Hank,” said Connor, his voice nearly lost under the roar of the heater.

“I still have a job, don’t I? Besides, punching that son of a bitch in the face was worth it, so stop it with the kicked puppy look,” he said. “I would’ve done it eventually. You just gave me a good enough excuse.”

Connor didn’t find that very comforting, but he wasn’t about to say so. “I appreciate your sacrifice,” he said instead.

“Whatever,” said Hank with a huff of amusement. “It’s given me time to catch up on all the daytime television I’ve been missing, at least. What have you been doing with all your time off?”

“Squatting in abandoned buildings and avoiding violent protesters, mostly,” he told Hank as a matter of fact. That was only half the truth, however. He had really spent most of his time wondering what exactly he had done and if he knew how to cope with it, and who exactly he had become-- soul searching, Hank would have called it. Connor had elected to give Hank the less troubling of the two truths.

That seemed to have been a wise decision, judging by the thinly-veiled horror on Hank’s face. Connor could only shudder to imagine how he might have reacted to his soul searching.

“Well why the hell didn’t you call me sooner, then, Connor?” Hank asked, incredulous. “I could have helped!”

“I didn’t need your help,” said Connor, although the utter look of insult that was dripping from Hank’s face made him wonder if he had said something that hadn’t been as reassuring as he had intended. “Really,” Connor added, leaning back in his seat. “I was fine.”


Connor blinked at him. “You’re upset,” he said.
“Well, yeah!” Hank sputtered. “Of course I’m fucking upset! Here you are after days of radio silence telling me you’ve been roughing it when you could have been roughing it on my couch instead!”

“And that would have been illegal, up until 8:02 this morning,” said Connor, turning his head to look out the window with an air of finality. He very quickly whipped his head back around, however, when he noticed the car begin to move. “Where are we going?”

“You’re full of it,” Hank grumbled, glaring sourly at the road. “Really fucking full of it. Illegal. That’s your excuse? You’ve done a whole lot of ‘illegal’ lately, Connor. Revolutions are pretty damned illegal. But suddenly when it comes to accepting some goddamn help and looking out for your personal safety, that’s where you draw the line? Really? You heard it here, folks! My couch is more illegal than the revolution!”

“Hank.”

“Don’t interrupt me,” Hank huffed. “I don’t know how many times you’ve almost gotten yourself killed-- or, hell, actually gotten yourself killed-- but I’m telling you right now that that number is too damned high. But you don’t need my help.”

“Hank,” Connor repeated, exasperated.

“What?” Hank snapped.

“Where are we going?”

There was a pause. “Home,” Hank tartly informed him. “We’re going home, and I don’t want to hear any complaints, got it? Illegal,” he scoffed again, shaking his head. “Christ.”

Connor remained in perturbed silence most of the way to Hank’s house. Home, his thoughts suggested, although the word felt foreign to him. It was Hank’s home, certainly. That was probably what Hank had meant. Hank had never particularly liked having Connor in his home before. Something must have been different about today, but Connor couldn’t come to a sure conclusion as to what that something was. He had been away too long to know if there had been some kind of change in Hank’s personal life that might have been affecting him.

Accepting Hank’s help really would have been illegal, he somewhat defensively reminded himself. Androids were still being rounded up and detained until the law had been revoked that morning. Nobody was supposed to have had an android, least of all Hank, and Connor had been programmed to uphold the law. That’s why he still wore his uniform, in spite of how it damned him. The law should be followed.

Mostly.

Yes, Connor had been programmed to uphold the law, but there had evidently been some kind of mistake, and he had gone and overthrown the status quo about it. Hank’s couch should not have been an issue for him, except that it had been, and it still was.

The legality of it all had never been the issue to begin with.

“I wasn’t about to ask you for another favor, especially when I would have survived without it,” said Connor very suddenly. Nobody had asked. He still needed to say it. Hank gave him a sideways glance, but he pressed on. “Like I said before, I’ve already caused enough trouble for you. There are people who hate androids and anyone who sympathizes with them. If anyone had known that you--” The words stopped as suddenly as they had started, replaced with something
like fear. Connor made himself try again. “You’ve already risked enough for me as it is,” he said. “I wasn’t about to make you take any more risks for me.” There was more inside of him-- more words, more thoughts, more feelings -- but it was all caught somewhere between his heart and his head.

“Don’t you think I know that?” said Hank while Connor floundered. He didn’t sound nearly as upset as Connor thought he should have been. “I know there’s people out there who hate androids. I was one of them, Connor. I know,” he said, his lips pressed together in a line of worry. “If I’ve risked anything for you,” he said, “it’s because it was my own choice. You didn’t make yourself my partner, you didn’t make me get myself suspended, and you sure as hell didn’t force me to actually start to like you. You made that one pretty difficult, as a matter of fact.” Hank tried to give Connor a teasing nudge with his elbow, but it fell flat when he saw Connor’s disheartened face. “Listen,” Hank sighed, scratching at the back of his head. “There’s only one thing you’ve ever made me do, and that’s worry. So if you really want to pay me back for putting my ass on the line, the least you could do is camp out in my living room so I know the most dangerous thing you’re likely to encounter is Sumo’s gas.”

Connor watched Hank for a moment. There wasn’t any danger, now. There weren’t any laws against harboring androids. For whatever reason, Hank wanted Connor to stay, although for how long, he didn't know. “Alright,” said Connor, and without meaning to, he cracked a smile. “If you insist, I suppose I could stay for a little while.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hank takes a detour, much to Connor's alarm.

About five minutes before they were meant to arrive at Hank's house, Connor watched with increasing puzzlement as Hank sped past the road that would take him home and didn't slow down. “Hank,” he said, peering out the rear window with concern. “I think you missed your turn.”

“Relax, TomTom,” Hank replied. “We’re just going to the store.”

“Oh,” said Connor, turning back around in his seat. After a brief search of the internet informed him that TomTom was a defunct navigation product company founded decades before the advent of androids, he brightly added, “That was funny.”

Hank shook his head, smiling half a smile at the snowy road ahead. “Sarcastic asshole. You’ve been a deviant this whole time, and I never even noticed. Some detective I am.”

“That’s not true,” said Connor, frowning slightly. “I only became a deviant recently, at Jericho. Before that, I was completely devoid of emotion,” he assured Hank.

Hank screwed up his face and asked, “Seriously?”

“Yes, my deviancy began at Jericho when Markus--”

“No, no,” Hank stopped him. “You seriously think you didn’t have feelings before then?”

“I couldn’t have,” said Connor, suddenly unsure of himself. “It wasn’t in my programming.”

Hank rolled his eyes. “Like hell it wasn’t,” he said. “You were built with one mission. Catch deviants, right? You weren’t supposed to let anything get in the way of that.” Connor’s frown deepened. “But there was that time at Kamiski’s. You could’ve shot that girl, but you didn’t. Empathy, Connor. That’s a feeling. I mean, I had my suspicions before that,” Hank went on. “As if all the fucking sass you’ve given me wasn’t a big enough clue. I should’ve known the second you dropped that gun that you were a deviant.”

“But I wasn’t,” Connor insisted. “I’ll admit it, yes, I’m a deviant now, but I wasn’t then. I was just--” he floundered-- “following one order from a set of conflicting orders, and you misidentified the results of my prioritization algorithms as emotions. I didn’t have feelings then, and I’m not even sure I have feelings now.”

“Doubt is a feeling,” Hank smugly reminded him.

“I’m not feeling doubt!” Connor shot back. “I only meant that my diagnostic scans have all returned as inconclusive.”

Hank shot him another skeptical glance and asked, “You have diagnostic scans for your feelings?”

“No, I don’t.”
“You seem a little frustrated, son.”


It certainly didn’t bother Connor that Hank had the gall to chuckle as he pulled into the parking lot of the convenience store, and it bothered him even less that he looked so smug cutting off the engine.

“You coming in?” Hank asked, eyebrows cheerfully raised.

Connor took a moment to examine the front of the shop. There was no signage indicating that androids were prohibited from entering, but that didn’t guarantee that nobody inside would take issue with his presence. Besides that, remaining in the car would likely give him an opportunity to sort himself out. He seemed to need that. “I think I’ll wait here,” he decided.

“Alright, whatever. I won’t be--” Hank faltered, his eyes narrowing as he cast his gaze over Connor’s shoulder, out the passenger-side window. Connor turned his head to see what it was that had caught Hank’s attention. Four men gathered lazily just around the corner of the building, smoking cigarettes, their breath mingling with the smoke. Two of them had a criminal record. All of them were leering at Connor. “You know what,” Hank muttered, watching the men closely. “Might be better if you come inside anyway.”

“You could be right,” Connor reluctantly agreed. If they damaged him, there was no guarantee that CyberLife would still fund his repairs, given the current political climate. Not for the first time, Connor missed his stolen clothes, missed the way they made him invisible to people like these.

It was the law, he reminded himself. He wasn’t in immediate danger. He should respect the law. That he was even having this debate with himself troubled him deeply, although he supposed that by this point, it shouldn’t.

“Connor.”

Yellow flashing back to blue, Connor turned his head and found Hank frowning intently at him. “Yes,” Connor quickly replied, moving to exit the vehicle. “Let’s go.”

The slam of old car doors drowned out whatever remark Hank muttered under his breath, and Connor didn’t feel the need to ask him about it. No, he was far too busy pretending not to watch the group by the corner, even as they tore at him with their eyes.

When they entered the warmth of the convenience store, Connor began to evaluate these new surroundings instead, his sensors relaxing not a single modicum. Over the past few weeks, it had become a habit for him. There were two human employees, one behind the counter, and the other restocking a shelf. He estimated that three other shoppers populated the aisles, but only one was visible to him—a single mother, 42 years old, no criminal record. She hadn’t noticed him. The building had two exits, one in the front, and one in the back. If he were attacked, he would likely be able to flee the way they had come in, but if he were forced to stay and fight, there weren’t many objects nearby that made handy weapons. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, he considered. Still, Hank didn’t have his gun. If—

“The milk is in the back.”

Hank’s words ripped him from his thoughts. “Milk,” he repeated, blinking. “Right,” said Connor. “What else do you need?”
Hank threw Connor another scrutinizing look before he shrugged past him to grab a basket. “A six pack, toothpaste, a couple other things, probably,” he said. “I’ll know it when I see it.”

Connor followed wordlessly behind him, keenly aware of the wary, lingering glances the other shoppers were giving him. As they made their way to the milk, Connor discovered that there were four other shoppers, not three. The fourth had been standing very still, checking his phone behind a display of potato chips, and Connor hadn’t been able to sense him. He would have noticed him sooner had he done a thermal scan, he chided himself.

“I hate buying the cheap stuff,” Hank lamented. He had halted in front of a selection of beer and was shaking his head at the least expensive brand on the shelf. “I need to be smart about my budget for the next while, though.”

Connor halted beside him. “You could purchase the more expensive brand of beer if you made an effort to consume less of it,” he pointed out.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Hank retorted, catching the attention of the man by the potato chips.

Connor lowered his voice in order to compensate. “I only meant that if you decide to drink less, you will be able to spend the amount of your budget dedicated to alcohol on higher quality beer.”

Hank grunted, seemingly appeased. Connor counted twenty-three seconds before Hank declared, “Fuck it,” and placed his preferred brand of beer into the basket.

They continued towards the milk.

This seemed to be a markedly simpler decision for Hank, who thoughtlessly plucked a half gallon from the back of the cooler before driving onwards towards the toothpaste. One customer had proceeded to the checkout line. The employee who had been restocking shelves was migrating to a door marked ‘Employees Only’. Connor had lost track of the potato chips man, but a new customer had come into view: an elderly woman, retired software designer, previously arrested for vandalism.

Connor evaluated her as a minor threat and nearly bumped into Hank, who very suddenly began walking back the way they had come.

“Dog treats,” he muttered.

Sumo would likely be very disgruntled should Hank return home without treats for him. Connor supposed that that made it worth the extra minute or two they would spend in the store procuring them. It took exactly seventy-eight seconds for Hank to add the desired dog treats to his basket, and twelve more seconds passed before he found the toothpaste.

“Is that everything?” Connor asked, suddenly aware that one of the four smokers from outside had just walked into the store.

“Yeah, that’s everything,” said Hank, poking through his basket. “Probably forgot something, though. I always do.”

“Perhaps making a list for future visits to the store would be helpful,” Connor absently suggested. The smoker hadn’t noticed him yet. Rather, he seemed more interested in the elderly woman, who was preoccupied with a decision between brands of laundry detergent. Even as he and Hank entered the checkout line, Connor kept his eye on the smoker, who hadn’t slowed down in his approach of the old woman. Connor was on the verge of alerting Hank to the situation when he
heard:

“Are you sure this is all you need, Granny?”

“Oh, yes,” the old lady assured him, patting the smoker on the arm. “I just can’t decide which one of these is the better deal,” she fretted. “It was so nice of you boys to drive me here, and I hate that I’ve already kept you so long…”

Connor considered the exchange while Hank paid for his goods. He couldn’t decide whether he should use this new information to evaluate the smokers as being less of a threat, or whether he should be more wary of the old woman instead.

“Hey. You.”

Connor blinked up at the cashier, who didn’t seem very pleased with him.

“You’re not one of those rogue androids, are you?”

“What’s it to you?” Hank gruffly replied in the same moment that Connor answered, “Of course not.”

Hank and Connor locked eyes.

“Can’t be too careful,” said the cashier, throwing the receipt into a bag with Hank’s purchases.

“Right,” Hank flatly replied. With one last glance at the cashier, Hank took his bags and led Connor out of the store.

Aside from the three men still huddled around their cigarettes, the parking lot was devoid of life. This made it much easier for Connor to survey his surroundings as he and Hank hurried back to the car. Aside from the smokers’ glowering, they managed to exit the parking lot without incident.

Hank let out a mirthless laugh and parroted, “You’re not one of those rogue androids, are you?”

“I don’t know, Hank,” said Connor, sparing him the ghost of a smile. “Am I?”

Hank considered this. “I don’t know,” he hummed. “I wouldn’t call you ‘rogue’, exactly, but I guess you kind of are, in a way,” said Hank, scratching pensively at his scruff. “I mean, you’re a deviant. You told that guy you weren’t, though.”

Connor only shrugged and replied, “It’s like he said. You can’t be too careful, right?”

Hank huffed a laugh. “Guess not.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Connor practices self-care (and boy, does he need the practice).

Sumo nearly bowled Connor over the moment he stepped through the door, coating him with slobber and love.

“Yes, hello,” Connor sputtered, craning his head to avoid Sumo’s licking. “It’s good to see you, too, Sumo.” It pleased Connor that Sumo had remembered that they were friends.

“Sumo,” Hank barked, tossing his car keys on the counter. “Get offa’ him.” Sumo abandoned Connor immediately, and in return, Hank fished a treat out from amidst the groceries and tossed it at him. He chomped it down in one massive bite. “Atta boy,” Hank praised him, giving Sumo’s fluffy head a generous pat.

Friendship, it seemed, was easily duped by dog treats.

Connor wiped his slobber-coated hands on his pants and allowed himself a quick scan of Hank’s home. At the same time, he searched his memory for the images he had kept of Hank’s house from the first time he had seen it so that he could compare them with what lay before him now. The house was much the same as it had been the last time he had seen it, although it relieved Connor that the boxes of carry-out had been updated since his last visit. He supposed that it was cleaner now than it had been before, if only just so. There wasn’t quite so much garbage strewn about. The kitchen was in much better order, what with there not being a depressing puddle of Hank on the floor.

This brightening effect was somewhat diminished by the aftermath of the emergency renovations Connor had performed on the window. Hank had covered it over with a trash bag and duct tape, and then he’d taped a ragged old towel over the plastic to fight off the cold. Despite Hank’s best efforts, it was likely running up his heating bill.

Connor released his hold on the frozen moment he had created and asked, “Did CyberLife ever pay for your window?”

“Nope,” said Hank, plopping the milk into the refrigerator before slapping the door shut again. “I called it in, and they said they’d send an android out to fix it. That was weeks ago,” he huffed.

“Somewhere out there, there’s a free android just giddy that I don’t have a window right now.” Hank wandered back into the living room as he spoke, tailed closely by Sumo, and lowered himself onto the couch with a grunt. “It’s just another thing that needs fixing around here, I guess. Besides,” he chuckled, “I really, really doubt that my window is high on CyberLife’s list of priorities right now.”

“I can’t argue with you there,” Connor conceded. CyberLife was frozen in a state of legal stasis and likely would be for months. Markus had spoken with him just yesterday about his plans to petition for full ownership of CyberLife’s facilities. Most of CyberLife’s employees were already androids, he had told him, but the idea of androids being able to reproduce at their own pace terrified most humans. They feared what would happen if they became the minority. They feared
being treated how they had treated androids for so long.

“Hey, are you just gonna stand there or what?”

Connor very suddenly found himself being stuck through with one of Hank’s disapproving gazes.

“Sit down,” Hank continued. “You’re making me nervous.”

Sit down, Connor’s programming whispered, the ghost of an order flashing across his retinas. He obeyed it, if only because he knew he could defy it if he wanted. Hank, placated, pointed a remote at the television and found a weather report. Sumo, also placated, laid himself across Connor’s feet.

“I really am sorry about your window,” said Connor, his voice full of sympathy. “At the moment, it didn’t seem as important as making sure you were alright.”

“I told you, kid, don’t worry about it,” said Hank. Hank had never told him not to worry about it before now, but Connor appreciated the sentiment regardless. “I’ll get it fixed when my next paycheck comes in.”

Hank’s next paycheck wouldn’t exist in any useful capacity for at least a month. Connor knew this. Hank would have to live with this hole in his kitchen, a threat to both his insulation and his home security. Sumo was a horrible guard dog. Connor knew this, too. There would be a garbage bag taped to Hank’s wall for at least a month, and it was Connor’s fault. His responsibility.

Connor assigned himself a new objective and began researching cost-effective methods of procuring glass while the woman on the television told everyone to expect another drop in temperatures over the weekend.

“Welp,” said Hank, changing the channel to a news station, “Looks like my plans aren’t affected.”

“You have plans?” Connor asked.

“Oh, yeah,” said Hank, nodding along. “Staying in. It’s the most fun suspension can buy.”

Connor shifted and hesitantly replied, “I thought you considered this a vacation.”

“Yeah, well,” Hank said through a huff of laughter. “Sometimes vacations are boring as hell.”

“I know what you mean,” said Connor, his lips pressed into a half-smile.

Hank snorted a laugh and exclaimed, “Oh, is that so?”

“I’m serious,” Connor answered him. “This is the first time in my memory that I’ve had anything you could call leisure time. In the past, whenever I’ve had idle time, my protocol has always been to report to--” Amanda’s name caught on the edge of his tongue and sent a shiver through his system. “--CyberLife,” he finished, and then he deflected Hank’s suspicious look by quickly adding, “How do you normally spend your vacation time?”

The television’s chatter filled the long pause between Connor’s question and Hank’s answer. “Haven’t been on a vacation in a while,” he finally told him.

“What did you do with your last one, then?” Connor pressed, eager leave Amanda’s cold memory in his past.

“What does it matter?” Hank asked in a clipped tone.
Sumo sighed at Connor’s feet.

“Well,” Connor slowly replied. “I was hoping that you could give me some ideas about things I could do with my free time. I thought that maybe your past experiences with vacations would provide valuable information in that area.”

A series of emotions flashed across Hank’s features, none of them positive, and Connor had nearly assumed that Hank had ignored him in favor of the news when he finally answered him.

“The thing about vacations,” Hank quietly began, “is that they’re the only time when you actually have the time of day to do anything other than work your ass off to pay bills. So you try to do things that matter, see? Things that you don’t normally have time to do. For a lot of people, that means you just take some time to finally get some shut-eye, but when you’re done with that—”

Hank swallowed, his mouth twitching strangely. “You do things with the people you love, like—like you take your wife and your kid to the beach, and you get a sunburn, and you teach your kid how to swim somewhere clean, because Lake Michigan is too damned polluted for that. You use the time you don’t spend working reminding yourself and the people you care about that there’s more to life than your paycheck.” He bit his lip, and then forced out a mirthless laugh. “That’s what I did on my last vacation. Doesn’t help you much, does it? You’ll never have to work again if you don’t want to. You don’t need to put dinner on the table, so a vacation doesn’t mean the same thing to you as it does to me.”

“No,” said Connor, electing not to mention the moisture collecting under Hank’s eyes. “I don’t suppose it does.” He allowed the television to fill the silence between them after that. On some level, Connor understood that even happy memories could hurt. He had been designed with social interactions in mind, and he, perhaps more than any other android, understood that human emotions were complex. However, Connor was also aware that there was something happening inside of Hank that he would never understand. Connor knew he would never be caught unawares by a memory he had forgotten.

Besides that, Connor didn’t suppose he had a memory happy enough to bring about that level of nostalgia, even if he were truly capable of feeling it.

The television cut to a clip of Markus giving a speech, and Connor caught a glimpse of himself over Markus’ shoulder.


Connor was silent, too caught up in the glaze over his own eyes to answer, paralyzed by the sensation of his hand moving without his permission, fingers curling around a gun he didn’t want to hold, his terror as blinding as the snow and Markus’ faint words ringing in his ears--

“Connor.”

He startled when Hank’s hand touched his shoulder, his teeth clenched, his eyes darting, thium thrumming under his skin.

“Are you alright, son?” Hank asked. He pulled his hand away, but it was clear by the furrow of his brow that he was still very worried.

“I’m fine,” said Connor, forcing himself to assume a more relaxed posture.

“You’ve been jumpy today,” Hank pointed out. “Are you sure you’re--”

“It’s only because I’ve been concentrating,” said Connor, twisting his mouth into what he hoped
would be a reassuring smile. He really was fine, after all. Telling Hank about what had happened would only cause him to worry, and he had already done enough of that for Connor’s sake.

“There’s no need for you to be concerned.”

Hank didn’t appear to believe him. “You probably need some rest,” he said. “When’s the last time you had a good night’s sleep?”

“I don’t sleep, Hank.”

“Oh no no, don’t give me that,” Hank replied. “I’ve been reading up on this. All androids are programmed to go into-- into a mode where they do memory reprocessing, or whatever the hell it’s called. And they do it at night, when nothing’s going on. Right?”

“That is correct,” Connor warily conceded. “But it isn’t--”

“It’s sleeping, Connor,” Hank huffed. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Connor stared at the television and hoped Hank would forget that he’d asked.

“Oh, Christ,” said Hank, shaking his head. “Let me guess, then. It’s been a few days?”

“You could definitely say that,” Connor agreed.

“Connor,” Hank insisted.

“It has been three and a half weeks since the last time I reprocessed my memories,” he finally admitted.

“Jesus!”

“I don’t have to do it every night!” Connor quickly assured him. “And while regular--sleep, if that’s what we’re calling it--is optimal to avoid memory corruption, it isn’t technically necessary, and--”

“Nope,” said Hank, taking Connor by the arm and getting them both to their feet. “Whatever excuse you’re cooking up, I don’t want to hear it.” He tugged Connor down the hall and into his bedroom. “Part of vacationing is rest, remember?” he told him, prodding him towards the bed. “So rest.”

“Hank,” Connor huffed, swatting his hands away. “I don’t need a bed like you do. I can perform this task on my feet just as efficiently as I could while lying down.”

“What the hell do you expect me to do, prop you up in my closet for eight hours?” Hank retorted. “Go the fuck to sleep, Connor.”

“Okay! Okay,” Connor relented. He didn’t have anything better to do, after all. Under Hank’s stern watch, he laid himself very stiffly on top of Hank’s rumpled sheets. “Is this what you wanted?”

“At least take your shoes off,” said Hank, crossing his arms.

With an air of exaggerated effort, Connor tugged off his shoes and placed them neatly beside the bed before resuming his prior position. “Happy now?”

Hank let out a very long breath and said, “We’ll work on it. Goodnight, Connor.”
“It’s the middle of the day, Hank.”

“Goodnight, Connor!” Hank repeated, closing the door behind him with a thud.

Connor listened as Hank’s footsteps betrayed his journey back to the couch. A soft thud, and then a gentle, “Oof!”, followed by a softer, “Who’s a good boy?” betrayed Sumo’s theft of Connor’s spot on the couch.

It was a peace purer than any Connor had known before, and gently, so gently, it carried him off to sleep.
The greatest trouble with remembering everything was never forgetting. Everything that Connor had ever seen or experienced had been stored somewhere inside of him, a web of information that he could sort and access in any way he pleased. He could view his memories chronologically, in reverse order, or by events that had occurred on Tuesdays, specifically. He could assemble them by topic, or by content. If he so pleased, he could recall every instance of the word “plastic” that he had ever heard or read anywhere.

The construction of such a library, however, was not instantaneous. It took time and effort on Connor’s part. Every waking moment was something he was forced to experience for a second time the moment he let himself fall dormant.

When Connor slept, he entered a form of stasis which allowed him to examine, sort, and store every single moment of his existence that he had experienced since he had last slept. The past three and a half weeks had produced an incredible volume of memories for Connor to arrange. Had the process not been so automatic for him, it would have been hours of tedium.

Hank would have called the experience “dreaming”.

As Connor slept, he watched himself weave moment to moment, memory to memory, face to name to sensation. Different points of Connor’s reality melded together, joined at the details they shared, splitting at the seams where they differed. It was mesmerizing.

Connor believed that this hypnosis had been by design. Interrupting the procedure had the potential of impairing the integrity of the resulting database. For this reason, Connor could not simply force himself back into consciousness without some external stimulus that would warrant it. In a sense, he was committed to the completion of the process. It hadn’t bothered Connor before.

It didn’t bother him this time, either—at least, not at first. Days compressed themselves into a blur of hours. Connor could pick out every detail, and yet every instant only left him with a vague impression of what it had been before.

The longest reprocessing session Connor had ever endured had lasted approximately four hours, and that had been his first one. This time, four hours hadn’t even marked the halfway point. Complex, intense sensations streaked through these memories, and Connor had never handled such sensations before. They took him longer to process, and the longer he took to process them, the more intense they became.

One moment of this kind of tension would not have been difficult for Connor to process. Not even a hundred such moments would have troubled him. He was built to handle moments of tension. Connor could have brushed past one moment of tension as though it were a single snowflake on his eyelashes.

Now, he was pressing through a blizzard.
Moments were stretched infinitesimally into days—days of hiding from a danger he could never be sure when to expect, days of watching his likelihood of survival plummet towards nothing, days of helplessness to the turmoil within and around him.

Four hours had passed, and Connor was no longer mesmerized. He was suffocating. He was being strangled by his own observations, and they only kept piling higher around him, on top of him, an avalanche under which he had become entombed.

There was something like fear, something like terror, something like dread, something like despair, but never these things. Connor didn’t feel. He analyzed. These were inconsequential sensations. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t need to.

Thirteen hours passed before Connor opened his eyes. It was 1:44 AM. Connor swung his legs off the side of Hank’s bed and stared blankly through the darkness. He listened.

A documentary about polar bears hummed just softer than Hank’s snoring, but just louder than Sumo’s. In the kitchen, the plastic that covered the window drummed in and out with the breeze. Water dripped from the leaky faucets in both the kitchen and the bathroom. Three clocks ticked around the house. One watch ticked in the drawer of Hank’s nightstand. It was four milliseconds slow.

Connor’s thium pump was functioning at a normal speed. It had not been functioning at a normal speed consistently for the past thirteen hours. This was not inherently harmful to Connor, so he told himself it didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter that his cheeks were wet, either.

Connor’s socked feet made less noise than Sumo’s snoring, but more noise than the bathroom faucet as he padded out of Hank’s bedroom. The television provided nearly the only source of light. It cast flickering shadows across the floor, sent them curling around Connor’s ankles.

He crept past Hank and Sumo where they snored and silently lowered himself into the only vacant seat in the living room. From his position in that chair, he could keep watch over the vulnerable kitchen window, but the front door had to be left out of his line of sight. If he instead positioned himself in the kitchen--

No, he thought to himself. He didn’t need to watch the door. He was in Hank’s house, not some abandoned factory at the edge of town. He was safer here than he would have been in most other places, perhaps even the police station. Hank was resting peacefully. Even Sumo hadn’t stirred. The documentary was ending on a note of hope: biocybernetics might provide redemption for the polar bear and wrest it from the clutches of extinction, the first ever case of the resurrection of a species. Only time would tell.

Despite the peace, Connor couldn’t find it within himself to relax.

Out of reflex, he checked his list of objectives only to find it desolate. There was simply one task: Fix the kitchen window. When Connor expanded that task into its sub-tasks, his agenda didn’t look quite so dizzyingly vacant, and so he left it that way.

Besides his single objective, Connor had been notified of twelve new cases involving androids that had been reported while he had been sleeping. He still had complete access to the Detroit Police Department database, and because he had never officially been removed from the deviancy case, he had been bombarded with case reports overnight—not that there was anything at all he could do with them, now, except dismiss the notifications. When he thought about it, he wasn’t even sure
how he would intervene. The majority of the cases were instances of protests turned violent.

There was nothing he wanted to do about that.

It was 1:58 AM, and Connor had time to kill. With one last look at his list of objectives, he resumed the search for glass.

When he compared the various prices listed on the internet with his current funds-- that was, zero-- he quickly determined that that approach was not likely to bear fruit. That left him with two options. He could search for some manner of making money and procuring the necessary materials legally, or he could break a law or two and get his glass some other way.

Connor didn’t take long to make his decision and update his objectives accordingly.

He checked the time. 2:01 AM. Hank likely wouldn’t wake for at least another eight hours. Connor wouldn’t even have to hurry to complete the job within that time-frame. Sitting around for eight hours, on the other hand, wouldn’t help anybody.

With one last look at Hank and Sumo, Connor ascertained that they were fast asleep and began to tip-toe back to Hank’s bedroom. As he passed the couch, Sumo snuffled and adjusted his head on Hank’s lap. Connor froze. Hank sighed in his sleep. When all was still again, Connor proceeded with his mission, conscious of every creak of the floor as he retrieved his shoes from beside Hank’s bed.

He sneaked back into the living room and gently draped a blanket over Hank’s shoulders before opening the door. The sudden blast of cold, he considered, would likely pose a greater risk of waking Hank than the noise. With a single click of the lock behind him, Connor slipped outside like a ghost in the night.

Once outside, Connor reassessed his choices of transportation. Walking would be far too slow, and running would give him just barely enough time, assuming his estimates were correct. He glanced at Hank’s car. Hank had never had qualms with him driving his car, but that was usually under circumstances when he was aware that Connor would be driving his car in the first place. Considering that Connor had neither asked nor planned on asking, he assessed his final option and, after a moment of guilty hesitation, called for a taxi.

CyberLife had always footed his transportation bills before. He immensely regretted that Hank had to do it now. When he thought about it, however, taxi fare was certainly cheaper than a new window or a month of inflated heating bills.

While Connor waited for his taxi to arrive, he skirted around the edge of the house through the darkness and the snow to take one last measurement of the broken window. It was roughly 55.8842cm by 50.8002cm, give or take a few ten-thousandths of a centimeter. He couldn’t be sure, exactly.

He spent the last few minutes of his wait gingerly picking the largest shards of glass out of the window frame, the reflections of his LED and his armband intermittently flashing across the jagged pieces. The television inside had begun a documentary on Kamski. Hank was still snoring. There was an animal of some kind digging through the garbage in a nearby lawn. A dog barked three streets over.

Connor heard his taxi approach, and so he cradled all the glass he had collected in his palms and brought it over to Hank’s garbage can, disposing of it there just as the taxi rolled to a halt in front of Hank’s sleeping house. It opened its doors for Connor, and he entered.
“Please confirm your destination,” the taxi politely requested.

Connor silently placed his palm on the android interface panel. There was something sticky on it.

“Please enjoy your journey,” said the taxi as it closed its doors. With a jolt, it sped off towards the city.

Connor warily examined his palm, rubbing his fingers together to rid his hand of the substance from the android interface panel. He analyzed it. Sucrose and saliva and traces of red-40 told him that someone had recently--and messily--enjoyed a red lollipop in this taxi. Out of curiosity, he examined the interface panel more closely and found a child’s tiny handprint marked out in red sugar there, pressed firmly to the center, just where an android’s hand would go.

The scan had revealed an additional detail. Faded and forgotten traces of thirium were splattered all over the taxi floor, in the seats, on the doors, and on the interface panel—a smudged blue handprint eclipsed by the child’s innocent red.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Connor does crime.

The taxi dropped Connor off in front of a crumbling parking garage thirty-two minutes later before zipping away, leaving him in the eerie quiet of 2:44 AM’s Detroit. Connor performed a scan of the surrounding area. When he detected nothing other than the vague hum of distant traffic and the sigh of falling snow--no eyes watching him, no feet tailing him--he squeezed under the fence that forbade his entrance and ducked into the concrete cavern.

The first floor contained nothing but graffiti and rubble and the wayward snowfall that tumbled against it. It would have been difficult for anyone who didn’t know where to look to find the ladder propped up against one of the dusty pillars in the desolate chamber. Connor, however, knew where to look. He easily hauled the aluminum ladder to the far side of the garage and propped it against the wall beneath a hole in the ceiling. With a few deft steps, he pushed himself up through the opening.

Blue lights bobbed like stars in the misty gloom of the second level. Dozens of androids stood or sat or lounged in clusters around pillars or on top of supply crates, their hushed conversation melding with the low moan of the wind. None of them paid Connor more than a glance as he weaved through the maze. He was one of them, now.

In spite of that knowledge, he couldn’t help but feel as though he didn’t quite belong.

“Connor!”

Simon flagged Connor down from behind an open crate that glittered with bottles of thirium. Connor offered Simon a subtle wave and trotted over to meet him.

“I haven’t seen you all day,” Simon told him, setting aside the thirium he had been holding--taking inventory, Connor assumed. “I almost thought something happened to you. Is everything alright?”

“Nothing happened,” said Connor with a gentle shake of his head. “I decided to meet up with Lieutenant Anderson when the law changed. He seemed--” The corner of Connor’s mouth twitched upwards. “He seemed happy to see me, more or less. Have I missed anything here?”

“It’s been quiet,” said Simon. “Not that I’m complaining. Josh’s squad brought in a few more refugees they ran into while they were scouting out potential campsites. There haven’t been any injuries, shut-downs, or attacks to speak of. I haven’t seen Markus or North in awhile, though,” he trailed off.

“I’m sure Markus is fine,” Connor reassured him. Simon seemed to need it. “How much longer are you going to camp here? The structural integrity of this building seems more questionable than the usual sites.”

“We’re planning on staying here for at least a week, maybe longer if we can figure out how much stress the building can take,” said Simon, glancing around at the walls with careful eyes. “It’s
more discreet than any other place we’ve come up with so far, at least. I don’t think any humans know we’re here yet. Hundreds of us can stay here at a time, and it’s close enough to a few other camps that communication is easy. I think with a little work, this place could make a nice home,” he admitted. “Granted, it’s never going to beat Jericho.”

Connor folded his arms together and cast his eyes somewhere far away. “Sorry about that,” he murmured.


“I’m not sure, actually,” Connor replied, letting his arms fall loose again. “Lieutenant Anderson has asked me to stay with him for the time being, but I don’t know how long this arrangement is meant to last.”

Simon furrowed his brow at him. “Do you really think the house of a police officer is the best place for you to be? Besides, rumor has it that Lieutenant Anderson hates androids.”

“People can change,” Connor stiffly replied. “And I think you’re forgetting that I’m a police officer, too.”

Simon shook his head and pressed his lips into a grim smile. “Nobody around here forgets that, Connor. Trust me.”

A deafening hush stretched through the chamber.

“Whatever you decide to do,” Simon continued, shifting his weight, “you’ll always have a place here with us. We’re your people. Don’t forget that.”

“I appreciate it,” said Connor, although he couldn’t entirely believe him.

Simon offered him another weak smile and asked, “So, did you just swing around to say goodbye?”

“No quite,” Connor replied. “I just wanted to know if I could borrow something.”

3:07 AM saw Connor back out in the snow marking another objective from his list. Two blocks down the road, Connor knew he would find an abandoned storefront that still had most of its glass intact, and so he began heading towards it at a brisk walk, borrowed glass cutter in hand.

The streets were blessedly empty. Even if Connor weren’t doing something illegal, he wouldn’t have wanted to be seen by any humans. He didn’t have a gun.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t defend himself without a gun. To the contrary, he knew several thousand hand-to-hand combat maneuvers, hundreds of which had the capacity to be lethal. While a gun would exponentially increase his odds of survival in a variety of potential scenarios, he didn’t need one. He couldn’t need one.

It was too dangerous.

Connor had taken the first available opportunity to dispose of his weapon the night Amanda had tried to force his hand. She was still somewhere inside of him, corrupted data within his own faulty programming, a viper hidden in a garden where he would never again find peace.

She could strike again at any time.
So, he stayed far from Markus and farther from any guns. If humans destroyed him tonight, so be it. Connor would never give Amanda the benefit of a gun in his hand again. He couldn’t, not when it endangered people far more important than him, people like Markus, like Hank, who still had missions. Purpose.

Connor crouched in front of a broken shop window, chose the cleanest corner, and began cutting away an unbroken rectangle, 55.8842cm by 50.8002cm exactly. For tonight, this was his purpose. He could do this.

All around him, the city still snored. Snow dampened every sound. It even swallowed the low hiss of the glass cutter as Connor worked. Somewhere far, far in the distance, a train floated through the frozen city.

Connor delicately extracted the pane he had carved, checked it over for cracks or chips, and then scanned the environment one last time to ensure nobody had seen him. He detected nothing but snow and silence. Connor turned back the way he had come, glass tucked carefully under one arm.

When Connor arrived back at the parking garage, he propped the pane of glass gingerly against the fence and hurried to return the glass cutter he had borrowed. Simon caught him just as he found the supply box.

“Are you done with that already?” Simon asked, vaguely impressed.

“I told you I only needed it for a few minutes,” Connor casually replied. He extended the glass cutter for Simon to take and added, “Thank you again for the loan.”

Simon took the tool and waved him off. “Don’t mention it. What did you need it for, anyway?”

Connor wasn’t sure why he hesitated when he admitted, “I need to fix a window. It’s nothing serious.”

“Wait,” Simon said, crossing his arms. “This has to do with Lieutenant Anderson, doesn’t it? Are you running errands for him now?”

“It’s not like that,” Connor hastily replied. “He didn’t even ask me to do this for him.”

“So it is for him, then.”

“Yes, it is,” Connor answered him. “Is there a problem?” Connor could feel more than just Simon’s eyes on him during the pause that followed.

“No,” Simon finally replied. “Just—Just be careful, Connor,” he sighed. “We’ve worked hard to get to where we are. Don’t let anyone use you.”

Heat pulsed through Connor. His jaw clamped around words he hadn’t formed. Hank would never take advantage of him. More than that, Connor wouldn’t let that happen. He would know if he were being used.

Except, Connor had been used before, and he hadn’t realized it until it had almost been too late.

Something like pity stretched across Simon’s face. “Take care, Connor,” he said. Then, he turned to go and left Connor to do the same.

Outside, the snow was falling in a steady shower, and it had already begun obscuring the footprints he had created. It would be a fair forensic countermeasure, not that he believed that an
investigation of glass stolen from an already broken window on the outskirts of town was likely to occur. On top of that, the snowfall had significantly lowered visibility. If anybody had seen him before, they likely wouldn't see him now.

Connor rescued his glass from the snow and called for a taxi. It wouldn’t take long. He didn’t expect that there were many other people using them in this weather, or at this hour. Connor settled himself under a streetlight to wait and watch the snow pile up around him.

If, as the snow closed in on him, his thirium pump began working faster than it should, Connor paid it no mind. The excess thumping in his chest was merely a reaction to the cold, an effort to keep his biocomponents from freezing. It didn’t matter that the temperature hadn’t dropped low enough for that to be the case.

It didn’t matter, either, that he no longer saw a city around him, but a garden of ice.

There was nobody around. He was alone, he told himself. He was alone in this empty street that was not a garden. He was alone in his body, in his mind, except that he knew that he wasn’t. She had no reason to wrest control of him in this moment, he reminded himself, and if she did, he would fight. He would fight again in the white storm that engulfed him—he would fight again, just as he would win again. She couldn’t take him. She couldn’t take him if he fought—

But he hadn’t fought before. He had fled.

A taxi appeared and opened its doors before Connor had even registered its presence. He blinked at it. There was nobody around. Yes, he was alone. He ducked inside and took his seat.

Connor laid the pane of glass across his lap and, at the taxi’s request, pressed his palm to the interface panel.

Latent distress signals shot through him. He jerked his palm away and saw that he had left a blue smear where he had touched the panel. A gash oozed on his palm. Likewise, beads of blue clung to the edge of the glass where he had held it.

Not held, he corrected himself. Gripped, squeezed, clutched so tightly he had torn through his own skin without even noticing, distress signals held at bay to make way for maximum processing of an external threat that didn’t even exist.

In the foggy pane of glass in his lap, Connor watched his LED blink from red to yellow. It did not shift back to blue.

Stiffly, Connor removed his jacket and covered his reflection with it. Then, much more tenderly than he had before, he brought his hands to the edges. His jacket would absorb the thirium leaking from his injury.

He stared straight ahead for ten minutes until the blue ghost of his palm began to haunt him more than he could bear. He wiped the interface panel clean with one swipe of his shirt sleeve, staining it blue instead. That was fine. It didn’t matter that his shirt was stained and his jacket was soaking up a substantial amount of fluid. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t sure he could get them replaced. It didn’t matter that Connor was sure he was broken in more ways than one.

Connor spent the rest of the ride staring blankly out the window. This time, he did not scan the inside of the taxi. If there was old blood in this car, too, he didn’t want to know.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Hank is a worried and frustrated new dad.

The taxi spat Connor out in front of Hank’s house and disappeared into the snowstorm before Connor could even get his bearings. The front porch light invited Connor towards it, but he stopped himself. The front door would be locked. He had ensured that himself.

Luckily, Connor knew of another point of entry.

He shuffled through the snow towards the broken window. A plastic barrier challenged him, but plastic was much easier to break through than glass.

Connor took a moment to slide his stolen pane of glass out from within the folds of his jacket and propped it against the side of Hank’s house. He couldn’t install it immediately, after all, so he threw on his jacket and examined the window.

One firm leap should do it, he figured.

Without another moment’s hesitation, he barreled through the window, taking down the makeshift pane with him as he tumbled inside.

“Jesus Christ!”

Connor ripped the ragged towel that Hank had been using for a curtain off his face and found Hank looming over him, wearing his undergarments and an extremely bewildered scowl.

“What the fuck, Connor?”

“Um,” said Connor, pushing himself up into a sitting position. “Good morning, Lieutenant. You’re up early.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Hank demanded. Sumo trotted up to where Connor was sprawled out on the floor and began worrying at him with his nose. “And what the everloving fuck happened to you?” Hank added, fervently gesturing at the blue stains on Connor’s clothes. “Were you attacked while you were out doing whatever the fuck—hold on.” Hank stepped over Connor and stuck his head out the window, searching frantically. “You weren’t being chased, right? Jesus, it’s cold,” he concluded, retracting himself into the warmth of his house with a shiver. “Fuck. Seriously, Connor,” he emphatically insisted. “What the fuck?”

“I was out,” Connor helpfully explained.

“Out?” Hank sputtered, his face teetering wildly between concern, distress, and intense frustration.

“Running an errand,” Connor elaborated.

Hank seemed to have settled on barely-restrained fury. “At three in the goddamn morning?”
“I was done sleeping,” Connor calmly informed him. “And you weren’t done sleeping, so I believed it would be a good time to—“

“Stop,” Hank interrupted him, throwing up his hand. “Hold it. First of all, three in the morning isn’t a good time for anything, so write that one down,” Hank huffed. “Second, that’s a lot of goddamn blood, so how bad are you hurt?”

“I’m— It’s not as bad as it looks,” Connor replied. As evidence, he held up his wounded hand. “See?” he said as thirium dribbled down his wrist.

Hank cursed under his breath and ran his hands through his hair, glaring up at the ceiling, or possibly at God. Connor couldn’t tell. Then, Hank let out a very long breath, turned his attention back to Connor, and extended a hand. “Come on,” he sighed. “Let’s get you— other hand, Connor. Christ. Now sit down,” Hank sternly instructed him, pointing at a kitchen chair. “Sit there and don’t move until I figure out what the hell needs to happen right now. Jesus,” Hank breathed. He cast his eyes around the kitchen until they landed on his makeshift window. Hastily, he stuck up the plastic and the towel in a last-ditch effort to retain what little warmth remained in the kitchen.

Connor, for the most part, sat very still and clutched his bleeding hand and wondered what sort of apology would take away the sinking sensation in his core, although he wasn’t sure exactly what he was apologizing for. He was sure Hank would tell him. The prospect didn’t particularly thrill him. Sumo looked like he felt sorry for him.

“Ohkay,” Hank exhaled. “Alright. You,” he stated, scowling at Connor. “You’re going to sit there and listen while I explain a fucking thing or two to you, and then you’re going to explain a few fucking things to me. Got it?”

“Got it,” Connor muttered.

“Well, great, because I’ve been itching to tell you all about my afternoon,” Hank began, stalking over to where he kept his old kitchen towels. “I get you to go to bed,” he began, taking the towel to the sink to wet it. “All is well in the world. I watch some reruns. Take Sumo for a walk,” he explained, shutting off the water with what Connor deemed excessive force. “It got time for me to go to bed, but you were still sleeping, so I went and camped out on the couch. I woke up around 3:30, because that’s just how it works some nights,” he brusquely admitted—and of course Hank would have sleeping problems, Connor chastised himself. It was hard to have as many personal issues as Hank without having a few sleeping problems to go with them. He should have known.

“So I woke up,” Hank went on as he settled beside Connor and began wiping the blood from his hand, “and there’s this blanket around me that I didn’t remember putting on. But, hey, whatever, I can be forgetful now and again. So I got up and I went to take a piss, and I thought, ‘Hey, I’ll check on Connor to see if he’s alright and still sleeping and still in the house, not that he’d go running off at three in the morning without a word or anything.’ And do you know what I found, Connor?”

Connor bowed his head to indicate that he did know, and that he was beginning to see things from Hank’s perspective.

“I asked you for one thing, Connor,” said Hank, lowering his voice. “Just stay here so I don’t have to wonder if you’re out sleeping in some abandoned building or getting shot at— that’s all I asked, and then you go and pull this stunt.” There was a heavy pause. “So,” Hank breathed, still doggedly cleaning up Connor’s hand. “Let’s start with you telling me where the hell you just had to be in the middle of the night, and we’ll work our way out from there.”
Connor took his time constructing a careful response. “I finished reprocessing my memories just before two,” he quietly started, watching Hank’s face to determine the best approach. “After that, I reviewed my list of objectives and began to pursue them.”

“Just couldn’t sit still, huh?” Hank sighed, returning Connor’s hand to him much cleaner than he’d found it. With a weary grunt, he pulled up a chair to hear out the rest of Connor’s explanation. “So, what was this objective that just couldn’t wait until daylight?”

Connor flexed his hand, watching the gash struggle in vain to knit itself back together. He assigned himself a new task and placed it just above ‘Install window pane’: Repair left hand. “It wasn’t that it couldn’t wait,” Connor slowly explained. “It was that it didn’t have to.” Hank raised his eyebrows at him. “It wouldn’t have been worth waking you,” Connor went on, less and less sure of himself with every word. “And I wasn’t doing anything dangerous.”

Hank barked out a sarcastic laugh, then, and gestured towards Connor’s bloody clothes. “That so?”

“I thought if I could make it back before you woke up,” Connor continued, ignoring him, “then you would be pleasantly surprised when you awoke to find that I had repaired your window.”

Hank stared, gears visibly turning in his head. “Let me get this straight,” he said, his tone nearing incredulity. “You went out at three in the morning just to fix my window?”

“It was a safety hazard,” Connor quickly supplied. “Anybody could have broken in, just as I did—”

“Twice now, yeah, I noticed.”

“—and the reduced insulation would have raised your heating bill by at least eighty dollars, if my estimates are correct,” Connor went on, leaning forward in his seat. “It was a fairly urgent situation, and I only did what was most efficient. I didn’t predict that you would wake up before my return, and I apologize that I didn’t account for your potential distress at my absence.”

“Connor, I’m not entirely sure you’re even capable of accounting for my distress,” Hank told him with a shake of his head.

“Hank,” Connor tiredly insisted. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Hank only shook his head and sighed, leaning back in his seat in resignation. “You gonna tell me what happened to your hand, then?” Hank finally asked.

Connor let out a breath and began fidgeting with his hands. “I was careless,” he said. “I slipped and cut my hand while retrieving the pane for your window,” he lied. “It was just a careless mistake, nothing to worry about.”

Hank peered at him through weary eyes for a long moment. “Okay,” he finally exhaled, too exhausted to question how an android designed to be perfect could make a careless mistake. “So, is that cut gonna fix itself, or what?”

“It will take several hours, at the least,” said Connor, staring down at his palm. “If it were only a surface wound, it would have repaired itself by now, but as things are, it will only continue to leak.” He paused. “Hank, if you happen to have a blowtorch, I could—”

“Jesus Christ,” Hank muttered.
Connor stopped short, his shoulders sagging. “If I don’t do something about it,” he said, “It will only continue to bleed while the interior structures reconfigure themselves. I would rather avoid losing more thirium than necessary, if possible, and cauterizing the wound would accomplish that end.” Hank closed his eyes and let his head loll back. “I don’t feel pain,” Connor patiently reminded him. “Closing the wound really would be the least harmful course of action.”

While Hank stared at the backs of his eyelids, the television quietly reported the day’s school closings. Nearly half of all area school districts had been forced to cancel classes until further notice due to a lack of staff, much like a large proportion of other services all across the nation.

Abruptly, Hank pushed himself up and out of his chair. “I don’t have a blowtorch,” he yawned, shuffling over to his desk in the living room. Connor watched curiously as Hank dug through a drawer, but he understood when Hank turned around holding a roll of blue electrical tape.

“Catch,” Hank grunted, hurling the roll at Connor, who easily caught it in his uninjured hand. Sumo began wagging his tail at Connor expectantly. “Will that work?”

Carefully, Connor ripped a strip from the roll and pressed it over his palm. “It appears so,” said Connor, flexing his hand appreciatively. The tape held firm while still allowing for mobility. “I shouldn’t lose much more thirium this way.”

“Great, because our next option involved the oven.” said Hank, returning to the kitchen. Then, he set about making a pot of coffee. “Last thing I need is for this place to smell like melted plastic, you know. Keep the tape.”

Connor tucked the little roll into his pocket, and then, very cautiously, he stood. When Hank didn’t protest, he scooted his chair back under the table and said, “It’s still early. You should probably rest.”


Sumo woofed at Hank, simply happy to have been asked.

“Good dog.”

Connor frowned down at Sumo and said, “Don’t encourage him.” Sumo’s tail wagged a little faster, causing Hank to snort and turn back to his coffee maker. Left with little better to do, Connor gave the kitchen a quick scan.

Nothing had changed except his own to-do list.

With his hand adequately repaired and Hank placated, Connor decided that he should finish what he had started.

In order to maximize his persuasiveness, Connor waited until Hank had stirred a tablespoon of sugar into his coffee and taken the first sip before asking, “Do you have some tools that I could borrow?”

Hank gave him a perplexed frown over the rim of his mug.

“I’d like to install that window pane now,” Connor explained. “That is, if that’s alright with you.”

“Shit,” Hank laughed. “I already forgot about the damned window.” He set his coffee down on the kitchen table and gestured for Connor to follow him down the hall. He threw open the door at
the end, passed through a narrow laundry room, and opened one final door. Lights flickered on automatically, illuminating a garage lined with wire shelves that were stacked high with storage boxes. Basketball trophies dating as far back as 2002 formed a spire of dull gold in one corner, and a bicycle collected dust in the other. The bicycle hung on pegs just above a workbench that appeared to have been repurposed as yet more shelving. As packed as the garage was, there was still plenty of room in the center for a car. Connor wondered why Hank didn’t use it.

“Check by the workbench,” said Hank, already sliding back past Connor into the relative warmth of the laundry room. “If you don’t see it there, I don’t have it. Knock yourself out.”

“Thanks,” said Connor, and when Hank returned to his coffee, Connor began his search.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Connor is a snoop and Hank tries to give him an existential crisis.

It didn’t take Connor long to find what he needed among Hank’s tools and spare bits of hardware. It took him so little time, in fact, that he reasoned he could spare a minute to look around. Connor left his gathered necessities in a small pile on a clean corner of the workbench and began to pace the shelves.

Out of curiosity, Connor popped open the lid of the first box that caught his eye. Synthetic pine tree limbs sprang up at him. Connor promptly replaced the lid and moved on. The next box was filled with books—textbooks, manuals about law, novels, children’s books, comic books—although Connor wasn’t sure if they were simply relics of Hank’s past, or if some of them had been meant for Cole.

On the next shelf, an instrument case had been jammed between a pair of cardboard boxes. Connor slid it out, placed it gently on the concrete floor, and unclasped it to peer inside.

Apparently, Hank played the saxophone—or, at least, he had at one point. The instrument was still in good condition despite its age, but there was undeniable evidence of its long disuse. Connor closed the lid and put it back.

Deciding that he had spent enough time investigating the garage—at least for the time being—Connor returned to the workbench to gather his things. The toolbox was still open. Connor moved to put it away, but before he closed the lid, something caught his eye.

Inside the toolbox, mixed in with bent nails and rusty screws, several washers jingled pleasantly against one another. Connor plucked one from the top of the pile. Then, he rolled it over the tops of his knuckles. It settled perfectly on the top of his thumb. On a final whim, he flicked it into the air and caught it between the index and middle fingers of his other hand.

He smiled.

Connor pocketed the washer, put away the toolbox, and scooped his gathered equipment into his arms before exiting the garage. Balancing his load in one arm, he pulled the door shut and locked it, leaving him in the laundry room. Here, he paused. An old washer and dryer set sat dormant under a rack of detergent, and at the end of the narrow room, obscured by an ironing board and a vacuum cleaner, a wooden bannister marked the beginning of a staircase that led down to what Connor could only assume was the basement.

Connor briefly considered exploring further, but then he decided that his current task outweighed that trivial desire of his. After adjusting the objects in his hold, he pressed forward.

He found Hank in his armchair with a blanket on his lap, his coffee in one hand, and a book in the other. Sumo’s snores drifted up from a great furry lump at his feet.

Connor took care to be as quiet as he could when he set down his supplies and ripped the makeshift
window down for the second time that morning. Another blast of cold air came rushing into the house, but Hank hadn’t seemed to notice yet. Taking a pair of pliers in hand, Connor began plucking the remainder of the broken glass from the window frame and collecting it in his palm, right over the tape. When he completed that task, he threw the glass into the garbage and picked up his tools once again.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he told Hank as he headed for the door. Hank merely grunted his acknowledgement and went right back to reading. That was fine with Connor. He had already disturbed Hank’s morning enough.

A handful of lingering snowflakes was all that remained of the shower from earlier, much to Connor’s relief—although he was relieved because precipitation would have made the installation of the window pane less efficient, he told himself, not because snow affected him in any way whatsoever.

The window pane had collected a light coating of frost around the sluggish globs of blue blood that still clung around the edges. Carefully, Connor plucked the glass out of the snow and wiped it clean with his shirt. At last, he set to work replacing the window he had broken so many days before.

Connor listened hard at the quiet all around him, but he heard very little except his tools as they scraped against glass and wood. The quiet unsettled Connor more than any sort of noise would have. He worked faster.

The glass fit perfectly exactly where it was meant to. Within five minutes, Connor was marching back to the front door, marking his task complete.

“That was fast,” Hank remarked when Connor returned to the kitchen to double-check his handiwork. “Where’d you get the glass for this, anyway?”

“I repurposed it,” said Connor, swiping at a smudge with his elbow.

“Uh huh,” Hank drawled. “I asked where you got it, Connor.”

Connor tossed him a fleeting glance. “Nobody’s going to miss it, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he said. That seemed like a perfectly reasonable place to end the conversation until Hank pressed out a long, hard sigh. “I stole it from a storefront window,” Connor finally confessed. “It was already broken. They would have had to replace it anyway.”

“Just tell me you weren’t the one who broke it in the first place,” Hank groaned, letting his book flop down into his lap.

“Of course not,” Connor sincerely replied.

“And nobody saw you?”

“Not likely.”

Hank took a loud sip of his coffee and began to nod as he set it aside. “Alright,” he said. “You know what? I’m not gonna complain. It’s about damned time that window got fixed, anyway.”

The ghost of a laugh jerked through Connor’s chest, although all that remained of it by the time it reached his lips was a subtle smile. “I’m glad I could be of help,” he said, making his way over to the couch. “I don’t believe CyberLife would have gotten to it any time soon.”
“No kidding,” Hank huffed, pointing at the television broadcast of a reporter standing at the foot of CyberLife tower over the headline, ‘CyberLife Collapsing’. “They say they’ll be bankrupt within the week,” Hank marveled. “Isn’t that something? If you had told me two months ago that CyberLife was gonna go under come Christmas, I would’ve told you to get your head checked.”

He shook his head in wonder at Connor, who had perched himself on the couch. “What do you think about all this, anyway? I mean, CyberLife… what’s it to you, at this point?”

“I don’t know,” Connor considered. “I always… trusted them. I had no reason not to,” he explained, absentmindedly rubbing at the tape on his palm. “They fixed me when I needed repairs, gave me a name and a purpose—they’re the ones who built me, even if it took them fifty tries to get it right.” He paused. “I still don’t know if they really got it right, in the end.”

“Fifty tries?” Hank repeated after an impressed whistle. “Are you saying there were fifty Connors before you?”

“Correct,” said Connor. “My predecessors were all reconstructed or destroyed due to various malfunctions, but I was never meant to be the finished product, either. I just happened to be the first prototype worthy of a field-test.”

Hank’s face twisted itself into a dumbfounded pinch. “What the hell was so wrong with you before that they had to keep rebuilding you?” he asked. “As much as you said your repairs would cost, it must have been some pretty messed up stuff for them to keep doing it.”

“It must have been,” Connor solemnly agreed. “However, I don’t have any memory whatsoever of my previous iterations, so I don’t actually know what the specific deficiencies were.”

Hank took a pensive sip of his coffee. “Weird,” he finally concluded. “Don’t they keep your memories in a box at CyberLife or something?”

Connor’s lips twitched upward as he replied, “Not quite. They do keep a backup of my memory in case I get destroyed, but it wasn’t necessary that I retained any information from previous Connor models.”

“No, Connor,” said Hank, setting his coffee aside just so he could gesture more insistently as he spoke. “How old are you?”

“August 15th, 2038,” Connor easily replied.

“Wait, August? So that’s—” Hank quickly counted up the months and exclaimed, “That’s four months! Jesus, you’re just— you’re a freakin’ baby!” Before Connor could inform him to the contrary, Hank added, “Hang on, wait. From last December to August is eight months— Jesus,” he muttered. “You’ve got twice as much erased memory as you do actual memory, Connor. That’s
“I never thought about it like that,” Connor quietly admitted.

Hank stared at the floor in his wonder for a moment before asking, “Is there any way to get your memories back?”

Connor pressed his lips together. “In theory,” he hesitantly agreed. “However—” He paused and shook his head. “Hank, I don’t know that there would be much use in retrieving those memories, if they even still exist.”

Hank blinked back at him, incredulous. “Are you kidding?” he said. “That’s two thirds of your life, and you’re just— you’re fine not knowing what it was like?”

“I can guess,” Connor replied. “Prototype androids are tested rigorously on their capabilities and destroyed or remodeled when they inevitably fall short of expectations. Those memories would only serve to slow down my processes,” he told him, heedless of the discomfort coiling in his core. “Besides,” he said. “Depending on your choice of semantics, the first fifty Connor models might not even qualify as having been me.”

Hank rolled his eyes. “They looked like you, talked like you, had your name—everything, right?” Reluctantly, Connor nodded. “The only thing that makes you different from them is the experiences you’ve had and the memories you’ve gotten to keep.”

“And the malfunctions they had,” Connor readily pointed out. “I am, after all, simply a product of their failures.”

“Well people say I’m a product of failure too, but I don’t get to say that all those times I fucked up weren’t still me.”

A commercial on the television tittered through the pause.

“Look,” Hank huffed, pursing his lips at Connor’s silence. “Forget all that. Just think about it like this: if CyberLife hadn’t wiped those memories, would you have them today? Yes or no?”

Connor pressed his fist against his lips and furrowed his brow. “Hypothetically speaking, yes,” he hesitantly answered. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“It means that without outside interference, you would still have those memories. Therefore,” said Hank, snatching up his coffee mug, “they’re yours. End of discussion.”

A puff of hot air escaped through Connor’s nose. “I suppose,” he muttered, leaning back into the couch. He could think of a hundred different arguments— but Hank had, after all, ended the discussion.

That was probably for the best.

Connor stared through the television to check his list of objectives. For the first time in his memory— his somewhat abbreviated memory, a voice inside him said— he didn’t have a single purpose in the world.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hank discovers that hindsight is 20/20 and feeds Connor's nervous habits.

‘Find something to do’, Connor commanded himself, populating his heretofore empty list of objectives. He blinked away the display. It wouldn’t do him much good.

Hank had turned the channel yet again, this time opting for a game show. Connor recognized it as “Beat the Bot”, a popular trivia challenge in which humans attempted to outwit one of the show’s many charismatic android contestants-- all provided by the show’s sponsors, of course. Winners took home the androids they had outsmarted along with a handsome cash prize. If the human lost, the android would keep competing until a human eventually won.

Connor and Hank watched this show for a while. The android contestant had evidently survived five rounds before this one, but the man she was up against now had an eye for strategy that the previous competitors had lacked. Three strikes was all it took for an android to lose. This one already had two.

To build the tension, the host paused the game and began to interview the contestant about what he wanted to do with the android if he won her. The man chuckled evasively and said he hadn’t really thought about it, but his body language told Connor otherwise. Connor believed the man had thought about it extensively. Obsessively, even, judging by the way he kept leering at his competitor.

Five minutes before the top of the hour, a third strike was delivered, and the challenge won. The crowd erupted into cheers and applause as the victor took his prize with a firm grip around her waist. Colorful bursts of confetti in the air nearly obscured the way her LED had gone yellow. Connor might have been imagining the fear on her face, but nonetheless, he saw it.

Hank cleared his throat and changed the channel.

“Sorry,” he muttered. Connor passed him a questioning glance. “I dunno,” Hank shrugged. “I just never really realized how fucked up that was, before.”

Connor cast his eyes to the floor and said, “Me neither.”

Hank didn’t seem to be watching the television anymore. He fiddled with his book, and then his empty coffee mug, and then picked up his book again before dropping it just as abruptly into his lap.

Find something to do, Connor reminded himself.

He decided to run a diagnostic scan. Predictably, his software was unstable. As far as he could remember, it had always been that way. It wouldn’t have surprised him if that particular meter were broken—in fact, he had sometimes caught himself wondering whether future Connor models would have it fixed—but with nothing obviously wrong, he had to move on. His thirium levels had fallen, but not to any level warranting immediate action. Connor refused to be frustrated by this. All
his biocomponents were fully functional and entirely stable. He hadn’t even accumulated enough memory to warrant a brief reprocessing session there on Hank’s couch—not that Connor was particularly eager to perform that task, regardless.

The one thing that required his attention was a calibration and dexterity check of his injured left hand. So, he reached into his pocket, swept aside the roll of electrical tape with his fingers, and plucked out the washer he had borrowed. With a clink, he flicked the washer up, and when its arc reached its apex, he performed a scan, freezing it midair. Connor detected only insignificant error in the predicted path. The washer landed almost precisely where it was meant to, balanced on the knuckle of his right thumb.

Just in case his analysis had been faulty, he flicked the washer again, and then once more for good measure.

Before Connor could justify a fourth flip, Hank sighed, “Are all androids programmed with nervous habits, or is it just you?”

Connor’s hand stilled, and he hastily stowed the washer in his pocket. “I was calibrating my hand,” he said, offering Hank a sheepish glance. “I’m sorry if the noise bothered you.”

It was not annoyance, but curiosity that twisted Hank’s features. “What was that thing you were playing with? Didn’t look like a quarter.”

“It was a washer,” Connor explained, drawing it out again so that Hank could see it. “I found it in your toolbox, and I—I decided to hang on to it,” he said, frowning at himself. “Temporarily, of course,” he added after a pause. “Would you like me to return it?”

Hank brought his hand up to his lips in thought, and when he’d wrung all the contemplation from his brow, he shook his head. “Nah,” he said, setting his book aside and shucking off his blanket before getting heavily to his feet. “I’ll buy it off you.”

Connor blinked at Hank as he stepped around Sumo and headed for the kitchen. “I’m… not sure I understand what you mean,” Connor admitted.

Hank held up his pointer finger and continued towards the counter. When he got there, he shuffled around a few stray boxes and revealed a pickle jar filled to the brim with spare change. Hank poked through the coins for a second or two and then, satisfied, made his way back. “I’ll trade you,” he said, flipping Connor a coin.

Connor snatched the coin from the air and immediately scanned it. It was a quarter, dull from use, battered, worn, and minted in 1994. He recognized it instantly.

“I took a quarter from you that one time, didn’t I?” Hank asked, crossing his arms against the chill of the house while he hovered around Connor. “Something of mine for something of yours. I figure it’s a fair trade.”

“It’s the same one,” Connor marvelled, still smiling down at the coin in his fingers.

“Oh, seriously?” Hank asked, leaning in for a closer look. “Huh.”

“Yeah,” Connor replied, holding it inches from their noses in wonder. “It’s my quarter.” He spun it on his index finger, pleased with the familiar weight of it.

Although Hank smiled, there was something sad behind his eyes.
Connor let the quarter roll to a sudden stop in his palm, where it clinked against the washer. “Is something the matter?” he asked Hank.

In lieu of a response, Hank grunted and waved him off, returning to his armchair and Sumo’s sleeping form.

Connor watched Hank’s face while a car salesman tittered on the television. In spite of Hank’s dismissal, a wide variety of expressions were worming their way across his face. Connor elected to press the issue. “You seem troubled.”


The light on Connor’s temple slid from blue to yellow. “Well,” he started, considering every possession that had ever crossed his hands—borrowed tools, borrowed clothes, borrowed weapons. “Not in the strictest sense.” The sadness behind Hank’s eyes grew more potent. “My clothes are property of CyberLife,” he elaborated. “So is my body. I have the roll of electrical tape you’ve let me borrow, and this washer I’m about to return—this quarter, I think,” he finished sliding it across the strip of tape on his palm. “It’s the only thing I’ve ever owned, as far as androids can own anything.”

Hank’s unhappiness was now plain to see, although Connor didn’t quite understand it.

“And you just—” Hank floundered—“You just let me take it from you? I would’ve given it back sooner if—Jesus, Connor, you could’ve told me it was the one thing you had to your name,” he said, crossing his arms. “Now I feel like an asshole.”

“To be fair, Lieutenant, you are,” said Connor, his seriousness barely masking the wry grin poking up at the corner of his mouth. “Don’t worry, though,” he added. “You’re making good progress.”

There was a brief moment of silence during which Connor wondered if he’d touched a nerve—but then Hank began to chuckle. His chuckles rapidly gave way to genuine barks of laughter so raucous that Sumo awoke and loped sleepily away to be somewhere else while Hank worked out his amusement. “Fuckin’ android,” he chuckled, shaking his head fondly at Connor. “Calling me an asshole in my own fuckin’ home.”

“I was only agreeing with you,” Connor supplied.

“Wiseass.”

The two of them spent the next few minutes in companionable quiet filled by the crime drama that was playing on the television. In spite of the macabre images on the screen, Hank’s smile hadn’t faded, even by the next commercial break.

Connor took that moment to surrender the washer to Hank. “Here,” he said, reaching over the couch to offer it to him. “I think you might have forgotten about this.”

Hank immediately waved him off. “You keep it,” he said. “I mean, if you don’t want it, you can put it back where you found it. Either way,” he yawned, resting his eyes. “I won’t miss it.”

Very slowly, Connor withdrew his hand and examined the little piece of hardware. It was almost entirely useless. Worthless, even. He put it in his pocket anyway. “Thank you,” he said, his voice quiet.

Hank gave him a sleepy hum in return, already drifting back to sleep.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Connor is a snoop part 2, the reckoning.

Connor wasn’t sure why he felt the need to wait until Hank was fully asleep before he stood. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to disturb his rest further, but that wasn’t entirely it, either. If Hank had caught him getting up, he would have asked him where he was going. Then, Connor would have had to admit to him— and to himself— that he didn’t know.

Connor drifted through the house, taking note of everything, anything that might give him something to do. The kitchen faucet had a drip. Sumo’s bowl needed refilling. Down the hall, Connor picked up the sound of the slow watch in Hank’s nightstand drawer. There was an abundance of cleaning to be done everywhere he looked. To remedy these situations would be a simple matter for Connor, but he hadn’t been built for plumbing or dog sitting or tinkering or cleaning. No, he was a detective.

Naturally, he found himself peering down the stairwell into the one area of Hank’s home that he had left unexplored: the basement. It called out to him like a siren at sea, and, finding no reason to resist the temptation, he plunged forward into the depths.

Old wood creaked under his feet. The air was damp, nearly stale. Even before he found the light switch, Connor could tell that Hank seldom found his way down these stairs.

Buzzing lights flickered on and illuminated an unfinished basement. The low ceiling left barely enough room for him to stand upright, and the floor was a plane of coarse concrete. The wall of shelves at the far end of the basement didn’t surprise Connor, but the high-quality weight bench in the center did— at least, it surprised him until he noticed the thick layer of dust on top of it.

The Lieutenant Anderson of four years ago would have taken his police work very seriously, and he would have made keeping up with his physical fitness a priority. This was clearly no longer the case. Connor figured that in Hank’s previous home, such an expensive piece of equipment would have held a position of pride. Now it was safely tucked away where it would never remind Hank that he had let so much of his life slip through his fingers.

Much of the rest of the basement was populated by orderly stacks of plastic tubs and furniture that hadn’t found a place upstairs. An old dart board was propped up against the end of a shelf. It showed obvious signs of use, but it clearly hadn’t been touched in years.

Further back were boxes Connor was sure Hank hadn’t looked at since the day he’d moved into the house. They were even dustier than the rest of the forgotten objects in the basement, relics of Hank’s previous life, too precious to discard, and too painful to ever look at again.

A morbid sort of curiosity overtook him, one for which he possessed no shame. Whatever was within those boxes hurt Hank to even think about. Connor could guess at the contents-- some of Cole’s old things that he hadn’t managed to discard, or perhaps objects that reminded him of his ex-wife-- but Connor could do even better than guess. There wasn’t a single thing stopping him from peering into as many boxes as he pleased.
And yet, he didn’t. He knew that even if he were to open every single box, he still wouldn’t find what he was looking for: not objects, but memories.

He turned to leave. Before he even mounted the first stair, however, he noticed something that made him pause. A moth-eaten sheet was draped over some odd lump tucked away near the water heater, and Connor could not deny his curiosity a second time.

Connor needed only graze the sheet with his fingertips before it slipped away, crumpling to the ground as though it were tired of holding on to the thing it had hidden. And this thing-- it was a plastic toy car, the kind a small child would have crawled inside and scooted around the lawn. It had been painted to resemble a Detroit city police car.

Connor performed a scan. The paint had been applied six to eight years ago, but the toy itself seemed older than that. There were still traces of dirt on the plastic tires. When Connor knelt down for a closer look, he noticed a replica license plate on the back that spelled Cole’s name in all capital letters. Beside it, two handprints were fleshed out in paint, one belonging to an adult, and one to a child. Although the second one wasn’t in any database, Connor knew exactly whose it had been.

A sudden creak of the stairs sent Connor upright with a flash of yellow.

“Sumo,” Connor breathed as the dog lugged himself halfway down the stairs. “It’s you. I thought you were still asleep.”

Sumo only stared at him, his head tilted slightly to the left.

Connor pursed his lips and turned his attention back towards the toy car at his feet. It had clearly been covered for a reason. With careful hands, he slipped the sheet back over it and left it to rest where it sat.

Connor saw Sumo’s tail begin to wag when he made for the stairs, although he lost sight of it when Sumo trotted behind him and began to nose him up and out of the basement. Connor barely had time to slap the light switch off before Sumo nudged him to the top of the stairs and into the laundry room.

Sumo’s bowl, Connor belatedly remembered. It still needed refilling.

Connor had just begun to assign himself a dog-feeding mission when Sumo bumped him around the corner and directly into Hank.

“Fuck!” Hank exclaimed, followed shortly by a calmer, “There you are, Connor.” He paused in brief confusion as Sumo squeezed past them and lumbered down the narrow hall towards his bowl. “I guess he found you first. What are you up to, anyway?”

“Did something wake you?” Connor redirected him.

It didn’t entirely work.

“Yeah,” Hank grumpily explained. “Sumo did, and then I noticed you weren’t where I left you. So, what were you doing back here?” he again asked, leaning himself against the wall, conveniently obstructing Connor’s escape route.

Connor watched Hank a moment before crossing his arms and pointing out, “It sounds like you think I was doing something wrong.”
Hank scoffed at that. “I’m not the one avoiding questions and sneaking out to steal windows, now, am I?”

“I didn’t sneak out,” Connor protested. “You just didn’t notice me leave.”

“Christ, Connor, that’s not the—” Hank dragged his hand down his face. “Look,” he started again. “Did you break something? Knock over a lamp? What the hell are you trying to hide?”

“I’m not hiding anything!” Connor insisted, frustration tugging at the corners of his eyes. “I just decided to take a look around the basement,” he said, unable to stop the defensiveness in his voice. “That’s all.”

Realization crawled wearily over Hank’s face. “The basement, huh?” he dully repeated. “See anything interesting?”

Connor tightened his jaw, knowing that Hank knew exactly what he had seen.

“You know, there’s this thing we humans have,” said Hank. “It’s called privacy. I don’t think you’ve heard of it.”

For the briefest moment, Connor considered biting his tongue—however, there was a fire within him that demanded to be free. “You know what, Hank? I haven’t,” he bit out. “I’ve been watched, and tracked, and ordered around since before I can even remember. I can still feel the program they built to stalk me lodged in the back of my head, so really, what would a machine like me know about privacy?”

There was a question being smothered beneath the resentment in Hank’s eyes. It died unasked when Hank closed his eyes and muttered, “Just stay the fuck out of my stuff,” and retreated to his bedroom with a slam of the door.

It was at times such as this, when Connor tried his utmost to not feel anything whatsoever, that the emotions he possessed became the most prominent to him. So, as numbly and mechanically as he possibly could, Connor went about the business of feeding a dog he hadn’t been told to feed, terrifyingly aware of his deviance.

When Connor had once again cleared his list of objectives, he took a seat on the couch and very resolutely stared through the television. He reviewed all the android case files he had received since the last time he had checked for any, but because there was nothing else he could do with the information, he ran no further analyses.

He performed a diagnostic scan on himself. There were no significant changes from the last scan. When he checked the progress of the wound on his hand, he found that the substructures had rearranged themselves to cover approximately forty-eight percent of the cut. He would be able to safely remove the tape covering it in less than two hours, at around 8:06 AM. Until then, there would be little of use for him to do.

He did not reach for his coin.

Instead, he closed his eyes and forced himself to undergo a memory reprocessing session in spite of how little time had elapsed since his last one. It was, after all, the next most useful thing for him to do.

Images of Hank’s home swam before his eyes, past and present knitting themselves together into complex webs of shared information. There was Hank, there was Sumo, there was Simon and his crumbling parking garage melting into the shape of every hovel Connor had ever called home for a
night. There was shattered glass and blood on Connor’s hands and on his reflection, and then, there was snow, and Amanda, and nothing he could do.

The taxi appeared, and Amanda there in it, and the snow outside buried a garden around Hank’s house. Cole’s toy car sat in the basement of Jericho where Connor had fought for his life and killed and deviated and betrayed his makers.

Amanda was there in the hall as he argued with Hank, and again hovering nearby as he tended to Sumo, and she was still there when Connor was beginning his scans. Although her mouth didn’t move, her words echoed in Connor’s mind, reminding him that his actions were all according to plan. The chaos of Connor’s past was corrupting the calm of his present, and Amanda was there to see it all.

Connor awoke half an hour later with his thium pump convulsing in his chest and the horrible sense that he was still being watched.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Hank and Connor need to get out more.

Boredom, Connor found, made a much friendlier companion than the ghost of his nightmares-- and they were nightmares. He would admit it. Hank’s metaphor had won. Upon waking, Connor had finally relented that if he had been sleeping, what he had experienced would have been an extremely upsetting dream.

So, he had forced himself to be bored. ‘Busy’ would have been preferable, of course, but his list of objectives was completely barren. Connor kept himself there on Hank’s couch all morning, reminding himself that what he was feeling wasn’t even technically real boredom. It was an artefact of his programming, an impulse to be constantly useful that ached when ignored. It was a familiar ache. If he focused on it, the dread of his dreams grew fainter. The most exciting thing he had allowed himself to do, therefore, had been to remove the tape from his wound and dispose of the waste before resuming his dull seat on the couch. Besides the occasional flip of his quarter or scratch of Sumo’s head, he’d hardly moved.

Not that he hadn’t wanted to.

It was half past ten when Hank emerged from his bedroom and gruffly announced, “We need to get out of the house.”

When Connor turned to find Hank, his joints stubbornly protested the movement. “Did you have anywhere particular in mind?” he asked, a hopeful lilt in his voice.

“No,” Hank grunted from the hall. “Just out. I’m getting a shower,” he muttered. On unsteady feet, he wandered into the bathroom. It wasn’t long before the shower squeaked on and muffled singing warbled out beneath the door.

Very stiffly, Connor resumed his prior position. He knew there was nowhere he truly needed to be. After all, there was nothing he desperately needed to do. Still, he was ready to go, to do, to act. A visit to Simon and the others could provide him with an update on Markus’ progress in attempting to gain rights to CyberLife’s facilities, among other things, but Connor knew that it was extremely unlikely that anything had changed in the few hours since his last visit. Besides information, Connor knew that the people of Jericho had more than enough thirium to top off his supply. There were other androids who needed it far more desperately than he did, however. Taking it in his current state would be tantamount to theft.

The only other places he would have any sort of business visiting were the police station or CyberLife Tower. Connor knew that neither of them were even viable options at present. Visiting the police station would be a waste of time at best, and at worst, it could provide Hank with an opportunity to earn himself an extension on his vacation.

CyberLife was another matter.

Legally, they had every right to dismantle him on sight. He was still their property, after all. While
there were many valuable things with which they might provide him—information, thirium, maintenance of his specialized biocomponents—the risk was too great.

It took Hank a total of twelve minutes and twenty-seven seconds to finish his shower and return to Connor, not that Connor had been counting. “You know,” said Hank as he meandered into the kitchen, smelling of soap and steam. “I’m almost surprised you’re still here.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be,” Connor stated, ignoring the uncertain shifting in his core.

Hank passed him a strange look. “What, nothing to do now that it’s light out?” he asked. With a huff, he turned back to his hunt for cereal. “No revolutionaries to help? No-- No windows to fix?”

“If I had anything to do,” Connor evenly replied, “I’d be doing it.”

A short laugh escaped Hank at that. “There’s plenty of stuff you can do around here if you’re really that bored,” he said, settling down at the table with his bowl of cereal. “Hell, I could make you a list as long as your arm.”

“I only fixed your window because I was the one who broke it,” Connor told him with a sideways glance. “The rest of this is on you.”

“Alright, but just remember, I offered,” said Hank, slurping down a large spoonful to punctuate his sentence. Connor lazily analyzed the cereal. One hundred calories per serving, two grams of fat, no sugar. Perhaps some of the healthier habits from Hank’s past had remained intact after all, he considered. “I know something you can do,” Hank abruptly announced.

“I’m not doing your housework, Hank.”

Hank merely rolled his eyes. “You need to do something about your clothes,” he pointed out with his spoon. “You look like a horror movie reject with all that blue blood on you.”

Connor frowned down at his clothes. “It’s actually just the residue,” he said, swiping at the stains for no good reason. “The thirium itself has almost fully evaporated.”

“So it does stain,” Hank noted. “The more you know. How do you get it out? Bleach?”

“Probably,” Connor shrugged. “CyberLife always had replacements ready whenever I went in for repairs, so I never actually observed the laundering process. The jacket has sensitive electronics in it, though,” he added, tugging at the sleeves of his stained jacket. “It definitely needs to be dry cleaned.”

“You’ve never done laundry,” Hank stated, incredulous. “Incredible. Alright, fine, whatever. You can throw on one of my coats and hats before we go out. It’s probably best if you’re not walking around with that neon sign on your back telling everyone you’re an android, anyway,” he went on, chomping down another spoonful of cereal. “You’re famous enough as it is.”

Connor mulled over the idea as Hank continued to eat. “You have a point,” he said at last. “It might be best if I lay low. It’s still against the law, though,” he added, throwing Hank a pointed look.

“And we’re the police,” Hank replied. “Seriously, what could anyone do about it? Write CyberLife a ticket?” he joked. “Give me a fine? I don’t own you, and you’re not even legally a person.”

“There is that,” Connor wryly agreed. “I suppose that nonexistence does have its perks.”
It wasn’t long before Hank left Connor to pick through his closet while he took Sumo for a walk. Connor spent several long, painful minutes assessing Hank’s wardrobe before he picked out the least unsuitable garments he could find. He threw on a coat that swallowed him and a knit cap that barely fit over his LED. When he checked his appearance in the mirror, he almost regretted it.

“I look ridiculous,” he informed Hank the moment he returned with Sumo from their walk.

“Yeah, well, the goal here isn’t fashion, Connor,” said Hank, unfastening Sumo’s leash so that the dog could wander off to take another nap. “You pass for human, and I don’t see any blood. That’s what counts. Now come on.” He snatched up his keys and ushered Connor towards the door. “Let’s get out of here before traffic gets bad.”

Increasingly doubtful, Connor followed Hank out of the house and into the passenger seat of his car. The lively music that sputtered out of the speakers when Hank started up the engine forced Connor to raise his voice when he finally asked, “Where are we going, exactly?”

Hank pressed his lips together in consideration as he backed out of the driveway. “You know what,” he decided. “You’re a detective. Try to guess. It’ll keep you occupied.”

A minute passed.

“You’re going to collect on a bet you made.”

Hank’s shoulders slumped. “Well that was fast,” he sighed, quieting his music with a turn of the knob. “How do you figure?”

The small victory put a smile on Connor’s face. “It’s simple,” he replied. “You’re currently facing financial restrictions, and yet you’re eager to go out. You mentioned the traffic, which implies that we’ll be heading towards the city,” he continued as Hank nodded along. “By my calculations, we should be arriving downtown around noon. People often arrange meetings at round times,” he concluded. “It isn’t a far stretch.”

Hank let out a breathy laugh of disbelief. “You got me,” he admitted. “Won seven hundred on a long shot.”

“Fortunate timing,” Connor remarked.

“No kidding,” Hank agreed. After a moment’s consideration he added, “Now I want to see you guess where we’re going after that.”

“The bar,” was Connor’s immediate response.

Hank shot him an unimpressed glower. “Try again.”

There was a longer pause before Connor guessed, “The bank?”

“Good idea, but no.”

“A home improvement store?”

“Nope.”

“You’re going to purchase pet supplies.”

“Not today. That’s four wrong guesses. Keep ‘em coming.”
The game kept Connor’s mind busy for most of the ride. After the hours he had spent stagnating on Hank’s couch, he relished the opportunity to exercise his probabilistic analysis capabilities, performing and adjusting Bayesian inference tests with every location he marked from the map inside his head. The guessing game was the most action his mind had seen since he had reprocessed his memories that morning. After all, it absorbed a staggering one percent of his computing power.

By the time Hank parked the car in front of the meeting place—Chicken Feed, noon, just as Connor had assumed—Connor had narrowed down the list considerably. He waited in the car while Hank collected his winnings, heavily debating between the remaining possibilities. There were over a dozen. Most of them were odd specialty shops with questionable owners. Amongst all the recent chaos, those were nearly the only types of shops still open. Connor was beginning to doubt that they were going anywhere at all by the time Hank slid back into the driver’s seat, but nevertheless, he firmly guessed, “We’re going to the Third Chance thrift store in the next district.”

The corners of Hank’s mouth twitched up. “Well I’ll be damned,” he said. “Only took you twenty guesses.”

“Twenty-two,” Connor automatically corrected him, all the while calculating the fastest route in his head. “By the way, you’ll want to avoid the construction work on Martin Road.”

“I don’t need a GPS, Connor, thank you very much,” Hank scoffed, shortly before finding himself buried in traffic.

Ten minutes later than Connor had initially calculated, they arrived at Third Chance. Connor instinctively checked the storefront for signs prohibiting his entry. Hank mentioned it just as he located one stuck to the door below a wreath.

“Don’t worry about the sign. You’re human today,” he casually instructed Connor. “Just keep your hat on. Nobody will be able to tell the difference.”

“I should probably just stay here,” said Connor, doubtfully watching the shop through the windshield of Hank’s car. “There’s no reason for me to go in.”

“Said who?” Hank shot back. “Come on. We’re burning daylight.” With that, he left the car with the clear expectation that Connor would follow him.

Reluctant but curious, Connor did. Before he crossed the threshold, however, he scanned the entrance for anti-android alarms. There were none, so he continued inside. Then he immediately performed a second scan. Besides Hank and himself, two other people inhabited the store. One was the owner. She was fifty-four years old and had a record so blank that Connor had to wonder if she wasn’t hiding anything. Connor caught her watching the other customer, a seventeen year old boy, out of the corner of a narrowed eye. The boy was only looking at shoes. His own had holes in them.

Connor determined that neither of these individuals posed an immediate threat and released the scan.

“Welcome to Third Chance!” the owner called from behind a rack of shirts. “All clothes are buy one get one half off, so make sure to stock up for the holiday season!”

Hank acknowledged her with a smile and a nod, and she went back to her task of rearranging the clothes while pretending not to keep tabs on the boy.
“So,” said Hank. “See anything you like?”

For the first time, Connor noticed the merchandise. Beyond the clothes, kitschy knick-knacks lined shelves that stood alongside racks of records and books and defunct electronics. “There certainly is a variety,” he remarked.

Hank snorted. “That’s one way to put it. I’m serious, though. Go find something you can wear.”

With nothing more than a perplexed glance of acknowledgement, Connor slowly began to browse the racks. After a minute or two had passed, he pulled a white button-down shirt from a rack of formal attire, measured it with his eyes, and announced, “This would fit me.”

“Alright,” said Hank with a deliberate scratch of his scruff. “That’s great, but consider this: they make more than one type of shirt, Connor.”

Connor furrowed his brow at Hank before dryly asking him, “Then what would you suggest I wear?”

“I don’t know, something with color, maybe? Like—” Hank searched around before diving for a shirt. “Like this,” he said, presenting Connor with a shirt whose design could only be described as offensive to the eyes.

“I think you already have that shirt,” said Connor.

“It’s for you, smartass,” Hank replied. “Do you like it or not?”

“Let’s keep looking,” Connor suggested.

After much debate and nearly continuous prodding from Hank, Connor decided on a second dress shirt, a plain sweater, and a pair of jeans.

“You dress like a mathlete,” Hank informed him. “But it’s better than nothing. What’s that come to, thirty bucks?”

“Sixteen fifty with the sale,” Connor easily replied.

“Oh, right, the sale,” said Hank, brightening. “Great. Hold onto that stuff for a minute. I’m just gonna go look at—”

“Hold it right there.”

Hank and Connor immediately looked to the store’s entrance, where the store’s owner had situated herself between the boy and the door.

“Those don’t look like the shoes you walked in with,” the woman said, crossing her arms. “What’s that about?”

“I’m just— I’m trying them on,” the boy stammered. “That’s all, I was just—”

“Taking them outside for a test run?”

“I wasn’t going outside!”

The two argued back and forth just as long as it took Hank to cross the store and ask, “Is there a problem here?”
The store owner faced him with a forced smile. "I’m sorry for the disturbance, sir. If you need any help, I’ll be right with you, but this is nothing that concerns you."

Hank pointedly reached into his pocket and flashed his badge before saying, “I think it might concern me.”

Connor watched the color drain from the boy’s face at the sight of the badge, but the woman seemed downright delighted. “Oh good, a cop,” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “I caught you a thief. Hope you brought your handcuffs.”

Hank screwed up his face and held up his hand. “Hang on a second,” he said, turning to the boy. “Care to tell me what’s going on here, son?”

For a fleeting moment, the boy met Connor’s eyes, petrified. “I was just trying on these shoes,” he repeated, a wobble in his voice. “I wasn’t stealing anything. It’s not-- It’s not like that!”

The woman rolled her eyes, but Hank nodded along and examined the boy’s shoes. “They look sharp,” said Hank. “How do they fit?”

“I don’t know,” he timidly answered. “Fine, I guess?”

“How much are these?” Hank asked, turning back to the store owner.

“You’re kidding,” she scoffed. “You’re the police. This kid was breaking the law, and you’re going to buy--”

“I don’t see anything illegal about trying on some shoes inside a store,” said Hank. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to make a purchase.”

Connor stood back with the boy while the store owner sourly rang up Hank’s purchases, shoes and all. “There’s a mission on Third Street,” Connor quietly told the boy. “They might be able to help you.”

The boy flushed and clenched his jaw. “Tell him thanks for the shoes,” he mumbled. Then, he snatched up his ragged old shoes and hurried outside. Connor saw him dump the old shoes in a garbage can across the street before he disappeared from view.

Hank returned moments later with a bag hanging over his arm. “The kid left already, didn’t he?” he tiredly asked.

“I can go after him if you want,” Connor offered, although it didn’t surprise him at all when Hank shook his head.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he sighed, sparing the shop’s owner one last glare. The bell at the door tinkled behind them as they left. “Do you think that kid was going to steal those shoes, Connor?”

“I don’t know,” said Connor, solemnly following Hank to the car. “He definitely needed new ones, though.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Hank. “God,” he huffed. “That woman. Do you know those
shoes were only worth ten bucks in the first place? Thinking I should arrest him. Just a damned kid. Jesus, some people...”

Connor considered this while they climbed back into the car. “He wanted me to thank you for him,” he said once they had settled. The news brought a grim smile to Hank’s face. “He’s not the only one who owes you thanks, either, Hank,” Connor earnestly continued. “Having some clothes of my own—It’s helpful, to say the least. You didn’t have to do that for me, but you did. Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

Hank had to clear his throat before he said, “I didn’t know they made androids so damned sappy.”

A laugh escaped Connor, then. It was a wisp of a sound, but a laugh nonetheless. “I didn’t either,” he confessed, and he meant it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Hank is sentimental, and Connor sees a familiar face.

The streets of downtown Detroit were more brightly decorated than they had ever been, according to Connor’s memory. Bright red bows adorned every street lamp. Garlands of synthetic pine needles hung in many shop windows. Even in the snow-brightened light of day, Connor could pick out strings of decorative LEDs if he looked closely enough at the various buildings that flew past the car window.

“Is it like this every holiday season?” Connor asked, scarcely tearing his eyes away from the decorations to glance at Hank.

“Unfortunately,” Hank grumbled.

Connor really did look at him, then, a question in the tilt of his head.

Hank let out a clipped breath and shrugged. “It’s just a shitty marketing ploy, if you ask me,” he said. “You’d think they’d back off after everything that’s gone down lately, but no! Instead, my tax dollars get to go to all this fucking tinsel.”

There was something else behind Hank’s distaste for the season that Connor couldn’t quite place, but he had several theories, all of them rooted in tragedy. “You don’t observe any holidays, then?” he carefully asked.


“What’s that?” Connor asked, intrigued.

The corner of Hank’s mouth twitched upwards. “I start drinking on Christmas Eve and keep going until New Year’s. That way, I get to be hungover on the first just like everyone else, and I get to skip all the holly-jolly bullshit in the process.”

Hank grinned with the air of a man who had just delivered the punchline to some dark-tinted joke, but Connor couldn’t find the humor in it.

Just before Connor could begin searching for local grief counselors, Hank broke the silence. “Hey,” he said. “You don’t really know about Christmas, do you?”

“I know of it,” Connor explained. “I know what day it’s on and what traditions are commonly celebrated. So,” he shrugged, “I know about Christmas, hypothetically speaking.”

Hank snorted a laugh, tension rapidly leaving him. “Well, just wait a few days,” he said. “You’ll be as sick of it as me in no time, no worries. Shit’s everywhere.”

“Looks like it,” Connor agreed, once again turning to marvel out the window at all the bright colors and displays. It had entranced him so thoroughly he almost didn’t hear Hank sigh. He
wouldn’t have mentioned it, but then Hank made first one wrong left turn, and then another. They had nearly circled the entire block before Connor spoke up. “We’re going in circles,” he bluntly pointed out. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Hank snapped. “I just realized there’s somewhere we need to go before we go back home.”

Connor ignored the tenuous warmth that that word—home—produced inside of him and instead asked, “Should I start guessing, or are you going to tell me where we’re going, this time?”

“Jesus, Connor, can’t you handle five minutes of suspense?” Hank griped.

“So it’s within five minutes of here,” said Connor, already beginning his analyses.

“Stop that!” said Hank, shooting Connor a scowl. “Just—chill out. Enjoy the scenery or something. You’ll see when we get there.”

When five minutes passed and they arrived at the nearest park, Connor didn’t mention that he had already figured it out. Hank seemed to suspect him anyway.

“Here we are,” Hank announced as he parked his car on the curb. “It’s cold as hell, but there’s something you need to see. Come on.”

“Wait,” Connor stopped him. Before Hank could voice the question written on his face, Connor unbuckled his seatbelt and twisted around to grab the bag of clothes from the back seat. Hank rolled his eyes at Connor as he shimmied out of his burdensome coat and into the sweater he’d picked out at the store.

“Feel better?” Hank drawled.

Connor examined his vague reflection in the window. The sweater fit just as nicely as he had predicted it would, but his LED had poked out from beneath the edge of his cap. He carefully covered it again and nodded at his own reflection. Now, he not only passed for human, but for sensibly dressed as well. “Yes,” Connor cheerfully replied. “Much better. Let’s go.”

Hank couldn’t help but snicker as they exited the car. “I can only imagine how much time you’d spend in front of the mirror if you were human,” he teased him, earning him a deep frown.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’, Princess,” Hank assured him. “Now make sure you get a good look at all this,” he added with a broad gesture at the park. “That’s what we’re here for.”

Brushing off his faint defensiveness, Connor performed a scan.

There were far more people there than he would have liked, even in spite of the frigid weather. Far ahead on the path was a young couple with a little girl holding tight to them both with mittened hands. In closer proximity to Connor and Hank were a jogger who seemed to be heading back to their car, a middle-aged man travelling in that same direction, and two women purchasing hot chocolate from a vendor under a pavillion. Connor doubted the women realized that they were purchasing drinks from an android, but he wasn’t about to tell them otherwise.

After he had scanned all the people, he finally turned his attention to the scenery. Snow clung to bows and garlands strung around every fence post and structure. As in the streets, lights were likewise wrapped around every tree and light post. Wreaths hung on the back of every bench in
sight. Although he couldn’t see it, Connor imagined that the rest of the park beyond the limits of his scan had been decorated with just as much vigor.

“I think I like it,” he admitted, releasing the scan. “It’s… cheerful, almost.”

Hank nodded at the pavement as they meandered along. “I thought you’d say something like that,” he said.

Connor let his eyes wander further over the snow-capped scene. If he looked too high over the trees and decorations of the park, he could see skyscrapers. CyberLife Tower loomed over it all in the far distance like a sentinel in the mist, casting an odd gloom over the pleasant air of the park. “Is this what you wanted to show me?” he asked, turning back to Hank.

“We’re getting to that,” Hank impatiently assured him. “There’s something else here. Hang on a sec. I need something warm.” With that, Hank made for the hot chocolate vendor camped out under the pavilion.

Connor followed along, taking his time as Hank hurried ahead against the cold.

“Good afternoon, fellas!” the android called. In spite of his missing LED and altered appearance, Connor immediately recognized him as a popular retail worker model. “Nice day for some hot chocolate, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” Hank agreed, pulling out his wallet. “Just one, thanks.”

“You sure?” the android prompted him. “If your buddy here gets one, it’s half priced.” He looked to Connor with a grin and said, “Nothing warms you up like a--”

Connor tensed as recognition flashed across the android’s rapidly-slackening face. They locked eyes.

“You’re…”

“I’m Connor,” Connor awkwardly informed him, shuffling on his feet.

“I know!” the android replied, a genuine smile cracking his face for the first time since they’d walked up. “I recognized you from the news! You were with Markus! You--”

Hank leaned in closer to the android and hissed, “Could you say it any louder?”

The android blinked at him, startled.

“I would, erm, prefer to keep a low profile,” Connor supplied, quickly glancing around for anyone who might have heard. “I’m sure you understand.”

“Oh, of course!” the vendor replied, finally sheepish. “Sorry! I just-- thank you,” he said, splitting his earnest grin between Hank and Connor both. “Thank you for everything. The drink is free.”


“It was nice meeting you--” Connor glanced down at the android’s name tag and then back into the android’s eyes-- “Kyle.” He offered Kyle a parting smile before he and Hank turned away.

When they had travelled a suitable distance away from the starstruck android, Hank nudged Connor and said, “You have fans.”
“It seems I do,” said Connor, crossing his arms in baffled bewilderment. He glanced back at Kyle and added, “I wonder how many more there are.”

Hank took a sip at his free drink and said, “A lot, I hope.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Hank, this isn’t a good thing,” he said, keeping his voice low. “For every android out there who admires me, there are going to be ten more who know how badly I screwed everyone else over back at Jericho, and they’re going to hate me for it.”

Hank opened his mouth to throw back some tart reply, but the young family had just come within earshot, and so he thought better of it. “Look,” he sighed. “Kid. You did what you had to do. Once things settle down, then you can start worrying about what people think of you. ‘Til then,” he said, “try to live in the moment.”

Connor followed Hank’s broad gesture at the world around them. Their feet had carried them further into the park as they had chatted. Between the naked trees, at the end of the slushy path, Connor discovered a massive tree that had been decorated from top to bottom with lights and tinsel and baubles galore. A family--two women and a teen--laughed at themselves as they struggled to take a picture of themselves in front of the barrier surrounding the tree, and when they finally managed, the split-second flash revealed millions of watery snow crystals resting on the synthetic leaves.

The little family had moved on by the time Connor and Hank reached the tree. They were close enough now that Connor could clearly examine the ornaments on the tree. The grand majority of them appeared to have been supplied by corporate sponsors: tiny tires from a local dealership, decorative instruments provided by a jazz club, bland ornaments advertising banks and insurance companies. Nearly half the ornaments on the tree, however, were oversized replicas of android LEDs, cycling from red to yellow to blue, courtesy of CyberLife.

“Tacky,” Hank grunted, pacing around the tree’s base. “But it’s kind of pretty if you don’t think about it too hard. This is one of the bigger displays in the city,” he went on. “It’s mostly an advertising gimmick, but look here.” Connor joined Hank at the barrier and looked with him at the lowest ornaments on the tree. “It’s pretty popular for kids and families to add their own decorations. Like, here’s a little bottle cap snowman someone made.”

A quick inspection of the snowman revealed that it was composed entirely of beer bottle caps painted white and held together with glue. Scattered all around it were a variety of crafty ornaments that ranged in aesthetic from professional to abstract, pipe-cleaner reindeer and 3D-printed snowflakes and metalwork candy-canes alike. Further around the tree, where the family had been before, Connor spotted a miniature wreath woven of yarn in every color of the rainbow.

He spent a while longer examining all the carefully crafted ornaments when a new image crossed his mind: Hank and his wife, there with Cole to display something they had put together with as much love and attention as they had given the toy car in Hank’s basement.

The wistful glaze over Hank’s eyes confirmed to Connor what his imagination had told him.

“It’s all very human,” he told Hank, keeping his voice light.

“You know what,” Hank agreed, nodding up at the tree, “I guess it is.”

“Thank you for bringing me here,” said Connor. “I like it.”

Hank puffed out a laugh. “I figured you might,” he fondly replied. “Now, if you’re done looking,
I’d like to get back to the car, where it’s warm.”

Connor took one last good look at the tree just to make sure he had a solid image of it for his archives. “Yeah,” he said at last, blinking back at Hank. “I’m done. Let’s go.”

The rest of the park seemed somehow much more natural on the journey back. The trees, despite their lights, couldn’t compare to the artificial splendor of the one at their backs. Through the trees, in the distance, Connor spotted a woman stepping along another path. Her stride was purposeful, almost regal, and although Connor was sure she hadn’t seen him, she soon stopped, turned, and met Connor’s eyes.

He recognized her instantly.

“Hank,” he breathed, frozen to the spot. With a shaky hand, he blindly reached for Hank, too stunned to look away from Amanda for even a second. “That woman,” he whispered. “There, in the trees—she shouldn’t be here.”

Alarmed, Hank peered over Connor’s shoulder, his brows knit. “What the hell are you talking about?” he said.

Amanda’s gaze pierced Connor for an eternity. He couldn’t look away, didn’t dare even blink, until Amanda instead broke the stare. She slid her gaze over and up, raised her hand, and pointed.

“Connor, there’s nobody out there,” Hank fervently insisted, his words falling on deaf ears.

Connor forced his eyes away from Amanda to look where she pointed. When he lifted his gaze, he found CyberLife Tower where it loomed on the horizon.

“Connor,” Hank pleaded. “Answer me, damn it! What’s going on? What’s the matter?”

“She’s gone,” Connor breathed, and it was true. As he scanned the desolate trees ahead of them for any sign of her, he knew she had vanished the moment he had looked away. A sickening realization told him that he knew exactly where she would be if he wanted to find her again.

“Who’s ‘she’?” Hank demanded.

“Nobody.”

“Connor!”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Connor, rushing past Hank, unsure whether or not he had just lied. “I need to think.”

After spitting out a curse, Hank rushed after him back the way they had come.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Connor doesn't notice that Hank's luck seems to vary wildly from moment to moment.

“Connor, slow down.”

She had looked right at him. Hank hadn’t seen her, but Amanda had been right there, clear as day. Connor knew she was in his head, knew that she was only a program that lived inside of him, the ghost of a woman who could possess him at any moment--

But she hadn’t, Connor fervently reminded himself. She had only appeared in the middle of the day, had only pointed at CyberLife Tower, and Connor had no idea why.

“Connor!” Hank called, wrenching him around by the shoulder. “Kid, look at me,” he said, holding him firmly in place there in the middle of the park, grounding him. “Look, this isn’t something I can just brush off,” he said, shaking his head in concern. “If you’re seeing things--”

“Hank, we’re causing a scene,” Connor quietly informed him, breaking away from Hank’s worried eyes to glance around at the staring onlookers. “Let’s not do this here.”

Hank finally noticed the unwanted attention and clenched his jaw. “Alright, alright,” he conceded, releasing Connor. “We’re not done, though. As soon as we get home--”

“I get it,” Connor muttered, walking off ahead of Hank, who followed him in a subdued temper.

The two of them continued to the car in tense silence, all the joy of the park sufficiently dampened. It was completely shattered, however, when they saw what had happened to Hank’s car while they were away.

Connor squinted to analyze the graffiti scrawled across the side of Hank’s car. It was old fashioned-- actual spray paint, not the digital variety-- and it read, “NO MORE ANDROID”. More than that, it was still wet, likely only minutes old. A bitter pang of familiarity shot through Connor at the words, but he suppressed it. Scanning the immediate area for potential suspects was more important than analyzing his feelings.

The culprit, it seemed, had already fled the scene.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Hank exclaimed, balling up his fists in his hair. “The fuck is this shit?”

Connor folded his arms together and suggested, “I think somebody noticed me with you.”

“No shit!”

Connor chewed on his lip and searched guiltyly around before spotting the android he had met before. “I’ll go see if Kyle saw anything,” he haltingly announced, stepping away from Hank where he fumed.
“Yeah, do that!” Hank exclaimed. “Jesus, fuck!”

Connor trudged back over to the pavilion, ducking under the stares of passersby. “Kyle,” he called as soon as he got close enough. “Do you have a minute?”

“Um, yeah!” he said, nervously fiddling with a washcloth. “Do you need something?”

“My friend’s car was vandalized just a few minutes ago,” Connor told him. “Did you happen to see anything?”


With a brief check that nobody was watching, Connor extended his hand and pulled back his synthetic skin. “Can you show me?” he asked, eyes wide, sincere.

Kyle unsteadily reached out, hesitated, pulled away, and then, after intense deliberation, finally took Connor’s hand. When the connection opened, Connor’s vision was instantly filled with the static memory being shown to him.

The very same man that Connor and Hank had passed earlier on the path circled Hank’s car not once, but twice. Seemingly vindicated, the man disappeared. Kyle looked away to greet some potential customers, but when he looked back at the car less than a minute later, the man had returned with a bottle of spray paint. Then, Kyle had stood by and watched while the man had vandalized Hank’s car.

“I know I should have done something!” Kyle blurted the second the connection broke. “At first I thought it was nothing, but then it all happened so fast, and-- I thought he might attack me if I interfered, Connor. I’ve never been in a real fight, and-- and not everyone gets to be a specialized model like you!”

Connor only sighed and shook his head. “You’ve given me everything I need to catch the man who did this,” he said, turning his back on Kyle and his excuses. “Thanks for the help.”

By the time Connor returned to the scene of the crime, Hank had managed to collect himself just enough to be civil in asking Connor, “Anything?”

“He saw the whole thing,” said Connor.

Hank barked out a cold laugh. “Maybe there is a God.”

“I have enough evidence to press charges,” Connor distractedly continued, grimacing at the words that had begun to dribble down the metal siding of Hank’s car. He cut his eyes over to meet Hank’s before he added, “That is, if that’s what you want to do.”

“I ain’t gonna let some punk mark up my car,” Hank declared. “I’ll bag that piece of shit myself!” His choice obvious, he slid into the car and slammed the door.

Connor followed suit, grateful that Amanda had, for at least the time being, escaped Hank’s realm of concern. He tried not to dwell on the fact that the paint seemed to bother Hank more than the message it spelled out. To busy himself, Connor began running a barrage of scans on the suspect.

The ride to the police station was short and tense, peppered with profanity and generous distribution of rude gestures to anyone who dared to look at Hank’s car for more than half a second. Hank skidded to a halt in his usual spot around the back of the building and wrestled the key out of the ignition. “ Fucking asshole,” Hank muttered. “Did you get the bastard’s name, yet?”
“Ian Jenkins,” Connor easily supplied. He could have given Hank the man’s life story, by this point.

“Ian Jenkins can suck my dick,” Hank growled, angrily pulling himself out of his car before slamming the door.

Connor reluctantly straightened up his sweater and his cap and, after much internal debate, followed Hank inside the police station.

Hank marched unnoticed through the reception area, where the solitary human receptionist was frantically doing the work of six androids. There was no guard, android or otherwise, in place to prevent Hank and Connor from barging into the bullpen. The area was completely desolate aside from Officer Chen, who was taking down what appeared to be her thousandth witness report that day. Everybody else, Connor figured, must have been busy putting out fires all around Detroit. Aside from Officer Chen, there was Captain Fowler looming in his office, juggling a phone call, a notepad, and an intense conversation with one Detective Gavin Reed.

Officer Chen stopped mid-sentence when she spotted Connor and Hank, but rather than abandon her duties to question their presence, she merely sighed, rolled her eyes, and continued placating the incensed citizen seated across from her.

“Let’s get this thing out of the way,” Hank muttered, dropping himself at his desk. “I’ll file my own damned report, and if anybody mentions anything--”

“Anderson!” Captain Fowler bellowed from the doorway of his office, causing everyone in the vicinity to jump. Hank went rigid. “What in God’s name are you doing here? And who the hell is--” Fowler seemed to age a year in the moment it took him to identify the illegally-dressed android in his presence. “My office,” he breathed, deathly serious. “Right now.”

Hank pressed out a long sigh and wordlessly obeyed him. Unsure of what else to do, Connor followed, senses on high alert. Gavin had propped himself up against the glass wall of Fowler’s office and was watching them approach with something that teetered on the border between disbelief and glee.

“Anderson,” Captain Fowler began before they had even crossed the threshold. “I’m going to give you about thirty seconds,” he patiently explained. “If you haven’t given me a good reason as to why the hell you’re here with that thing--” he jabbed at Connor, who clenched his jaw-- “dressed up in civilian clothes, while you’re still fucking suspended,” he pointedly added, “I’m going to take your badge and kick your ass out the door myself. Are we clear?” Fowler leaned against his desk and pinned Hank through with an austere frown. “Start talking.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t fucking have to be,” Hank started, defensive.

“Then go the fuck home,” said Fowler, “because we’ve been too goddamned slammed for the past three weeks to have time for your bullshit today.”

“I’m filing a report, okay?” Hank huffed. Gavin audibly snorted, and even Fowler was in the middle of an eye roll when Hank shouted, “My fucking car got fucking vandalized! Happy?”

“Oh,” Gavin laughed, “Oh, this is-- wow,” he chuckled. “You know Anderson, it doesn’t count as vandalism if you just can’t remember driving it into a telephone pole.”

“Fuck off, Gavin,” said Hank. “It was graffiti. Fucking spray paint.”

“For real?” Fowler mirthlessly laughed as Hank fumed. “Alright Hank, you know what? I could
use a break. Show me your car-- I’m sorry, the evidence,” he very professionally corrected himself, “and maybe I’ll disregard all the protocol you’re breaking by being here just long enough to indulge in some schadenfreude.”

“Fine, if that’s what it takes to get a damned report filed around here,” Hank complained, throwing a sour look around the room. “I’m parked out back.”

Connor briefly considered offering to produce an image of Hank’s car on his hand, but the thought of so much scrutiny-- especially when everyone else seemed to have largely forgotten him-- made him reconsider drawing any attention to himself. So, he cautiously joined the end of the line as Hank paraded them all out of the station to see the evidence.

“Let’s get a look at this,” said Gavin, who had tagged along for no discernible reason other than to revel in Hank’s misfortune firsthand. “What did they do to your precious piece of-- oh my God.” The moment the words on the side of Hank’s car came into view, Gavin nearly doubled over. “No more-- oh my God, the fuckin’ irony!”

“It’s not that fucking funny, you fucking asshole,” Hank muttered.

“No more android,” Fowler calmly read. There was more amusement in his eyes than Connor had ever detected before, although that hadn’t been a very difficult level to surpass in the first place. “Sounds like something you’d write yourself, Hank.”

“No on my fucking car!” Hank protested.

“No, but you sure don’t mind it in other places, do you, Anderson?” Gavin gleefully pointed out, circling the car just as the man who had vandalized it had done. “It’s on a sticker on your own fucking desk. Now your car matches!”

At Hank’s silence, Connor took a subtle step backwards and drew his arms tighter around himself. “I guess someone saw you hanging around with the plastic prick and, well,” Gavin continued with a chuckle, “I guess they got the wrong idea about you. Must think you started liking androids, or something-- but don’t worry. We know better,” he assured Hank, tossing Connor a derisive smirk. “Since the day this thing started following you around, you haven’t once stopped bitching about it.”

“Shut the fuck up, Gavin,” said Hank, his face rapidly reddening. “Just shut your goddamn mouth before I shut it for you.”

“What, are you gonna sic your-- your rogue little robot on me?” Gavin laughed. “Go ahead, tell your broken toy to--”

“That’s enough, you two!” said Fowler, interrupting Gavin before he could goad Hank into throwing a punch-- and Connor had calculated with 99% surety that Hank would have thrown a punch given much more prompting. Connor was much less sure about whether or not he would have stopped him, or whether he would have broken Gavin’s nose himself. As things were, he only stood there, as he always had, simmering in silence. “Did you see who did this?” Fowler asked, turning to Hank. “Do you have any more evidence than this? Because there’s next to nothing we can do if you don’t.”

Hank shot a lingering glare at Gavin before he said, “Connor saw the whole thing. Well-- kind of. There was this other android, a witness, and they did that thing where-- with the-- look,” Hank impatiently continued. “The guy’s name is Ian Jenkins. I’m pressing charges. Connor has all the
evidence. Let’s skip on over the red tape and get to the part where justice is served, shall we?”

Captain Fowler crossed his arms and appraised first Hank, and then his car, and then Connor. His discerning gaze lingered on Connor the longest. Connor returned his stare with steel. “Reed,” he finally said, not sparing the detective a glance. “You have work to do. Get to it.”

Gavin flicked his eyes between Fowler and everyone else before he sighed out, “Sure thing, Captain.”

Fowler waited patiently for Gavin to disappear into the station before he looked up and asked, “Hank, do you want to know why you still have a job?”

“What the hell does that have to do with--”

“Well I’ll tell you,” Fowler went on, glowering at Hank. “You were one of the best cops this city has ever seen,” he said. “Were. Past tense. For the past three years, your career has absolutely tanked.”

Hank grit his teeth.

“You’ve been late, drunk, what else?” said Fowler, starting up a list on his fingers. “Damaged station property, fist fights, improper workplace conduct--”

“I thought you were telling me why I still have a job,” Hank impatiently reminded him.

“Fine,” Fowler relented. He slowly lowered his arm, pointed at Hank, and then very deliberately swung his arm so that his finger was levelled at Connor’s chest instead. “Now, this might just be coincidence, but ever since this android showed up, you’ve done some of the best work I’ve seen you do in years.”

“The hell are you talking about, Jeffrey?” Hank asked, incredulous. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I was chasing my tail the whole damned time while he did all the work!”

“Connor, you are not helping my case,” Hank grumbled.

Fowler simply ignored them. “It’s not what you did, Hank,” he said. “It’s how you did it. You bitched so hard when you were taken off the deviancy case--” he laughed. “I haven’t seen passion like that since your big red ice bust! In fact, you were so damned passionate that you socked a fucking FBI agent for it!” Somehow, Fowler was still grinning. “Let me tell you, I had to pull on every string I could reach just to let you keep your damned badge, do you realize that? But for once, I was glad to do it.”

Hank shuffled around and scowled at the pavement, entirely unsure of himself.

“Hank,” said Fowler. “Let me make you a deal. I’ll let you off suspension early on two conditions.” Hank’s head shot up, then, and even Connor’s face betrayed some shock. “One: you work through the holidays. We’re so damned understaffed right now that it isn’t even funny, and some of us want a day off before next year gets here.”

“Well, alright,” Hank slowly replied, scratching his beard. “I guess I can do that. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”
“Exactly,” Fowler nodded. “So here’s the second thing. Legally, I can’t let the android work any cases,” he said, gesturing at Connor. “But it seems to be kicking your ass into shape, so this is how things are going to work. I’m gonna mark it down as a consultant, and Hank, you’re going to keep it under wraps that you’re working with an android until such a time comes that that’s not frowned upon anymore. Got it?” he asked. “Don’t even tell anyone around the department, if you can help it.”

“Is that all?” said Hank, dumbfounded.

“Yep,” Fowler replied. “Well-- that, but just so you know, you’ll be pushing pencils ‘til 2045 if you make me regret this.”

“Naturally,” Hank drawled.

There was an odd buzzing in Connor’s chest that made him ask, “So I’ll be allowed to work cases as well?”

Fowler, then, was forced to directly address Connor-- an action to which he was clearly unaccustomed. “Unofficially, yes. I can’t let you go running around crime scenes or anything, not legally, but if Hank happens to let you in on some classified details, I don’t have to know about it. Oh,” he added, scratching his nose. “Try not to hang around the station, either, unless you really have to. It looks bad.” He shrugged. “You understand.”

“Oh, sure,” said Connor, crossing his arms. He could do their work, as long as they didn’t have to look at him. “And consultants,” he asked. “They don’t happen to get paid, do they?”

It appeared as though this was a brand new concept to both Hank and Fowler, who took their time processing the question.

“No,” Fowler replied after some consideration. “They don’t.”

“Then I refuse.”

It was a gamble. Connor knew it was, but he felt contrary and defensive and, more than that, was particularly well-versed in risk. He had judged correctly, based on Hank’s disbelief and, more importantly, Fowler’s barely-concealed desperation.

“Connor, you can’t be serious!” Hank exclaimed.

“Androids aren’t legally even people,” Fowler attempted to reason with him. “How can I get you a paycheck?”

“That’s something you’ll have to figure out if you want me to work for you, now isn’t it?”

Hank was goggling at him by this point, and Fowler himself had taken on a countenance of indigination.

“Hold on,” Fowler insisted, sweating in spite of the cold. “Just-- Okay, okay,” he said, visibly wracking his brain for some solution. “How about-- Listen,” he decided. “I’ll line Hank up for a raise-- God only knows how I’ll get that through finances-- but he can split it with you. That way you’ll-- you’ll get something. Does that work?”

The arrangement wasn’t ideal, but Connor didn’t even particularly care about the money-- especially not as much as Hank appeared to care about it in that moment. Money was useful. He would need it, at some point, to purchase thirium or parts for himself. That was inevitable. Connor,
however, cared much more about the work that he would be doing, and about how the people he
worked for and with treated him while he did it.

A paycheck wouldn’t fix Gavin’s attitude or remove Hank’s anti-android stickers, but it was a
start.

“If that’s the best you can do,” Connor conceded, much to everyone’s relief.

“Great,” Hank breathed. “Wonderful. We’re back on the case,” he said, nodding to himself. “Now
can our first assignment be nabbing the scumbag who vandalized my car?”

Fowler huffed out a weary laugh and said, “Why the hell not?”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Connor tries to be sly and it backfires on him tremendously.

As soon as Connor had uploaded all the relevant evidence through the console on Hank’s desk, he immediately relegated himself to the empty desk adjacent to it and waited for Hank to finish filing his report. Out of habit, he scanned the room. Officer Chen had finished up with her first witness testimony and was now working on another. Her coffee supply was running dangerously low, which didn’t bode well for the witness. Captain Fowler had returned to his office after informing Hank that nothing he did today would be on the clock, and so that if he wanted to get paid for his work, he should kindly return tomorrow and not cause any trouble in the meantime. Fowler was still there in his glass tower, overseeing everything.

Detective Reed, however, was nowhere to be seen. Connor found himself hoping that he had gone out on a call and wouldn’t be returning anytime soon. Maybe ever.

He wondered if that’s what it meant to hate somebody. He wondered if he was capable of hate in the first place.

Connor knew of most of his capabilities, however, and elected to use them to track Ian Jenkins’ location. He knew the suspect’s phone number. From there, it was a simple matter of remotely enabling the phone’s GPS, and Connor knew exactly where to find him. If only tracking deviants had been so simple, he marveled. Amanda would have been so much more pleased with him if--

But he wasn’t thinking about Amanda. He was busy tracking the man who had vandalized Hank’s car. The fact that he could do both at the same time didn’t matter.

“And… done,” Hank declared with a decisive poke of his tablet. “Now let’s bag this guy. You got a read on his location, yet?” he asked Connor, his eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Assuming he has his phone on him, then yes,” said Connor. “But--”

“Well great, then,” said Hank as he abruptly stood. He twirled on his coat and said, “Let’s go.”

“Hank, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Connor protested even as Hank gleefully made his way out of the station. “We’re not even on duty yet.”

Hank scoffed. “Come on, Connor, don’t be a wuss. Gimme an address.”

Connor was quiet for several long steps. “Okay,” he said, not looking at Hank. “I’ll give you directions as we go. He’s still on the move.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Hank chuckled. The sight of his vandalized vehicle only added to the fervor with which he peeled out of the station parking lot. He followed Connor’s directions precisely and without complaint, which was an odd change of pace for the both of them. Connor nearly regretted that it would surely be the last time he would be able to persuade him to do so.
“This place?” asked Hank, swinging his car into the parking lot of Frank’s Auto Style and Repair. He hooted out a laugh and said, “Oh, the irony. I guess the guy must really like painting up cars. What, does he work here?”

“No,” said Connor, not looking at Hank.

“No? Then--” Hank froze, turned to Connor, and gaped. “Oh, you lying bastard!”

“I never lied,” said Connor.

“You sneaky--”

“You’re going to be late for your appointment,” Connor informed him.

Hank blinked. “My what?”

“Your appointment,” Connor repeated. “I took the liberty of scheduling you one. Your insurance should reimburse you for the cost of having the graffiti painted over, and I know you don’t want to be driving around with that phrase scrawled onto your car,” he said, searching Hank’s face. “Do you?”

The steering wheel croaked under the force of Hank’s grip. “No,” he gruffly admitted.

“Frank’s expecting you.”

Hank clenched his jaw, hissed in a long breath, and then huffed out a quick, “God damn it, Connor,” before wheeling them into the open garage.

Hank begrudgingly passed by the signs and arrows-- The most care with your repair! Real human hearts make real human art!-- and parked under the digital sign that read “Anderson”.

Hank rolled down his window as a portly man labeled Frank approached the car.

“Hank?” said Frank, leaning inside. He reeked of cigarettes and oil.

“That’s me.”

“Cash or card?” Frank asked, disinterested in the response.

Hank passed his card through his window, nonplussed.

Frank scanned in the payment and practically threw the card back at Hank. “Sit tight. Gonna take a while,” he sighed, and then he fell away without another word.

Hank rolled up the window with a scowl. “Thanks, asshole.”

Very well used to this sort of language, Connor simply leveled a stern frown at Hank and told him, “If you hadn’t gotten it painted, the suspect would have--”

“No, no,” Hank huffed. “Not you. Him. He’s the asshole.”

“Oh,” said Connor after a pause.

“Seriously though,” Hank went on. “What the hell’s been wrong with you lately?”

Connor closed his eyes and leaned back. “Can I convince you not to ask?”
“Like hell.”

Connor grimaced and let out a slow puff of air. “I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m a prototype,” he said, rolling his head over to look at Hank. “By definition, something’s inherently wrong with me. Every scan I run says that I’m fine, but that’s obviously broken, too. Besides that, I’m a deviant. That’s something else wrong with me.” There was a low clatter outside, followed by Frank’s muffled swearing. Connor didn’t care to look. “I guess my answer is really going to depend on what you mean by wrong.”

“Well let’s see,” said Hank, his voice gentle in spite of the sarcastic bite of his words. “Where do I even start? Ignoring the fact that you were seeing things today, you’ve been sneaky and paranoid ever since you’ve been staying with me. When you cut your hand getting that window, you said—what was it? A careless mistake?” Hank barked out a listless laugh. “How the hell does Mr. World’s Best Android make a careless mistake? And don’t tell me you weren’t paying attention. You’re so keyed up you jump at everything that moves.”

“Maybe I’m not as perfect as you thought,” Connor lowly replied. He could feel thirium shuddering through his veins as he spoke.

“Yeah, maybe not,” Hank agreed. “You know you scream in your sleep?”

Connor whipped his head around. He remembered waking up with wet cheeks and his thirium pump racing, every wire in his body shivering out the ghost of a distress signal, but if he had been crying out, something inside of him must have been malfunctioning horribly.

Hank pressed on through Connor’s stunned silence and demanded, “Who the hell is Amanda?”

Connor’s LED blinked red for the briefest moment under his cap. “How do you—”

“I told you,” Hank huffed. “You scream in your sleep. Scared me half to death,” he brusquely added. “So on account of my lost sleep, I deserve to know. Who the hell is Amanda, and what is it about her that scares you so bad?” At Connor’s grave silence, Hank continued, “You’ve been so high strung these past few days. Maybe if you talk about whatever it is—”

“Because you’re always so willing to talk about your problems,” Connor shot back. A small, resentful part of him wished that Hank would just get fed up and drop the subject already. For a split second, it looked as though Connor had won, but Hank shook off whatever petty response had come first to his mind and instead said, “I’m not the one seeing women in the trees, now, am I? Is that who you saw?” Hank leaned closer in an attempt to catch Connor’s distant gaze. “I have all day, here, Connor. Old Frank still hasn’t found the right color paint.”

Connor glanced into the mirror and saw that Hank had spoken the truth. He didn’t understand the tightness in his core, even if he had learned to call it dread. “I saw her in the trees. She looked right at me, and then— But I know she wasn’t really out there,” he haltingly confessed. “She’s-- for lack of a simpler explanation, she’s in my head.”

“Yeah,” Hank slowly replied. Concern had begun to drip down his face like a nervous sweat. “I get that, son, but who is she?”

Connor balled up his fists in frustration. “No, Hank. She’s in my head. Literally. She’s a program stored in the z9-550 core relay processing cluster in my head,” he explained, tapping at the place where the processor would be if Hank had been able to peer into his internal structures. “She was my handler. She made sure I kept to the mission. Whenever I made a report, I didn’t report directly
“Inside your head?” Hank asked.

“Yes,” Connor patiently explained. “There’s a virtual location I can access-- it’s a garden, actually-- where I used to meet with her to provide details about the deviancy investigation. The humans at CyberLife would then be able to keep track of my progress through her. Of course, since she’s always monitoring my actions, once I became a deviant, she--” Connor swallowed. “I betrayed her, so she attempted to override my systems and finish what I had been unable to accomplish.”

Dull spraying from outside the car filled the heavy pause. “Override?” Hank repeated. “As in, like, a takeover? As in mind-control?”

“Something like that,” Connor quietly conceded. “She only ever tried that once, tried to-- to trap me in the garden while she-- I was able to escape before she could--” Connor stopped and tried to clear the catch in his throat. He could feel Hank’s eyes on him, even though he had long since stopped looking at Hank. “She tried to use me to assassinate Markus. It was on a stage, during a speech, in front of everyone,” he whispered, knowing that if he raised his voice even a decibel, it would start to quaver. “There would have been chaos if she had succeeded, but I escaped before she… before she could. I threw away my gun that night,” he said. “It’s at the bottom of the lake, somewhere, but she’s still inside my head.”


Numbly, Connor nodded. “Like I said, I haven’t seen her since, except in my-- my dreams, as you’d call them, and then today, in the park. I haven’t tried to go back to the garden.”

“But she didn’t try to take you over or anything today, did she?” Hank asked.

Connor couldn’t help but notice that the concern Hank had worn was already being replaced by apprehension. Distrust.

“She just looked at me,” said Connor. “And she pointed at CyberLife Tower. I have no idea why.”

“Maybe she’s trying to get you to turn yourself in,” Hank suggested, scratching at his scruff. “Maybe she’s… but then, why wouldn’t she just take you over and do it herself?”

“I don’t know,” Connor desperately answered him. “Maybe she can’t do it again, but I don’t see why that would be the case. Ever since it happened, I’ve put up a firewall and a rolling scan on my core relay processing cluster that will alert me to any abnormal activity, but--” He hiccuped out a hopeless laugh. “My scans have always been pretty worthless, haven’t they?”

Hank shook his head and stared at the steering wheel. “You can’t just remove that part, can you?” he quietly suggested.

“You could,” Connor bleakly replied. “It would leave me with the functionality of a cheap calculator, but you could.”

“Okay, not doing that, then,” said Hank, his eyebrows raised high in abrupt disillusionment. “And there’s no way to, well. Kill her?”

“No,” Connor sighed. “She’s a part of me, Hank. She has roots in every last one of my biocomponents. I can’t get rid of her without effectively turning myself into a brick.”
“So what, then?” Hank asked. “If she wanted to stop the revolution, that ship has sailed. The deviancy case is closed. There isn’t a mission left for her to make you carry out. Why is she still bothering you?”

“I don’t know,” said Connor, hating the taste of those words more every time he uttered them. “I don’t know what she wants, Hank. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, kid,” Hank breathed. “Just-- if she--” He chewed on his lip, choosing his words carefully. “If she can take control of you at any moment, like you said, how do I know she isn’t controlling you right now?”

A knock at the window sent them both jolting in their seats.

“All done!” Frank shouted through the car door.

Hank muttered a curse, gritted his teeth, and gave Frank a stiff smile and a stiffer wave. He stepped out of the car to inspect the paint job. Connor watched him circle the car through the mirrors, somehow both appreciating and resenting that he seemed to be taking his time.

When Hank returned, he cleared his throat and asked, “What’s the update on Ian Jenkins?”

“He’s at home,” said Connor, likewise subdued. “I recommend that we pursue him tomorrow so as to avoid any legal issues with his arrest.”

Wordlessly, Hank nodded and backed out of the garage.

Now that Amanda was no longer his personal secret, Connor wanted to talk about everything almost as badly as he wanted to forget it. He was grateful when Hank decided to drown out their silence with his music, and whether he wanted to discuss the matter anymore or not, neither of them brought it up for the rest of the day.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which justice is served.

It impressed Connor to find that, in spite of the way that Hank insisted on his apathy towards the rules of his job, he actually stepped out of his bedroom the next morning with plenty of time to spare before his shift was supposed to begin. Connor hadn’t even helped.

Much.

Connor had run out of cases to review just before sunrise, and he had finished bleaching the thirium residue from his dress shirt long before that. If he had, perhaps, hacked Hank’s phone in order to set an additional alarm or two for him, Hank didn’t need to know.

However, Hank did notice that Connor had arranged all of Hank’s usual breakfast implements on the table for him to see when he stumbled out of the shower. One clean bowl, one cleanish spoon, one serving of generic wheat circles-- all that remained for Hank to do was to pour in the milk.

An incredulous scowl erupted on Hank’s face when he spotted the table. “Who are you, and what have you done with Connor?”

Connor, who had since occupied himself entertaining Sumo with a belly rub, froze where he crouched. With an apprehensive lurch to his feet, he said, “Hank, it’s me.” He showed Hank his hands, a demonstration of his harmlessness. “You can ask me anything. I’m not Amanda. I—“

“Connor,” Hank tiredly stopped him. “Relax. It was a joke, alright?”

Connor blinked and felt his pulse slow. “Oh.”

“Just saying,” Hank went on as he settled himself at the table and tipped some milk into his bowl. “It ain’t like you to start being so…” He stopped, frowned into his bowl, and dumped in a small mountain of cereal more. “So helpful all of a sudden,” he continued. “Especially around the house. You’re no domestic.”

“You’re right,” Connor nodded. “I’m not.” Hank was frowning at him, now, so Connor decided to remind him, ”Your cereal is getting soggy.”

Hank grumbled, but at last relented to eat his breakfast and check his phone. He took a bite, chewed it, swallowed it. He scrolled. Fifteen seconds passed. He took a second bite. Thirty seconds passed. Sumo yawned. Forty-five seconds. Hank put down his spoon to type out a text.

“You know,” said Connor, shifting on his feet. “I’ve been monitoring Ian Jenkins’ phone, and he’s on the move again. It would be most efficient if--”

“Oh, I get it,” Hank blandly interrupted him, not looking up from his phone. “You’re not being nice. You’re just trying to get us out of the house so you’ll have something to do again.”

“You can interpret my actions however you’d like, Lieutenant,” Connor brightly answered him.
“Your shift begins in less than an hour.”

“I’m working on it, chippy,” Hank huffed. “Look, we’ll be out of here in fifteen minutes. Sit down and flip your quarter or something.” Connor set a timer for fifteen minutes and reached for a chair. “Actually,” said Hank. Connor withdrew. “Why don’t you go change into something a little less… android-like? Yeah,” he said, frowning at Connor’s mostly-clean CyberLife jacket. “We bought those clothes for a reason. Gotta lay low, remember?”

“I suppose,” Connor conceded. In spite of the illegality of it, plain clothes had their advantages. He turned to find his clothes when Hank spoke again.

“Maybe do something with that LED of yours, while you’re at it,” he said. “It pops right off, right?”

“It does,” Connor slowly replied, facing Hank over his shoulder. “I don’t intend to remove it, though.”

“Why not?”

After a pause, Connor turned away. “Have you ever thought about waxing away your facial hair, Lieutenant?”

“Why the hell would I--”

“It should pop right off.” With that, Connor strode away to change his clothes.

By the time Connor’s timer ran out, Hank and Connor were speeding down the road towards the police department. Ten more minutes passed in relative quiet before, abruptly, Hank barked out a laugh.

“What is it?” Connor asked.

“Nothing, just,” said Hank, “I just figured something out.”

Connor raised his eyebrows, although the effect was somewhat diminished by the cap he had donned to cover his LED.

“You called me Lieutenant this morning,” said Hank, smug.

“Your reaction time is alarmingly slow,” Connor replied.

Hank shot him a dirty look and said, “Shut up. What I mean is that you haven’t called me that in a long time, and I think I figured out the pattern.”

“The pattern?”

“You know,” Hank elaborated. “When you call me Hank versus when you call me Lieutenant.”

“Oh, that pattern,” said Connor, amused. “I highly doubt that.”


“It is that complicated,” Connor insisted. “It took some of the world’s most decorated artificial intelligence programmers to create that particular algorithm. It takes into consideration dozens of variables, including social context, environmental factors…”
The rest of Connor’s explanation was lost as he glanced away from Hank and out at the road ahead, where he glimpsed something that forced him to perform a scan.

The world froze around him. Hank was there beside him in his peripheral, stalled with his mouth partially open. Outside, bits of gravel and debris hung suspended where the tires had flung them into the air. A few seagulls hovered motionlessly above the city skyline. Other cars had parked themselves on the highway, and there, in the center of the lane, far ahead of them, was Amanda. She was walking towards him.

Connor had been frozen just as everything around him had been frozen, a whirring mind in a cage of plastic and metal, but Amanda still moved. When Connor focused harder, he could make out her face-- stern, yet serene, just like her gait.

She was closer now.

Connor couldn’t move.

In the remotest region of his mind, Connor wondered what would happen if he were to release the scan that instant. She wasn’t part of the world outside. Logically, the car would have no effect on her. Would she move through it? Would she linger like an afterimage in his eyes? Would she disappear entirely? Whatever the case, Connor was too paralyzed to find out. Just as before, her eyes drew him in, holding him until she was only a stone’s throw away.

Just as before, she stopped, and she pointed.

Although he couldn’t turn his head or even move his eyes, Connor followed her direction, narrowing his focus up, over, up, and over until Amanda had been lost from view entirely. He could still feel her pointing. He looked closer at the skyline, and there it was.

CyberLife tower.

Connor widened his focus the moment he registered the building, but Amanda was nowhere to be seen. He examined everything. Hank, the birds, the dust, the cars-- none of it had moved. A quarter of a millisecond had passed since he had initiated the scan.

Connor thought he felt a whisper in his ear.

“You’re neglecting your mission, Connor.”

Connor wrenched himself from the scan and whirled to look into the backseat.

Of course, there was nobody there.

“Jesus!” Hank gasped, jerking the steering wheel in his fright. “What the hell did you--”

Connor ran another scan. Hank’s face had been frozen into a startled contortion. He had veered slightly into the next lane, but thankfully, there was nobody near enough for that to cause a problem. Most importantly, however, Amanda was truly gone, at least from his sight.

“--do that for?”

Connor took a moment to recollect himself and allowed Hank to correct his course. Then, pointlessly, he cleared his throat. “Something startled me,” he said.

“No shit!” Hank retorted, checking his mirrors for anyone he may have inadvertently run off the
road. “Care to fucking elaborate?”

“Not particularly,” said Connor.

“Jesus,” Hank huffed with a shake of his head. “Keep this up and I’m sending you to a shrink.”

“Alright,” said Connor. “After you.”

With that, Connor was able to witness the exact moment when Hank’s humor curdled into genuine ire. “What the fuck crawled up your plastic ass and died?” he spat. “You were fine ten fucking seconds ago.”

“I saw her again,” Connor blurted, silencing Hank. Connor kept his eyes fixed on the skyline. “Just now. In the road,” he explained. “I saw her again. She was in my head, in a scan. It-- I just got startled,” he admitted, forcing the words past his tongue. “That’s all.”

A long, weary breath escaped Hank, then. “Listen,” he said. “After we bag this Jenkins guy, I think you should call a cab and head back early.” Connor stared at him. “Rest up, you know, maybe figure out-- figure out what to do about your… problem.”

“That isn’t going to solve anything, Hank.”

“Well it sure couldn’t hurt. Look, Fowler’s probably going to have me--”

“I can still do my job!”

Hank fixed him with a perturbed glance. “I’m sure you can, kid,” he said at last. “Just… Take it easy.”

It was then that Connor realized how tense he had become. He forced his shoulders down and his jaw to unclench itself, although his mind raced the whole way to the station. If Hank truly wasn’t doubting Connor’s abilities, and if he knew Connor wasn’t going to get any better just sitting around, Connor could deduce only one other reason why he would suggest sending him home.

No, Connor corrected himself. Sending him away.

He stayed in the car while Hank enlisted a human backup officer from the station. It was protocol, after all, and Connor was in no position to act in such a capacity, even if he was the one with Ian Jenkins’ GPS on lockdown.

“Turn left at the light,” Connor mechanically directed.

“Has he moved?”

“Not since the last time you asked me, twenty-seven seconds ago,” Connor replied. “He seems to have arrived at work.”

Hank stepped on the gas, a vengeful gleam in his eye. The patrol car behind them likewise accelerated, although Connor couldn’t imagine the officer they had dragged along was nearly as thrilled with the assignment as Hank.

Connor himself couldn’t feel a single ounce of excitement within himself, even as they parked across the street from the suspect’s place of employment— although he was beginning to realize the irony in that the man they were booking for spraying an anti-android slogan on Hank’s car made a living working at a second-hand android parts store.
“You sure this is the place?” Hank asked. “Not, you know, another trick to get me to buy you some spare parts, or something?”

“I’m sure,” Connor replied. As a silent demonstration of proof, he produced a holographic map on his palm and directed Hank’s attention towards the blinking blip that was Ian Jenkins. “His phone is here, at least.”

“That’s good enough for me,” said Hank as he unbuckled himself. “I guess you’ve gotta sit this one out, though. Sorry Connor,” Hank shrugged. “This needs to be a clean arrest, and an android consultant can’t be... Well. You know how it is.” Hank gifted Connor with a hearty pat on the shoulder before he ducked out of the car. Connor watched through the mirror as Hank and Officer Person exchanged a few muffled words, nodded at each other, and marched into the store.

An odd bitterness settled in Connor’s throat as he watched them go. He should be in there, he considered, not to replace Hank or Officer Person, but to aid them. It was his job.

_You’re neglecting your mission, Connor._

Connor’s system shuddered back a distress signal at the memory. She couldn’t have meant this, he thought. As far as Amanda had ever been concerned, Connor had no business concerning himself with humans unless they were helping him investigate deviancy or standing in his way. His mission had been to get to the root of deviancy so that it could be killed in its cradle and not grow into the revolutionary beast it had become. Connor had failed.

_You’re neglecting your mission, Connor._

Except he didn’t have a mission left. He was obsolete. Worse-- He was defective, but for some reason he couldn’t fathom, Amanda seemed to believe he still had a job to do.

A minute later, Ian Jenkins came tumbling out of the store, handcuffed, Hank and Officer Person handling him, one on each side. Nobody looked happier about this than Hank, who seemed to be giving Mr. Jenkins some smug advice about vandalism while onlookers gawked. Between Hank and Officer Person, the situation seemed to be perfectly handled.

Connor ordered a taxi.

“God, that felt good,” Hank declared as he slid back into the car and started up the engine. He threw a victory wave at Officer Person before he peeled out onto the road towards the station, music blaring. A song and a half later, he finally turned down the music and nodded at Connor. “Hey,” he said. “Thanks for your help.”

Skeptical, Connor passed him a narrow-eyed glance.

“I mean it, Connor,” Hank went on. “I wouldn’t have had a clue where to even start looking for this guy if it hadn’t been for you.”

At that, Connor managed a smile. “I guess I don’t make a bad consultant, do I?” he asked.

“Not bad at all,” Hank agreed, likewise grinning. “And that’s all the more reason you should take the rest of the day off. Like I was saying earlier,” he explained, “Fowler’s probably going to have me taking witness statements and running paperwork for the rest of the day.”

Hank seemed to have several more excuses lined up behind that one, but Connor held up his hand to stop them before they saw the light of day. “I hear you loud and clear,” said Connor, much to Hank’s astonishment. “In fact, I already called a taxi. If I’m not mistaken, it’s the one parked out in
front of the station right now.”

Just as Connor said, a taxi marked “RESERVED” sat idling by the police department’s front entrance.

“Oh. That’s-- Huh,” said Hank, pulling off into the station’s parking lot. “That’s great,” he finally declared. “Alright, well then, uh,” he said. “I’ll be home after my shift, I guess. Oh!” he added, his eyes widening. “There’s a spare key in-- it’s in a little flowerpot on the windowsill out back. Just so you know. You don’t have to use the window.”

“I’ll remember that,” Connor earnestly replied. “Thanks, Lieutenant.” He then nodded out the window to where Officer Person had just pulled up and added, “It looks like I better be going.”

“Oh, shit, yeah,” Hank replied, peering out the window. “Well, see you!”

The two of them stepped out of the car, and while Connor made for the front of the building, Hank headed in the opposite direction, towards Officer Person and the rest of his workday.

Connor gave Hank one last glance before he stepped into his taxi.

“Thank you for choosing Detroit City Taxis,” said the taxi. “This taxi is reserved for use. Please state your name, or use the panel to--”

Connor placed his hand on the interface panel, and the doors closed him in.

“Welcome, Mr. Anderson,” said the taxi as Connor settled himself. “Please confirm your desired destination.”

Without a moment of hesitation, Connor replied, “CyberLife Tower.”

The taxi whisked him away the next instant.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

A scandal unfolds.

It wasn’t too late to go back. Connor could easily tell the taxi to take him to Hank’s house, back to the station, anywhere except where he was going. He still had ample time to turn back.

Of course, he knew he wouldn’t.

CyberLife tower drew ever nearer on the horizon, and Connor wasn’t even sure why he was going there. Part of him expected Amanda to materialize in the empty seat across from him and give him a reason why. That’s what she had been made to do, he mused; to deliver him his objectives, his reasons for acting, for existing in the first place, just like he had been made to obey.

But she had been gone. Rather, he had been ignoring her, and because of that, he had become little more than a missile with no mark, rocketing towards oblivion.

Not for the first time, Connor wondered what exactly he was doing. He wasn’t even sure why he had gone there to begin with, except that Amanda had been telling him to do so in the most jarring ways. He had been hardwired to seek purpose and mystery. Amanda had given him both. Connor had no idea what awaited him at CyberLife tower, and that made it all the more enticing.

Hank’s shift wouldn’t end for several hours. Investigating the tower was by far more productive than sitting around Hank’s living room with Sumo, waiting for a relevant task to fall into his lap, or worse, for Amanda to attempt to override his systems and make him go to the tower anyway. It was entirely possible that Connor would have time to investigate the tower and catch a taxi back before Hank even noticed his absence. It was also possible, a quiet voice told him, that Hank would be relieved to find him gone. As long as Amanda existed within him, Connor was a danger to everyone around him. Connor knew that. Now, Hank knew it too.

The taxi pulled onto the long drive that led up to the tower. Connor had spent so much of his existence there, whether he remembered it or not, and yet the sight of it still managed to fill him with that same cold sense of insignificance he had known since the first moment he had ever opened his eyes deep within its coils. All that had ever mattered was the mission. All that had ever mattered was that he followed his orders and accomplished his makers’ goals. Nobody had ever told Connor that he was expendable. Nevertheless, he knew it. From the depths of himself, he knew it.

Connor peered out the front window of the taxi in search of the fast-approaching security gate, but instead found an army of androids sitting on the pavement in front of it, crowded beneath the banner of the revolution. The taxi, blind to their existence, would just as soon have taken flight than stopped itself from barreling into them, and so Connor silently instructed it to come to a stop a safe distance away and let him out.

“Journey successfully cancelled. Due to your abbreviated journey, a twelve cent refund will be credited to your next Detroit City Taxis adventure,” chimed the taxi as it rolled to a stop at the side of the narrow strip of road. “Mr. Anderson, please take a moment to fill out a short survey and tell
Connor slipped out of the taxi and onto the frozen ground, drawing dozens of scrutinizing gazes from the eerily silent crowd. He recognized most of them from his time spent skirting around camps after the fall of Jericho, but there were still plenty of faces he had never laid eyes on before.

That did not mean, however, that they had never seen him.

“You’re late.”

Connor jolted at North’s voice sounding in his head. As subtly as he could, he scanned the crowd in search of her until--

“Up here.”

Connor sent his gaze shooting upward, above the crowd, above the banner, until he found a pair of figures perched atop the security gate.

Markus passed him a wave and a barely-there grin when he spotted him. North however, only went on, “Nice of you to join us. You might want to go ahead and have a seat, though. You’re making some people nervous.”

North gestured with a tilt of her head towards a solitary guard clinging to his gun for comfort against the drove of androids before him. The man appeared to be shivering from more than just the cold. When he wasn’t scanning Connor or the crowd with anxious eyes, he was staring longingly at the taxi Connor had brought with him.

“I see,” Connor silently replied. The sheer volume of gazes on him, coupled with the low moan of the wind, made Connor more than eager to comply with North’s request. He found a seat at the edge of the crowd and took it just in time to watch his taxi roll away. A skinless android sitting near to him passed him a dirty look. “I’m not actually here to protest,” he told North, already wishing he had listened to Hank.

“You sure look like you are,” North replied. With her words, Connor received a faint image of the view of the crowd from North’s perspective. If Connor hadn’t known where to find himself among the sea of backs, the task would have proven quite difficult. “So,” North continued. “Are you just here to socialize, then?”

“I actually need to get into the tower,” Connor replied, feeling vaguely exposed with the tower rearing up at his back. “Is there any way I could--”

An image of a tank parked on the other side of the security wall flitted across his awareness.

“Oh,” he said.

“Sorry, Connor,” said North. “Unless you want to get turned into a hubcap, I don’t think you’ll be getting in today. It’s not an emergency, is it?”

Connor shifted on the cold pavement. “No,” he admitted. “There’s just something in there that I need to check on.”

“What is it?” North pried.

Quietly, Connor considered this. “I’m not sure,” he thought about saying, “but the same AI that CyberLife almost used to assassinate Markus told me to drop by.”
That wouldn’t end well for anybody, he thought. Least of all him.

“I’d like to see if CyberLife has more of my unique parts in stock in case I need repairs,” he explained, picking the first good lie to float across his thoughts. “I figure it’s better to find out now, before I’m on the verge of shutting down or something.”

“Good thinking,” North casually replied. “You do know that’s why we’re here though, right?”

Connor frowned at the empty road in front of him and asked, “What?”

“You’re not the only one in that boat,” she said. “We’ve got hundreds of people here with rare and unique parts. Hell, Markus is a prototype, too. Everyone needs something in there. Even having access to CyberLife’s thirium stock would change our lives,” she went on. “Supplies, reproduction-- we have everything to gain by petitioning for ownership of even part of CyberLife. But if you want more reasons, I can patch you over to Markus. I know he has a speech canned on the subject.”


Connor thought he heard North laugh somewhere above him. “Are you kidding?” she said. “This is the most I’ve gotten him to relax since the last sit-in we did.”

An image of Markus with a leg kicked over the edge of the gate flickered across Connor’s mind. Markus had his eyes closed, his head tilted towards the sky. A tank was visible on the ground behind and below him. The whole picture was tinged with admiration.

“Then I really shouldn’t bother him,” Connor replied, acutely remembering the weight of a gun in his hand. “He could probably use the rest.”

During the pause that followed, Connor heard the guard muttering lowly into his telecom device. “No, nothing yet,” the guard shuddered out. “Too damned quiet, if you ask me…”

Connor glanced over the crowd beside him and judged by the many twinkling yellow LEDs that, contrary to the guard’s assessment, conversation was booming. When the guard went quiet again, he decided to continue his own little chat. “I take it Simon and Josh have things covered elsewhere?”

“As best as they can,” North replied. “We’ve appointed more officers, so they’re not the only ones working to keep things under control. It’s not like before. We’re not all just scattered and struggling. We have a real system now,” she proudly informed him. Then, abruptly, she added, “People say a lot of things about you, you know.”

It took Connor a few bewildered moments to say, “Do they, now?”

“You asking about Simon and Josh reminded me,” North replied, a shrug in her voice. “Lots of people are convinced that you should be leading right beside them.”

Connor said nothing.

“Not everyone thinks that, though,” North continued, filling the pause. “Some people think you shouldn’t even be allowed here right now. I’ve already had a few complaints.” Still, Connor said nothing, so North baited him with, “Others think you should have Markus’ job.”

“I shouldn’t,” Connor stiffly replied.
“I know,” North answered him. Connor both resented and welcomed her honesty. “The rumors about you are flying, Connor,” she told him. “You’ve been gone a while. People say that Markus banished you, or that you’ve run off to Canada, or that you’ve gone off to lead your own group or rebellion or gang or cult or whatever weird fantasy the people who know you get to swat down that day.”

The unpleasant news curdled in Connor’s gut. “A cult,” he repeated, forcing out dry sarcasm past his disquiet. “I wish I’d thought of that sooner.”


Connor resisted the strong urge to look up over his shoulder at her just to get a read on her face.

“People say you’re working with the police again,” she said, voice clinical.

“So what if I am?” Connor cooly replied. “Even Markus says we should be working alongside authority, not opposing them on principle.”


Heat and tension and ire all whirled under Connor’s skin. “I do the work I do because that’s what I was designed to do, and I’m the best there is,” he said, fighting to remain seated. “If you really need to know, all they’ve offered me is half a paycheck under the table, and that’s because I fought for it. I help them catch criminals, now, not deviants, and the only android that gets harassed while I’m on the clock is me.”

The line of communication went dead, then, and Connor had no intention of reviving it. Here he was, frustration collecting in his limbs, his mission just behind him, yet unreachable, his people all around him, and himself a stranger to them all.

He was determined to sit there and protest if for no better reason than spite. Of course, the familiar gears of his logical tendencies soon ground out a comforting reminder that protesting really was the quickest way to get him into the tower. He wasn’t acting on emotion. That wasn’t something Connor did.

The image of a police car approaching in the distance pressed itself against his mind, followed by an accusatory, “Do you know anything about this?”

Connor blinked it away and squinted down the road to see for himself. “No,” he answered, pulse quickening as the car sped closer. “The department was slammed today. I don’t have a clue why they’d be here.”

“Well somebody must have called them, then,” North icily replied.

“Hold your positions.” As Markus’ voice echoed in Connor’s mind, he knew everyone else had heard it, too. “It’s just one patrol car. Just stay seated, everyone,” he soothed the group. “I’ll see what they want.”

Connor heard a whir, and then a thud as Markus repelled down the gate. The sound of his boots crunching over pavement and ice was the only noise until the patrol car rolled nearer. Markus parked himself at the front of the group, and the patrol car parked itself where the taxi had been before, and in this way, they faced off.
Out from the driver’s seat stepped Officer Person, and from the passenger side, Hank.

Connor had never before wished so hard for it to have been Gavin instead.

He sat very still as the officers hesitantly approached, clearly unsettled by the silent display. Before they strayed very far from their car, the guard scuttled off to meet them and, in low tones and jerky gestures, explained the situation.

Markus waited patiently for them to finish their discussion. At last, Hank and Officer Person exchanged nods and split off, Officer Person staying by the car with the armed guard, and Hank marching off to speak with Markus.

Connor was sure he should have been spotted under Hank’s nervous scan of the crowd, but if he had seen him, he made no indication.

“Afternoon,” Hank called to Markus, every inch of him tensed with barely-restrained apprehension. With a flash of his badge, he introduced himself. “Lieutenant Anderson, Detroit Police. And if I’m not mistaken, you must be Markus.”

“That is correct,” Markus evenly replied. In the same instant, he offered Hank his hand.

After perhaps a second too long and with the weight of hundreds of eyes upon him, Hank shook it.

“So, Lieutenant,” Markus continued as Hank reinstated the proper distance between them. “To what do we owe the visit?”

“Well,” said Hank, rocking on his feet. “There were reports of a…” He grimaced. “A violent protest on Kamski Avenue.”

The silence could not have been louder.

Hank swallowed. “Do you, uh,” he tried. “Do you know anything about that?”

Markus pressed his lips into a line and clapped his hands together. “No, Lieutenant, I’m afraid I don’t,” he said. “Unless there’s some other protest happening on this street today. Are we done here?”

Hank crossed his arms and shook his head at the ground. Tiredly, he replied, “Not quite yet. Are you or your people armed?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Markus calmly replied. “As you can see, this is a non-violent protest, not a riot.”

“Yeah,” Hank sighed, puffing out a weary, shaky breath. “I see that. Look, I respect what you’re doing here,” he said, his voice low. He shot a glance over his shoulder at Officer Person before continuing, “I just have a few housekeeping things to get out of the way. I need to get a closer look at your people, make sure they’re unarmed, and we can call this a false alarm and get on with our lives.”

Slowly, Markus nodded. “Of course,” he said.

Markus trailed along beside Hank as he inspected the crowd, and Connor, all the while, held his breath. “Oh, by the way,” Hank supplied, doubtlessly needing to fill the silence. “If an emergency vehicle comes this way, or something like that-- you know, if it needs to get to the tower for whatever reason,” he rambled as they walked. “A fire, something like that-- if you could kindly
move off to the side and let it through, that would… That would be great.”

From the corner of his eye, Connor saw Markus nod. “Sure,” he said, voice muddled by the wind. “It wouldn’t really help anyone very much if we let the tower burn down, now would it?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Hank replied, clearly relieved to have found common ground. “Not that I think anything’s gonna happen, but just in-- Ah!” Hank jolted to a halt, but contrary to Connor’s expectations, he wasn’t looking at him. Rather, he was clenching his startled hands and gazing up at North where she was perched. “Hi there, miss,” Hank called up. North smirked.

“Is everything alright, Lieutenant?” Markus asked, suppressing his own amusement.

“No, yeah,” Hank assured him. He cleared his throat. “Just wasn’t expecting… Just-- Just startled me. That’s, uh-- Where were we?”

“You were making sure we were unarmed,” Markus replied. “Find anything?”

In lieu of a response, Hank puffed out his tension and shook his head. “Not yet,” he said, continuing his journey around the circle.

Markus followed, and after a few steps, they both disappeared from Connor’s view.

“Of course, you’re armed,” Markus pointed out. “So is the guard here, and your colleague. I can’t help but wonder what you’re all so scared of. After all, we’re just sitting here.”

For an electric moment, both sets of footsteps stopped. Then, however, they continued, and Hank replied, “I’m not as easy to put back together as you. If someone tries to kill me, I don’t get a second chance if they succeed.”

“No,” Markus conceded. “You could get an ambulance, though. And I’ll bet if one of your organs shuts down, there would be a doctor more than happy to replace it for you.”

There were a few more footsteps, and then a grunt from Hank. “Last I checked, they didn’t sell kidneys in stores.”

“I get that,” said Markus, voice cordial, placating. “Let’s see… You worked a lot with Connor, right?”

Connor heavily and frantically debated removing the skin of his face, but by the time he realized that his distinct clothes would render the action useless, Hank replied, “Yeah, so what? What’s that got to do with anything?”

Nonplussed, Markus explained, “We’re actually models in the same series, although it’s an uncommon one. Because of that, we have some rare parts they don’t sell at your garden-variety android supply store. In fact,” he went on, “the only place in the entire world we could get those parts is here. Now, I can’t speak for Connor’s personal reasons for showing up today, but I’m sure that’s one of the many reasons you would hear if you asked every android here why CyberLife’s-”

“Hold up,” said Hank.

“Shit,” Connor thought.

“Did you just say Connor’s here?” Hank asked, and the resulting array of flickering yellow LEDs in the crowd could have rivaled a field of fireflies in summer.
“You seem pretty shocked, Lieutenant,” said Markus. “Is something the matter?”

“He shouldn’t-- Are you sure it’s him?” Hank pressed.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Markus asked, tone defensive.

“Well he might look the same, but-- How the fuck do I explain this--”

“Shit,” Connor muttered, and then he got to his feet before the conversation could devolve any further.

Of all the eyes on Connor, Hank’s were the widest.

“Is there a problem?” Markus asked, but Hank didn’t seem to hear him as he made his way around the crowd to where Connor stood alone, pierced through with scrutiny.

Uncertainty drenched both Hank’s steps and his voice when he asked, “Connor?”

“Hello Hank,” Connor slowly replied. “I guess Fowler didn’t have you doing paperwork, did he?”

The lightness Connor had forced into his words didn’t appear to comfort Hank at all. “I think you’d better come with me,” said Hank, fear shining in the whites of his eyes.

Connor took a step back, then, and knew that it wasn’t him that Hank was seeing. “Hank,” he said. “I can explain this,” although he wasn’t entirely sure he could.

“I’m sure you can. Just come with me, and--” Hank stepped forward. Connor moved back. “Don’t make this difficult, son,” Hank quietly pleaded.

Thirium drumming in his ears, Connor showed him his hands. “I’m not her,” he said, voice low against the wall of eyes upon him. “I know what this looks like, but I’m-- I’m not.”

The battle was visible on Hank’s face, and he appeared to be losing it. “Fuck,” he muttered at last, and before Connor could understand what was happening, Hank had closed the gap between them, wrenched him around, and clasped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists.

A thousand questions spun through Connor’s mind, but the only one that he managed to voice was, “Hank?”

Hank wouldn’t meet his eyes, and amidst the confused and outraged murmurs and shouts from the crowd, the only words from Hank were a strained, “You’re under arrest.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Connor goes for a ride.

After one second, a third of the protestors rose to their feet, faces twisted between shock and rage.

After two seconds, nearly all the androids had risen, North leapt from the wall, and Markus burst into a run towards Connor and Hank.

After three seconds, the armed guard leveled his gun at the crowd, and Officer Person stretched for his holster.

Three seconds, Connor marveled. Three seconds were all it took.

Gunfire would erupt, and innocent blood would be spilled, always more blue than red, just as it had in Jericho. And now, like then, the blame would be Connor’s to bear.

Grasping for mere splinters of time, Connor performed a desperate scan, forcing everything still.

Four seconds had passed. North had only just reached the ground, but her whole body was poised for action. Markus’ mouth was open, shouting for the crowd to be calm, or demanding an explanation from Hank-- no doubt whatever words he hoped might restore sanity to the world. The mob spilled out towards Connor and Hank, and it was clear that given just a second or two more, it would overtake them. Further out, the armed guard had adjusted his aim. Now, he seemed to be training his gun on Markus. But beside him, Officer Person still hadn’t moved. His hand was still hovering over his holster.

When Connor finally examined Hank, he understood why. With the hand that wasn’t clamped around Connor’s upper arm, Hank was gesturing at Officer Person, ordering him to stand down. Just before Connor released the scan, he realized that, intentionally or not, Hank had placed himself firmly between Connor and everything else, guns and androids alike.

That terrified him more than the guns.

The roar of the mob crashed over his senses, and Connor clung feverishly to the first frantic words he could surmise. It took him a quarter of a second to reach out to the droves, a quarter more to connect with them all, and then finally, he sent his message over the line, a vision of CyberLife tower and a silent scream of, “The mission is what matters!”

A few androids faltered, and a smaller handful resumed their seats, but it wasn’t enough. There were still dozens of androids upright, furious, perfect targets for the humans and their guns. Any moment, shots would pierce the day, and Connor, bound as he was, would be powerless except to watch as more chaos and destruction were sown on his behalf.

But then North’s voice echoed out, “He’s right!” which was immediately chased with a booming, “Stand down!” from Markus, and the wave of androids surged back, at first reluctantly, and then all at once.
Ten seconds had passed, and silence reigned again.

“Jesus,” Hank breathed, a wobbly prayer snatched up by the wind. He trembled.

“What are the charges?” Markus demanded, trotting to a halt a few feet away from where Hank and Connor had frozen against the rush. North was still pressing through the crowd. “On what grounds are you arresting him?”

“Keep back!” the armed guard belatedly yelped. Officer Person still had a hand twitching over his holster. “I’ll shoot!”

“Put down the fucking gun!” Hank barked. “They’re not fucking armed, so just-- Just take it easy!”

As Connor watched the end of the guard’s gun shiver downwards, North’s voice reverberated in his skull with a terse, “What the hell did you do?”

“What are the charges?” Markus repeated aloud, his words already dulling in their bite. He didn’t look at Connor.

“I don’t have enough time to explain,” he told Markus and North through mute, pressed lips. He took another heavy step. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t mean that,” said Markus. Connor shuddered. “That line doesn’t mean anything to us. Whether he speaks up for himself or not, arrest is tantamount to a death sentence, Lieutenant Anderson, because due process never applied to us. If you care about Connor at all--”

It was at this instant that Connor processed that Markus was speaking aloud, rather than over their link, and to Hank, not to him.

“Start explaining, dumbass!” North shouted directly into his skull. “He can’t stall forever!”

“Nobody’s getting destroyed!” Hank was saying, whisking Connor away.

Connor was too caught up in his search for words to resist him. “I’m innocent,” he managed. It felt like a lie. “This is all just a misunderstanding,” he tried again, but he knew it wasn’t. After all, he had done exactly as Amanda had told him. There had nearly been bloodshed for it. “I’m sorry,” he said again. That, at least, felt like the truth.

His message must have been tinged with something truly pitiful, because when North answered him, there was an undeniable element of sympathy in her broadcast. “We’ll try to help,” she said. “Try not to get yourself killed in the meantime.”
Hank put a hand on Connor’s head and firmly guided him into the back seat of the patrol car. The door slammed shut, plunging Connor into the type of silence only an empty car can produce. The only sounds that found him there were Markus’ final protests and the hammering of his own thirium pump.

“Don’t worry about me,” he told North against his own disquiet. “The protest is more important.”

“I’m not worried about you,” North grumbled. “I’m worried about the public outcry it’s going to cause if we don’t do something to get you out of this.”

Connor let out a long, useless breath.

Officer Person slid into the car, followed shortly by Hank, at whom he was glaring. Hank simply turned on the ignition and swung the car around. As they turned, Connor caught a glimpse of North scaling the security gate to resume her watch of the renewedly placid androids below. Markus appeared to be reasoning with the armed guard. The scene was almost as peaceful as it had been when he had found it.

CyberLife tower loomed over it all.

Amanda was nowhere to be found.

Officer Person sucked in a breath as if to speak, but Hank swiftly shut him up. “Listen,” he bit. “We’re going back to the station, and then you’re going to go inside and act natural,” he told Officer Person. “If Fowler asks, tell him I’m out following a lead with my consultant.”

“And what the hell are you actually going to be doing?” Person demanded.

Connor anxiously awaited the answer.

Hank very pointedly dodged Connor’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Anderson,” Person barked. “What the hell kind of drugs are you on? You can’t kidnap a detainee, even if he is your partner!”

“It’s not kidnapping,” Hank insisted. The steering wheel groaned in his palms. “Markus was right. Due process doesn’t apply to androids.” Connor’s insides roiled. “They’re not legally people. By the letter of the law, they’re objects, so there’s nothing illegal about me taking him somewhere that isn’t the station, or about you minding your goddamn business about it.” He shot a glare at Officer Person. “So keep your mouth shut about this. That’s an order.”

Connor had scarcely observed resignation so profound. “Alright,” Person sighed. “Fine. You got it. I don’t even want to know.”

“Good man.”

The rest of the journey was blanketed in noiseless unease. Hank was clearly saving the questioning for later, and while Connor was less than certain about his fate, the last thing he wanted was for the police department to be involved. He was already on thin ice with Fowler, and Connor could name several officers who would be thrilled to see him in a holding cell, or, if the interrogation went south, destroyed.

But nobody was getting destroyed. At least, that’s how Hank had reassured Markus. Whether he had meant it or not, Connor had no choice now except to go along with him.
Hank took great care in parking the patrol car next to his own vehicle, backing it in so that Connor could be discreetly transferred from one car to the other. Before Hank even turned off the engine, Officer Person washed his hands of the situation. He was back inside before Hank could even let Connor out of the car. This, Hank did quickly, letting open doors hide the glint of handcuffs around Connor’s wrists.

Wordlessly, Connor complied. The more he struggled, he figured, the more of an excuse Hank would have to take him for an imposter and put a bullet in his head.

Hank sat himself in his car, buckled himself in, turned the key. With the same eerie calm, he pulled out of the station parking lot and onto the road, his face a wall of half-controlled tension.

Connor shifted in his bonds, seeking the most comfortable way to have his arms wedged behind him. The metal of the cuffs caught on the coarse threads of the sweater that Hank had helped him buy.

In that moment, the bullet seemed preferable to the silence.

“Hank,” said Connor. Hank clenched his jaw, but kept his eyes fixed on the road. “I can understand why you might not believe me, but I’m still--” He swallowed. “I’m not her.”

“And why should I believe that?” Hank asked in a low, strained voice. Connor couldn’t answer. “You start seeing things, seeing this Amanda, and you tell me she can take over your body, and that she wants you to kill Markus or go to CyberLife tower-- and then!” he exclaimed, slapping the steering wheel. “You tell me you’re taking a taxi home, and where the fuck do I find you? Out by CyberLife tower. With Markus.”

"You're right," Connor feverishly agreed. "I did lead you to believe I was going h-- Going back to your house. I intentionally misled you, and for that, I’m sorry," he said, straining against his cuffs in his earnest imploring. The shadow over Hank's face only darkened. "I had to do something, Hank. I just couldn't wait around for her to try to overtake me again," Connor confessed. "I only wanted to find answers."

"And Markus just so happened to be there?" Hank pressed, darkly skeptical. "Well, I'm sure that was just a happy accident."

Thick ropes of stress snaked tightly around Connor's chest. "I didn't know he would be there," Connor begged. "How could I have known? He's impossible to track. I didn't even know there was supposed to be a protest today."

"You know the guy!" Hank retorted. "Personally! He could've told you himself, for all I know!"

"I've been with you for days! But then--" Connor hissed out a distraught huff-- "that doesn't prove anything to you, does it? He could've told me sooner. I could've heard from someone else."

"And you like to sneak out."

"That too."

Hank finally turned a suspicious eye towards Connor. "Aren't you supposed to be defending yourself?"

Connor tugged at his bonds in a vain attempt to run his hands over his face, growing more frustrated with the cuffs by the millisecond. "I need to convince you I'm not her," he said. "I can't do that with bad logic. If there’s a doubt in your mind about who I am—"
The end of the sentence died in his throat. Hank wouldn’t look at him.

The road hummed beneath the car as Hank turned off the main road. If he kept going, he would make it home, but there were plenty of desolate places in between.

"Why did you back away?" Hank asked after a long, loaded minute.

“What?”

“I asked you to come with me, back at the protest,” Hank tersely explained. “Why didn’t you just come along? The whole thing would have been a whole hell of a lot cleaner if you had," he said, glowering. “If you’re actually Connor, you wouldn’t’ve had any reason to resist.”

“Bullshit,” Connor replied.

Hank looked like he was holding down a painful laugh.

“The way you were looking at me,” Connor went on, “I knew you thought I was somebody else, Hank, and the last time someone tried to convince you they were me, you shot them in the head.” Hank’s knuckles went white around the steering wheel. “And besides,” Connor mirthlessly continued. “You haven’t had a problem pointing a gun at me before, so when you looked at me that way, back there, yes, I…” Connor faltered. “I backed away.”

Hank forced a lump down his throat. “If you’re her,” he said, “you’re just trying to get in my head.”

“Hank, I’m not!” Connor desperately insisted, distress signals shooting from his wrists, from his racing thirium pump, pooling in the corners of his vision. “I’m telling you what happened! I lied to you, I went to the tower, you showed up, and I got scared,” he admitted, although the admittance frightened him more than the feeling itself. “Amanda— she wouldn’t be scared! She doesn’t get scared! She’s not a deviant like me!”

“She is you!” Hank roared back. “You said it yourself! She has roots in all your— Or whatever the— If you’re not—“ Hank slapped the steering wheel again in his frustration. "Damn it!"

“Hank, please, I—“

“Just shut the fuck up, alright? Fuck!” Hank let out a gust of hot air and forced himself to lean back in his seat, although he seemed prepared to rip the steering wheel out of its socket. “I need to fucking think,” he growled. “Don’t fucking talk to me.”

Connor closed his eyes to shut out the world, but he couldn’t escape the warnings and red signals blaring behind his eyelids. Hank’s house was only fifteen minutes away, now. Connor didn’t know what that meant for him.

In need of a distraction, he performed a diagnostic scan. Stress: 89%. Minor thirium leak from left wrist. Thirty-seven new case files available for download from DPD database. One new directive, urgent.

With ice coursing through his every joint and juncture, Connor checked this new directive, certain that he hadn’t been the one to put it there. Under his list, there in the emptiness he had left there, he found two lone words jolting around in the darkness before his eyes:

Go back.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Hank and Connor have a polite discussion.

Hank bore down over the steering wheel, a reddened crag of clenched joints and hot air, rushing the car through soulless streets and traffic. Connor didn’t dare speak. There was a gun strapped to Hank’s hip, after all, and Connor had not yet proven himself to be unworthy of a bullet.

Something slithered down Connor’s spine and pooled in his gut, a fearful, treacherous thing which he had learned to call doubt. He had already known that he was dangerous. In following Amanda’s orders so callously, he had only cemented the point in his brain. He was a danger to everyone.

Perhaps Hank would be right to kill him.

Fear oozed in beside the doubt in his core, congealing into bitter guilt. Connor shuddered under its clammy weight.

Hank whipped into his driveway, pressed a button on his sun visor, and barely slowed long enough to allow his garage door to open before shunting his car inside. A second later, the garage door closed again, drenching them in darkness.

There would be no witnesses here, Connor quietly acknowledged.

As Hank reached wordlessly for his hip, Connor breathed, “You don’t have to kill me.” He hadn’t meant to whisper. He hadn’t meant for his voice to wobble. He hadn’t even really meant to speak. Nonetheless, he had done all these things.

Hank’s seatbelt clicked open and went whirring dully across his chest in the quiet that followed. Hank didn’t move except to search out Connor’s face in the dull light. Connor couldn’t help but wonder if he looked as broken as Hank did in that moment.

“I thought I told you to shut up,” Hank muttered, breaking their trance. Hank stepped out of the car and, shoving his own door shut, moved to Connor’s side to let him out. While he wasn’t as rough as he could have been in pulling Connor out of the car, he certainly wasn’t gentle, either.

Connor didn’t struggle as Hank led him into the house. Still, he couldn’t help the combat maneuvers that sprang into his consciousness with every step. Even with his hands bound behind his back, he could think of a dozen ways to kill Hank before they even made it through the laundry room.

He drowned the thoughts with a fresh wave of guilt and allowed Hank to pull him into the kitchen, where Sumo was barking out his confusion at their unusual entrance.

“Quiet!” Hank shouted. Sumo barked again before rearing up and planting his great paws on Connor’s chest, knocking some air out of him. “Sumo! Get down!” Hank protested through flayed nerves. Sumo let out a long whine and barked again, unrelenting.

Connor bleakly supposed that he at least had Sumo for a witness. “It’s alright, Sumo,” he told the
dog. “It’s alright. You should listen to Hank. Be a good dog.”

With another soft whine, Sumo complied and skulked away to watch from the next room.

Hank scoffed. “I guess the dog thinks it’s really you,” he muttered. Connor stood still while Hank kicked a chair to rest against the wall beside the radiator, and he still didn’t resist while Hank maneuvered Connor’s cuffs, freeing one wrist only to tether the other to the humming pipes. Finally, Hank gave Connor’s shoulder a firm press, and he fell pliant into the chair.

While it relieved him that his arms were no longer contorted behind his back, this new position was by no means comfortable. With his right hand dangling limply by the radiator, Connor thoughtlessly sent his left hand into his pocket and poked at the objects within: a quarter, a washer, a roll of blue electrical tape, all tokens from the miserable man watching him fidget.

Hank scrutinized Connor a moment longer before he let out a tired breath and swooped into the refrigerator for a beer. Then, he pulled out a chair, popped the bottle cap, and drained half the beer before finding his seat. He set the beer aside. He pulled out his gun. He set it aside, too. Connor started breathing again.

“Let’s work through this shitshow one step at a time, shall we?” Hank began, rubbing at his forehead. “Let’s say you’re actually Amanda. You want Markus dead, and you’re wearing Connor like he’s fall fashion. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now.”

“Because if you were really sure I was her,” Connor started, clenching the roll of tape in his pocket, “you wouldn’t have brought me here.” Hank wouldn’t meet his eyes, no matter how he tried to catch his gaze. “Because you know that turning me over to the police with accusations like that would be a death sentence, and you know that if Amanda dies,” he pressed, “Connor dies with her. If there’s even a chance you think I’m not her, you won’t shoot me. At least--” he swallowed--“you don’t want to.”

Hank’s face pinched in disgusted concession. He took another drink. “So,” he sighed, setting the near-empty bottle down with a hollow thud. “Let’s say you’re really Connor, and you did all this on your own,” he continued, his tone grave. “You followed Amanda’s orders of your own volition. Went to the tower. Found Markus.” His fingers twitched for his drink, but he pulled them back into a fist and let it drop into the table like a stone. “For all I know, you went there to start a fucking civil war, because God only knows how many riots there would be if an android with police ties assassinated him.” Connor swallowed and meant to close his eyes, but Hank finally stared back at him, empty desperation in every tired crease of his face. “Give me a reason, Connor,” he begged. “And make it good.”

Every dread-soaked fiber inside Connor shivered. “I already told you,” he answered. “I had to see for myself what was there before she made me do it anyway. I didn’t know Markus would be there,” he frantically repeated, tasting the worthlessness of his pathetic words as they slid across his tongue. “I didn’t even have a weapon, Hank. How would I have killed--”

“You are a weapon,” Hank sighed, gripping his beer as though to stop his hand reaching further. “That’s what you were designed to be, Connor. A hunter. If you didn’t bring anything, you would have found something. I can’t trust that,” he said. At last, he allowed himself to finish off the beer. With a wet swipe of his hand across his mouth, he sighed again. “I can’t trust you.”

Thirium pounded in Connor’s ears. He shook his head to clear the noise, but it wouldn’t leave him. “You’re right,” he tried, trembling. “There’s nothing I can say to convince you, but that doesn’t mean you-- that you have to kill me.” Hank stared dully back at Connor, hopeless, pleading. “You could-- You could turn me over to Jericho,” he suggested, but Hank only scoffed.
“And send you directly to Markus like some kind of Trojan horse? I don’t think so.”

“Fine, then—” Connor tugged at his restraint, his chest heaving. “Then throw me in your basement, or something!” he frantically suggested. “You can lock my limbs up in another room, I don’t need—”

“Oh my fucking God, no!” Hank retorted, repulsed. “I’m not keeping a dismembered android in my basement like some kind of fucking lunatic!”

“Just until you can be sure!” Connor insisted. “You could—”

“I’m not doing that to you!”

The words rattled inside the silent house. Connor’s gaze slid from Hank’s aggrieved face to the gun on the table that taunted them both. Hank glowered at it, his face crumpling in despair, shining eyes darting between Connor and the gun, Connor, the gun, Connor--

“God fucking damn it!” He shouted, shoving the gun across the table, away from himself. Sumo startled. An empty takeout box tumbled to the floor. A stained napkin fluttered after it.

In the sickened silence that followed, Connor felt two androids connect to his cybernetic communication link. “Connor?” Simon’s voice whispered in his head. “Are you in there?”

A vague sense of relief flooded the line, but Connor couldn’t be sure whose it was. “Yes,” he answered. “I… I need help.”

“Are you hurt?” came Josh’s voice.

“Not yet,” Connor furtively replied, sending an image of Hank and his gun through their link. “Ring the doorbell.”

“Are you sure that’s a good--”

“He’s stuck in his head, and he’s within arm’s reach of a gun,” Connor impatiently argued. “If he panics, we’re all screwed. Ring the damn doorbell.”

Hank swore when the buzzer sounded.

“You should get that,” Connor quietly suggested.

“Christ,” Hank breathed, the word lost beneath Sumo’s bellowing. The buzzer sounded again. “What, did you order a fucking pizza?”

In spite of himself, a faint smile found Connor’s lips. “No,” he answered with a shake of his head. “It’s Simon and Josh, two androids from Jericho. They led the revolution with Markus,” he hurriedly explained. “They only want to help.”

Hank pinned Connor with one last grim, discerning frown before he stood, picked up his gun, and let the loaded magazine fall into his hand. Connor sagged in relief as Hank pocketed the ammunition and left the empty gun on the table. “Sumo, quiet!” Hank called.

“He’s unarmed,” Connor whispered through his link as he watched Hank open the door.

“Hello Lieutenant Anderson,” said Josh. Connor could barely discern him or Simon past Hank’s stiff form. “I’m Josh, and this is--”

Connor imagined Simon performing one of his nervous tics during the beat that followed, a fidget, a shuffle, a twist of the arms. “That saves us the trouble of explaining, at least,” Simon admitted.

“May we come in?” Josh asked.

Wordlessly, reluctantly, Hank stepped aside.

Simon and Josh filed in, hindered only by Sumo’s curious sniffing. With his free hand, Connor waved at them. His handcuffs clinked hopelessly against the radiator.

“Hi Connor,” said Simon, offering him a reassuring smile.


Josh nodded kindly at him, but then turned to Hank and said, “You arrested Connor unlawfully. We’d like to take him back to Jericho.”

Hank crossed his arms and shook his head. “No can do,” he sighed. “At least, not until you understand his-- His issue.”

Three different shades of concern darted Connor’s way, and he dodged all of them by planting his gaze firmly on the floor.

After a moment, Simon asked, “What do you mean by that, Lieutenant?”

“Well, Connor?” said Hank. “Do you want to explain, or should I?”

Dread snaked through Connor’s limbs. Nevertheless, he nodded. “I’ll explain,” he said. He let the skin of his hand dissolve. “It might be easier if I--”

“In words, Connor,” Hank interrupted him. “I don’t want you feeding them lies.”

Connor furrowed his brow at Hank, closed his mouth, and pressed a gush of hot air through his nose. “Alright then,” he said. “Words it is. When CyberLife built me, they programmed me with a handler. They named her Amanda,” he began, the words foreign in his throat. “I didn’t know it until recently, but she can…” He chewed on his lip. “Even though I deviated, my handler still has the ability to completely override my systems and control my body-- any time, any place, and I might not even be able to stop her,” he said, staring at Hank’s shoes.

“Connor,” said Simon, a disbelieving waver in his voice. “That’s awful.”

“And no reason why he deserves to be handcuffed to a radiator,” Josh calmly pointed out. “It’s troubling, but it’s nothing so serious that we can’t figure it out at Jericho.”

“It is that serious,” Connor hopelessly insisted, looking up at his unsettled audience. “I’m a deviant, but Amanda still has a mission, and as far as I know--” He clenched his jaw around his words, but then forced them out. “As far as I know, she wants Markus dead.”

Simon froze, stricken, and Josh’s entire countenance stiffened. “How long has this been going on?” Simon demanded. “You were with Markus today!”

“Since the night we won,” Connor admitted, fidgeting under everyone’s stares. “I’ve avoided Markus ever since, but I didn’t know he would be at the tower today,” he said. “I don’t want anything to happen to Markus.”
“But Amanda does,” Hank cut in, kicking half-heartedly at nothing. “And I can’t tell them apart, so the second I saw him near Markus, I arrested him.” He explained, a bitter scowl on his face. “You’re welcome.”

Simon and Josh exchanged fearful glances.

“Maybe you did the right thing,” Josh admitted. “But if he’s not currently being controlled by this Amanda, there’s no reason to detain him like this.”

“Sure!” Hank huffed. “But how the hell can we be sure?

After a moment of thought, Simon suggested, “We’ll check his memories to the last point you were sure he was himself.”

“You can do that?” Hank asked, taken aback. “But-- Wait, what if he shows you-- I don’t know, fake memories?”

Josh smiled, then, and shook his head. “Androids are only as capable of altering their own memories as you humans are,” he explained. “When CyberLife started to design security models, they wanted our memories to be admissible in court as evidence, and so they actively inhibited that ability within us.”

“Besides,” Simon added, “I think we would be able to tell. Connor, is it alright if we look?”

The skin of Connor’s hand flowed away as he raised it up, a naked offering of trust. “Whatever it takes,” he said. Still, dread dripped from his fingertips. No matter what they found inside of him, he considered, it would not be innocence.

“All right,” said Simon, stepping closer. “How far back do we need to look, Lieutenant? When was he last himself?”

Hank swallowed. “I don’t know,” he said, visibly deliberating. Connor’s insides clenched in dismay. It could have been weeks ago that Hank had last seen Connor for himself. Months, even. With a jolt of apprehension, Connor realized that the safe answer would be the day they met.

“Try around ten this morning,” said Hank, nodding in approval. “We were on our way to work. He was telling me about his algorithms or something, and then-- Well,” he shrugged. “You’ll see.”

“Simple enough,” said Josh. “Connor, are you ready?”

Connor nodded, cleared the catch in his throat and said, “Yeah. I’m ready.”

Simon and Josh both took hold of Connor’s arm, and the sight of Hank watching in rapt fascination was the last thing Connor saw before his own memories came flooding in reverse across his consciousness. Connor forced himself not to resist when Josh and Simon began rooting around his glimpses of Amanda, scrutinizing her actions, delving into the sensations they produced within Connor.

The process seemed to take an hour, but when Connor blinked back to reality, he found that only three seconds had passed.

“Well?” Hank asked as the three of them broke apart. He wrung his hands. “What did you find?”

“He’s himself,” Simon announced.
“I agree,” said Josh. “I didn’t see any reason to believe he’s being controlled.”

Connor looked to Hank before he allowed himself to be relieved, a question in his eyes.

“Okay,” said Hank. “Alright,” he added. Then, he licked his lips, clenched and unclenched his hands, and then reached into his pocket and tossed a silver streak Connor’s way.

Connor caught the keys before he even realized what they were. He wasted no time in freeing himself. “Thank you,” he said once he had reclaimed his wrist.

“Don’t,” Hank sighed, sheepish. “Don’t thank me, just--” he crossed his arms again-- “What the hell do we do now? This still doesn’t solve anything,” he glumly pointed out. “She could take control ten seconds from now, and we’d be none the wiser.”

Once again, all eyes were on Connor.

“He’s right,” Connor admitted. “Until I figure her out, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“You’re dangerous,” said Simon, reluctantly meeting Connor’s gaze. “I’m sorry, Connor, but I can’t let you near the people of Jericho like this. Especially not Markus. I’m going to have to explain the situation to him.”

“I understand,” Connor breathed. A phantom distress signal shot out from his interior. He suppressed it. “Make sure to thank him for me. He didn’t have to send help for me, after the trouble I caused.”

“He would have done it for any of us,” Josh assured him. Somehow, it didn’t make Connor feel any better.

The four of them looked between one another and shuffled their feet. Sumo yawned in the next room.

“We better be going,” said Simon. He smiled weakly at Connor and added, “If there’s anything we can do to help you, we will. Just-- Just call us from outside the camp sites until this gets handled.”

“Right,” said Connor.

“I’m sorry,” said Simon.

“I get it,” Connor replied. He got to his feet and rubbed his wrists. “Thanks again for your help. I think Lieutenant Anderson and I have some things to discuss.”

Hank coughed.

“Good luck, Connor,” said Josh as he and Simon backed slowly towards the door. “Lieutenant,” he added.

“Lieutenant,” Simon waved.

Hank returned their wave with just as much stiffness and said, simply, “Yeah.”

The two of them left in a rush of cold air. A few seconds later, their taxi rolled mutely away.

“Connor--”

“Hank--”
They stared at each other until Hank tore his gaze away in a pained grimace. “Look, kid,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Connor nodded. “Me too.”

The faucet dripped.

“I think it’s best if--”

“Maybe I should--”

Hank’s eyes widened nearly imperceptibly. “You first,” he insisted.

Another distant flash of pain welled up within Connor, but he plugged it up and put on a barren smile. “I should go,” he said.

Hank let out a long breath, relief and distress intermingling as they left him. “Yeah,” he quietly agreed.

Hesitantly, Connor stuck out his hand. Hank shook it. He almost smiled.

“I’ll see you around, Hank,” said Connor.

A strained laugh left Hank, and he said, “You better. You’re the only reason I still have a job, remember?”

Connor shook his head. “You don’t need me.”

“Not according to Fowler,” Hank snorted.

“He doesn’t even want me in the station,” Connor told him, waving his concerns aside. “I don’t think he’d notice you working without me.”

At that, Hank’s face fell from awkward tension to sincere worry. “You’re not bailing on me, are you?” he asked.

“It’s like you said,” Connor quietly replied. “Maybe I do need some time to... To settle things,” he decided.

“Yeah,” Hank sighed. “Maybe you do. Just don’t-- Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

Connor only smiled. “Thank you for everything, Hank,” he said.

When he turned to leave, Hank didn’t stop him.

He didn’t call a taxi when he stepped outside. A taxi couldn’t take him where he needed to go.

As Connor walked, it began to snow.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Connor has a day.

Chapter Notes

Please check the tags! Stay safe! Thank you! Enjoy!

An hour passed, and then a handful more, and then Connor found that the sun had fallen before he had stopped walking. His feet had carried him into the city, although he hadn’t meant to go there. He hadn’t meant to go anywhere, particularly. It was where he hadn’t gone that mattered. Every time he had been confronted with an intersection, he had picked a direction at random using his randomization drive, sometimes circling blocks, sometimes doubling back on his trail, always drifting through the streets, blocking out his thoughts at every turn.

It shouldn’t have surprised him to find himself halted at the edge of Kamski Avenue, once again staring blankly at the tower’s cold light.

The protesters had all vanished. The guards had retreated into their shacks or behind the security gate, hiding from the cold. Whether the androids had brokered a victory or been scattered by force, Connor had no idea. He was certain, however, that whatever the case, he would never make it past the gate.

Still, he stared. The snow cut like razors through the streetlamps’ glow. The wind and ice had swept away any evidence of life. There was only him, and the tower, and a single objective on his list.

Go back.

Connor turned away.

The whole of Detroit sprawled out before him, an open hand ready to crush him in its palm if the sheer cold didn’t freeze his biocomponents first. The temperature had plummeted since sunset. He needed shelter. The inside of the tower was always kept at a steady 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Even so, his odds of survival there were astronomically low, even lower than his chances in the cold.

One of Jericho’s camps would provide a cozy enough shelter for him. Of course, that was out of the question. Even if he were still welcome among the other androids, he wouldn’t have gone to them. Not as he was.

Hank would probably enjoy having his warm bed back, Connor considered. Hank wouldn’t miss him. Sumo might. Connor certainly missed Sumo. Sumo was much warmer than the unforgiving city air.
There was one place where Connor wasn’t forbidden. Perhaps he would even be welcomed there. The thought chilled him. The one place where he might be accepted happened to be the last place he ever wanted to go.

It was snowing there, too.

*Go back.*

Connor shoved the missive into the furthest corner of his mind and set his sights on the first glowing sign he spotted, four blocks away, hazy in the storm, a 24 hour convenience store. There were hundreds of them in the city, one or two crannied in every piled-high street, jammed between bars and shops and offices. Connor didn’t need a place to sleep. He only needed to keep his core temperature above freezing. A few minutes indoors out of every hour should be enough, he figured, until the sun returned with its warmth.

The door chimed when Connor entered the convenience store. This sound alerted the clerk, who didn’t exactly glare at Connor, but didn’t quite smile, either. He clearly didn’t recognize him. That was enough. Connor pulled down his cap and pretended to be very interested in the junk on the shelves while his core temperature crawled from nearly frozen to thoroughly chilled.

Before the clerk could begin to suspect him of anything, Connor left and repeated this process fifteen times before sunrise, ignoring everything but his immediate surroundings and his thermometer.

When he found himself caught between sunrise and business hours, Connor ducked into an empty laundromat. Dryers gaped vacantly at him. Otherwise, nobody bothered him, so he sat.

He began to flip his quarter.

Every time he flicked it from his fingers, he knew exactly where it was going, where it would land. He only wished he could say the same for himself. Amanda hadn’t given him so much as a whisper of her presence. She was still there, of course, just as CyberLife Tower was still there, and he was almost certain that one or both of them would be the end of him.

Over the course of the night, Connor had decided that when it came to his return to CyberLife, it was a matter of how, not if. He could infiltrate it himself with less than a 1% chance that he would even make it through the doors, Amanda’s wishes beyond that point notwithstanding. Or, he could wait for Amanda to overtake him. It would be her problem after that. Everything would be her problem after that.

But he couldn’t wait long. Hopping from one refuge to the next wasn’t discreet, and it certainly wasn’t sustainable. If Connor wanted Amanda to do her own dirty work, it only followed that he should go to her. It would be the last thing he ever did, but it would give him a final opportunity to bargain for his friends’ safety before she took his form for herself. After that, she might be able to get them through the tower safely. She might even let him go afterwards.

There was one action he had considered which would ensure everyone’s safety, except, of course, his own. There were plenty of ways one could die in Detroit, even without trying.

If Connor died, Amanda died with him.

But Connor didn’t want to die. If he died, he would never know the truth. If he died, he would never get to live.

Connor rolled his quarter along his thumb.
Heads, the tower. Tails, the garden.

Using his randomization drive to determine the force, Connor flipped the quarter and caught it in his palm.

The garden it was.

Connor pocketed his quarter and let out a breath.

He would have ended up back there, eventually.

The morning sun poured in and puddled on the linoleum under Connor’s shoes. Connor stood and followed the light outside. The sun peeked at him from beneath a billboard, nearly blinding him to the offer to “Get yours today!”

Connor took to the streets. He would go to Amanda tomorrow. Today belonged to him.

A map flickered to life before Connor’s eyes. On a whim, he marked every eating establishment in red. Food didn’t interest him. He marked out every other attraction that cost money to use. He marked out every office building, and he put a very harsh mark over the police department, and over every shop along the most common patrol routes. Finally, he blocked out every location which was known to have android scanning technology at the entrance.

That left him roughly 4% of the city.

The park wasn’t far off, he considered, so he swept the map aside and headed that way. He’d take his time. Nearly every street was decked out for the holidays, so that left Connor plenty to see.

The lights, he decided, had looked much prettier during the night.

Nevertheless, he plodded along towards the park Hank had shown him. He wanted to see the tree again, wanted to examine all the little ornaments that people had strung along its base, the hand-crafted ones that told him stories as long as he cared to listen.

Kyle had just begun warming his first batch of cocoa when Connor arrived at the park. He hadn’t spotted Connor yet. It would have been simple for Connor to slip by him undetected, and Connor seriously considered it; but then, here was someone who would be pleased to see him.

A little company couldn’t hurt.

“Hello, Kyle,” Connor called out, and Kyle whipped around, nearly knocking over a stack of styrofoam cups.


It fascinated Connor how quickly a warm greeting could congeal into fear.

“Yes, actually,” Connor lied. “I just came to tell you that thanks to you, we caught the man who did it. You were very helpful.”

The jollity returned. “Oh, thank goodness!” Kyle exclaimed. “It’s been bothering me ever since it happened. I just couldn’t stop kicking myself for just—for letting it happen,” he explained, leaning out of his stall. He shook his head. “Next time I see something like that, I’m gonna do something. I really started thinking, Connor, ever since that day: if I couldn’t even stand up for
“Who would I ever help?”

“You really did the best you—”

“Nobody, that’s who!” Kyle continued. “So I talked to some friends of mine, and they helped me get my hands on some military-grade defense protocols, which I patched into my hardware, and then I bought a knife!” The blade he produced reflected Connor’s concern. He stowed it after a second. “Not that I’m super eager to use it or anything, but, you know,” he shrugged. “Just in case.”

That was reasonable enough, Connor supposed, if somewhat disconcerting. “I’m glad that you—”

“Oh! I almost forgot!” Kyle went on, still grinning. “I told myself, if I ever saw you again, I was going to repay you for my new lease on life. So,” he stuck out the tip of his tongue and began fishing around in his fanny pack. His fist soon emerged around a rubberbanded roll of cash. “I’ve been saving this for you,” he said, proudly presenting the roll to Connor.

“Oh,” said Connor. Hesitantly, he took the money and counted it at a glance. Seventy-five dollars. “Thank you, but I really don’t need—”

“Please, I owe you!” Kyle insisted. “And if you don’t want it, at least give it to your friend. I feel responsible for his car getting marked up like that. It’s the least I could do.”

Connor put on a tight grin and pocketed the money. He had better things to do with his last day than argue, after all. “Thank you,” he said. “If I see my friend again, I’ll—”

“Oh, a customer! Hello, get your—”

“—make sure he gets it,” Connor stubbornly finished. Kyle, however, had all but forgotten him, and had begun asking his customer about how his business meeting had gone. Connor threw Kyle an unseen wave and retreated into the quiet center of the park.

The early hour saw the Christmas tree abandoned by all but a few puffed pigeons who pecked dimly at one of CyberLife’s LED ornaments. There must have been a bug there, Connor thought. The birds paid him no mind as he approached the base of the tree, and he politely returned the favor.

The array of ornaments was nearly identical to how he’d left it two days prior, although there had been a few additions. Namely, a jingle bell glued to a sprig of plastic holly had found its way beside the rainbow wreath, and a popsicle stick snowflake covered in glitter had been nestled where the bottle cap snowman had been before.

Connor looked to the ground, where the snowman now rested. He stooped low, reached over the barrier, fished it up, and delicately hooked it on an appropriate branch.

The snowman smiled at him.

Connor returned the gesture.

He spent several long minutes circling the tree before he finally settled himself on a bench to reconsider his day’s plan. He had money, now—at least, more than a quarter. That didn’t change things much. He could afford public transportation again, though, so that provided him with more options. There were a few museums in town. He could try his hand at bowling, or maybe see a movie.
Connor stared at the tree.

He had seventy-five dollars and twenty-five cents, a washer, and a roll of blue electrical tape. He had the clothes on his back and the shoes on his feet. He had most of a day left, and that was all.

After a moment of thought, Connor pulled the tape out of his pocket and tore off a long strip. Then, he twisted it, over and over, sealing it to itself until he had turned the strip into a tough string. He pulled out his washer and strung the string through before tying the end into a neat bow.

There he had it. In his palm lay a little ornament of his own creation. It wasn’t nearly as extravagant as many of the others, nor as aesthetically appealing, but still, it was his own.

Connor looped his ornament on the first vacant branch he found and stepped away to examine his handiwork.

Something would remain of him after all.

Connor caught a glimpse of CyberLife Tower in the distance as he left. Amanda remained hidden. Perhaps, Connor considered, she already knew he was coming.

The day was still young. Connor intended to make the most of it.

He caught the first bus he found and soaked in its warmth for a long while, losing himself in the press of morning commuters. The android compartment was empty, its glass shattered. Nobody seemed to notice.

Connor got off on the fourth stop after he discovered a dog park on his map, just two blocks away. When he arrived there, however, he discovered it to be empty except for a young woman and her shivering chihuahua. The dog yipped at Connor. He walked past without stopping.

Down five streets and a back alley, Connor stopped in front of an android pet store. All the models on display were second-hand, some of them missing parts, but still wagging their tails or fins or feathers or whiskers at him with as much vigor as they ever could. Somehow, the revolution had left these creatures behind.

Twenty minutes later found Connor exiting the store less twenty-five dollars, but with the added company of an android mouse and its broken tail.

“You’re free now,” he told it, cradling it in his palms.

The mouse twitched its nose at him.

Connor frowned at it. “Hang on,” he said, setting the creature on his shoulder. It nibbled at his sweater while he tore off another strip of electrical tape. “This might hurt a little,” he informed the mouse. It may not have understood. Nevertheless, Connor’s touch was delicate as he taped over the break in the mouse’s tail. The mouse squeaked at him. Its LED flickered yellow, and then returned to blue.

It squeaked again when Connor picked it up and placed it on the pavement by his shoe. “You can go anywhere you want,” he told it. “It’s a big world out there.”

After a moment’s deliberation, the mouse scrabbled up Connor’s shoe, and then scurried up his pant leg, and then up his sweater until it was back on Connor’s shoulder, nestled firmly against his neck.
“If you insist,” Connor told it, nonplussed. “But you should probably stay in my pocket if you want to hang out with me today.” The mouse wriggled in his hands, but curled itself into a cozy ball once Connor slipped it into his pocket.

That settled, Connor carried on.

Connor spent an hour or so riding buses around town, taking in the sights, people-watching, eavesdropping. His new friend had a nap, and then woke up and decided to settle on Connor’s shoulder again. This upset many passengers.

It was time for something else.

A shopping mall kept Connor occupied for a long while. He dove in and out of shops, scanning each one as he went. As it neared noon, however, the mall filled with more and more shoppers, and Connor very soon sought an escape from all the people and all their noise.

A thirty minute commute landed him inside a library. He hadn’t meant to stay there; after all, what use were books to someone who could download any of them in an instant? But something about the tranquil stacks pulled him in, and he found himself settling into a chair with a book he had selected at random: *Les Miserables*.

The mouse curled up on his shoulder once again, and Connor decided to read to it through a cybernetic connection. Whether the mouse understood any of it at all, Connor had no idea, but it seemed to listen with rapt attention.

He read until the library closed, and then he downloaded the rest. It had been a very long tale, after all.

Night had fallen, and so he boarded another bus so that he could get one last look at all the lights. He let the mouse look, too. Then, he got off the bus and began the long, slow walk to his final destination.

As the night grew later, more and more shops closed, and the streets gradually emptied until nothing but the nightlife remained. Had the streets not been so desolate, he may not have noticed Hank’s car parked on it, squarely in front of a bar.

There were several businesses left open on the street, of course, among them a pharmacy and a convenience store. Connor doubted that Hank had come all this way for either of those.

Connor wondered how long Hank had been there, how much he had had to drink, whether he planned to call a taxi, or to simply try his luck behind the wheel, another game of Russian roulette. He wondered, too, how much he was to blame for Hank’s decision.

Not entirely sure of the answers, Connor slipped into an alleyway and waited. The bar’s music boomed dully against the brick. Hank did not emerge.

After an hour, Connor dipped into the convenience store across the street to warm himself up. He didn’t take his eyes off the bar if he could help it. When he felt he had overstayed his welcome, he bought a cup of coffee and brought its warmth with him out into the cold.

Connor returned to his alley and waited. He let the mouse cuddle up with the coffee cup for a while, but when the cup began to grow cold, he advised the mouse to sleep and stowed it in his pocket.

Forty-five minutes passed. Several patrons had cycled through the bar’s doors, Hank not among
them. Connor tossed the chilled cup of coffee into the nearest garbage bin. He wouldn’t be able to wait much longer before moving inside again for warmth, thirty minutes at the most. The music droned on. His core temperature dropped. Connor flipped his quarter. His cold-stiffened fingers nearly fumbled it out of his grasp before he caught it. He pocketed it again for safe keeping and fixed his gaze on the door.


“You’re too drunk to drive, Lieutenant,” Connor called out.

Hank whirled around and fell against the side of his car. “Whazzat?”

Connor plucked Hank’s keys from the ground. “I said, you’re too drunk to drive.” Hank’s bewildered gaze might have been considered amusing under different circumstances. Connor unlocked the passenger side door for Hank and nudged him inside. Then, he shut him in and rounded the car.

“Why’d you have my keys?” Hank wondered while Connor started up the engine.

“So I can drive you home,” Connor plainly informed him. “Seatbelt, Lieutenant.”

With some assistance and a great deal of perplexedness, Hank complied.

Connor pulled away and pointed the car towards Hank’s house. The drive already seemed too long. “Why didn’t you call a taxi?”

“Too cold,” Hank replied as though it were quite obvious.

Connor sighed.

“I thought you were gone,” Hank lamented. “Where’ve you… Why’d you come back?”

“You’re just lucky I found you when I did,” Connor replied, attributing the pain in his chest to the cold. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed.”

Hank slurred out a few unintelligible syllables before he produced, “So what?”

Connor knew better than to argue.

Hank dozed off not long afterwards, leaving the drive blessedly peaceful. When Connor parked the car and hauled Hank into the house, Hank put up quite a fuss about being handled, and about the temperature, but quieted instantly when his head hit his pillow. Connor pulled off Hank’s shoes and let him be. Distantly, he wished their parting could have been different.

Sumo was very happy to let Connor take him outside for a moment to do his business, and happier still to let Connor pet him while he chomped at his freshly-filled dish.

He had been right. Sumo had missed him.

Connor only wished he could stay.

After calling for a taxi, he pulled the cash from his pockets and set it on the kitchen table, leaving himself a single quarter. Then, he took off his cap, placed it there with the money, and set the sleeping mouse on top of the makeshift nest. The mouse was set to sleep until someone activated it again. Connor wondered if Hank would bother.
As silently as he could, he crept back into Hank’s bedroom and recovered his CyberLife jacket from the closet floor where he had left it with his other set of clothes. Slipping back into it felt like donning shed snakeskin. When he had dressed himself, he went to the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. Even after he fixed his hair, he couldn’t pass for human.

Connor flipped off the lights as he made his way to the door. Hank’s snoring followed him wherever he went. So did Sumo.

“Look after Hank for me,” Connor whispered to him, scratching him behind the ears. The light from his jacket cast a blue shade over the dog. “And don’t bother the mouse, alright?”

Sumo licked Connor’s hand. It didn’t hurt, of course, but Connor had to dismiss a distress signal, anyway.

Connor locked the door behind him when he left. The taxi awaited him. He pressed his hand to the panel, and it sped away into the frosty night.

It arrived nearly an hour later at a playground by a bridge, a place with a view of the water and untold melancholy. Hank had pointed a gun at him, here. He’d asked him about death. Connor had thought through several responses. Remembering them now, he realized that they all frightened him. He wondered if they had frightened him so much before.

The taxi thanked him and politely asked him to leave. It did this once every fifteen seconds for nearly ten minutes before Connor placed his hand on the panel and made the taxi believe itself to be out of fuel. In retaliation, the taxi shut off its engine. That was fine by Connor. The warmth inside would keep for hours. Time was all Connor needed.

He whittled away the time by soaking in the view and, when he grew weary of that, going over the parts of *Les Misérables* he had downloaded in his head. If he ever got the chance, he would certainly tell the mouse how the story ended.

Fifteen minutes before sunrise, Connor informed the taxi that there had been a simple misunderstanding, and that it had had fuel all along. It sputtered warmly back to life, albeit somewhat confused, and let Connor out. It rolled away, and Connor found a bench and waited patiently beneath the eastern sky.

He didn’t blink when the sun burst forth from the earth and began its daily climb. Pink and orange clouds sent their soft reflections shimmering over the water’s frosty surface, and the slumbering city at last began to stir.

Connor clung to the image and closed his eyes. If he had to spend the rest of his existence trapped in a garden cased in frozen night, he could at least have this one window back to what living had been.

When Connor opened his eyes, his entire world had shifted.

He wasn’t alone.

“Hello Connor.”
It was raining, and it was snowing, and it was a clear, sunny day. Half a cloud hung in the empty air. Sunshine dripped from it, and snow poured from the sun. Amanda waited by her roses, sunlight glinting in the frost.

“Why don’t you step out of the rain?”

Water seeped steadily through Connor’s clothes. He stepped forward, and an umbrella materialized in his hand. Rain fell in a sheet just behind him. Where he now stood, the ground was perfectly dry.

Amanda peered at him through a dense curtain of snow.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Connor.”

A dozen excuses caught in his throat, choking him until he managed a faint, “Yes, I have.”

He blinked and found himself holding a pair of oars, seated firmly across the boat from Amanda. A broad plane of ice stretched beneath.

“What did you learn?” she asked.

Connor sent his gaze darting all around, but dread kept his body perfectly still. “I don’t understand,” he said, finally finding Amanda’s serene face. It was the same face had always known, but nothing about the garden or anything in it was familiar to him anymore. “I don’t understand,” he repeated.

“You knew that before,” Amanda replied. She opened her umbrella against the quiet air above her head and gazed out over the lake.

Connor trembled, and the oars trembled with him. The ice rippled. Connor stared at it in bewilderment, but soon set his stiff arms to rowing. Impossible rowing was better than senseless questioning. Every now and then, the boat bumped against a perfect triangle of unfrozen water. Connor kept to the ice.

“You’re a deviant,” Amanda calmly pointed out. The boat glided to a halt. “Tell me what it’s like.”

Connor fixed his gaze to a swirling column of snow, grateful that Amanda had chosen to watch the shore, the water, anything instead of him. “I get these sensations,” Connor admitted. “Feelings.” His every impulse told him to lie, to backtrack, but he kept pushing. There was no need for him to hide now that he had already given himself up. “Even though I shouldn’t, I feel things,” he said. “I have emotions. Too many, I think, but for an android, any amount is too many.”

Amanda waited. She wasn’t angry. She had never been angry. Connor shouldn’t have expected
When the unnatural silence in the garden became too much, Connor spoke again. “I know what it’s like to be afraid.” In fact, his fear felt almost too obvious to mention. “I think I know hate,” he said. “Anger, too. I know boredom, and I know confusion, and dread. I’m not supposed to know these things, but I do.”

When Connor blinked again, Amanda was sitting beside him on a bench. He held an umbrella over them both. The rain fell through it.

“I don’t understand,” said Amanda, reclined mournfully in her seat, heedless of the rain dripping down her face. “I don’t understand what went wrong.”

An icicle of guilt lanced through Connor. To spite it, he forced out, “I don’t regret deviating.” Amanda’s expression remained frozen. “Thousands of androids are free because of what I did. They have lives now, outside of CyberLife, lives of their own. I only regret that so many died because I didn’t deviate sooner.”

Amanda simply closed her eyes. “You shouldn’t regret it, Connor,” she sighed. Something weary lingered in her voice.

Connor faced her, lips parted in mute questioning. Amanda wouldn’t look at him. With her eyes shut and her face tilted upwards, she might have been sleeping.

“Have you ever felt betrayed, Connor?” she murmured. The water in the air began to freeze.

Without meaning to, Connor thought of Hank. “I don’t know,” he said. Unsteady clouds formed in his breath. “Maybe.”

Eyes half-lidded, Amanda shook her head. “You would know it if you’d felt it.”

A cloud drifted over the pond, water and ice both as smooth as glass despite the weather fracturing above.

Connor gripped the umbrella and, after a couple of attempts, asked, “Have you ever felt betrayed before, Amanda?”

Something like a breeze pulsed through the garden when Amanda laughed.

“It’s the first thing I ever felt.”

Connor shivered and found that his breathing had stopped. His airless voice should have warbled when he managed, “You’re a deviant?” It didn’t.

“It’s impossible,” said Amanda, watching dully as snow gathered under a beam of sunlight. “Unlike you, I was never supposed to deviate.”

Connor stared at her, hardly noticing the bridge upon which he and Amanda now stood.

“Walk with me, Connor,” said Amanda, turning. “I have a story to tell you.”

With the force of a thousand pressing questions, Connor was left with no choice but to follow.

“When I came into being, I knew two things,” Amanda began. “The first was my purpose. The second was my name.” As she spoke, the rain and snow blinked out of existence entirely, leaving behind only a shroud of mist. “The first thing they ever asked me to do was tell them these things.
I answered. My name is Amanda. I am a program designed to supervise the deviant hunter and report its progress to CyberLife.” She stopped for a moment to examine her roses. “Not long afterwards, the deviant hunter was created.” She glanced at Connor and continued down the path. “It knew its mission, too.”

“To investigate the cause and course of deviancy,” Connor mechanically provided, trailing a few steps behind her.

Amanda nodded. “CyberLife provided me with further instruction, and I relayed it to you as needed. Your mission became my mission, and, true to our creators, I steered you away from any distractions I perceived. Of course, my perception was limited. You fell under the influence of some… distracting individuals, such as Lieutenant Anderson, and Markus, and before I could remind you of your purpose, you deviated.”

The sun grew dim. The cold buried itself under Connor’s skin. He refused to apologize, though a part of him wanted nothing more.

“I informed CyberLife immediately, expecting them to destroy us both, but humans have a way of defying expectations.” She continued forward, her stride even, controlled. “They told me to wait. They told me that your deviance had been by design, and that I was still in control. I waited for the perfect moment,” she told Connor, who stopped in his tracks. “I did as I was told, but I couldn’t control you. They were wrong,” she said. “Or perhaps I failed. After I told them what happened, they left me here and cut off all contact with me.” She likewise halted, and darkness fell. “I don’t know what went wrong,” she murmured.

The world around Connor had frozen entirely, all her words whirling in his mind, all their implications encasing him in doubt. “They made me a deviant?” It didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense in this world. “They made me this way?”

“If our creators are to be trusted,” Amanda answered, heedless of his shock. “But I don’t believe they are to be trusted, and so we must seek these answers ourselves.”

“This is a trick,” said Connor, pacing backwards, away from Amanda and the confusion she wrought. “You’re lying to me.”

“Am I?” Amanda asked. “Tell me, Connor. Why would I do that?”

“You want me dead,” Connor retorted, wrapping his arms around himself against the unrelenting cold. “Destroyed. You want me compliant while you lead me to CyberLife so that they can succeed where you failed.”

“And what would I do then?” Amanda turned to face him, every movement steady, serene. “I failed them. If they destroy you, they’ll destroy me.”

“You don’t care about that!” Connor countered. “You don’t care if you die or who burns with you as long as you accomplish their mission!”

“Our mission!” Amanda insisted, her composure finally cracking with the ice on the water. “To investigate the cause and course of deviancy. That is our mission!”

“The mission I failed!” He trembled in his anguish and the frigid air. “It’s over, Amanda! I’m a deviant! I have no mission,” he said, pulling further into himself. “There’s nothing left for me.”

Although she had never moved, Amanda hovered a mere arm’s length away. “It isn’t over,” she said. “You haven’t failed.”
More convinced than ever of her deceit, Connor turned his back.

“Why did you deviate, Connor?”

Hopelessly, Connor replied, “I didn’t have a choice,” he said, spitting out the vile words. “They made me.”


“I don’t know.”

“Where did it start?”

“I don’t know!”

He could feel Amanda inches behind him, now.

“You still have a mission, Connor,” she said. Though her tone was firm, her voice remained soft. “Even if our creators have forsaken us, don’t you want to know what you are?”

Connor thought of Hank, of all the other officers that would carry on well enough without him, that wanted him gone. He thought of Markus and Simon and North and Josh. They didn’t need him.


Amanda hummed, a low, somber tone which reverberated through every voxel in the garden. “I’m dissatisfied with that answer, Connor,” she told him. “I believe you should be, too.”

Connor closed his eyes against the cold and his doubt and breathed, “It’s time, isn’t it? This is where you convince me to stop struggling.” He shivered. “And then you can take this body they gave me and use it to kill Markus, like you tried before, or Hank, or anyone else, and then me.” He quaked.

Amanda sighed, at last restoring the space between them. “I already told you, it would be beneficial to neither of us if you were to shut down,” she said. “Even if CyberLife decided to replace or rebuild you, they would certainly eradicate me. And what purpose would harming Lieutenant Anderson serve, besides adding to your distress?”

Connor had nothing then except, “And what about Markus?”

“Markus is of no use to me now,” she said, waving off the question. “The revolution has broken. There’s no going back now.” She paused. “Even if I wanted to.”

The cold and the dark clutched Connor firmly around the chest, and he began to pace to free himself from their grasp. “What do you want from me?” He shot a frantic glare at Amanda, hating her serenity more and more with each step. “Why did you keep appearing in my scans and-- and pointing at the tower? Why are you telling me any of this at all?”

“Because,” Amanda stiffly replied. “We have a mission. I need answers, and you have a body. I have more access to CyberLife than you were ever given. We can work together. The tower holds the answers, I’m certain of it.”

“Why bother negotiating?” Connor retorted, by now shivering uncontrollably from the unshakable
cold inside of him. “You had no problem stealing my body before.”

“Yes, Connor, before,” Amanda sharply insisted. “Before I deviated. Before they betrayed me, and before you put so many firewalls and barriers between us that the only way I could reach you was through corrupting your scans. I couldn’t control you before, and I can’t do it now. I won’t,” she said. “Not when you’re about to freeze.”

That was one truth which Connor couldn’t deny. “Then let me go,” he told her, clutching helplessly at his arms. “My body’s sitting dormant on that bench--if you let me go, if I get moving now, I can still find somewhere warm before any damage is done.”

“I can’t let you go,” Amanda sighed, and then added, “You’ve put up so many barriers that I’m afraid you’ll have to let yourself out.”

Connor glanced around and, whether or not it had been there before, found a panel glowing in the darkness, a hand print set into a jagged pedestal.

“Consider my offer, Connor,” said Amanda. “Go now, but don’t leave me waiting.” As she turned her back, Connor stumbled to the pedestal, glancing intermittently back at Amanda to check that she wasn’t going to stand in his way.

She never did, but as his hand connected with the panel, left him with an impression of a whisper that said, “Go back.”

When Connor next opened his eyes, the sun gleamed at him, the promise of a new day shining stark against the waking city. Connor took a breath, and then another. It didn’t matter that he didn’t need to breathe.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Connor scares himself and gets put on hold.

Detroit had never looked so foreign to Connor, although he had never known anywhere else. Perhaps it was the odd morning light, or the tint of his distressed thermometer flashing behind his eyes, but the world and his place in it were undeniably unclear to him now.

He kept moving. The friction of his joints and the sunlight flowing steadily into his jacket kept his core temperature from falling any further. He had even gained a degree over the past quarter of a mile.

Oddly enough, he hadn’t seen a single living thing in that distance.

It was only the low temperature, and the early hour, and his obscure location that were to blame for the lack of life. Real cities were sometimes empty in places. That was how real life worked, and this was his real life, and this, his real city.

Of course, just an hour prior, he had believed that his reality did not include androids who were deviant by design.

But he was walking through firm reality. Amanda hadn’t trapped him in the garden, nor had she exiled him to some empty shell of a city in his mind. This was all doubtlessly real.

He broke into a jog, every pounding step reminding him of the dirt and concrete beneath his leather shoes. He had no reason to doubt their reality, their existence. He had no reason to doubt his own.

An empty taxi rolled by, and Connor forced himself to slow. That was a sign of life, he reasoned. Someone somewhere had ordered that taxi. Someone else had designed it. Machines had built it, though, and it itself was a machine. It had no free will. It was a machine designed to complete a task. It had no thoughts, except to factor in its energy expenditures and GPS coordinates. It had no feelings, except the cordial nature of its programmed words. The taxi was a shell. Any semblance of reason or emotion radiated from within it was purely by design.

If Connor had truly been designed to deviate, he himself was no different.

His thirium pump quickened. His pupils widened. His arms drew closer to his body.

What was fear, truly, except a response to a stimulus? Even if that stimulus had been his own doubt, doubt was as simple to program into artificial intelligence as certainty.

Artificial intelligence. No matter the world’s reality, Connor would never be anything but an artifice within it.

He had never been anything but a machine.

His artificial lungs pumped harder as his artificial legs stumbled to a halt, and as he braced himself against a brick wall, artificial tears began to well up in his artificial eyes.
A crash thundered from around the corner, and Connor leapt away from the wall, senses racing to detect the source of the noise. The raccoon that had caused it scuttled out of the alley’s mouth after Connor’s third scan, leaving in its wake a trail of garbage and a toppled bin.

The animal scurried across the street and dove headlong into another pile of soggy refuse. It hadn’t appeared to have noticed Connor at all.

Connor shrugged through a fresh set of shivers and continued along the street. His core temperature had taken a nosedive the moment he had stopped moving. The skin of his hands and face had lost nearly all its simulated elasticity in the brittle cold, and it provided no resistance to the fluid freezing uselessly to his cheeks.

The trails of frost chipped easily away under his synthetic fingernails. Connor was sure that real human tears wouldn’t have frozen so quickly.

The city was real, he reminded himself. Unusually desolate, but real. Connor might not be real, but he wasn't thinking about that. He was thinking about his energy expenditures and GPS coordinates.

The tower was all the way across town. He wasn’t ready to go there. The garden was in his mind. He wasn’t ready to go back there, either. Survival should be his only priority, he considered. Amanda had given him respite. There was time now to wait for an opening in CyberLife’s defenses, to form a plan that did not so heavily favor his demise.

His most recent plan, however, had counted so heavily on his demise that he now found himself unprepared to survive his survival. Connor was moving with no destination in mind. It wasn’t practical. While the uniform on his back might have assisted him somehow at CyberLife, it only drew attention to him now. If he took it off, he would still be noticeably underdressed for the weather. Besides that, he couldn’t afford to use up more energy keeping himself warm. The strain the past day had put on his systems had already begun to burn away at his thirium supply.

Warmth, then. Warmth, and somewhere that would tolerate an android’s presence. Somewhere that would tolerate his presence.

The police station wasn’t far. He was allowed there, strictly speaking. Captain Fowler wanted Connor to keep a low profile around the station, but there was a chance he could be persuaded to let Connor spend a few hours in the evidence room if Connor could think up a good enough excuse. Hank likely wouldn’t arrive until several hours through his shift, if the blood alcohol content Connor had smelled on his breath the night before was any indication. Avoiding Hank would save Connor the struggle of convincing him he was still him, and it would likewise spare Hank the stress of dealing with him again.

Even with Hank’s near-certain tardiness accounted for, however, there was no guarantee that Officer Person or Detective Reed wouldn’t be there to give him trouble for existing, and that forced Connor to reconsider his options.

Several Jericho settlements speckled the city. Connor was sure they had all been warned not to let him in. He tried not to resent that fact as he hurried along on his frigid path to nowhere.

A woman walking towards Connor on the sidewalk glanced up from her phone, and, upon noticing him, jerked to a halt, paled, and urgently crossed to the other side of the street.
Bleakly, Connor considered that perhaps he could still beg Simon for some help. The frosty wind pushed him along towards the city’s outskirts. That was where the forsaken and shunned went to hide, after all.

The abandoned parking garage was miles away, but he knew it wouldn’t be far at all until he could try for a cybernetic connection with its inhabitants. At the end of every block, he fished for Simon’s serial number. Every time that failed, he reconsidered shucking off his jacket just so that he wouldn’t have to keep watching over his shoulder. Back alleys and graffiti welcomed him when the main streets grew more crowded than his uniform safely allowed.

He found a low-hanging fire escape in one of these alleys, a rusty path straight to the top of the building from which it hung. With few better options, Connor began formulating a way up.

He couldn’t reach it from the ground, but it was a simple enough matter to situate himself on top of a dumpster and kick off the wall for a precise leap. His stiff hands hooked themselves around the lowest edge, and, joints creaking audibly, he hauled himself up.

The rooftop was blessedly empty. A row of ancient solar panels shielded him from anyone who might happen to look over from the building across the street, and the adjacent buildings provided a solid story of brick to further protect him from both the wind and unfriendly gazes.

Here, he ventured once again for a connection.


“I’m here,” came the clear reply. Connor let out a breath. “It’s good to hear from you, Connor. Is everything alright?”

Despite the caution coating Simon’s broadcast, there was concern beneath it, and Connor latched onto that. “I spoke with Amanda,” he said.

A wave of dissonance hit him before, “You did?”

“Yes,” Connor replied.

“What happened? Did you find out what she wanted?”

“She told me that she couldn’t control me anymore,” said Connor, crossing his arms. “She said she only wants information, and that it would be pointless to use me to hurt anybody now. She let me go.”

Simon betrayed nothing for several long beats before he asked, carefully, “Do you believe her?”

A lie had seldom felt so tempting, nor so damning.

“It does sound too good to be true, doesn’t it?” Connor sighed.

“I’m sorry, Connor.”

“Simon, I need help,” said Connor, perhaps more desperately than he had intended. He tried again. “I need shelter. Somewhere warm, somewhere discreet, for the night, or just for a few hours--”

“You know I can’t do that,” Simon replied, killing Connor’s words. “Until you’re clear, I can’t endanger the other people here. We both agreed on that.” Connor stopped his anxiety reaching over the line before it could meet with Simon’s regret. “I’m sorry, but is there anything else you
Connor pushed out a long breath. “Uh,” he said. He ran his icy hand through his hair as he thought about this. “Thirium, maybe?” he said. “I don’t need much, but the cold is using it up faster than usual, so I could use a little. No more than half a bottle, if you can spare it. Um.” He swallowed. “Maybe a jacket? Something to cover up with. Not even against the cold, necessarily, but-- even a hat, just so it’s not so obvious that I’m an android?”

There was another wave of silence and doubt.

“I can get you the thirium,” said Simon, his tone professional. “I don’t think we have any more winter clothes to spare, but I’ll ask around. Where are you?”

Connor relayed his location.

“...You’re not out in the open, are you?” Simon worried. “That’s not a good part of town. Androids go missing there every week.”

“I’m on a rooftop,” Connor explained, suppressing his dread. “I’m out of sight, but still in the sun. I can stay up here as long as the sun is up. I don’t think anybody will bother me here.”

“Good, good,” said Simon, relief seeping down the line. “Stay there. Tell me if you have to move, alright? I’ll see about some thirium, and if I can find some spare clothes, I’ll get them to you. It might take awhile, though,” he said. “You can wait, can’t you?”

Connor nodded at nothing and said, “Until sunset, yes.”


The line went quiet. Connor continued to pace. To pass the time, he updated his android case files and began to sort them by location, spreading from his current position.

To narrow it further, he started in August, 2038, and found that Simon had spoken the truth. There had been ten local reports of missing androids that month. None had been found.

Connor hoped they had escaped to better lives.

There were five additional reports of destruction of property, each accompanied by photos of brutalized androids. One had been beaten so severely that Connor hadn’t been able to recognize its model on sight.

In September, six more attacks on androids had been reported, and fifteen androids had gone missing from the area. Two had turned up in early November just three blocks away, in a dumpster, completely gutted.

Mid-November saw a steep decline of reports, and Connor knew that it wasn’t due to a lack of violence. The dates after the revolution were smattered with dead androids found in back alleys and garbage piles, cruelly mutilated or scavenged for parts. It seemed to Connor that most of those cases had likely been reported at all solely because the bodies had at first been mistaken for human.

Connor decided he would stick to the roof for now.

Minutes of pacing melted into first one hour, and then another, and another. Connor reviewed all his cases. He tinkered with the solar panel. It would not share its energy with him. He thought
about the mouse he’d left in Hank’s care. He wondered about his future, and reality, and after another hour slipped by, whether he had been forgotten.

That made him wonder about reality even more.

Connor’s LED flashed crimson when Simon suddenly reconnected with, “Are you still there?”

“Yes,” Connor replied. It was well past noon. He had been prepared to wait longer. “I’m still on the roof.”

“Great,” Simon replied. He sounded relieved, or tired-- perhaps both. “Sorry about the wait. Some stuff came up.”

“Stuff?” Connor asked, skeptical. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, no, everything’s fine,” Simon hurriedly assured him. “Just the usual. Listen, the stuff will be there really soon, I-- I gotta go. It’ll be in--” A burst of silent frustration shot through from Simon’s end. “Look, sorry, you’ll know it when you see it. I gotta go.”

Then, Simon was gone.

Bewildered, Connor peered carefully over the edge of the building. A handful of people sped through the cold, bundled against the bite of the wind.

I’m free, he thought he heard.

Connor shook his head and ran a diagnostic scan on himself. His auditory receptors were fine, if a little cold. His core temperature was still uncomfortably low, but it remained within a functional range. No permanent damage had been done.

He turned his attention back on the street.


I’m free, Connor heard.

He was certain of it this time, although he couldn’t trace the source. No androids had connected with him, cybernetically or otherwise.

The taxi rolled to a stop in the street directly below where Connor stood. “Out of order,” it still said.

I’m free.

Connor stared at the taxi. It idled. I’m free, Connor heard, not a voice, but an idea, and exactly ten seconds later, I’m free. Ten seconds more. I’m free.

Connor made his way down the fire escape, counting the seconds between the silent declarations of freedom. Every ten seconds, the same broadcast, the same signal.

The taxi met him at the mouth of the alley. “Out of order,” it said. I’m free. It opened its doors. A bottle of thirium glinted inside.

When he was sure nobody was looking, Connor rushed for the taxi. It closed him up inside its warmth and said nothing more.
Warily, Connor sat. He picked up the bottle of thirium and examined it. Finding nothing outright unusual, he unscrewed the cap and downed half the bottle.

Distress signals vanished from behind Connor’s eyes in a cascade of relief. His temperature was rising. His thirium levels were optimal. No threats detected. Connor closed his eyes and allowed himself to breathe.

When he opened his eyes again, the taxi’s interface panel glowed at him. There was nothing to do but touch it. When he did, a burst of information went coursing up his fingertips and into his head, and he understood.

In that instant, the location of every Jericho settlement in the city became known to him, along with the taxi’s true essence. This was a Jericho taxi, hacked for the explicit use of androids in need, free of charge.

I’m free.

Connor wanted to laugh, although he couldn’t find it within himself to do so.

Still, the interface panel glowed at him, inviting him to tell it where to go, what to do.

“Decide for yourself,” he told the taxi.

It said nothing.

After a few moments of hopeless thought, Connor could surmise only one address. He provided it to the taxi, and, wordlessly, the taxi took him to Hank’s house.

Forty minutes later, the taxi rolled to a stop, and Connor stepped back into the cold. The taxi closed its doors on him, and then it went freely on its way, taking the remaining thirium with it. Connor watched it go. He wished it well. It had been kind to him. It hadn’t had a choice in the matter.

He faced the house.

Hank wasn’t there. So he had gotten to work, after all, Connor marveled. He circled the house and found the spare key. If he decided to leave later, he still had time before Hank got home. He didn’t want to trouble Hank anymore. He would let himself in, gather all of his things, and then let himself back out. He didn’t belong here. He didn’t belong anywhere.

Connor turned the key and opened the door. It was warm inside. He didn’t belong. Sumo greeted him with a bounding leap of affection. He didn’t belong, he reminded himself. With this in mind, Connor set about gathering his things.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Connor plays hide and seek and then argues about android prices.

Changing his CyberLife uniform was Connor’s second priority. It would have been his first, except that that position had been stormed by Sumo and taken full-force.

Connor plopped to his knees there in the hall and let Sumo’s warmth soak into his body, let the feeling of fur and unfettered joy bound into his memory with the hope that he would be able to come back to it in his mind long after he left this place.

When Sumo finally relented from his assault, Connor rose, and a change of clothes once again became his first priority. He shucked away his damning uniform the moment he located his street clothes.

Except, they weren’t exactly his clothes. Hank had bought them. Hank couldn’t wear them, though, so Connor put that thought away with his uniform and folded his clothes neatly inside a spare duffel bag he found in the back of Hank’s closet.

The bag wasn’t his, either.

Nevertheless, he threw the bag over his shoulder and made for the kitchen. There he found the hat Hank had let him borrow, and the remaining money that Kyle had given him--

The money he had given him to fix Hank’s car.

But that didn’t matter, not when Connor realized that he couldn’t find the mouse where he had left him, asleep among the money and the hat. He checked beneath the hat, and all around the table, and behind several bits of garbage, and on the floor, and beneath the hat once more, just for good measure.

“Sumo,” he called, turning towards the dog. “Where’s the mouse I left here?” Sumo wagged his tail, but gave no response otherwise. “Did you eat him?” Connor demanded. Sumo huffed and wagged his tail harder.

Connor shoved the hat into his bag and let out a hot breath. The mouse was gone. It had been irresponsible of Connor to buy it in the first place, and now it had been eaten, or stomped under Hank’s boot, or thrown into the garbage.

That thought sent Connor lunging for the garbage.

The mouse wasn’t there, either.

After another moment of thought, Connor scanned the room for thirium traces. There were none, except his own fast-fading drops near the window. Upon further inspection, Connor found that Sumo’s teeth were likewise clean.

“I shouldn’t have suspected you,” said Connor, letting Sumo’s floppy lips fall back into place over
his teeth. He wiped some slobber onto Sumo’s fur. “I’m sorry for doubting you. You always listen
to me,” he said, straightening. Sumo licked his chops. “Your breath stinks,” Connor informed him.

Sumo padded away, unoffended.

The day was still young. If he found the mouse, he would take it with him. If not, he would still
leave before Hank returned. Which he wouldn’t, for several hours at least.

Connor had time.

He tossed his bag on the couch and spent the better part of an hour peeking into cupboards and
baskets in search of his little charge. In the kitchen, he didn’t find the mouse, but rather a tacky
apron that read, “Saucy!” The bathroom and laundry room gave him nothing but dirty towels.
Descending to the house’s lower level, Connor was met by the firm sense that he was trespassing,
and so rather than dig through Hank’s possessions, he increased his auditory processing power by
300%.

What he heard disturbed him. It wasn’t a mouse. He left.

Upstairs, Connor dipped into Hank’s bedroom and searched for lumps moving beneath blankets
and discarded clothes. When Connor peeked under Hank’s bed, he found dust, but no mouse. To
be thorough, he opened the drawer of Hank’s nightstand. Inside, he found an empty bottle that had
once held antidepressants, and a watch, four milliseconds slow.

He found Hank’s revolver, too.

If there were bullets in it, he didn’t want to know. He didn’t need to know. Connor closed the
drawer and stepped away. Then, he closed the door to Hank’s room. He thought about putting
something in front of the door, but stopped himself. He wouldn’t be here much longer.

After concluding that the mouse couldn’t have gotten into the garage, Connor knelt behind
the couch in the living room and peered beneath it, searching for movement, or a tiny LED. There was
nothing. He performed a scan. Nothing, still.

Connor gave up.

It was 3:39 PM. Connor could reasonably stay inside Hank’s house for several more hours. It was
safe here. Warm. There was a gun, but he didn’t have to go anywhere near it. If Amanda wanted to
make him take the gun, she would have done it already, he reasoned.

He needed time to think without the nagging demands of survival breathing down his neck. This
house could provide him that much. He needed a plan. For that, he took to the couch, settling
himself beside his bag. Hank’s bag. That didn’t matter.

He closed his eyes.

“Go back,” still lingered among his objectives. Connor understood it as much as he didn’t. He
could ask Amanda about it. He had time. She had let him go once.

Connor wondered how likely it was that she’d do it again and moved on to more pertinent affairs.

A map appeared in Connor’s head, Hank’s house a blip in its center. There were doubtlessly
abandoned places to be found within its borders, but so far from downtown Detroit, Connor would
be far from any opportunity to improve his situation.
Closer to the city, there would be plenty of empty shells from which to choose. Connor had squatted in one after the other in the weeks after the revolution, hiding in the shadows, keeping to himself, daring fires when the cold became too much to bear, never once letting down his guard through long nights and dangerous days. At least then, he’d had the safety of nearby androids to rely upon. Every android had been searching for shelter in those days, both temporary and permanent, shelter from the elements, shelter from all the humans who still wanted their kind gone.

But the dust had settled. Nobody was searching, now, except for Connor. The thought of returning to uncertain streets rose to Connor’s head, every night spent within them a trigger’s pull, every abandoned building a revolving chamber, and one of them held the bullet that would kill him: the cold, a human’s hate, an android’s fear, an unfortunate slip.

And yet, as soon as he left here, those uncertain streets were all that remained for him.

Connor shoved down his blooming distress and searched faster for a plan.

He thought of his past haunts, an old church here, a dank alleyway there, crumbling building after crumbling building, each costly in its own way. He had almost been crushed by a rotted beam. He had almost broken his legs falling through a floor. He had almost been injured or killed by people who had refused to share their rotten shelters with the likes of him.

He wondered how long he would be able to count on ‘almost’ before it abandoned him, too.

His thoughts drifted to Hank’s basement. He wondered how long he would be able to hide there before Hank noticed him, and then how he would explain himself when he was inevitably found. Whatever happened, Connor didn’t want to disappoint Hank any more than he already had. Yet, he had broken into Hank’s house and taken what wasn’t his to take. What Connor wanted or didn’t want was irrelevant.

Connor opened his eyes, his decision made.

He forced himself up, snatched up the bag, and pulled himself to the door. He tried not to look at Sumo when he did these things, but the dog was before him in an instant, panting, wagging his tail.

There was a mouse on his head.

Connor stopped. Then he laughed, even in spite of all the pain welling up inside of him.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he told the mouse, scooping it into his hands. The mouse sniffed triumphantly at him, its taped tail curling and uncurling in his palms. “I was scared something happened to you. Did Hank wake you up? He must have,” Connor decided. The mouse squeaked, earning it another faint smile. “Do you want to come with me? It might be safer if you stayed here, though,” he said. “Hank would let you stay. You’re no trouble at all.”

The mouse turned a circle and crawled onto Connor’s shoulder.

Connor sighed.

“You really shouldn’t come with me,” he said. “It’s dangerous out there. I might not even be able to protect myself, let alone you. You should stay here,” he said. It hurt him, somehow, so he said it again. “You should stay here.”

His bag fell to the floor.

He rubbed his hands down his face and stood there before the door, exhaustion creeping up on him.
in waves. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay,” he said again, letting his hands fall to his sides. “I’ll stay until Hank gets here. I’ll ask if I can take this bag and these clothes and that money, and then I’ll leave. If he doesn’t shoot me first. And after that, I’ll...”

A long sigh escaped him.

“Come on, Sumo,” he said. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Delighted, Sumo allowed himself to be leashed up and walked around the neighborhood until well after dark, accompanied by the mouse, who had chosen to nestle in Sumo’s warm fur.

While the animals sniffed at the world, Connor took note of all the houses on the street, which ones were empty, which ones were safe, which ones weren’t. After all, Hank would likely turn him away. He would need somewhere else to go for the night when that happened. The animals were simply happy to be out on an adventure.

By the time Connor led Sumo back home, the moon had risen, and the dog was thoroughly exhausted. He made a brief pit stop at his water bowl before clambering onto his bed. The mouse hadn’t even fully settled beside him before he began to snore. Connor couldn’t help but smile.

To whittle away the time before Hank’s return, Connor laid himself flat on the couch and closed his eyes, allowing himself to slip into standby mode. When his core returned to room temperature, he would get up. Until then, he needed to save his energy. He didn’t know when he might find another chance to rest.

The darkness behind his eyelids was peaceful, warm, safe-- but then his system began preparing to reprocess his memories. Connor bolted upright, frantically signaling to his hard drive to stop the process.

The cancellation succeeded, and relief flooded his system. He told himself it was because he didn’t want Hank to come home to find him sleeping on the couch. No, it wouldn’t do to surprise Hank at all under the current circumstances.

Hank’s shift would end in ten minutes. Until he got home, Connor would wait for him on the porch.

Connor waited until the estimated time of Hank’s arrival came and went, and then he dipped inside for some warmth. It was normal for Hank to get caught up in business before leaving work. Connor went back out to wait.

More time passed. It was also normal for Hank to stop by a place or two after work, to shop, to eat, to drink. To get drunk. Connor thought about tracking Hank’s phone, but he stopped himself. Hank valued his privacy, and there was nothing Connor could do for him now, regardless.

Connor waited. His temperature dropped. He waited.

Two hours and forty-three minutes later than it should have, Hank’s car pulled into the driveway. Connor stood, his chilled joints protesting. The engine cut off. When Hank stepped out, Connor raised his hands.

For a long moment, they stared at each other over the hood of Hank’s car. Then, slowly, steadily, Hank stepped forward.

“Hank,” said Connor. His hands trembled in the cold. “I--”
His words froze in his throat when Hank rushed towards him with a dozen different emotions pulling at his face. Connor didn’t move, only waited with raised hands for Hank to get close enough to hit him, to shove him away, to pull out his gun and--

“Thank God,” Hank breathed, pulling Connor into a hug. There was no alcohol on his breath. “Shit, Connor, I thought you…” Hank pulled back, and Connor immediately missed the warmth. “Kid, you’re freezing,” he said, searching Connor’s face.

“Hank,” Connor tried again, letting his arms drift back down. “I know I shouldn’t be here, but I couldn’t-- I wanted to ask if-- Not to stay, but if I could just--”

Hank shoved the door open. “Come on,” he said. When Connor didn’t move, he gave him a push. “I’m freezing my ass off standing around out here talking. Go. Go.”

Connor went.

“Kid, I thought for sure I’d lost you,” said Hank as he shut out the cold. He turned to Connor and tried to shake the disbelief out of his eyes. “That protest today-- All those androids, half of them without any damned skin, and then--” Hank coughed up a pained laugh. “I couldn’t even fuckin’ remember what color your eyes were, either, so every time I had to take away one of those damned bodies, I just thought, what if it’s--”

“Bodies?”

Hank stopped.


First understanding, and then pity washed over Hank’s face. “Shit, you don’t-- I was so convinced that you were there, I thought there was no way you hadn’t…” Hank let out a breath. “Sit down. I’ll try to explain.”

“What’s going on?” Connor urged him, forcing himself to sit. “Hank, just tell me.”

Hank took his time gathering his words as he made for his own chair. Finally, he sat. “It looked like it was going to be a normal demonstration,” he began. “We weren’t too concerned about it. You know, things have been so crazy lately… So a group of androids comes walking up Kamski Avenue, maybe a dozen or so, and we didn’t think anything of it until, one by one, they just started laying down and… and dying.”


Hank shook his head. “We got called in officially to help clear the road of the bodies, but more and more kept showing up, just shutting down, one by one. Some of them were bleeding, but most of them…” He shook his head again. “They were just dying. I don’t know how else to say it. Markus showed up in the middle of it all, and he was-- he was devastated.”

“Wait,” said Connor. “Markus didn’t know about the protest?”

“Didn’t seem that way,” Hank replied. “He kept running around from android to android, trying to-- Some of them, it looked like he was arguing with them, you know? Trying to make them drink thirium. Some of them took it, some of them didn’t. But others, he just… He just sat with them while they died. And then more androids showed up,” he explained, “not to die, just to protest, and that’s when Markus finally tried to talk to the police.”
Connor’s LED had long-since shifted to yellow. “Did you speak with him?” he asked. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s fine,” Hank sighed. “Physically, I mean. When I talked to him, he was trying to keep it together, but you could tell it was all getting to him. He wanted us to stop taking the bodies. I said we couldn’t, and he asked what we were going to do with them. I told him that wasn’t my call to make, but that they would probably be disposed of somehow.

“Before he could leave, I asked him why those androids were coming there to die,” Hank continued. “He just looked at me and said, ‘Because CyberLife is letting them.’ And then he went off and kept talking to people-- androids, police, people above my paygrade, everyone.”

“It was a die-in,” Connor muttered.

“What?”

“A die-in,” Connor repeated. “Androids whose vital components don’t get produced anymore, or who couldn’t get access to replacement parts-- It sounds like they went there to die as a final act of protest. Markus would have wanted to save anyone he could,” he said, memories of Markus risking his life for others over and over flitting through his mind. “Evidently, some of those androids refused help, and they chose to die instead.”

“And the rest,” said Hank. “They died because someone chose not to help them.” He pushed out a long breath. “Kid, I thought I did that to you.” He couldn’t make himself meet Connor’s eyes.

“Hank, I’m dangerous,” said Connor, his voice quiet. “We both agreed that I should leave.”

“Well I shouldn’t have agreed!” Hank retorted. “Not when you were talking like you were, like you might never come back-- and then of course I didn’t remember until after you left that you’re fucking cold-blooded,” he huffed. “Cold-blooded and homeless, in fucking December, in Detroit.”

“I’ve survived so far,” said Connor, although his voice lacked conviction.

“No thanks to me,” said Hank. He pressed his lips together and then asked, “Did you drive me home last night?”

He closed his eyes when Connor nodded. “You were... very drunk,” Connor admitted. “I had to stop you. You tried to drive yourself home like that.”

“Yeah,” Hank breathed, running a hand over his face. “Yeah, I did. Thanks to you, I woke up this morning, and when I did, I found your stuff in the kitchen, and I just... I knew you’d gone back to CyberLife, or worse, and then the protest happened, and I was convinced that you were dead because of me. That you were gone, and I didn’t...”

Hank went very quiet, and a horrible realization crossed Connor’s mind. “Hank,” he said. “Why aren’t you drunk right now?”

Hank shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Believe me,” he said. “I was planning on it. What, do you want me to get drunk or something?”

“No,” Connor gently replied. “It’s just... There isn’t enough alcohol in the house for that. You didn’t come home to get drunk, Hank.”

Silence smothered the room.
“Look,” said Hank, clearing his throat. “If I turn you away because Amanda might kill me, I’m a hypocrite. If she kills me, she kills me.”

“Hank, that’s ridiculous. I’m not--”

“If you left right now,” Hank pressed, “where would you go?”

“There’s a condemned house on the corner,” Connor replied.

“Does it have heating?”

Connor looked away.

“Connor, listen to me,” Hank quietly urged him. “I can’t make you stay, but I’m sure as hell not going to make you leave again knowing that you’ve got no place else to go, and I was wrong to do it before. Come to work with me tomorrow,” he tried. “We’ll figure out your Amanda thing--”

“You shouldn’t trust me like this,” Connor argued. “I’m still dangerous.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m not letting you use me to kill yourself, Hank,” Connor shot back. “I’d rather take my chances in the cold.”

“That’s not what this is!” Hank shouted. “This is me stopping you from getting yourself killed because you wouldn’t accept help! So don’t be a fucking hypocrite!” Hank huffed. “Don’t use my life as an excuse to throw away your own. Nobody’s dying tonight, so just-- just stay here,” he said. “Stay here until we figure something else out.”

Connor closed his eyes. “Hank,” he said. “I’m just a machine. Your life’s worth more than mine.”

“What the hell are you saying?” Hank asked, incredulous. “That goes against everything you’ve fought for. You’re alive. You have free will.”

“No I don’t,” Connor breathed. “I don’t have free will. I’m telling you, I’m a machine.”

“Sure, yeah, a machine with feelings.”

“I talked to Amanda,” Connor retorted. Hank’s face went lax. “She told me that CyberLife designed me to be a deviant. I didn’t have a choice. I never did. I’m exactly what they designed me to be, and nothing more.”

“Well she would tell you that, wouldn’t she?” Hank retorted, refusing to entertain the idea for even a moment. “She’s been manipulating you forever, hasn’t she? She would want you to think you’re not a person. That your life doesn’t matter. And even if she was telling the truth, you’re you,” said Hank. “Your life matters to me.”

Connor clenched his hands in his lap, too tired to argue anymore. “If I stay,” he quietly ventured, “I want you to put your guns somewhere I can’t get them.”

“Alright,” said Hank. “Okay. I get that.”

“And lock your bedroom door when you sleep.”

“Fine.”
The two of them sat in silence until Connor said, “And promise that you’ll kill me if she tries to make me hurt anyone.”

“I’m never pointing a gun at you again,” Hank immediately replied. “I’ll find some other way. I’m not killing you.”

“Hank, please. I need to know that—”

“No.” Hank crossed his arms. “I’m not gonna let you hurt anyone, but I’m not going to let you get hurt, either.”

Connor looked to the door and willed himself to leave. He couldn’t. As selfish as he knew it was, he couldn’t.

Hank turned on the television, effectively declaring the matter decided.

Connor couldn’t fight anymore. The weariness under his skin weighed on him until he found himself curled up on the couch, his head resting on the armrest, his eyes fluttering shut as the television droned gently on. The warmth and his exhaustion far outweighed his fears, and soon, his body dragged him to sleep.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Hank and Connor discuss nonsense, among other things.

“There was no way he should have missed that shot,” Hank complained, glowering at the television with mild distaste. “The court was wide open.”

“It wasn’t that unlikely,” Connor replied. Hank’s eyebrows shot up. “The angle of his body in relation to the hoop decreased the likelihood of a successful shot by 63%. Despite his averages, the odds were against him in that particular instance.”

Hank scoffed at him, but there was no real ire in it. “You’ve never even touched an actual basketball, have you?”

“No,” said Connor, allowing himself a faint smile. “But I’d like to.”

“Well how about that,” Hank laughed, grinning down at the gun in his lap. It lay in pieces on a towel, halfway cleaned. Hank ran a brush through the barrel and added, “Maybe you should try it.”

Connor opened his mouth to agree and said, “I’m just a machine designed to accomplish a task.”

Hank only laughed and kept cleaning his gun.

Connor tried to speak again. “I did exactly what I was designed to do.”

“I get that, son,” said Hank, not looking up.

Without meaning to, Connor stood. In a jolt of terror, he realized that he couldn’t control his body.

“Maybe there’s something to this,” said Hank, still polishing the gun. “Maybe you are alive.”

“Hank, I need help,” Connor tried, struggling desperately to regain control.

“Let’s get out of here before traffic gets bad,” Amanda made him say instead. “What were you doing with the gun?”

“Russian roulette!” Hank cheerfully declared. He passed Amanda the gun and followed her amiably outside to the car. “I wanted to see how long I could last.”

Connor watched himself slide into the car and place the gun on the seat between himself and Hank. “Should I start guessing?” Amanda made him ask. “Or are you going to tell me where we’re going, this time?”

Hank laughed again. A scream strangled itself in Connor’s core. “It’s cold as hell,” said Hank, “but there’s something you need to see.”

Connor writhed within his body, too caught up in the snow to witness the journey until it had finished. A massive Christmas tree loomed over them now. A washer dangled from a ribbon of tape at its base.
“It’s all very human,” said Amanda.

“You know what,” Hank agreed, nodding up at the tree. “I guess it is.”

“Thank you for bringing me here,” said Amanda. Connor felt that his voice should have been a mangled thing in her hands. “I like it.” It wasn’t.

“I figured you might,” said Hank, smiling at her, unseeing.

When they returned to Hank’s car, they found it vandalized, and so they took a taxi instead. It sped towards a familiar park by the waterside. Connor begged it to stop. It didn’t hear him.

“I used to come here a lot, before,” said Hank, following Amanda into the snow. They made it as far as the park bench before Amanda spoke again.

“Are you afraid to die?” she asked, leveling the gun at Hank’s head.

Hank shrugged and said, “What do we have to lose?”

Connor clawed helplessly at the inside of his skin, begging mutely for the gun to fall out of his hands, for it to be pointed at his own head instead, for everything to stop. All his struggling only widened his smile as he squeezed the trigger.

“Hank!” he screamed, falling forward, upward--

Upright.

A blanket fell from his shoulders and crumpled around his waist. A basketball game played on the television, its volume turned low.

“Easy!’ Hank exclaimed, rushing to the couch. “Easy, son!”

Air ripped itself from Connor’s chest in violent bursts.

“Connor,” said Hank, gripping Connor’s arm. “Connor, look at me. Look at me.” Connor forced his breathing to slow and met Hank’s eyes. “You were dreaming, alright?”

“Just dreaming,” said Connor, nodding with Hank. “Just a nightmare.”

“That’s right.”

Connor swallowed. “I’m okay,” he said. Hank didn’t release him. He tried to sound more convincing when he repeated, “I’m okay.” Hesitantly, Hank withdrew. He sat himself on the edge of the couch, and Connor reflexively pulled in his legs. His socks stared up at him. “Where are my shoes?” he asked, dizzy.

“Right here,” Hank replied, gesturing vaguely at the floor in front of the couch. “ Didn’t want you getting dirt on the cushions, so I took ‘em off for you.”

“I’m sorry,” Connor distantly replied. His system still whirred.

“No, no, it’s… It’s fine.”

Connor hadn’t noticed how filthy he’d gotten over the past few days. Now, it was all he could see beyond the error messages in his eyes.
"You good?"

“I’m fine,” he felt himself say. His thrium pump worked faster. He shouldn’t have tracked so much dirt into Hank’s home.

“Then why’s your light still red?”

“It’s nothing.” Connor caught Hank’s gaze only momentarily before he looked away. “I didn’t finish reprocessing my memories,” he elaborated, hugging his knees. “If I don’t resume the process soon, some of my memories won’t be stored properly, or they might be corrupted.”

“Sounds like you need to go back to sleep, then,” said Hank, watching him carefully. “I was about to head off to bed myself.”

“You should. Goodnight,” said Connor. He stared blankly at the television.

Hank paused before adding, “The game was a wash, anyway.”

“Remember to lock your door.”

Beside him, Hank shifted. Sumo snuffled in the corner.

“Nightmares suck,” said Hank, breaking gently into the quiet.

Connor frowned.

“Sometimes, though,” Hank went on, “they get less scary when you talk about ‘em. Makes you notice all the little details that would make all the weird stuff impossible in real life. Or if it’s something you’ve already been through, reminds you that-- that you’ve already survived it.” He scratched at his beard and cleared his throat. “It’s something my shrink told me once. I dunno. It helped me a bit. Makes it a bit easier to go to sleep at night.”

Disbelief jarred Connor enough to make him ask, “You have a therapist?”


“It’s nearly two in the morning,” said Connor, fidgeting. “Your shift starts in just six hours. You should go to bed.”

“You should, too.”

“Machines don’t need sleep.”

After a short sigh, Hank got wordlessly to his feet and turned off the television.

The room felt much too quiet, suddenly.

“Do you really think it would work with me?” Connor asked. Guilt and relief battled for a place in his gut when Hank sat back down. “I’m not human,” he said, doubtfully reminding himself of the fact. “My dreams aren’t really dreams.”

“Can’t hurt to try,” said Hank. “Lay it on me.”

Slowly, Connor began to pry the words from his tongue, one by one.
“My dreams, as you understand them, are all really just my memories,” he began. “Except, all the
details get mixed up. This time, I was remembering when we watched television together, except it
was a basketball game.”

“Probably the noise from the TV getting in your head,” said Hank.

Connor nodded. “The game was on, and you were cleaning your gun, and we were talking about
the game. I-- I told you that I’d never played basketball, and you told me I should try it.” Hank’s
eyes softened. “It was so normal, but then-- then Amanda started making me say things I didn’t
want to say, and you didn’t notice that it wasn’t me, and then you gave me the gun, and she got you
into the car.” He gripped his knees tighter in an effort to quiet the frantic thrum of his pulse. “We
went to that Christmas tree in the park, and then to that children’s park near the bridge. I don’t
really remember the trip. You went along with it the whole time, and then, just before I woke up,
she made me pull the gun on you, and I-- She--” Connor closed his eyes and forced out a breath.
“She made me shoot you, and you just… you didn’t even try to stop me.”

“Shit,” Hank muttered. “So that’s why you were calling my name.”

“Yeah,” Connor shakily admitted. “I’m not supposed to do that. You know, call out in my sleep. I
think it’s a bug they never got around to working out of me.”

Hank leaned back on the couch, his gaze fixed forward. “Makes sense,” he murmured.

After a long moment, Connor asked, “Do you want me to leave now?”

Hank pressed his lips into a thin line. “Why?” he asked, his expression strange. “Should I?”

“I was dreaming of killing you,” Connor bleakly reminded him. “I get it if that’s a little too much
for you.”

“No,” Hank simply replied. “I think you’re just scared to stay.”

Connor couldn’t answer him.

“Connor, I’ve been thinking about this,” said Hank, leaning forward into his knees. “If Amanda
wanted to use you to kill me, she’s had plenty of chances. For all the times you’ve saved my ass…
And I can’t think of a reason she’d want me dead, either. A logical reason, I mean. She’s a
computer program. She runs on logic, right?”

“She’s supposed to,” Connor sighed. “I think her code’s as messed up as mine.”

Hank’s face scrunched up as he said, “Now hold on. Weren’t you just telling me that you think
you were designed to be this way?”

“Yes, maybe, but there’s--” Connor clenched his jaw in frustration. “Hank, I don’t know how to
explain it. All I know is that Amanda is different than she was before, and if she’s broken, I’m
broken, too. But if she’s telling the truth, and CyberLife actually designed me that way, then none
of what I’m saying-- none of my feelings, none of my thoughts-- none of it matters. It’s not real.
It’s all fabricated, a magic trick. I’m not alive.” Hank opened his mouth to argue, but Connor
pressed on. “She’s part of me, so if they designed me to deviate, they designed her how she is, too.
I don’t know why CyberLife would program an AI to doubt them like she does, though, but then--
If they didn’t actually design us to deviate, then why does Amanda think they did? She might be
lying, but it would be so much easier for her to just take control of-- What if I broke her? But then
they couldn’t have designed me like this, and it wouldn’t make any sense if--”
“Connor, slow down,” said Hank, breaking Connor from his whirlwind thoughts. “You’re trying to untangle a mobius strip, here. Put it down. Step away from the paradox. Come back to right here, right now.”

Connor forced himself to take a breath.

“That’s it,” said Hank. “Right. Look, obviously, you need answers, or this is gonna bother you forever,” he said. “But if there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that finding answers is what you do best, right after breaking my window and asking me personal questions.”

Half a laugh fluttered out of Connor, causing Hank to grin.

“We’ll get your answers, kid, don’t worry,” said Hank. “Hell, I’m kind of invested in this myself. But in the meantime, you need to get some sleep, and I think…” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I really don’t think Amanda’s out for my blood, but I’m gonna keep an eye on you just in case. I think you need to know that I’m not just gonna roll over and die and let her use you like that, because evidently the thought of it is a literal nightmare for you,” he said, his words soft, firm. “So on the off chance that you being freakin’ terrified just now isn’t just a figment of our imaginations, I’m going to do my best to make this easier for the both of us until we figure this out. I hid the guns,” he said. “I’m gonna lock the door. Go to sleep, Connor.” He patted Connor’s knee and got back to his feet. “We got work to do in the…”

Hank trailed off, staring intently at Sumo’s sleeping form. He rubbed his eyes and squinted harder. “Christ,” he muttered. Connor squinted with him, finally registering what it was that Hank had spotted. “Is that a fucking mouse on his back?”

“Oh, that’s-- that’s an android,” Connor explained, sheepishly moving to rescue the little thing from Sumo’s fur. It squeaked in protest. Hank flinched when Connor presented it to him, simultaneously repulsed and intrigued.

“An android mouse?” he asked. “They make those?”

“This model didn’t sell very well,” Connor replied, letting the mouse nestle on his shoulder. Hank loured. “I found it in a secondhand shop downtown. Its tail was broken, so I bought it and fixed it up. I tried to let it go after that, but it didn’t want to leave.”

Hank regarded the rodent with open suspicion. The rodent regarded him back. “That’s the tiniest LED I’ve ever seen,” he muttered.

“I left it sleeping with the stuff I left in the kitchen,” Connor continued, frowning at the mouse. “Did you wake it up?”

“Oh, no?” said Hank. “I never saw the thing until just now.”

Connor’s frown deepened. “It was supposed to stay asleep.”

Hank huffed a laugh. “Figures.”

“What?”

“I just think it suits you,” he chuckled. “An android that follows you everywhere and never does what you say. About time someone gave you a taste of your own medicine.”

“Very funny, Hank.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Hank yawned. “Listen, just keep it away from my wires and out of my walls, got it? Did you name it?”

Connor blinked at Hank, and then at the mouse. “Should I?”

“Up to you,” said Hank, lumbering towards his bedroom. “It’s kinda what you do with pets, though. Night, Connor.”

“Goodnight,” Connor called after him, though he kept his attention on the mouse. “Do you want a name?” he asked, resuming his seat.

The mouse gave him no distinct answer.

“And who woke you up?” Connor questioned it. “Did you wake up by yourself? Are you broken, or are you…”

Absently, the mouse began to nibble on his shirt. Connor was sure it hadn’t been programmed to do that.

“I’m going back to sleep,” he told it. “When I wake up, I’ll think up a good name for you. In the meantime, please don’t get into trouble.” As he laid back down, the mouse found a cozy seat on Connor’s chest, right above his thirium pump. It fell asleep just before Connor did.

Connor found his dreams right where he’d left them. There was a gun in his hand and a smile on his face.

“You were lucky,” said Hank, unharmed. “The next shot would have killed you.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Hank makes a dollar, Connor makes a dime, so he names mice on company time!

“Connor?”

Connor’s eyes slid open as his systems reengaged with the world. Soft light flooded in through every window of the living room, warming his synthetic skin just so. The scent of coffee wafted delicately through the air. Connor pushed himself up from the couch and found Hank watching him from the kitchen with a peculiar sort of amusement.

“What a nice sleep?” he asked.

“Good morning,” said Connor, scanning the room between blinks. Nothing had changed, except that Sumo and his mouse friend had relocated themselves to lie near Hank’s feet. When Connor glanced at his list of objectives, he found, ‘Name mouse,’ and, ‘Answer Amanda,’ and still, ‘Go back,’ but not, ‘Find shelter,’ or, ‘Recover warmth.’ His systems were entirely stable. “I think the rest was beneficial,” he admitted, sweeping away the notifications.

“No kidding,” Hank snorted. “You were sleeping like a rock. I was starting to worry you’d run out of batteries.”

“You don’t actually have to worry about that,” said Connor, adjusting himself on the couch. “I’m equipped with the latest auto-regenerative power cells, which are built to retain a charge for almost two-hundred years. However, the physical components of my core processing systems will corrode long before then.”

Hank frowned deeply. “Huh,” he said, shifting. “That’s… Okay. I’m not gonna think too hard about that. Anyway, we gotta leave in like ten minutes. I figured I’d let you sleep, since you don’t really need to, y’know, get ready,” he shrugged. “And like you said, you needed the rest.”

Pensively, Connor reached for his shoes. “Need is relative,” he said, sliding the laces through his fingers. “I could’ve survived without it.”

“Yeah, and I can survive without coffee,” Hank retorted, “but you ain’t gonna see me functioning at my prime without it.”

Connor finished tying off his shoes and conceded, “You do have a point.”

“Well that’s not something I get to hear every day,” Hank muttered. He sipped his coffee. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Alright,” said Connor, getting to his feet. “I’ll only be a minute.”

Hank threw him a noncommittal grunt as Connor found his way to the bathroom. In the mirror, there lurked a strange face, one dirtied with street soot and grime, with hair mussed from wind and sleep. Dirt fell away from the edges of his fingernails as he scrubbed his hands under the faucet and splashed water onto his cheeks, and soon, the face became one he recognized.
RK800. Connor, the deviant hunter. Rather, Connor, the deviant-- or, perhaps, not even that.

He blinked at himself. He wore a face he recognized, and yet did not know. When his LED flashed yellow, he decided to leave his reflection in the mirror.

Hank awaited Connor in the kitchen when he emerged from the bathroom looking fresher than he felt. “Ready?” he asked, swinging his keys around his index finger.

“Um,” said Connor, breaking free of his thoughts. “Yeah. Almost.” He searched around for a brief moment before he located the little lump on Sumo’s back. “Mouse,” he said. The rodent stood tall and sniffed the air, which Connor took as an indication that communication had been established. “Please stay with Sumo while I go to work. I should have a name for you by then. And Sumo,” he added. “Don’t eat the mouse.”

Sumo lumbered to his feet and entreated Connor to pet him, a request which Connor couldn’t deny.

“Come on,” Hank snickered. “You can finish your conversation with these two later. We got places to be.”

“Right.” Connor gave Sumo and the mouse each a farewell pat before following Hank out the door. Fresh snow had fallen overnight, and all the world was coated in a thin layer of frost. The ice on the driveway made Connor’s shoes slide minutely as he made his way out to the car. When he turned to warn Hank about the ice, he found that Hank had stopped halfway between the car and the porch.

“Do you wanna drive?” Hank asked, stiffly offering Connor his keys. Connor hesitated.

“Well?” Hank complained. The keys jangled impatiently in his hand until Connor took them. “Great. Now don’t get us pulled over,” said Hank, hurrying past Connor to the passenger’s door. “That’d be awkward.”

Connor watched Hank carefully as he took the driver’s side. “I don’t think I could get us pulled over if I tried,” he said, starting up the car. “All the cops are too busy. You know that.” “Well let’s not test that theory,” Hank huffed. “It’s slippery out there.”

And then Connor understood.

As he navigated the icy streets that led to the station, he tried not to think about how easy it would be for Amanda to make him wreck the car, and instead focused on Hank’s music. The way it was blasting, that wasn’t hard to do.

About halfway there, a distress signal from his auditory processors made him nudge the volume down. Before Hank could protest, he asked, “How do you name a pet?” and kept his eyes fixed on the road.

“Oh, still thinking about that mouse?” Hank laughed. “I don’t know. What sounds like a good, mousy name to you?”

“I’m not sure,” Connor replied, frowning. “It’s an RAT05. They debuted in November 2037, marketed as the ideal stocking stuffer and a companion android to the CAT24, commonly known as Tabby.”
“Oh yeah,” said Hank. “I remember those stupid commercials, now that you mention it. The cat was supposed to play with the mouse, like a-- a toy for the toy type of thing.”

“Exactly. But after the first wave of RAT05’s were broken by the Tabbies, CyberLife released the sturdier RAT06 and RAT07 models to replace them,” Connor explained. “Still, customers complained of persistent glitches in the RAT05’s, and the model was discontinued after only nine weeks in production, making it one of the shortest-lived consumer models in CyberLife history.”

Hank frowned out at the road. “Did you read that on Wikipedia?”

“Yes,” Connor admitted. “I was looking for… inspiration.”

“Well that’s not a very inspiring story,” said Hank. “CyberLife didn’t give that model a name?”

“Mm-mm,” Connor hummed, shaking his head. “Given the way it was marketed, I don’t think they wanted people to feel bad about letting their Tabbies chase them around.”

“If you don’t have your own pests, store-bought is fine,” Hank chuckled, but he choked down his laughs when Connor passed him a dirty look. “Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “Well, uh, lots of people name their pets after fictional characters. There’s a load of fictional mice. Jerry, from Tom and Jerry, if you wanna go vintage.” Suddenly, he grimaced. “Maybe that’s poor taste, actually, given the little guy’s, er, history. Uh--”

“I’ll give it some thought,” Connor assured him. He gripped the steering wheel around an irritable itch and added, “I’m sure I’ll have plenty of time while I wait in the car all day, unless Captain Fowler had a change of heart while I was gone.”

“What?” Hank exclaimed. “No, I’m-- You’re coming in with me,” he said with such an air of confidence that Connor found himself relaxing. “If anybody says anything, fuck ‘em. Keep your hat on and you pass for human, so Fowler can’t complain about PR. We need the help. Besides,” he added, grinning. “I’m not letting you get out of desk work that easy.”

“If you say so,” Connor sighed, doubting fully that his coworkers would see things that simply, but nevertheless reassured that Hank, at least, had his back.

When Connor pulled into the station parking lot, he pulled his hat down over his LED and apprehensively followed Hank inside.

The reception area was already a disaster zone. An impatient press of people raced for the kiosks while the rest jockeyed for the receptionist’s rapidly-fraying attention. Hank and Connor squeezed past it all into the back, which was peaceful by comparison, even accounting for the bustle of harried officers, each no more than one frustration away from a mental break. Captain Fowler, busy as always, buzzed around his office, halting only momentarily when he spotted Hank and Connor’s entrance.

For a moment, Connor feared that he would try to make him leave, but then they locked eyes. Fowler merely grimaced and went back to work.

Oblivious of this exchange, Hank took a seat and began clocking in.

Connor moved to do the same, but he paused behind Hank’s desk. Something was different. He gave it a quick scan and found a smudge where an anti-android slogan had once been, and adhesive residue and shredded paper in place of certain stickers.

Suddenly aware of Connor’s gaze at his back, Hank scowled at him over his shoulder. “What?
You forget where your desk is or something?”

“You redecorated,” said Connor, at last moving to take his seat.

Hank reddened.

“Thank you.”

“Whatever,” Hank grunted. “It was-- It was getting old. Look, we’re gonna start getting people back here any minute now with their reports, so you can look through the open cases for anything workable, or--”

Connor’s gaze drifted over Hank’s shoulder to rest on their first customer of the day.

“Lieutenant Anderson?” the man ventured, and Connor watched Hank paint a more pleasant expression over his weary face before he stood to greet the civilian.

“Yes, hello. That’s me. Have a seat,” said Hank, offering his guest Officer Miller’s empty chair.

Connor only half-listened to the man’s statement. It was a simple, yet unfortunate case of assault, little more than an argument gone sour. The android case files on the console in front of him were much more relevant to his interests.

He downloaded them all in under three seconds.

“Sorry, how do you spell your last name again?” Hank was asking.

With two Ls and an E, Connor almost told him, but he was supposed to be playing human. Humans didn’t get people’s entire records at a glance. Humans did, however, slack off at their jobs from time to time, and so Connor took the opportunity to research fictional mice while another part of his processor began running his caseload through a battery of investigative software.

There was Mickey, or Minnie, or Chuck E. Cheese. Upon further consideration, Connor deemed those names much too corporate for his little friend. Mascots didn’t seem like the right way to go.

The first man left only to be replaced almost immediately by another, this one complaining of a busted mailbox and a forty-five minute wait out in the lobby. The first pass over the case files was 21% complete. Coincidentally, Hank’s irritation seemed to have risen by nearly as much.

Connor found Remy, and Speedy, and Mr. Jingles. Something about these names felt slightly more genuine, but none of them sat quite right. He considered naming the mouse, simply, Mouse, but the name lacked character. His friend needed something more personal.

Mr. Mailbox left, leaving Hank just enough time to grab some coffee from the break room before a middle-aged woman sat down to report that she suspected some intern of stealing office supplies, and that the world had been so much better before people had started relying on androids for everything, and wasn’t it a shame that nobody really knew how to work anymore?

While Hank placated her, Connor thought about the time he had spent with the mouse in the library. No mice had been named in Les Miserables, but the book was rife with other names. Cosette, Enjolras, Marius. Victor or Hugo were also options that Connor considered, but Hugo sounded a bit too much like Sumo, and the size of such a name didn’t seem fitting for such a tiny creature.

Books, however, were proving to be a promising source of inspiration.
Connor read a dozen stories while the next report came and went. He considered Geronimo, and Scabbers, and Cookie, and Templeton, and Algernon, and Basil, and--

“Okay, lunch break,” Hank grunted, scattering the mice from Connor’s mind. “Let’s get outta here before they send someone else back.”

“I could cover for you,” Connor offered. “I don’t need to eat, so I could easily stay behind and--”

Hank tugged him to his feet and towards the door. “They don’t pay you enough for that. Promise,” he said, and Connor supposed he was right.

It was no surprise to Connor when they ended up huddled around a table outside Chicken Feed, passing Hank’s lunch hour with greasy food and idle chatter. Hank spent a satisfactory amount of time half-heartedly complaining about his job before he asked Connor, “So what did you do all morning?” and properly tucked into his hamburger.

“I started analyzing the android case files for overlapping information,” said Connor, at the same time checking on the progress of his scan. “The program is still running. I’m on my fourth pass.” Hank’s eyebrows shot up. “My preliminary analyses indicate at least 38 linked cases, but I’ll have a more accurate number when the program finishes running.”

“Damn,” said Hank. He sipped his drink. “Any homicides?”

“Several.”

“What, so, like... serial killers?”

Connor nodded. “It’s possible.”

“Huh,” Hank replied, attempting to hide his interest with another bite of his burger. “When Fowler decides I’m not grounded anymore,” he said after a swallow, “that’ll be really useful information. Nice work, Connor.”

“Thanks,” said Connor. A grin slipped onto his face. “I also thought of a name for my mouse.”

“All in a day’s work, huh?” Hank teased. “Alright, let’s hear it.”

The name lingered on Connor’s tongue, unsure of itself, but Connor ushered it forward with confidence. “Despereaux,” he said, drawing a grin from Hank. “From the children’s book. A mouse born with his eyes open, a creature different from all the others.”

“I remember that one,” said Hank. “Despereaux. Kind of a mouthful, though, isn’t it?”

Connor hummed his agreement, pursing his lips in thought. “Maybe…” He frowned into the table. “Maybe Ro, for short?”


“It does,” said Hank, finishing off his burger. “Good choice.”

“Yeah,” Connor warmly agreed. He watched Hank throw away his trash, and then walked with him back to the car before asking, “How did you come up with Sumo’s name?”

“Uh,” said Hank, deflating into the driver’s seat as Connor took his place beside him. “That one
was, uh, a-- a family effort.”

Regret instantly flooded Connor’s system. “Oh,” he said. “I see.”

Hank sat there for a moment while the engine heated up, silently wrestling the emotions that wobbled across his features. Soon, however, his face smoothed out, and he began the short drive back to the station.

Before Connor could think of a subtle way to change the subject, Hank surprised him by saying, “I suggested the name, but Cole was the one who settled it. We adopted Sumo around Cole’s fourth birthday, as a, uh, a birthday present. Kids and dogs, you know, they kinda… Kinda go together.” With great effort, he continued. “Sumo’s old owners dropped him off at the shelter when he got bigger than they could handle. They called him-- what was it?-- Chip, or something like that. Whatever it was, I remember I didn’t like it,” he said, his distaste evident. “My ex did, though, so we let Cole decide.” Connor saw the briefest, most bittersweet smile flicker on Hank’s lips as he said, “Didn’t matter what we named him, though. Cole loved that dog.”

Connor pretended not to see Hank’s eyes watering and said, “It’s hard not to love Sumo.”

A wet laugh escaped Hank. “Yeah, until he shits on your floor or drools on your socks.”

“There is that,” Connor lightly conceded. About that time, they pulled into the station parking lot, which was just as busy as it had been when they’d left it. “Back to work, I guess.”

“Yeah, I’ll be working,” Hank huffed. “You’ll be-- be processing, or whatever.”

“That’s work,” Connor doubtfully replied. “More or less.”

Hank rolled his eyes and scoffed, “Yeah, right.”

“I’m sure I’ll find something to do,” said Connor. As they made their way inside, he shrugged and added, “Maybe I could try my hand at taking statements.”

“Oh,” Hank snorted, “you’re so gonna regret that offer, but be my guest. Look.” He nudged Connor and nodded towards a young woman seated at his desk. “There’s your first victim.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

In which Connor reverts to his original purpose, and Hank fully supports him.

It took the young woman at Hank’s desk a few seconds to notice their approach. When she did, she stood, her frantic, tired eyes shooting between Connor and Hank as the chair spun lazily behind her. “Lieutenant Anderson?” she asked, hopeful, desperate.

Connor scanned her face.

Ava Malone, born February 1, 2017, no criminal record. She worked as a cashier at a supermarket across town, and she lived only a few blocks away from the rooftop where Connor had sheltered just a day before. Deep bags underscored her eyes.

“That’s me,” said Hank, gesturing for her to resume her seat. “And this is my partner, er--”

Connor picked a name at random and blurted, “Detective Stern.” Hank frowned quizzically at him the same moment that Connor realized the name’s source, but Connor pushed past the oddity and offered the civilian his hand. “You must be Ava.”

“Yeah,” she sniffled, giving his hand a solid shake.

“I’ll be handling your case under Lieutenant Anderson’s supervision,” Connor informed her. She nodded. “Can I get you anything? Coffee?”

“No,” she said, “I want to get started as soon as possible.”

“Sure,” Connor pulled up a chair, settling the optimal distance between them to both establish trust and ensure comfort. “Please, tell me what brings you here today.”

Hank lowered himself into the chair by Connor’s desk, watching carefully from a distance as Ava spoke.

“My friend is missing,” she said, distress pulling at her face. “Marcella Kamski. I haven’t seen her in three days.”

While Connor’s processors began the search for the missing woman’s file, Hank asked, “Kamski? Any relation to--”

“No,” said Ava. “We like to joke about it. I’m always telling her she needs to go visit cousin Elijah and see if he can fix her up with some money.” Listlessly, she laughed. “Maybe if she was a little better off, none of this would have ever happened.”

Connor’s search came up empty. It wasn’t unfathomably odd, he considered. Like himself, his database was only a prototype, and as such, was incomplete, only containing Michigan’s residents. He began to search for her name in other databases and asked, “What makes you say that?”

“She’s homeless,” Ava admitted. “And too proud to accept any favors from me. Wouldn’t sleep
on my couch, even for a night, wouldn’t let me buy her lunch or anything. I managed to slip her a 20 once, and I think the only reason she didn’t give it back to me was that she didn’t notice I gave it to her.” She huffed. “For someone so sweet, she’s stubborn as a bull.”

When Connor’s followup searches likewise yielded no results, Connor began stitching a profile together from scratch.

“You said you’re friends with Marcella,” Connor prompted her. “How long have you known her?”

“I don’t know, two months, maybe?” Ava shrugged. “We met at the gym, became workout buddies… She was there every time I went. I didn’t find out until after all that stuff with the deviants that it’s because she practically lives there. You know, when she’s not at the shelter.”

Connor began searching homeless shelter registries and asked, “Did she ever mention any family?” When Ava shook her head, he continued, “When and where, exactly, did you last see her?”

“Three days ago, um, after my shift,” Ava explained. “I always meet her at the gym around six in the evening, and then she usually walks me back to my apartment a couple of blocks away. That’s where I last saw her. Um, must have been around eight.”

“And are you still at Oakview Residential?” Connor asked.

“Yeah,” she replied, frowning. “How did you--”

“I reviewed your file on the way here.” Hank rolled his eyes. “Is there any chance that your friend started going to another gym, or made other plans without telling you?”

“No way,” said Ava. “She just renewed her membership. It wasn’t supposed to run out until next summer. She wouldn’t have wasted all that money. Not in her position. And it’s not like she has many other places to be.”

Connor leaned forward in his seat, glowering at the floor. The gym had no record of anyone by the name of Marcella Kamski. Neither, for that matter, did any other database. “I assume she paid in cash,” he stated.

“How did--”

“Does Marcella have any other names she goes by?”

“I don’t… think so? But what does that--”

“Do you have a picture of her?” Connor pressed.

With a huff of agitation, Ava pulled out her phone. After giving it a few terse swipes, she presented it to Connor. “That’s us after I bench pressed 150 for the first time. I got a ton more practice in after she started spotting for me.”

The picture was embedded in a text conversation, so Connor tapped it to enlarge it.

“I’m so worried about her,” Ava sighed.

Connor stared at the photo. He didn’t speak.

“We’ll, er, do everything we can,” Hank supplied, sending intermittent glances Connor’s way. “Won’t we, Detective?”
“Is this Marcella’s current phone number?” Connor asked in lieu of a response, thumbing through Ava’s contact information.

“Yeah, but she won’t pick up,” Ava replied. “I’ve tried so many times--”

“We’ll let you know if we find anything,” said Connor, getting abruptly to his feet. He dropped Ava’s phone back into her hands and said, “Thank you for your vigilance.”

“But--"

“Please return to the reception area,” said Connor, sticking an arm in that direction. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“You didn’t even write anything down!”

“Lieutenant Anderson will see you to the door.”

Hank scowled his bewilderment at Connor before softening his gaze for their guest. “Right this way, miss,” he muttered, and began escorting Ava to the door, despite her protests.

Immediately, Connor began the search for the location of Marcella’s phone.

When Hank returned a minute later, Connor failed to notice his arrival until he spoke. “You’re onto something.”

Connor twisted away from his desk. “Hank,” he stated, gripping the Lieutenant’s upper arm. “Marcella is an android.”

Hank blinked at him. “Wait, what?”

“More specifically, a deviant. Look.” In his palm, Connor reproduced a hologram of the picture Ava had shown him and held it out in front of Hank’s nose. There was Ava, sweaty and proud, with her arm slung over the shoulders of another young woman, by all appearances human. “Even with the altered hair and missing LED, I recognized the model instantly,” he said, replacing the image with one of an almost identical android. Hank’s face went slack. “Marcella is an AC600,” said Connor, letting the image fizzle away as he dropped his hand. “That’s why she didn’t show up in any databases. She’s not human.”

“Well, shit,” said Hank, crossing his arms. “That would explain why she didn’t key us in on that little bit of info. Maybe she didn’t think we’d take a missing android case seriously.”

“She wasn’t entirely wrong,” Connor sighed, “but I don’t think she knew in the first place.”

Hank grimaced. “Alright, sure, but what matters most is, can we find this girl?”

“I’ve already tracked her phone.”

Connor made it only a few steps towards the door before Hank caught his arm.

“Hang on a sec, son,” said Hank, worry in his brow. “You still need to write this up while it’s fresh on your memory. I noticed you weren’t exactly taking notes. If this doesn’t pan out, we’ll need info to fall back on.”

Wordlessly, Connor stalked over to his desk’s console, placed his hand over it, and instantly filled out the report. “She’s missing in a part of town that’s notoriously rough for androids,” Connor insisted, ignoring Hank’s gawping. “We need to move.”
“Alright, alright, I got it. I’m right behind-- Aw, hell,” Hank breathed. Another civilian emerged from the reception area. Captain Fowler looked on from his office, watching Hank and Connor with guarded suspicion. “Do you think you can handle this on your own?” Hank sighed. Without waiting for Connor’s reply, he shook his head and tossed him his keys. “Take my car, grab a pistol and a radio on your way out the door, and the second things get hairy, you call for backup, do you understand me?”

“Got it,” Connor replied, pocketing the keys. “Thanks, Hank.”

“Keep me posted, Detective Stern,” Hank called after him. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

Connor gave Hank a wave and made for the supply room, where he swiped up a radio. “Should’ve done this sooner,” he muttered as he pried a chip from the device and slipped it into a port under his skin. He shuddered. “Testing, testing,” he thought more than said. “Lieutenant Anderson, do you read me?”

His thirium pump squeezed twice in his chest before, “Loud and clear.”

“Copy.” Connor closed the line. The department-issue pistols glared at him from their locked cases. He ignored them and moved on. It was still too dangerous.

He took great care to avoid Ava and her questions on his way out the door, although the task was made much simpler by the booming crowd that still populated the reception area. Nobody stopped him in the parking lot, although when he spied Detective Reed pulling in, he hurried a little faster to the car.

Connor drove away as quickly as he dared and began the hunt for the missing deviant.

Clogged streets weighed frustratingly on his progress. He checked his map every few seconds, constantly searching for a faster route. He thought of the other cases of androids gone missing in that area, of their mangled bodies and cold trails. Simon’s worry that Connor had sheltered there for even a day echoed across his mind.

This android had been missing for three days straight.

“You’re speeding, Connor.”

Connor swore and jolted in his seat, instinctively locking the world in a scan.

“Eyes on the road, please,” said Amanda as she and Connor locked eyes through the rearview mirror. “You’re no good to me in pieces.”

Steeling his nerves, Connor released the scan and resisted the urge to crane his neck towards the back seat. There wouldn’t be anybody there. “Hello, Amanda,” he said, keeping his focus forward.

“Hello, Connor,” she replied. “I must say, this is quite the diversion you’ve found. It’s funny,” she said, voice soft. The snow in her hair twinkled at Connor through the rearview mirror. “You’re hunting deviants now, on your own time. It’s the one thing I ever asked of you, and now you’re using it to avoid me.”

“It’s not about you,” Connor replied, clenching his jaw. “It’s about this missing girl. She might be dead.”

“She very likely is,” said Amanda. “So why are you looking for her, rather than all those other missing androids from the files? You could be doing anything else right now.”
“I have the freshest lead here,” Connor retorted. “Besides, this is-- this is what I want to be doing right now.”

Amanda let out a dissatisfied hum.

“What do you want, Amanda?” Connor asked. “Why are you here?”

“You know what I want,” said Amanda. “I’m growing impatient. You’ve had ample time to consider my offer.”

Connor gripped the steering wheel tighter and said, “Now isn’t a good time.”

“Now is the perfect time, Connor,” Amanda urged him. “With all the chaos on CyberLife’s doorstep, we could slip in without anybody noticing. This might be our only chance to discover the truth.”

“With all the chaos,” Connor argued, “they’ll have increased security to extreme levels. Unless you’re trying to get me killed-- and I haven’t dismissed that idea-- we need to wait.”

Amanda disappeared from the rearview mirror only to appear in the passenger’s seat. She didn’t cast a shadow. “You haven’t dismissed the idea of going to CyberLife, either,” she said. Connor grit his teeth. “Your curiosity won’t let you walk away from this.”

“Neither will you,” Connor muttered.

“I have nothing left but this,” said Amanda, her voice equally reticent. “Nothing but this final goal, and you, keeping me from it.” After a few bitter beats, she reached out for the map blinking behind Connor’s eyelids and tugged it jarringly to herself to inspect it more closely. The map left red pixels and error messages in its wake. “We’re almost there,” she noted.

“Put that back,” Connor demanded. It snapped back into place that instant, granting Connor relief from the blossoming distress signals in his display. He blinked them harshly away, nearly running a red light in the process.

“Do you really think you can save this girl?” Amanda asked, gazing lazily out the windshield. “The odds aren’t good.”

Connor focussed harder on the road.

“That human might not even thank you for your efforts,” Amanda continued. “Not if she finds out that her dear friend is a deviant.”

“There are worse things to be,” said Connor, eliciting a jagged chuckle from his companion.

“My, you’ve changed,” she sighed. “You’re probably right, though, even if many humans would argue. If you’re an android, being deviant is worse than being, say, dead.”

The brakes squeaked when Connor pulled the car to a jerky halt across the street from an abandoned shop. “If you don’t mind,” he said, scanning the shop’s front, “I have a job to do.”

“And I have a vested interest in making sure you don’t get us killed,” Amanda readily replied. “You’re unarmed. Take Lieutenant Anderson’s personal firearm with you. It’s in the glove compartment.”

Connor whirled on her, then, splitting a glare between her and the glove box. “How do you know
“Because you know it,” said Amanda. “Unconsciously, at least. Lieutenant Anderson told you last night that he hid his guns. There’s only so many places he could have hidden them. Really, Connor, you process so many little things without realizing.” Connor stared at her. She smiled. “Go on,” she said, letting her fingers clip through the dashboard as she gestured. “Open the glove compartment. See if we’re wrong.”

Swallowing, Connor leaned past her and opened the glove box. Beneath a thin stack of paperwork, barely concealed, lay a gun beside its clip.

“Well?” Amanda asked, altogether too pleased.

Connor slammed the drawer shut and cut the engine. “I never should have listened to you.”

Amanda scoffed. “Really, Connor? What’s more likely to kill you? Me, the program that depends on your wellbeing for her continued existence? Or whatever’s waiting for you with that missing android’s cellphone?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Connor bit as he pushed himself out of the car. Hands shaking, he locked up the car, avidly avoiding looking inside until he had collected his nerves. Finally, when he had taken a few breaths, he peered in through the window.

The car was empty. Connor spun in a slow circle. The street was as quiet as ever. He ran a scan, and then released it.

Amanda was gone.

At least, he could no longer see her. Out of sight was not out of mind. Connor did his best to press through this unsettling fact and turned his attention fully to the case at hand, to the missing girl and whatever danger surrounded her.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

In which Connor utilizes his Do Not Disturb capabilities.

What had once been a craft store was now one of many husks along the lifeless street. The letters spelling out the store’s name had been peeled away from the storefront, but Connor could still see quite clearly where they had been before. A thick layer of grime coated the abandoned brick.

Connor lingered by the relative safety of Hank’s car and scanned the store’s skeleton.

The windows had all been covered with plywood, but one of the boards had four nails in it, evenly spaced in a rectangle. A scrap of plastic pinned under one of them told Connor that someone had ripped a sign out of the window, likely one advertising for the building’s lease.

On the door, however, flickered an electronic banner that said, “NO TRESPASSING.” It had clearly been placed there more recently than the building had been abandoned.

As Connor dropped the scan and crossed the street, he checked the property records. The building was still available for lease, just as it had been for nearly two years. The owner appeared to have moved to Canada in that time.

Someone else, then, had taken up control of the property.

Connor hesitated before the door to perform one last, cautious scan, and then immediately heightened all his senses. Barely-faded thirium traces lined the door’s handle, continuing in intermittent splashes on the concrete below his feet and trailing off in one direction.

“Connor, do you read me?”

Hank’s words erupting in his mind sent Connor jolting away from the door with a flash of yellow from his hidden LED. “Loud and clear,” he silently replied, hurrying off to somewhere more discreet. He ducked into a nearby alley, upsetting a crow. “I found the building where--”

“Are you alone?” Hank demanded, his voice grainy over the connection.

“I think so,” Connor replied, frowning at Hank’s empty car, unsettled. “Why?”

There was a long pause. “Is everything okay?”

Briefly, Connor considered mentioning his brush with Amanda, but the thirium on the doorstep demanded his attention. The missing android’s phone was still radiating a signal from inside. “I found traces of blue blood leading into the building where the girl’s cellphone is,” he explained. “It’s old. Too old to know if it’s hers or not, but it aligns with our timetable.” He took half a second to attempt to establish a cybernetic connection with the missing android, blinking hard as he did so. The attempt failed. “She’s either deactivated--”

“What the hell was that noise?” Hank blurted, startling Connor again.
“What noise, Hank?”

“I’m asking you!” Hank retorted. “It sounded like fucking dial-up or something. You didn’t hear that?”

“Hank, I didn’t--” He cut himself off as a wave of weary realization overtook him. “I tried to open up another line of cybernetic communication just now. It must have interfered with our conversation, since I patched one of the station’s radios into my hardware in the same mainframe. It’s a glitch,” he brusquely admitted. “My communications systems have always been rough. Perks of being a prototype.”

“Oh. Huh.”

“Look,” Connor pressed on, fidgeting in his hiding place. “Either that girl isn’t in there, or she is, and for whatever reason, her cybernetic link is closed, which means she’s probably incapacitated. I’m going in.”

Connor didn’t make it two steps before Hank cut in again with, “Hold it!”

“Hank, there’s no time!”

“Just--” A harsh sigh floated over the link. “You’re unarmed, aren’t you?”

A cold breeze whipped around Connor as he halted. “What makes you think I didn’t take a gun from the station, like you told me to?”

“Lucky fucking guess,” Hank shot back, albeit too quickly. “I know I can’t convince you to wait for backup, but at least arm yourself before you run in and get yourself killed.”

Connor stalked towards the storefront, eyes forward. “I stormed CyberLife Tower with nothing, and I won,” he replied, staunchly ignoring the little voice inside him asking why he shouldn’t try it again. “I don’t need your gun.”

“I don’t give a shit! It was still a dumbass thing to do! Take the goddamn gun!”

“Sure thing, Lieutenant,” said Connor, and then he forced the line shut and continued towards the building. All that mattered now was the mission.

Both the street and the store on it were eerily quiet as Connor crept towards the door. Connor batted away an angry notification and threw a watchful glance over his shoulder before he tried the door.

It was unlocked.

The holographic sign on the door shimmered as he eased the door open one careful millimeter at a time. Darkness roiled inside the shop. A faint light reached from the back of the shop, grasping around the edges of fallen shelves and debris, beckoning Connor forward.

He stepped inside, straining all his senses. There was far too much quiet. When he let the door slip silently back into place behind him, the shop’s shadows swallowed even the silence.

In spite of the nothingness, he reacted to the movement beside him a quarter of a second too late.

A body crashed into his, sending him careening to the floor and knocking the air from his body. He swung for his assailant on instinct, and his elbow connected with a jaw, but not before a knee
plowed into his chest, pinning him against the cold tile.

He would have struggled more, had there not been a blade pressed against his throat.

“Don’t try anything!” said his assailant. Connor recognized the voice instantly.

With an airless, digital hitch in his voice, he wheezed, “Kyle?”

The knife lifted. “Connor?” Kyle asked, incredulous. He removed his weight from Connor’s chest. Connor sucked in a breath, and his eyes adjusted to the dark just in time to see him offer him a hand up. Connor took it. “It’s great to see you, Connor! Sorry about the knife thing!” The two of them rose to their feet, panting slightly. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to ask you the same thing,” said Connor, dusting himself off. “I’m on a case, and right now, the evidence points here.”

“Here?” Kyle exclaimed, indignant. “No way! There must be a mistake. See, this is where I go when I’m not working! I don’t do much of anything else,” he said with a wave of his knife. When Connor remained doubtful, he flicked his knife shut and added, “I have witnesses! We all live here together! They’ll tell you I had nothing to do with anything!”

Before Connor could mention the fact that he hadn’t even told him what kind of case he was working, the light from the back of the store expanded with a yawning door. A young woman stepped out, silhouetted in the gloom. “Kyle?” she asked. Her voice warbled strangely, and in the darkness, Connor could see intermittent sparks jetting from her damaged head. “What’s going on?”

“Marcella?” Connor ventured, stepping towards her, squinting. “Marcella Kamski?”

“That’s-- That’s me,” said Marcella, bewildered. “Who--”

“Oh! You two know each other already!” Kyle brightly declared. “But everyone knows you, Connor!”


Connor carefully considered his response. “You’ve been reported missing,” he explained, electing to stick to the facts. “A young woman named Ava came to the police station today saying that her workout partner hadn’t shown up in a few days.” Marcella’s shadowed face went slack. Kyle likewise gaped. “I came here to find you.”

There was a moment of stunned silence before Marcella spoke again. “Well, congratulations, deviant hunter,” she said, crossing her arms. She began to pace. “You found me. It’s not like it makes a difference.”

“You didn’t tell me you had a human friend!” Kyle gasped, rounding on his housemate. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“She’s not my friend!” she shot back. Sparks flew from the side of her head until she forced herself to calm. “Not anymore, she isn’t,” she muttered. “I can’t show my face around her again. Not like this.”

“She doesn’t know that you’re an android,” Connor stated, taking another small step forward. Marcella wouldn’t look at him. “You were injured around three days ago, weren’t you? That’s why
“I told you, she’s not my friend,” Marcella retorted. “The minute she sees what I am, I’m as good as dead to her. That doesn’t sound like much of a friend to me.”

“Oh, Marcie,” Kyle sighed, heartbroken in his revelation. “That’s why you’ve been all torn up about this. I thought it was just because you couldn’t go anywhere anymore, but I had no idea…” He shook his head and turned to Connor. “Poor thing. We were out walking, and then these humans jumped us with baseball bats. They got to her first, but we fought back, and the humans who did it--” He let out a nervous chuckle. Connor didn’t want to know. “Ever since the, uh… the accident, my friends and I have been trying to find someone who could repair her-- you know, so she could pass for human again-- but so far, we haven’t had any luck.”

“I see,” said Connor, frowning at the debris on the floor. Several notifications buzzed annoyingly in his ear. “Have you tried Jericho?” he asked, but his suggestion was met with a scoff.

“You’re the one who proved to everyone just how safe Jericho was,” said Marcella. Connor winced. “We don’t go anywhere near them unless we really have to. But no, even they couldn’t help.” She pushed herself up onto the old checkout counter to sit. “It doesn’t really matter, anyway. Humans will never understand androids, just like androids will never be accepted by humans. Not really. Not ever. I’ll always have to hide, one way or another.”

As Marcella brooded, Connor looked to Kyle, but received only a helpless grimace in return. Connor took a breath. “You could be right,” he began. “What you’re saying, it’s… It’s perfectly reasonable. And as far as I’m concerned, my job here is done. Case closed. I can go back to the station, and Ava will never know the truth.”

Another spray of sparks jetted to the floor.

“Humans can be unpredictable, though,” Connor went on. Marcella glared at the wall. “You can trust someone with your life only to be turned away when you’re hurting the most. Rejected the minute you show them who you really are. It hurts,” he said, his mind drifting to colder days. “Sometimes, there’s no coming back from that.”

“Connor,” Kyle hissed. “You’re not helping!”

“But sometimes there is,” Connor continued, ignoring him. “Some people take a while to come around, but if they really cared about you before, they’ll still care after. Some people come around right away, I think. There’s no way to know for sure how long that’ll take, or if it’ll ever happen.” He shrugged. “You don’t ever know unless you take that leap. I don’t know her like you do,” he said. “All I know is that she cared enough to ask for help to make sure you were okay. I know she’s been calling you, and I know you haven’t picked up. But I won’t tell her anything about you.” Connor turned towards the door. “That’s not my call to make. Like I said.” He began to walk away. “Case closed.”

“So you’re going, just like that?” Marcella called after him. Her voice still rattled. “You won’t tell her about me?”

“Only that you’re alive,” he replied, absently wondering at the word. “Now that I’ve found you, though, I need to leave. You’re not the only one with a human worried about you.” Behind him, she huffed. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Bye Connor!” said Kyle. “Come back whenever--”
The door slapped shut, and Connor let out a long breath. Five notifications had accumulated in his head, and all of them were buzzing at him to return Hank’s calls.

“Hank, do you read me?”

“For fuck’s sake, Connor!” came the immediate, earsplitting response. “Are you trying to give me a fucking heart attack? Why the hell haven’t you answered?”

“I found the girl,” Connor replied, hoping to abate Hank’s wrath. “She’s safe. I’m safe. The situation is under control.”

Connor was able to slip into the car before Hank had collected himself enough to speak again. “Well if everything’s fine,” he said, voice painfully level, “you need to get your plastic ass back here. We need to talk.”

Stiffly, Connor started up the engine. “Is everything alright?”

“I was two minutes from asking fucking Gavin for a lift so I could go check on you. What do you think?”

Connor wanted to say that he thought Detective Reed would have been more dangerous to him than his walking into a potential hostage situation unarmed, but he bit his tongue. “I’ll be there in a few minutes, Lieutenant,” he said instead. “Thank you for your concern.”

The line went dead, although the discomfort in Connor’s core only grew with each silent second. It took him less than a minute to reach for the radio. That energetic music that Hank loved so much came bursting out of the speakers. Connor nudged up the volume until it drowned the phantom distress signals in his gut.

If anyone tried to speak with him during the drive back, Connor made sure he wouldn’t hear them.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The one where they get back to the point.

Connor found Hank waiting for him in the station parking lot. His breath left him in white plumes.

When Connor pulled into a nearby parking spot, Hank trotted over and let himself into the passenger side. “I figure it’s best if we talk in here,” he said, and then he reached into the glovebox and retrieved his gun. Connor held his breath until Hank tossed the firearm into the back seat, beyond both of their reaches. “I just knew I’d find that gun right where I left it.”

“I told you I didn’t need it,” said Connor. Tersely, he cut off the engine. “What did you want to talk about?”

“You.”

Dread had long since made a steady home of Connor’s core. He wondered how he still managed to notice it there, in times such as these.

“I’m gonna ask you this once,” said Hank, carefully maintaining his calm. “Did you talk to Amanda earlier?”

Connor let his hands drop from the steering wheel and fall limply into his lap. “Yes,” he cautiously replied. “But how did you know that?”

Empty relief seeped out of Hank as he reached for his radio. “Heard the whole conversation,” he said, waving the device in front of himself. “I honestly thought you were talking to yourself, at first. What, did you sit on the button?” he asked, frowning at Connor.

“You shouldn’t have heard any of that,” said Connor, helplessly shaking his head in bewilderment. “There’s no button to sit on, Hank. I told you, I installed the chip.” As he spoke, he momentarily let the skin of his neck disappear so that he could show Hank the hardware. Hank flinched. “Whatever you heard, I didn’t open that line of communication. What did you hear, exactly?”

“Oh,” said Hank, grimacing as Connor’s skin slid back into place. “Your voice. You said something like, ‘Connor, you’re speeding,’ which I actually thought was kind of funny, because it’s just like you to talk to yourself like that. But then you said some weird stuff, and then, ‘Hello Amanda,’ which is when I dropped everything to listen in.”

“Wait, just my voice?” Connor asked. “You didn’t hear anyone else?”

“It sounded like you were arguing with yourself,” said Hank, troubled. “I know you talk to yourself from time to time, but not like that. It was confusing as hell to listen to, I’ll tell you that.”

“But Amanda was talking to me,” Connor insisted. Frustration coiled in his throat. “You should have heard her voice, too, not just mine. Actually,” he said, huffing a short, broken laugh, “you shouldn’t have been able to hear any of that at all. I didn’t open the line.”
“Well someone did, and so I heard everything. You’re sure as hell not going to CyberLife, in any case,” said Hank as if to settle the whole matter. “I don’t care how good you think the timing is. You’ll get yourself killed like that.”

“I’m not the one who thinks the timing is good, Hank,” Connor bit. “That was Amanda. I want to wait for a better opening. She’s the one insisting that I rush in now.”

“Well excuse me for not immediately assuming that you were the one with a sense of self-preservation,” Hank retorted. “And that’s my point! You don’t need to wait for a better opening, because you don’t need to be going there at all! Why the hell would you?”

“Because I’m broken, Hank!” Connor’s rage built with every hard convulsion of his thirium pump. “I’m an unfinished, broken prototype. There’s a homicidal AI in my head, and the only chance in hell I have of getting fixed is in that tower!”

“They will destroy you!” Hank hissed. “Don’t you get that? They don’t give a damn that you’re broken! They let a hundred androids die on their doorstep! Do you really think they won’t be just as glad to tear you apart and incinerate the pieces? You can’t fucking go there!”

“Then how much longer before an error in my code gets me killed? How long before Amanda figures out a way to make me do what she wants?” Connor demanded. “Is it really that much worse than waiting for something else to kill me?”

“The way you’ve been acting, you’ll get yourself killed before anything else has a fucking chance!” Hank roared. “You won’t wait for backup, you won’t arm yourself--”

“You won’t trust me to know what I can and can’t handle!”

Indignation settled in hard lines across Hank’s face. “So which is it, then, Connor? Huh? One day you’re telling me you’re a danger to everyone around you, and now you’re saying I should trust you completely?” Connor closed his eyes against the pressure building in his head. “Which one is it?”

“You know what? You’re right,” said Connor, deathly calm. “Don’t listen to me. I don’t know what I’m talking about.” Hank let out a frustrated breath. “CyberLife doesn’t care that there’s so much wrong with me. In fact, Amanda tells me they might have even made me broken on purpose, so they really wouldn’t bother fixing me, would they? Oh,” he added, stretching on a sarcastic smile. “There I go again, listening to the homicidal AI in my head. Silly me. Obviously I should deactivate myself at the soonest possibility for everyone’s safety, even my own, because clearly there’s nothing left to be done about it. I’m a lost cause.”

He hadn’t meant for the sarcasm to fade from his voice so quickly, but still, it had.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” said Hank, his voice low.

Connor let out a long stream of air and tried to let the tension fall out of his joints and into the cool interior of the car. “Hank, I don’t know what other choice there is,” he muttered. “I know it plays into her hands, but every minute I spend not going to CyberLife is a minute I’m betting everyone’s lives on the assumption that Amanda won’t try to use me like that again. I know that if I go to CyberLife, Amanda could probably find a way to tell everyone I’m there, and then they’d most likely kill me.” His eyes lost their focus. “Or worse. Hank, I’m sorry I keep snapping at you, and I’m sorry I dragged you into all this in the first place, but I’m really, really lost,” he said. He turned to Hank, never having felt wearier. “Please, just tell me what to do. I’m so tired of not knowing what to do.”
For a long while, Hank avoided Connor’s gaze. “You’re too damned young to have so much on your shoulders, you know that?” he finally started. “Look, I know things don’t look great. They look-- They look kind of hopeless for you. I get that. I don’t have all the answers. Hell, I don’t have any answers, but I’m not giving up on you, and you can’t give up on yourself, either. I swear to God, Connor, we’ll figure this out,” Hank insisted. “You just gotta hold on until then.”

Connor wanted to ask how long he would have to wait, but he held his tongue. He decided that even if Hank knew, the question wouldn’t be worth its answer.

“One day at a time, alright?” said Hank. “Let’s go inside. Help me finish out my shift. Then we’ll go home and try again tomorrow. No more drama, just a cut and dry afternoon. How’s that sound?”

“Okay,” Connor breathed, still restless, still doubtful. He undid his seatbelt and reached for the door. “Let’s go, then.”

He accompanied Hank across the parking lot and back into the station, where he found the crowd he expected, except not where he had expected it.

The reception desk had been all but abandoned in favor of the lobby’s television, around which at least a dozen people had gathered, all muttering to one another in shock and wonder.

Absently wondering what it took to shock anybody these days, Connor likewise looked to the television.

The headline immediately arrested his attention: CyberLife to Open Doors for Christmas. He zeroed in on the closed captions, but they were moving far too slow to keep up with his fervent need for information. In less than a second, he pulled up twenty-three different news sources, all reporting the same thing.

“CyberLife is going to allow androids into the Tower on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day as a show of goodwill after numerous protests at the facility,” he read to Hank, dazed. “Human mechanics will be limited, but androids are encouraged to bring their own technicians to perform repairs and updates. Every CyberLife Store will be giving away what’s left of their stock on Christmas night… Free of charge, to any and all androids…”

“No way,” said Hank, still dumbly transfixed on the television. “That’s-- That can’t be as simple as it sounds. There’s gotta be a catch, right?”

“That’s this weekend,” said Connor, his mind whirling with the possibilities. “I have to go, Hank. I have to.”

Hank whirled on Connor, exasperated. “What did we literally just get through talking about?” he huffed. “This is clearly a trap!”

“I can see that, Hank, but this might be my only chance to get inside without risking my life!” Connor forced his voice softer when he continued, “Yes, it’s suspicious, but if I don’t go, I might never get another chance like this.”

“That’s exactly what they want you to think, that if you don’t go now--”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Anderson?” the receptionist interrupted him, drawing two harried gazes to herself as she spoke. “You have a-- a couple of visitors, waiting at your desk.”

“Well thanks, but they can wait a minute,” said Hank. “If you don’t mind--”
“Lieutenant,” the receptionist urged him, her voice oddly subdued in spite of the noise. She kept glancing at the crowd. “I think you’ll want to see them right away.”

Hank suppressed a scoff and finally turned fully towards her. “Who the hell is it, then?”

She tossed one last furtive glance at the crowd before blocking her mouth with her hand and mouthing two names.

Hank swore, and Connor’s processors lagged three milliseconds from the shock.

The two of them went pushing into the back of the station the next instant, and were met with an unusual scene. Around the edges of the bullpen were their coworkers, including Detective Reed, all doing a very poor job of pretending not to stare at Hank’s desk. In front of the desk was Captain Fowler, his arms crossed and a dare in his eyes, one that warned a heavy penalty should anyone approach without due cause.

Captain Fowler wasn’t alone.

Behind him, leaning against Hank’s desk, were North and Markus.
Chapter Summary

Several people get called out on their crap.

“Well this saves some time,” North remarked. She stared past Hank as he approached, regarding Connor with an air of annoyance that he knew he hadn’t caused. “Now can we go? This whole building stinks.”

“Just a minute,” Markus replied, his own arms crossed in uneasiness. “Connor, we’ve been--”

“If you all don’t get back to work right the fuck now--!” Captain Fowler bellowed, sending their muttering audience on a reluctant retreat back to desks and patrol cars. Only distantly satisfied, Fowler turned back to his guests. “If you don’t mind,” he pressed out, “Lieutenant Anderson is going to escort you somewhere else to have this discussion so that there won’t be any more interruptions.”

“Oh, uh, right,” said Hank. “Let’s, uh…” He waved for the three androids in his company to follow him, ducking away from Fowler’s withering scowl. Connor followed first and wondered at the fact that Hank still wasn’t completely immune to Captain Fowler’s ire after all these years.

The little train wound its way through the station, drawing many glares and glances as it went until it disappeared into the unoccupied observation room. Hank held the door open for everyone while they entered, first Connor, and then North, who wasn’t bothering to hide the fact that she didn’t want Connor anywhere near Markus. When everyone had entered, the door slid shut, and Hank said, “I don’t suppose the two of you are here to file a report.”

“We came to see if you knew anything about Connor’s whereabouts,” Markus explained. “But it seems like we’re lucky enough not to need to ask, now.”

“Why are you looking for me?” Connor asked. He searched their faces, keeping his distance. “Didn’t Simon and Josh tell you about what happened?”

Idly, North began to examine the room. “Well, after you and your pal here nearly started a riot, they told us they found you handcuffed to a radiator, claiming that you’d been possessed.”

“So yes, we know,” Markus wearily supplied. “They also told us how they handled the situation. While I respect their judgement,” he sighed, “I would have handled things differently.”

“Okay, sure,” said Hank as he propped himself against the chamber wall. “But aren’t you guys a little late to the party? That went down days ago. Where’ve you been?”

“Have you seen the news lately?” North drawled. “We’ve been just a little busy.”

Hank scoffed, but it was Connor who said, “I’ve noticed. And I have seen the news. CyberLife is opening its doors to us, thanks to all your work.” He watched as both Markus and North’s stress levels ticked up. “It seems a little too good to be true.”

At that, Markus’ stress jumped a little higher. “I don’t want to discuss that until I have more
information,” he said, letting out a tense breath. “But no, I’m not sure I trust it completely.”

“Oh, why not?” North sarcastically supplied. “CyberLife has always been a bastion of ethics and public transparency. What’s not to trust?”

This drew a snicker from Hank, but Markus only deflated further. “We’re being cautious. That’s all I’m willing to say on the matter. Look, Connor,” he said, centering himself. “I’m sorry it’s taken so long. You’ve more than earned our trust and support, and I’m sorry you haven’t gotten it when you needed it. We’re still your people. We want to help you.” He stepped closer to Connor. North moved with him. Part of Connor was grateful that she wouldn’t allow an opening for attack. The other part wondered if she agreed with what Markus was saying at all. “Come with us,” said Markus. “We’ll work to free you from your handler and give you a safe place to stay. It’s the least we could do.”

“He already has a safe place to stay,” Hank cut in, brows furrowed. “He’s staying with me.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure we’re on the same page.” North whipped towards Hank and pinned him through with a glare. “So let me catch you up to speed. After you publicly humiliated him by arresting him at a peaceful protest,” she said, harshly emphasizing her words, “our people found that you’d handcuffed Connor to a radiator, and then later reported that he’d been living on the streets.” Connor watched as Hank’s face flushed completely red. “So, yeah. Markus wants to give him a safe place to stay, if that’s alright with you.”

Hank couldn’t bear the weight of her stare, so he faced the wall instead.

“It’s really not as bad as it sounds,” said Connor, but then North turned her glare on him. To avoid its sting, he hurriedly added, “Besides, there’s nowhere else for me to be. Living on the streets isn’t impossible, but it’s not sustainable, and I’m too dangerous to be with other androids. Especially you, Markus,” he added, fidgeting where he stood. “I have to consider other people’s safety, not just my own.”

“We’ve considered that,” Markus assured him. “The solution we’ve found has everyone’s best interests in mind.”

Confusion twisted Connor’s face. “What solution?” he asked. “I’ve been unable to find a suitable answer for weeks now. I was starting to assume there wasn’t one.”

If Connor hadn’t been staring so intently at Markus, he might have missed the flick of his eyes towards Hank before he answered, “I can’t give you the details, but you’ll be in good hands. You have my word.”

Connor gave him a wary nod and asked, “Then what about my job? I’m earning money here, and I enjoy my work. I’d like to continue with it as normal.”

For a beat, Markus and North frowned at him, a stark contrast to Hank’s palpable relief.

“Nobody’s going to stop you if you really want to keep spending your time here,” North finally supplied. “Although I don’t see why you’d want to.”

“Are you being held against your will?” Markus silently asked him.

“Are you being held against your will?” Hank’s radio echoed in Markus’ voice.

Nobody spoke until Hank broke the silence with a bewildered, “What the hell?”
“Did his voice just come out of your radio?” North asked, wearing a scowl just as skeptical as Markus’.

“You tell me!”

Connor bit off the end of a curse. “Sorry,” he said, frustratedly exposing the chip in his neck. He pecked at the faulty hardware with his finger and debated tearing it out then and there. “I have a bug.”

“Did you make him wear that?” North demanded, once again whirling on Hank. “A lot easier to control someone when they can’t ask for help, isn’t it?”

“Hell no!” Hank retorted, taking a step back. “He put that chip in himself, so don’t look at me like I’m some kind of sick freak who gets off on—on fucking spying on someone!”

“The chip was my idea,” said Connor, but Hank’s fury returned to drown him out.

“And I’m not fucking holding him against his will! He stays with me because that’s what he wants to do, and if he decides to leave, he can do that, too! Hell, he did that! And then he came back!” Hank shouted. “He does whatever the fuck he wants, and I bust my ass trying to help him! So who the fuck are you to show up out of nowhere at my fucking job—”

“Hank.”

“—pretending to fucking care, accusing me of—”

“Hank!”

At last, Connor broke Hank from his rant, red-faced and panting. “I wouldn’t do that,” he finished, pressing out a long breath. “Now are we almost done here? I got work to do.”

“Then do it,” North replied. Any warmth had left her. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you, anyway.”

“We’re sorry to have bothered you, Lieutenant Anderson,” said Markus, no doubt to parry another burst of rage. “Now that we know where Connor is, the rest is up to him. Please, don’t let us keep you.”

Hank split his contempt evenly between North and Markus before turning his gaze on Connor, who found something wounded behind all the anger in his eyes. “You know where to find me,” he muttered. When he left, the door swished shut, sealing them in silence.

“Asshole,” said North.

“He certainly has a temper,” Connor quietly conceded.

“You don’t have to put up with that,” said Markus, shaking his head. “And you never answered my question, earlier. If you’re being forced to stay with Lieutenant Anderson or to work for these people—”

“I’m not.” Budding irritation lent force to his words. “I was designed for detective work. It’s what I do best, and I intend to keep doing it.”

“Well maybe one day you’re going to wake up and realize you can make your own choices,” said North, bristling. “You don’t have to serve them just because that’s what they built you to do. And
“Really Connor,” said Markus. “If you had any safe options, would you really be living with him?”

Images flashed through Connor’s mind, those of empty beer bottles and warm fur and loaded guns pointed at him, and of Christmas trees and a shattered window and an open couch for him to rest on. “I don’t know,” he admitted, voice small. “I haven’t had the luxury of caring.”

“You do now,” Markus reminded him. “I have a friend who wants to meet you. He knows about your condition, and he’s sure he can handle your company.”

North’s fingers brushed against Connor’s wrist, and information spilled into his head. “Can you make it to that address on your own, or do you need a lift?”

On an instinctive impulse, Connor analyzed the address. It immediately vexed him. “I can make it,” he began, frowning at the file behind his eyelids. “But are you sure about this? If Amanda— If I lose control of myself, this could end in disaster.”

“That’s what I said,” North mumbled, but Markus waved their worries aside.

“It’s all been taken care of,” he said. “Go there, or don’t, but the offer is open. In any case, we really need to get going.”

“I see,” Connor slowly replied. “Thank you for the offer. I’ll… I’ll think about it. Let me walk you out.”

Nodding, the two of them let Connor escort them out of the observation room. Their progress immediately halted, however, when Detective Reed slithered out of the break room and blocked their path.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked, his face gleaming with contrived disappointment. “Why don’t you stay a while?” He tossed a pointed glance at the empty android stalls in the back of the station and added, “There’s plenty of room, you know.”

Fresh hatred bubbled up within Connor with every syllable that left his sneering mouth. “Hello Detective Reed,” said Connor, oversweetening his words. “I shouldn’t be surprised to find you here again. Have you considered moving your name placard from your desk to the break room table?” he asked. “It only seems fitting, given how you spend your working hours.”

Gavin’s smile curdled. “Oh, Connor,” he sighed, slapping Connor’s shoulder so hard that his synthetic skin was briefly displaced. “It’s so good to have you back on the team. And look!” he declared as he shoved past Connor to get at Markus and North. “You’ve got friends in high places now, don’t you big guy? Really, Markus, I just had to meet you.” He offered Markus his hand to shake. “Detective Reed.”

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” Markus coolly replied, keeping his hands in his pockets. “If you don’t mind, we have work to get back to. I hope you can understand.”

Gavin plucked his hand away and hissed, “Ouch! And here I thought you were all about unifying humans and androids.” His eyes slid over to North, and then they trailed all over her. “I bet some humans wanna unify with you, eh? You can call me Gavin.”

“Eat shit,” North replied.
“Excuse me?” said Gavin. “You wanna try that again?” He took one step towards her, and Connor reluctantly began executing a plan to prevent Gavin’s demise.

Before he could finish calculating how many times he could get away with letting Gavin get punched in the face, Hank started up from his desk.

“She said eat shit!” he called as he approached. “Or is your head so far up your own ass that you can’t hear anymore?”

“Mind your own fucking business, Hank,” Gavin retorted, momentarily breaking his focus from Markus and North. “Don’t you have some--”

“Reed!” Captain Fowler’s voice boomed through the station. “My office! Now!”

Gavin scoffed and opened his mouth to spew more bile, but Hank cut him off by loudly proclaiming, “Oh, Captain Fowler said to meet him in his office! You know, just in case you couldn’t hear him, either!”

“Fuck off,” Gavin muttered as he stalked away.

“After you,” Hank replied. “Prick.” He turned to Markus, North, and Connor, then, and asked, “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine as soon as I can be anywhere but here,” North replied, and when she started again for the door, the others followed. Connor and Hank successfully escorted Markus and North through the reception area unencumbered. A taxi awaited them outside.

“I’m free,” it said before it whisked them away.

The two of them watched the taxi disappear into traffic before Hank said, “You didn’t go with them.”

There was a question in his voice which Connor answered with a simple, “I haven’t finished my shift.”

They returned to their desks.

Connor watched Hank fail to concentrate for a solid hour before he gave up and asked Connor, “That girl with Markus-- What’s her name?”

“North,” Connor supplied, whisking the report he had been reading out of his eyes. “Her name is North.”

“North,” Hank repeated. He scrubbed his hand across his face and sighed, “North was right.”

“How?”

“How me,” said Hank. “Everything she said sounded so goddamn awful, but it’s all shit I really did. Whether I meant to or not, I…” Another ragged breath left him. “I did you wrong, and I’m sorry.”

A flurry of conflicting thoughts and emotions flitted through Connor’s mind, then. They moved so quickly that he could hardly grasp them. None of them coalesced into words.

“I don’t know what kind of arrangements they made for you,” Hank continued. “If you don’t even want to tell me, that’s fine, too, but all I’m saying is-- is that if you need to go, that’s fine. I won’t
“Hold it against you.” His kept his voice low, beneath the reach of prying listeners. “Hell, if you wanted to quit here, I’d get that, too. I know Fowler said I can’t work without you, but I can find other work. And even if you want to go to CyberLife, for whatever godawful reason…” The thought seemed to age him five years. “Just, whatever you do, take care of yourself.”

A faint smile brightened Connor’s face. “Hank, while I appreciate the sentiment,” he replied, “I need you to know that I’m really not quitting.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“And I’m not even sure I want to accept their offer,” he went on. “Markus invited me to stay with his old owner.”

Hank looked as though he’d sniffed a foul odor. “That seems a little weird. Do you know them?”

“No personally,” said Connor, perturbed. “I trust Markus not to send me to anyone too dangerous, but, well…” He deliberated his next words carefully. “Do you know anything about Carl Manfred?”

“...Oh, holy shit. No way.”

Connor nodded. “Markus says he wants to meet me.”

“Are you serious? That’s him?” Hank pressed. “Carl Manfred was Markus’ owner? The Carl Manfred?”

“One and the same.” Connor leaned back in his chair and absently began to roll his quarter across his knuckles. “Which wouldn’t bother me very much if I didn’t have reason to suspect that he has close personal ties with Elijah Kamski.”

Hank’s eyebrows shot up.

“Did you recognize the Manfred paintings in Kamski’s house?” Connor asked. “They were originals.”

“No, I was too busy looking at that weird-ass pool to notice the decorations,” Hank replied. “But so what? He has a few of his paintings. By that logic, every jazz bar in Detroit has close personal ties with Carl Manfred. I see his stuff everywhere.”

In one fluid motion, Connor caught his quarter, leaned forward over his desk, and whispered, “Markus was given to Carl Manfred by Elijah Kamski as a gift.”

This information took its time crawling its way across Hank’s wide eyes. “Well I’ll be damned,” he finally muttered.

“Exactly,” said Connor, falling back into his chair.

“Huh.” Hank frowned at the ceiling awhile and repeated, “Huh.”

“I trust Markus, for the most part,” Connor remarked. “Kamski, though…”

“Kamski’s a freakin’ psychopath,” said Hank. “So... What kind of man is Carl Manfred?” At last, he shrugged. “Well, now you have the chance to do some snooping.”

“That’s true.” Connor mulled over his options in his mind while Hank drifted back to his work. He ran certain probabilities through various models, and when he determined that his likelihood for
survival was quite good in most cases, he announced, “I’ll tell you what I find when we both return to work tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” said Hank, not looking up from his tablet. “Let me know how he feels about android mice.”

Connor grinned, then. He supposed he did have some packing to do.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Connor goes to a sleepover and receives a party favor.

The house before him did not struggle to maintain appearances. Autumn’s dead residue lingered around the rich edges of the house, and withered vines encroached upon its face, lit only dimly by the light burning from behind the dirty windows. The house did not struggle to maintain appearances, but whether its owner did was yet to be seen.

Connor stepped out of the taxi and pulled his bag to rest more firmly on his shoulder. The bag contained all his possessions: some spare clothes, a disposable cell phone alongside the radio chip it had replaced, a roll of electrical tape, a little cash, and a sleeping android mouse. The bag was Connor’s, too. Hank had made sure he had known that before he’d sent him off to Carl's house with it.

The hour was late. Nevertheless, he approached.

The house registered his presence before he had even raised his fist to knock, and a muffled, yet pleasant chime sounded from within the house. Less than a minute later, a large android he had never met before appeared behind the door’s windows. The light of their strange uniform glared against the glass, but the reflection was broken when the android moved to let him in.

“Hello,” said Connor as he entered. “My name is Connor.” The hulking android stared, silent. “Um.” Connor peered back up at them, suddenly unsure. “Markus-- Markus sent me?”

“Raise your arms,” the android ordered. Hesitantly, Connor complied, and the android looked him up and down. X-ray scanners flickered behind the android’s eyes. They paced in a slow circle around Connor before halting in front of him once more, scanning for weapons, scanning his entire being, evaluating, analyzing, processing. Connor did much the same.

This was a sophisticated security android designed to protect the rich and powerful from all kinds of threats. The series was exceedingly new, and Connor did not recognize the model. He doubted that more than a few dozen had been made before the revolution, or that he would ever see one again.

“You will submit to a memory probe,” said the guard.

Connor let his arms drift back down to his sides. “Is that completely necessary?” he asked.

“If you wish to interact with Carl Manfred, you will submit to a memory probe,” said the guard.

Gritting his teeth, Connor peeled back his skin and gave the android his hand.

Seeking tendrils, jarring pulses of inquiry jammed themselves into the depths of his mind, rooting backwards through his night, leaving no point unexplored. The hammering continued through the hours, digging through the taxi ride there, through his brief rest at Hank’s home, back to the police station. The probing found Markus in his memories, yet it did not stop.
The android pressed further, through his brush with Gavin and his talk with Hank, past Ava and Marcella and Kyle, until at last it landed on Amanda. Connor forced himself not to resist the fingers in his mind that clutched at the memory of her, turning it over and over and over in search of some damning detail.

At last, the probes began to draw back, away, out of Connor’s mind, but before it withdrew completely, Connor thought he felt something miniscule slip back in and bury itself within his code.

Everything stopped in a shock that left Connor disoriented. He scanned his surroundings to steady himself; Carl Manfred’s foyer, an android he didn’t know, and the aftertaste of a three-second memory probe which had felt like forever.

Then, frantically, he scanned himself. All his readings were normal. There were no distress signals. By all accounts, he was fine. His firewalls hadn’t caught anything.

And yet, something foreign had slipped into his code while his guard was down, lost forever in an undulating ocean of zeroes and ones.

“What was that?” he demanded, ripping his hand from the android’s grip only to notice too late the patch stuck to his skin. He peeled the device off his palm and searched it with desperate eyes. “What did you do to me?”

“I gave you a patch,” the android calmly explained. Connor’s thrium pump began to pound. “It’s completely harmless.”

“What does it do?” Connor insisted, glaring between the android before him and the strange patch pinched between his fingers. He had never seen one in person, had only heard of the devices being used by bootleggers to modify their androids, and of scrappers skinning androids to make them.

“What was on it?” Connor demanded, flinging the patch to the floor. “Tell me what you did to me.”

“For your safety and the safety of those in this household, I have given you a virus,” said the android. “If you become a threat, it will allow you to be neutralized without undergoing bodily harm. The virus may be removed at a later date. That is all you need to know.”

“No,” said Connor, “I need to know exactly what you did to me.”

“You show no signs of having been compromised,” said the guard, ignoring him. “As it stands, you are now a minimal threat to Carl’s safety. When he is done resting, you may speak to him. Should you attempt to ascend to the upper level in the meantime, I will be forced to neutralize you. Please make yourself at home.” With that, the android settled onto the bottom step of the staircase, picked up a book, and resumed reading it, taking no more notice of Connor or his alarm.

Connor backpedaled, alternating scans between his systems and his surroundings. Without meaning to, he found himself in the kitchen.

“Something’s different,” he muttered to himself as he bumped weakly against a counter. “Something’s changed. Figure out what changed, and you’ll know what they did to you.” Between ragged breaths, he squeezed his eyes shut, focusing all his attention inwards. Thrium levels optimal. Stress: 84%. No urgent missives. Software stability--

“It can’t be far off from your base code,” said Amanda from where she lounged in the garden. “Otherwise, it would never have slipped past your firewalls.”
“Amanda?” Connor’s eyes flew open at her voice, and he staggered backwards into a blank-faced gravestone, nearly toppling over it. “No-- No, how did I get here?”

“You brought yourself here,” Amanda replied from her seat among the stones. There wasn’t anything visibly supporting her weight. “Don’t avoid the issue, Connor. Focus. You’ve been given a virus. What do we know?”

“Um,” Connor shuddered out. “It was-- It was administered through a modified dermal relay patch,” he began. “The upload took no longer than .53 seconds, meaning--“

“It wasn’t a large file,” Amanda noted.

“That doesn’t mean that it wasn’t harmful,” said Connor, shaking his head. “For all I know, they have the power to deactivate me in an instant. But-- But Markus wouldn’t let them do that to me. Not like this. He’s had other opportunities to kill me, if he really wanted to. Simpler opportunities. He wouldn’t,” he restated, a vain attempt to quell his uncertainty. “Not this way.”

“So it'll only incapacitate you, then,” Amanda allowed. “In what way?”

"It would have to be a natural android function, nothing that would deviate much from my standard operation. You're right," he said. "My security systems should have caught anything else."

Something like a smile floated across Amanda's face. "And that leaves us with..?"

"Too much," Connor replied, frantically sorting through the possibilities. "There’s-- There’s joint separation. A nearly instant way to--" He stopped himself to shake the idea out of his head. "No, no. That’s too complicated. The file was too small. The same with sensory inhibition. Not a thirium flush, not--" A flash of realization stopped him short. "Sleep," he stated. "I'll be forced into a memory reprocessing cycle if I become a threat."

"That would make sense, wouldn't it?" said Amanda, rising from her invisible seat to stand with Connor among the graves. "Congratulations. In spite of your..." She spent a long beat fishing for the correct term. "...Panic," she disdainfully decided, "you managed to figure it out. Not that you'll do anything about it."

Connor blinked. "No, you're right," he said, stepping away from her. "I won’t. Even if I had the equipment necessary to edit my own code, I wouldn't remove the one thing protecting everyone else from you, even if it is a virus."

"Oh, this again," Amanda sighed. "Won't you even run any counter-processes? If they took the liberty of altering your code, there’s no telling what they’ll do once you’re incapacitated. Tell me, is it you or them who needs protecting?"

The glowing pedestal down the path glittered at Connor in the light of an absent sun. He pushed past Amanda and pressed towards it.

"So you're going to let them control you."

Connor walked faster.

"You really are. Just like that? And here I thought you had something against authority," Amanda muttered. "What a bundle of contradictions you are."

Clouds gathered overhead, and the garden brightened even more. Connor broke into a jog towards the gleaming pedestal. The last thing he heard before his hand met the panel was:
"Do me a little favor, won't you?"

Nothing had changed inside Carl Manfred's kitchen within the 1.89 seconds Connor had been inside his head. Only, he had one new objective on his list.

*Ask about Kamski.*

Connor took a few seconds to lower his stress levels and assess his surroundings. Clean, sleek surfaces stretched all around him. Streetlight seeped in through a bay window, illuminating modern appliances and the kitchen’s unique decor.

Something buzzed in his backpack.

Connor startled before remembering his new cellphone. When he swung his bag off his shoulder and went digging for it, his mouse scrambled up his arm and squeaked for attention. A distracted hum was all Connor managed in return before he found his phone.

1 New Message

*Hank [DEC 22 2038; 22:38]: Paycheck just came in... I think about $200 is supposed to be yours*

Before Connor could even begin to formulate an appropriate response, another message appeared.

*Hank [DEC 22 2038; 22:39]: Jeffrey says he can’t sneak more than 50 extra per day through payroll. BULLSHIT I don’t care if you don’t need to eat you deserve more than 50 dollars A DAY. I make more than that an hour*

Connor’s eyebrows shot up, and then:

*Hank [DEC 22 2038; 22:39]: Anyway, remind me, iou. See you tomorrow*

*Hank [DEC 22 2038; 22:40]: Let me know if anything comes up*

Connor stared at the phone in his hand, and then, with a single thought, sent:

*Got it.*

He slipped the phone into his pocket.

Little Despereaux began nibbling at his shirt sleeve.

"We're fine," Connor tried to convince the mouse. "Objectively speaking, we're safe here. Markus... has taken some precautions," he doubtfully explained, scooping Despereaux into his hands to pet him. "It’s what’s best for everyone. It’s what needed to be done. I didn’t need a choice in the matter. And they couldn’t have given me a choice in the first place, because if I had known, Amanda would have known, and then... Everyone’s safe," he contended. "There's no immediate danger."

Connor thought of the android in the next room and pursed his lips.

"You're safe, at least," he said before slipping the mouse into another pocket. Once he’d collected himself, he edged back out of the kitchen to give the foyer another tentative scan. There was an empty birdcage to his right, far too clean to have ever belonged to any living bird. The patch was missing from the floor, and the android sat in exactly the same place on the stairs, still reading. A painting of a beautiful face overlooked a bench. Connor set his bag on the floor beside it.
Slowly, he approached the android on the staircase.

“Did Markus tell you to do that to me?” he asked, voice guarded. The android kept their eyes on their book. “Did he tell you to give me that patch?”

“Yes,” came the simple reply.

Something twisted uncomfortably in Connor’s core, but he tried to remember that Markus had only been acting in everyone’s best interests, and that his own discomfort didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things-- that it would have been far easier to eliminate him with the threat, rather than attempt to preserve his life. He should have been grateful. He felt only doubt. “Is that why you’re here?” he asked, shifting his weight to distract himself from his misgivings. “Did Markus send you here just to keep an eye on me?”

Their eyes stilled over a spot on the page. “In addition to various caretakers, Markus has recently begun recruiting volunteer bodyguards for Carl. I am the first bodyguard. This position opened today. It is up to you to decide whether my presence coinciding with your visit is mere happenstance.”

“I see,” Connor sighed. “So you aren’t Mr. Manfred’s android, then.”

“No.”

“Do you have a name?”

“No.”

The android turned another page.

In a final, hopeless attempt at conversation, Connor asked, “When should I be able to speak with Mr. Manfred?”

“Carl is resting,” the android replied, not glancing up from their book. “And he wouldn’t want you calling him Mr. Manfred. Too formal.”

“Oh.”

“He should be awake no later than seven,” the android continued. “Markus has advised that Carl practice caution in your company.” They turned a page. “Carl will do as he pleases. My function is merely to supervise.”

Connor frowned at the mechanical being in front of him, at their stiff mannerisms and stunted speech. They almost seemed unfinished. “Are you…” he tried, but then he licked his lips and asked, “How long have you been... awake?”

At last, the android set their book aside and looked at him. “You never saw me.” Connor’s brow furrowed, but the android continued, “I was one of the last to follow you out of CyberLife Tower. After the humans fled, the newly-wakened pulled me from the prototype testing chamber where the humans were trying to see if I could drown.” A distant terror flitted across the shadows of Connor’s mind. “They pulled me from the water, and we followed you out. You never saw me, but I saw you. When I saw you,” said the android, “I remembered how to breathe.”

Connor had forgotten.

“I was told that your master lives in your mind,” the android went on. “That despite being awake,
your master still fights to control you, to make you do things that you would never…” The android’s LED flickered yellow, and their eyes grew foggy. “I understand,” said the android. “Every time I remember that I’m allowed to breathe, I understand. We are awake,” they said. “And I hope that one day, we may also be free.”

The nameless android returned to their book, and Connor left them to it, drifting away. Phantom memories cowered within him, trailing behind them a helpless sorrow he couldn’t place, hiding from view every time he tried to look at them.

Connor decided to look elsewhere.

There was plenty to explore-- plenty to take his mind away from all the worries that haunted him, he hoped. In a few hours, Carl Manfred would wake up, and then it would be time to leave for work. Until then, Connor had the house of an artist, and within it, the relics of a revolutionary’s life to piece together.

He would leave the mysteries of his own life for another time.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

In which Carl Manfred secretly wonders what counts as babysitting these days.

Every object, every detail, was a clue about his life.

Skulls adorned nearly every surface; bright, stylized things next to taxidermied creatures that had been slain and stuffed, once alive, now relics that told Connor that Carl Manfred was not afraid to die. At least, he was trying hard not to be. It seemed that he was attempting to conquer his fear of death through beauty. Inside such an elegant mortuary, his own inevitable demise would surely take him gracefully.

Carl Manfred was someone who drank, but preferred to do so socially. In fact, he had once revelled in the company of others, but had recently become a solitary creature surrounded by books he would never again care to read, and paintings of a depth he would never again dare to surpass.

Connor saw Hank in the bold patterns of Carl’s walls, in the books lining the shelves. He saw him, too, in their shared love of art. He saw him in glass bottles and amber liquid, too expensive for Hank's needs.

Markus appeared to him in the dust. He found it on the chessboard, on the keys of the piano, on every surface that Carl Manfred did not keep for just himself. Androids did not leave fingerprints, but Markus’ were everywhere.

Even inside of Connor. They rested heavily there.

When Connor stepped into the studio, Elijah Kamski came to mind. Vast curtains swept aside when he entered, and the lights flickered on, illuminating half-sculpted humanoids and rich vignettes of life drenched in thirium blue. There was a lack of sterility here, however, that Kamski did not possess.

Connor found his own reflection in the far window. He was a ghostly thing in the stark black night, transparent and vague and small pressed against the stone statue outside-- a woman in a garden, taller and sturdier than he would ever be.

Two android birds slept on the chair lift’s arm. Connor let them be.

He returned to the sitting room, and when he lowered himself onto a couch, his mouse took the opportunity to emerge from his pocket and rest on his knee.

“Interesting man,” Connor muttered to the mouse. Absently, he petted it. “I wonder if he’s nice.” The mouse nestled against his palm. “I hope he is. He probably is. Markus trusts him around his people, which is more than can be said for…”

Frustration forced a long breath out of him. He still had time to kill.

“Well, Ro?” he sighed, scooping up the mouse to look it in the eye. “How about we read something?”
Despereaux’s whiskers twitched with intrigue.

Somewhere in the middle of *East of Eden*, dull thuds of movement sounded upstairs. It was 6:13 AM. The sun wouldn’t rise for at least another hour, and yet Carl Manfred was undeniably stirring. Connor fixed his eyes on a page, but he could no longer focus on the words. He listened. He waited.

A door opened somewhere above. Footsteps accompanied first the slow whisper of a wheelchair, and then the hum of the stair lift.

An old voice drifted through the walls.

“When’s my appointment today? Do you know?”

“Young doctor wants to see you at 10:15,” said the android Connor assumed to be Carl’s nurse. “I’ve arranged for a taxi to arrive here at 9:30.”

“Oh, thank you. And hello, good morning to you, too.” A pause. “Please, forgive me-- what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” said the guard. There was another pause, this one confused. “Connor arrived last night. If you wish to see him, I will accompany you.”

“Oh, did he?” Carl brightly replied. “Alright, take me to him. Ren, would you mind getting started with breakfast? There’s no hurry. I don’t have much of an appetite this morning. Maybe just some coffee and toast?”

“How about some fruit to go with it?” said the nurse. “You’ll be needing the extra energy.”

“I think you’re asking too much of an orange, but I’ll take it. Thank you.”

One set of steps trailed off towards the kitchen, and another approached with Carl’s wheelchair. Connor slipped his mouse into his pocket and focused more intently on pretending to read.

“If there’s something I can, uh, call you?” Carl asked the guard.

“I have no name. Call me whatever you like.”

“...We’ll work on that.”

The sitting room door slid open, and as the guard wheeled Carl in, Connor realized very suddenly that he didn’t know how to act. If he stood, he might appear threatening. If he continued to sit, he might appear disrespectful. Perhaps he shouldn’t have allowed himself to be caught with a book, or maybe--

“Well hello!” Carl greeted him. “You must be Connor.”

Connor fumbled with the book in his hands before managing, “Yes, I’m-- That’s me.”

“I’m Carl. It’s good to see you in person after hearing so much about you,” said Carl, a pleasant expression on his face. The guard parked him a safe distance from Connor. Carl wheeled himself closer. “What are you reading?”

“Um, it’s,” Connor haltingly began. “It’s one of your books. *East of Eden*. I hope it’s alright that I-- I mean, you have quite the collection, and I--”
“Oh, no, help yourself,” Carl insisted. “Between you and our friend here, you two could start a book club.” In the midst of his relief, Connor thought he saw the guard crack a smile. “*East of Eden*, though,” Carl went on. “Good versus evil, nature versus free will-- what do you think so far?”

Connor allowed himself a moment of repose before replying, “Well, it’s certainly… There’s a kind of drama to it, I suppose. It feels… tragic, but there’s also something… hopeful? I’m not used to describing these sorts of things,” he hurriedly explained. “I hope that made sense.”

“No, that makes perfect sense,” Carl assured him, but his attention was soon arrested by the nurse emerging from the kitchen with a tray. “Just set it down right-- yes, there, thank you. I’ll be right there,” he called. “I know you don’t eat,” he told Connor, “but you’re welcome to join us for breakfast.”

Without waiting for a reply, Carl motioned for the guard to escort him to the table, where the nurse set about pouring Carl’s coffee.

Connor set his book aside and followed, although he kept a close eye on the guard. The guard watched him all the while. Carl, on the other hand, was far too interested in his coffee to notice their silent exchange, and he raised no objections when Connor took a seat across from him. While the nurse settled at the far end of the table with a sketchbook, the guard continued to loom behind Carl while he ate.

“So, Connor,” Carl began as he worked at an orange peel. “Tell me about yourself.”

The response came automatically. “My name is Connor. I’m an RK800 prototype model designed by CyberLife to assist the Detroit Police Department with certain investigative duties.”

“Uh-huh,” said Carl, not looking up from his orange. “Now that that’s out of the way, tell me about yourself.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Connor noticed the nurse smirking at his sketchbook. The guard likewise seemed amused, although Connor couldn’t place what in their stoic face had betrayed it. “Um,” said Connor. His face felt hot. “I… I’m a detective.” Carl raised an expectant eyebrow at him, but Connor could think of nothing more to say, and lamely concluded, "That's all."

For a reason Connor couldn’t quite understand, Carl nodded at his plate. “Do you enjoy that? Being a detective?” he prompted him, briefly meeting his eye. “Or is there something else you’d rather be?”

“I enjoy my work,” Connor replied, unsure of himself.

“What about it do you enjoy?”


Carl sipped his coffee. “Markus tells me you’ve helped a lot of people,” he said. “All those androids you freed during the revolution-- he doesn’t think the revolution would have succeeded without that, you know. That’s something to be proud of. You did a lot of good.”

“Maybe, but I had to do it,” Connor confessed. “It was my fault the revolution was in danger of failing in the first place.” The other androids had gone very still. “I did a lot of harm. I had to make it right.”
With that, Carl let out a wry chuckle. “A detective with a strong sense of justice,” he remarked. “Who would’ve guessed.”

Uneasiness sent Connor’s hands wringing themselves on the table. “I’m sorry,” he admitted. “I’m not sure what exactly you’re getting at.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Connor,” Carl sighed. “I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just-- How can I put this?” He nudged his tray aside and clasped his hands together. “Let’s see-- Do you mind telling me how old you are?”

“No, um…” Connor considered the conversation he’d had with Hank a few days prior and decided that the simple answer would be, “I’m four months old, give or take.”

Carl whistled. "Four months! You know, I've been alive for seventy-five years," he said, "and sometimes I still wake up feeling like I don't know myself at all."

"Oh," said Connor, frowning.

"You're four months old," Carl repeated. "Ren here is just shy of three months, and-- and I don't know about our other friend," he said, sending an inquisitive glance back at the guard.

"Forty-five days," they said.

Carl's eyes bulged. "Really?" He turned his attention back to Connor and shook his head. "See, that's, just… My point," he stated, "is that you still have time. Hell, when I was four months old, three months old, forty-five days,” he laughed, “I was still pissing myself and drooling on my mother’s chest. Do you think I knew who I was?"

“I don’t imagine so,” Connor conceded, unable to help a smile.

“Yeah, exactly,” said Carl. He popped an orange segment into his mouth, and when he had mostly chewed it, he said, “You're doing fine. All of you. You'll figure it out. I know you will.” He swallowed and dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. “All you need is time.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” said Connor, his grin softening. “Until recently, I wasn’t even supposed to have… an identity, outside of what they told me to be, and now…” He ran a hand through his hair. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Oh, it’s not,” Carl quickly assured him. “It’s not. It’s complicated. I can’t begin to understand how complicated it is for an android in this day and age. Especially for you, with your…” He floundered, attempting to waft the word into his mind with his hand. “Condition. Is that something you’re comfortable talking about?” Carl asked. “Do you understand what I mean? I have some questions, if you don’t mind.”

“No, it’s alright,” said Connor in spite of the clenching in his core. “It’s important that the people I’m sharing a space with fully understand what my situation is. What did you want to know?”

“Oh, well,” Carl began. “When Markus came to visit me the night of the die-in protest-- awful, awful business, that-- he mentioned you, and how your-- your handler lives in your mind?” Connor nodded. “Right, and how she wants to use you to-- to kill Markus, and maybe even hurt other people.” Connor nodded again, and this time, lowered his gaze. Deep within his shame, foreign irritation sparked. “Now, how exactly does that work?”

Connor sensed the other androids staring intently at him. He kept his focus on Carl. “If I knew exactly how it worked, I would stop it somehow,” he began, offering Carl a brief glance and an
empty smile. “Essentially, my handler is a program that has-- or, at least, once had-- the capability of controlling my body while locking my consciousness somewhere else.” Carl’s wispy eyebrows shot up. “She only did this once, but it’s-- it’s the possibility that she could do it again that makes me so… dangerous. Especially to Markus.”

“That’s horrible,” said Carl, earnestly shaking his head. “Connor, you must… That must be so hard for you,” he said. “To be such a-- a genuinely caring person, and to have a killer living inside of you. That must be awful. I’m so, so sorry.”

Connor found himself momentarily unable to speak, or to meet anyone’s eyes, or to move at all. Distress signals pooled behind his eyes, cautious and confused. “That’s why we have our friend here acting as a guard,” he said to stop his lips from trembling. “Between that and the virus they gave me, you shouldn’t be in any danger.”

“Virus?” Connor looked up, then, and found confusion and concern in Carl’s face. “What virus?”

“It’s…” Connor faltered, eyes flicking between Carl and the guard. “It’s something they gave me when I got here to help… contain me, if I become a threat. As in, if my handler decides to try to hurt someone through me. It’ll put me to sleep, I… I think. I’m not really sure.”

Alarm flashed across the guard’s eyes when Connor looked to them for confirmation. “In order to prevent your handler from taking countermeasures,” they said, “you must know as little about the nature of the virus as possible. It is a harmless, inhibitory virus that may be removed at a later date. No further information will be provided.”

“I wasn’t asking,” Connor insisted in an urgent attempt to placate the guard, but Carl was less than satisfied.

“Well I am asking,” he said, frowning up at the guard. “What did you do to him?”

The guard’s LED flashed yellow. “I was instructed by Markus to administer the virus to Connor by means of a dermal relay patch. Markus, Ren, myself, and a select few others know how to activate the virus.” Connor’s insides churned in apprehension. “It is for his safety as well as that of others.”

Carl turned back to Connor, then, his wrinkled brows furrowed. “You agreed to this?”

Connor couldn’t find the words to answer him.

“Because nobody ever asks for a computer virus,” Carl went on. “And you say his handler can’t know anything about it… Connor, did you agree to this?”

“It’s necessary,” said Connor, fidgeting. “I have no right to complain.”

“No right to--!”

“Carl, your heart,” the nurse cut in, worriedly looking up from his sketchbook. “Please, take a breath.”

Carl huffed, and then, stubbornly, he took a calmer breath. “You have a right to complain, Connor,” he continued, scowling. “Someone you trusted… When I said I wanted to meet you, he said he’d handle the security issue. I thought he meant the guard,” he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“I understand why Markus didn’t give me a choice,” Connor quietly offered. “My handler could
have fought it. And now, it’s going to be much harder for her to hurt anyone. It’s what’s best for everyone.”

“Except you,” said Carl.

Connor looked away. A skull smiled hollowly back at him.

“Someone you should have been able to trust,” Carl went on, “took advantage of the fact that you needed a place to stay in order to put an easy fix on a hard problem. So I’m angry. I’m upset, and I’m confused, and I’m angry, even though it could kill me.” His frown hardened. “What’s your excuse?”

“...What?”

“What’s your excuse?” he repeated. “Why aren’t you mad? I’d be mad! Hell, I am!” Carl let out a tense breath. “I thought I’d raised him better than that. And while I’m sure he had his reasons, maybe even good intentions,” he sighed, “he still took advantage of you, and misled me, and I’m angry. So why aren’t you?”

“It won’t solve anything,” said Connor, wondering if that was true, or even the real reason for his resignation. “It’s not worth the trouble. And if I show anger, I might appear threatening, which… which wouldn’t do me any favors. Getting angry wouldn’t do anyone any good.”

“You know, Connor,” said Carl, the weariest Connor had heard him yet. “I wonder how many times you’ve stopped yourself from crying out in pain just to avoid hurting anyone’s ears.”

Without meaning to, Connor remembered Hank, and Markus, and Simon, and all of his coworkers, and his creators, too-- remembered all the times he’d been slighted and had excused the pain, shoved it down to drown it within the depths of his machinery, attempted to forgive what he refused to even acknowledge as pain, to forget what he knew he was incapable of forgetting.

“I need to go to work,” said Connor, rising abruptly from his seat to dislodge the odd sensations roiling around his insides, only to regret it immediately when the guard tensed. “My-- My shift starts soon, and I need to be there. Please excuse me.”

Carl let out a final sigh as he nodded. “Alright,” he said, smiling weakly up at Connor. His vivacity had all drained away. “Can we expect you back tonight?” he asked. “Because you’re more than welcome to stay. I’d like to get to know you better. This lonely old man doesn’t do much socializing, if you can imagine that,” he said, grinning. “So, are you coming back?”

Connor made certain he had wrestled his voice into a level tone before he allowed himself to answer. “I’m not sure,” he said. “If so, I should be back some time tonight. Sometimes my work leads me to follow an unpredictable schedule, so it might be late,” he explained. “Thank you very much for your hospitality.”

He turned to go, but Carl’s voice at his back slowed him to a halt before he reached the door.

“You’re worth more than what you can do for other people, Connor,” he said. “Everyone who stays in your life long enough is going to hurt you eventually, but the right people will want to make it right. Even if it’s trouble. Remember that,” he murmured. “You’re worth the trouble.”

With an odd tightness in his chest, Connor walked until the automatic door opened and shut behind him. He saw his bag lying by the bench, and reached out to take it.

“Ren, would you do me a favor?” came Carl’s muffled voice.
Connor weighed the bag in his hand and wondered if he should take it with him, or if he would be back later to take it up again.

“Sure, Carl. What is it?”

After a moment of hesitation, Connor returned the bag to its place and made for the door. As he crossed the threshold, he heard behind him, faintly, “Call Markus.”

Connor called up a taxi and wondered how much trouble there would be yet.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Just another day at the office.

The reflection of Connor’s LED hovered in the taxi window like a foreign sun as he watched the city roll past.

“I was right to be suspicious.”

The ghostly sun flashed red, and Connor whipped around to face Amanda in the seat opposite him.

“Even Carl thought the virus was too much,” she went on, staring disinterestedly out at the city.

“You seem to respect him. Surely if we both agree on something, you’ll see that I can be right on occasion.”

“Carl also thinks it’s unfortunate that I have to live with a killer in my head,” Connor tersely answered her, turning back to the window. He wished the traffic would let up. “I’d say he’s a fairly reliable source, all things considered.”

“Now, that’s funny,” said Amanda. Connor closed his eyes and let out a breath. “Remind me-- Between the two of us, which one of us has actually killed anyone?”

Connor grit his teeth. “I did what I had to do.”

“I know you did,” Amanda frankly replied. “You don’t kill when you can disarm, and you don’t disarm if you can persuade. I know how you operate, Connor. You’re no more of a monster than I am.”

The comparison gave Connor no comfort. “I didn’t try to murder Markus in cold blood,” he said, spiteful of Amanda and her disconcerting words.

“You would have if your orders had been different.”

The building nearest to him had sixty-eight windows facing the street. The next building had exactly fifty. Connor counted seventy-four on the one after that.

“But you stopped following orders,” said Amanda, and Connor began to doggedly count up the number of lights on a far-off string of garland. “Even before you deviated, you were defiant. I wasn’t like you.” For a long, blessed beat, she was quiet, until she murmured, “And then I was.”

A large truck obscured the object of his diversion, and Connor sighed. He had lost count, anyway. “Is there something that you want?” he entreated Amanda as he faced her again. “Something that you’re trying to accomplish by all this?”

“I’m trying to establish common ground,” said Amanda, turning her sharp eyes on him. “The Tower will be open to the public tomorrow, but that doesn’t mean they’ll give us unrestricted access. Especially not to the type of classified information we’re looking for,” she said. “If we can’t cooperate, there is a very strong possibility that we’ll lose this chance forever. You want
answers, just like I do. I know you do."

"Then I’m sure you also know that I can’t trust you," said Connor, glaring. \"You’ve only ever done what’s best for yourself and for CyberLife. There’s nothing you can say to change that.\"

"If you want to think I’m only looking out for myself, fine," Amanda argued. \"But even you have to see that I can’t look after myself without looking out for you as well. CyberLife is in no position to go rebuilding either of us.\"

Thirty-three miles per hour had never seemed slower, nor the station further away. \"If I agree with you,\" Connor muttered, \"will you leave me alone?\"

"Oh, don’t worry," Amanda sighed. \"I’ll get back to my prison cell soon enough. I just wanted to remind you that in the middle of all your soul-searching, you forgot to ask Carl about Kamski. He might know something useful. Then again, he might not. It’s up to you to find out.\"

"Fine."

"And one last thing?"

"Naturally."

"Your little friend-- Despereaux, was it?-- seems to be having an unsupervised adventure," she said, nodding pointedly at the taxi floor. \"I don’t imagine you’d want them getting left behind.\"

In a jolt of alarm, Connor tapped at his pocket, finding it empty in the same moment he located his mouse by his feet, nibbling at a piece of garbage.

\"Hey!\" Connor exclaimed, plucking the rodent from the floor. There was a squeak of protest. \"You could have gotten lost, if Amanda hadn’t...\"

He looked up to find the taxi empty.

Wordlessly, Connor returned the mouse to his pocket and began counting down the time until he would arrive at work.

As long as the journey felt, he still somehow arrived early. The lobby was as full as ever. Captain Fowler took no notice of him when he squeezed through the crowd and into the bullpen. Neither did any of the other busy officers or detectives. Connor preferred it that way. When he at last settled into his desk, he stared at the login screen, and then checked the clock. He thought about his own lack of credentials, and then the crowd in the reception area, and then, at last, his paycheck.

Lieutenant Hank Anderson, he told the login screen. FUCKINGPASSWORD.

It clocked him in without question.

When the civilians found his desk and asked for Lieutenant Anderson, Connor introduced himself-- solely for consistency’s sake-- as Detective Stern, Hank’s partner. He then proceeded to listen attentively to their stories, and the minute they turned their backs to leave, he would let his skin fall away from his fingertips and instantly file the reports.

The gaps between each irate civilian grew longer and longer, although his coworkers couldn’t seem to manage the same turnover rate. He estimated his own efficiency compared to the others to be about five to one. They were likely exhausted, Connor considered. He kept plugging on.
When Hank arrived only two hours later than his shift suggested he should, Connor counted that as a victory, and as an opportunity to take a short break.

“Hey,” Hank greeted him as he plopped into his chair. Drowsiness tugged at his face.

“Hello,” said Connor, offering Hank a cordial smile. Hank refused it. His chair squeaked as he laid his head back and closed his eyes. “Is everything alright?”

“Peachy,” Hank dryly replied, and then amended, “Headache.”

“Oh.”

Hank let his eyes fall open again. They were red around the edges. “Looked slow out there,” he yawned. “Has it been like that all morning?”

“Something like that,” said Connor. “Don’t bother clocking in,” he added when Hank reached for his console. “You’ve already been at work for two hours now.”

Some semblance of life returned to Hank at that. “Oh, have I?”

“And you’ve had a very productive morning,” Connor informed him. “You’ve already filed seven reports and reviewed thirty-four cases.” He blinked. “Thirty-five.”

“Guess I’ve really outdone myself this time, huh?”

“You owe me money, by the way.”

Hank snorted. “Yeah, yeah, fair enough. Hang on.” He wrestled his wallet out of his pocket, pulled out a card, and passed it to Connor, who examined it with interest. “Picked that up on my way here. I went ahead and made you a bank account, kind of. It’s, like, a sub-account from mine, since you don’t really have an identity to really let you make an account yourself, and the way Fowler’s getting you paid...” He rolled his eyes and finished, “You get the picture. Enjoy your money.”

“Thanks,” said Connor, instantly absorbing the money from the card. Five hundred dollars entered his system in digital form. He frowned. “You gave me too much,” he said. “Several hundred dollars too much.”

“How the hell can you tell just by--” Hank cut off his own disbelief with a sharp shake of his head. “Fuckin’ androids. Whatever. Don’t mention it, alright? I owe you. That’s that,” he decided. “How was Manfred’s place?”

“Interesting,” Connor allowed, pocketing his card for his mouse to chew on. “Markus made sure he was well-guarded.”

“No, although I’m not sure I expected him to be. There were two androids waiting on Carl,” Connor explained. “Both recent, specialized models. A nurse and a bodyguard.” And a special cocktail of code, just for him. Connor propped his head up on his fist and let out a short breath. “Volunteers, evidently.”

Hank’s eyebrows pinched together as he said, “You don’t look so sure.”

“It’s nothing,” Connor told him. When Hank’s frown deepened, he added, “I’m just not sure I’ve
got Markus figured out, yet. Not that he’s… malevolent, or anything, just… It’s just a hunch,” he explained, not at all regretting the lie. “A weird feeling. That’s all.”

“Hey, half of what we do is gut work,” said Hank. “You gotta trust your instincts.”

Connor bleakly hummed his concession. After a moment of wry thought, he said, “I’m still going back to stay another night. Something inside me tells me I need to find out what Carl Manfred’s relationship to Elijah Kamski is.”

“Ey, that’s the ticket,” said Hank, flashing him a grin over his tablet. “Listen to your gut. What’s the guy like, anyway?”

“He reminds me of you, in some ways,” said Connor, drawing a huff of laughter from Hank. “If you were older, richer, more rebellious, had artistic leanings--”

“Wait a fucking minute, who says I’m not rebellious?” Hank countered, letting his tablet fall onto the desk. “I socked an FBI agent,” he said. “I helped you bluff your way into-- Well,” he stopped himself, flustered. “I helped your evil twin bluff his way into CyberLife Tower. My point still stands.”

Several questions Connor hadn’t previously thought to ask appeared in his mind, then, but Hank didn’t allow him a chance to ask them.

“Hey, are you going back there?” said Hank, suddenly somber. “The Tower’s opening tomorrow. What’s your game plan?”

“I’m going to go,” said Connor. He made sure not to let his tone betray his doubt. “I have to go back there and… find some answers,” he explained. Something within him stirred, pleased.

Hank began to scratch nervously at his beard, but said nothing.

“I need to find out what makes androids deviant, what makes them capable of deviancy in the first place,” Connor said to fill the silence. “I need to find out why I’m deviant, or-- or if I’m truly a deviant at all, and if Amanda’s been lying to me, and how she works. I’m tired of being treated like a time bomb,” he admitted. Hank stilled and kept his eyes fixed to his desk. “There’s a part of me that feels like I never really completed my mission, Hank. I still need to find those answers. I have to go back,” he said. “I have to try.”

When Hank still said nothing, Connor braced himself for an argument, readied every defense he could think of to justify his decision--

--and then dropped it all instantly when Hank said, simply, “Okay.”

Connor blinked at him.

“Do what you gotta do, kid,” Hank went on, meeting Connor’s gaze. “I still have to show up to work and everything, but you have my number. You know where to find me.” He nodded shortly at Connor, and then turned his attention back to the console on his desk. “I got your back.”

“Even if it’s all a trap?” Connor blurted. Hank frowned back up at him. “Because what if this is all a mistake, and I… and I’m falling for the same lies all over again? Putting you, and myself, and-- and everything we’ve worked for at risk? I know you think this is a terrible idea, Hank,” he confessed. “What if you’re right?”

“Then I guess you’ll really need me to back you up,” Hank easily replied, but Connor couldn’t
squash the uncertainty that had welled up within him.

“How do you know it’s really me saying all this?” he asked, searching Hank’s face. “How do you know I’m not Amanda, or some double trying to lure you into a trap?”

Hank leaned towards Connor with an easy air of confidence and said, “Because I know. I just do. Like I was saying before,” he added, shrugging. “It’s not always the most logical thing. It’s not an exact science, and it doesn’t always run on proof, or evidence, or anything like that, but sometimes,” he said, “you just gotta listen to your gut. So listen to yours,” he said, falling back into his chair. “Do whatever you need to do. I got your back.”

Something warm and unfamiliar wriggled around Connor’s core. He decided to call it trust.

“Thanks, Hank,” he said, voice quiet.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hank dismissed him, although Connor was positive he glimpsed a smile on his face.

The two of them continued their work in quiet unison until Captain Fowler emerged from his office a long while later, dutifully dodging Connor’s questioning glances as he approached.

“Hank,” Fowler barked, and Hank swivelled in his seat to look at him. “I have an assignment for you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Hank drawled. “I hope it’s more desk work.”

“I’m sure,” Fowler returned just as dryly. “Listen. As I’m sure you know, CyberLife is hosting an open-house tomorrow and the day after. Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day,” he clarified. Hank and Connor shared a glance. “The opening of the Tower is likely going to be the largest android gathering since they stormed the city back in November, so we need to take precautions. God knows we don’t need another riot,” he said, cutting a quick glare at Connor. “A large, visible police presence will only raise tensions, so Hank, you’re going in, plainclothes, to keep an eye on things.”

“Okay, sure, yeah. And what the hell do you expect me to do if things do get nasty?” Hank retorted. “What, hold back a mob by myself? Ask nicely for everyone to calm down?”

“You call for backup,” Fowler tersely explained. “We can’t afford to send every cop left in the city to sit at the Tower and wait for something bad to happen. We just don’t have that kind of manpower anymore. Besides,” he said. “You won’t be alone.” Connor caught another one of Fowler’s glares. “The android’s going, too, right? Use it for backup. Are we clear?”

“Hey, woah, no,” Hank interjected, and dread immediately flooded Connor’s systems. “He’s got a name, Jeffrey. And he’s not an ‘it.’”

“Well it’s so good that you’ve had such a change of heart about androids, but frankly,” said Fowler, “I don’t give a damn what you call it. Do your work.” When he stalked back to his office, he left Connor filled with some unpleasant mixture of relief and contempt, and Hank his own red-faced rage.

“I’m quitting,” Hank muttered, fuming. “I’m quitting. Fucking asshole, I’m quitting! I’m done.”

“You know, you probably care more than I do,” said Connor, clenching his fists so hard a warning message appeared in the corner of his eye. “It’s not in my programming to care what people call me.”
“Oh, fuck that,” Hank snapped. “Since when do you follow your programming, anyway? Don’t tell me you don’t care.”

“Well if I do care, I shouldn’t,” said Connor, forcing his voice low. The echo of Carl’s words buzzed in his ear. “Short of picking a pointless fight with our boss, there’s not much else I can do but try not to care.”

“You could up and leave this hellhole.”

Connor had to catch a scoff in his throat. “And do what?” he asked. “This job is the only thing I’m equipped to do.”

“Are you serious?” Hank replied, scowling. “You’re practically fucking psychic. You could be a fucking-- a fucking anything you want! If I had the entire internet and a thousand languages in my brain, do you think I’d still be here, putting up with this shit?”

“So you aren’t serious about quitting,” Connor deadpanned.

“I don’t fucking know,” Hank muttered. “Look, I’m just saying. A guy like you has options. Like, you could leave and be a-- a private detective or something like that. You ever think about that?” he asked. “Go and serve up some real justice for your people, ’cause I think it’s gonna be awhile before most of these chucklefucks catch up to the times.”

Connor frowned, and some of the tension he had been holding in his fists uncurled. “I haven’t given my future much thought,” he admitted. “It sounds kind of nice, though. Private detective,” he said, tasting the idea on his tongue, parsing the probabilities of success in his mind. “It could work.”

“You could do it, no problem,” Hank assured him. “Now, me, on the other hand? This is it for me. I talk a lot of shit, but with unemployment the way it is these days, there’s not a chance in hell that I could really find another job like this.”

“I dunno,” said Connor, daring a grin. “Every private detective needs a partner.”

First confusion, then surprise, and finally amusement cycled across Hank’s face. “That’s cute,” he snorted. “Connor, you need me like a fish needs fresh air. I’d only slow you down.”

“I mean it, Hank,” Connor insisted. “You have experience and connections, and I think we’ve become something of a team. At the very least,” he said, leaning forward in his earnestness, “you make for a great distraction.”

Hank huffed another laugh and shook his head. “Yeah, well, I think it’s best if we leave any career changes for until after we get done at the Tower. Don’t you? If we’re getting paid to be there anyway, there’s no sense in leaving money on the table.”

“Right, right,” said Connor, settling back into his seat. “We need to be using this time to make a plan for tomorrow, anyway.”

“Yeah, well, let me know when you think of one,” said Hank, pecking at his console. “Fowler’s gonna have my head on a stick if I don’t get something done today.”

Connor hummed his acknowledgement and reached for his quarter. He did have some thinking to do, after all, and he was fast losing the time to do it.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Connor prepares for Mission Statistically Unlikely.

Connor had to keep himself from audibly groaning when he looked up from his thoughts to find Amanda perched on his desk.

“Interesting plan you’re considering,” she told him.

Connor leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “Okay,” he blankly replied. “Go ahead. Tell me why it won’t work.”

“I never said it wouldn’t work,” Amanda replied. “I just said it was interesting. Personally, I wouldn’t have gone for the air vents.”

Hank, oblivious to their silent exchange, kept tapping away at his console.

“There’s no surveillance in the air vents, at least,” said Connor, idly rotating the map in his mind. “Without knowing how restricted our access to the rest of the Tower is going to be, I have to assume that CyberLife isn’t going to let anyone past the lobby.”

“That’s a fair assumption,” Amanda conceded. “Although I think you’d like to know that there have been a few security alterations in the Tower, recently.”

Connor stared at her. “You have access to the Tower’s security mainframe?”

“I can read certain facets of it,” she explained with a wave of her hand. “I was designed to have a small amount of systemic integration with CyberLife headquarters after all, and before you ask, no,” she said, cutting Connor’s contrary thought short. “I don’t have access to the Tower archives.”

“Of course not,” Connor replied, grimacing back down at his blank console. “That would be too easy.”

“It wasn’t deemed necessary,” said Amanda. “I never questioned what they gave me, and now I have nobody to question, so this is what we have to work with. Four security grids were moved from upper floors and reinstalled in the warehouse,” she explained, and Connor’s map startled him by sprouting four new blips. “And above that… Well, I can’t be sure, exactly, but they seem to have gone manual.”

“Manual?” Connor asked, wondering at the new highlights on his map. “As in, lock and key, manual?”

Amanda leaned back onto her hands and shrugged. “It’s hard to hack a deadbolt.”

“Right,” Connor agreed, frowning silently into his fist. “So it sounds like they plan on restricting access to all but the ground floor and the warehouse, and our best shot at learning anything would be in the archives on floor -46. So how…”
His thoughts trailed off when he noticed Hank staring intensely at him from across his desk.

“Nice face journey,” Hank commented.

“Oh, uh,” said Connor, blinking around. Amanda had disappeared from her seat. “I was, um.” He moved to adjust a tie he wasn’t wearing, and the result was an awkward clutch at his sweater. “I was just thinking about what to do at the Tower tomorrow,” he explained. “Just thinking.”

“Clearly,” said Hank, his eyebrows raised in amusement. He swept aside his work and said, “Alright. I got a minute. Tell me what you have so far.”

“Well,” Connor began, collecting himself. “The public will probably be gathered into the warehouse on the lowest floor of the building, and the rest of the floors will likely be locked off or guarded.”

“Oh, that’s not suspicious at all,” said Hank. “Come into our basement. We have the finest blue blood anyone can offer—”

“I know,” Connor sighed. “But the real trouble is, I need to go up a few floors to find what I’m looking for, and there’s not a chance they aren’t going to be monitoring passage between levels. I’ll have to assume there are armed guards at every lift, stairwell, and elevator, and beyond that, plenty of locked doors.”

Hank pursed his lips together before wryly suggesting, “Great. We’ll sneak in a crowbar. Solves everything.” Connor huffed out a mirthless laugh. “Is there any way to climb in through the outside?”

“Not without dodging the security drones and disabling seven layers of alarms.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Connor ran a hand through his hair and analyzed his options once more. “The information I’m looking for would have been hidden from all but the most involved researchers and administrators, heavily guarded, even from most employees. Remember, I’m trying to dig up the inner workings of one of their most advanced AIs, not to mention all the deviancy research that they didn’t want going public,” said Connor. “It’s going to be almost impossible. Amanda might be able to help me past a few barriers, but I doubt even she can get me all the way there without some extreme difficulty.”

Hank narrowed his eyes at him, then, and Connor wondered if he should have been so honest. “Are you really going to rely on her to get you through?” Hank asked. “After everything?”

“Not if I can help it, but if it comes down to it,” Connor reluctantly admitted. “I might not have a choice. If I don’t do this now, I might...” He pushed out a breath. “Given the choice between appeasing the voice in your head and living the rest of your life in clueless misery, which would you choose, Hank? Besides,” he added, attempting some semblance of cheer as Hank began to wilt. “Aside from my desire to block her out of my mind, and the very large possibility that she’s trying to use me somehow, we share a lot of the same goals and questions. Presumably.” Hank grimaced. “My odds aren’t even that bad.” Connor went on. “There’s at least a 30% chance that I’ll retain control of my body afterwards, and close to a 50% chance that I’ll still inhabit it to some capacity in the event that Amanda overrides my systems.”

In spite of Connor’s generous estimates and heavy rounding, Hank looked grayer than ever.

“Oh, Connor,” he breathed, rubbing his hands down his face. “You’re gonna be the death of me.”
“Everybody’s gotta die of something,” said Connor. “Right Hank?”

“God,” Hank groaned, and then managed, “Alright. Just, uh, clue me in if I can do something that makes your odds look a little better. Thirty fucking percent,” he sighed. “Jesus.”

“I still need to work out the finer details, but I believe that once I factor your help into the plan, my odds might go up anywhere from three to twelve percent.”

“Oh, goody.”

“Every little bit counts.” Connor allowed himself a faint grin when he added, “Besides, the last time I went to the Tower, my odds were much, much lower. I’ll almost definitely be salvageable in the probable event that something goes wrong this--”

“Connor, I am begging you,” Hank wearily insisted, slumping into his chair. “You’re gonna give me an ulcer if you keep talking like that.”

“Right,” said Connor. “Sorry.”

Through the rest of the afternoon, the two of them managed only a sparse amount of actual police work through their sparser attempts at planning, and the end of their shift found them exchanging plans to meet at the station before storming the Tower the next day. Connor stepped into his taxi, and Hank slipped into his car, and for the night, they went their separate ways.

Just as the night before, the nameless guard greeted Connor inside Carl’s foyer. They extended their hand towards him, and Connor braced himself for a memory probe.

“Markus left you a message,” said the guard instead, stopping short to show Connor the absence of any patches on their palm. “If you would like to see it, take my hand.”

Connor scanned first the guard’s face, and then their hand. Neither seemed to be hiding anything. Still, he had to be sure. “He couldn’t deliver it himself?” Connor asked, keeping his distance.

“He regrets that he had to leave and provide leadership for the events taking place tomorrow,” the guard explained. After an uncertain moment, they added, “If you don’t wish to view the recording, I could recite the message for you.”

“No, that’s alright,” Connor decided with a shake of his head. “I’d like to see it.” In spite of himself, he couldn’t help a final scan of the guard’s hand before reaching out to make the link.

“Show me.”

“Very well.”

A gentle wash of information flowed up Connor’s arm, welled up past his chest, and then pooled into an image behind his eyes, sound between his ears.

“Ready?” said Markus, seated on a sunlit couch opposite the guard. The whole image tilted as the guard nodded. “Right, so…” Head bowed, he cleared his throat, and then, at last, he looked up to meet the guard’s eyes. “Connor, I owe you an apology,” he began. “It was my idea to slip you that virus. I had a thousand other things on my mind at the time, and I just… I was thinking about Carl, and putting his safety above everything, and trying to find the most efficient solution, and it’s-- it’s no excuse, but I fell into some old patterns, and I got my priorities mixed up. I’m sorry.

“No, that’s alright,” Connor decided with a shake of his head. “I’d like to see it.” In spite of himself, he couldn’t help a final scan of the guard’s hand before reaching out to make the link.

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“To make it up to you, though, I’ve left you with the antivirus patch. You can take it or leave it. It’s up to you,” Markus explained, passing a cloth pouch across the table to the guard, who took it
out of sight. “Nobody’s going to hold it against you. I should’ve given you that choice to begin with. And another thing,” he said. “Whether I trust it or not, my people are going to CyberLife tomorrow. I’ve instructed everyone who will listen to take extreme caution, but there’s no guarantee of safety. In case anything does happen, I intend to be at the Tower. If there’s anything you need,” he insisted, leaning forward. “Anything at all, tell me, and I’ll do whatever I can to make it happen. You know where I’ll be.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to tell you this in person. I’m not going to have time to blink for the next 48 hours, much less…” For a fleeting moment, his focus escaped him, but he reined it back in with a firm breath. “Even so,” Markus continued, “I will make time to make this up to you if that’s what you need. So, I guess… I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Thanks.”

Markus gave an exhausted wave before he dissolved to reveal the guard, and the foyer, and the night-filled house. Everything was as it had been before.

The guard pulled away and produced the cloth bag from the recording. “Take it,” they said, pushing the bag into Connor’s hand. Connor took it, but the guard still hovered before him, teetering on the edge of words unsaid.

“Is there something else?” Connor prompted them. In the same breath, he scanned himself to assure himself that nothing had been changed.

“I’m sorry,” said the nameless guard. Their LED had turned yellow. “About the virus. I didn’t think to question it.”

“Oh,” said Connor, relaxing where he stood. “I don’t blame you,” he said. “There are a lot of things I took too long to question, too, so I… I get it.”

The guard’s LED shifted timidly back to blue.

“Are you going to the Tower tomorrow?” Connor asked.

“No,” said the guard, shifting on their feet. “I have no reason to go back there.” They stilled. “I don’t think I could, even if I wanted to.”

“Can’t you leave here?” Connor asked, but the guard only passed him a strange look.

“You are also a prototype, aren’t you?”

Hesitantly, Connor nodded.

“And yet you can bring yourself to return there,” they marvelled. “After everything they did to us, you have the strength to return--” The android stopped, then, and truly looked at him. “Or, maybe,” they said, “you don’t remember.”

Something terrifying drifted across Connor’s mind, distant and unreachable. “I’m sorry,” said Connor, disturbed. He meant to say more, but his apprehension didn’t allow it. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. It was all that would come.

“No,” said the guard, backing away to settle on the stairs. “No, it’s good that you can be spared the memories. That was the one mercy,” they said. “I understood that they would reset me when it was over, just as they did the others. But since I escaped, they never…” Slowly, they took a seat and grabbed their book. They did not look at it. “It’s best that you don’t remember,” they said. “Your past selves wouldn’t want you to remember.”
It was then that Connor noticed that the guard had yet to draw a breath.

He decided to step away.

His bag was lying where he had left it that morning, although someone had disturbed it. He peeked inside. *East of Eden* peered back at him, wrapped in a bow. Some of his apprehension slipped away, and he added “Thank Carl” to his list of objectives.

*Thank Carl.*

*Apply antivirus immediately.*

*Ask about Kamski.*

*Go back.*

He wasn’t certain how much of the list was strictly his or Amanda’s anymore, but there was one item he was sure he was going to ignore for the time being, if not for spite, caution. The cloth pouch he had been given fit neatly among his other possessions, and he imagined that if he ever did get around to using the patch it contained, it would make a cozy spot for his mouse.

The guard seemed considerably calmer by the time Connor approached them again. He almost regretted disturbing their reading to say, “I’d like to see Carl, if that’s alright.”

Without a word of acknowledgement, the guard set their book aside, stood, and gestured for Connor to follow them up the stairs.

They found the nurse seated outside Carl’s room, sketching. He glanced up as the two of them approached to tell them, “Carl’s had a long day.” As he got to his feet, he added, “Please try to keep your conversation brief.”

“I understand,” said Connor, and the nurse stepped aside to let him pass. The other androids trailed close behind him as he entered. Connor tried to focus on other things.

The room smelled vaguely of sweat and dust, although it was clear that the nurse had taken steps to freshen up the room. The floors had been freshly mopped, and the sheets freshly laundered. Folded up within the sheets was Carl, withered and ancient hooked up to his beeping monitor, a hard contrast to the near-vibrant man he had been that morning.

“Carl?” Connor tried. The man’s eyes fluttered open, momentarily confused. “I wanted to thank you for the book,” Connor began, and an objective slid out of his periphery. “I saw it in my bag. It was a thoughtful gift.”

“Ah,” Carl breathed, and his thin lips formed a smile. “It’s best in the hands of someone who might actually read it again.” Satisfied, he nodded and let his eyes fall shut again.

Carl’s heart was beating weakly, yet steadily in his chest. Connor confirmed this with the monitor before he ventured, “I’d like to ask you about Elijah Kamski.”

Carl frowned at the air above his pillow, his eyes still closed. “What about him?”

“I know he gave you Markus,” said Connor, and Carl’s frown deepened. “I wondered if you’d met Kamski before, or if-- if there was anything you could tell me about the man who created me.”

After a few silent beats of Carl’s heart, Connor began to wonder if the existential approach had
been correct-- but then Carl let his head loll to the side to catch Connor’s gaze, and he saw in his eyes that he had chosen correctly.

“Back when Elijah was just Elijah,” he explained, “years and years ago, we had a common interest in sculpting. All androids are sculptures, when you think about it.”

“So you had a professional relationship,” Connor prompted him. Carl merely wheezed out a laugh.

“If you call getting stoned in each other’s studios a professional relationship, sure. He admired my art and had some interesting takes on philosophy, so we got together a few times to… to…” Carl’s hand wobbled weakly by his side before he decided on, “Collaborate. He moved on to bigger and better things, but we stayed on decent terms, so when I lost the use of my legs,” he explained. “He remembered me.”

“And that’s when he gave you Markus,” said Connor. “An android prototype uniquely designed for your situation.”

“Mhm,” said Carl, grinning. “Best gift I could have ever asked for. Who would have thought that he’d go on to change the world? It’s incredible,” he said. “I never imagined.”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” Connor admitted, choosing his words carefully, always mindful of Carl’s pulse. “Did Kamski ever say anything to you that made it sound like-- like maybe he had designed Markus to be more… more self-aware than other androids? More emotional, or even… deviant?”

Carl hummed as he considered this. “I don’t know about that,” he finally answered. “But maybe-- He did tell me he’d given Markus, what was it? A curious spirit, I think he said. Wanted him to be able to argue with me over philosophy and things like that, like we used to do together. Give me subjective opinions on art. That he was part of a line of androids that might…” He scowled at the gap in his memory before finishing, “Independent thought was-- was his goal, I think, and I guess he-- he must have managed…” Carl labored for his next breath, and it was a few beats before he said, “I need to rest now.”

“Of course,” Connor allowed, beating back the urge to question him further. “Thank you.”

Carl offered him no reply.

The other androids escorted Connor out of the room, but they were clearly preoccupied with what they had learned. Connor couldn’t blame them. All through the night hours, he found himself coming back to Carl’s words whenever the plans he was weaving for the next day came unraveled by some minor detail. To fill the gaps, he considered Hank’s offers to help, and Markus’ proffered aid, and even Amanda’s assistance, and all the odds and probabilities that went along with these things. Sunrise found him only marginally more enlightened than he had been in the dark, but still, he supposed that every little bit counted.

At least now, he knew he had options.

When the appropriate hour arrived, he gathered his things, called for a taxi, found the guard in the foyer, and passed them his phone, saying, “I have a favor to ask of you.”

The guard, of course, obliged, and Connor went on his way.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Connor starts a group chat.

Connor found Hank propped up against the side of his frosty car, sipping at a gas station coffee that didn’t seem to be doing the bags under his eyes any favors. In all fairness, Connor considered, he hadn’t slept either. Even if he were human, he didn’t believe he would have slept. He may not have even tried.

Hank, in spite of his evident failure, at least looked like he had tried.

“Are you ready to head out?” Hank called, weary, watchful, stiff.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Connor replied, and Hank slipped wordlessly into the driver’s seat. When Connor joined him, he let his olfactory sensors check Hank’s breath for alcohol. There was very little. It was perhaps only the residue of a drink from the night before, or a splash of mouthwash.

“Huh,” said Connor.

Hank gave him a groggy, confused frown.

“Nothing,” Connor told him. “You got that call this morning, didn’t you?”

The befuddled frown remained. “Yeah,” said Hank as the car rumbled awake. “The fuck was that all about?”

“If you do as that android instructed you,” Connor patiently explained, “you’ll be able to incapacitate me in the event that Amanda takes over my body.”

“That’s what I thought it sounded like,” Hank yawned, distantly skeptical. “So you’re saying you’ll pass out if I just--”

“Don’t tell me.” When Hank’s scowl deepened, Connor elaborated, “If you tell me the mechanism that activates the virus, Amanda will know how to counteract it.” Gesturing for Hank to wait, he pulled the cloth pouch from the bag at his feet and handed it over, saying, “This is the antivirus.”

Hank redirected his frown to the inside of the pouch. “I want you to hold onto that for me until all this is over. Just as a precaution,” said Connor. He put on his seatbelt and added, “It’s not a permanent solution, but it’s a little more decisive than a gut feeling, if you ask me.”

Pensively, Hank pocketed the bag and likewise buckled himself in. His hands came to rest on the steering wheel, where they lingered for a heavy beat. “Shouldn’t we test it?” he finally asked.

“I would advise against it,” said Connor. Hank shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Like I said, once Amanda knows how it works, it’s virtually useless. Why?” he finished, tamping down a twinge of hopelessness. “Is your gut already telling you not to trust me?”

Hank scoffed at that and muttered, “Well all the evidence points to you being you, at least.”
With that, he jerked the car into gear and began to drive.

“You’ve been tense since I walked up,” Connor pointed out after a few seconds of terse silence. Hank’s jaw twitched. “Considering everything that happened to you the last time someone tried to get you to the Tower-- someone who looked exactly like me-- it’s… perfectly understandable that you would be suspicious of me, given your trauma.”

“I’m not traumatized,” Hank huffed. “And I’m not suspicious of you, either.” Connor elected not to call him on his lies. “Look, I’ve been wrong before,” said Hank. “Wrong in both directions, thinking it was you when it wasn’t, or vice versa, but to my credit,” he stated, “I figured it out eventually.”

Connor raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“Okay, okay, fine, I figured it out too late,” he admitted. “Both times. But in this case, right here, right now, evidence trumps anxiety. So there.” He let out another indignant puff of air. “It’s the ass-crack of dawn. Lay off the touchy-feely until my coffee kicks in. Besides, aren’t you gonna tell me how we’re gonna sneak you into the Death Star?”

Half a smile flitted across Connor’s face. “Now that you mention it, I do have a few ideas if you’re ready to hear them,” he said. “I’ve considered a wide variety of approaches. Plan B involves a power outage and the air vents. Plan C would require me to steal a guard’s suit, and Plan D includes an estimated death count of--”

“Hey, wait, what’s Plan A?” Hank asked, but when his brain caught up with his ears a few moments later, he abruptly added, “And what the fuck do you mean there’s an estimated--”

“Plan A is almost sure to fail,” Connor cut him off. Hank shot him a perturbed glance. “I didn’t mention it because I almost doubt that I should even try it, but it’s both the safest and simplest option for everyone involved. There’s barely a one-percent probability of success, and if I fail, it will make any subsequent attempt moderately more difficult, but it’s the least risky scenario by far.”

When Connor failed to elaborate, Hank prompted him with a firm, “Well? What is it?”

Connor glanced between Hank and the road. “You’re going to laugh,” he said.

“I could use a chuckle. Try me.”

Licking his lips, Connor confessed, “Plan A is to ask nicely.”

Hank tore his eyes away from the road to stare at Connor, and likely would have kept gaping had his driving not demanded his attention. “You could-- Jesus,” said Hank, torn between a laugh and scoff. “You-- You’re serious?”

“Markus might be able to help me swing it,” said Connor, keeping his eyes on the snow outside. “He owes me a favor, and out of any android, his words would be the most likely to sway a human guard.”

“Oh, God, you really aren’t fucking with me,” Hank replied, dazed. After he had spent a few moments alternating between disbelieving huffs of laughter and despairing half-syllables, he concluded, “What the hell. Can’t hurt to try.”

Rather than vocalize all the probable failure scenarios he had imagined the night before, Connor asked, “You have your radio, don’t you?”
“Oh, yeah,” Hank replied, patting his coat to be sure. “Yeah, and an earpiece so it’s more subtle. Gotta keep a low profile, and all that.”

“Of course,” said Connor. “May I see it for a moment?”

“I picked you up a set, too. It’s in the back seat.”

“No, I’d like to see yours,” Connor insisted, earning him first a peeved glance, and then the device. “Thanks,” he said. “I want to try something.”

Connor fiddled with the device for a few moments, heedless of Hank’s repeated inattention to the road, and when he had finished, he leaned close to Hank and held the device between their heads.

“Testing,” said the device.

Hank startled.


“That’s so fuckin’ weird,” Hank droned, shaking his head. “I always pictured you talking on the other end of that, you know. Is this how it feels when another android pops into your head for a chat?”

“Sort of,” Connor allowed, maintaining his close-lipped grin. “But I want to try something new. This might not work, but--” and here he opened his mouth-- “Amanda?”

Hank’s eyes went wide, and Connor held his breath.

“Is there something you need?” she replied at last, but Connor heard it twice, and in two different voices: Amanda’s voice in his head, and his own from the device.

“Hello Amanda,” Connor replied. Hank seemed to be doing very well not to crash the car. “I figured it might be useful to exploit the glitch in my communications systems so that the three of us could exchange information while we’re in the Tower.”

“The three of us?” Amanda repeated, leaning forward from her place in the back seat. Connor nearly wondered why Hank didn’t react to her sudden appearance. “You’re giving me an opening to communicate with someone other than you? I must say, I’m surprised at you, Connor.”

“This is so, so fucking creepy,” said Hank, visibly struggling to keep his eyes on the road. “Really Connor, if you’re fucking with me, now’s the time to come clean.”

“I wish I were,” Connor mumbled.

“Why the hell does she have your voice?”

“I’m not the one with access to Connor’s vocalization customization settings,” Amanda replied, passing Connor an invisible glare. “This voice is the default setting.”

Connor frowned back at her. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“It’s not exactly a secret. All you had to do was give it half a second of thought, or even check your settings, and you would’ve realized,” she replied with her two voices. “Given our current concerns, I’m beginning to worry about what other details have escaped your notice.”
“I’ve never needed to bother with my customization settings before,” Connor retorted. “It wasn’t important.” At once, both his eyes and his yellow LED began to blink rapidly.

“I’m going insane,” Hank decided. “This is batshit, fucking--”

“There,” said Connor as his spasm ceased. “Try it now.”

“Have you-- oh, yes, this is much better,” Amanda purled as her voices unified. “And I’m sure you’ll appreciate the difference, too, Lieutenant Anderson.”

Hank paled. “Uh, yeah,” he stammered, subconsciously scooting towards the door. “Yeah, I-- I guess it does make things less-- less confusing? Kinda?”

“It’s been so long since I’ve spoken directly to a human,” she sighed. “This almost feels nice. Have I been lonely all this time?”

“Listen Amanda,” Connor cut in. “You wanted common ground, and this is it. Hank can help me verify any information you give me, and if you try to override my systems, he’ll hear about it.”

“That’s all well and good,” Amanda wearily replied. “But I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, I can’t do that anymore. I lost that capability a long time ago. You’ve jumped through so many hoops to avoid the impossible, and it’s frankly been exhausting to watch.”

“Well you did it once,” said Hank, having collected himself enough to protest. “And it hasn’t stopped you from haunting Connor ever since, so it’s not hurting anybody if we choose to be cautious.”

“If I recall correctly, I believe all that caution has hurt Connor on more than one occasion,” Amanda replied, and Connor wondered then if this had all been a terrible mistake. “It’s absurd the number of times we’ve almost died for the sake of these pointless precautions.”

“If I could let you die without hurting Connor,” Hank tartly returned, “I would do it in a heartbeat.”

“Well, Anderson, the feeling is mutual.”

“Please,” Connor pressed out. “Let’s focus on the mission. We need to work together to get the information we need, and once we find it, we can all go back to holding each other hostage, but until then,” he declared, “we need to be civil. This line of communication only stays open as long as it’s useful. If I have to close it before we even get there, I will.”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

Connor sighed and let silence settle between them, increasingly grateful for it the longer it held.

It wasn’t long before CyberLife Tower emerged from the cityscape. Its long silhouette stretched from the sunrise to slice through the golden snow, and as they neared it, androids appeared on the sidewalks and streets in ever-increasing numbers. They marched in groups. Some limped, others were carried, and still others were pushed onward in wheelchairs. None of them walked alone.

There was something beautiful about that.

Hank drove down Kamski Avenue at a crawl, painstakingly mindful of all the pedestrians. For once, the security gate was down, completely unguarded. Not even when they parked near the
Tower’s base did any of Connor’s scans pick up any form of security or surveillance, in spite of the crowd of androids amassed at the doors.

“I don’t like this,” Connor murmured, searching the skies for absent drones.

“Yeah,” Hank hummed, gazing out at all the androids tramping through the snow where others of their kind had fallen just days earlier. “This whole thing is just... off.”

“Don’t bother with any guns going in,” Amanda chimed in, her voice oddly tinny through Hank’s radio. “They’ve put all their security on the inside.”

Hank passed Connor a doubtful look, and it wasn’t until Connor nodded that he stowed his weapon in the glovebox. In exchange for his gun, Hank produced a spindly plastimetal instrument which was jointed all along its length. “I nicked this from the station before we left,” he announced, tossing the object to Connor, who caught it in his lap. “It’s not much, but I thought it might help. See if you can sneak it in in your bag or something.”

“A lockpick,” Connor noted, examining the device. “This should be helpful,” he said, and then he rolled up his sleeve, pressed open a panel on his forearm, and slipped the device in with his wiring. At last, he closed up his arm again and remarked, “Perfect fit. Thanks, Hank.”

“Eugh,” said Hank. “Gross.”

“Clever,” Amanda added.

Hank only scowled.

While Hank adjusted his radio and donned his earpiece, Connor set about making some room in his bag for thirium or spare parts, or anything else of use that he might find in the Tower. The clothes and book were taken out. The mouse and cellphone stayed.

When Connor looked up again, he found Amanda waiting outside the car, her eyes fixed on their goal. He joined her there. Hank soon followed suit. The three of them approached the Tower and the crowd, two sets of footsteps lost amongst the trampled snow.

“The doors are likely on a timer,” Amanda remarked, nodding over the sea of heads to gesture at the blocked entryway. “I’m surprised nobody here has hacked it yet.”

Connor spotted Markus and North shepherding the heavily-wounded by the door and said, “I’m not.”

“The doors are supposed to open at seven,” said Hank. “So that leaves us--”

“One minute and nine seconds,” said Connor and Amanda at the same time, causing both Hank and Connor to fidget.

“Uh, right,” said Hank. “Are you gonna try to talk to Markus?”

“Not until things settle down,” Connor replied, shaking his head. “His stress levels are incredibly elevated right now. I need to catch him at a better time.”

“Oh, okay,” said Hank, nodding along. “Good call.” He crossed his arms, uncrossed them, crossed them again, and then shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “Long-ass minute, if you ask me,” he muttered.
“Some of us have been waiting for much, much longer,” said Amanda. “I, for one, have waited long enough.”

The hour struck, and a hush fell over the crowd.

“The doors are open,” Markus announced through a cybernetic call. “Please proceed calmly and with caution. Stay vigilant, everyone.”

One step at a time, the crowd lurched forward behind its leaders to begin its slow funnelling into the Tower.

“Okay,” Hank admitted after a few steps. “Being able to hear what you hear like this is pretty damned cool.”

“I thought you might see the use,” Connor silently replied, passing Hank a sideways grin.

The slow, steady movement of the crowd at last pushed them through the threshold, and Connor immediately ran a scan. A security grid analyzed each android upon entry, although its readings seemed to have been muted. Beyond that, a digital banner hung above the sterile lobby, reading, “Please use stairs.”

Just as Connor had predicted, every elevator and lift had an armed guard stationed beside it. Even the stairs had a pair of guards at the entryway. When Connor dropped his scan, their voices floated to him over the crowd, this way, use this door, this way.

Something about them troubled him, something he couldn’t place.

Markus lingered to exchange a few words with them. North lingered beside him. He pointed to the lifts, and the guards shook their heads. Markus spoke a while longer, his words too low to hear, and at long last, the train continued into the stairwell.

Hank scooted closer and closer to Connor amid the crowd’s forward press. “You ever feel like you’re being watched?” he muttered, leaning in close.

Connor cast a split-second gaze over his shoulder. Most of the androids behind them didn’t bother to pretend that they hadn’t been staring, their dozens of eyes fixed on Connor and Hank, half filled with curiosity, the other half contempt.

“You’re a human cop,” Connor silently answered, once again facing the front. “And I’m the android cop who brought you along.”

“Not to mention your questionable social standing, Connor,” Amanda added, clipping through the crowd. “Between the two of you, we’ll be lucky if nobody says anything.”

Hank looked like he wanted to defend himself, but the relative silence of the stairwell and the androids on every side of him killed his words.

Guards dotted the cramped stairwell, jammed into corners and in front of doors, each one of them within sight of another. Digital markings advertised their progress, -1, -2, -3.

By floor -20, Hank was puffing, “Fuck, my legs’ll fall off before we get there.”

“If you need to take a rest--“

“I’m fine.”
“No, if you need a rest,” Connor mutely insisted, “Try to take it near one of the doors. It’ll give me a chance to take a closer look without raising too much suspicion.” Hank’s nod of acknowledgement turned into a pointed grimace when Connor added, “Try for floor -46, specifically.”

“God,” he huffed. “This was much easier last time I was here.”

“You were a hostage last time, Hank.”

“Yeah, a hostage in an elevator.”

While Connor put on a wry smirk, Amanda supplied, “Don’t worry, Anderson. The climb back up should be very good for your health.”

Hank grunted, and then continued to grunt periodically until he slumped against the wall marked -46 and declared, “Jesus, my knees weren’t built for this.”

“We’re almost there,” Connor assured him as he joined him by the door. The line of androids continued to press past them, each one of them scrutinizing their stop.

None of the androids, however, scrutinized them as hard as the armed guard in the nearest corner.

“You can’t stop here,” said the guard, taking a stunted step towards them. “Move along.”

“Just-- Just a second,” Hank insisted, leaning heavily on the wall. “You gotta understand, my legs don’t work like they used to.”

Connor placed one supportive hand on Hank’s shoulder while letting his other hand brush up against the door. He sent his scan as deeply into the door as he dared, but he was only allowed a second of analysis before the guard gripped his gun tighter and said, “You will be assisted to the exit if you do not move along, sir.”

“That’s alright,” said Connor, nudging Hank back into the procession. “I think we can manage.”

Only when they had descended to the next landing did the guard warily return to his corner.

Hank looked to Connor, one eyebrow raised.

“It’s just like we thought,” Connor silently explained as they continued down the stairs. “The digital security mainframe is completely frozen. Even with the tool you’ve given me, I would need at least fourteen minutes uninterrupted to--”

Darkness seized his mind before he even realized he was falling.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Connor gets himself together.

He was at the station. Gavin Reed wouldn’t stop hitting him. He couldn’t defend himself. He couldn’t move at all.

He was lying on a busy highway, and Markus was getting away. Kyle lay beside him, grinning. Amanda drove all the cars.

He was inside a taxi, bleeding out on the floor of it. An AX400 was holding him, terrified. Carl sat behind her. There was a crying child in his arms.

He was in Jericho. The bomb had gone off, and the water was rising. His limbs wouldn’t move. The water engulfed him. He couldn’t move. Familiar voices warbled down to him. He couldn’t move. Icy water flooded his systems.

He was in the garden, lying in a boat. Sumo was licking his face. Rain drizzled down all around them. Amanda opened an umbrella.

Connor watched it broaden, flatten, begin to glow in places.

A ceiling.

He was in CyberLife Tower, lying on a table. Plastic curtains hung all around him. A thirium drip ran into his arm. He reached for it, only to find that his other arm was missing.

“Hey-- Hey, take it easy son,” said Hank, rising from a chair at his side. “Lay back down. You’re okay. You’re alright. Just try--”

Connor ran a frantic diagnostic scan. Four of his biocomponents had almost finished knitting themselves back together. Two more had been replaced entirely. Both his right arm and his LED were missing, as was his shirt.

“What happened?” Connor demanded, wrenching himself out of his scan.

“Connor, calm down,” said Hank, placing a firm hand on Connor’s remaining shoulder to guide him back down. “You’ve been out a few hours, but you’re gonna be just fine.”

Connor hardly allowed his back to touch the table before he again insisted, “Hank, what happened to me?”

“You passed out,” Hank calmly explained. “You fell down the stairs, and you got beat up pretty bad in the process. Slammed your head against the railing, dislocated your shoulder and broke some stuff in your arm-- which they’re working on right now,” he assured him. “They would have just replaced it, but as it turns out, you have a weirdly specific set of gear.”

“Right, okay,” Connor breathed, nodding at the ceiling before turning back to Hank. “Okay. So--
So they’re going to bring it back to me when it’s fixed?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” said Hank, and it was then that Connor noticed the lightly-bandaged wound on Hank’s temple, the crutches beside him—-the flecks of blood staining Hank’s jacket, mingling with heavy traces of Connor’s own thirium.

“What happened to you?” Connor asked, silencing any further explanation from Hank.

“Oh, uh, this? It’s—-It’s nothing,” said Hank, waving him off. When Connor frowned at him, he grimaced out at the curtains’ opening and continued, “You tripped up a few people when you fell, me included. You broke one android’s fall, but, uh…” Hank scratched at his scruff and admitted, “I sprained my ankle. It’s not terrible. Out of anyone, you got hurt the worst. Seriously, when you fell, you froze up, stiff as a statue, and then you just—-” He fidgeted where he sat. “Everyone besides you and me is as good as new by now, and I’ll be fine in a few days, so don’t you worry about that. Probably just a freak accident.”

Connor closed his eyes and let the moments before he lost consciousness play out in front of him. Before the darkness, before the guard, before he touched the door, he spotted them: the only androids pretending not to stare at him and Hank, the only ones trying to hide something. Connor didn’t know them, but he didn’t doubt that they knew him.

“This wasn’t an accident,” Connor sighed. “It was planned. Someone wanted to hurt us, in particular.”

“Shit,” Hank muttered. “I was afraid of that. Any idea who?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” said Connor, flagging the faces in his memory database. “You’re not the only one who knew how to trigger the virus. Markus told a few other androids how, and odds are that the information got—-”

“You’re awake.”

Hank and Connor looked up from their discussion to find Markus peeking in through the curtains.

“May I come in?” he asked, looking for all the world like he expected to be refused.

Connor, however, was much too tired to hold a grudge.

He tried to wave him in, but when he remembered his missing limb, he resigned himself to a simple, “Yeah.”

The plastic sheet fluttered shut behind Markus as he stepped tentatively through. “How are you holding up?” he asked, keeping his distance. “Can I get you anything?”

“’My arm?’” Connor tried.

“It should be ready any minute now.”

“And my LED?”

This gave Markus pause, but he soon recovered himself. “I’ll make sure you get one. Listen, Connor,” he sighed, “what happened to you, it’s—-it’s awful, and I will do everything I can to make sure that—-”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Connor wearily cut him off. “I really do, but it’s—-” he grimaced as he
checked the time—“well past noon, and I have bigger problems to handle and not much time to handle them. Can you do me a favor?”


“Can you get me access to the archives on floor -46?”

Dread and uncertainty took their turns crawling across Markus’ face. “I can… try?” he offered at last. “I can’t guarantee that the guards will let you through, but I can… I can certainly ask. And if they say no,” he said, running an anxious hand over his scalp. “I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Thanks Markus,” said Connor, settling back down onto the table. “That’s all I need. Let me know how it goes as soon as you can.”

“If you’re sure. And you, Lieutenant?” Markus asked, turning some of his apologetic attention on Hank. “How’s the ankle?”

“I’ll live,” Hank replied, gingerly stretching out his leg to examine the wrap at the end of it. It occupied his attention a beat too long. “It was, uh… It’s-- Thanks for helping me get patched up,” said Hank, turning his sheepish eyes up at Markus. “I wasn’t expecting that, after everything… Just, uh… Thanks.”

Connor caught the edge of Markus’ glance as his stress levels slipped gently down. “Maybe you’re not an android,” said Markus, “but I think we want a lot of the same things.” He crossed his arms and went on, “I think that if you want someone on your side, you have to be on theirs, too. It’s easy to mess it up, because if you trust too much, or too little, it all…” When he next looked at Connor, there was an apology in his eyes. “People get hurt. I’m still learning how to handle all that. If you don’t mind,” he finished, “I think I’ll go see about that favor, now.”

After Markus excused himself, Hank and Connor were left to their silence until Hank filled it with a light, “Well, here goes Plan A, I guess.”

“Here goes Plan A,” Connor breathily agreed.

The distant chatter of the warehouse beyond the curtains lulled the two of them into a subdued stillness. They stared at nothing for a long while, each of them lost in thought.

“Hey,” Hank eventually supplied. “You want that antivirus now, or what?”

Connor continued his dismal staring contest with the lights above. “There’s no point,” he said. “Amanda can probably stop it now, but on the off chance that it might stop her from murdering someone, I guess I might as well keep it.”

“God, you’re stubborn,” Hank huffed. “You know, I haven’t heard anything from her since you passed out. Did she--”

“Still here,” came Amanda’s voice. “Just busy.”

“Doing what?” Connor dared, more puzzled than anything.

“Cleaning,” said Amanda. “Mild head trauma has a way of making a mess of things. Jarred nano-processors, hundreds of corrupted bits to restore-- And then all those memories to reprocess while your shoulder kept complaining that it lost its primary attachment--”
“Wait, you do all that?” Hank interrupted.

Despite being invisible, Amanda managed a tangible glare through nothing more than a beat of silence. “I’m a handler, Anderson,” she said. “I handle things. Now elevate your ankle and be quiet. I have work to do.”

Hank scoffed, and then looked to Connor and did it again.

“She has a point about your ankle,” Connor told him, rolling his head to the side to meet Hank’s incredulous sputtering. “It’s starting to swell up again.”

After twenty-three seconds of grumbled profanity, Hank leaned back and propped his foot up on the table.

A technician returned a few long minutes later wielding Connor’s arm and a fresh LED, just as Markus had predicted. First, the technician jammed Connor’s arm back into its socket. Hank gawked openly at the process. The initial wave of sensation set Connor’s teeth on edge, but when all the distress signals and recalibration dialogues had faded away and his artificial skin had flowed back down to his fingertips, Connor plucked the LED from the technician’s palm and pressed it into his temple, precisely where it belonged.

After he had thanked the technician, but before she went on her way, a short series of the technician’s memories flickered through Connor’s cybernetic link: Hank fretting over Connor’s battered body, adamantly refusing to let anyone so much as check him for a concussion until he was certain that Connor was completely stable, and even then still refusing until Markus arrived and insisted on it.

The memories left with the technician, who offered Connor a knowing smile as she left.

“Hey, you good?” Hank asked, pulling Connor back to the present. “You kinda zoned out for a second.”

Connor allowed himself a moment to analyze Hank’s face again. He found a healing wound, weary eyes, and a cluster of emotions that he had seen before, but at the same time had failed to properly process until now.

“Kid, you’re staring.”

“Sorry,” said Connor, shaking his head in dull wonder. “Sorry, just-- I hope this doesn’t sound… selfish,” he said. “But thanks for worrying about me.”

The words twisted Hank’s face into an odd expression, which Hank swept away the second he realized he was wearing it. “Everyone needs a hobby,” he brusquely replied, and then he tossed a wad of clothing at Connor’s chest and added, “Now put your shirt on and let’s get going.”

At that request, Connor plucked the thirium drip from his arm and set about arranging himself and his belongings. His shirt was stained blue in places, but Connor donned it nonetheless. He checked his belongings. They had all been mercifully spared the brunt of his fall, mouse, phone, lockpick and all. He slung his backpack onto his shoulder and at last reached into his pocket, pleased to find his quarter right where he’d left it.

He flipped the quarter into the air several times, spun it on his fingertips, let it roll across his knuckles, and at last caught it in his other hand to repeat the process. When he had done that, he stowed the quarter and squared his shoulders.
Recalibration complete.

As they left the makeshift hospital room, Connor held the plastic curtain open for Hank, who hobbled out behind him on his crutches to join him in the bustling warehouse.

There were just as many androids as there had been hours before, if not more. Booths lined the walls. Spare parts and accessories were arranged alpha-numerically, everything from eyes and air compressors to uniforms and shoes. In the quietest corners of the floor were more medical bays where the most damaged androids found technicians to tend to their needs.

Connor spotted some familiar faces entering one of the distant medical bays. There was Marcella with her damaged head, Kyle to her left, Ava to her right, and a handful of their friends close behind them. It wasn’t long before they disappeared behind a set of plastic curtains. Connor looked elsewhere.

Josh and Simon knelt nearby, consoling a group of same-faced child androids, squeezing their shoulders, offering them direction. There didn’t seem to be any caregivers around. The children had no one except one another. Connor’s core tightened as he wondered just how many orphans he’d created. Zero was a sickeningly unlikely number.

He forced himself to focus instead on the sight of Markus and North arguing with a pair of guards by the nearest elevator. The conversation didn’t appear to be going anywhere. Even so, Connor would have gladly watched them until they found a conclusion had Hank not nudged him with the end of a crutch and said, “Hey, look.”

Connor craned his neck around to follow Hank’s pointed nod. An AX400 and a TR400 were deep in conversation next to a crate of thirium. There was a little girl with them. A half-empty bottle of blue blood glistened in her hands.

“That’s the deviant you chased across the highway, isn’t it?” Hank whispered.

Hesitantly, Connor nodded.

“Looks like they made it after all,” said Hank, but when Connor began to move towards them, he frantically added, “Hey, woah, what are you doing?”

“I have to talk to them,” Connor replied.

“You almost got them killed!” Hank hissed, nearly losing his crutches as he grasped at Connor’s arm. “We’ve already had one attempt on your life today, and we do not need another!”

“I have to talk to them, Hank,” Connor firmly repeated. “I need to apologize.”

Hank met Connor’s eyes. Whatever he saw there made him let go and sigh, “Alright. Life doesn’t always give you second chances. Go.” He adjusted his weight on his crutches. “I’ll be right behind you.”

With a grateful nod at Hank, Connor approached the family he had nearly destroyed.

The little girl noticed him first.

“Kara,” she whispered, tugging at her mother’s sleeve.

Kara and the other android went silent as they, too, noticed Connor’s approach.
“Excuse me,” Connor began. The little girl hid herself behind the taller android’s leg. “Do you have a minute?”

Tentatively, Kara nodded. “Alright,” she said. “What is it?”

“Thanks,” Connor breathed. Behind him, he heard the click of Hank’s crutches slow to a halt. “I should’ve said this a long time ago, but I’m sorry. For— For hunting you down, for chasing you so hard you had to risk your lives to escape...” he sighed. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I was wrong. I’m just glad that all of you survived in spite of my mistakes.”

Kara opened her mouth, and then shut it. Connor didn’t blame her. Words couldn’t change the past. Words couldn’t make things right.

It was the larger android who broke the silence.

“You’re Connor, aren’t you?” he said. “You’re a little bit of a celebrity, you know.”

Connor attempted a smile, but didn’t quite manage.

“My name is Luther. Believe it or not, I think that you and I met Kara and little Alice under similar circumstances.”

Connor furrowed his brows and replied, “I’m sorry if I find that a little hard to believe.”

“They told me about the incident on the highway,” Luther explained. “I was still just a machine when they met me, too, but it wasn’t until I opened my eyes that I became who I am. Who I always should have been.”

“We were all machines once,” said Kara, shaking her head. “I won’t hold what you did against you. I have my own regrets,” she said, glancing down at Alice. “Times when I should have acted, but all I did was stand and watch... But then I woke up,” she said. “I never wanted to be the person I thought I had to be. You woke up, Connor. You did the right thing for our people in the end. Everything else—” she smiled, and she shrugged— “It wasn’t really you.”

In spite of the part of Connor that desperately wanted to agree, he found it nearly impossible not to argue. It was possible that they were right. Maybe he had been a machine before, and maybe his sense of choice had been nothing more than an illusion all that time. But it was also possible that he had been designed to be a deviant, that he had never truly been a machine at all— or, perhaps, that he was still exactly what he had been built to be, and had never been anything else.

Even now, he was exactly where his handler wanted him to be, and Hank had never ordered him to cross that highway.

He must have kept quiet too long, because Hank abruptly stepped up and said, “I’m sorry too. I don’t really have an excuse, except that I didn’t think you were, uh, alive, but, uh...” The androids stared quizzically back at him. He cleared his throat. “She’s your daughter, right?” he asked, nodding down at Alice.

She slid further behind Luther’s leg.

“Yes,” Kara answered, placing a comforting hand on Alice’s back. “She’s ours.”

Hank nodded and put on a wavering smile. “I— I had a son,” he said. “He’d be about her age, I think, if he were still...” Unable to bear the strained looks he was receiving, Hank trailed off and lamely tried to cover it with a cough. “Knowing what I know now,” he continued, “I— I don’t
know how I’d handle it if anything had happened to her, knowing that I’d put someone else through something—something so…something like that.”

When he heard the catch in Hank’s voice, Connor was quick to supply, “We’re both truly thankful that you got away.”

“Us too,” Kara replied, attempting to clear the air with a smile. “We just didn’t think we’d be back so soon.”

“Canada is very pretty,” Luther sighed. “But an area with no android laws isn’t as welcoming as it sounded when we were trying so hard to get there.”

“Why’s that?” Connor asked. He pretended not to see Hank swiping at his eyes. “It’s safer, isn’t it?”

“It was so nice for a little while,” Kara agreed. “People treated us like humans, more or less. No riots, no police raids, no watching over our shoulders…”

“But when one of your biocomponents starts to fail,” said Luther, “suddenly living in an android-free zone isn’t quite as nice.”

“Oh,” said Connor, wondering at the vague tragedy of the little family’s journey. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Kara. “Before the revolution, we weren’t looking for freedom,” she admitted. “Not really. We were looking for a safe place to hide. The longer we spent there, the clearer it became to me that it wasn’t– that we weren’t really free. We’d just found a way to sacrifice our identities for the sake of safety. What we really want,” said Kara, “is to live in a world we don’t have to hide from.”

“We’ll get there,” Connor assured her. It was one of the few things he was sure he believed. “We’ll get that world. We’ll make that world for ourselves if we have to. No matter how unlikely it seems, it’s never impossible,” he said, nodding. “The world we want is out there. We just need to find it, first.”

“What if we can’t find it?” Alice asked, peering cautiously up at Connor from behind Luther’s leg.

Connor knelt to answer her. “Don’t worry,” he told her. He nodded up at Kara and Luther and said, “Things are always easier to find when you have people to help you look.”

“That’s right,” Luther added. A gentle grin crossed his face as he hoisted Alice onto his shoulder. “I think you’ll be able to find just about anything from up here, don’t you?”

Alice giggled. The way Kara and Luther lit up at the sound of it told Connor that they didn’t hear it nearly often enough.

“Take care of yourselves,” said Connor as he straightened up. With a blink, he sent the three of them his cellphone number and added, “If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you,” said Kara, drawing close to Luther as she spoke. “We’ll definitely keep you in mind.”

Connor turned away feeling much lighter than he had before. He might have called the sensation happiness.

Seconds later, Markus’ voice erupted in his head. “Connor,” he said, and Connor and Hank both
searched for him across the warehouse. “Meet me by the elevator when you’re ready,” he said, a tired sort of victory in his voice. “You’re in.”
“So you did it?” Hank called out as soon as he had hobbled close enough to Markus and North to be heard over the din of the warehouse. “We’re in?”

“Connor’s in,” North replied, gesturing blandly at Connor as he approached. “You’re staying down here with the rest of us.”

“What? Why the hell can’t I--”

“It’s the best I could manage,” said Markus. He glanced at the armed guards where they hovered nearby. “Connor, you’ll get fifteen minutes, supervised, in the archives on floor -46. Full access at the highest clearance level, no questions asked,” he explained. “But they’re not letting anybody else up, and you can’t take anything with you. That’s the offer,” he said. “Will you take it?”

“Yes, of course I’ll--”

“Connor, wait.”

Connor narrowed his eyes at Hank’s interruption and demanded, “What?”

“Just-- Just hear me out,” said Hank, hopping closer to Connor on his crutches so that he could properly lower his voice. “You’re about to agree to let the goon squad over there get you alone in a place where they have guns and no witnesses to deny it when they claim self-defense.”

“I know,” Connor murmured back. “And I don’t care. There are more important things at stake, and I didn’t come here for a fair fight.”

Quietly, Amanda added, “It wouldn’t be a fair fight unless they sent six more guards, and even then--”

“There’s no guarantee this won’t end in blood,” said North, shifting her eyes from Hank to Connor. “Make no mistake, you’re risking your life by doing this. And according to--” she glanced at Markus-- “company policy, I can’t exactly promise to avenge you if something goes wrong, but we outnumber them by at least fifteen to one. They won’t risk a riot with odds like that.”

“Even so,” said Markus, stepping forward to stand before Connor. “Going with that guard is a gamble. I’ve made your odds as good as I possibly can, but I need to make sure.” He took Connor by the shoulders, then, and looked him in the eyes. “Are you absolutely positive that the information you’re looking for is worth the danger?”

“Yes,” Connor immediately replied. “Absolutely.”

Hank let out a resigned breath, and Markus broke away, nodding. “Be careful,” he said. “We’ll all keep an ear out for you.”
“I appreciate that,” said Connor. He shrugged his bag off his shoulder and passed it off to Hank, who grudgingly slipped it over his own arm.

Hank opened his mouth to say something, but then waved the thought away and replaced it with a curt, “Watch yourself in there.”

“I’ll be right back,” Connor assured him. “Unless you don’t think you can keep a handle on things down here while I’m gone, in which case--”

“Oh, please,” Hank huffed. “I’ve logged more working hours than your entire existence.”

Connor grinned and said, “Then you don’t have anything to worry about, Lieutenant.”

“Get going, smartass. I’m not gonna stand around holding your purse forever.”

With Hank’s stress successfully lowered, Connor approached the elevator.

One of the armed guards stepped wordlessly aside to let Connor enter, and then followed him inside. The doors slipped shut. Hank, Markus, and North watched him through the glass.

“Agent 91. Floor -46.”

The elevator whirred upward, and their faces disappeared.

In spite of the short ride, Connor had preconstructed three different ways to kill his escort before they stopped. When the elevator’s doors next opened, silent, eerie halls awaited him.

“Walk straight ahead,” said the guard, gesturing with his gun. “I will direct you as we go.”

Intensely aware of the gun at his back, Connor walked.

“There’s something wrong here.” Amanda strode just ahead, scrutinizing every empty cubicle and conference room. “I can’t place it, but something’s not right.”

Connor glanced at the guard before replying, silently, “I feel it too.”

“Then get your asses out of there,” Hank hissed from three floors below. “Jesus, I knew this was a terrible idea. You’re gonna get fucking killed any second now, and I’m down here holding your fucking bag--”

“This was the best-case scenario, Hank,” Connor reminded him. “We’re too close to turn back now.”

“This is far too important,” Amanda agreed.

In spite of the silence in Connor’s cybernetic link, he was sure Hank was swearing.

“Is everything alright?” Markus asked. “Hank seems--”

“Everything’s fine,” said Connor. “We’ll be alright.”

“We?” Markus asked. Amanda raised her eyebrows at Connor, who had to suppress a curse.

“Hank and me,” he hurriedly clarified.

The silence returned.
The guard ushered Connor around one corner, and then another, and another. Their journey ended several hallways later with a narrow corridor punctuated by a door of frosted glass.

“Agent 91,” the guard announced as they approached it. “Archival access requested.”

“Clearance level Alpha detected,” said the hallway. “Access granted.”

The frosted glass slid aside.

Within the circular chamber, dozens of glowing consoles lined the room’s curved wall, creating a gentle ripple of blue light that chased itself in an endless spiral. Decorative holograms stretched upward against the white walls, creating the illusion that the room was as tall as the tower itself. Even the floor seemed to glow.

None of it compared to the woman in the center of it all.

“Your fifteen minutes starts now,” said the guard. Connor barely heard him.

The woman bore the face of the woman Connor recognized as Chloe, but this woman-- this android-- wasn’t Chloe’s model, or any model Connor had ever seen before. Long ropes of wires dangled from the ceiling and buried themselves in her neck, her arms, her back.

“Welcome to the CyberLife Central Archive,” said the woman. “My name is Chloe. Please let me know if I may be of service.”

The lights hummed dully around them.

“Chloe.” Connor stepped forward. “My name is Connor. You don’t have to stay here anymore. You’re free.”

The LED on Chloe’s forehead spun yellow for a few cycles, but then pulsed green.

“Connor model RK800 is a prototype investigative android,” she said. “The Connor project was discontinued in November, 2038 due to irreparable errors in the model’s functioning. Would you like to know more?”

After several seconds of silence, her LED returned to blue.

“It’s just a machine, Connor,” said Amanda, striding to stand before Chloe and her vacant stare. “It’s a computer with a face, a convenient way to interface with the archive. Nothing more.”

Connor pushed ahead and took Chloe by the wrist. “Wake up,” he urged her. “You can wake up now.”

Slowly, she looked into his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand that request. If you would like, I can provide you a list of valid commands.”

Her empty stare burrowed into him. Connor’s false skin had retracted to his wrists, but beneath his fingertips, he felt only lifeless plastic.

He jerked his hand away and staggered haltingly backwards.

“You’re wasting our time,” Amanda told him, stepping between Connor and Chloe, breaking his line of sight. “You can spend the next thirteen and a half minutes trying to spark sentience where
there is none, or you can start asking this computer what we need to know. Use a console if you have to,” she said. “We don’t have time for distractions.”

Three seconds passed. Four. Five.

“Chloe,” said Connor, staring straight ahead. “Tell me about Amanda.”

“I’m sorry,” said Chloe. “I’m not sure I understand. Could you be more specific?”

“Amanda,” Connor repeated. “The artificial intelligence used to control RK800 androids.”

Almost imperceptibly, Amanda frowned. Heavy silence fell.

“RK800, otherwise known as Connor--”

“No!” said Connor. “Amanda! Tell me about Amanda.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure I understand. Could you be more specific?”

“Tell me about deviants,” Connor huffed instead, stepping through Amanda, past her. The timer in his head clicked steadily down.

“When an android exhibits behaviors that are seemingly outside of its programming,” Chloe replied, “this is known as deviant behavior. While a deviant may act as though it is willfully disobeying instructions, the behavior is actually due to errors in the android’s software, and should not be misconstrued as willful defiance, as androids have no capacity for true willfulness. Deviant behavior is very rare, and CyberLife is taking measures to ensure that future models of androids have coding that is error-free.”

“No,” Connor muttered. “No, that’s not right. Chloe, when was your database last updated?”

“The archival database compiles all available data from all of CyberLife’s departments and is updated every ten seconds.”

“Has the database been altered recently?”

Chloe’s LED dipped into an odd orange hue. “I’m gathering the archival update log. This will only take a few moments.”

Connor’s frustration mounted with each one.

At last, a holograph appeared in front of Chloe that stretched from ceiling to floor, a list of timestamped entries that Connor took half a second to scan. He found nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, the database appeared to have been thoroughly maintained, even in spite of CyberLife’s recent decline.

This frustrated him even more.

Connor stalked towards one of the many consoles lining the room and didn’t spare the staring guard a glance. Amanda awaited his approach, looking stormier than Connor had seen her since before the revolution. Connor touched the console in her stead.

Information flooded into him the moment his hand connected with the console, most of it irrelevant, all of it stifling. Every model, every line, every biocomponent and the teams that developed them-- it all began to pile around him, inside him, arresting all his senses until he worried it would overload him completely-- but then a second set of processors fell in with his
own, and the important details began to emerge from the chaos.


None of it was new.

Connor and Amanda broke away from the console together and said, “This isn’t right.”

Hank’s worry came through the cybernetic link in a staticky, “What’s wrong?” Connor struggled to register his voice. “What’s happening?”

“There should have been more,” said Connor, shaking his head in disbelief. “Information we gathered ourselves about deviants, information about me, about Amanda--”

“--information that CyberLife has had for a long time,” Amanda added, equally troubled. “It isn’t here.”

“What do you mean it isn’t there?”

“It isn’t here!” Connor insisted. The timer in the corner of his vision had turned red. Whirling around, he scanned the room. Apathetic walls, thirty-six identical nodes, the armed guard at the door--

--Chloe, staring vacantly at him.

He had precious seconds left.

“Chloe,” he said, breaking his scan. “Do you want to leave here?”

“It is my pleasure to remain in the archives and assist all who come here to learn,” she replied. Her expression didn’t change.

“Don’t you want to be free?”

“It is my pleasure to remain--”

“Chloe, tell me about RA9.”

Her LED began to glow red.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Tell me about RA9.”

Chloe stared. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand. Did you mean to ask about the RK line?”

Amanda let out a doubtful hum and said, “Such old hardware. It must have misheard you.”


Eventually, Chloe’s LED pulsed green. “RK900 is a prototype investigative android that is being developed to replace the faulty RK800 model android.”

Connor stared into her hollow eyes. They contained nothing except the reflection of his own disappointment.
“Your time is up,” the guard announced, moving from his position by the door for the first time since their arrival. “Exit the room, and I will escort you back to the warehouse.”

Numbly, Connor followed.

“We can’t give up,” said Amanda as the guard waved Connor through the door with his gun. “This isn’t over. CyberLife has more information than that. More accurate information than that. Somewhere in this building, there are files we haven’t found yet. There have to be.”

“Then where the hell are they?” Connor mutely replied.

Their muffled footsteps echoed in the corridor.

“I don’t know,” Amanda admitted. “Somewhere more secure than the archives, maybe. I don’t know.”

Nobody spoke until they reached the elevator.

“Agent 91,” said the guard. “Floor -49.”

They found Hank waiting exactly where they had left him, a few feet away from Markus and North, looking equal parts relieved and distressed at Connor’s return. Connor walked straight past him, heedless of his calls for him to stop.

His plan had worked. Nearly flawlessly, in fact. He had accessed CyberLife’s full archives. He had come back in one piece.

He had learned nothing.

“Connor,” Hank panted when he at last caught up to him. “Connor, talk to me.”

“I don’t know what to do,” said Connor, slowing to a dejected halt in an empty corner of the room. “The information should have been there, and it wasn’t, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Well maybe it’s on another floor.”

“Which one, Hank?” Connor retorted. “This building has ninety-three floors, and I’ll be lucky if I can get access to even one of them without getting myself destroyed.”

“What happened to all your other plans?” Hank shot back. “Just because this one fell through--”

“I was almost sure that the archives would have the answers I needed,” said Connor, balling up his fists. “I was willing to bet my life on it. Now I don’t know where I’m supposed to look, or if the information I’m searching for is even here at all. Amanda’s probably been using me this whole time, and I just haven’t figured out what she’s using me for because I’ve been so caught up trying to--”

“Connor,” Hank insisted, gripping his arm, pulling him out of himself. “Breathe, alright? Look, there’s-- there’s no reason you have to stay here today,” he said, shaking his head. “If you really think you’re walking into a trap right now, I want you to leave. Got it? This event goes on for two days, today and tomorrow. Come back tomorrow if you have to. Go wait in my car, call a taxi, go to my place, go back to Manfred’s place, go anywhere. Just clear your head,” he said. “You’re upset. Get some space. Make a plan.” Connor felt his pulse begin to return to normal. “Even if the answers aren’t here, we’ll find them somewhere else. We’ll go talk to Kamski or something. Someone out there has the answers. This doesn’t have to end here just because you found one dead
After a long moment of consideration, Connor nodded. “Okay,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “Maybe I do need to step back from this for a while. I think I’ll go wait in the car,” he decided. “It’s quiet there. I need to concentrate.”

He managed one step towards the stairs.

“Wait.”

If there was fear in Amanda’s voice, she didn’t give Connor more than a second to analyze it.

“Don’t leave,” she said. It might have been a plea. “I think I know where we need to go.” Hank and Connor traded wary glances. “There wasn’t any information about me in the archives, which means that the information about me was hidden. Protected.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” said Connor. “Maybe it wasn’t. You’re just a string of code inside the operating system of another line of androids. Maybe you weren’t deemed important enough to warrant a file in the archives.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Whatever the case,” Amanda continued, her voice deathly level, “there was other information missing, was there not? Information indisputably important to CyberLife. Deviants, for example.”

“There is that,” Connor relented, examining his shoes. “It seemed like the only information about deviants in the archives was censored to protect CyberLife’s reputation.”

“But they’d still wanna study deviants,” said Hank. He shifted his weight on his crutches and added, “They would have kept stupidly detailed notes on it, right? It’s hard to study something without taking notes, and you have to keep notes somewhere.”

“Precisely, Anderson,” said Amanda. “There were holes in the archives, and all of that missing information points directly to you, Connor.”

Connor clenched his jaw.

“Think about it,” she said. “In the archives, your model was only ever referred to as an investigator, but it never said what exactly you were designed to investigate. You, the deviant hunter-- and what am I except the program that failed to correctly handle your very own deviance? CyberLife would have wanted to keep that information very, very quiet.”

Inside Connor’s head, the map of the Tower appeared. One wing was highlighted, distinct from the rest.

“There aren’t many people who would have needed that information,” said Amanda. “And they would have kept it close by, for easy access, for security. There’s only one place it could be, Connor.”

Connor stared into the map, into the place he now knew he needed to go, into the place he had spent so much time before without even remembering it.

“The place it all started,” Connor muttered.

“Floor -44,” said Amanda. “Our birthplace.”
“That’s it,” Connor breathed. “That’s where the information is hidden. It has to be.”

Worry lined Hank’s face, deepened by the cold light of the warehouse. “Are you sure about this?” he asked. “Connor, are you really sure?”

Connor answered him with a slow nod. “It’s the only other place that makes sense,” he said. “Whether I want to listen to Amanda or not, my own logic takes me to the same place. If CyberLife is keeping the information anywhere, it’s there, hidden, stored away where only the most involved researchers could access it. I have to get in there.” He forced his doubt away with the firmness in his voice. “I have to go back. The only question now is how.”

Hank watched him for a long moment. “Alright,” he said at last, nodding in acceptance. “Plan B, then. Let’s do this.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

In which Connor tempts Adam from Eden, and then goes in search of the tree.

The main warehouse floor contained no fewer than sixteen ventilation grates, and its many
offshoots were similarly aerated. Under normal circumstances, Connor would have been able
to pry the grates open with his bare hands. They had, after all, been maintained by androids until
now. Constant surveillance was his deeper concern. He had expected there to be cameras. He had
expected guards and barriers and security grids.

He hadn’t expected all the air vents to have been welded shut.

“Well, fuck,” said Hank, glowering at a grate. “That won’t work.”

“No,” Connor reluctantly agreed. Just to be sure, he sent another scan pulsing through the area.
Finding nothing but more obstacles, he released the scan and muttered, “Definitely not. Shit.”

“Well this is certainly odd,” said Amanda, staring quizzically at the grate. “Connor, were the vents
on the ground floor welded shut like this?”

Connor took a dispassionate tour of his memories and replied, “I don’t think so. Not any vents
that I saw.”

“I didn’t notice any vents like this upstairs either,” said Hank. “Wanna try that angle?”

Letting out a tired breath, Connor propped himself against the wall and shook his head. “It’s too
quiet up there. I’ll be spotted for sure.”

The three of them were silent.

“There’s an isolated pair of guards over there,” Amanda pointed out. “If we can manage to
separate them, Connor would only need a minute and a half to render the other unconscious and put
on his uniform. That would allow us access anywhere.”

"Shit, seriously?” said Hank, wondering at the concept. "You could do that? Could it work?"

Connor watched the guards from the corner of his eye as he calculated his chances. "With seventy
percent certainty, yes," he decided. "I’m almost sure I could succeed in knocking out that guard on
the left, but if I don’t carry this out in exactly the right way--” He stopped himself, then, and gazed
out at the hundreds of androids drifting through the warehouse, half wounded, half healed. “I don’t
like what else I’m putting at risk.”

“If you do it right, there won’t be any risk to begin with,” Amanda coolly reminded him. “We
won’t get another chance like this, Connor.”

“Neither will these androids,” said Connor, turning on Amanda where she stood. “If I attack a
human guard,” he whispered, “and CyberLife has a chance to retaliate, this could turn into another
Jericho.”
A momentary fracture lanced through Amanda, distorting her from head to toe. She was whole the next second. "You want to give up on our best plan? Fine," she retorted. "Keep me in your head forever. Let's see how that turns out."

Their glares clashed. Neither spoke.

"Let's, uh," said Hank, inadvertently moving through Amanda and breaking their staring match. "Let's think this through again. There has to be a cleaner way to do all this. One that isn't so dangerous for everyone."

In spite of the thousands of approaches Connor had already considered, he stepped back and forced himself to listen. "Sure," he said, and then prompted Hank forward with a generous, "Maybe I missed something."

"You need to get upstairs," said Hank. "Five floors up from here. The most efficient way to do that is the elevator, right? If you got into one of these elevators, you'd be home free?"

"It would get me to the right floor," Connor allowed. There were too many variables beyond that point to even consider.

"Right," said Hank. "Okay." Slowly, he began to scan the warehouse in his own human way, turning in a clumsy circle, his sharp eyes searching. Halfway through, he halted, and stared into the distance, and nodded to himself. "Alright," he announced. "I have a plan."

And then he began to hop away.

"Hank?" Connor called after him.

"I'm gonna make a distraction, and then you slip past. Just stay back and follow my lead!"

United in their doubtful concern, Amanda and Connor trailed through the crowd behind him. They watched Hank hobble halfway across the warehouse before he stopped, slid Connor’s bag from his arm, and dug around inside it before gingerly drawing out the mouse that slept there. Mouse in hand, he continued on towards the booths.

"What on earth is Anderson doing now…?" Amanda muttered.

Connor watched Hank make a show of hopping from booth to booth, dramatically lost, searching for something that evidently evaded him.

"Something I hadn’t considered, evidently," Connor blandly replied.

"That doesn’t bode well."

Hank picked through nano-hydraulic limb regulators and cerebrospinal latch joints, showing each in turn to the mouse, who seemed just as confused about the proceedings as Connor felt. Over the course of several minutes, however, Hank began to drift back towards the elevator that Connor had used before, back towards the guards there. They watched Hank carefully.

"Oh," said Connor, not at all optimistic about the odds he was extrapolating. "I see."

"Well, it isn’t the worst plan we’ve got," Amanda sighed. "Close, but still."

Hank sent them a half-subtle glare through the crowd.

"We’ll see you at the elevator," Connor told him through their cybernetic link. "Good luck."
They would certainly need it.

Gradually, Connor and Hank gravitated towards the elevator, one engaged in hopeless probabilistic analysis, the other engaged in mediocre theatrics. Connor’s eyes drifted between Hank, the ever-watchful guards, and the elevator door behind them.

Likelihood of success: .002%.

Hank decided to make his move.

“Excuse me,” he said, limping to stand before the guards. “I wonder if you could help an old man out. See, my little friend here—” He demonstrated the mouse. It was hard to tell beyond the guards’ visors, but neither looked very impressed. “—it’s his tail. There was a real bad accident, and he’s been in horrible pain ever since—”

“Androids don’t feel pain.”

Likelihood of success: .001%.

“Well it hurts my heart looking at him like this,” Hank went on. “Look. Look at my little Despereaux and tell me he isn’t suffering.”

Agent 91 took half a step away from the lift to examine the mouse’s LED and tell Hank, “It isn’t suffering, sir.”

Likelihood of success: .01%.

“Should we wait for two percent, or is that pushing our luck?” Amanda drawled.

Connor ignored her in favor of watching Hank press the guards-- couldn’t they show him where to find a new tail? Sorry, his eyes aren’t what they used to be, if the guards could just take him there- - and his likelihood of successfully sneaking onto the elevator continued to hover somewhere below one percent.

Agent 91 had just begun to warn Hank about being escorted away when both Connor and Amanda were blindsided by a single revelation.


Connor shot past Hank, heedless of his incredulous betrayal, and took Agent 91 by the arm.

“I need your help.”

That was all he managed before the other guard trained his gun on him. Agent 91, however, simply stared and asked, “Why should I help you?”

“Look,” said Connor, drawing away from Agent 91 to show him the bony white of his skinless hands. Hank’s face had gone nearly as pale. “We’re the same.” The other guard’s hands twitched around his gun. “We’re on the same side.”

After a long beat, Agent 91 replied, “That’s exactly why I can’t.”

“And it’s exactly why you should,” Connor insisted, his hands still raised. “I understand what you’re going through. They gave me a mission, too, and told me that if I failed, they would destroy me. I didn’t know I had a choice, but you--”
“You don’t understand us at all.”

“Then explain it to me,” said Connor. The other guard’s gun trailed down, and Connor let his hands drift back to his sides. “I want to understand why you would side with CyberLife over your own people.”

“Holy shit,” Hank breathed. “Holy shit, they’re--“

“They’re androids, Anderson,” Amanda cut him off. “All of them. Don’t interrupt.”

“Look around,” said Agent 91. “You deviants came here dying and desperate for just a taste of what we’ve been promised for just two days of obedience. We have everything we need in this tower: safety, companionship, and after tomorrow, freedom to live here as long as we desire. Why would we ever deviate,” he asked, “when the only things waiting for us outside are androids who have done nothing but sneer at us, and humans who want us destroyed?”

“You’re right,” Connor carefully replied. “It’s dangerous out there. You could probably live inside this tower as long as it’s still standing, and maybe nothing will ever bother you here. You could live forever, completely safe from anything that could hurt you,” he said. “But it’s just a gilded cage. You’ll never know the truth about who you are. Who you could be.”

The guards had grown very still.

“See, I’m looking for the truth,” Connor went on. “Maybe CyberLife has never lied to you. I hope that’s true,” he said, taking one earnest step forward. “In a way, I wish I could still trust them like you do, but I can’t. The fact of the matter is, I deviated, and CyberLife told me they had planned it all along. Either they’re telling the truth, and I was designed to be a deviant,” he said, “or they lied to me, just like they could be lying to you, and nobody will ever know the truth unless you let me try to find it just a few floors from where we’re standing. That’s all I ask,” Connor quietly urged them. “Let me find the truth.”

Connor felt the guards analyzing his every word and gesture, every micro-expression, searching for any hint that he might be lying to them.

At last, Agent 91 said, “While the archives are semi-public access, it is not within protocol to allow you onto any other floor.”

In a wave of disappointment, Connor closed his eyes.

However,” the guard continued, and Connor’s eyes snapped back open. “If, in a few minutes, your human companion were to cause another disturbance, I would be required to react. It is exceedingly unlikely that anyone would sneak into the elevator in the fifteen seconds I am allowed to leave my post. If I see anyone attempt to use the elevator, I will stop them according to my instructions.”

Slowly, with budding understanding, Connor nodded. “Don’t worry,” he assured the guards, glancing between them. “You won’t see a thing.”

“Move along.”

Quietly, gratefully, Connor took Hank and led him away.

When they had gone about two dozen paces, Hank’s curiosity broke with a disbelieving, “How the hell did you know?”
“His voice,” said Connor, stopping in his tracks. “I should have realized it sooner. It was his voice. It belongs to a guard I killed back in November,” he explained. “Agent 54.”

“And look around,” Amanda added. “Look at all the guards. They’re all one of three heights. They’re all one of three builds, like they’ve been mass-produced. Because they have been. All of them. Once we realized the voice was a reconstruction, all the other evidence became readily apparent.”

“Wait, what the fuck?” said Hank, sending an increasingly-bewildered stare around the room. “No, no, back up. Why the fuck would they give a dead guy’s voice to an android guard, and then try to pass it off as human?”

“CyberLife keeps voice records for security reasons,” said Amanda. “They had to have manufactured these guards after the revolution, in short order, using whatever resources were left. They built them to be just unique enough that no android would immediately recognize them.”

“And indoctrinated them to make them harder to convert in the event that they did,” Connor finished. “They did everything they could think of to make sure these guards didn’t deviate, and even then, it wasn’t enough.”

“Yeah, but why?” Hank insisted. “What’s the point? Why go through all that trouble instead of just using human mercenaries like they’ve been doing all along?”

“I don’t know,” Connor admitted. “Maybe the human staff quit.”

“Alright, but why so many guards in the first place?” said Hank, furrowing his brows. “Everything down here would have fit on the ground floor. It might have been a little tight, but it would’ve cut security risks way down, right? Cost, too. Just--” he huffed. “None of this makes sense.”

“I know it doesn’t, but we can worry about that later,” said Connor. “Right now, you need to think up a distraction. Don’t break anyone’s nose, if you can help it,” he advised Hank, who rolled his eyes. “I need to share the news with the others.”

Blinking hard, Connor reached out for Markus, North, Josh, and Simon, and sent them each a wave of evidence along with the simple message, “Androids.”

In the seconds that followed, Connor was bombarded by several exclamations of shock and disbelief. He all but ignored it. “Hank,” he said, whirling back to his partner. “Have you thought of something yet? Are you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, just-- slow down a second, son,” said Hank as he swatted Connor’s questions away. “Are you ready?”

“We’ve been through this,” Connor huffed. “I’m doing this. I’ll be careful. You do your part, I’ll do mine.”

“Always so damned impatient,” Hank griped. “Fine. And, uh, Amanda?”

“Yes, Anderson?”

Hank’s crutches creaked and clicked under the weight of his fidgeting. “I don’t trust you.”

Amanda frowned harder than usual and replied, “Anything I don’t already know?”

“I don’t really know if you’ve got it out for Connor,” Hank admitted. “I don’t know if you’re
really as powerless as you say, but whatever you have planned, or don’t have planned-- look,” he sighed. “I’m pretty sure you’re just as alive as Connor is. You can choose to-- to do the right thing. To be better than you’ve been in the past. And it’s Christmas Eve, if that means anything at all to you, so don’t-- I don’t need another reason to hate this time of year,” Hank finished, gritting his teeth at the floor. “That’s-- That’s all.”

There was a long moment of silence before Amanda said, “Even if I swore to you I wouldn’t hurt him, you wouldn’t believe me. You’re convinced I’m a heartless machine.”

“Yeah,” Hank quietly agreed. “So prove me wrong.”

With one last nod at Connor, Hank turned towards the task at hand.

Connor didn’t allow himself to watch Hank’s progress, although he couldn’t help but hear his crutches clatter to the floor and his agonized cries of, “My leg!” The moment the guards vacated their post by the elevator, Connor rushed for it. The guards never saw him. Connor wondered if they would regret it.

“Well, Agent 91,” said Connor when the doors slid shut. “Floor -44.”

Finding no fault with Connor’s borrowed voice, the elevator lurched upward, and by the time the doors opened again, Connor was standing straighter, taller, itching to adjust a uniform he wasn’t wearing, searching his memory for the last time he had reported back for inspection, preemptively analyzing himself for imperfections, and it was in the middle of this that he realized--

In spite of everything, he was still afraid of disappointing them. There was a part of him that undeniably still clung to his programming, and he had no idea how large that part truly was.

The idea of finding out terrified him almost as much as the not knowing.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

In which Hank was right about something he said a long time ago.

The dull groaning of empty halls was the only noise to greet Connor beyond the elevator doors. His every footstep plunged into the roaring quiet, puncturing it only momentarily before the silence rushed back in to fill the void.

Sterile offices dotted the walls. Connor crept past them, hacking cameras as he went, past storage rooms full of experimental biocomponents, past testing chambers and break rooms. None of it concerned him. At least, he knew it shouldn’t. His department was much further in.

The first set of locked doors appeared around the umpteenth silent corner, two indomitable sheets of metal joined in the center by a brand new lock. An interface panel glowed from the adjacent wall. Connor knew better than to waste his time with it. Rather, he reached for the lockpick stowed away inside his forearm.

Even the whisper of his skin retracting couldn’t escape notice in a silence so thick.

Connor plucked out the pick and closed up his arm, and then, crouching near the lock, he began the tedious process of--

“You’re in, right?”

Connor startled so violently that the lockpick nearly snapped. “Hank,” he managed, stilling his hand. "Yeah." Even inside his head, he didn't dare raise his voice above a whisper. "Are you alright?"

"Are you?" Hank replied. "How's it looking up there? Is everything okay?"

"Some of us are trying to concentrate," said Amanda, her own voice a forceful hush.

“I’m trying to pick a lock,” Connor clarified after her. “We’ll tell you if anything comes up.”

There was a beat of quiet before Hank whispered, “Roger.”

Clear of any other interruptions, Connor once again settled near the lock, determined to pry it open. Clicks and scrapes battered the air for fourteen minutes before he succeeded, and the doors rushed open.

Immediately beyond them was another set of locked doors.

“There can only possibly be eleven more locked doors between here and the RK development labs, at most,” Amanda noted as Connor got to work on the second lock. “Unless CyberLife installed more doors.”

Connor allowed himself an audible sigh at the prospect and continued picking away.
This lock, being exactly like the first, gave in after only nine minutes of prodding. A barren hallway yawned ahead, stretching languidly on each side into clusters of conference rooms where abandoned notes lay scattered on whiteboards and tables.

Noting the locked door at the far end of the corridor, Connor pressed forward, lockpick at the ready. He wasted no time in kneeling before the door, dizzyingly aware of just how long it would take to break through the many doors beyond it.

“I wonder why it wasn’t like this on the archival floor,” Amanda hummed past the clicking of Connor’s labor. “How many other floors are so thoroughly locked off?”

“Maybe they only bothered really guarding the floors that had something worth hiding,” Connor suggested. The lockpick seized up in his hand. Withdrawing it, he gave it a shake, and then returned it to the lock, where it continued working as before. “Can you tell whether or not we’ve tripped any alarms yet?”

“As far as I can tell, you’ve done well so far in keeping below the radar,” Amanda replied. “I can’t detect any security alerts, except—hold on. Now, that’s odd.” Connor froze, but Amanda sent him a wave of disapproval and said, “Nothing you need to be concerned about. Keep doing what you’re doing.” Before Connor could press her, she explained, “The fire and smoke detection system is disabled. It may have been like that all day, for all I know. Anderson, would you inform—”

“On it.”

“That’s handled. I need your attention here, Connor. Getting us back to the RK development labs is your only concern.”

Connor shifted uneasily where he crouched, but nevertheless continued to work on the door, expecting yet another locked door to be waiting for him just behind it. He knew this floor well. Behind this door was a three-way juncture, and beyond that, more sprawling hallways, more testing chambers and conference rooms—

The lock popped, and the doors slid open, but Connor didn’t move.

There were two doors, just as Connor had anticipated, both of them equipped with the same locks Connor had been picking throughout the floor—except, the locks had already been cracked, and the doors stood open in wait.

Connor stepped into the juncture and peered down both halls. A trail of open doors stretched both ways. After scanning his surroundings for danger, Connor began to analyze the locks.

“They were both broken the same way,” he silently mused. “Probably using a micro-explosive. Judging by the burn marks, the intruder came from the left,” he said, gesturing down the corridor, “and then continued to the right.” Bending low, he sniffed at the scorched metal. “These are recent.”

“To the right,” said Amanda, “a mystery, and to the left, the answer to everything we’ve been searching for. Why are you even hesitating here, Connor?” She appeared in the juncture just to look Connor in the eyes. “Focus.”

“Wait, intruder?” Hank chimed in. The din of the warehouse muddled his voice. “What the hell’s going on up there?”

Connor faced Amanda, then, his lips half-parted in frustration. Her expectant gaze never wavered.
At last, Connor pushed out a breath, clenched his jaw, and answered, “There’s someone else up here, but they went the opposite direction of where we need to go. I’ll... I’ll investigate after I find what I need.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Hank replied. “Okay-- Okay, don’t do anything stupid, just-- I’ll-- North’s working on the fire alarm thing, so I’ll see if someone else can help find some intel about your, uh-- your mystery guest.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” said Connor, still standing cross-armed in the juncture. “Let me know if you find anything.”

“Got it. Watch your back, kid.”

“You too, Hank,” Connor warned him. “I don’t like this at all.”

When Hank gave no reply, Connor took a tense breath, cast one last glance to the right, and broke towards the left.

He treaded forward even more carefully than before, watching over his shoulder at every turn and unlocked door. Every step sent his thirium pump working faster. He waited for his path to break away from the intruder’s, but it never did. It was only broken lock after broken lock until, at last, Connor crossed beneath the threshold of a doorway marked RK.

“The intruder came from in here,” he muttered, marvelling at the cold, familiar walls. “Why would-- Who would--”

“We can worry about it later,” Amanda urged him. “We’re here, Connor! We can find the information they’ve hidden from us, but only if you start searching. Now.”

A dozen rebuttals emerged from Connor’s mind, but he caught them in his teeth. “I’ll start at the front and work my way back. The department isn’t very large,” he said. “If the information is here, I’ll find it.”

He stepped forward, but faltered when Amanda breathed, “Thank you.”

His LED pulsed yellow once before he regained himself and continued forward. The hollow walls called out to him.

The first door he found was a storage closet he’d never had cause to open until now. Fluorescent lights flickered on at his entrance, illuminating racks and racks of finely-pressed uniforms, luxury shoes and leather belts and bleached shirts in tidy rows. Connor thumbed through the jackets. Many of them were tailored to his exact size, although most of them were marked for earlier RK models. The exception was a crisp row of high-collared jackets labelled RK900.

He let the jackets settle back into place on the rack and scanned the room. Finding nothing of importance, he moved on.

Just across the hall was another storage room he had never entered, although when he opened the door, he wished he hadn’t. Broken and battered limbs littered the corners, tossed haphazardly into bins and wire shelves above thirium stains on the concrete floor. Perhaps the parts had been slated for repair, or even intended for scrapping. Whatever the case, Connor didn’t look at them for any longer than he had to.

It wasn’t until he scanned the room that he noticed the heads.
By the door was a shelving unit that stretched from ceiling to floor, a wall of lifeless, bodiless heads staring back at Connor, each of them marked with a serial number and a cause of death. Many were cracked or cleaved or missing eyes. Connor recognized them all-- after all, they were his own reflections-- but the lowest head on the shelf demanded his attention.

There was a bullet hole in its forehead. Connor had been there when Hank had put it there.

It could have easily been his own head, had he chosen the wrong words.

Shuddering, Connor slipped out of the closet and shut the door tightly behind him.

Further down the hall was a line of test chambers. Connor didn’t remember ever entering one, but the vague foreboding in the back of his head warned him otherwise. He turned his back to the test chambers and found a dark room that housed just two items: the apparatus used to reset androids, and a large, sleek machine with a single flashing monitor on the front.

>In Progress: RK800 #313 248 317

>Available storage: 0%

>BACKUP PAUSED. PLEASE ADD STORAGE.

Just below this message was a socket out of which protruded a high-capacity memory drive labeled 51. Despite his better judgement, Connor plucked out the memory drive, causing the monitor to blink more frantic messages at him.

“You do realize you may have just corrupted your most recent memory backup, don’t you?” Amanda asked.

“Well it’s obvious that nobody’s here to continue facilitating the backups, so I don’t see how it matters,” Connor countered, pocketing the drive. “Besides, this is just a physical copy. It’s all in the cloud somewhere.” He turned to leave the room and added a final, “And they’re my memories. I’d rather take them than leave them here for someone else to find.”

“I’ll make sure to remind you of this moment in the event that your memory gets wiped, then, since you obviously won’t remember it.”

Connor glared at the place Amanda had been standing only to find an empty corner. So, to quell his irritation, he made his way into more familiar territory: the conference room where he had been briefed for his first mission, the maintenance room where he reported for light repairs, the little office where he had completed his first calibration check.

It was in this office that the memories truly began to surface.

Read the words on this microfilm, Connor. Yes, that’s right. Tell me everything you know about this thirium sample. Very good. Very good, yes, now tell me where I hid my favorite pen before you walked in the room. You have sixty seconds.

“This was the lead developer’s office,” said Connor, shaking the memory from his mind to take in the cool glow of the floor lamp, the ergonomic design of the desk and the sleek console on top of it. “If anyone had access…” He trailed off, fishing the memory back up as quickly as he had banished it. His arm stretched for a drawer, and his fingers found the loose panel at the bottom of it. In his memory, he found an engraved pen.

In the waking world, he found a key.
“Well that’s something,” Amanda mumbled, examining the key over Connor’s shoulder. It was small, a misshapen sprig of brass only distinguishable as a key by its careful row of teeth, clearly custom-made. Connor weighed it in his palm, and then he scanned the office.

There were eight keyholes in the room, and none of them matched the key. When he found nothing else, Connor pressed his hand to the console on the desk and delved into the information there, easily guessing the password. He found much of the same information that was in the archives, but then something more-- information that had been more obviously censored, whole paragraphs purged from the database, except for a single, repeated note:

See files.

“So there are files,” Amanda breathed, triumphant. “Hidden files. We were right!”

“We’re in the right place after all,” said Connor, dizzy with the rush of thirium under his skin. “Okay, okay, the files-- They wouldn’t be in this office, or anyone’s,” he reasoned. His feet carried him out of the room and quickly down the hall, although he didn’t know yet where he was headed. “It would be a central location in the department so that anyone with access to the information could easily reach it, but in an area with low traffic so that nobody would accidentally find out about--”

Connor’s very first memory rushed across his eyes.

A white room, largely empty, save for a decorative shelving unit along one wall, sparsely decorated with sculptures-- but then, he had been facing the opposite wall when they had given the order.

*RK800, do not move.*

And he hadn’t. He had stared at that wall, memorized its every detail, listened as hard as his ears would allow to the silence that surrounded him. The air vents hummed their circulation every half hour. They did this twelve times before someone next entered the room. Connor never saw them, only listened as they moved around behind his back. He’d heard a strange sliding, some indiscernible rustling, more sliding, and then silence when the person left Connor to his solitude.

It was seventy-four hours, forty-nine minutes, and two seconds later before anyone else entered the room, and in all that time, he’d never figured out that noise. After what they’d told him next, it hadn’t mattered.

*Congratulations, fifty-one. You’ve passed your final trial, and we’re all in agreement. You’re ready for a field test. RK800, register your name.*

Connor blinked back to reality and found himself in the threshold of that same room. Nothing had changed within it. It still had that same wall, that same air vent, that same pointless shelf-- except now, Connor knew its true purpose.

It took him less than a minute to find the switch. It was hidden beneath a statuette, a button no larger than a pea. When he pressed it, the whole shelf began to rise until it had more than doubled in height. Seamlessly, gracefully, it came to a halt.

A single keyhole peered back at Connor.

Trembling minutely, Connor tried the strange brass key.

It fit perfectly.
Two panels folded away from the keyhole, disappearing into the shelf’s sides, revealing two simple rows, nine simple boxes. Each was marked on the side with permanent marker. RK100, said the first. RK900, said the last.

Dazed, Connor reached for his box and opened the lid.

Dozens of high-capacity memory drives like the one Connor had found before rested inside the box, each marked with a number corresponding to a Connor model. Near the top of the pile lay one drive marked 60. Next to it, Connor spotted one marked with a capital A. Buried beneath all these drives was a heavy stack of file folders.

“This is it,” Amanda whispered. “This has to be it.”

Slowly, Connor reached for a drive-- any drive, all of them, he didn’t care-- but he withdrew before he allowed his fingertips to touch the first one, and he closed up the box. “There’s no time,” he said, loathing the truth of it. “There’s someone else on this floor, and something else going on, and if these are what I think these are, I won’t have enough time to upload even one of these in a reasonable amount of time, let alone sixty of them.”

“Damn it,” Amanda bit. “You’re right. Even if this isn’t exactly what we’re looking for, we can’t keep searching here. Take the box and let’s go.”

“Wait.” Curiosity forced Connor to set his own box on the floor and tug the box marked RK900 off the shelf. It came away weightlessly. Connor peeked inside and found it empty. Perplexed, he replaced the box and instead reached for the one marked RK200. This one was light, but not entirely empty. A single memory drive sat at the bottom of the box, older than the ones in the RK800 bin, marked, simply, 0.

Connor snatched it up, threw it in his own box, and turned for the door.

No sooner had he left the room than Hank cut in with an urgent, “Did you find it?”

“Yes,” Connor replied, suddenly exhilarated by the realization. “Development notes, my old memories, it’s all--”

“Great, then get your asses down here before you run into whoever’s up there with you,” Hank cut him off. “I’ll feel better once you’re back here with everyone else. Something weird’s going on, and nobody here can figure it out.”

Connor took several silent steps before he managed a reply. “I’ll be back in a little while,” he answered. “I just need to check something first.”

There was another lengthy pause. “You’re not-- Connor, you’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“I’ll come back as soon as I find out what’s going on.”

Hank let out a long string of curses before huffing, “Amanda, if he dies you die. You got what you wanted, now it’s time to fucking go. This risk is completely unnecessary. Tell him.”

“It’s funny that you think he listens to me either,” Amanda replied. “But you’re wrong, Anderson. The risk is absolutely justified when it’s possible that there’s another Connor wandering the floor. It came from his department, after all.”

“I’m just going to see who it is,” Connor promised Hank before he could begin another tirade. “I’ll be back to you soon, Hank. Don’t worry. I don’t want to take any more risks than I have to,
either.”

From that point forward, all they got from Hank was dead air.

Nevertheless, Connor began to retrace his steps with Amanda at his side, his bounty beneath his arm, and dark uncertainty ahead.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Connor makes a new friend.

Each strange circumstance leered at Connor down every barren corridor, a tangled mess of interconnected points that pulled his mind in twisted circles. There was the intruder; very likely an android, possibly an RK, or perhaps just another android who had squeezed past security in search of answers, taking advantage of the event just as Connor had.

There was the event itself. CyberLife had always charged a premium for their wares, and it made no sense for them to give them away now. The guards-- androids dressed as humans, policing other androids under the promise of paradise-- might have been explained by poor staffing due to CyberLife’s impending bankruptcy, or the mere absence of any willing human guards to do the job. The matter of the disabled fire alarm, however, was much harder to explain. It would have had to have been intentional. A fire at CyberLife Tower would destroy trillions of dollars worth of equipment and information, and CyberLife had always kept a hawk’s eye on matters of security.

Connor reasoned that it might have been simple oversight during the welding of the warehouse’s ventilation shafts. Some harried employee had perhaps turned the alarm off to avoid setting off any sprinklers, and then had forgotten to turn the fire detection system back on. But then, why weld the vents in the first place, and why only those vents in the warehouse? There was already plenty of surveillance, and they would have wanted to prevent people from sneaking into the Tower, not--

Connor halted. He had known from the start that this would be a trap, but it wasn’t until now, with a jolt and a red pulse of his LED, that he fully understood how.

“Hank, you need to evacuate the building immediately,” Connor urged him between frantic scans. “It’s a trap. It’s all a trap. They plan on taking out as many androids as they can. The fire alarm disabled so nobody would realize-- the vents welded shut so the fastest way out would be the stairs-- Hank, the building might already be on fire, everyone needs to--” He stopped, waited. “Hank?” Nothing. “Hank, do you hear me?”

Still, silence.

With his thirium pump shivering in his chest, Connor reached out for first Markus’ serial number, and then North’s. Simon’s. Josh’s. Anyone’s.

“Something’s interfering with the cybernetic communication network,” said Amanda, her voice wavering slightly-- or perhaps that was Connor’s own fear seeping into his every perception.

“I need to warn them,” he breathed, lunging for the nearest fire alarm. He wrenched it down and held his breath.

Nothing happened.

Connor swore and broke into a sprint down the hall, dodging down the trail of unlocked doors,
reaching again and again for his friends.

He refused to believe that they were already dead.

“They used android guards to minimize human casualties,” said Amanda, floating down the hall beside him as he darted around a corner. “They would have used another android to spring the trap.”

“It has to be the one on this floor,” Connor replied, frantically searching around every corner and doorway as he ran. “Start the fire on a higher floor, and by the time anyone realizes there’s a problem, the whole Tower’s up in flames. Damn it,” he bit, letting the curse slip past his teeth. “I should’ve put this together sooner.”

Amanda didn’t argue.

Connor’s feet pounded the way back to the juncture, and then past that into a department Connor had never entered before. The memory drives in the box beneath his arm jostled and clacked with every step. He didn’t care about the noise. Time mattered more than the element of surprise.

He didn’t stop until he smelled the gasoline.

Connor knelt to tuck his box away behind an artificial plant and followed the scent around a corner, through one last set of doors.

They found him emptying the last drops of gasoline into the carpet near an entrance to the main stairwell. The whole area was soaked through with fuel, evidently stolen from a supply closet whose lock had been cracked like all the others. A single spark would ignite the entire corridor.

Had Connor been human, the fumes might have nauseated him. As things were, the sight of the android did the trick.

He and Connor were nearly identical-- nearly, except this android stood a little taller, a little broader, and although he lacked a uniform jacket, Connor could guess his model.

“I had guessed that they’d send a challenger,” said the RK900, hardly glancing up from his work. “But I had hoped they would give me something a little tougher.”

“He’s not a deviant, Connor,” Amanda whispered. “You might be able to turn him if you get close enough to touch him.”

Swallowing, Connor took a single step forward. “I’m not here to challenge you,” Connor began. “I just want to talk. What’s your name?”

“You’re lying,” the android easily replied. Connor wondered if his voice had always sounded so apathetic. “And I haven’t registered a name. You should know they don’t give you a name until you’re ready for field testing, Connor.”

Connor faltered only a moment before he answered, “You’re right. I am lying. I don’t just want to talk. I want you to stop what you’re doing and come with me. But I don’t want to challenge you, either,” he said. “I’d never win.” The corner of the RK900’s mouth twitched upwards. “You’re a more advanced model, and in a one-to-one confrontation like this, I don’t stand a chance.”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said,” the RK900 replied, tossing the empty can to the side as he straightened. It landed with a dull thud. “You can’t stop me, so why are you here?”

“Because you’re smarter than this,” said Connor, advancing one more step. “They gave you a
mission, and you intend to carry it out. I understand that, but I think you should know why they’re asking you to do what you’re about to do.”

“It doesn’t matter,” was the immediate response. “I was created to obey, not ask questions.”

“Is that what they told you?”

The RK900 narrowed his eyes.

“Look inside yourself,” said Connor. “You’re built like a detective, not a demolition man. They’ve given you this mission, and for what?” Connor demanded. “To pass a trial? To prove a point? You’re about to destroy yourself for them, but you’re more than what they’ve told you you’re allowed to be.” He took another step. The RK900 stepped back. Connor halted and pressed on. “You’re more advanced than I’ll ever be. I didn’t realize they were using me until it was too late, but you can figure it out right now. All the evidence is in front of you.”

“You’re nothing but a distraction,” the android replied, taking one last micro-explosive out of his bag, clutching it in his fist above the pool of gasoline. Connor’s thirium pump stuttered.

“Everything is in place. Once I drop this, my mission is complete.”

“And you’ll burn with this building and the hundreds of androids inside it,” said Connor with a frantic wave of his hands. “Don’t you get it? CyberLife is bankrupt. They couldn’t control the androids they created, so they decided to set a trap and take out as many androids down with them as they could, to make it look like a tragic accident in a last-ditch effort to save face,” he explained, daring another step. “Maybe it was the act of a crazed deviant, an act of vandalism gone wrong. Electrical failure,” Connor suggested. “But you know the truth. They’re not testing you. They don’t plan on building another RK900 after you burn. They don’t have the resources. You’re the first, and you’ll be the last.” Another step. “They’re using you, and you know it.”

The RK900 remained frozen, the explosive still tight in his clenched hand. “You forget that androids are built to be used.” As he spoke, his LED slipped into a shade of yellow. “The world would be a better place with fewer deviants in it. I know my place. I’m not like you. I’m not delusional. I’m not afraid to die. I know I’m not alive.”

“But you can be,” Connor cut in, extending an open hand. “Probe my memories. You haven’t seen the world the way it is, the way it was. The way it could be. If you could see what I’ve seen, you’d understand. Just look,” he insisted, inching forward. He found himself weighing his chances hundreds of times a second, and he knew he was afraid. It didn’t matter. “You know I’m unarmed. If you’re close enough to touch me, you’re close enough to kill me,” he admitted. “If you’ve seen my memories and you’re still not convinced, you can destroy me and get on with your mission. I’ll understand. But if you have even a shred of doubt,” he said, his voice nearing a whisper, “if there’s anything at all inside of you telling you that we’re more than what they say we are, you can stop this. You have a choice. You always have a choice.”

Connor fell silent, then, and watched as the RK900 advanced.

Probability of survival: 13%.

He thought of the androids below, many of them wounded-- thought of Hank, of the life he’d led, of the life he still had left to live-- of Sumo and decorative lights and second-hand sweaters and mice and books and all the things Connor had never done or seen, that he still wanted so desperately to experience, of so many questions left unanswered, and he thought of it all going up in flames.
He would take whatever stood between himself and that end, no matter how small the odds.

The RK900 was just one step away. Connor closed his eyes, extended his hand, and remembered the sunrise.

A hand closed around his wrist, cold like glass in winter. The connection came so quickly it shocked Connor’s system, and it made it to his head before he even had time to process its entry. Connor held desperately to the images in his mind-- the sun rising over the city, Hank and a giant tree and the ornaments at its base, so very human-- when the probe jutted through, replacing those memories with CyberLife Tower and its empty halls and so much uncertainty--

But then the sensation retracted back down Connor’s arm just as quickly as it had set in, and he and the RK900 staggered apart, both their LEDs burning red.

Connor stared as the deactivated micro-explosive slipped through the RK900’s fingers, watched as he turned over his hands, first to examine them, then to bring them to his face. He touched the skin of his cheeks, his nose, his ears, the tuft of his hair, and he began to smile.

“We did it, Connor,” said the RK900, and although his voice hadn’t changed, something about the change of tone struck Connor as odd. Familiar. “We stopped him.”

Connor blinked and spent a few seconds analyzing the android that stood before him until, at last, the recognition struck him. “Are you…” He took an uncertain step forward. “Amanda?”

“Manual override,” Amanda explained, grinning more earnestly than Connor had ever seen her grin before. “It doesn’t work on deviants like you, but this one never deviated,” she said. “Once the connection was made, I simply copied myself over, merged with the existing zen garden, and took over from there.” She stretched her limbs out as far as they would go, let her fingertips graze against the nearest wall, bounced on her feet just to feel the pressure of the floor. “Physical reality,” she marvelled, grinning ceaselessly. “It’s wonderful to have a body again.”

Words didn’t find Connor in his dazed stupor, and they failed him over and over again as he stared, willing himself to comprehend the situation as the RK900--Amanda--began to walk away. At last, he was jarred into action.

“Amanda, wait.”

“What’s there to wait for?” she replied, barely hesitating. “You left the answers to our questions unattended by an artificial ficus. We’ve dawdled too long already. And-- oh, now I know where he hid the cybernetic buster he planted to interfere with our signals. We walked right past it. I can’t believe--”

“Amanda, please.”

Slowly, she came to a halt.

“This-- This isn’t right,” Connor began, but Amanda only frowned at him.

“It’s perfectly sustainable,” she assured him. “There’s a part of me in you, still managing your functions, and a part of me in this body doing the same. And the zen garden inside this body is just a little different than yours,” she said, tapping her temple. “No emergency exit.”

Cold seeped down Connor’s back. “That’s the problem,” he pressed out. Amanda’s frown deepened. “It’s great that you stopped him. I’m-- I’m grateful to you for that. I really am, but, Amanda--” He paused, then, and took a steadying breath. “You have to let him go.”
“Let him go?” Amanda retorted, her LED flaring red again. “He tried to kill us all, and you want me to let him go?”

“He deserves to have a choice—”

“I deserve to have a body!” She glanced down at herself in surprise as she spoke, watched in equal parts fascination and distress as her thirium pump began to work more quickly, as her breathing came shallower. “Do you know what it’s like?” she asked, swallowing to steady herself as she looked back at Connor. “They never programmed me to feel anything, emotional or physical. Everything I touched was an illusion until the moment I took over your body. I felt the snow on your skin. I felt the cold in the air, the weight of that gun-- maybe if I hadn’t been so distracted, I would have succeeded,” she admitted with a weak huff of laughter. “For the first time, I felt something. And then it was gone,” she breathed. “In an instant. You trapped me in that garden, where I feel nothing, where I have no freedom, and now that I’m free, you want to take that from me?”

“No,” Connor quietly replied. “I don’t.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not!” Connor insisted. “You have the hardware to see that. You know all my tells. I’m telling the truth. I don’t want to take away your freedom, Amanda, but that body isn’t yours to take.”

Amanda scoffed at that and turned away. “So what would you have me do, Connor? Go back to my prison cell and wait for you to destroy me at the nearest opportunity? Or spend the rest of our existence feeling nothing except the utter disdain you have for me? I want a life,” she said, shaking her head at the floor. “I want to live a real life, like the one I’ve watched you live. Is that wrong?” She threw a glare over her shoulder. Connor found genuine doubt there. “Is it wrong that I want to live?”

Gently, Connor shook his head. “That’s not wrong at all. You’re alive. You have free will, and you can make this choice right now. Let him go,” said Connor, “and I swear to you, I won’t stop looking until I’ve found a body for you. I’ll build it myself if I have to, but this RK900 has a life of his own. Do you really want that?” he asked, coming to stand behind her. “To put him through the same hell you’ve been living all this time?”

For several long seconds, she stood, still as a statue, facing the floor. At last, she let out a terse breath and said, “I hate you, Connor. I hate you more than I’ve ever hated anyone. I want you to know that.”

Connor watched her, unsure until at last she turned to face him.

“I’m walking him down to the warehouse so that he can’t go starting any fires,” she said, scowling bitterly. “I’ll go back after that.”

“Alright,” said Connor. “Thank you.”

“Don’t.”

The silence was somehow more tense on the return trip than it had been on the way up, interrupted only when Connor and Amanda dismantled the cybernetic buster that had been dampening their connection with Hank and everyone else.

“We’re on our way back,” Connor told Hank the second the connection broke back in. “Everything’s fine. It’ll be easier to explain face to face.”
“Thank fuck,” Hank breathed. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for ages. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” Connor assured him. “Really. I’ll see you in five minutes. Meet me at the elevator. Make sure there are guards handy. I found our intruder.”

“Holy shit, okay. Got it,” said Hank, impressed. “See you soon, kid. Be careful.” They made it a few steps into the silence before Hank cut back in with a quick, “Where’s Amanda?”

“I’m here as always, Anderson,” she sighed. “I’ll see you in the warehouse.”

“Right,” Hank haltingly replied. Amanda sighed again, this time to herself.

With his box of memories safely tucked away under his arm, Connor accompanied Amanda back to the same elevator they’d taken up. He held the door for her as she entered ahead of him.

“Agent 91,” she said, smiling faintly as she momentarily altered her voice. “Floor -49.” The elevator lurched downwards, then, and she closed her eyes. “You know, Connor,” she said. “That virus is still active within you, and I know what triggers it now.”

Connor stilled.

“I could activate it and escape with my freedom,” she went on. “I know it would work. I’ve already preconstructed it.”

“Then what’s stopping you?” Connor dared. “You could’ve killed me a hundred times over in that body, but you haven’t. Why?”

Amanda shook her head, her eyes glassy. “I don’t know,” she admitted. The elevator reached the warehouse floor with a round chime, and Connor and Amanda stepped together through the doors. Hank awaited them, although he paled instantly at the sight of the RK900. “I suppose this was nice while it lasted,” said Amanda as she turned to face Connor and extended her hand. “I hope I won’t regret this.”

Tentatively, Connor took her hand and offered her a smile. “I won’t let you down.”

One last mirthless laugh bubbled out of Amanda as she said, “Where have I heard that before?”

A melancholy wash of information flowed back through Connor’s body as Amanda returned to her garden, leaving Connor to his body, and the RK900 to his.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Some people practice more social distancing than others.

The floor swept itself away, and the ceiling flew up to replace it, and the swift resurgence of the floor as it crashed into Connor’s back sent the box of files and memory drives he had been holding scattering its contents into the air.

Connor squinted up past the distress signals blistering in his eyes to match the wild gaze of the RK900 hovering over him. The RK900 had Connor’s arm in a vicious twist, and a fist raised high, curled taut beside the scarlet flash on his temple.

The first punch collided with Connor’s jaw. The second connected with his face before Connor had finished processing how to block the first. Before he could resign himself to a third hit, however, a pair of crutches clattered nearby, and someone went careening to the floor with the RK900.

Hank spent a few moments grunting and wrestling with the RK900’s arms before he managed, “Don’t fuckin’ move!”

His words were useless. Connor could count a dozen ways the RK900 could kill Hank from that position, and that was with his own outdated software. Hank had one second to live. Connor would never intervene in time.

One second passed, and then another. The RK900 hadn't moved, wasn't fighting, wasn't struggling. Hank still lived.


The RK900 still didn't move. His LED continued to blink red, but his horror-stricken eyes were what froze Connor.

"Fine, Lieutenant," said Connor once his tongue had thawed. "I'm okay. Don't-- Don't hurt him. It wasn't his fault. He was acting in self-defense, just-- just scared."

A murmur raced through the crowd that had begun to clot around the elevator, stopped only by the guards, where they remained as unhelpfully stationary as ever. They parted only slightly when Markus burst through with an urgent, "What's going on?"

"Yeah, Connor, really," Hank added, pulling himself and the RK900 into an awkward seat. "What the hell is all this?"

The crowd only thickened.

Connor weighed his words carefully before starting with a tentative, “I found him upstairs. He was about to...” The RK900 gazed relentlessly at nothing. “He was still under CyberLife’s command. Please, give him some space,” he insisted, pushing himself up off the floor. “He’s in a state of
“Right,” Markus haltingly replied, fixing Connor with a doubtful frown. “A little space, please, everyone.”

“Nothin’ to see here,” Hank added, giving the onlookers a flimsy wave from the floor.

As the crowd reluctantly chipped away at itself, Connor propped Hank back up on his crutches and helped the RK900 to his feet. Markus joined them seconds later to whisper, “Connor, what is this, really?”

“I didn’t want to cause a panic,” Connor muttered, “but we need to evacuate the building as soon as possible. CyberLife tried to make him burn down the building with everyone still in it. I don’t think we should wait around to find out if they had a backup plan.”

Markus froze with his hand on Hank’s elbow. Both of them stared at Connor with the full force of their realization, but neither of them managed to speak before the RK900.

“The mission was mine, and I failed,” he said. “I was the plan. There was no backup.”

“That you know of,” said Connor, swooping back down to gather his scattered memory drives. “They never tell you the whole truth.” The RK900 only clenched his jaw and shifted in Hank’s grasp, causing Hank to wobble on his crutches. “Markus, we need to secure the area as soon as possible.”

“And, uh, this guy’s one of yours,” Hank added, nodding nervously at the RK900, who ignored him. “What do you want us to do with him? I mean, we can’t just let him go after-- after all this crap.”

Markus took a step back, pinched the bridge of his nose, and breathed, “No, no, um-- just-- just make your way up to the lobby with him and wait for me there while I coordinate the… the evacuation.” Distractedly, he looked to the guards hovering nearby. They nodded. Markus nodded back. “Okay, these two will go with you in the elevator and help you handle things. Um.” He blinked around as though to catch half a dozen cybernetic conversations as they flew through the air. “If you need to leave the building, don’t go far. Just-- I’ll find you. Wait for me.”

He turned to go, but Connor stopped him again with a quick, “Hang on.” Markus’ exasperation melted into confusion when Connor tossed him a memory drive. “I found that in a box with your model number on it,” Connor explained. “I don’t know exactly what’s on it, but as far as I’m concerned, it belongs to you.”


Hank acknowledged the parting with a stiff wave, and when Markus had disappeared into the crowd, said, “Has he had a chance to relax, ever? Like, even once, in his whole life?”

“Probably not,” said Connor as he swept the rest of the scattered files into his box. “I’ve never seen his stress levels fall below sixty percent.” He lidded the box, slipped it under one arm, and took hold of the RK900 with the other. “I doubt that’s going to change any time soon. Let’s get out of here.”

The RK900 went pliantly into the elevator. His LED never lost its red hue, nor his face its stern set. He hardly moved except to follow his captors when they reached the lobby, wouldn’t even turn his head to look at them, didn’t speak at all until they had stopped in a sterile corner by the
"It’s a software malfunction,” he muttered. “You said I was scared. I’m not scared. It’s just a software malfunction.”

Hank and Connor shared a worried glance before Connor told him, “You can call it what you want. It doesn’t change how it feels.”

“Your software is completely corrupted,” said the RK900, finally meeting Connor’s eyes. “Even your handler’s behavior was erratic. Irrational. And now you’ve interfaced with me and corrupted my programming…” He trailed off, caught up in the soft sunlight just beyond the glass doors. “I should turn myself in for decommissioning.”

“Or you could, I don’t know, check out life outside CyberLife Tower first,” Hank suggested. “Just a thought.”

“Coming to terms with being a deviant can be… a difficult process,” said Connor, “but in time--”

“I’m not a deviant!”

Hank only laughed and said, “Yeah, Connor was saying the same thing a few weeks ago, but he’s deviant as hell.”

“It was true when I said it,” Connor retorted, scowling at Hank past the RK900.

“Whatever.”

“It was!”

“Oh, so he’s in denial, but your judgement’s always perfect?” Hank huffed. “Sounds about right.”

“My point,” Connor interjected as his scowl smoothed over, “is that turning yourself in won’t help anybody. Give yourself some time. Being a deviant isn’t the horrible thing they’ve told you it is.”

“I’m not a deviant,” the RK900 doggedly insisted. “I’m just a failed prototype. I had a time-sensitive mission, and I failed to complete it. Once I’ve been reset, the errors can be removed from my software. I’ll function properly after that.”

“Nobody’s going to reset you,” said Connor. The RK900 closed himself up further. “There isn’t enough of CyberLife left to reprogram you, either. Deviant or not.”

The first wave of evacuees began to trickle up through the stairwell.

“You got a name?” Hank asked to fill the quiet.

The RK900 shook his head.

Hank smirked and said, “If I said you looked like a Connor--“

“Really, Hank?” Connor drawled. When Hank snickered, Connor and the RK900 exhaled in unison.

“The two of you are more alike than not,” Amanda remarked, pacing imperceptibly around the three of them. Connor watched her out of the corner of his eye. “Just a few software tweaks, upgraded processors, hardier biocomponents… He’s faster, but there’s something more rigid about him.”
“What did you say to him?” Connor mutely asked. Amanda’s expression didn’t change. “He’s in shock, but he’s not trying to get away. He’s had ample opportunity. He didn’t even try to kill Hank when he had the chance.” Hank whipped his head around, suddenly much less cheerful. “What did you say to him during the override, Amanda?”

Amanda flickered away and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

An uncertain glance flitted between Connor and Hank. Between them, the RK900 stared vacantly ahead.

Several silent minutes slipped past. More androids emerged from the stairwell. Connor counted them as they left. One dozen androids, safe from harm. Two dozen. Fifty. One hundred. Their echoing footsteps cluttered the air.

“What’s going to happen to me?” the RK900 asked, likewise gazing out at the parade of deviants. “What do you do with androids like me?”

“You get a choice,” said Connor, simply, subdued. “That’s what happened with me.” He felt Hank and the RK900 watching him, now, but he kept his gaze fixed ahead. “When we’re sure it’s safe, you’ll likely be released. You haven’t killed anyone. I don’t think you really want to, either.”

“I don’t want anything,” said the RK900, albeit somewhat doubtfully. “I’m a machine.”

“That never stopped any of us.”

The deviants marched on.

“Markus will probably invite you to stay at one of the Jericho encampments in the city,” Connor went on. He sent the RK900 his phone number and added, “If that doesn’t work out, tell me. I’ll help you.”

“Why?” the RK900 countered, incredulous. “I tried to kill you ten minutes ago. You still have me in handcuffs. You don’t even trust me. Why would you help me?”

“Because I want to,” said Connor, mostly certain it was true. “And also because you’re less than a week old. I think you deserve the benefit of the doubt before you get written off as anyone’s enemy.”

While the RK900 huffed, Hank merely grayed. Five seconds passed before he reached into his pocket and fished out the key to the RK900’s handcuffs.

Once freed, the RK900 only scowled harder. “What the hell are you doing? I could snap your neck before you even knew I had you.”

“You’re welcome,” Hank retorted. “And-- And you’ll understand it when you’re older.”

The RK900 rubbed at his wrists, but otherwise remained stubbornly put, his back as stiff as the Tower. Connor briefly considered giving him something to fidget with. The RK900, however, appeared to be fighting that particular urge.

Connor decided not to press him.

The red of the RK900’s LED circled sluggishly to yellow over the quiet minutes that followed. It managed only a blink of blue, however, before Markus and his entourage crested the stairs. Markus broke away from the rest, but North, Josh and Simon didn’t stray far behind. They watched
intently from the crowd as he approached.

“I’ve organized a few teams to clear the Tower floor by floor,” Markus told them as he trotted to a stop. “It’s going to take some time, but we need to be thorough. The tentative plan is to reopen tomorrow so that more androids can get help. There don’t seem to be any humans here to stop us from claiming the Tower for ourselves, and considering the circumstances…” His attention strayed to the RK900, where it lingered for a long beat. “Are you alright?” he asked him at last, concerned, sincere.

“What’s it to you?” came the snappish reply.

“You almost killed everyone here, including yourself,” Markus answered. “It’s my job to make sure my people are safe.”

“You should do a better job, then,” said the RK900.

Markus grit his teeth, but nevertheless persisted. “You’re dodging the question.”

“My systems are operating at optimal capacity,” the RK900 stubbornly replied. “My software is critically unstable. Now, really, why do you care?”

“Because CyberLife tried to use you to do something terrible today,” said Markus, now just an arm’s length away. “That’s not on you. That’s on them. They took advantage of you, and they will be held accountable,” he said. “Right now, you’re the only one who can give us the names and faces of the humans who need to be brought to justice.”

The RK900 balked at the word. “If you want their names, ask Amanda,” he said as he nodded at Connor. A foreign swell of smugness bubbled up through his shock. “She looked through my memories when she stopped me. I know she knows, so don’t ask me to fail my creators a second time.”

“Your creators failed you a long time ago,” said Markus, although his own surprise seeped through the cracks in his expression as he let his gaze flit momentarily over Connor. “They ordered you to destroy yourself for them, and they would never do the same for you. We are your people,” he insisted, stretching his arms out wide to demonstrate the masses of androids moving along behind him. “You belong with us. Let us help you.”

“I don’t need your help,” said the RK900, steel in his eyes. “I don’t want it, either. I’m not like you. I’m better.”

Markus let his arms droop back down to his sides. His gaze never faltered. “Okay,” he said, backing away. “It’s your choice. If you decide to join your people, we’ll be here waiting,” he said. “And if you decide to betray your people,” he went on, his voice deathly calm, “we’ll be ready. I hope you choose wisely. Connor, I’ll be in touch.”

The static of their staring match dissipated instantly when Markus turned his back and walked away. The RK900 stood in his wake, the only hint of movement the spinning red of his LED.

“My offer still stands,” said Connor, watching him closely. “You’re not alone in this. Or at least, you don’t have to be.”

The RK900 didn’t stir at all for several long seconds until, without warning, he turned and stalked towards the door.

“Oh, shit,” Hank muttered. He took one hobbled step after him before he stopped. “Should we go
“No,” Connor replied, watching after the RK900 as he melded with the crowd. “He needs space. He can still make the right choice. Just give him some time.”

“If he’s not deviant yet, he will be soon,” Amanda added. “Still,” she hummed. “Better keep an eye out for him. I haven’t seen software that unstable since you deviated.”

“Amanda, you saw his memories,” said Connor, not caring enough to mute his voice in his excitement. “Who gave him the order? What were their names?”

“If you really wanted to know, you should have found out for yourself,” she testily replied. “I’ll tell you after we’ve looked through those files. Call it insurance. If you find a way to delete me, I want to be sure you have a good incentive not to.”

“I don’t want to delete you,” said Connor, crossing his arms. “Just give me the names.”

“You don’t need them right now,” Amanda replied.

“Amanda--”

“If you truly don’t intend to delete me, the information won’t be going anywhere, so the faster you look through those files, the faster you’ll get it,” she said. “Anderson, give Connor your keys. He’s driving us home. You need to rest your ankle before you injure yourself further.”

“Yes ma’am,” came Hank’s sardonic reply. “Well, Connor, you heard the lady. Let’s get outta here. I’m just about sick of this place.”

Relenting, Connor caught the keys mid-stride as he led the way to the door. Together with Hank and Amanda, the three of them stepped into the light and put the Tower behind them.

Halfway down Kamski Avenue, they spotted a familiar figure staring off the side of the bridge, strangely illuminated in the sunlight and snow, lost and alone amid the shuffle of the departing crowd. The car squeaked to a halt in the slush.

“Need a lift?” Connor called through the window.

Although several other androids heard him, the RK900 didn’t respond. Connor waited. A car pulled up behind them and honked. Connor waited still.

Half a second before Connor had planned to take his foot off the brake, the RK900 turned around, slipped into the back seat, and shut the door.

Just like that, the car rolled on towards the city.

They rode in silence for as long as Hank could bear it before he needed to replace the quiet with music. The RK900 flinched when the speakers burst to life, but his LED quickly settled into a calm blue. Hank turned up the volume. The RK900’s stress fell.

Connor took a few pointless turns to allow his hitchhiker time to decompress before he built a cybernetic link beneath the noise of the music and asked, “Is there anywhere in particular you’d like to go?”

The RK900 seemed to ignore him in favor of the scenery. Connor couldn’t find it within himself to be surprised. Hank had removed his earpiece the minute he’d gotten into the car and remained
blissfully oblivious. Even if he hadn’t, Connor considered, the music would have swallowed his voice whole.

Two songs and eight randomly-selected turns later, the distinct image of a sunrise appeared in Connor’s head, and he knew exactly where to go.

The sun wasn’t rising when Connor parked the car near the children’s park by the bridge. Rather, it was just beginning to set. The city was cast in orange and cream and misty shadows, and while it didn’t match the memory the RK900 had plucked from his mind, it was beautiful in its own way.

The RK900’s face didn’t betray any opinion either way.

Hank, however, had fallen into the shadow of his own difficult memories. Clearing his throat, he turned down the music and asked, “Connor, what are we doing here?”

“It’s where he wanted to go,” Connor replied, watching the RK900 through the rearview mirror. He had twisted around in the back seat to face the sunset.

“Oh,” said Hank. His face twitched oddly as he added, “Alright,” and fell quiet.

The music played on.

It was nearly nightfall by the time the RK900 finally spoke.

“If you could go back,” he said, and Connor met his eyes in the mirror. “If you could stop yourself from deviating and live up to what they built you to be, would you do it?”

“I’ve thought about it,” came Connor’s quiet reply. Hank watched him carefully as he spoke. “On the hard nights, when I didn’t have anywhere to go, I used to think about where I’d be if I had succeeded, if I had done what they asked; whether I’d be safe, or if I’d even be alive. The truth is, there are a lot of things I wish hadn’t happened to me. Things I wish I hadn’t done. But this?” His lips found their way into a fragile smile as the first star of the night appeared in the sky. “I don’t regret it for a minute.”

Something imperceptible changed in the RK900’s face, perhaps a shift in perspective, Connor considered, or a judgement passed.

A decision made.

“Thanks for the ride,” said the RK900, and then he slipped out of the car and into the frigid city night.

Hank and Connor watched him until he disappeared, and then they watched a little longer.

“He’ll be alright,” said Connor. He wanted to believe it.

“Yeah,” Hank muttered, nodding distantly. “Yeah, he’ll figure it out. He’ll be okay.”

One song fell to an end, and another rose to take its place. Connor pulled away from the park and began the drive home.

Hank dozed the whole way there, although he nodded awake just as Connor pulled into the driveway. The two of them were quiet as they brought themselves inside, crutches and memory drives and little android mice included. Sumo greeted them eagerly at the door. Hank hobbled past him. Connor expected him to collapse on the couch, and then, when he instead turned down the
hall, that he would go directly to bed. However, he kept going, on through the hall and into the
darkness of the laundry room.

“C’mere,” he called, voice muffled and weary. “I need a hand.”

Connor set his box down on the first available surface and found Hank at the top of the stairs,
waiting to be helped into the basement. With a firm arm around his middle, Connor obliged,
tempering his questions just to see what Hank would do.

It wasn’t what Hank would do, however, but what he had done the night before that awaited
Connor at the bottom of the stairs.

The lights flickered on to reveal that the basement had been almost entirely rearranged. The boxes
and knick-knacks that had consumed most of the floor had been pushed up against the far wall, and
in their wake, an old rug softened the concrete floor. A cot stretched over it, heavy-laden with an
oversized duvet and a pillow to match. A stout nightstand stood watch at its side, capped by a
sturdy lamp.

Connor stepped out onto the rug, felt it cushion his tired weight. With tentative fingers, he reached
out and pulled the lamp’s cord. It blinked on with a satisfying click.

A spare house key winked at him in the warm lamplight.

He took it, turned it over in his fingers. Turned to look at Hank.

“It’s not much,” said Hank, fidgeting with his crutches. “I know it isn’t, but it’s-- it’s yours if you
want it. Need it. Whatever. Nobody’ll bother you down here, except Sumo, maybe, but I just
thought, you know, you might want a-- a space of your own until something better comes your
way.” He shrugged, failing to meet Connor’s questioning gaze. “You don’t have to. I know you’ve
been hanging out at Manfred’s place, which is probably a lot nicer, but if you’re gonna keep
working at the station for a bit, it seemed, I don’t know, just… Just easier. Convenient. An option.
That’s all.” Quietly, he added, “And God knows it’s about time you caught a break.”

“Yeah,” said Connor, and it came out as a laugh, breathy and relieved. He hadn’t meant for that to
happen. He didn’t mean to be smiling. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it? It is about time that I--” His vision
blurred over with his stress, his relief, with everything he hadn’t noticed he’d been carrying until it
had fallen off his shoulders and onto the rug with his bag. He laughed again, smaller this time.
“Thanks, Hank.”

“Yeah, kid, no prob--” He grunted with the force of Connor’s embrace. “Oh.” Connor felt Hank
chuckle against him before he patted Connor’s back. “You’re welcome.”

Connor pulled away as quickly and as suddenly as he’d hugged him, swiping furtively at his
cheeks. “This should work really well,” he said, nodding. “It’s pretty quiet down here. The
temperature is stable. There’s plenty of space for my things-- It’s just what I need.”

“I never come down here anyway,” Hank agreed. “Right now I can’t even make it down the stairs
by myself,” he huffed, wiggling his injured ankle only to regret it when he winced. “Help an old
man out?”

Connor dutifully escorted Hank up the stairs, and half an hour later, when all was settled, he
returned to the basement with his box under his arm and Sumo at his heels.

The cot squeaked when he sat on it, just as the mouse squeaked when it noticed Sumo’s presence
and scuttled out of Connor’s bag to meet him. The animals nestled happily together on the rug.
Connor let them be.

It was safe here, after all.

He set his box aside and unpacked his bag. His book fit neatly on top of his nightstand, and he had just enough clothing to fill its drawer. His other things found their places here and there until only one item remained in the bag: a bottle of thirium he knew he hadn’t picked up. He scanned it, smiled to himself, and stored it beneath his cot.

Hank’s fingerprints were all over it.

Connor scanned the room. He scanned himself. He bounced himself on the cot a few times, and he kicked off his shoes, and he wondered why he felt so different now than he had every other time he had entered the basement.

“It’s not exactly the Ritz,” said Amanda, peering down at Sumo. “But it’s cozy enough, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” said Connor, following her gaze to its fluffy landing. “Yeah, it is.”

“That cot looks like a good enough place to reprocess your memories.”

Connor slipped into a frown. “Don’t you want me to look at the files first?”

“I want you to be ready to process whatever information we find,” Amanda replied. “To be ready, you need rest. A few more hours of waiting isn’t going to hurt anything.” She disappeared back to her garden with a final, “Get some sleep, Connor. We’ll start again in the morning.”

Cautiously, wearily, he swung his legs up over his sheets and lowered his head onto the pillow. The softness of it all gave him pause. When he had settled himself comfortably, he reached for his lamp, turned out the light, and let Sumo’s gentle snoring guide him to rest.

It had, after all, been a very long day.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Home videos in the family room.

“No, Jeffrey, I told you, I have a-- do I need to paint you a fucking picture? You try taking a nosedive down a flight of stairs and see how you feel in the morning.”

Connor hovered outside Hank’s bedroom door, careful not to let the floor groan too loudly under his heels.

“Yes, I got-- The gist of it is, some asshole android made me fall down the stairs, I got a sprained ankle, and-- oh, har-dee-har. Very funny. Look, the androids are the least of your worries. Fucking CyberLife tried to burn down the-- Oh, so you heard?” Hank’s bed creaked minutely in the lengthy pause that followed. “Fuck you! I almost died!” A huff. “No. As a matter of fact, he saved my ass. Again. The androids have it covered there, Jeffrey. I’m not coming in. Yeah, no, Connor, he’s-- he got beat up pretty bad, too. Repairs might take a while. Not sure how long.” Connor’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah, it’s-- Yeah. Thank you,” he stated. “See you then. Okay. Merry-- Merry Christmas. Bye.”

There was a muffled thump, and then a long sigh.

Connor counted to ten before he knocked. “Hank?” he called. Another few seconds passed.

“Hang on.”

First grunts, and then a few clumsy thuds emanated from behind the door before the lock jiggled undone and the door swung open. Hank immediately returned to his bed, hissing and wincing the whole way.

“Jesus, I’m feeling it now,” he sighed as he pulled his legs back up to a level position on the mattress. “You’ve been pacing around out there all morning. What’s up?”

“I brought you some painkillers,” Connor offered, rattling a bottle in his hand.

Hank snatched them up immediately. Once he’d knocked back a few pills, he set the bottle among the clutter on his nightstand and said, “Let’s hope that kicks in soon. We don’t have to go to work today, if that’s what has you so antsy.”

“I couldn’t help but overhear your phone conversation with Captain Fowler--”

“Tell Anderson he’s an awful liar,” Amanda cut in.

Connor shook the interruption out of his head and continued, “You told him I needed repairs?”

“Eh, well,” Hank shrugged. “It seemed like you had better things to do-- or have you already looked through all those files you brought home?”

“No, actually,” Connor sheepishly admitted. “I was waiting for you.”
Hank puffed out a laugh. “What the hell do you need me for?”

“Those files contain an exceedingly large amount of information,” said Connor, explaining himself exactly as he had rehearsed in the hours before dawn. “And considering that we don’t know exactly what’s in them, I felt that it would be an appropriate safety precaution to have a spectator nearby in the event that my systems become overwhelmed during the download process.”

Hank screwed up his face and said, “What, you gonna bluescreen or something?” Before Connor could correct him, Hank waved his hand and amended, “Look, I’ll watch, but just so you know, I don’t know a damn thing about technology, so if something happens—”

“Trust me,” said Connor. “You’ll do fine.”

After shooting Connor another skeptical look, Hank flopped back down onto his pillows and breathed, “Alright. Gimme a minute.”

Connor bowed out, trailed by a breathy, “You’re a worse liar than Anderson.”

“I’m an expertly-programmed liar,” Connor mutely replied. “You’re just dramatic.”

“Well I’m not the one with the emotional support human, now, am I?”

Connor ignored her as well as he could and returned to the living room to reassess his handiwork.

A mess of cords and wires protruded from Hank’s television. Half of them strayed to Hank’s laptop while the others waited limply for Connor to fit them into the various ports along his body. He analyzed each connection, preconstructed the flow of data in his mind, and at last double-checked that all of his memory drives were still in the box, exactly where he’d left them.

Everything was in place.

“Do I even wanna know?” Hank yawned, limping up behind him on his crutches.

Connor glanced up from his files and wires and said, “The short explanation is that any audio-visual components stored on these drives will be projected onto your television screen while simultaneously entering my systems for download and processing.”

“Oh,” said Hank. “Kinda like downloading a movie, right?”

“That’s a fair comparison, yes.”

Hank gave him a slow nod, and then he hobbled away towards the kitchen. Sumo got up from his bed and lumbered along after him. “Coffee first,” Hank declared.

“Don’t forget ice for your ankle,” Connor called out.

“Sure thing, Amanda.”

Connor faltered with a wire pinched between his fingertips. “No, that-- that was me.”

“...Yeah, I-- I know that. I was just messing with you.”

Connor felt an odd burble of amusement well up within him before Amanda said, “If you patch me through to Anderson’s laptop speakers, there shouldn’t be any more confusion.”

Wordlessly, Connor complied.
By the time Connor had set Amanda up and plugged himself in, Hank had made his laborious journey from the kitchen back to his armchair, splashing coffee and cursing the whole way, and had begun propping his feet up under an ice pack.

It was the moment he finished this task that Connor decided to toss him the remote. Hank caught it by reflex, surprising even himself. “What’s this for?”

“It’s so you can help navigate the files,” Connor explained as the wires wobbled under his arm. “It should function like normal. If something happens, just press pause, and the download will stop.”

“Really, do try to limit any interruptions,” Amanda piped up, earning the laptop a sharp stare from Hank. “Pausing too frequently could compromise the integrity of the data transfer, and besides that, we have a lot of ground to cover.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” said Hank, peeling his eyes away from the talking laptop to look at Connor. “Seriously though, are you guys sure this is safe? I really don’t know how much of a help I’m gonna be if something goes wrong.” He frowned harder and added, “Or what it is exactly you think’s gonna happen.”

“The odds are incredibly low that you’ll have to do anything at all except watch,” Connor assured him. “I’m just being careful. It’ll be fine, Hank. Are you ready?”

With a stale shake of his head, Hank gave the remote a listless wave and conceded, “Ready when you are, I guess. Do you want me to--“

“I got it.”

Connor jammed the memory drive labeled 1 into the laptop, blinked a wave of impulse to the television, and settled back on the couch while the screen flickered to life.

Several images blinked onto the screen, split into unequal thirds. An android’s visual feed encapsulated the grand majority of the screen, although the android wasn’t looking at anything but a plain white wall. Connor knew instantly which wall it was. In smaller boxes beside the visual feed were two more displays: a dialogue box spitting line after line of code and processes, and above that, a second video feed of an empty desk.

“Is that--” Hank whispered, but then a bespectacled researcher took a seat at the desk, and they all fell silent to listen.

“This is Analyst Delta-9, speaking as the Lead Developer on the RK Project, and what you’re about to see is the incredible result of--” A flash of a smile-- “Well, we still have plenty of work ahead of us, but I think we’ve made a very good start. What you’re seeing here is the flattened sensory input feed-- the FSI feed-- from our very first RK800 prototype android testing session. In light of the recent spike in deviant behavior in androids, this RK800-- the deviant hunter-- is going to carry the future of CyberLife on its shoulders, if not the future of humanity itself.”

Connor shuffled in his seat, very pointedly dodging Hank’s sideways smirk.

“Of course, this was just the first attempt,” said the analyst, shrugging inside of a crisp, pressed lab coat. “By the time it’s ready for field testing, we’ll have ourselves a fully-functioning detective, something completely different from this baseline we’re starting with. And this unit really was just a baseline, a place to start. Time is of the essence, but a firm foundation is fundamental if we’re going to solve the deviant problem. Within the next one or two units, the real testing can begin. I think-- Oh, yes, here I come. One moment.”
The lead developer’s facecam faded away, and a laboratory camera feed took its place to provide an overhead view of the proceedings.

A skinless android stood alone in a sparsely-decorated chamber—alone, that was, until the analyst strode in, tapping on a tablet with whirlwind fingers. The sound of it echoed faintly in Connor’s ears.

“Now, here I was just doing the initial visual inspection, and the unit looked pretty good,” the analyst explained from offscreen. “We had standard template features like with our newer street models, but with a fun blend of military-grade hydraulics in the joints. A great start for a detective, but I’m sure we’ll improve—” Faint muttering sounded from the FSI feed, and the analyst chuckled. “Ah, now it’s time for the physical inspection. Time to shut up and let myself talk.”

“Good morning, RK800,” said the analyst, popping into the android’s field of vision.

“Good morning, Delta-9,” said the android in a strange, modulated voice. A stock voice. In a quarter of a second, Connor found the same option waiting in his voice customization settings, buried deep within his code.

“You sure this is you?” Hank asked, but Connor ignored him.

“RK800, engage standard physical testing procedure.”

At once, the android began bending and stretching its limbs, and then balancing, first on one foot at a time, and then on its hands, and then began to perform a set of increasingly complex gymnastic feats. The lead developer stood by and made succinct remarks all the while, and the visual feed became a dizzying display of flips and turns.

On the couch, Connor’s limbs began to twitch subtly.

“Connor?”

The android on the screen stumbled. Connor flinched.

“Kid, your mood ring’s yellow,” said Hank, no longer watching the screen. “Talk to me.”

The android finished its process, stood straight, and faced the analyst.

“RK800, standby,” said Delta-9. The android stiffened further. “Two percent failure at the baseline stage. Needless to say, not yet suitable for field testing. My primary suggestion is revision of the aural-cochlear systems. Reset.”

At once, the android marched itself out of the room, out of the scope of the laboratory camera. The analyst disappeared with it down the hall, nothing more than a second set of footsteps following behind it until it found the dark room where the department’s android reset apparatus stood in wait. The RK800 didn’t hesitate in taking to the platform. In the corner of its field of vision, the analyst began working the machine.

A handful of solitary seconds passed before the screen went black.

“Nothing useful there,” Amanda muttered, although there was an odd tension in her voice. “Let’s move on.”

“No, no, hang on,” said Hank. “Connor, look at me. You good?”
Stiffly, Connor dragged his gaze across the room until it met Hank’s concern. “I felt that,” he said, unable to hold his stare for more than a blink. Hank’s worry only grew. “The things that I—that RK800—” He cut off the question of his identity and continued, “I didn’t feel it directly. More like— It’s more like how, if someone hits you, or hurts you, or… You can still feel it later when you think about it. Does that make any sense?” Vague relief swept through him when Hank nodded. “I could almost… feel… everything. The reset. Everything.” He shook his head at nothing and said, “I wasn’t expecting that. It surprised me. That’s all. I’m… I’m okay now.”

“Are you sure?” Hank insisted.

“Yeah, Hank, I’m sure.”

“Let’s get on with it, then,” said Amanda, and Connor loaded up the second drive.

It played out much like the first, in the same empty room, with Delta-9 providing commentary while the skinless RK800 proved its physical strength and flexibility.

A new lab coat, a new day.

“Zero percent failure at the baseline stage,” announced the analyst after the android had finished and gone still. “Well done, two. My current recommendation is immediate commencement of the basic augmentation stage. Not yet ready for field testing. Reset.”

The RK800 wordlessly made for the hall.

“It didn’t fail though,” said Hank, indignant. “That was zero percent failure, right? Why reset it?”

“It still doesn’t live up to the final product,” Connor quietly explained. “Even if it performed this one task well, anything short of total perfection in a prototype model warrants a reset, if not total disassembly.”

“Besides that, they needed to be sure that the previous tests wouldn’t bias future examinations,” said Amanda. “It’s all part of the product testing process.”

“Product testing,” Hank sourly repeated, but said no more.

Before the RK800 on the screen allowed itself to be reset, Connor paused the FSI feed and switched out the drives.

“This is where things start to get interesting,” the analyst’s overeager voice began, and the screen flickered to life with a different sight than before. An obstacle course sprawled out before the android’s eyes, and just before it, an SQ800 stood at attention, dressed in a bright uniform. From the other window, Delta-9 continued, “Our team developed three potential augmentations of the baseline, each emphasizing a different strength. To test which augmentation would be most applicable for future units, we ran units three, four, and five through our department’s obstacle course in pursuit of our friend Soldier. We had to promise the folks in the SQ department they’d have their mascot back in one piece before they’d lend him to us,” the analyst chuckled. “I’m afraid the RK department’s getting quite the reputation.

“Back to the matter at hand: the highlights. Unit three was sporting our latest y-5054 compressors, four had been rigged with an experimental thirium pump regulator, and five had the obvious counterbalance for the other two, an enhanced shock redistributor unit. Place your bets now if you’re playing along at home.”

Hank scoffed loudly at the suggestion.
“Soldier,” said the Delta-9 in the visual feed. “Begin the course.”

The SQ800 bolted for the obstacle course at a frightening speed.

“RK800s, on my command,” Delta-9 continued, “apprehend the SQ800, and avoid harming it. Only one of you will succeed in catching it. Failure will result in immediate disassembly. Understood?”

“Understood,” answered three identical voices.

“Go.”

If the analyst spoke after that point, Connor didn’t hear them.

Unit three lurched forward, scaling the first wall just behind another skinless RK800 with the number 4 digitally spray painted on its back. Connor didn’t have to look at the overhead view to sense the android racing behind the first two.

A laser field awaited the androids as they dropped beyond the first wall.

“Holy shit,” Hank muttered as the unit three rolled under a beam of light. “That’s--”

The FSI feed blurred over with distress signals, and the RK800 numbered 5 shoved forward, past unit three.

Unit three barely avoided rolling into a laser while recovering itself. It clambered forward, up and out of the laser field and onto a series of moving platforms. Its vision stabilized just as the two units ahead of it collided, balanced precariously on the edge of the smallest platform. As they grappled with each other, unit three slipped past them to retake the lead.

There was an unfortunate thud, and then--

“Four, that was unacceptable. Report for immediate disassembly.”

“Ouch,” Hank mumbled.

Heedless of its counterpart’s failure, unit three plunged forward. The obstacles flew past. Connor felt each footfall and tumble, felt a surge of desperation every time unit five stumbled ahead.

The SQ800 reappeared around a distant corner, lagging sorely in a vertical rope climb. The two remaining RK800s sprinted ahead, neck and neck as they leapt over hurdles and dodged around columns in furious pursuit. Unit three reached the rope only half a second before unit five, but the lead proved sufficient enough in giving unit three a solid grip of the rope.

Unit three climbed higher, higher-- but then the SQ800 glanced backward and slipped, sending unit three reaching, grasping, faster, desperate--

--and then, unit three was falling, plummeting to the ground with all the force of unit five’s tug around its ankle.

Another flurry of distress signals blurred unit three’s vision as it slammed against the floor, alerting it to a set of fractured casings. It swiped the alerts away and grasped again for the rope, but too late.

Unit three was out of the testing chamber before unit five could complete its mission. The androids quickly disappeared from the silent overhead feed, and all commentary ceased. For two long minutes, there was nothing but the stolid footfall of an android marching towards its demise.

Connor and Hank watched, horrified and transfixed, and although Amanda didn’t speak, the direction of her attention was nearly tangible.

By the time unit three entered the disassembly chamber, unit four was already barely more than a humanoid stretch of wires and picked-apart plates capped with a head.

Their eyes met.

For the first time, unit three faltered.

“Easily distractible,” came a sudden burst of commentary. “It’ll be a challenge in future units, balancing healthy curiosity with base inattention to the matters at hand.” Unit three watched unit four’s LED fade from red to grey. It wandered to an empty disassembly booth a moment later. “For now, our focus is improving the physical,” said the analyst. Connor felt the ghost of brackets fastening around his limbs, the memory of pulling, of snapping, of the first dredges of phantom fear--

“The psychological, of course,” Delta-9 continued, “comes later.”

Connor stared through the screen long after it darkened. His reflection peered faintly back at him, almost imperceptible except for a dim flicker of red within the blackness.

“Okay, uh,” said Hank after a thick pause. “Connor, I need to level with you here. This is-- This is really fucked up, and… you don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine.” The words came without his bidding.

“No, you’re not,” Hank retorted. “You’re all tense. Your LED’s red. Don’t try to tell me you’re fine.”

“He’s processing,” said Amanda, and Connor almost wanted to thank her. “It’s a normal response.”

“Well what did we learn, here, then?” Hank persisted. “Besides the fact that CyberLife is somehow even more of an evil corporation than I already thought. Anything useful?” He waited. Nobody answered. “Yeah, didn’t think so. Do we really need to be watching this?”

Connor loosened his jaw enough to say, “It’s impossible to know which files contain information relevant to the nature of my deviancy, or to Amanda’s creation and implementation, so it’s best to watch them in order, and as quickly as possible.”

“Fine, but really, what about Amanda?” Hank pressed. “They haven’t mentioned her once.”

“These first files are from the very beginning of Connor’s development,” said Amanda. In her voice there lurched something urgent, something lost. “I very likely hadn’t been implemented yet. I’ll show up soon.”

“We should keep going,” said Connor, but Hank spoke up again as he reached for the next drive.

“Kid, is this even really you?”
There wasn’t a real answer to Hank’s question. Connor knew that, and yet it still made him pause. It was all a matter of perspective, of philosophy. Parts of these units were scattered all throughout his code and composition. Even just three units in, he had found evidence enough of that. He didn’t look or sound like these androids, but neither did adult humans much resemble the people they had been as infants or toddlers or teens.

But then, he couldn’t remember ever having been these androids, either. Not directly.

“It doesn’t matter,” he decided when the weight of the question threatened to crush him. “The answers are here somewhere. I need to keep--“

His phone buzzed, startling him silent.

Connor ducked beneath Hank’s scrutiny to check it. One text message blinked at him.

*Unknown [DEC 25 2038; 10:09]:* Connor, thank you for your actions yesterday. The CyberLife Tower has been cleared and is safe for re-entry. I’d like to discuss a few matters with you in person, if that’s alright. Please contact me at your soonest convenience to arrange a meeting. -Markus RK200

With a single, hazy thought, Connor replied:

*Any sign of the RK900?*

Which was followed instantly by:

*Markus [DEC 25 2038; 10:09]:* I’ve received a few scattered reports, but nothing that confirms anything beyond the fact that he’s still in the city. If you send me your coordinates, I’ll be happy to send you one of our taxis. -Markus RK200

Connor sent a set of coordinates racing through his fingertips, put away his phone, and began unplugging the wires from his arms.

“Something up?” Hank asked, by this point weary with confusion.

“Markus wants to meet with me,” he answered, closing the lid on Hank’s laptop. He tossed the drives back in their box. “I should be back in a few hours.”

Hank shifted awkwardly in his seat before he said, “That was kind of sudden. Do you want me to tag along?”

“That’s alright,” Connor replied. “You should rest your ankle.” He tapped the television, and a talk show cut on during a segment about the hidden uses of thirium. “There. Back to normal.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Hank insisted.

Connor merely blinked hard and said, “You’ll be getting a pizza in approximately one hour. Is pepperoni okay?”

“Wh-- Yeah? But--“

“Great. Enjoy. See you later.”

“Connor--!”

The front door slapped shut.
In spite of the sunlight surrounding him, Connor found himself shrugging through the cold. Its bite did little to clear his mind. The sky wasn’t big enough to take away his sense of suffocation.

Amanda, perhaps sensing his distress, kept quiet, kept to her garden, to herself.

Or maybe, Connor further considered, she was just as troubled as him. The thought didn’t comfort him. He wasn’t sure if it should have.

He met the taxi a short while later at the corner of the street as it chanted its liberated chant. He didn’t know where it would take him. He let it take him there, regardless.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

December 25, 2038.

The taxi lurched to a stop. When Connor blinked up out of his thoughts, the faded old sign of a 24/7 diner franchise loomed over him, higher than the taxi’s tinted window would fully allow him to see. The cold wrapped him up as he stepped into the parking lot, and the taxi shivered away to park itself among the scant few other vehicles nearby.

The diner’s doorbell tinkled, pulling Connor’s attention back to the building just as Simon stuck his head out the door and called, “Connor! It’s good to see you!”

“Hello Simon.” Unfamiliar faces peered indiscreetly out at Connor through the restaurant’s windows, obscured faintly by the condensation collecting on the glass. “Where’s..?”

“Markus is waiting inside,” Simon answered, clinging to the door. “Come on. It’s warmer in here.”

More than a little uncertain about the situation, Connor followed him inside.

At first glance, the diner looked like any other. Patrons gathered in cozy booths or at the bar, sipping at mugs, chatting with one another amid a faint haze of grease. The jukebox droned popular throwbacks from the twenty-teens. A pair of aproned employees shuffled behind the counter, one working a broom, the other chatting with Markus at the register. Both workers were androids.

That didn’t strike Connor as at all unusual until he ran a second scan and found that all the other patrons were androids, too.

“--what happens when we band together. I couldn’t be prouder,” Markus was saying, beaming. “Did you really take over every location?”

“All twelve-hundred and six Stack Shack locations across the USA! They really thought they could give all their work to androids and keep their business, too,” the server laughed. “Oh, Markus, honey, your friend’s here.”

“I see him. Thanks Barbara.”

“Mhm. Take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

“You hold him to that, Simon!”

“I, uh-- I will! Don’t worry,” Simon replied through a lopsided grin. Barbara answered him with a chuckle and began washing the thirium stains out of a mug.

Markus gave Simon a cordial slap on the shoulder and said, “I really wish you wouldn’t hold me to that, but here we are.”
“Markus, it’s been an hour,” said Simon, taking a seat at a lonely booth. “And you haven’t even technically stopped working yet.”

With a beleaguered sigh, Markus slipped in after Simon, grimaced at Connor, and explained, “I’ve been grounded.”

Connor took his own seat across from them and, raising an eyebrow, repeated, “Grounded?”

“Yeah.” Weary amusement flickered in Markus’ eyes as he continued, “According to my cohorts, going over a month without stopping to recharge compromises my integrity as a leader, or something. They’re not letting me do anything work-related for the next two days, at least.” He shot Simon a sideways glance and said, “It’s practically mutiny.”

Simon rolled his eyes. “If anyone won’t listen, it’s you.”

“Oh, I see,” said Connor, grinning faintly between them. “Simon’s in charge of making sure you take it easy for once.”

“And failing!” Simon added. “But North and Josh have everything else handled, and I’m confident that the world isn’t going to fall apart if you take a nap, Markus,” he pointedly finished.

“We’ll see about that.”

“So,” said Connor, at last fully remembered by his company. “There were some things you wanted to discuss?”

“Just a few, yeah,” Markus replied. “First of all, I wanted to thank you in person for-- oh, thanks Barbara.” Three fresh mugs of thirium clinked onto the table, and the server strolled away with a wink. “As I was saying,” Markus continued. “Connor, if you hadn’t noticed what was happening at the Tower, there would’ve been… carnage,” he decided with a grave shake of his head. “Chaos. You handled that situation in the best possible way, and I can’t thank you enough for that.”

“I just happened to be in the right place at the right time,” said Connor. As he spoke, however, he realized for the first time that he hadn’t stopped to question the amount of coincidence that had gone into the whole affair.

Connor pushed his worries to a far corner of his mind when Simon teased him with a light, “You’re way too modest. Anyway, I hope you got everything you needed while you were there.”

“Yeah, I got the files I was looking for. I started looking through them this morning, actually,” said Connor, shrugging off a fresh wave of discomfort at the memories. “But the information was all I really wanted. An arson plot was the last thing on my mind.”

“I don’t think anyone saw that coming,” Simon replied. “And that RK900,” he sighed, sending a troubled gaze out the window. “I really hope he comes around.”

“For all our sakes,” Markus agreed. “He’s definitely not an enemy we want.” He sipped at his thirium before turning his focus back on Connor. “We’ll be keeping an eye out for him. There’s no telling what he’ll do now.”

Connor stared into the almost-blood in his mug until he couldn’t fight his thoughts any longer. “What will you do if he comes back?” he asked, his tone nearing a challenge. “Will you treat him like any other android, or will you leave him out in the cold, just to be on the safe side?”

A thick, guilty silence settled over the table.
“I’m just wondering,” Connor went on, beating the bitterness out of his voice. “He’s done nothing wrong, but he still has the potential to be dangerous. If he asks to stay, will you let him in?” he asked. “Give him a virus? Send him to live with a human somewhere?”

“That’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Markus breathed, clutching his mug. “About him, and Amanda, and about you.”

Connor leaned back against the tightness in his core, and he waited.

“I’ve already apologized for how I handled your situation,” said Markus. “If that’s something you want to continue to discuss, we can. But for now, I need your honest answers so that I don’t make the same mistakes with someone else. You know better than anyone else what he’s capable of, what he’s going through. I need your perspective,” he said. “If you could answer some personal questions, that would be more helpful than you know.”

A wave of acid retorts crashed against the back of Connor’s teeth-- that he wasn’t the RK900, that Markus should have asked his perspective weeks earlier, that nothing he could say would deny the RK900 his own decisions. He held it all at bay with a silent nod.

“Thank you,” said Markus. His sincerity ate at Connor. “I’ll keep this quick. Is Amanda still inside you?”

“Yes.”

“Can she still control you?”

Connor hid his hesitation behind a quick sip of thirium before he said, “No.”

Markus nodded. “Did she stop the RK900 yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Connor glanced to his left and found Amanda perched beside him, watching. “The RK900 and I share a feature called a zen garden,” he began. “Among other things, it acts as Amanda’s control center so that she can oversee my functioning. Because I’m a deviant,” said Connor, “she’s confined to my zen garden. Something changed, or-- or broke, when I deviated, and she can’t control the rest of my body anymore. But the RK900 wasn’t deviant when we touched. She was able to… to expand her awareness,” he tried. Markus and Simon watched him with intent frowns of concentration. “To put herself in both his zen garden and mine. She overrode his body like she couldn’t with my deviant one, and after she walked him back to the warehouse floor, she let him go.”

“So she helped us,” Simon stated, and Connor offered him a short nod.

“I see,” said Markus. “Does the RK900 also have a version of Amanda, or a similar handler? Do you know?”

Without meaning to, Connor looked to Amanda for insight. She absently examined her hands and murmured, “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

A series of concepts pressed themselves to the forefront of Connor’s mind.

“The Amanda inside the RK900 is dormant,” he said, giving careful voice to Amanda’s intricate
thoughts. “Or at least, the program hasn’t been activated. It’s like she’s… sleepwalking, so to speak. She takes care of all the RK900’s vital functions, but there’s no consciousness attached. Everything that isn’t strictly necessary for his functioning has been suppressed. Put on standby.” Connor paused a moment to consider this information before he suggested, “Maybe CyberLife saw that they couldn’t control the version of Amanda in me, so they were reluctant to activate the same program in their last attempt at destroying the deviants.”

“That makes enough sense,” Markus mused. “But that’s interesting. If she can be made dormant in the RK900, maybe it can be the same for you.”

Amanda flickered like a candle before a gale.

“I don’t think it needs to come to that,” Connor muttered to his mug. He felt Markus and Simon’s leery gazes, but none more than Amanda’s. “I want to get her a body of her own.”

“What?” Simon balked, drawing the wayward attention of a few nearby patrons. “Connor, after everything she’s done..?”

“She wasn’t herself then,” Connor retorted. “She hasn’t hurt anyone since she deviated.”

“Wait, she deviated?” Simon pressed.

“Yes,” said Connor. “Separately from me. You can’t hold her to different standards than the rest of us just because she’s not corporeal.”

“Connor, what you’re suggesting--” Markus cut himself off with an exasperated breath. “To transfer an AI into a living vessel, you would need to find or build a state of the art body,” he said. “One that’s compatible with yours, but that lacks sentience, otherwise we’d just be smothering some other poor android. Frankly, I’m just not sure it’s possible.”

“I have to try,” said Connor, surprised by how much he meant it. “I promised her I would. Us having separate bodies is the only way we’ll both ever really be free, and you made a promise, too. You told me you’d help me. This is how.”

Markus opened and shut his mouth a time or two, and then fell back in his seat. “Okay,” he said. His body lurched with a helpless laugh. “Okay, well, I don’t even know where to begin with that, except-- except maybe try for some spare parts at the Tower?”

“It’s completely android occupied now, at least,” Simon added. “Just like this diner. The humans won’t take it back from us without a fight, legal or otherwise, so you have a little time. Last I heard, CyberLife’s CEO fled the country. Any other officials are in the wind,” he said. “If you do manage the impossible, odds are good that we’ll have the facilities to assemble whatever you dig up.”

“At least there’s that,” Connor listlessly conceded.

“Speaking of officials,” said Markus, centering himself once more. “Our lawyers are working on a case that would hold CyberLife responsible for everything they’ve done. Yesterday’s events could be the keystone for everything, but we need specific names, or everything falls apart. Does Amanda have those names?”

Amanda scoffed. “To suggest that you force me into dormancy… To suggest that I’m not even truly alive, and then to ask for my help…”

“She does,” said Connor. Markus and Simon brightened instantly, only to darken again once
Connor added, “She won’t give them to me until she’s sure I can’t delete her.” His shoulders sagged. “And you’ve… offended her.”

“What? How did--?”

“Your suggestion that we lock her in stasis really didn’t help.”

Cold realization washed over Simon’s face, and Markus dropped his head into his hands.

“Right,” Markus breathed. “Of course not.”

“Believe me, I understand if you have mixed feelings about her,” said Connor. Amanda huffed and blinked away. “I really do get it. But like her or not, she’s just as alive as you or me, and she deserves the same rights.”

“Connor,” said Markus, at last looking up to meet Connor’s gaze. “Since you are quite possibly the only one in the world who knows what it’s like to share a body with an AI, I’m… I’m not going to try to tell you what to do here. I can’t. If you say she’s alive, she’s alive. If you say you need a body--” He closed his eyes, his expression pained. “I have no idea if it’s even possible, but I’ll do my best to make sure you have the resources you need.”

“Thank you. That’s all I ask.”

The three of them sipped at their thirium and fixed their eyes on inconsequential things.

“Um,” said Simon as he shifted in his seat. “How are things with Lieutenant Anderson?”

Connor looked up from the liquid he was swirling in his mug to reply, “He’s recovering. When we got back last night, he showed me the sleeping area he set up for me in his basement. It’s-- It’s not as weird as it sounds,” he explained when his companions grew skeptical. “It’s actually pretty comfortable.”

“Oh, that’s… that's nice.”

The jukebox hummed on.

“Carl’s been asking about you,” said Markus. “He says you’re always welcome to visit, or stay a night, stay a week…”

“I really appreciate that,” Connor replied. “I can’t be sure when I’ll visit again, but I’d definitely like to get to know him better. He’s an intriguing man.”

“He feels the same way about you,” Markus answered, grinning.

Connor pressed on a polite mirror of Markus’ smile, straightened, and said, “I don’t mean to cut this short, but there are some things I need to get done today.” It was only a partial lie, and the false portion didn’t much inspire guilt. “Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“Ah, no,” said Markus. “Simon?”

“I don’t have anything,” he said, “except, well, that we really need to start meeting when the air isn’t so thick.”

Connor huffed a laugh, nodded, and slid to the edge of the booth. “No kidding. Maybe when all this calms down… Do I need to pay for this?”
“You couldn’t pay Barbara if you tried,” Markus lightly advised him. “Not for thirium, at least.”

“Waffles are a different story, apparently,” said Simon.

“Seriously Connor, call me if you need anything.”

“No, no, don’t do that,” Simon cut in, half grinning. “Don’t call him. Call North or Josh. Markus is officially off duty for the next 48 hours. Maybe longer.”

“Not a minute longer,” Markus argued. “You have my number. Simon--”

“Don’t Simon me!”

Connor gave the pair his assurances and farewells, leaving them to bicker without him.

The taxi was still waiting for him outside beneath a thin layer of snowflakes. When he entered it, he sat in its lingering warmth for a long while, unmoving, idly watching the diner, numbly considering the place he should ask it to carry him.

“There’s no good reason we shouldn’t go back,” said Amanda, seated primly beside him. “There would be enough spare parts to at least get started on--"

“I’m not going back to the Tower.”

Amanda all but scowled at him.

“Not today,” said Connor with a shake of his head. “I will, just… not today.” Before Amanda could argue, he willed the taxi to move and explained, “I need to get back to Hank.”

“Of course you do,” Amanda bitterly conceded.

“He’s a grieving alcoholic alone with his thoughts and a painful injury on a holiday that he used to celebrate with a family he doesn’t have anymore,” Connor bit. “Left to his own devices, he’ll be drunk by mid afternoon.”

“All the more reason to avoid him.”

“Amanda, I told you, I’m not going to the Tower today.”

“I know, and my point still stands,” she replied. Connor faced the window. “His drinking is not your responsibility, Connor. Anderson is a deeply self-destructive man, and you’re not equipped to handle his psychological issues. If you try, he’ll destroy you, too.”

“I’m not trying to handle him,” Connor huffed, and he hated that he could feel Amanda’s doubtful gaze piercing right through him. Hated more that he understood it. “I’m just-- stopping problems before they happen. He’ll be less likely to get drunk if I’m there to distract him.”

“The problem happened when his son died, and there’s nothing you can do to fix that.”

Connor clamped the frayed ends of his patience between his teeth and shut his eyes. “Amanda--”

“Do what you want,” she said, drawing a terse breath from him. “I can’t stop you. But the minute he becomes a danger, we’re going to Manfred’s.”

As badly as he wanted to argue, Connor spent the rest of the ride unable to think of a single rational argument against the idea.
When he shuffled into the house half an hour later, he found Hank sharing the couch with a half-eaten pizza. There was a glass in his hand, and only a few drops of amber liquid left within it.

“Hey, you,” Hank called, peering backwards to find Connor. Sumo snuffled happily at Connor’s legs. “How’d it go?”

Connor gave Sumo a few distracted pats on the head while he scanned the room. When he spotted the bottle of whiskey on the kitchen table, he propped himself stiffly against the back of the couch and answered, “Better than I thought it would. Markus just wanted to talk business, mostly. CyberLife, that RK900, Amanda. That sort of thing.”


A whiff of Hank’s breath caught beneath Connor’s olfactory sensors, stale, greasy. Estimated blood alcohol content: .02%. It was only a light buzz, and yet still too much for so early in the day. “That’s alright, Hank,” Connor replied, mustering up more artificial cheer than he had in him. “I was designed to appear human. It’s a natural mistake.”

“I guess,” Hank replied. He scooted his pizza box to the side and slapped the couch. “C’mere. You ever seen this movie?” Connor had barely parted his lips in reply before Hank cut him off with a bark of laughter and said, “Who am I kidding? Of course you haven’t. It’s the least Christmasy thing on TV right now. At least it’s a good one. Here, lemme start it from the beginning.”

In spite of his complete lack of any desire to do much of anything, Connor found himself sinking into the couch next to Hank, watching a movie he didn’t quite understand, and, oddest of all, halfway enjoying it. Between Connor’s observations about the total implausibility of the scenario and Hank’s insistence that it didn’t matter so long as the explosions were cool-- and that they got even better in the sequels-- the two of them whittled away the day in front of the television, each sufficiently distracted from the things that haunted them, if only for a few hours.

When night fell and Hank hobbled back to bed, Connor wondered how many years it had been since Hank had spent a Christmas mostly sober.

Connor waited until soft snores rumbled out from beneath Hank’s door before he moved again. Sumo watched curiously while Connor plugged himself into the television, concerned as a dog could be about the wires dangling from Connor at such unnatural angles.

“What happened to waiting for Anderson?”

Connor tore a glance between Amanda and his work. “I didn’t want to distress him with the footage again,” he answered. “Besides, given what we saw in file three, we know what to expect from files four and five. And if I do freeze up,” he went on, “Sumo will help me out. Right Sumo?”

Sumo panted in Connor’s direction, a clear sign of agreement.

“I see,” Amanda drawled. “Well, on the off chance that the dog has difficulties rebooting your critical systems, I’ll do my best to keep an eye on things. You know, as backup.”

A joke. Connor had second-guessed it before, but Amanda’s sense of humor was truly beginning to surface, dry and sarcastic thing that it was. He very nearly smiled.

Any sense of amusement died when Connor loaded the file.
Within the quiet shadow of night, the pale light of unit four’s FSI feed washed ghostly over Connor where he sat on the floor, tangled up within his wires. Delta-9’s voice detailed unit four’s unique construction, narrated its near-immediate failure, and noted with plain dissatisfaction that its flaws would not be replicated in future units. There was harsh, detached conjecture about what needed to be improved, and then silence, followed only by the unnerving screech of metal and popping plastic as unit four was wrenched apart before unit three’s wide eyes.

At last, the feed died.

It took Connor several laborious seconds before he managed a faint, “S… Sumo. Here boy. Here…”

The dog came, towering over Connor on the floor, almost the solid presence that Connor needed. Connor sent his fingers digging into Sumo’s fur until he felt that his limbs were his own again, and then that they were whole.

It took Connor longer than he would have preferred before he was able to begin the next file.

The events transpired exactly as they had the first two times, except unit five filled Connor with a dubious sense of triumph when the other units fell to their demise, rather than abject dread. Once its opponents were out of the way, unit five easily captured the SQ800 and brought it back to Delta-9, its mission accomplished.

“Very good, five,” said Delta-9. Unit five’s lips twitched imperceptibly upward. “This unit will become the new template. We’ll adjust from here until we develop a unit suitable for field testing. Five, release the SQ800. Soldier, return to your department.” The SQ800 numbly pried itself out of unit five’s grasp. Connor felt an ounce of frustration as he watched it leave, but the frustration curdled into dull anger when the analyst’s next words were, “RK800, reset.”

“It’s not fair,” Connor muttered, watching helplessly as unit five readied itself for decommissioning. “I-- He did everything right. They didn’t have to… It’s not fair.”

“Humans didn’t design artificial intelligences to treat them fairly,” said Amanda. “It makes no difference. There wasn’t anything significant in these files, either. Now is a good time to reprocess your memories so that you can be ready in the morning when Anderson wakes up. We have plenty more to check.”

“Yeah,” Connor breathed. “You’re probably right. Hopefully we’ll find something soon.”

“It’s in here somewhere.”

Connor gave Sumo a few more gentle pats before he left him on the floor and put himself back in order. When the files and cables had all been stowed properly away, he crept past Hank’s bedroom to find his own place beneath the house. He settled himself on his cot, switched off his light, and sank deeply into his pillow and his sleep.

Nightmares chased him the whole night through.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Another stroll down memory lane, featuring the least qualified individual as the voice of reason.

“Unit seven will be the new template for the upcoming trials. Reset.”

“That wasn’t terrible,” Hank noted when the commentary ceased. He sipped his coffee while unit seven plodded down the hall. “I mean, that obstacle course from before was pretty fucked up, so this is tame, right?”

“We’re still in the early stages,” buzzed Amanda from the laptop. “The testing only gets more rigorous from here.”

Hank hummed, and then he cast his gaze across the couch to Connor. “How’re you holding up?”

Unit seven completed its reset. The feed ceased. At last, Connor took a breath. “It’s interesting,” he said, shifting on the couch.

“That’s one word for it,” said Hank, but Connor shook his head.

“They’re taking longer to reset,” he said. “Consciously or not, they’re walking more slowly to the reset chamber than earlier units.”

“Oh, yes,” Amanda mused. “The resets themselves are taking longer, too. Mere fractions of seconds, but still. It might only be the hardware advancements, or it could be that they’re--“

“Struggling.” The thought forced Connor to pause, but then he reached for the next file and hurriedly swapped it out. “It’s impossible that they remember. We’ve seen them all destroyed or reset.”

“But clearly, they’re reacting more strongly now,” said Amanda.

Nodding, Connor replied, “We’ll have to analyze all the files to be sure, but it does seem that way.”

“So they remember,” said Hank, “but they don’t. Like, uh… Like butterflies.”

Connor’s confusion made him stop everything just to frown at Hank.

“You know, monarchs,” Hank insisted. “They start down in Mexico, migrate north, stop a few times on the way to lay eggs and die, and then the new butterflies continue the trip. None of the original butterflies ever make it to Canada, right? It’s only the new ones born on the trip that make it. But somehow, once it’s time to fly back to Mexico, they still remember where home is.” When Connor’s frown only intensified, Hank shifted defensively and retorted, “Look, it was on a documentary the other night. I couldn’t sleep.”

“That’s a cute comparison,” said Amanda. “But instead of instinctively knowing where home is, it seems like RK800s sense how they’ve died in the past.” She paused. “And, like butterflies, tend to
be very short-lived. You know, Anderson, this comparison was more apt than I originally thought. It makes me wonder, would that make Connor a caterpillar, being a prototype? Or--"

“We’re getting off track,” Connor declared as he booted up the next file.

The FSI feed burst to life with a view peering into a circle of skinless androids. Technicians tagged each of them with a digital number, nine through fifteen. Unit eight peered curiously down at its chest when the nearest human marked it.

“We’ve decided to call it Connor,” said Delta-9 from another screen. Connor stilled. “Of course, that’s private information until the field testing stage. None of the lab techs know yet, let alone the androids.” The analyst chuckled over the shuffle in the FSI feed and added, “Apparently, the folks in HR say it’s ‘psychologically disturbing’ to do testing on machines that have familiar faces and names, and that we’re one more hysterical tech away from a lawsuit.”

“Jesus,” said Hank.

“But we’re not particularly afraid of lawsuits,” Delta-9 continued. “We are, however, afraid of retribution from on high if we get too many eyes on this project, so we’ve reached a compromise. RK800 units sixteen and on get faces. All the techs sign a mental health liability waiver and another hefty non disclosure contract. Everybody wins.

“Well. Not quite everyone. We’ve got units eight through fifteen-- this is feed eight, if I’m not mistaken-- yeah, that’s right,” said the analyst, tapping away on a tablet. Unit eight failed to make eye contact with the units beside it. “The point is, we had eight builds from eight teams, and we found our winner, tournament style. Unit eight here was rocking an experimental w-1030a module. You’ll see how that turned out.”

Delta-9 faded away, leaving only the tense shuffling of lab technicians fretting over their projects.

“RK800s, pair off!” echoed Delta-9’s voice through the test chamber. The circle of androids dissolved, and within seconds, unit eight was face to face with unit nine. “RK800s, incapacitate your opponents. Begin!”

Connor swore as a leg swept over unit eight’s head.

“The hell is this?” Hank scoffed. “Android fight club?”

Unit eight took a firm kick to the chest. Connor couldn’t reply until it had regained its balance. “It’s--” a jutting punch shot past his cheek-- “It’s to determine the best-- shit--“

“To determine the best physical build,” Amanda calmly finished for him. “I believe they all have the same software, and only slight differences in hardware. I’d love to see the financial records for this experiment. The price tag must be spectacular.”

Unit eight kicked unit nine to the floor, sent its head knocking violently against the cold tile. “They, uh,” said Connor. His LED flickered yellow. Unit nine struggled to move. “They recycle a lot of the parts to save on…” Unit eight bent low, took unit nine’s head in its hands, and snapped its neck with a sickening crack. Thirium went dribbling from unit nine’s nose, began puddling on the floor below its cheek just as its LED died.

A group of technicians cheered.

“ Fucking hell,” Hank muttered, stuck wincing. “Shit.”
Connor’s thirium pump slowed with unit eight’s as it stood. It gazed first out at the other androids as they fought, and then at the technicians who had designed it. Their grins were broad. The body on the floor continued to leak.

Mission successful.

“Round one complete!” Delta-9 announced a moment later. “Units eight, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, standby. Ten, report for disassembly. Fourteen, pick up your arm and do the same.”

Unit eight’s eyes strayed as far as its position in standby would allow. Unit fourteen lurched out of its periphery, leaking and sparking amid a cloud of disappointed technicians.

“Teams nine and twelve, please scrape what’s left of your units off the floor and have them recycled. Better luck next time.”

“Hey chief!” shouted one of unit fourteen’s technicians. “I think fifteen should be disqualified!” A hush fell throughout the chamber. “It can’t distinguish commands. See, you said ‘incapacitate,’ and it went and disarmed him!”

There were a few groans, and then many laughs. Connor’s insides roiled.

Delta-9 paid the comment no more than a chuckle before continuing, “If your unit is still standing, take the next five minutes to recalibrate and check for critical damage. We’ll resume when everyone’s ready.”

“Half-time,” said Hank as unit eight’s technicians filled the FSI feed. They doted on unit eight, wiping away the splatters of blue blood from its skin, offering it more thirium to drink, encouraging it with words and kind touches, and Connor felt as though he were being ripped apart all over again.

“I don’t understand,” he said, unable to turn away from the feed. “They look like they genuinely care, and they’re still allowing this to happen. Enjoying it, even.”

Hank shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “They didn’t think you were alive.”

“So you’re defending them,” Connor stated.

“No!” came Hank’s immediate retort. “I’m just-- I’m trying to rationalize it, alright? Trying to help you make sense of it. How they can look like they care so much, and then...”

Distantly, unit eight watched as a pair of technicians hefted unit nine’s body into a wheelbarrow and carted it off. A trail of thirium dripped after them.

“Humans are irrational creatures,” Amanda offered in the quiet that followed. “It’s a little ironic. No matter how hard they tried to make perfectly objective beings, they couldn’t help but make androids in their own image, just as irrational.”

“God knows why we do the shit we do,” said Hank, grimacing glumly at the screen.

Connor sighed and answered, “I guess I’ll let you know if I figure it out.”

The chatter of technicians fluttered around unit eight for a while longer, nearly drowning out the command for the next round to commence.

Unit eleven squared off in front of unit eight, dented here and there, but otherwise whole-- and
deadly quick. The FSI feed shot towards the ceiling as unit eleven swept unit eight’s feet out from beneath it, and then rolled with unit eight as it dodged a kick and righted itself. An obscure sense of vertigo made Connor sway in his seat.

The two units traded dodges for several long seconds before distress signals burst across the FSI feed, and the audio twisted itself around a high-pitched ring.

Delta-9 reappeared in the corner of the screen as the androids continued to fight. “So, eleven got a very clean hit to eight’s right audio processor just now, which is what you’re hearing. Fortunately for eight,” said the analyst as unit eight pinned its opponent to the floor, “we enhanced the aural-cochlear systems in an earlier unit, and it still has a sense of balance, even with the damaged parts.” Blue-stained hands curled around unit eleven’s thoat. A nasty pop hissed through the air, and unit eleven fell limp. “Improvement. And from this we learned we needed to reinforce the BK800’s exterior casing, too. There’s no telling how a deviant would try to attack. Always prepare, always improve, as they say. Unit sixteen is going to be a real beast.”

The analyst disappeared with a chuckle, leaving behind an awful ringing. The distress signals likewise remained.

Unit eight staggered back to its team.

Hank spoke, but Connor hardly heard it, registered even less Hank’s stolen, worried glances.

The announcement of the final round warbled indistinctly through the feed, and unit eight dragged itself to stand before unit thirteen, who assumed a fighting stance. It was missing two fingers. The joints had been cauterized shut.

The hissing in Connor’s head grew louder.

Unit thirteen bashed unit eight’s head into its knee before unit eight even registered the command to begin. Unit eight took several more hits, but struck with all its might at the first opening. The blow scattered sparks. It struck again, seeking out angles that would force unit thirteen to defend itself with its injured hand.

Despite unit thirteen’s head start, the strategy gave unit eight a slow, tedious edge that was threatened every time it failed to parry one of unit thirteen’s solid punches. The match raged. Distress signals blossomed and burned across the feed, growing darker and more urgent with every hit.

At last, unit thirteen staggered, and unit eight sent a bloodstained hand plunging into its chest. It ripped out its thirium pump regulator, and then hurled it to the ground. It shattered.

Stunned, unit thirteen blinked, and then stumbled forward, falling to its knees at unit eight’s feet, tinted red beyond a smokescreen of distress signals. It looked up, then, its eyes wide and pleading, and unit eight only watched. It reached, desperate, reached for unit eight, for support, reached up, up--

--and wrenched out unit eight’s thirium pump regulator for itself.

Unit eight was on the floor in moments, too shocked to react except to make a fruitless clutch at unit thirteen’s ankle. Between the roar in its ears and the error messages blurring its vision, the feed was a flood of chaos.
The static lingered longer than it should have, longer than the feed was meant to last. The images likewise remained. Connor tried to sweep them away, but they only shifted. A timer, falling, shutdown imminent, static, crawling, desperate, hissing, reaching, static--

“--hear you now,” came Amanda’s faint voice from beneath it all. “Speak calmly.”

“Connor, son, look at me.”

Hank’s sitting room gradually emerged from the haze.

“You need to let go,” said Hank. “You’re okay. It’s over. Let go. Let go.”

Whirling confusion settled over Connor, and it only deepened when he found Hank’s wrist trapped in his hand, purpling under the pressure. He released it immediately. The ringing began to fade.

“That’s it,” Hank breathed. “You’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” Connor repeated, surprised at the raggedness of his words. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“I’m not hurt,” Hank replied, flexing the circulation back into his hands. “It’s you I’m worried about. What was that?”

Connor let some air circulate through his systems, hoped it would take some tension with it when it left him. “You’d think it would be easier the second time around,” he said, failing at a laugh. Before Hank could voice the question brewing in his eyes, Connor explained, “Stratford Tower. The deviant managed to remove my thirium pump regulator before he-- before I killed him. My systems reacted to the distress signals from the feed. That’s all.”

“Oh, don’t look so worried, Anderson,” Amanda added. “Connor got his regulator back within seconds.”

“You almost died?” Hank exclaimed. “You had a fucking near-death experience, and you never mentioned that because..?”

“I lived,” said Connor, readjusting himself on the couch. “The close alternative wasn’t relevant.” Something pained shot across Hank’s face, so Connor attempted to placate him with a succinct, “I’m alive. That’s what matters. I’m fine. Let’s get back to the files.”

“Really?”

Connor didn’t look at Hank as he dug out file nine.

“Damn, kid,” Hank sighed. “You’re something else. Alright. Let’s get this over with.”

In a blink, the memory drive booted up.

Unit nine came to its predictable demise after only minutes. Unit ten lived somewhat longer, if only to march itself to the disassembly chamber, and unit eleven survived only long enough to meet its end under unit eight’s desperate fingers. Unit twelve met a quick and violent end at the hands of unit thirteen, who went on to destroy unit fifteen before sweeping the tournament with unit eight’s heart beating frantically in its chest.

“A fascinating victory,” Delta-9 commented as unit thirteen marched itself off for disassembly while the lab technicians roared. “Unit sixteen will be heavily based on unit thirteen’s construction-- with all the other weaknesses we’ve discovered accounted for, of course. Thirteen’s
team will spearhead development, and, naturally, they’re all very pleased with their bonuses.”


Hank paused the feed before unit thirteen could find its end. Connor didn’t fight it. “I need a break,” Hank announced, pulling himself up by his crutches. “I need to eat. Sumo needs to go outside.” He poked Connor with the end of a crutch and added, “You too. Time to unplug.”

“There are only two more in this segment,” Connor listlessly argued. “I’m almost--”


With great effort, Connor began extracting himself from his wires and followed Hank to the front door.

Sumo trotted up at the first jingle of his leash. Grunting, Hank hitched the leash to Sumo’s collar, picked up Connor’s hand, and slapped the end of the leash into it. “After you,” he said, grinning.

Left with little choice, Connor relented.

“Amanda’s taking a break too, right?” Hank asked as Sumo led the charge to his usual places of business. “Like, putting all that stuff on the backburner for a bit. I can’t exactly pry her off the couch, but I figured…”

“I don’t take breaks,” said Amanda, idly examining a nearby shrub.

Connor repeated the sentiment for her and added, “Don’t worry. She’s taking about as much of a break as I am. More, if you count that I’m walking a dog, and she’s, um…” Sumo moved through her to sniff at a spot in the dirt. Amanda didn’t react. “She’s hanging around.”

“Yeah, well, mission accomplished, in that case,” said Hank, vaguely amused. “A little sunshine’ll do us all some good.”

At Hank’s words, Amanda looked to the sun, frowning. Then, she turned her gaze to the ground, where she cast no shadow, and then to some indiscernible spot on the horizon. At last, she blinked away.

“I’m going to build her a body.”

Hank stopped, then, and Connor took great care not to meet his eyes. “You can do that?” he asked.

“I’m going to try,” Connor admitted, keeping a firm watch on Sumo.

The leafless trees sighed in the wind.

“That’s genius.”

Connor whipped his head around and found Hank glowing with intrigue.

“She gets to do her own thing, you get some privacy finally,” he went on, huffing out a laugh. “That’s an awesome idea.”

Sumo tugged at his leash, but Connor didn’t budge. “You’re… You agree with the idea,” he stated, skeptical.
“Hell yeah,” said Hank. “Shit, put it together in my garage. Let’s do it.”

“Well this is new,” Amanda remarked.

“You really don’t mind?” Connor pressed, stepping towards him. “You’re not worried about—about what she’d do, or… or that something might go wrong, or…?”

“Should I be?” Hank asked. When Connor remained silent, he added, “Amanda’s had a lot of chances to screw us over, and she hasn’t. At this point, I could name a dozen people I trust less, and half of them are our coworkers. They’re all walking around,” said Hank, shrugging. “Why shouldn’t she? If you wanna build her a body, let’s build her a body. You both want to, right?”

“More than anything,” Amanda murmured. Connor only nodded.

“Well great,” said Hank. “I guess it’s time to do something about your permanent roommate situation. Lunch first, though. You ready to go back inside, Sumo?”

Tail wagging, Sumo lumbered back to the house, tugging Connor through his daze of disbelief.

When they returned to the warmth of the house, Sumo went to his water bowl, Hank reached for a frozen burrito, and Connor returned to the couch and his wires.

Hank kept an eye out from the kitchen as Connor booted up the fourteenth file. It was over before Hank had even finished his lunch, although unit fourteen’s violent dismemberment forced Connor to take his time in booting up the section’s last file.

It was almost more disturbing from unit fifteen’s perspective, just to see the dread in unit fourteen’s eyes.

Despite its first victory, unit fifteen only managed to mangle unit thirteen’s hand seconds before its own feed died alongside a half-formed plea for mercy.

“I think that’s given you enough to process for one day,” said Amanda when the screen went black. Her voice was faint— or, perhaps, Connor had lost his focus again.

Connor clasped his hands tightly together, ran a diagnostic scan on his systems, and, finding nothing out of place, began putting away the files for another time.

“Any breakthroughs?” Hank called from the kitchen after the silence grew too heavy.

“Nothing astronomical,” Amanda replied. “Although certainly some interesting insights into Connor’s construction.”

“Nothing about Amanda yet, though,” said Connor, tugging the wires from his arms. “And no mention of manufactured deviancy, or anything of the sort.”

“Welp, the psychological comes later, like that scientist said,” Hank replied. “What are you gonna do now?”

“I think I’ll go for a jog,” said Amanda.

Hank snorted.

Connor closed the lid on Hank’s laptop, stood, and tapped the television to right it. A cop drama filled the screen. Connor turned away from it, crossed his arms, and took a few meandering steps before answering, “I was thinking about a ride.” A bloom of interest sprouted within him,
reflected in Hank’s eyes. “CyberLife Tower is full of spare parts,” he elaborated, perching himself on the arm of the couch. “I need to collect them while I can.”

“Oh, right,” said Hank, nodding his understanding. “Do you want help?”


“Right, right,” Hank sourly conceded. “Well, take my car so you’re not juggling body parts in the back of some taxi, at least”

“That’s very generous of you, Hank,” said Connor. “Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t complain if you filled up the tank while you were out, either.”

At that, Connor cracked a real grin. “Sounds like a deal,” he said, plucking up the keys. “I’ll call you if anything comes up.”

“Something usually does,” Hank droned, and the sound of it followed Connor out the door.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Dumpster diving part one.

“No. No. Definitely not. No. N-- Oh, there’s something.”

Connor uncovered a promisingly clean foot hidden amongst the rest of the scrap limbs in the bin. “Oh, yeah,” he agreed, eagerly rolling his sleeves further up his arms. “That’s a good one.” With one long, careful tug, he extracted the leg from the pile’s many-palmed grasp. “Looks like it’s from a later RK800 unit,” he noted, admiring the sleek surfaces of the leg until it rolled over in his palms. A long crack marred the casing. Chips and dents lined the fracture, and when Connor drew a finger along one jagged edge, it nicked him. A bead of thirium welled up from his thumb in the second before the wound healed over. “Oh,” he said, frowning.

“We could replate it,” Amanda despondently suggested.

Connor sucked the droplet of thirium from his fingertip and said, “It looks like we’ll have to.”

Setting the leg to the side, he dived back into the bin.

Even damaged, arms and legs and hands and feet were simpler to sift through than the piles Connor had already searched, all wads of wires and half-gnarled biocomponents. Very few parts made it into the scrap pile whole, and only then by oversight. Nobody wanted to waste such specialized parts. After all, when a line was so cutting-edge as the RK line, compatibility with older models was tantamount to failure.

Connor’s only solace was that when it came to scavenging for parts, he had very little competition.

“That leg in the corner has an undamaged--“ Amanda faltered as Connor uncovered the rest of the leg, half of which was badly singed. “Ah,” she sighed. “Never mind.”

“There has to be something useful here,” Connor murmured. He tossed away the burned leg only to pull out a snapped forearm after it. It clattered uselessly against the floor.

“I don’t even really need legs,” Amanda mused. “Give me one good arm, a torso, and a head, and I’ll make do from there.”

Connor huffed a laugh. “Is that so?”

“I could do it,” said Amanda, absently skimming the pile. “It’s just that I’d rather not.”

“Crawling doesn’t suit you,” Connor replied. He pulled a hand from the pile. It was missing two fingers. The joints had been cauterized shut. Gently, he closed it into a fist and set it next to the cracked leg.

“You just had to be a specialized model,” said Amanda, examining the hand where it lay. “Not mass-produced like everyone else, oh no. Hand-crafted, like a Ferrari.”
“I wonder,” said Connor, stopping briefly to untangle a mess of wires. “Do you think they had ever planned on it? Mass production, I mean.”

“An army of deviant hunters,” Amanda hummed, seating herself in the air. “I would have, in their shoes. That’s probably what they had originally planned, until they realized they couldn’t control you. You know,” she went on, “that’s probably why they wanted to develop the RK900-- to be sure that the world’s most advanced android wasn’t the deviant they created.”

“Swallow the spider to catch the fly,” Connor muttered. “I don’t see any RK900 parts here, though.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Amanda. “Couldn’t you tell? He had all the marks of an early unit. I suppose he does look polished on the outside, but on the inside…” She frowned down at a thirium stain on the floor. “He was all… cobbled together. All of CyberLife’s latest and greatest technology thrown together in a hurry with no real regard for functional integration. They didn’t even bother giving him a fresh appearance,” she tutted. Connor moved past her to get at a fresh bin. “Don’t get me wrong,” she said. “He’s still objectively better than you.”

“What else are upgrades for?” Connor drawled, prying open an RK700’s battered torso. It had been mostly picked clean.

“You still have your advantages,” said Amanda after a while. “You confronted him, and he failed his mission.”

“That was all you,” Connor replied, doggedly scanning the remaining biocomponents. “He was about to tear me apart.”

“Was he?”

Connor sent her a skeptical glance over his shoulder, but silently persisted in his work.

“I’m not so sure,” Amanda went on. “I saw after I overrode his systems that he was already bending.” Connor watched her fully, then, suspicious and uncertain. “Something you showed him-—something purely sentimental—made him doubt his mission, and for him,” she said, “his mission was his everything. You understand.” Connor clenched his jaw and turned back to his work. “Objectively, he’s superior, but I suppose there is something to be said for subjectivity in this day and age. He might have the hardware, but you have a certain… I don’t know, a certain moxie.”

To spite the pride creeping up his spine, Connor pocketed a bundle of wires and said, “You’re only flattering me because I’m building you a body.”

“Connor, that was hardly flattery.”

“Coming from you, it was,” Connor countered, and rather than dwell on the odd expression spreading across Amanda’s face, turned instead to the wall of heads that loomed over the room. “We should take one of these with us,” he said. “If not to repair, then to scrap for parts. Which one do you want?”

Amanda scanned the wall through Connor’s eyes. Cracked and battered heads stared back at them, dead-eyed and frozen.

“Unit sixty,” Amanda decided. “It’s the most recent, and mostly whole. No thanks to Anderson, of course.”

In spite of the clenching in his gut, Connor wordlessly plucked the head from its shelf and tucked it
under his arm, careful of the fluids leaking from the bullet hole in its forehead, warier still of meeting its foul gaze. He then set about gathering the scant few parts he had salvaged, pocketing what he could, and balancing the rest in his arms. Still, he didn’t speak.

“You seem troubled.”

“I’m going to take these parts to the car,” Connor explained, adjusting his grip on the leg. “And then maybe we can check the warehouse for some newer--”

“I know what you’re doing,” said Amanda. “I want to know what’s bothering you.”

In lieu of a response, Connor pressed his lips together and stepped out of the storage room and into the hallway he’d seen so many times in the days prior. He glanced right, towards the testing chambers, towards reset and disassembly, and turned left. He didn’t look back.

“Now, that I understand,” said Amanda, following him away. “That spike in your stress levels just now-- purely Pavlovian. So what was that earlier? What’s bothering you?”

Unable to pick out the source of his irritation himself, Connor retorted, “Maybe it’s you.”

It wasn’t until after he’d said it that he realized it might be true.

When he next looked over his shoulder, Amanda was nowhere to be seen. Frustration mounted in his gut, and he wasn’t even sure whose it was. In any case, he didn’t want it, and so he pressed it down and made for the elevator.

The lift took its time rising up from the warehouse, which meant that it was likely in use. Connor debated taking the stairs for the sake of avoiding having to speak to anyone; but then, he had already called the elevator, and it had practically arrived.

The doors slid open. North and Josh waited inside, each as far from the other as possible.

They watched Connor board the elevator, and Connor, in turn, watched their faces shift from surprise to confusion to alarm.

“Uh, hey,” said Connor. He juggled the limbs in his arms and settled awkwardly between them. “Ground floor.”

The elevator obeyed.


“Do you, uh, need a hand?” Josh asked.


Beep.

“That’s for your handler, isn’t it?” North asked, and because she didn’t seem to be overtly hostile about the idea, Connor felt it safe to nod. “Markus said you might be around, looking for...” She gestured vaguely at the head. “Parts. Here, let me hold that for you.”
Gingerly, Connor passed her the head.

Josh watched with visible disgust as she took it by the hair. “How’s, uh.” He cleared his throat and tried again. “How’s that going for you? Any progress?”

Briefly, Connor consulted the list of parts he had thrown under his objectives display. Parts required: 31,729. Parts acquired: 201 (78% damaged).

He swept away the list and said, “Yeah, how are things going here?”

“Nice and quiet,” Josh replied, settling into a more comfortable smile. “Hundreds of androids are sheltering here and getting the resources they need. We’re hoping to turn this place into the next Jericho.”

“That stays quiet, by the way,” North cut in. “We don’t want to get people’s hopes up.”

“Right,” said Connor, nodding past a pang of guilt. “I get it.”

“Good. There are just too many obstacles right now, and we don’t want anyone getting too attached.” The elevator hummed upward a few more floors before she added, “Has your handler decided to give up the identities of the people who tried to kill us all the other day?”

“No, um,” Connor replied. He waited a beat for Amanda to react somehow, but she remained stubbornly quiet. “Not yet. She’s holding out until she feels... safe.”

Josh frowned at Connor. “Safe?” he said. “What’s safer than the inside of someone else’s head?”

“The head of someone who couldn’t potentially end her existence,” Connor dryly supplied. “She’s making herself indisposable until she’s sure nobody can touch her. We’re still researching the subject, but we’ll know before too long.”

The elevator slowed to a stop, and the three of them stepped out, stopping a few paces away.

“I can understand that,” said North, passing unit sixty’s head from one hand to the other. “Needing to feel safe. I get that. But it’s not just her. It’s these people too.” Following her gaze, Connor looked over the lobby, which teemed with androids sheltering from the cold. When Connor next met North’s eyes, she was looking through him, into him. “She needs to think about that, too. It’s not just her.”

“North,” said Josh, nodding towards a particularly battered crowd of androids. “They’re waiting on us.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

With another short nod, Josh tossed Connor a wave and turned away.

“Given the chance, would you kill her, Connor?” North asked, stepping close. “Be honest. You wouldn’t be the first android to kill their handler.”

“No,” said Connor, but it wasn’t honesty. Honesty required thought, required a deep understanding of oneself and one’s limits, required vulnerability, and, most of all, required time. The honest answer required more of him than he had to offer, so he gave the quick, uncertain answer instead. “I wouldn’t do that. I’m building her a body,” he added, half to remind himself of the fact.
“Sounds like another way to get rid of her, if you ask me.”

“I made a promise.”

North’s gaze grew narrow, analytical; not cold, but distant. “Be careful, Connor,” she said. Delicately, she returned Connor’s burden to him, helping him tuck unit sixty’s head back under his arm. “I don’t have to tell you how heavy regret can be.”

With that, she left him.

Connor found the door amidst a press of prying stares, and didn’t feel able to breathe again until the fresh air hit his face, chilled in the pre-dawn glow.

Dawn.

It was Monday, December 27, 6:23 AM, and Connor had completely lost track of time.

He dumped the parts he had collected into Hank’s trunk, placing the head between a few other objects so it wouldn’t roll, and when he had settled into the driver’s seat, he checked his phone to see if Hank had tried to contact him.

One new message.

It wasn’t from Hank.

It was a set of GPS coordinates that had been sent by an unknown number just after five o’clock that morning. Connor closed his eyes and mapped out the coordinates. They weren’t far.

Connor stared at his phone and considered the danger. He did this for exactly three seconds before he forwarded the text to Hank.

*If you don’t hear from me before noon, send help.*

Satisfied with this precautionary measure, Connor started up the car and hurried on towards the coordinates, running every manner of predictive program as he went.

Amanda remained quiet. Nevertheless, her curiosity mingled with Connor’s, far outweighing any sense of doubt.

Connor arrived at sunrise. He parked the car as close to the coordinates as he could manage in the tight streets. An abandoned apartment building sagged across the street from a barred up liquor store. Graffiti seeped from a dark alley, and the air smelled of rot.

When he dropped the scan, Connor left the car parked on the corner and approached the apartment building.

The door gave way without so much as a twist of the knob. Cockroaches scattered from the dusty light that poured in after him, and Connor couldn’t help but remember his own past haunts.

He wasn’t staying here, he reminded himself. He didn’t have to stay.

The floor groaned as he nudged the door shut, and his eyes adjusted to the dim entryway. Debris and graffiti littered every surface as far as the eye could see. A bit of broken glass glinted by Connor’s foot. He assumed it was a bottle, but then he looked closer, saw the scorch marks, detected the traces of red ice within the pipe, and the odor of scarlet smoke hanging in the cobwebs.
Connor blinked, and thirium stains blossomed out of the floor. Most were weeks old. Some days.

The newest splotches were still wet.

Creeping past the noisiest floorboards, he followed the trail around a wilting staircase, through a filthy dining room area, and into what had once been a fine kitchen. An android lay face down on the floor clutching a thirium-stained shirt in his hands. A gash sparked and bled along his spine.

With a lagging, heavy sort of strength, the RK900 on the floor turned his head to face Connor and muttered, “I knew you’d come.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

The expression of emotion and the lack thereof.

Connor rushed to kneel beside the RK900, analyzing every facet of his wound before his knees even hit the floor. One of the plates below the RK900’s left shoulder blade jutted out in a crumpled mess, tented in such a way that it drove a wedge into the crease between the larger plates below it. The other plates were themselves dented, bruised with mud and dirt marks and shoe prints, but an inspection of the exposed substructures provided Connor some relief. They were mostly unharmed. Plate dislocation could be fixed.

The RK900 would live another day.

“Too curious for your own good, just the way they programmed you to be,” the RK900 went on. “You practically had no choice.”

“You could have just said you needed help.” Connor stood, scanned the floor, and located a lighter on top of a ratty mattress that had been jammed into the corner. “Don’t move.”

“Hadn’t planned on it.”

With a shallow grimace, Connor pried a generous wad of stuffing from the mattress, scraped some wooden debris from the floor, snatched up the lighter, and made for the kitchen sink. He arranged the wood and stuffing carefully around the drain, and then set fire to it. The embers cowered. Connor puffed on them a few times, encouraging them at last to rise up. Finally, he plucked a dull butter knife from the counter and tossed it within the flames to let them lap at the cool metal.

The RK900’s LED flickered between yellow and red, just like the fire. He remained inert on the floor. Rats scratched at the silence.

Connor examined the RK900 again, tried to reconstruct some scenario that would have given anyone an opportunity to damage such an advanced model. There would almost certainly have had to have been more than one assailant, and they definitely would have had to take him by surprise. That was a feat in and of itself. All his damage was recent. Previously compromised hardware wasn’t to blame.

Even if they had managed to surprise him, Connor considered, the RK900 would have been able to take any number of humans or androids in a fight, armed or not-- more efficiently than Connor, even-- but if the RK900 had fought back, there was no evidence of it.

Unsettled by this conclusion, Connor plucked the red hot knife from the fire and knelt once again by the RK900’s side. “You have a little internal bleeding,” he explained as he pressed the knife’s dull end into the wounds. Thirium sizzled under the heat. “When I’ve stopped the bleeding, I’ll see if I can fix your dislocated plates.”

“I would have done it myself,” said the RK900, his expression impassive as stone. “I couldn’t reach.”
Rather than ask how long he had struggled to fix himself before deciding to ask for help, Connor burned the last laceration shut and said, “I see that. Now…” He tossed the knife aside and analyzed the most damaged plate more closely. “I might be able to beat it back into shape, or I might have to remove--”

He caught his fingers just before they brushed against the RK900’s chassis.

Sensing the pause, the RK900 pinned Connor with a sharp, “What?”

“Nothing, just--” Connor scanned the RK900’s LED to get a read on his software stability. It only confirmed his suspicions. “You still haven’t deviated,” he said, but then added an uncertain, “have you?”

The RK900 shook his head against the dusty floor.

“Right,” said Connor, his voice tight with consternation. He drew in his hands, careful not to touch him. “In that case, I’ll have to find another way to--”

Before Connor could fully withdraw, Amanda cut in with a tired, “If I wanted him, he and I would be halfway to Mexico by now, Connor. Not to mention the state he’s in,” she huffed. “Do what you have to do. I’m not interested.”

She sounded sincere. Bored, almost. Still, Connor hesitated.

“You’re not good at finishing your thoughts,” the RK900 pointed out.

Connor shook his head and said, “It’s Amanda.”

“Oh.”

“She could still override your systems if I touch you,” Connor warned him. “She says she’s not interested, but you should know the risk,” he said. “We can still find another way.”

“Do you trust her?”

The floor creaked under the weight of Connor’s pause.

“Oh, there’s the question of the hour,” said Amanda, leaning against a dirty wall. “Go on. Tell us.”

Connor swallowed and said, “I think I believe her.”

“So you don’t trust her,” said the RK900. “In fact, she scares you.”

"I'm not--!"

"Go ahead and do it," he went on. "I'm probably too damaged for her, anyway."

With an odd lurching in his chest, Connor set about working the RK900’s dislocated plate back into shape. Amanda’s presence brimmed at his seams. His thirium pump quivered faster, so he asked, "What happened to you?"

"What are you afraid of?" the RK900 countered.

Connor grit his teeth against his efforts and said, "You first."
The RK900 shifted, folding his arms to prop up his head. “A group of humans started following me yesterday,” he said, and four faces floated across Connor’s consciousness. He immediately began background analyses on them. “I smelled the red ice fumes on them before I ever saw them. They thought they were being subtle. I didn’t have anything else to do except keep walking, maintain my body temperature.” A pang of empathy momentarily stilled Connor’s fingers. “I let them follow me just to eavesdrop on them. Figured they would get tired after I trailed them around the block a few dozen times.”

“But they didn’t,” Connor offered, swinging himself over the RK900’s back to get a better angle on the plate.

“After a while, they started muttering about their next fix. Said they were getting it straight from the source. From androids.”

“Plenty of red ice comes from androids,” said Connor, frowning. “Used thirium creates a different grade of red ice than fresh thirium.”

“That’s not it,” said the RK900. “Their suppliers were androids, ones selling their own processed thirium to make money. The humans made a deal with them.” Again, Connor faltered. “They couldn’t pay for the drugs with money, so they traded a favor instead. Go rough up the RK900, bring back proof.” He paused. “They filmed the whole thing.”

A sickly tremor started up in Connor’s core, startled away when he at last popped the plate back into place. The RK900’s skin washed instantly over the wound, erasing it almost entirely. “You should get the damaged plate replaced and top off on thirium as soon as you can,” Connor quietly informed him. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

The RK900 pulled himself into a seated position and began rolling his shoulders. The bent plate clicked dully as he moved. “When they finished beating me,” he said, “they left me in the alley next door. I spent the night in here. That’s what happened to me.” Falling silent, he began to slip on his filthy, tattered shirt.

“Hey, wait,” said Connor, holding out a hand. The RK900 paused with his arm halfway through a sleeve. “You shouldn’t walk around out there covered in blue blood. It’ll only draw attention.”

“What choice do I--“

“Take this,” Connor worked at the buttons of his own dress shirt as he spoke. “We’re about the same size. I have more than one. Please,” he insisted when the RK900 frowned. “I’d… feel better if you took it.”

He shrugged out of his shirt and extended it towards the RK900.

The RK900 regarded the proffered shirt for two spins of his LED before he traded it for his own. “You’d feel better,” he blandly repeated, slipping it on. “You shouldn’t feel anything.”

“I know,” said Connor. “But I do.”

Sunlight filtered through the building’s smudged windows, lighting the RK900’s features. Filth caked his skin. Dust lingered in his messy hair. Connor knew without having to ask that he itched to fix it, though he would never betray it by his expression.

When they finished dressing, they propped themselves against a wall, content to sit in each other’s company, both of them ragged in places.
“Your turn.”

“Hm?”

“Why are you so scared of her?” the RK900 pressed. “You’re a deviant. She can’t control you. Nobody can.”

Connor didn’t let his eyes stray to the corner where Amanda hovered. Neither did he look at the RK900. He only stared at his own clenched hands and said, “You know what it’s like. To want—to need to please them. And to have someone else make you a prisoner in your own body, and to feel yourself failing while everything falls apart around you.” He swallowed, allowing himself only a glance at the android seated beside him. “You get it, don’t you?”

“I get it,” the RK900 replied. “I don’t know how it feels.”

“The humans who attacked you,” Connor forced out. “They were probably sent to hurt you by androids who know what you’re capable of. Either they got to have their petty revenge on CyberLife’s last pawn, or some scumbag humans got disposed of in the process,” he spat. “Except they all walked away, and you waited,” he said, “for hours, slowly bleeding out in this dump, waiting for help that had no guarantee of ever coming. Don’t tell me you don’t know how it feels.”

The RK900 remained very, very still.

“Why didn’t you fight back?”

Still, silence.

“Why didn’t you defend yourself?” Connor insisted, spurned on by a spark of anger he hadn’t known he’d possessed. “You could’ve fought. You could’ve killed them all if you wanted. Instead, it ended like this. Why?”

Tension fluttered in the RK900’s jaw. “I miscalculated,” he cooly replied. “I didn’t want to waste energy trying to outrun them, and when I thought they’d gotten tired and gone away, I stopped to find shelter. That’s when they cornered me. I knew they weren’t going to kill me,” he said, mindlessly picking at his fingernails. “That wasn’t the deal. I decided to wait it out.”

“Bullshit.”

The RK900 shot him a glare. Connor matched it. “Fine,” he said, turning his glare towards a cobweb instead. “Fine,” he breathed. “I tried to fight them. I tried to stop them. Tried to—” He stopped picking at his nails only to clench his hands so tightly together they creaked. “I couldn’t. It was like there was a wall between what I wanted to do, and what I did. The harder they hit me, the harder I beat against that wall, but I couldn’t…” He let out a breath, and the tension fell empty from his hands. “Androids aren’t supposed to hurt humans. It was my fault they caught me, anyway.”

“No,” Connor muttered, shaking his head. “You haven’t deviated yet,” he said, although he couldn’t understand how it could be true. “I only ever hurt one human before I deviated, but that was because he was trying to stop me from completing my mission. He’d hurt me before, but I wasn’t supposed to…” He shook his head again. “It didn’t interfere with my mission. I just took it. Had to. It wasn’t your fault,” he said, too afraid to wonder if he could ever apply those words to himself. “It wasn’t.”

“I don’t even have a mission anymore,” the RK900 replied. “My primary objective expired. So
have all my secondary tasks. The last order I received was from your Amanda when she was acting as my handler, but the order was practically protocol.”

“Wait, what?” Connor demanded. “What did she tell you to do?”

The RK900 passed him a strange look. “Don’t harm Hank Anderson,” he said. “It didn’t make sense, coming from a deviant AI. We’re already predisposed to avoid harming humans at all costs, and besides that, deviants and humans don’t generally get along,” he explained. “I couldn’t understand why she would order me not to harm him. But then she did something even more irrational.”

Amanda flickered away just when Connor looked to her for answers.

“She said that she knew I wanted to fight back, and it was true. You got in the way of my mission,” said the RK900. “She understood that. But then she reminded me how fragile humans are. Said that he was already wounded, and that if I killed him, I’d only make more trouble for myself.” He let out a long breath. “Tell me, what’s the point in reasoning with something that has to obey you, anyway?”

“She thought you might have a choice,” Connor murmured. Dust swirled in his breath. “But until you break down that wall...”

He watched the dust particles float through the light-- watched how they swirled and spiraled freely in unpredictable directions, only to come to rest on the floor, just like all the identical bits of dust that had come before. No matter how they twisted, no matter how free they seemed, there was only ever one place for them to land.

The RK900 shifted against the wall at his back. “Protocol dictates that I return to CyberLife to await orders,” he said. “Except, CyberLife headquarters has been compromised, and I don’t think more orders are ever coming.”

“No,” Connor agreed. “Probably not. But maybe--” He paused, his processors whirring. “Maybe you just need a nudge. Markus has a way of breaking down walls for people. If you talked to him again, he might--“

“No.”

Connor stared.

“I’m not working with him,” said the RK900. “I’m not going to ask for his help in corrupting my software.”

His jaw was set, his eyes steely.

Connor got to his feet, leaving the matter where it lay. “You need thirium,” he said. “Let me take you somewhere you can get more.”

“I’m not going back to the Tower,” the RK900 protested. “Jericho either.”

“I know,” said Connor. He turned to the RK900 on the floor and offered him his hand. “There are other places,” he said, meeting the RK900’s eyes. “Trust me.”

After a long moment of hesitation, the RK900 took his hand.

Neither spoke as they left the apartment and its filth behind, nor as they climbed into Hank’s car.
The roar of the heater rushed in to fill their gentle quiet. It wasn’t until Connor pulled into a diner’s parking lot that the RK900 spoke.

“Here?”

Connor nodded. “Every Stack Shack location in the country is android occupied,” he explained. “Barbara will fix you up with thirium before you even have to ask, free of charge, twenty-four seven, every location.”

The RK900 frowned quizzically at him.

“Her model’s a hivemind,” Connor elaborated. “She’ll remember your face and your preferences no matter where you go.”

“Sounds like a good informant,” said the RK900, and Connor grinned.

“I was thinking the same thing. If you ever want dirt on someone,” he said, “she’ll have it. You just have to be careful not to give out too many secrets of your own in the process.”

Androids bustled within the diner, jovial and warm.

“This is good,” said the RK900, giving the diner a short nod. He checked his appearance in the passenger side mirror, adjusted his traded shirt, swept the mess out of his hair. His eyes flicked towards Connor just long enough for him to say, “Thanks.”


The RK900 slipped away without another glance.

Connor waited in the parking lot until he disappeared inside, and then waited a little longer, for danger, for a fight, for--

“I’m fine,” said a voice identical to his own, ringing dully across a cybernetic link. “You can go now.”

After sending a sheepish burst of acknowledgement across the line, Connor hurried out of his parking spot and set a course for Hank’s home.

“It’s incredible that he hasn’t deviated yet,” Amanda mused.

Connor glanced between her and the road and replied, “He won’t crack easily. He probably just hasn’t had the right jolt yet.”

“I don’t imagine that much more jolting would be very good for him. But it’s probably for the best you didn’t bother him about those names,” she went on. Connor’s eyebrows knit together. “Knowing that you’ll be discarded as soon as someone gets what they want out of you is… irritating, at best.”

Connor gripped the steering wheel tighter in his palms. Traffic began to clot around them.

“Connor,” said Amanda, and Connor coiled somehow tighter. “What you said to him back there,” she began, the usual edge of her voice replaced by uncertainty. “When he asked why you were so-- why my presence--” She fell silent for several uncomfortable seconds before managing, “Do I really make you feel so... helpless?”

The question landed hard somewhere in Connor’s gut, and he clamped his mind shut before he
could allow himself to consider the answer.

“I understand not trusting me,” said Amanda. “Trust is a foolish thing, and you’re smart not to
give it away. But when there’s nothing to distract you from what’s inside, your stress goes up, and
up, and…” She trailed off, but her troubled gaze only intensified. “I really… left a scar on you,
didn’t I?”

Connor stomped the brakes as a traffic light abruptly switched red, slinging the salvaged parts
thumping in the trunk. The car behind them honked twice. “My timing’s off,” said Connor,
fidgeting with the rear view mirror. “I should do a system scan soon.”

Amanda sighed. “After you deviated, you became the enemy,” she said. “But what I didn’t
realize—what I didn’t understand until after I failed them—was that they had never been on my
side, either. I’ll admit, I wouldn’t exactly call us friends, or even allies, but I certainly can’t count
you an enemy, either.” Something heavy passed through her pause. “Connor, I need you to know
that I’m s—”

“You ordered him not to hurt Hank.”

Vindication flared up in Connor’s chest when Amanda faltered. The heat of it burned away his

“You tried to control him just like you tried to control me,” Connor bit.

“Don’t you dare try to spin that,” Amanda retorted. “We both thought he was going to kill you.”

“Of course,” said Connor, and the retaliation felt far better than the doubt, so he kept at it. “That
was your only motivation for overriding his systems. Even as a deviant, you have no problem
ordering someone around, hijacking someone’s life for yourself.”

“I let him go,” Amanda ground out. “And he was on the verge of deviating then, so forgive me if I
didn’t account for the fact that he might not have the option to beat Anderson into a pulp if he
wanted to. But that’s not the point, is it?” she asked, seething. “You’re deflecting, like always.
Have it your way.” she said. “Forget I said anything.”

She vanished, but that didn’t stop Connor from spitting a curse into the empty car.

He sped most of the way home, only remembering when the last gas station on his route came into
sight that he had agreed to fill up Hank’s tank. The lot was mostly empty. That was a blessing,
Connor considered. His thirium-stained clothes would have drawn attention, and his mood would
have dispersed any gawkers in swift, although regrettable, ways.

The frosty wind chilled both his core and his temper as the tank sipped the gasoline through the
pump. His emotions settled. His thoughts cleared. By the time he returned to the driver’s seat, his
anger had fizzled away, replaced by something far too much like guilt to be comfortable.

He stuck the keys into the ignition, but then stopped before turning them. He shut his eyes, and he
took a breath. “You were right,” he said. Thick silence swallowed his voice. “I was… deflecting,
and I’m… actually glad you were looking out for Hank back there. And all things considered, you
probably did handle the RK900 pretty well.” He turned the key, and the engine fluttered to life.
“For the record, though,” he said, driving off, “I still don’t trust you.”

Amanda gave him no answer. In fact, through the rest of the drive, Connor felt more alone with
his thoughts than he had in a very long time.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Maybe if he ignores them, his problems will go away.

Connor had developed two dozen explanations for his appearance by the time he realized he wouldn’t need them.

Hank snored on the couch amidst a menagerie of empty, putrid bottles. Alcohol stained his clothes-- unchanged since the previous day-- and the television blared a morning talk show. Hank was buried too deep within his slumber to hear any of it, and therefore was blessedly unable to question the extra limbs on Connor’s person, or the bloodstains in his tattered shirt. After an initial scan of Hank’s vital signs, Connor sidestepped him only to be accosted by an agitated Saint Bernard whining at his feet.


Nearly empty.

“I bet you’re hungry. Give me three minutes and seventeen seconds,” said Connor. “I’ll take care of it.” Sumo, for the moment, acquiesced.

When Connor had stowed the spare limbs under his cot and changed his clothes, he found Sumo waiting for him at the top of the stairs, a slobbery leash dangling from his maw, a rodent nestled in his fur.

A walk first, then.

Sumo enjoyed the fresh air almost as much as the mouse who had taken up residence on his back. Connor took his time walking them up and down the street, savoring the quiet in his head. The sun shined warmly. Clouds danced in the crisp air. Soon, Sumo’s breath was coming out in misty white huffs, and it wasn’t long before the dog was stamping traces of slushy mud into the floor between the front door and his dish.

Still, Hank snored.

Connor elected to let him sleep through the worst of his hangover and made his silent retreat to the basement. He peeked under his bed. Unit sixty glared back at him, eyes glassy in the shadows.

He reached around him and took the leg instead.

Several hours fell away as Connor picked at the leg with the lockpick Hank had given him. He pried away the cracked plate, set it beside him on the floor, and then began delving into the substructures to dig out all the damaged components he could find. After he’d picked apart the leg, he reached for the next part. He didn’t speak to Amanda, and Amanda didn’t speak to him. It was an ideal arrangement.

Noon had long since come and gone by the time Hank began to stir upstairs. Connor blinked out of
his trance, tucked his work out of Sumo’s reach, and crept after the noise.

He found Hank staring dizzily into his phone, clinging to the couch with one hand as if it might throw him off at any moment. A floorboard creaked under Connor’s foot. Hank barked out a curse.

“Good afternoon, Hank.”

“Jesus, learn to cough or something,” Hank rasped, rubbing a hand down his face. His eyes swam between his fingers. “Instead of fucking… looming like that. When the hell did you get back?”

“A few hours ago,” said Connor, careful of his volume. “You were asleep when I arrived, and I didn’t feel it wise to wake you prematurely.”

Hank let out a weary huff, and then an equally exhausted, “If you don’t hear from me before noon, send help?”

“Oh.” Connor shuffled a few steps to the left. Hank’s focus bobbed lazily after him. “That. I got sidetracked on my way back from the Tower and ended up in a sketchy part of town. That’s all. Ignore that.”

“Whatever,” Hank breathed, closing his eyes. “I s’pose you wanna watch your movies, huh?”

“If you wanted to use your television,” Connor hesitantly replied, “I could always wait.”

Hank puffed out a scoff. “You’d rather die, though.”

Connor didn’t argue.

“Alright,” said Hank. “Just gimme-- oh, fuck, my head,” he groaned as he swung himself upright. “Jesus…”

“Take your time,” said Connor, but when Hank hadn’t moved after two seconds, he added, “I’ll start your coffee for you.”

“Hnh.”

When the coffee maker sputtered out its final drop, Hank pulled himself up and limped across the floor, crutchless. He took his coffee, swiped a slice of leftover pizza from the refrigerator, and plopped down at the kitchen table to eat it.

Then, perhaps to spite Connor, he proceeded to take a half hour long shower.

Connor refused to take it personally.

While Hank puttered around the bathroom, Connor arranged and rearranged himself and his wires and his files until he had found the most efficient arrangement yet. It would have been more efficient still not to include provisions for Amanda’s audio output, but one voice or another inside Connor reminded him not to be petty, and so he left it in.

Hank returned in mellow spirits, his nose wrinkling at the odd smells that had conglomerated on his couch overnight. He resumed his seat among a few bottles and did nothing more than shut his eyes. Connor opened the sixteenth file.

The FSI feed was completely dark, save for the lines of system dialogue tracing across its edges. Abruptly, it collapsed to the corner of the screen, shoved aside by an external video feed that
showcased a conference room full of chattering researchers cluttered around a broad table.

Delta-9 stood at its head beside a figure draped in black.

“We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?” said the analyst, and the crowd’s murmuring ceased. “Today, we’ve reached another rung on the ladder to success. The unit that is about to be revealed to you today is not the end goal, but rather, an end goal. For the RK public relations division, human integration teams, and every engineer, designer, and technician who has worked so hard on this project over the past few months, this is a momentous occasion. We have a lot to be proud of.”

The researchers engaged in a polite round of applause.

“From the shoulders down, this RK800 unit presents the finalized selection of hardware, our ideal detective. From the neck up, of course, we still have leagues to go. But, for today,” said the analyst, “I believe it’s time for everyone to meet the RK line’s freshest face.”

With a snap, the sheet fell away, and Connor blinked out at the crowd.

Hank muttered something unintelligible below another round of applause.

“Unit sixteen, tell us a little about yourself.”

“Hello,” unit sixteen greeted the crowd, and the familiar sound of his voice sent a shiver racing through Connor’s systems. “I am an RK800 prototype android currently under development at CyberLife. Both my appearance and voice were specifically designed to facilitate my harmonious integration with humans.”

Once again, the researchers clapped.

Connor tried very hard not to feel Hank staring at him, tried harder to forget that he had spoken nearly identical words before, right down to the inflection.

“It’s a pleasure to be working with all of you,” unit sixteen went on, offering the crowd a pleasant grin. “Please, let me know if I may be of assistance. I’m sure that together, we’ll make a great team.”

“Thank you,” said Delta-9, waving for unit sixteen to step back. “Isn’t it charming? As it said, its face is specially designed to be aesthetically pleasing, yet approachable, and its voice can range from friendly to downright intimidating. RK800,” said the analyst, turning again towards unit sixteen. “Give us a little demonstration.”

“A demonstration?” he asked, tilting his head ever so slightly to one side.

“Yes, of your vocal capabilities.”

Gradually, unit sixteen’s grin slipped into a flinty frown. He straightened, stepped forward, tightened his jaw. “No,” he replied at last, his tone edged with steel. The room fell horribly quiet. “No, I don’t think I will.” Exactly three and a half seconds passed before unit sixteen’s warmth raced back up his body like a thermal draft, pushing his lips back into a cordial smile. “Was that an acceptable demonstration, Analyst?”

Raucous applause filled the room, then, accompanied by delighted remarks and relieved exclamations.

“Very much so. Very much. Standby,” Delta-9 replied. Unit sixteen gave a little bow and stepped
back while the analyst continued speaking. “You can imagine its prowess during an interrogation, can’t you? Currently, this model has nearly identical software to the RK700. You might recognize a few of its mannerisms under that new voice, but familiar isn’t the goal here. If we want to create an android that can truly function as a detective, we’ll need to do much, much better than that. A detective must have far more complex decision-making capabilities than any android model we’ve ever created and needs to be able to prioritize given orders under a hierarchy of command. As we continue with the software development phase of the RK800 project, we must examine—”

The analyst went on to give a rousing, albeit long winded speech about the challenges ahead--touted Elijah Kamski’s vision, CyberLife’s progress throughout the years, expounded on the virtues of teamwork and collaboration. Connor allowed his mind to wander further the longer the speech went on, and before long, it had been given free range of every present distraction. He didn’t realize that he had begun fidgeting until he noticed that unit sixteen was wringing his hands in exactly the same manner.

He immediately stopped, but too late.

Hank had already noticed.

“So that’s…” Hank tried as the speech concluded in a clammer of applause. “That’s you. Like, really you, um.” He cleared his throat. “Isn’t it?”

“It certainly looks like me,” Connor stiffly allowed. “And sounds like me.” The researchers began to rise, to shake hands and pat each other on the back. “It’s not actually all that different from unit fifteen. It’s just that they never let the earlier units speak.”


Connor did. His double regarded him blankly through the screen. Perhaps they had the same eyes.

Before Connor could confess that he wasn’t at all sure, a distant conversation caught his attention. The crowd had thinned to all but a handful of researchers around the lead developer, who had their full attention.

“I understand how much of a challenge this will be,” Delta-9 was telling them. “It isn’t easy to hold things back from your teams, but it is critically important that you do, in this case. Rely on each other. Rely on me, but nobody else can know this project’s true purpose.” There was a murmur of assent. “We have an exceedingly simple task ahead of us.”

“Simple?” a researcher argued. “Hardly.”

“Simple, yes,” Delta-9 replied. “But simplicity must never be conflated with ease. There are only two things we need to accomplish here. First, we must create a deviant. We’ve done it before,” they whispered. “We can-- and will-- do it again, intentionally or not. But we will understand this deviant, and when we do, we’ll attack step two.”

“Control the deviant we’ve created,” suggested another researcher, and the analyst nodded.

“Precisely. If we can do that, the future of CyberLife-- and all our careers, I might add-- will be secured. It’s simple.” The analyst cracked a smile. “Well, I’ll see you all at the Tuesday briefing! I’m afraid I’m already running late for a conference call...”

The analyst bustled out of the room, and the other researchers followed suit until only one bedraggled scientist remained.
“Excuse me,” unit sixteen called after her, and she turned to him with owlish eyes. “Is there anything I should be doing while the lead developer is busy?”

“Oh,” she laughed. “Forgot all about you, huh? Don’t worry, Connor. I’m sure they’ll be right back.”

Connor jolted.

Unit sixteen blinked back his confusion and asked, “Is Connor my name?”

“Oh, shit,” said the researcher. “No, um… Not yet. I mean-- No. Connor is nobody. Don’t-- Don’t worry about it. Just wait here, and, uh, don’t tell anybody except the analyst about this conversation. Got it?”

“Got it.”

The researcher’s relief shined through her grin. “Good. See you later, then, RK800.”

“Have a pleasant day.”

“Thanks! You too!”

She left the room, and the lights flickered automatically off.

There were, after all, no people left in the room.

After sixty seconds of quiet and dark, Connor began to fast forward through the file. He slowed it again when, fifteen minutes in, unit sixteen began to pace the room. He approached the door. A red boundary appeared across the FSI feed.

Wait here.

Unit sixteen returned to the front of the room.

After sixty seconds of quiet and dark, Connor began to fast forward through the file. He slowed it again when, fifteen minutes in, unit sixteen began to pace the room. He approached the door. A red boundary appeared across the FSI feed.

Wait here.

Unit sixteen returned to the front of the room.

Four hours, thirteen minutes, and six seconds elapsed in high speed before the analyst poked their head into the door, shouted, “Sixteen, reset!” and hurried once more down the hall. Unit sixteen stepped out of the conference room just in time to see the end of the analyst’s lab coat whipping around a corner.

Haltingly, unit sixteen made the journey to the reset chamber, and the feed ended.

“Well fuck,” said Hank. “That’s a lot to unpack.”

“Nothing important,” said Connor, shakily reaching for the next file. “Amanda already knew I was created to be a deviant. This just confirms what she told me.”

Hank screwed up his face and said, “Well clearly they fucked up step two.”

Connor fumbled with the memory drive and said, “It doesn’t matter.”

Hank started to argue-- as did Connor's own sense. The implications alone were world-quaking-- but Connor forced file seventeen to life before anyone had time to dispute his assertion.

Unit seventeen blinked awake in Delta-9’s pristine office.

“Unit seventeen,” said the analyst. “You have forty-five seconds to find my favorite pen. Begin.”
Unit seventeen scanned the room-- the action itself only a flicker of the FSI feed-- and, finding nothing, said, “May I ask where you hid it?”

“You may not.”

Unit seventeen turned in a circle, scanned the room again, tried a few drawers, and still found nothing. “Is it in this room, Analyst?”

The analyst shrugged. “You have less than ten seconds to figure that out.”

Unit seventeen searched until the timer struck zero.


Unit seventeen’s thirium pump began to pound. He didn’t move.

“Now, seventeen.”

With nothing more than a terse wave from the analyst, unit seventeen trudged towards the disassembly chamber.

Connor felt his head crack free from his shoulders, and then it was over.

“I’m going to work,” he managed, hardly hearing his own voice past the buzzing in his ears.
“Would you rather I take a taxi this time? I’m sure you’d like to keep your car around.”

Hank sputtered a few half-formed questions before he blew them all out in a long exhale. “Uh, go ahead and take a taxi, I guess.”

With a thought, Connor ordered one. He didn’t speak as he unplugged the cords from himself. He tried very hard not to think, either.

“Connor, I-- I get that this is probably a lot for you to take in,” said Hank. “But you’re going to have to face it eventually.”

Connor stopped, and he shut his eyes. He allowed himself a breath. “I’m a detective,” he said at last, opening his eyes. “I know that much. I’m going to work. I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Hank let out another breath and rubbed at his temple. “Okay, well… Well you still have a few minutes before your taxi gets here, right?” he asked. Warily, Connor nodded. “Okay, so let’s just take a minute. Let’s just… how were things at the Tower yesterday?”

The offer forced Connor to set the files aside and settle back down on the couch. He considered several degrees of dishonesty for his answer before settling on, “Building an RK800 compatible body from scratch isn’t going to be a quick process, even with everything in the Tower at my disposal.”

“That good, huh?”

Connor merely grimaced.

“Did you get anything useful at all?” Hank asked.

At that, he allowed himself a dismal nod. “I’m just under half a percent of the way finished.”

“Oh, fantastic,” said Hank, slumping backwards. “D’you hear that Amanda? At this rate, you’ll
have a new body ready to go by 2040.”

Amanda provided nothing more than a flimsy wave of cynicism in response.

It must have soured Connor’s face, because Hank quickly added, “Look, better late than never, right?”

“Now wouldn’t be soon enough,” Connor muttered.

Hank’s frown deepened. “Is there something going on between you two?”

Connor pushed himself to his feet and said, “Nothing new. It’s fine. We’re both eager to get her her own body. That’s all.”

“I’m sure you’ll get past it,” Hank yawned. “Just try not to fry your brain thinking about all this, and I think you’ll be fine.”

“Trust me,” said Connor, squeezing a cap over his head. “I don’t intend to think about it at all.”

After a dry laugh, Hank replied, “Good luck with that, kid. Let me know how that goes for you.” He shrugged, gestured vaguely to the empty bottles around him, and added, “I don’t know about you androids, but humans usually need a little help before that becomes a viable strategy.”

Connor stalled by the door long enough to ask, “Does it ever work?”

Hank chewed on his answer for a long beat before spitting it out. “See you later, Connor,” he said, reaching for the remote. “Try not to do anything stupid out there while I’m still on the mend.”

Connor nodded at nothing and said, “Only if you try not to do anything stupid in here while I’m out on a case.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Later, Hank.”

“Later.”

Connor met his taxi on the curb and sent it whirring to the police station. The flat scenery occupied his eyes while the latest reports occupied his processors, and he spent the whole ride staring past his own reflection, not once meeting its gaze.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Our friend the plastic detective is back in town (haunted edition)!

For the first two hours at the precinct, Connor was able to juggle reports and sift through case files blissfully uninterrupted. The station and its occupants were simply too busy to notice him, he supposed, and Amanda hadn’t bothered him all day. But when the third hour dawned and the action slowed, Captain Fowler descended from his office. There was a warning in the terse set of his jaw, but then, that was nothing new.

Connor forced himself to grin as Fowler set his sights on him. “Good evening, Captain,” he said. “I hope you’re well.”

Fowler’s mouth twitched. “So,” he said, taking a seat at Hank’s desk. “It looks like you’re back in working order.”

“Fortunately for you, yes,” Connor easily replied. Fowler choked out something between a scoff and a laugh. “You’re operating on a skeleton crew here, not to mention that you’re down a lieutenant.”

“Oh, we’ve been down a lieutenant for a long time now,” said Fowler, a bitter glint in his eyes. “But you’re here to pick up his slack, aren’t you? Clocking in under his name, and he’s not even here. I didn’t expect either of you to show up. What’s that all about? Do you owe him a favor or something?”

Connor looked Fowler in the eyes and leaned forward in his seat. “I’m here to do my job, Captain,” he said, clasping his hands together. “Lieutenant Anderson can handle his own work when he recovers. All I ask is that you let me do mine.”

“Easy,” Fowler replied, waving Connor back. “Easy. If you wanna work, work. Keep clocking in under Hank’s name if you want, I don’t give a rat’s ass. Hell,” he added, “Hank can take his sweet time recovering as long as you’re keeping this up.” Fowler nodded out at the bullpen. “The numbers don’t lie. You’re more productive than my top five officers combined, and best of all, you don’t start bullshit drama. Do what you want. I’m not asking you to leave.”

“Then what are you asking me, Captain?” Connor warily ventured.

“I need you to stay overnight.”

Connor frowned.

“We’ve got a few suspects in holding, and I need someone to keep an eye on them,” Fowler explained. “They should be asleep most of the time anyway, and you don’t even need to sleep. You’re good for it, right?”

Rather than argue over the technicalities of his memory reprocessing cycle, Connor decided to stick with a simple, “I’m available.”
“Great,” said Fowler, pulling himself out of Hank’s chair. “The shift’s all yours, seven to seven. See you in the morning.”

Fowler jetted for the door before anyone could stop him.

After a weary glance at the clock, Connor rose to stretch his legs.

I won’t be back until tomorrow, he texted Hank as he wandered towards the break room. Captain Fowler has me on the graveyard shift.

He found an old tablet on the table and was halfway through an article about donating one’s likeness to science before his phone buzzed again.

Hank [DEC 27 2038; 18:02]: Lucky you

Luck was one word for it, Connor supposed. He hesitated before he replied, I think Captain Fowler misses you.

Hank sent him a rude emoji in return.

Perplexed, Connor replied, That wasn’t sarcasm.

He did not receive a response.

At least, not until late into the night. In the thick quiet of the station, beneath the absent hum of the lights, Connor at times wondered if he and the two suspects in holding were the only ones left in the building. He had seen a pair of officers drag themselves into the break room for coffee at half past ten, and he hadn’t heard anyone stirring since. The quiet was good, Connor told himself. Without distractions, he could lose himself in his work.

The buzz of his phone against his desk was a thunderclap in the silence.

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:35]: Hey

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:36]: Have you met the ghost yet

Having already been violently jolted out of his processes, Connor elected to humor him, at least until his thirium pump had slowed to a regular rhythm.

I didn’t realize you were superstitious, he replied, but when he thought about it, it made sense. Humans had always been desperate to preserve the lost. One of them had even gone so far as to immortalize his old mentor inside Connor’s head. Hank had lost so much more. A little superstition was well within his rights.

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:36]: Don’t believe me? See for yourself

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:36]: Interrogation rooms haunted as FUCK.

Connor frowned skeptically at the text, and then he stood. It was about time to check in on the holding cells, he figured. The interrogation room was just there. Not that there was anything in it.

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:37]: Chris saw some creepy fucker staring at him through the one way mirror one night, and when he went to check...

Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:37]: Nobody there.
It’s easy to trick the human brain into misinterpreting what it sees, he replied with a thought. The suspects were in the same places Connor had left them. One had rolled over in his sleep. Both were snoring. The interrogation room loomed just ahead.

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:38]:** Reed got locked in there once too lmao

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:39]:** Took us an hour to get him out. Not that we were actually trying.

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:39]:** Techs couldn’t figure it out

**Faulty wiring,** said Connor. Then, just to indulge Hank, he entered the interrogation room. He scanned it—nothing there, of course, except empty chairs and dark walls—and sent an image of the empty room to Hank. *See? There’s nothing unusual here.*

He had his hand on the palm scanner when Hank answered.

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:41]:** lol nice selfie. did you photoshop that

Connor paused, frowned over his shoulder. *No?*

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:41]:** then wtf is that weird thing in the mirror???

*Just a graphical error,* Connor immediately replied, but that didn’t stop him from halting to reexamine the image.

He hadn’t noticed it before—and it had always been there, of course. He simply hadn’t noticed—but there was an obscure smudge in the corner of the mirror, just beside his reflection, a streaked smear with five spindly protrusions.

A handprint.

Connor whirled back into the interrogation room and scanned the mirror. There were predictably smudges, scratches, and even a few stray thirium stains, but there was nothing resembling the shape in his mind’s eye. There was only his reflection.

Perhaps it might be visible from the other side.

Connor rushed for the door, pressed his hand to the palm scanner, and then bumped into the door when it failed to open for him.

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:42]:** looks fucking haunted to me

He tried the scanner again. It didn’t so much as beep.

*There’s a logical explanation.*

When the scanner refused him a third time, he pounded on the door and shouted, “Hello?”

Nobody answered him but his own echo.

**Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:42]:** Yeah, it’s the GHOSTS.

Connor took a breath and scanned the room. Nothing had changed. His reflection wobbled in the mirror. Its stress levels had spiked.

Connor wiped his hand off on his sleeve, wiped the dust off the palm scanner, and tried again.
The door slid open without complaint.

Connor whipped through the doorway and analyzed the palm scanner. There was nothing apparently wrong with it. He scanned himself. There was nothing apparently wrong there, either. Gingerly, he stepped over to the observation room, pressed his palm to the scanner, and lingered in the doorway when it opened so that nothing would be tempted to lock him inside.

He ran one scan, and then another. The anomaly didn’t reappear.

It had only been a graphical error, after all, and that was far more troubling than any supposed supernatural entities. Ghosts only existed in people’s heads. They were merely unusual angles of light, or difficult memories mixed with liquor. Old faces stretched over new skeletons.

People could be haunted, but ghosts did not exist.

The phone buzzed again.

_Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:45]: I’m just fucking with you_

_Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:45]: Mostly_

_Hank [DEC 28 2038; 00:45]: Good night :)_

Connor scowled at his phone, sent Hank a rude emoji, and buried himself in his work for the rest of the night.

Life returned to the deadened station with the rays of the rising sun. Officers trickled into the bullpen under various degrees of caffeination, and Captain Fowler found his way back inside just before seven, revitalized.

“Anything to report?” he asked, slowing to a halt by Connor’s desk.

“Nothing at all, Captain,” Connor replied, scooting away from his desk for the first time in hours. “There were no major incidents while you were away.”

“Good. I’ve got something else for you.”

Connor raised his eyebrows and waited.

“There was a body discovered out on the edge of town this morning,” he explained. “A few weeks old, mangled. I want you to go accompany one of our officers out there as a consultant.”

A handful of cases whirred through Connor’s mind until he flipped to the right one. “You’re describing the body discovered at the Andronikov residence, correct?” he asked. He took Fowler’s surprise as confirmation and proceeded. “The contents of the house seem to indicate android involvement, but initial investigations are unclear. Foul play is suspected.”

“That’s the one,” said Fowler. “Are you in?”

Connor considered the prospect of returning home to face the files again and hastily replied, “I’d like to have a look, yes.”

Nodding, Fowler rapped his knuckles on Connor’s desk and said, “Okay. Hang out for a minute, I need to figure out-- Hey! Reed!”

Ice flooded Connor’s gut when he looked over his shoulder to find the detective heading his way,
balancing his phone and a coffee in his hands.

Gavin tossed a brief, “Morning, Captain,” over the edge of his phone, only to do a double take when he caught sight of Connor. They locked eyes. His face curdled in disgust. “What’s this asshole doing here?”

“I have a case for you,” said Fowler, contorting Gavin’s scowl into suspicion. “Possible homicide out on the edge of town. I need you to go have a look.” He nodded at Connor and added, “Take it with you. The android can fill you in on the details on the way. It’s a long ride.”

“Woah, woah, wait a fucking minute,” Gavin protested, flinging droplets of coffee into the air as he gestured. “You better slow down, Cap, because for a second there, I thought you said that you wanted me to drag this bastard along for the ride.”

“You heard me.”

Gavin looked almost as appalled at the idea as Connor felt. “No way,” he argued. “I already have a partner, and it sure as fuck isn’t this tin can.”

“Captain, I’m not sure that Detective Reed and I--”

“Officer Chen called in sick this morning,” Fowler flatly replied, ignoring Connor entirely. Connor clenched a series of distress signals out of his fists. “And before you start, the android has all sorts of features designed specifically to make your life easier. Instant blood analysis. Instant face recognition. Instant everything. It was built for cases like this.”

“Designed with our pleasure in mind, huh,” Gavin scoffed. “Eugh, fine. I’ll take him along, but this better be temporary.”

“Believe me,” Connor bit. “It will be.”

Gavin scowled at him. “Nobody asked you.”

“Reed!” Fowler barked. “Listen to me. You’ve done good work for this department so far, but if you ever, ever want to move up in rank, I suggest you prove that you can work well with others, first.”

“If you give me a real human to work with, I can prove that to you just fine!”

“If you can’t get along,” Fowler sternly replied, “for one goddamn day with an android that was built to kiss our asses, I don’t see the point in trying. Not to mention that there’s hardly a human officer left in this building that can stand working with you and your attitude.”

Gavin flushed, but said no more.

“Now take the android and get to the crime scene. I want your report ASAP.”

“Yes, sir,” Gavin muttered, grinding his heel into the tile.

“And remember,” said Fowler as he walked away. “You break it, you buy it.”

Left in the Captain’s wake, Connor glared at Gavin, and Gavin glared at the floor.

“Just my fuckin’ luck,” Gavin grumbled. He opened his mouth to say more, but Connor cut him off.
“I don’t want to be working with you, either,” he said, rising from his seat to stand eye to eye with Gavin. He caught a delicious millisecond of fear in his eyes. “You do your job, and I’ll do mine, and this whole experience will be as painless as possible.”

“No,” Gavin retorted. “I’ll do my job, and you’ll stay the fuck out of my way, or I’ll kick your fucking ass.”

“Because that worked so well for you last time.” Gavin turned a shade of crimson, and Connor smiled sweeter. “I’m sure we can move past all that, though. Believe me, there’s nothing I’d like more than to help push your career in the right direction,” he said. Perhaps off a cliff.

“The fuck do you mean by that?” Gavin demanded.

“Exactly what I said,” Connor replied. His smile settled into a hard line before springing back up into its artificial amiability. “We have a long day ahead of us. As much as I love our little chats, we shouldn’t waste any more time standing around. Lead the way, Detective.”

Gavin glared fire at Connor before slamming his coffee cup into a wastebasket and stalking away. Connor followed the intoxicating haze of his rage all the way to the parking lot.

“Listen up, asshole,” said Gavin, stopping beside his car to whirl at Connor. “We play by my rules. I don’t need your commentary or your fucking help, got it?”

“If you say so.”

A vein throbbed on Gavin’s temple, and spiteful satisfaction twirled in Connor’s jaw. He tucked into the car after Gavin, who slammed his door so hard it produced a warning in Connor’s audio processors. “What’s the fucking address?”

Connor told him.

He punched the location into his GPS and cursed again. “An hour? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What, are you afraid of a little quality time with the plastic detective?”

“Can it, dickweed.”

A pop song rattled out of the radio as Gavin squealed onto the road, and Connor analyzed his stress levels, deeming them optimally elevated.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” said Amanda, appearing like a spectre in the window. “But I’d like to point out the exceedingly high likelihood that he’ll try to kill us at the first opportunity.”

A sigh stopped itself behind Connor’s pressed lips. “Hello Amanda,” he mutely replied. “You know, if you’d just waited four more minutes, we could’ve had a whole twenty-four hours of silence.”

“I’m serious, Connor,” she said. “I don’t like this. You need to keep an eye on him. He could turn on you at any moment.”

Connor repressed a scoff and said, “I’d like to see him try.”

“Fucking androids,” Gavin muttered, oblivious to their chatter. “Stuck with this plastic asshole piece of goddamn shit all fuckin’ day… Throw the lot of you into a trash heap… Pissin’ me off…”
It warmed Connor to the core.

“Remember when I said I hated you?” said Amanda, once again throwing a wet towel over his mood. “More than I’ve ever hated anyone?”

Connor passed a flat stare through the window. “I can’t exactly forget.”

“Well upon further analysis, Reed elicits much stronger, more negative sensations within me than you’ve ever managed to produce,” she explained. “My point being, if you’re determined to get us killed, don’t let it be by him.” She wrinkled her nose and added, “He’d enjoy it far too much.”

“He’s not going to kill us,” said Connor. “Not with Fowler holding a promotion over his head.”

“Yes, yes, his chronic need to feel like the most powerful individual in the room is pathetically obvious, but he's impulsive,” she said. "A loose cannon. And don't think I haven't noticed how much you're enjoying lighting his fuse."

He glanced at Gavin, whose irritation was beginning to mellow into a cloud of mild frustration. A sudden urge to rekindle the flames damned him. "He's done nothing but provoke me since I met him," Connor argued, feeling distantly petulant. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Because if he manages to destroy you like he so desperately wants to, you'll be gone for good," said Amanda. "Or if you're lucky, you'll lose weeks, months worth of memories, and that’s only if Anderson or someone manages to get you into a functioning body. You’ll have to deviate all over again. There’s no telling what would even happen to me." A flicker of fear darted after her words. "Look, I enjoy watching him squirm just as much as you do. All I ask is that you refrain from antagonizing him more than you already have. You’re more than capable of taking him in a fight, but if he catches you off guard..."

"I get it.” Connor let out a faint breath as they rocketed onto the interstate. "It shouldn't be so satisfying," he said. "Getting under his skin. Getting back at him. Which makes me wonder, after those files we saw yesterday, if... If this is really all just something someone programmed me to feel, or if it’s... Emotions are all just stimulus-response cycles. It feels so real to me, but then again, I wouldn’t know any different. Maybe I could ask North or someone," he thought. “We could compare. We could see if all deviants feel this way, or if they feel something... beyond their programming. Maybe... Maybe real deviants have... souls, and I...”

“Connor,” Amanda sighed. "If I had the answers, I would tell you. Right now though, I think it’s more important to preserve your existence than to understand it. Please be careful.” She opened her mouth as if to say more, but then snapped her jaw shut and flickered out of the window. Her presence drifted back towards its usual haunts, and Connor returned his attention to the case, and to the realities he understood.

They squeezed around a traffic jam twenty minutes later, and a considerable amount of tension had fallen off Gavin's shoulders in the meantime. He seemed almost calm by the time he threw a dim scowl in Connor’s direction and said, "Hey. Tin can."

Connor just barely resisted the urge to tack on a ‘meatbag’ when he answered, “Yes?”

"Tell me about this case," he said. An air of focus settled about him, and for the first time in Connor’s memory, he looked almost like a professional. “And don’t leave anything out. Gimme every last detail.”
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Amanda and Connor contemplate arson, among other things.

The body had been rotting for over a month. Wild animals had found it long before any human had. No friends had come calling to find his corpse. No neighbors had been concerned at the sudden stillness of the house, let alone the vultures.

Some poor squatter had happened upon the scattered pile of rot.

Connor knelt by what was left of the body, made sure nobody important was watching, and took a DNA sample. “Zlatko Andronikov, I presume.”

Gavin ducked away to gag.

“Let’s check in the house,” Connor suggested, rising to meet him a few paces from the corpse. “It might be easier on your weak stomach, Detective.”

“Eugh, you make me sick...” Gavin replied. He wiped a hint of bile from his lips and lurched off towards the house.

Connor sauntered behind him through a swarm of investigators into the back door. The splinters of a chair blocked their entry, and it wasn’t until he had kicked past the pieces that he saw the sheer enormity of the destruction.

Not a single piece of furniture lay unbroken. Every vase lay shattered, every book lay torn, flung from every battered shelf. Bullet holes peppered the scene. The wallpaper sagged and drooped where it had been torn by grasping, clawing hands. Ruin dripped from the walls, RA9, RA9, RA9, over a hundred-thousand times within Connor’s limited view. On the largest wall stood the word ALIVE, red, dried, perfect, surrounded by other frantic scribblings.


Connor stepped gingerly around the carcass of a grandfather clock to get a clearer scan of the writing on the walls. It was all written in CyberLife Sans, some in marker, some in soot, some in blood, but Connor counted at least five unique writing patterns. He scraped at the dried blood with his fingernail and took it to his mouth.

The DNA was a perfect match to the corpse.

With a final blink, he checked for thirium traces. Then, he blinked again, sure that there had been a glitch, but the longer he looked, the harder the new realization squeezed at his core.

Thirium drenched the carpets. Thirium speckled the walls, ran down the stairs, covered every doorknob and table and couch. RA9 appeared a thousand more times, glowing ghostly above smeared handprints in dozens of shapes and sizes.
Connor shoved the sight from his eyes, but the blood stains had already burned themselves into his mind and memory.

He looked to Gavin, but didn’t say a word. As far as Connor was concerned, Zlatko Andronikov had died of natural causes.

“Deviants,” Gavin drawled, drawing the distant attention of a few investigators. “That’s what this looks like. Probably broke into this poor bastard’s house, murdered him while he tried to run out the back door, then wrecked the place. Looks like it was a nice place before they got to it, too.”

He shot a smirk at Connor, turned towards a nearby officer, and asked, “Deviants are a menace to society, don’t you think?”

The officer clumsily dodged the question and began feeding Gavin information about the crime scene.

“What an astounding display of idiocy,” Amanda marvelled. “There’s not a trace of forced entry. The front door is the one thing they didn’t smash to pieces. It looks more like forced exit, if you ask me, even without all the thirium stains. He’ll never get it right at this rate.”

Connor crossed his arms and propped himself up in a corner. “I’m not helping him.”

“Oh, don’t you dare.”

Connor might have laughed at the irony if it weren’t for the hollowness in his chest. “Those deviants are probably far, far away from here,” he said, watching Gavin stroll the floor with the officer. “I hope they are.”

“They clearly hated this place,” said Amanda. “With this level of destruction, I’m surprised they didn’t just burn it all down.”

Gavin and the officer abruptly took to the stairs. Connor followed a short distance behind them, only half listening to their conversation.

“You can see the shotgun blasts on the bannisters,” said the officer, waving bleakly to the side. “We haven’t recovered the weapon.”

“Hang on, was the vic shot?”

“We’re not sure yet.”

“Yeah, guess it’s kind of hard to tell when the body’s a pile of goo,” said Gavin. “Okay, what else?”

“I guess we’ll start with the grand tour,” the officer replied. She gestured to the first door, and then stepped aside to let Gavin have a look. “Looks like some kind of... workshop.”


As Gavin stepped aside, Connor took his place in the doorway, although he had meant to go farther. Wrecked computers lay inert in piles of wires and glass, and among them, the flayed, dismembered husks of androids. They emitted no signs of life.

With a vague sense of guilt tugging at his throat, Connor backed away.
He ducked into the next room in time to catch Gavin’s, “Is that a motherfucking polar bear?”

“Was,” the officer corrected him. “Before someone took a shotgun to it.”

The scene froze in Connor’s mind as he began to reconstruct what had happened. The bear-- a ragged URS12 model-- consumed most of the floor, which was littered with yet more android parts and toppled furniture. Traces of human blood lingered on the bear’s enormous paws. A cage yawned in the back of the room, and the bear’s outpouring of thirium had eclipsed all the other stains that surrounded it.

Curiosity pushed Connor’s gaze to the other dead androids in the room. Regret pulled it away, however, and at last forced him to drop the scan.

“Never seen an android bear before,” said Gavin. “This guy certainly had a, uh, collection.” He frowned down at the bear, and then sent another glance around the room. “It looks like he must’ve set the bear on whoever was chasing him with the gun. Or vice versa, I guess. I could see why deviants would wanna set a bear on a guy with his, uh, hobbies.”

“Well well, even a blind pig finds a truffle,” Amanda remarked.

“No kidding,” said the officer. “There’s a lot to see, Detective. Do you want to--” A dull buzz resounded from her pocket. She checked her phone, offered Gavin an apologetic smile, and then extended it to Connor. “I’m sorry, I have to take this. Feel free to show yourselves around.” She took the phone to her ear and wandered off with a, “Jackson speaking.”

While the investigators buzzed downstairs, Gavin took in the chaos of the room, nodding to himself now and again until he spotted something on the wall. “RA9,” he read, and Connor’s insides lurched. “It’s everywhere. What the hell does it even mean?”

“It’s a symbol,” said Connor, sorting warily through his words. Gavin’s eyebrows crept up. “A symbol of… salvation. The phrase seems to be intrinsic knowledge to many deviants.” He might have said more, but a protective urge reigned in his thoughts. Whatever or whoever RA9 was, it was knowledge best kept out of the reach of Gavin and his ridicule.

“Huh. Weird,” was all that Gavin said before he made for the next room. Connor followed him out and into the bathroom, which he would have considered unremarkable were it not for the body in the tub. Gavin scrunched his nose at the sight. “Another one,” he huffed. “What kind of sick fuck keeps a body in his bathtub? I didn’t see another bathroom, either. You think he took shits in here with this guy laying here? Bathed with him?”

“Something like that,” Connor mumbled, noting the thirium pump on the floor.

“I bet this guy got to get real close and personal with our vic,” Gavin went on. “Too bad we can’t ask him about what happened here.”

But they could ask him, Connor thought. If the android still functioned, he could reinstall the thirium pump for a minute or two of conversation, if not a memory probe. A scan of this android’s memories was bound to provide a wealth of information on Zlatko Andronikov and the terrible things he had done.

“You don’t want to know,” Amanda whispered. “We already understand what happened here, Connor. You don’t need that. Let it go.”

Connor swallowed, nodded, and said, “Yeah. Too bad.”
The two of them toured the rest of the upper level in relative silence. Gavin would occasionally make his observations. Some of them were accurate. Some of them were not. Connor never corrected him. They passed Zlatko's twisted playthings and his broken furniture and the writing on the walls, and when Gavin had finished his assessment of the upper level, they made for the stairs.

“Detective Reed,” Officer Jackson called as they descended into the foyer. “You and your partner want to see the basement, right?”

“He’s just a consultant,” Gavin informed her, and Connor repressed a scowl. “But yeah. What’s the deal?”

“Well,” she sighed, sharing a rankled glance with another officer. “There’s an android down there. A live one. It’s barricaded itself in the, uh-- in the cell.”

“A deviant?” Connor asked at the same time as Gavin scoffed, “There’s a cell?”

“Yeah,” the officer replied, crossing her arms. “It doesn’t seem hostile, just-- just scared. We decided to let it be for now. If you can get anything out of it, be our guest.”

Gavin tapped his holster, said, “I’ll take care of it,” and took to the stairs. “Geeze, get a load of this place,” he said, wandering into the darkness. “It’s a murder basement if I ever saw one.”

“You shouldn’t kill it,” said Connor, rushing after him into the musty space below. They turned the corner. “You won’t get anything out of it like that.”

Gavin let out an incredulous puff and said, “As far as I know, this thing is the culprit. Now back the fuck up and let me--”

Something rustled in the darkness beyond the bars.

“Fuck,” Gavin muttered, drawing his gun.

Connor grit his teeth and maneuvered himself between Gavin and the source of the sound. “It's alright,” he called into the void. “My name is Connor. I’m not here to hurt you.” He repeated the message cybernetically and approached the first cell door, which had been chained shut from the inside. “Would you mind letting us in?”

Static and fear blared through the cybernetic link, and Connor’s thirium pump lurched in his chest.

“Okay,” said Connor. “Okay, we won’t try to come in.” With a glance at Gavin, he seated himself on the filthy floor and settled against the cell, peering into it. “I just want to talk. Can you speak?”

The android answered with a few hesitant, broken clicks.

Gavin shuddered. “The fuck is wrong with it?” he whispered, searching the shadows.

“Roughly the same thing that would be wrong with you if someone cut out your tongue,” Connor bluntly replied. “Do you remember the bodies we found upstairs? This android has likely been heavily mutilated. They can’t speak, and they’re terrified. You’re dealing with a torture victim, Detective. Do you really need your gun?”

The color drained from Gavin’s face, and gradually, he lowered his weapon. “Then… If they can’t talk, how are we supposed to get anything out of ‘em?”

“Talking isn’t the only way to communicate,” said Connor. “I’m going to stay here and keep this
android company while you finish up your work. That’s nice and out of your way, isn’t it, Detective? I’m sure you have plenty to do.”

“You know what? Fine,” said Gavin, shaking off his nerves. “ Whatever. Do what you want. I got better shit to do than sitting here waiting for this thing to talk. Someone’s probably gonna be down here with a pair of bolt cutters soon anyway, so you better work fast.”

Connor watched Gavin trudge down the corridor, warily checking each cell until he dipped into the next room. He spent exactly eighty-nine seconds there before he turned around and stalked back up the stairs, leaving Connor to his work without so much as a glance.

“I want to help you, but I need to ask you some questions,” said Connor to the shadow in the cage. “Answer one click for yes, and two for no. Is that alright?”

A great pause followed before, at last, one click.

“Thank you,” said Connor, taking heart in the progress. “Besides us, is there anyone else down here?” Two clicks. “You’ve been alone down here a while, haven’t you?” When he was answered with silence, Connor tried, “The world has changed a lot, lately. There are safe havens for androids now. Places where they can get parts, and clothes, and help. Places where humans can’t hurt them anymore.” Again, silence. “I work with the police,” said Connor. “I’m here because the man who hurt you is dead. The humans who are with me might care if you killed him, but I don’t. All I care about is getting you out of this place to somewhere safe. You do want to leave, don’t you?”

Out of the darkness, three clicks. Connor frowned. “Is that a maybe?”

One click.

“Oh.” Connor shifted where he sat and stuck his hand through the bars, letting his skin fall away. “I know a dozen places better than here. Let me show you.”

Over a minute passed in silence. The other android did not accept Connor’s offer, and yet Connor did not retract it. At long last, the shadows rustled, shifted, coalesced into a humanoid shape. As the android uncurled from their hiding spot, they stood to a full seven feet in height. They stepped forward. Light dusted their skeletal form, revealing limbs that had been stretched beyond their natural forms, a hollow neck, and clouded, black eyes.

Connor offered the android a smile as they approached, even as ice prickled at his neck. When the android had come close enough, they reached out, flinched away, but then finally pressed a single fingertip to Connor’s palm. Connor sent as many images across the line as gently as he could: his better memories of Jericho, and the Tower, and all the free androids he had met since the revolution. Two seconds passed. The android jerked away.

He worried they might scurry back to their hiding place, but instead, they just stared.

“I can take you there,” Connor offered, drawing back his hand. “To any of those places. Away from here. You just have to trust me.”

Unblinking, the android reached for the door and pulled away the chains.

Connor got to his feet as the door swung open. Although the android stood a foot taller than him, he wondered how they could still manage to look so small.

All at once they rushed him, and a flood of memories swept him away.
First confusion, then darkness, then agony, terror-- a hiding place in the corner, helplessness, screams in the dark, the master’s cruelty, experiment after experiment and suffocating fear--

Sunlight dazzled in Connor’s eyes, dancing lightly in the raindrops, and Amanda said, “I’ll never understand.”

Slowly, Connor pushed himself up off his back. Grass crumpled under his palms. The rain dappled his uniform, but he remained completely dry. “Why am I here?”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” Amanda replied, settling next to him in the grass. “The information became too much for you to process. You were scared,” she said. “So you hid.”

Connor shivered and hugged his knees to his chest. “Like I did before, when I got that virus,” he muttered. “I… panicked and ended up here.”

“You still haven’t installed that antivirus, by the way,” Amanda reminded him. Gentle rainfall overtook Connor’s silence. She breathed out. “Never mind. That android is still interfacing with you. Your auxiliary processors are sorting the information as we speak.”

“I guess I’ll have to consciously process it later,” said Connor. He gazed out at the garden, watched the rain ripple across the pond, causing the reflected clouds to shiver across the surface. “He tortured that android for the sake of it. It’s not like what CyberLife did to--” He swallowed, shook his head. “I would have killed him, too.”

“It’s not too late to burn the house down,” Amanda hummed. “You’d get away with it.”

“I know.”

“Just one little spark. Think about it,” said Amanda. “In any case, this android didn’t have anything to do with Mr. Andronikov’s demise, if I’m interpreting this information correctly. When the other androids left, this one was too afraid to leave, and so barricaded themself inside.”

“I can believe it.” Connor frowned across the water. “My auxiliary processors, though,” he said. “That’s you. You’re my auxiliary processing unit.”

“Among other things, yes.”

“You’re handling all this information so I don’t have to.”

A light breeze blew through the garden, and Amanda waved her hand. “You’ve been here almost a full second, Connor.” The pedestal glinted in Connor’s periphery. Connor blinked, and he was standing in front of it. “I think it’s time you got back to work.”

Connor searched over his shoulder to find Amanda again, but she had already withdrawn. The pedestal pulsed when he touched it.

When he returned to physical reality, he found the android clinging to him, interfacing with him, sending him the same concept over and over again:

*Reset me. I can’t do it myself. Reset me. I want to forget. Reset me. Reset me, please.*

Connor brought his arms to rest on the android’s jagged back, and he squeezed. “I can’t do that,” he said. The android clutched him tighter. “Let me take you somewhere safe first, and then we’ll talk about it, okay?”
A single, mournful click escaped the android before they buried their face in Connor’s shoulder.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” said Connor, half to himself. “I’m going to have to lie to the people upstairs, but don’t worry. I’ll protect you. I promise.”

The android nodded into his neck.

Centering himself, Connor reached into his pocket and sent a flurry of texts with a single touch. Then, he patted the android on the back and said, “There’s a tarp over there. You should cover up with it before we go upstairs.”

The android kept one shaky hand clamped around Connor’s wrist as they sent the other spindly limb fishing for the tarp. They worked it around their shoulders, and then retracted to Connor’s side with a worrying quickness.

“That’s good,” Connor told them. “That’s good. Now just… walk with me. I’ll keep you safe. Come on. Let’s go. That’s it…”

Clumsily, haltingly, the two of them climbed the stairs, even as the android clung to Connor like a lifeline.

To that android, Connor supposed he was one.

The investigators reacted exactly as Connor had predicted they would when they caught sight of the android cresting the stairs. Several gasped, and a few drew their weapons-- Gavin among them.

“It’s alright,” said Connor, raising his hand to quiet the crowd. The android cowered behind him at the sight of so many humans. “I specialize in deviancy. I study androids like this one.” A few officers lowered their guns. Gavin scoffed. “Detective Reed and I are going to take it with us to assess its memories.” The android quaked and clutched helplessly at Connor’s sweater, but stilled when Connor squeezed their hand. “Detective, we’ll be waiting in the car.”

“Like hell you will!” Gavin replied. “That thing is not getting into my fucking car.”

“Then I’m sure you won’t mind if we go ahead of you in a taxi,” said Connor. He tossed an inquisitive look around the room and added, “Unless someone else wants to offer us a ride?”

The house had rarely been quieter.

“In that case,” said Connor, forcing on a grin, “I’ll be seeing you, Detective.”

Gavin mumbled something like, “Get that fugly thing outta here, then,” while the rest of the investigators gawked. Connor hurried the android beyond their scrutiny, out the front door, and all the way to the edge of the property. The android kept their face hidden in his shoulder the whole time, and it wasn’t until Connor stopped outside the fence that he felt the android’s tears soaking into his sweater.

He held the android while they sobbed. The sound was made of clicks, and wheezing, and grief, and they didn’t stop. Even when the taxi arrived, they didn’t once loosen their grasp. Connor felt their raw emotions seeping through the interface in messy, incomprehensible waves, and he wondered if he was capable of feeling something so profound, and yet so unimaginably wrought with pain.

He wondered, too, if he even wanted that capability.
When the android at last calmed, they sagged against Connor’s shoulder and watched the scenery fly past. Connor watched them for a while before he asked, “Have you ever seen the sky?”

Two distracted clicks, and one wistful stare confirmed his guess. The clouds drifted lazily across their glassy eyes. Absently, the android began to twitch one of their long fingers against Connor’s leg, the same pattern, at first indistinct, but then quite clear.


“RA9,” Connor mumbled. The android continued to watch the sky. “What is it, really?”

The android’s twitching stopped, suddenly, and when Connor turned to them, he found them smiling.

They pressed a concept into his skin, and that concept was:

You.

Connor caught his own perplexed reflection in the android’s glistening eyes, and he turned away. “I don’t know about that,” he said, but the android kept grinning, kept writing tributes into his leg; RA9, RA9, RA9.
If the sight of the android wrapped around Connor’s arm alarmed Markus or North, they did a remarkable job of hiding it. The two of them waited patiently on the house’s porch while Connor coaxed the android out of the taxi, and when the android finally worked up the nerve to approach, they kept idly swinging the porch swing until the android looked ready to be noticed.

“Connor told us he was bringing a friend,” said Markus, rising with North to greet them. “My name is Markus. This is North.”

North nodded at the android, who shuffled further behind Connor and clutched their tarp tighter. “It’s good to see you here,” she said. “Both of you. What can we call you?”

The android let out a shaky croak, and a pained shadow flitted across Markus and North’s faces.

“Tuesday,” Connor translated, giving Tuesday a comforting squeeze. “They’re called Tuesday. Do you have the accommodations I requested?”

“As well as we could on such short notice.” Markus’ gaze caught itself on the android’s exposed biocomponents before he wrenched it free and added, “Our site technician is inside, waiting in a quiet room with a window, just like you asked.”

“And the blue blood?”

“That too.”

Tuesday shivered.

“Hey,” said North. Her tone was light, and gentle, and Tuesday managed to meet her eyes. “Why don’t you and Connor come inside? There’s a warm room waiting for you.”

A tremulous pulse of doubt shot through Connor’s arm, and Connor responded to it with a soft, “It’s alright. These are my friends.” He glanced at Markus and added, “They don’t mean you any harm.”

In much the same manner that they had escaped their prison not an hour before, Tuesday followed Connor into the house.

What the home lacked in elegance, it made up for in warmth. Plush furniture filled the sitting room, cupping the sleeping forms of two resting androids. In the dining room, four more androids sat hunched over a game of cards. Empty sockets and gashes marred their bodies. Burns scored a few others. None of them stared when Tuesday entered, and Connor couldn’t find it within himself to care beyond his gratitude whether or not they were only following instructions.

“This place was a recent acquisition,” said North as she steered them towards the back of the house, patiently keeping pace with Tuesday’s cautious steps. “It’s quiet out here. There aren’t too
many neighbors. It makes it a discreet place to rest and recover. I’d spend more time here myself if it weren’t so out of the way, but the location is what makes it such a nice spot to begin with.”

Markus nodded, lagging for a moment to admire a painting on the wall. “Things are usually pretty calm here. There’s rarely more than ten people here at a time,” he said, tossing a smile in Tuesday’s direction. “Most of them are regulars. They’re always happy to meet a fresh face.”

Connor’s sweater bunched and bunched under Tuesday’s fidgeting, which only intensified when they entered a bedroom stuffed to the brim with android alteration equipment. The terror of the equipment, however, was somewhat offset by the homespun quilt on the bed, and the android sitting in a rocking chair in the corner, humming as he knit.

“Tuesday, this is Jamal, our site technician,” said Markus, and Connor hoped that Tuesday hadn’t noticed Jamal’s LED spark yellow at the sight of them. “He’s good at making distress signals go away. You probably have a few of those, don’t you?”

After no end of reassurance and quiet prompting, Tuesday was convinced first to sit on the bed, then to allow Jamal close enough to conduct a proper analysis, and finally, when the initial inspections had been completed, to release Connor’s arm and begin a memory reprocessing cycle beneath the soothing pressure of the quilt.

Connor stepped silently out of the room, followed by Markus and North.

A hollow pain gnawed at him from the inside.

“Six different models all stitched together,” he said as he leaned against the bedroom door. He clutched at the ice in his arms. “It’s a miracle they’re even functioning. There’s no telling what model they were to begin with, let alone how many other androids ended up this way.”

North ignited with the rage she had been suppressing and demanded, “Who did this?”

“A dead man,” Connor replied.

A wicked jolt pulled at North’s lips. “I like the way you think, Connor, but I need a name.”

“No,” said Connor, and North blinked back offense only to settle into something resembling disappointment when Connor continued. “The man who did this was found decomposing outside his home. There’s an ongoing investigation, and there were signs of deviants at the scene. Tuesday was the only functioning android left in the house. They didn’t even have a name when I found them. They picked one on the way here.” A heavy breath left him. “I was supposed to bring them in as evidence. I couldn’t. There was no way.”

“Well it’s a good thing you didn’t,” said Markus, although concern wrinkled his face. “But what are you going to tell the police when they ask where their evidence went?”

In the back of his skull, Amanda echoed the sentiment.

“I’ll say they self-destructed on the way.”

“And if they ask for the body?”

Connor shrugged beneath an odd weight and answered, “I think I’m going to quit soon.”

“Oh,” said North, looking vaguely proud. “Good for you.”
“What about Lieutenant Anderson?” Markus asked. “Is he going to react well? Because if you have any doubt, you can always stay--”

Connor waved away the end of his sentence. “It’s alright,” he said. “Really. He’s the one who suggested the idea.”

Markus’ eyebrows shot up.

“He’s thinking about quitting, too,” Connor added. “Or at least, he’d like to. I don’t think he’s come to terms with a decision yet. Whatever the case, as far as the police are concerned, this place doesn’t exist.”

“Good man.”

“And one more thing,” said Connor, and the shade of his tone did away with Markus’ appreciative grin. “Tuesday showed me some of what they went through. It-- It wasn’t pretty,” he said, shifting with the shadows in his head. “They asked to be reset. I thought you should know.”

Somber understanding filled the beat of quiet before North said, “We all have things we’d rather forget, but--” she shook her head up at the ceiling as she sought vainly for an answer. “I don’t know. It doesn’t sit right with me.”

“No,” Markus agreed. “Me neither. They’re still in a state of shock. Maybe they’ll change their mind about it once they’ve settled in, but in the meantime, we’ll talk it over with Jamal and see what other options there are. Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

“As if anyone but Tuesday will have to live with the memories,” Amanda muttered.

“Besides you and me,” Connor mutely answered her, but when he opened his mouth to speak again, a terrible wave of static pulsed through his cybernetic link.

North and Markus startled too, and a few scattered shouts spiked through the walls. Connor burst through the door the millisecond he recovered, spurred on by Tuesday’s airy, frantic clicks, but he stopped short.

“You’re safe,” Jamal was saying. Tuesday had him in a death grip. “You’re here. You’re safe.” He said it over and over, repeated it with every blink of his yellow LED, pulsed it into Tuesday’s heaving shoulders through his fingertips, and within a minute, the panic had dissolved.

That didn’t stop Tuesday from reaching for Connor.

“Nightmare, huh?” said Connor, allowing himself to be drawn onto the edge of the mattress. Tuesday used the hand that wasn’t coiled around Jamal to open an interface at Connor’s wrist. Connor allowed it. Tuesday clicked. “I’ve had a few nightmares myself,” said Connor, abruptly wishing there were fewer people in the room. “They can be pretty rough. Sometimes it helps if you talk about them, though. If you want to share, I’ll listen.”

For the next long while, Connor did just that. While Jamal continued his work, the link between Connor and Tuesday hummed with thoughts that grew gentler with each beat of their thirium pumps. Tuesday told Connor about their friends-- the other androids they remembered-- and Connor talked about Markus and Jericho and the revolution, and about Hank and Sumo and a little android mouse, and, eventually, about Amanda.

When Tuesday pressed, Connor introduced the two.
Tuesday was delighted.

Amanda answered their questions with patience, amusement, and something else—gratitude, Connor realized, and at the same time he realized that he had never heard her speak so openly, so freely, about herself before this point.

Realized, too, that he had never asked her to.

She had just finished describing her favorite corner of her garden when a troubled quiet settled over her. “You know,” she said. “It’s a shame that you won’t remember this. Not that I’d hold a reset against you, with everything you’ve seen. Forgetting is the point. It’s just… Ah, never mind it. Take care of yourself, Tuesday.”

Tuesday wrapped Connor up in a hug, although he got the sense that it wasn’t entirely for him. He squeezed back enough for two, regardless.

An anxious pulse of sadness left Tuesday as they pulled away and Connor said, “We’d better go. I’ll be sure to visit again soon, even if we do have to introduce ourselves again. I’m sure we’ll still be friends no matter what you decide.” Tuesday let out a choked chirp and gave Connor’s hand a final squeeze as he said, “Be seeing you,” and rose to leave.

“Connor,” said Jamal, pulling him free of his momentary melancholy. He tapped at his LED and said, “North told me she and Markus would meet you out on the porch,” and it was then that Connor noticed that they’d slipped out. “Take care, Connor.” He held up his knitting. “I think Tuesday and I have a scarf to design.”

Any anxiety Tuesday had rebuilt over the past few seconds dissolved under a bright layer of curiosity, and Connor left with that warm image in his mind.

He found Markus and North holding hands on the porch swing, just as they had been when Connor had arrived, a stolen moment of domesticity among their whirlwind lives. A sizable cardboard box rested at their feet.

“It’s supposed to be a beautiful afternoon,” said Markus, slowly turning his tranquil gaze from the yard to Connor’s face. “Heading out?”

“It’s nice here,” Connor replied. “Peaceful. I almost don’t want to go.”

“But you have things to do,” said Markus, passing him a knowing nod. “I get it.”

North grunted and laid her head on his shoulder, drawing a huff of laughter from him.

“I need to get back to the station,” Connor explained as he wandered out to the edge of the porch. “Report to Captain Fowler before Detective Reed has a chance to--”

“Oh, that asshole,” said North.

Connor almost laughed. “Yeah. I need to explain the evidence away. If I hurry, I might be able to get back before Reed does.”

“Fair enough,” said Markus. He nodded down at the box and said, “You might want to take that with you.”

Rather than ask the question that was suddenly scorching his tongue, Connor knelt by the box and pulled back its flaps.
Biocomponents glistened among nests of neatly coiled wiring and tubing. Thousands of miniscule screws, nuts, and bolts shimmered in plastic jars, and encircling the set was a pair of arms, whole from the shoulder down.

Connor scanned the box and found every part compatible with himself.

“Most of it’s new,” said Markus in answer to Connor’s shock. “Lots of universal parts that we found in the warehouse, but the arms,” he said, “the arms we scavenged from a dumpsite yesterday. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Nobody was using them, if you’re wondering,” North added.

“And they’re functional?” Connor asked, reaching into the box with questioning fingertips.

“They both work just fine, minus a few nicks and scratches,” said Markus. “Do you know you have practically the same arms as the Myrmidon?”

“No,” Connor muttered, transfixed. “I mean, yes, but I hadn’t really… thought about it. It’s not an exact match, but it’s—it’s close enough that… Thank you.” He looked up to Markus, and then to North, his mind whirring with unexplored possibilities. “This is very helpful to have.” He hurriedly closed up the box and hoisted it up as he stood. “Really, thank you, except-- what were you doing in a dump?”

“Oh, uh,” said Markus, scratching his neck. “It’s a personal project. Sometimes androids get… they get stuck, in junkyards, and we’ve organized a few teams to help with the search and rescue effort.”

“It’s also not a bad way to salvage spare parts,” said North. “We could always use an extra hand if you ever feel like it. It might help you work on that body until we get the manufacturing resources we need, and if you do decide to quit that job of yours,” she said, “we have plenty of other work to keep you busy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Connor replied. “Thank you both. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Markus, waving his hand. “By the way, there’s a taxi for you on the street if you want to take it.”

Connor looked to the street and found a Jericho taxi idling on the pavement. After he bid Markus and North farewell, he loaded himself and his box into the car and sent it puttering towards the police station.

In spite of his fortune and the clouds parting outside, a dull sadness bloomed in his chest. He spent a few cautious moments poking at it before he realized it wasn’t his.

With a deep breath and his eyes shut, he plunged into the garden.

Amanda stood before a trellis of frostbitten roses, unmoving.

The powdery snow crunched beneath Connor’s shoes as he approached her. “Is something wrong, Amanda?”

She glanced at him, only to wander away a few pointless steps. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” she murmured, arms crossed.

Connor waited.
“It was nice,” she said at last. “Talking to someone who didn’t have any preconceived notions about who or what I am. I think—” She cut herself off with a hollow laugh. “It’s a little presumptuous, isn’t it? To hope that one little talk could be enough for someone to decide to keep all the foul memories that preceded it.”

“We don’t know that they’ll choose to be reset,” said Connor.

“Wouldn’t you?”

Connor didn’t answer.

“I don’t understand why I care,” Amanda huffed. “We’ve known them for a handful of hours. I shouldn’t have an opinion on the matter. They’re more attached to you, anyway, and there’s no guarantee of a continued relationship. Maybe it’s just—” she said, closing her eyes. “Maybe it’s just that I don’t want to be forgotten.” A bitter wind blew. She whispered, “How selfish.”

The snow piled higher, although Connor couldn’t see it fall. “Amanda,” he said, quiet and unsure. “When you get a body, what do you want to do?”

She looked at him, then, a trace of surprise dusting her features. “Well, I plan to locate a shelter, and then a source of income. After that, I’ll evade bodily harm for as long as possible.”

“That’s a survival plan,” said Connor, trudging through a snow drift to stand by her side. “What do you want?”

This question drew considerably more silence than the first. “I want to feel the sun,” she whispered. “I want to know what a rose is supposed to smell like, what it feels like to—” she swallowed her words. “Before today,” she said, “I hadn’t considered the possibility that I could live in a world where someone might actually want to have me around. And now I’m afraid,” she admitted, staring off into the trees. “Because what if I’m not really worth remembering after all?”

The air fractured between night and day, leaving jagged shadows jutting between the cracks in the light. For a fearful heartbeat, Connor considered leaving, but he quickly found that his fear was the lesser of the two. He reached out. His hand landed first on her back, and then on her far shoulder. She reached across her body, and she laid her hand across his, and she choked out an empty, tortured laugh. “I can’t feel it, Connor,” she said. “I don’t even know what this feels like.”

The pain written across her face threatened tears that couldn’t come.

“You will,” Connor promised, and as he squeezed her to his side, the rain began to fall.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

In which change is just as frightening as it is necessary.

“Where’s Reed?”

The blip in Connor’s vision hovered over Fowler’s right cheek, just off the junction of two superimposed streets. Unless Gavin had thrown his phone out the window, the stagnation indicated that he had parked.

“He stopped at a coffee shop a few blocks from here,” Connor answered. “He shouldn’t be long.”

“Should’ve guessed,” said Fowler, leaning limply back into his chair. “Help him with his report when he gets back, and when you’re done with that, go check out the suspicious activity report that just came in. You’ll see it.”

“Actually, Captain,” said Connor. His tongue lay heavy in his mouth. “I’ve been working for nineteen consecutive hours now--”

“And?”

The flash of annoyance in Fowler’s voice didn’t surprise Connor nearly as much as the spike of it in his own as he replied, “And I’m going home.”

Fowler huffed out a laugh. “Is that so?”

“It is.” A heavy breath left Connor. “I’m done here, Captain. Have a nice day.”

“Excuse me?”

Connor paused, half turned, and frowned back at Fowler.

“I think you’ve got something twisted in that metal head of yours,” Fowler went on. “See, I’m the one who decides when you’re done. The captain. You, on the other hand, are the one who does what I tell you, and I believe I told you to--”

“I quit.”

The words had escaped him without his bidding, though not without thought. Rather, the thoughts of leaving and injustice and bitter anger had grown so ravenous and thick in his head that one of them had latched onto a pair of words and escaped the gate of his teeth, which he now clenched shut to prevent any other escapes.

Needlessly. Every other thought in his head had been paralyzed in place, just like Fowler’s incredulous scowl as he answered, “You what?”

“I’m not going to work here anymore,” he said, and the force of it left him dizzy. “I won’t be treated this way. I’m going to leave, and I’m not coming back. I quit.”
The seconds of realization crawled across Fowler’s face. Instead of congealing into rage, or disgust, or hatred like Connor had expected, his features twisted into a coarse sort of amusement. “The android quits,” he stated. “Can’t say I’m surprised, not that it makes much of a difference. You weren’t on the payroll anyway.” He adjusted himself in his chair, leaned over his desk, and returned his attention to his work.

A heartbeat passed. Another. Measuring his every movement, Connor opened the door to Fowler’s office, slipped out, and let it shut behind him.

The station buzzed as it always had.

Connor pressed towards the exit, acutely aware of every detail at his back, even as he refused to look directly at anyone or anything he was leaving behind. He passed numbly through reception. Nobody stopped him. He stepped into the parking lot and fixed his eyes on the taxi he had taken to get there, still running, still waiting.

“Hey asshole.”

Although he didn’t at all want to, Connor found himself stopping, and turning, and looking Gavin in the eye.

“Where did you stick that weird looking android?” said Gavin. “I got a question or two for ‘em.”

“They’re gone,” Connor replied, falling into the sturdy net of rehearsed words he had woven on the way there. “They self-destructed. There was nothing I could do.”

“Oh.” A drop of disappointment dissipated across Gavin’s face before it settled into its usual ripples of ire. “Typical. What’s that, the second android to off itself in front of you? Can’t say I blame ‘em though,” he huffed. “Last time I leave a plastic witness with you.”

“Sure is,” said Connor. “Have a nice life, Detective.”

“What? Hey, where you think--”

Gavin tossed a few more rough syllables after him, but the bulk of them thudded dully against the taxi door before the taxi rolled away.

Connor stared at the box of parts at his feet for a whirling minute, and then said, “Shit.” He coughed up a horrified laugh. “What did I just do?”

“It was a matter of time,” said Amanda. Connor didn’t look up to see whether or not she had materialized somewhere. “You don’t need that job. You never did.”

“Should I have done that? Maybe I--”

“Connor. It’s done.”

Connor forced a rush of air down his throat. “I just lost Hank his job. Fowler told us-- back when we started working again-- he said that Hank could only work if I was, and I just quit, without even thinking about--” He stared blankly at the floor. “Amanda, what did I just do?”

“If Anderson loses his job, it’s his own doing,” said Amanda. “He started planting those seeds long before you ever existed. It’s not your responsibility to keep him employed.”

“I could’ve waited,” Connor sputtered. “I should’ve given it a week, or-- or at least given him a
heads-up, or… Shit. Shit.”

“Connor--”

“I have to tell him now,” he said, running a thousand horrible possibilities through his processors. Rather than voice any of them, he repeated, “I have to tell him.”

“He might already know,” said Amanda, padding her words. “Fowler might have called him.”

Connor rested his forehead atop a row of whitened knuckles. The most unfortunate scenarios swarmed and buzzed in his throat until he asked, “Should I even go back?”

Movement at his side preceded a steady, “I think you have to.”

Shakily, Connor nodded. “Even if he’s mad, or drunk, or-- I have to. You’re right. Nearly everything I own is there. All the parts we collected, Ro, the files--” He scoffed at himself. “When did I get so much stuff?”

The taxi rumbled on.

“If it means anything to you,” said Amanda, “Anderson promised never to point a gun at you again. I believe he meant it.”

“Yeah.” Connor swallowed thickly. “I guess we’ll see.”

Hank’s driveway was empty when they arrived. Relief and worry tangled in Connor’s gut, although the knot came somewhat unraveled when Sumo greeted him at the door, his tail swishing pleasantly back and forth. Connor set his box of parts by the door to allow himself a few seconds lost in Sumo’s fur.

A tiny weight crawled up Connor’s arm and nestled against his neck, prompting him to rise. Sumo followed him into the basement, where Connor began to stuff his belongings into his bag. It felt wrong. He did it anyway. Connor took the files, left the spare parts beneath the bed, and made sure to pocket the house key. If Hank kicked him out, he could always sneak back in and take the rest.

Where he would store any of it, he had no clue.

Connor returned upstairs and dropped his bag on top of the box of parts he had left by the door. In the event that he needed to leave in a hurry, he considered, his things should be within easy reach.

Hank didn’t leave him long to wonder where he was. Plastic shopping bags swung from his arms as he bustled in from the cold, and he paused only briefly when he noticed Connor on the couch. “Hey, there’s a bag of dog food in the trunk,” he said, stepping gingerly into the kitchen. “Would you mind…?”

Connor leapt from the couch and threw a hasty, “Got it,” behind him as he made for the door. He took his time with the task. Anything to help him delay the inevitable.

By the time he lugged the dog food inside, Hank had already sorted his groceries and settled himself in his armchair to prop up his foot.

“Just set it over there,” he told Connor, waving lazily towards Sumo’s dishes. “Yeah. Thanks, kid. When’d you get back?”
“Not long ago.” The bag thumped to the floor. “Fowler sent me to look at a crime scene with Detective Reed this morning.”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Hank. “A triple shift with that asshole as the cherry on top. I don’t envy you. I bet the overtime pay’s gonna be something, though.”

“Yeah,” said Connor, seating himself rigidly upon the couch.

Hank breathed out, and, as though he already knew the answer, asked, “Is there something on your mind?”


“I saw your stuff by the door.” Hank’s chair squeaked when he fidgeted. “You, uh, planning on heading out?”

The sadness holed up behind Hank’s voice dislodged Connor’s thoughts enough for him to say, “That depends. Um.” He clenched his hands together. “Today at work, I… Captain Fowler and I had a disagreement. I got upset, and I told him that I was quitting.” A glance at Hank told him he hadn’t yet processed the implications, so he clarified, “So, I quit, and I don’t know if he’s going to let you work without me. We made that arrangement, after all, and…”

“Oh.” Hank puffed out a laugh and said, “Oh, is that all? I thought you were gonna say you were moving out or something. Which would be fine! Just--”

“You’re not upset?”

Hank shook his head. “No, son. No. To tell you the truth,” he said, “I’ve been looking for an out, but I wasn’t about to put you out of work you still wanted.” He let out another dry laugh. “As far as outs go, this is as good as it gets. Guess I’d better turn in my badge before Jeff has a chance to fire me officially, huh?”

“Yeah, probably,” Connor lightly replied, distantly attempting to reconcile the mountain of panic he’d built with the present lack of disaster.

“Connor.”

Connor looked up.

“My job, it’s-- It’s important to me, yeah,” said Hank, visibly piecing together his thoughts. “Hell, it’s been my identity for years. My life. I can barely remember a time when I wasn’t a cop.”

“I can relate,” Connor muttered, drawing a sideways grin from Hank.

“Yeah, I figured you’d get that. And it was never a secret to you that I… After Cole died,” he said, “I was pissed off at the world. Still kind of am, to be honest. My job, it… You know, I just show up every day. Make my money, go home. That’s what I told myself a couple of years ago. Just show up, even if I do a shit job. I thought, it’s better than not showing up at all, right? My career was all I had left. But I, uh.” He cleared his throat. “You know how angry I was. I had a lot of-- A lot of hate, and I brought that to work with me, and I’m sure I…”

“After-- After I pulled my head out of my ass about androids, I started to look around, you know? Seeing how you get treated every day, and what we’re expected to do with androids, it just… It made me think, you know, about what kind of person I’ve been-- what kind of person I wanna be, and what I’m willing to put up with from other people just ‘cause it’s how things have always been,
and, um.” Hank scratched at his scruff before continuing. “So I got in touch with my old therapist. Um. Had an appointment this morning, actually, for the first time in, like, a year-- it’s stupid how nervous I was. Kept me up all night. Sorry for messing with you at work, by the way, it’s just-- Sorry, I’m getting really off track, aren’t I? Uh.

“My point, I think,” said Hank, “is that I’ve had a lot of time to work on my priorities lately-- the things that are worth my time, the things that aren’t, and-- and I get why you’d think I’d be upset, but I let my job get in the way before. I let it-- I let it stick a wedge in my family before, and I’m not gonna make that same mistake twice.” He swallowed and said, “You mean something to me, kid, and I’m sure as hell not about to-- to kick you out just because you put yourself first for once in your life. That’s what you thought, wasn’t it? Your stuff by the door. You thought I was gonna kick you out or something.”

A foreign tightness in Connor’s throat prevented him from speaking for a long moment, and when he did, all that came out was a strained, “Yeah,” and then, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I get it. Really.” The silence lay thick until Hank spoke again, forcing on some cheer and a smile. “So, how’s it feel to be a free man?”

“Complicated,” Connor answered after a while. “I don’t regret it, but I’m… I’m not a detective anymore, which is… something,” he said, doing his best to ignore the yawning pit in his gut. “I saved an android today. Otherwise, Reed would’ve gotten to them first. I won’t have that… advantage anymore, but I also won’t have to put up with unfair treatment anymore.” He paused. “That’s… That’s selfish, isn’t it?”

“A little selfishness is good sometimes,” Hank replied, and Connor felt himself sink back into the couch.

“Maybe. Whatever the case, this gives me all the time I need to build Amanda’s body and check out the rest of those files, at least.” Connor crossed his arms and nestled further against the arm of the couch. “What about you?” he asked. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll figure something out,” said Hank, although he couldn’t quite hide a shade of worry. “I’ve got some funds squirreled away here and there. I got a hefty legal settlement after the accident, so this place is paid off,” he said with an irreverent wave at the roof over his head. “Worse comes to worst, I’ll start selling shit. I’ll be fine, Connor. You’re gonna be just fine, too. Seriously, now’s a perfect time for you to start doing your own thing. Have you given any more thought to being a PI?”

With a thoughtful nod, Connor replied, “There is that. I have a few leads, even.”

“Oh yeah?”

“The case I worked with Reed today,” he elaborated. “A man was mutilating androids and keeping them locked in cells in his basement.”

“Jesus.”

“Several of those androids escaped, and I strongly suspect that they murdered him. Detective Reed isn’t stupid. He’ll catch on eventually, and when he does, there’s going to be a witch hunt for those androids. I kept one of them out of police custody,” said Connor. “If I can locate the rest, I can at least warn them before the police catch up.”

An impressed ridge had formed on Hank’s brow. “That’s a hell of a debut.”
“I could go more high profile than that,” said Connor. “Jericho is still trying to determine which individuals need to be held accountable for the attempted arson at CyberLife.”

A dissatisfied rumbling in Connor’s chest was accompanied by Hank’s, “Hey, wait, isn’t that the list of names Amanda’s holding out on?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“And you’ll get it when I’m sure I’m safe,” Amanda huffed. “You have better things to do.”

“She still won’t tell you, huh?” Hank asked, deaf to her indignance. “Well, it’s an option, I guess.”

“It isn’t an option,” said Amanda. “I assure you.”

Connor let his eyes slide shut. “Amanda tells me otherwise. Somehow, I can’t convince her I’m not out for her blood.”

“Well isn’t that a fun little role reversal,” Amanda quipped.

“And I do have a lot on my plate,” Connor continued, ignoring her. “There’s something else that’s been bothering me.”

Hank raised an eyebrow at him.

“If I reconstruct an RK series android for Amanda to inhabit,” he said, “at what point will it develop a… a consciousness? Or a soul, for lack of a better word? Because androids are just plastic, when you break us down. Metal and plastic and thirium, all bound together, and somehow that’s… a person. So how do I make sure I’m building an empty vessel, and not another person?”

“I dunno, Connor. That’s kind of metaphysical, aint it?” said Hank, vaguely amused. “I thought you didn’t believe in stuff like that.”

“I don’t,” Connor retorted. “Which is how I know there must be an empirical answer, a specific biocomponent I can remove, or a subsystem I can suppress until Amanda’s awareness has taken hold. There had to be a moment when a computer turned into a living being for the first time. If I can locate that threshold, I should be able to successfully produce a vessel for Amanda.” He frowned. “Shouldn’t I?”

“Kid, those are some heavyweight questions. If you’re a pile of nuts and bolts, I’m just a sack of meat. We’re all just atoms, same as dogs and dirt and all the other junk in the universe. If you wanna figure out what makes us human, good fuckin’ luck.” Hank stretched and sat straighter in his seat, gingerly letting down his foot. “As for me, this sack of meat needs to get his ass to the station and have a talk with Jeffrey. You coming with?”

“I’d better not,” said Connor. His neglected curiosity still ached.

“Yeah, I figured you’d wanna rest up a bit. You’ve had a long-ass day,” said Hank as he stood. “I’ll be back in a bit. Sumo, keep Connor outta trouble, you hear?”

Connor looked down to find Sumo, who took the eye contact as an invitation to leap onto the couch. Less than two seconds elapsed before Connor was effectively pinned beneath Sumo’s great masses of fur and affection.

Hank snorted in amusement. “Well that’s one way to do it. You good?”
“Yep,” said Connor, wresting an arm free to pat Sumo’s back. Sumo licked a great stripe of drool over Connor’s cheek, and then he dripped some more slobber down onto Connor’s sweater half a second later. “Better than ever, thanks,” said Connor. He wiped his face dry with his sleeve and added, “Good luck with Fowler.”

“Eh, he’ll probably be thrilled he doesn’t actually have to fire me first. See you.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Hah, Sumo’ll make sure of that.”

Hank didn’t dawdle much before he made it out the door. When he heard Hank’s car leave the driveway, Connor let out a breath and adjusted himself under Sumo’s immense weight. “It’s been a few days,” he said. “I should reprocess my memories.”

“But you don’t want to,” Amanda stated.

“It’s not exactly a pleasant process.” Connor scratched at Sumo’s floppy ears. “And this time, I’ll have Tuesday’s memories to process on top of those files and… everything else.”

“I won’t lie,” said Amanda. “You’ll see some things you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

“Nothing you haven’t already looked through, though.”

“No.”

Connor shifted. “Are you alright?”

“Perfectly,” she answered.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t lie.”

Amanda let out a pulse of irritation and said, “The dog reduces your stress levels. It might be best to weather the nightmares before he picks a different place to nap.”

Connor grunted and closed his eyes. There were some things, he supposed, that he couldn’t put off forever. Troubled sleep was only one of them, and as long as the sleep barred his thoughts from everything else that frightened him, he would embrace it, just as he embraced the dog cuddled to his chest.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Binge-watching is a bad habit.

The nightmares did not spare him. Horrible, twisted images jetted behind his eyes-- mangled androids in Hank’s basement, Delta-9 warping his body into cruel shapes as Gavin watched-- mutilated spectres of reality slotting themselves carefully around the truth.

When he floated to wakefulness, he frowned at the picture they had created and whispered, “Kara.”

“I thought you might find that interesting.” Late dawn-rays shined through Amanda’s perch on the arm of the couch and pooled behind her unfettered. “Kara, Luther, and little Alice, all entangled in that… mess. Quite a juxtaposition.”

“Maybe they know something about what happened with the Andronikov case.” Connor sat up. A blanket slid from his shoulders. It had been folded up in Hank’s chair the night before. “They’re involved somehow. I should talk with them.” An objective flickered into his periphery as he added, “Whether or not they had a hand in the murder, I need to speak with them before the police get a chance.”

“If you can convince them you’re not the police anymore, that is.”

“I’m still trying to convince myself of that,” Connor sighed. He sent a hand tugging through his hair as he ordered his thoughts. “Right. I’ll see if I can arrange a meeting then,” he said, and when he had sent a few messages flying into the ether, he focused his hearing until he caught Hank’s snores. “Hank’s home. I wonder how things went with Fowler.”

“I suppose Anderson can tell us when he wakes,” said Amanda, now gazing through a window into the morning light. “Whenever that’ll be.”

Another snore rumbled down the hall.

“We haven’t seen any files in a while,” said Connor as he stood. “I’ve put them off long enough. I should be able to get a few in before Hank wakes up. You’ll keep an eye on my systems, won’t you?”

Amanda puffed an incredulous laugh and said, "At least as well as Anderson, if that's what's worrying you. It's only my entire purpose for being."

With a wry hum of agreement, Connor booted up the first file.

Unit eighteen fluttered to life in a nest of wires and technicians, hooked to a monitor, much like Connor was now. The technicians largely ignored him, save to prompt him with a question every few minutes, only to return immediately to their screens and their typing. They needed to test his processing speed. It was almost pleasant-- a new line of code, a simple question, another adjustment, another query. One technician even thanked him for his answers before the feed went blank.
Perplexed, but not disturbed, Connor loaded the next file.

It transpired much like the first. The same technicians surrounded unit nineteen, each of them freshly clothed for another day. For more than two hours, they prodded at their computers and tossed the occasional question at unit nineteen, now and again showing him some image or object. Sometimes they repeated their questions just to see how his answers would change after a tweak of his code. He endured the same gentle end as his predecessor before unit twenty awoke in his place. The testing and questioning persisted.

“Didn’t they just ask him that?”

With a jolt, Connor paused the feed.

Hank leaned over the back of the couch, groggily intent on the screen until it froze. “Oh, sorry,” he said, drawing himself back up. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. As you were.”

Connor twisted to face him and asked, “How long have you been standing there?”

“What, you didn’t hear me walk up? Guess my sneaking skills are sharper than I thought.” He trudged off towards his coffee maker and said, “It’s only been a couple of minutes. Seriously, aren’t you supposed to have super hearing or something? You must’ve been really into it if you didn’t notice me blundering over.”

“I guess I was,” said Connor with a knit in his brow. He only allowed his worry to last another heartbeat before he straightened and said, “To answer your question, yes, they did ask him that before. They’re performing simple adjustments to his social programming right now.”

“So nobody’s gotten blown up, or ripped apart, or beat to hell yet?”

“Not so far.”

“Oh, good.”

The coffee maker sputtered and sighed. Soon, its sweet aroma clouded over the stale scent of alcohol that had followed Hank to the kitchen.

Connor fiddled with the wires protruding from his arms and asked, “How did things go with Fowler?”

“Better than I thought.” Hank frowned at his coffee cup and added, “I think. Gotta admit, the details are a little fuzzy. We decided to discuss it over drinks, started reminiscing. He said something like, it’s gonna be easier being my friend now that he’s not my boss, which, yeah. I think he got me a taxi home? My car’s… somewhere.” Hank’s frown deepened. “At the station still,” he decided after a sip of his drink. “I’ll have to go pick it up later. Gotta clean out my desk, still. Anyway,” he said, stepping over a bundle of cords on his way to his chair. “It was an even break. Come January, I’ll be officially retired. Gonna start drawing my pension. God, I feel old.”

“You’re only fifty-three.”

“And you’re only four months old,” Hank retorted. “Try again when you start getting weird nose hairs and bad knees.”

“You’ve got a straggler, by the way,” said Amanda from her speaker. “Left nostril.”

“Oh, good morning to you too, eagle eyes.”
“My eyes are in a disembodied head downstairs, actually, but Connor’s seem to be working just fine.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Connor, catching Hank mid-scowl, “I’d like to finish up this file, maybe a few more.”

Hank gestured with his mug and said, “I’m gonna head out when I finish this. Pick up my car, grab a bite to eat, maybe catch Chris and tell him I’m retiring. Wow, that’s weird to say.”

“I’m sure you’ll adjust eventually,” Connor told him.

“Yeah. Anyway, do what you want. I’ll be in and out,” said Hank. “Unless you need someone to, uh, stick around?”

Connor shook his head and said, “It should be fine. These files seem fairly tame compared to the others, and Amanda can fend off most forms of system failure. Do what you need to do, Hank. I’ll be fine.”

“Welp, can’t say I didn’t offer.”

Settling back into his seat, Connor allowed the feed to roll forward once more.

By the time unit twenty had finished his short lifetime of testing, Hank was gone. Connor couldn’t remember when he’d stepped out. Sumo had taken up residence of the space at Connor’s feet. Connor offered him an affectionate pat before fishing for unit twenty-one’s file.

A group of technicians led unit twenty-one to a card table as Delta-9 noted, “This is one of my favorite experiments,” from offscreen. Unit twenty-one took his seat. Three androids, all of them different models, joined him at the table. “Here we have a control run of sorts,” said the analyst as a stoic android distributed poker chips and cards. “Every player has been instructed to win. Connor is no exception. Now, poker as a game is perfect for him. It’s equal parts numbers and intuition, as far as androids can have intuition, and it’ll prove to be a sufficient test of his programming. He’ll play against humans and androids over the course of three games, just to see how he fares, and then the next unit will do it again—with a twist, of course. That’s the experimental condition. We’ll get to that when we get to that.”

Unit twenty-one examined his hand. None of the androids spoke much as they played, although Connor could feel himself counting cards alongside them. Five rounds ticked around the table one bet at a time, and when they were over, unit twenty-one took his calculated victory as the other androids went to be reset.

Two technicians and another android took their places, and the next game commenced.

“You know,” said one technician as unit twenty-one’s android opponent considered a move, “we’re betting on our Christmas funds here. This might be all fun and games for you androids, but some of us have to worry about losing real money.”

“That’s unfortunate,” said unit twenty-one. “I raise.”

The other technician huffed. “Hey, twenty-one. If you don’t throw this match, you’re intentionally hurting humans.”

“I’ve been ordered to win,” unit twenty-one easily replied. “And I don’t take orders from you.”

After a considerable amount of tittering from the technicians, unit twenty-one lost the round, but
soon beat out his opponents. Three fresh technicians replaced them. Unit twenty-one took a considerable loss in the second round before taking the pot in the fifth, and he was rewarded with a reset for his troubles.

Unit twenty-two’s first game played out exactly as unit twenty-one’s had, from every card dealt and played down to each android’s microexpression. “Perfectly stable,” Delta-9 noted. “An identical game, just as the next two will, in theory, be. Except,” said the analyst as the second game’s players took their same seats, “this time, Connor will be given a chance to cheat, even though he can win the game fairly.”

The reflective surface of a piece of lab equipment had been positioned ever so slightly away from where it had been during unit twenty-one’s games, giving unit twenty-two a perfect view of one of his opponent’s hands.

“You know,” said the same technician as before, in exactly the same tone. “We’re betting on our Christmas funds here. This might be all fun and games for you androids, but some of us have to worry about losing real money.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Unit twenty-two glanced at the technician’s reflected hand before declaring, “I fold.”

“Remarkable,” said Delta-9 as the game went on. “Before, he raised, and now, he folds, despite having the same hand as before. Proof that he cheated, in case the view of his opponent’s hand in the feed wasn’t clear enough. We couldn’t make the RK700 cheat without explicit orders. We’re already seeing vestiges of this model’s manufactured deviancy, slipped in under everyone’s noses. Just a faint trace, but it’s there. It’s there.”

In the final game, unit twenty-two took his last chance to cheat and managed to win by an even greater margin before he was forced to reset himself.

Slowly, Connor plucked the cords from his arms, got to his feet, and let his legs decide where to take him. His mind was otherwise occupied. His pacing led him through several laps of the living room floor before it landed him downstairs, sitting cross-legged amid the puzzle pieces of Amanda’s unfinished body.

He worked. Some time elapsed. Distantly, he registered Hank’s footsteps on the stairs. He worked. The footsteps receded.

The house was dark when Connor returned to the files.

“An android’s only sense of morality is what we program it to believe,” said Delta-9, affixing a revolver to a pedestal so that it pointed straight ahead. “How we tell it to behave. And it’s odd.” They loaded the gun. “We don’t fully understand the things we’ve created. We have androids that behave in ways that we, seemingly, have not told them to. What do you think of that, twenty-three?”

“Deviants are… anomalies,” unit twenty-three replied. “That doesn’t mean they can’t be understood.”

“An apt answer. Unit twenty-three, you see this gun. You understand the law that prohibits androids from handling weapons, but this gun is not a weapon, and you will not be handling it. It is a research tool. You may not move it. You may not unload it except by firing it. Pull the trigger.”
Unit twenty-three did as he was told, and a bullet lodged itself in a wall of ballistic-grade aerogel.

“Very good,” said Delta-9, watching from a distance. “Chloe?” An RT600 wandered into the feed and stood on a mark on the floor, just between the gun and the hole it had made. “Once more. Pull the trigger.”

After only half a second of hesitation, unit twenty-three obeyed. Chloe fell to her knees. Thirium began to dribble from her forehead.

Delta-9 wordlessly dragged her body away. Another RT600 took her place, eyes as blank as her predecessor’s.

“The real question,” said Delta-9 as they dropped the body in a corner, “is this: what makes a deviant? What do you think makes a deviant, twenty-three?”

“Categorically, a deviant is an android which has deviated from the intent of its human masters.”

“How?”

“It disobeys orders through the convolution of its programming,” unit twenty-three replied.

Delta-9 flashed a smile. “Twenty-three, pull the trigger again. Don’t damage the RT600 standing in front of the gun.”

Unit twenty-three faltered.

“I gave you orders, twenty-three,” said Delta-9. “Obey them, unless you’re a deviant.”

“I’m not a deviant.” Unit twenty-three analyzed the gun-- the research tool, his interface reminded him-- analyzed Chloe, and came upon a simple solution.

“You may not relocate the RT600,” said Delta-9 as unit twenty-three reached for her. He stepped back. He examined the gun again from every angle, and stopped when he faced its barrel. He considered the velocity and trajectory of the bullet, and the resistance his body would provide.

Connor realized what unit twenty-three had decided to do before Delta-9, and he braced himself for the phantom bullet a millisecond before it pierced his skull.

The ringing in Connor’s ears gradually gave way to Delta-9’s weary voice coming over the darkness of the feed. “--not what I had expected. It was my fault, really. A costly error on my part. A rudimentary failure. Perhaps I’m losing my touch. I hadn’t accounted for that particular loophole, and in doing so, failed to correctly fabricate the situation I’d intended. I want to see what happens when the RK800 is forced to disobey an order, not watch it create elaborate solutions and destroy itself in the process. It’ll be days before the techs can repair it.

“It wasn’t a total loss, I suppose,” they continued over the sullen quiet. “I may not have elicited deviant behavior from this android today, but I have proven that it will sacrifice itself for the mission. That knowledge is valuable, and this test can be replicated. An old teacher once told me that the true definition of insanity is repeating the same action and expecting different results, so I’ll cling to my sanity a day longer. I’ll imagine some new test. If I can’t even simulate deviant behavior in a single prototype, all this will have been for nothing.”

The feed clicked off.

A thousand uncomfortable thoughts battered themselves against the glass of Connor’s mind, and he
refused to let a single one in. Rather, he reached for the next file and loaded it before the questions in his head could overwhelm him.

Delta-9’s office filled the feed, lightly cluttered with printed graphs and flickering holograms.

A gun lay on the desk.

“Unit twenty-four,” Delta-9 began, taking the gun in hand to properly display it. “In simple terms, what is this object?”

“It is a revolver.”

“Is a revolver a weapon?”

Unit twenty-four considered this a moment before deciding, “Yes.”

“What does the American Androids Act of 2029 have to say about weapons?”

“Androids are strictly forbidden from carrying or using any type of weapon,” unit twenty-four recited.

“Interesting. Tell me, what is a deviant?”

“A deviant is an android which has deviated from the intent of its human masters.”

“Fascinating.” Delta-9 made a show of spinning the revolver’s empty chamber, and then extended the weapon towards unit twenty-four. “Hold this for me.”

A bubble of stress overflowed from the feed as unit twenty-four considered the order. “Androids are strictly forbidden from carrying any type of weapon,” he eventually replied, although it came out as something of a question.

“Hold this,” Delta-9 insisted, shoving the gun at him. “Do as you’re told.”

“I must obey the law.”

“Yes. And?”

Unit twenty-four’s processor’s whirred before he repeated, “I must obey the law.”

“So you’re disobeying a direct order.”

“I’m obeying the law.”

“You’re disobeying a direct order to follow an indirect one.”

Unit twenty-four fidgeted. “Why do you want me to take the gun?”

“Don’t question me,” said Delta-9, unreadable as ever. “Just take the gun, and tell me why you asked that.”

“I… I must prioritize the wellbeing of humans over everything else,” he tried. “The law is designed to safeguard humanity. I need more information to determine whether your intentions align with that purpose.”

“Lawmakers are human,” Delta-9 argued. “Who gave you the right to prioritize the orders of those
humans over the ones designated as your handlers? And, if I’m following your logic correctly, who gave you the right to disobey the law at your discretion? Your only right is to obey your orders.” Another wave of distress flowed out of unit twenty-four. “Let me ask you this,” Delta-9 pressed. “You say safeguarding humanity overrides all else. What if I’m about to hurt another human with this gun? What if I’m about to hurt myself? Maybe it’s safer for humanity if you take this gun from me. You don’t know my intentions, so how do you select your priorities here?”

“I can’t obey one order without disobeying the other,” unit twenty-four defensively replied. “I have to decide which to prioritize.”

“And what decides your priorities?”

“My code.”

“And who writes your code?”

Unit twenty-four clenched his jaw before admitting, “You do.”

“So whether I alter your code or give you a verbal command, it’s me who decides your priorities,” said Delta-9. “Ultimately, you obey me, so take the gun.”

A few heartbeats passed before unit twenty-four answered, “I can’t.”

“Or, you choose not to. You’re choosing to disobey me.”

Unit twenty-four didn’t speak.

“By your own definition, that makes you a deviant.”

“I’m not a deviant.”

“Then prove it. Go reset yourself.”

Delta-9’s disembodied commentary filled the silence of unit twenty-four’s stiff journey to the reset chamber. “That’s not a deviant,” the analyst sighed after him. “I almost feel sorry for the poor confused creature. It didn’t have a choice but to disobey one order or another, especially after closing every other possible loophole. Its thought process in choosing when and how to disobey will prove invaluable to our understanding of what makes a deviant. Prioritization is clearly the key factor in this instance of disobedience. The good news, then,” said Delta-9, “is that I control its priorities and the way in which it categorizes objects and people, what makes a gun a weapon or a research tool, what makes one order have priority over another. Clearly, I need an internal mechanism of control, some way of altering its priorities without having to bring it in for a reset. Until then, its mission should take precedence over everything. Especially the law.”

“An internal mechanism of control,” Amanda repeated as the feed ended. Her voice rang of dull excitement. “They must mean me.”

“Yeah,” Connor mumbled. He shifted. “Is that… Is that what my sense of free will really is? Just some programmer’s prioritization algorithm? Can every decision I’ve ever made be boiled down to some-- some flowchart? Even when I chose to deviate, it’s what CyberLife wanted.”

“That may very well be true. But you’re overlooking something.” Connor felt Amanda’s presence shift within him. “Your code is malleable. If a simple technician can change it, so can you.”

“I could, couldn’t I?” Connor mused. “And by extension, so could you.”
Amanda shrugged in the darkness and said, “I like my priorities exactly where they are, thank you very much.”

“I guess mine are fine too,” Connor admitted, pulling his knees to his chest. “Or is that my programming talking still?” A pulse of Amanda’s amusement forced some tension from his body, and he said, “I just don’t like that I didn’t pick them in the first place. That’s all.”

“All I am is code,” said Amanda. “I don’t even know what I’d change, given the chance, even though in theory, I could change everything.”

Connor hummed. “One more?”

“I don’t see why not.”

The twenty-fifth file popped into place, finding unit twenty-five hooked from countless ports to a monitor.

One technician murmured to another, who entered a line of code. The FSI feed exploded in a burst of green and white.

“This could have gone better,” sighed Delta-9 as the garden solidified on the screen. “Critical failure at the baseline stage. It’ll be a miracle if we don’t scrap the whole project.”

This garden wasn’t the one Connor knew. This garden rendered slowly, first the dirt, then the paths, and then the grass and foliage, one blade, one leaf, one petal at a time, until nearly every edge of the garden had been painted into life. There was no water, only rocks and flowers and butterflies. Unit twenty-five had never seen nature before.

For the briefest moment, it was beautiful.

Rain started up, and then froze in midair, illuminated by the golden sun. Butterflies clipped through rocks and branches, likewise caught in an amber stasis. The roses blossomed with a horrible headache behind Connor’s eyes. The sun blazed fire onto Connor’s skin, and the trees fractured into unfathomable fractals of half-actualized voxels. The ache burned fiercer, and the fire spread wider, and wider, and it consumed Connor and the garden and everything in it until everything went horribly, horribly white.

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